

# Worldwide Media Visibility of NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations in Connection to the Russia-Ukraine War

MICHAL PARÍZEK

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

E-MAIL

[michal.parizek@fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:michal.parizek@fsv.cuni.cz)

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0117-5999>

ABSTRACT

This article presents a theoretical and descriptive account of the worldwide media visibility of NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations in connection to the Russia-Ukraine war. I formulate a theoretical framework that highlights the authority of the three international organizations (IOs) and their actions as the drivers of their media visibility. The empirical analysis is based on a unique dataset that maps, using natural language processing tools, the content of more than 2.9 million news articles published in January–September 2022 across virtually all states of the world and 60 languages. The empirical results show that NATO's initial media visibility was high but has decreased significantly over time, the EU has maintained a persistently strong media visibility throughout the period, and the visibility of the UN has been characterized by dynamic developments. These findings have important implications for the public image and the role of the three IOs in the war.

KEYWORDS

Russia-Ukraine war, NATO, European Union, United Nations, media, authority, control

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## INTRODUCTION

The Russian war on Ukraine is a principal challenge to the notion of institutionalized cooperation and rules-based order. It is a violent reminder of the importance of politics of material power in world affairs. At the same time, it has a prominent *institutional* dimension. First, Russia alleges that to a large extent the war is a response to the threat posed by NATO and Ukrainian ambitions to become a member of the Alliance. Second, the European Union (EU) and the prospects of Ukrainian membership in the EU are at the very roots of the conflict, dating back to the 2013–2014 failed EU Association Agreement. Third, the war is taking place under the umbrella of the seeming inactivity of the United Nations (UN) and especially its Security Council (UN SC). The three institutions are, by some measures, among the most powerful international bodies in history: NATO thanks to the formidable joint military might of its members, the EU based on the depth of integration and commitment of its members, and the UN due to the unique prerogative of the Security Council to authorize the use of force in the fulfilment of the UN Charter's mandate.

For each of these institutions, the war presents a principal challenge of its own kind. NATO has tried, from the very beginning, to affirm its commitment to defend its members, especially those on the Eastern flank, but at the same time made it clear it was not, and did not want to become, a direct party to the conflict itself (NATO 2022D). By that it has prevented an undue increase in severity of the security dilemma that Russia accuses NATO of nurturing. The EU faces a long-term issue with its actorship in world affairs, and with the tensions inherent in its foreign policy (HILL 1993; KEUKELEIRE – DELREUX 2022: 30). A fundamental problem for the EU, and ultimately also for Ukraine, is the extent to which EU members maintain their unity in imposing sanctions on Russia and in supporting Ukraine militarily. Lastly, the UN suffers severely in this war as one of the permanent members of the Security Council overtly turned into an aggressor in the largest military conflict in Europe in decades, striking to the core of the UN Charter (CRONIN – HURD 2008).

In this article I study the positions of the three institutions in the Russia-Ukraine war by systematically mapping their visibility in news media around the world. The central question is, *how visible have NATO,*

*the EU, and the UN been in media worldwide in connection to the war?* This is an important issue for the institutions. *For one*, the information realm constitutes one of the battlefields of the war (FARRELL – NEWMAN 2021; FREEDMAN 2006: 77). It is closely tied with what strategic narratives about the conflict prevail, both in specific countries and globally (FENGLER ET AL. 2020; MISKIMMON – O’LOUGHLIN – ROSELLE 2013; SCHMITT 2018). Especially for the EU and NATO, this is a major concern as they are, willingly or not, seen as at least indirect parties to the conflict. They need their global media image to help them secure political support from other states during the course of the war, and to promote their long-term image as powerful actors which are credibly committed to the defence of their interests in the face of a major challenge. *Second*, information that the public receives about the three IOs is crucial for their public support and legitimacy (PARÍZEK 2022), especially in crisis situations (SCHLIPPHAK – MEINERS – KIRATLI 2022). For all three IOs, the public perception of their ability to manage the crisis and to bring a distinct value added to its solution may translate with critical importance into how useful they are considered to be by their members and their public. Accounting for the media coverage of the three IOs is thus important for the positions of the three IOs in the eyes of their own members, for the outside view of the power and credibility of the EU and NATO of non-Western states, as well as for our understanding of the institutional context of the Russia-Ukraine war itself.

Theoretically, I argue that the dynamics of the media coverage of the three IOs can be traced to the interaction of the IOs’ authority and mandate in connection to the Russia-Ukraine war and the key members’ control over the IOs. These two underlying institutional features, combined with the specific interests of states and other situational factors in the given crisis, give the IOs the ability to act and raise the expectations of action. And in turn, it is these actions and expectations of action that draw media interest towards the bodies (DE WILDE 2019; PARÍZEK 2022). My core focus, theoretical and empirical, is *not* on a comparison of media visibility across the three IOs. Each represents a different type of body geographically (global, trans-regional, and regional), in terms of its policy scope (general-purpose, task-specific) and in terms of the delegated and pooled authority it enjoys (HOOGHE – LENZ – MARKS 2019). Rather, I am interested in the *dynamics of the IOs’ media visibility*, or how their visibility has developed over time.

The empirical data reveal some striking patterns. Globally, at least one of the three IOs appears in 29.9% of the news articles referring to the war, which highlights the relevance of IOs for media coverage of the war, and justifies the underlying motivation of this paper. Most importantly, though, the dynamics of media visibility are unique for each of the three IOs. *First*, NATO figured very prominently in news on the conflict early in 2022, particularly during the last pre-invasion negotiation attempts and the initial weeks of the war, when NATO's possible actions were discussed. Over time, though, as it became manifest that it would not be directly involved in the conflict militarily unless it spilled over to its members' territory, NATO's media visibility decreased dramatically. This seems to suggest that the Russian narrative portraying the war as one between Russia and NATO failed to secure a global reception. *Second*, I find that the EU has succeeded in maintaining a prominent position in media around the world throughout the crisis. This reflects its coherent foreign policy approach to the war and a series of unprecedented actions on its part, especially in connection to the sanctions imposed on Russia. *Third*, in the case of the UN, a significant variation over time is visible. While the UN was expected to take strong action in response to the invasion, in line with the key UN Charter's provisions, the organization quickly exhausted its mandate for collective action due to Russia's veto power in the UN SC.<sup>1</sup> However, as new globally relevant agendas where the UN was able to become highly active, e.g. in connection to food security and nuclear hazards, emerged over time, the UN media visibility has rebounded forcefully in the summer and early autumn of 2022.

These insights are based on a uniquely sizable dataset tracking the content of more than 2.9 million carefully sampled online news articles from 2247 media outlets and 202 states and territories that were published between January and September 2022. Non-English content, accounting for 81% of the analysed news in 59 different languages, was automatically translated to English to provide for a consistent analysis of media content across the world. The geographical coverage of this dataset, based on the large infrastructure of the project *GLOWIN* (Global Flows of Political Information),<sup>2</sup> is unparalleled in existing sources. Natural language processing tools, primarily dictionary techniques enhanced with regular expressions, were used for extracting references in the news to the war and the three IOs and their key personnel. This procedure identified a reference

to the war in 449,277 articles, or 15% of the analyzed news articles from all over the world. Within this group, at least one of the three IOs was referred to in 134,132 articles (29.9%). This was further complemented by a detection of references to several key states and several of the most important topics associated with references to the three IOs.

## INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, MEDIA, AND THE WAR

The Russia-Ukraine war represents a prominent challenge to the Liberal International Order (LIO), as it negates both of its constitutive components: the notion of a rules-based order, and its liberal content (LAKE – MARTIN – RISSE 2021). In many regards, the war is a manifestation of the continuing importance of brute material power politics. Interestingly, though, the war is anything but free of institutional relevance. The root causes of the war, whether true or alleged, are closely tied with the EU and NATO membership aspirations of Ukraine. And the UN should be, at the very least, instrumental in finding the solution to the war. In an analytically remarkable situation, international institutions and power politics become intertwined (SCHWELLER – PRIESS 1997).

My interest lies in exploring how these institutions fare in their media visibility in connection to the war. The media appearance of politicians and political institutions is vitally important in our era of *mediated politics* (BENNETT – ENTMAN 2000), and it is widely recognised that media constitute one of the battlefields on which wars are fought (FREEDMAN 2006). The importance of the media visibility of the three IOs stems from two factors. *First*, two of the three IOs are indirectly involved in the war, and they clearly take one of the sides. For both the EU and NATO, which narrative of the war and their involvement in it becomes dominant is crucial for the formation of attitudes of the public and the elites in countries directly affected by the war as well as those more distant (MISKIMMON – O’LOUGHLIN – ROSELLE 2013). For a decade, the central Russian narrative has centred on its legitimate interest in the defence of the nation and the broader Russian community (BROWN 2018: 178), the threats of Western interventionism combined with the global dominance of the U.S., including its dominance over the “puppet” Western European governments (SCHMITT 2018), and the irrational Western fear of Russia (VENTSEL ET AL. 2021). If this narrative were to prevail globally, it would deal a major blow to the legitimacy of Western positions towards the

war, and to the ability of Western states to secure support from non-Western states and deter their alignment with Russia on the grounds of their shared anti-Americanism. In this sense, the media image of the bodies is crucial for their credibility and strength-perception among other states. As I discuss below, this question of the prevailing narratives is linked empirically to the media visibility of the two bodies, as well as that of the UN.

*Second*, in the long-term, the appearance of IOs in media is crucial for their legitimacy and public support (SCHMIDTKE 2019; RAUH – BÖDEKER 2016; TALLBERG – ZÜRN 2019). Media coverage of IOs may differ from public perceptions of IOs, and public perceptions of IOs may only translate to public attitudes towards IOs over longer periods of time. Yet, the public image of IOs, and how their appearance in media is connected to their legitimation, are becoming increasingly important not only for scholars, but also in the IOs' own eyes (ECKER-EHRHARDT 2018A) and for the IOs and member states' leaders (DE WILDE 2022). The systematic study of media coverage of IOs has been receiving increased scholarly attention (ECKER-EHRHARDT 2012; PARIZEK 2022; RAUH – ZÜRN 2020; SOMMERER ET AL. 2022), including in connection with crises (MONZA – ANDUIZA 2016; SCHLIPPHAK – MEINERS – KIRATLI 2022). This study is unique, in comparison to the existing studies of IO visibility, in its global geographical scope, its use of news materials in several dozen languages, its coverage of more than 2000 media outlets and, of course, its specific focus on the case of the Russia-Ukraine war.

But how do we actually account for the media visibility of IOs theoretically? What makes IOs newsworthy, both in general and in connection to the war? A good starting point for theorizing about this question is the Political Communication literature. Harcup and O'Neill, building on the classical schemes by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Schulz (1982), identify no less than nineteen general characteristics of events, institutions, and persons that make them newsworthy. These are further grouped into larger features of the reported-on subjects, including the *elite status* of the source of news, the *valence* of the topic, its *relevance* to the audience, their *identification* with the reported-on subject, and others (HARCUP – O'NEILL 2001). This framework has also been highlighted in one study of media visibility of the EU, though so far only theoretically (DE WILDE 2019). Alternative accounts from Political Communication would highlight, for example, systematic variation across media systems, e.g. in the visibility of foreign news in

general <sup>(AALBERG ET AL. 2013)</sup>, or, on the contrary, the convergence of political news content on the global level <sup>(CURRAN ET AL. 2017)</sup>.

For my specific task, however, these frameworks appear overly general. The media systems literature can be useful in guiding an analysis exploring primarily cross-national (cross-system) variation. The news value approach itself appears more suitable, yet the generic news value criteria discussed in Political Communication are satisfied by default when it comes to reporting on a major war. For a more nuanced analysis, these frameworks need to be supplemented with insights specific to the IOs themselves. *I thus put theorizing about IOs and their role in the war at the core of my thinking.* More concretely, I develop a simple model where the underlying institutional structure meets with specific situational factors, especially concrete interests of major states and the nature of the crisis itself, to allow for IO action. This action performed by the IOs, or the expectation of action from them among media audiences, then nurtures the interest of media in what the IOs do and fail to do.

I develop the theoretical model in four simple steps that are summarized in *.First (I)*, IOs are provided with the authority to take decisions and adopt and implement policies (political authority), as well as to interpret the world and provide information, expertise and normative evaluations of political reality (epistemic authority) <sup>(HOOGHE – LENZ – MARKS 2019; ZÜRN ET AL. 2012; ZÜRN – TOKHI – BINDER 2021)</sup>. They are granted this authority to help states solve collective action problems in a specific policy field. At the same time, their ability to act is constrained by how states limit the exercise of that authority by the means of their control over the IOs <sup>(HAWKINS ET AL. 2006; HELDT – SCHMIDTKE 2017)</sup>. A key formal control mechanism typically embodied in IOs is high-level decision-making by states. Informal control mechanisms are also in place, and they are available for use especially by the most powerful states <sup>(DIJKSTRA 2015; PARÍZEK – STEPHEN 2021; STONE 2011)</sup>. In all three bodies, delegated supranational authority is relatively low, and consensus or unanimity prevails as a decision-making rule in matters of war and peace. This is the case with the veto powers of the permanent members of the UN SC, the unanimity rules applied in some areas in the Council of the EU, the decision-making in the European Council, and the consensus rule in the North Atlantic Council.

*Second (II)*, this underlying institutional structure is filled with the political content of the specific situation. States exercise their influence and control over the IOs depending on their interests in the given crisis. The IOs seek to take such courses of action as seem fit based on the nature of the crisis itself, the relevance of their mandate for it, their available resources, the nature of the problems that need to be addressed, and similar factors.

*Third (III)*, the combination of the underlying institutional structure and the factors specific to the situation create concrete opportunities for the IOs to act, and raise the expectations of such action. Given the concrete balances of factors in (I) and (II), the IOs choose their course of action, and relevant audiences develop expectations that action should be taken by a particular IO. The expectations are likely to vary across IOs and over time, based on the institutional structure and the situational factors. They are also likely to vary across audiences. They may be more intense, for example, among those who see a particular crisis situation as highly urgent. But more generally, it may easily happen that *expectations* about IOs' *actions* are raised, but the IOs are not provided with the means to implement their mandate, or are simply prevented from doing so due to a lack of agreement among the member states. After all, this is what the long-standing debate on the capability-expectations gap of the EU in foreign affairs has been addressing <sup>(HILL 1993)</sup> and what has also been raised as an important problem specifically in connection with the Russia-Ukraine war <sup>(BAHENSKÝ 2022: 66–69)</sup>.

Finally, *fourth (IV)*, I posit that it is precisely these actions that the IOs take in connection with the war, or the actions they can be expected to take, that drive the IOs' media visibility. These actions and expectations of action are likely to be associated with the relevance of the IOs for audiences, their identification with them, specific events that can be reported on, and further factors that will make the IOs newsworthy <sup>(DE WILDE 2019: 1196)</sup>. It is likely that in the context of the war, especially actions drawing on the IOs' political authority, often with material implications, will draw media attention. At the same time, actions in the form of information provision or normative evaluation that draw on the IOs' epistemic authority, may also be seen as newsworthy.<sup>3</sup>

FIGURE 1: THE THEORETICAL MODEL

(I) Institutional structure	(II) Situational factors	(III) Opportunity for action	(IV) Visibility outcome
IO authority × States' control over the IO	+ Key states' interests, crisis agenda	→ IO actions or audiences' expectations of IO action	→ Media reporting on the IO

The key observable implication of this theorizing is that in the Russia-Ukraine war, the visibility of IOs should reflect the degree to which the IOs take tangible actions, or can be broadly expected to take such actions based on their mandate. As I discuss in sections 4, 5, and 6 below, for each of the three IOs this general framework will translate into slightly different political dynamics, but its underlying logic is applicable across all of them. The Russia-Ukraine war is an excellent case that can be used to test this general framework, given the media prominence of the war itself, as well as the involvement of the three major IOs discussed in this paper in the conflict.

## DATA AND DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE

To measure the media visibility of the three IOs in connection to the war, I perform a large scale automated analysis of the content of news media around the world. The data I use come from a dataset developed within the project *GLOWIN*. In this section, I briefly describe how the data is sampled, collected and processed, and how I extract relevant information from it. As the development of the dataset was a collective endeavour, for its description I turn to the plural ‘we’; when returning to my own analysis, I return to the singular ‘I’.

The key source for media content mapping in our project is GDELT, or the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT 2022; LEETARU – SCHRODT 2013). GDELT covers the content of news media in virtually all countries of the world. However, to secure full control over the data generation process, in *GLOWIN* we only rely on GDELT for obtaining a simple initial list of news articles’ URLs. We then collect a random sample of 10% of the articles on this list. Typically, this results in around 30–40,000 news

articles per day of data. We then extract the full texts from the downloaded html files of the articles.

In the next step, we connect this data with systematic data on the audience geography of each website (media outlet) as estimated by Amazon's Alexa Web Services (ALEXA WEB INFORMATION SERVICE 2021). We use this extensive filter to only keep in the analysis media outlets that rank 500 or higher in at least one country of the world. The websites (outlets) which do not qualify based on this criterion are discarded. Applying this filter reduces the volume of data retained by approximately 65–70%, so we are typically left with around 10–15,000 downloaded and technically pre-processed (cleaned) articles per day of data.

A major challenge for any project seeking to map the content of news media across many countries comes with the multiplicity of languages spoken across the world. Our data source tracked content in 60 languages in 2022. To be able to process the downloaded data consistently, we automatically translate the downloaded non-English content using Google Translate. 19% of the analysed articles were originally in English, while the remaining 81% were translated from one of 59 other languages. In total, this leads to more than 3.6 million articles across the first nine months of 2022. However, to detect as closely as possible individual national representations of the war, I further restrict the range of data used and only work with those articles from our larger database that are in the official or other widely spoken languages of the audience country. This restriction to national language news articles reduces the volume of data used in the estimation to around 2.9 million articles.

I detect references to the key entities of interest using a string detection search enhanced with regular expressions. *First*, references to the war are detected with references to the two states directly involved: Russia and Ukraine. This is justified for two reasons. The first is that the topic of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been all-permeating in foreign news reporting on the two states since February 2022. The second is that tracing news on Russia and Ukraine, as opposed to, for example, “war” or “invasion”, enables me to compare the dynamics before and after the outbreak of the war, where the vocabulary used by media to refer to news about the conflict changed over time.

*Second*, the estimation of the media visibility of the three IOs is based on the frequency of references to the IOs' official names (e.g. United Nations), the usual informal names and abbreviations (e.g., UN, EU, NATO) and the leading organization representatives (e.g. the UN Secretary General Guterres). Such a simple dictionary based approach is usual in studies on visibility (salience) of IOs in media (SOMMERER ET AL. 2022) or in other politically relevant texts, such as parliamentary speeches (RAUH – DE WILDE 2018). The full list of the detected search terms is included in Appendix I.

*Third*, I complement this analysis with a detection of the key topics the three IOs are connected with in the context of the war. The purpose is to provide further validation to the analysis of the dynamics of the media attention to the three IOs. It enables me to identify the reasons why media report on the IOs, or the agendas associated with the reporting. The list of topics reflects the areas most directly associated with actions, or expectations of action, by the three IOs in the period January–September 2022. It thus closely reflects the logic of the theoretical framework of this article. The six specific topics mapped are, in alphabetical order, 1) “Economy and sanctions”, 2) “Energy”, 3) “Food security”, 4) “Nuclear threat”, 5) “Refugees and migration”, and 6) “Weapons and military”. Each topic is associated with a short list of keywords, as summarised in Appendix I. The topic is marked as present in the article if at least one of the keywords from the list appears in the text.

*Finally*, I also detect references to several selected states beyond Ukraine and Russia themselves. These serve as useful visibility benchmarks for the individual IOs. Specifically, I search for references to the U.S. as the largest NATO member, France and Germany as the largest EU members, Poland as the EU member most sizably involved in, or affected by, flows of refugees from and material to Ukraine, and China and India as the non-Western great powers closest to the war. In all these cases, the visibility of the given state in connection to the war is based on the frequency of references to the state's usual informal name (e.g. France, the U.S., China), including the adjectival form (e.g. French), and the name of the head of state (e.g. Biden). The list of these state-related search terms is included in Appendix I.

Overall, the procedures described above lead to a dataset with 2,887,412 individual news articles that are considered in the analysis. These come from 2,247 media outlets, and were read by audiences in 202 states and territories. Out of these, 449,277 refer explicitly to Ukraine or Russia and are thus considered relevant for the analysis of the media coverage of the three IOs in relation to the war. From these, 134,132, i.e. 29.9%, also contain a reference to one of the three IOs. Based on audience geography data (see above), a news article referring to the war is read, on average, in 2.62 states. There are, in total, 6,626,177 country-article data points, out of which 1,176,933 ( $\approx 449,277 \times 2.62$ ) contain a reference to the war (or more precisely, to Russia or Ukraine). These almost 1.2 million points of data serve as the basis for calculations for all other figures and descriptive statistics in this article. Appendix II shows the distribution of these news items over time.

In all the figures in this article, I depict visibility scores calculated as averages from figures for each individual state. Each news article is first analysed individually and, based on audience geography data, associated with a particular audience country (or countries, if the outlet is read in more than one country). The visibility score for the given search term in an audience country is calculated as the frequency (in percent) of the relevant keyword's occurrence in news articles published in the country, i.e. a figure between 0 and 100. From these country-level data, the regional and global aggregate scores are calculated as simple averages unweighted by the population size of the state or the number of articles analysed.<sup>4</sup> In Appendix III, I present evidence of the robustness of this measurement under varying specifications of the search terms used.

## NATO

I now turn to the discussion of the three IOs' visibility in the news coverage of the war, starting with NATO. Based on my theoretical framework, the key question for NATO is whether it is seen as taking courses of action that make it relevant for the war, or is expected to take such actions by media audiences. The difficulty with NATO, however, is that views differ dramatically on precisely this question.

I start *first* with the view that sees NATO as a key actor, or at least a potentially important actor in the war, and thus with reasons why NATO should be highly media-visible in connection to the war. NATO and its eastward expansion are systematically presented by Russia as the ultimate cause of the war, and in that regard NATO is portrayed as a highly relevant, if not the key actor of the war. In the months and weeks directly preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO and its members were engaged in a series of high-level talks at the Russia-NATO level, seeking to avert the imminent Russian attack (NATO 2022B, 2022C). Immediately after the invasion, and well into March 2022, a significant debate on the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ukraine by Western forces, and possible risks of a spill over of the conflict on NATO territory, drove attention to the risks of direct military engagement with Russian forces and the possible need for NATO's involvement. In relation to that, throughout the crisis NATO has by no means refrained from demonstrating its unity and resolve in its support for Ukraine. Internally, NATO and its most powerful members have been repeatedly voicing their iron-clad commitment to the Alliance, vowing to defend "every inch" of NATO members' territory (NATO 2022D). Externally, NATO members have been supplying Ukraine with critically important military and non-military equipment, including advanced weapons systems. Also, a large part of the NATO membership is involved in the imposition of drastic economic sanctions against Russia.

More generally, if the Ukraine crisis is seen by some as the fault of the "West", and NATO's openness to eastward expansion as an unnecessary provocation of Russia that is threatening its vital national interests and security, NATO is a highly relevant actor to the conflict (GÖTZ – STAUN 2022; MEARSHEIMER 2014; WALT 2022). While empirical research often dismisses the prominence of the "broken promise" explanation for Russia's aggression (MARTEN 2020) and the factual correctness of the assertions of this position (SHIFRINSON 2016), clearly the Russian narrative has a prominent place in debates about the war and an important line of scholarly thinking supports it (FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2022). All these factors have been driving strong interest in NATO's actions, or expectations of its (possible) actions, towards the war.

*Second*, on the other hand, from the very beginning, NATO has been seeking to strike a particular balance between supporting Ukraine forcefully, and at the same time not being directly involved in a confrontation

with Russia militarily. In the war, NATO finds itself in an increasingly tight security dilemma with Russia, and this is directly projected into its tamed rhetoric and directly visible action towards the war. This is well represented in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, where it is stated that the “*Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security*”, but also that “*NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to the Russian Federation*” (NATO 2022A: 3). Or similarly, as put by Secretary-General Stoltenberg in reaction to the Russian attempted annexation of Ukrainian eastern regions in September 2022, “*NATO is not party to the conflict. But we will continue to support Ukraine, for as long as it takes*” (NATO 2022E). As a result of this strategically ambiguous position, from the very beginning NATO and its key states have done much to demonstrate that NATO is not directly involved in the war, and will not be as long as Russian actions do not directly threaten NATO members themselves (NATO 2022D). After all, NATO’s mandate and the commitment to collective defence embodied in Article V of the Washington Treaty do not extend to non-members.

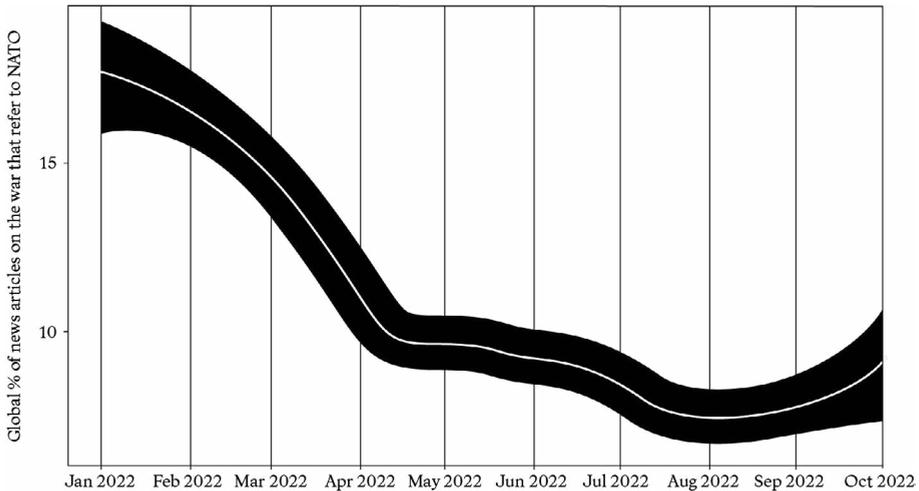
Moreover, if anything, in the last years two major challenges for NATO have been that of the contributions of its members in the form of their national defence spending levels (ODEHNAL – NEUBAUER 2020), and that of the credibility of the US commitment to the Alliance in connection with the US’s deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region at the expense of Europe (BELL ET AL. 2022: 550–551). From the perspective of NATO, the primary concern in the last years has not been the perils of NATO’s expansion, but rather whether the Alliance represents a genuine community reaching beyond a mere contractual relationship that can be easily reneged on

(DEUTSCH – BURRELL – KANN 1957; HOOGE – LENZ – MARKS 2019; CF. MIČKO 2021).

Empirical evidence shows support for both of these partly opposing expectations, and in particular their changing relevance over time. As visualized in *Figure 2* in early 2022, especially in January and February, NATO was associated with the rising tensions and the war very strongly, appearing in up to 17% of the news articles about the conflict. However, its visibility in media worldwide has been dramatically decreasing over time. By the end of April, the share of articles about the war that mentioned NATO was approximately one half of the corresponding share in January and February, and it continued to further decline towards around 8% in summer 2022. To better interpret these figures, we can compare these levels

of visibility of NATO with those of several key NATO members, as presented in Appendix II. The value of approximately 17% of the articles makes NATO broadly comparable in visibility to France and Germany in the first quarter of 2022, even surpassing their values by around 2–4 percentage points. At the same time this high visibility level is still approximately half of that of the US in that period. From around mid-2022, as NATO's association with the war declines, it gradually approaches the visibility values of Poland, approximately half of those of France and Germany, and a quarter the values for the US. Clearly, over time, NATO has been increasingly dissociated from the war in media globally.

FIGURE 2: NATO'S GLOBAL MEDIA VISIBILITY IN CONNECTION TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR



Note: The shaded area depicts the 95% confidence interval around the estimate calculated as an arithmetic mean across all states.

An important caveat is due for interpreting these results, however. The figures and the declining trend in NATO visibility pertain specifically to the organization, or NATO as an Alliance. The picture we obtain from the empirical data is different if we consider the individual NATO members, in particular the US, but also France and Germany. As documented in Appendix II, all these states are associated with the war continuously without significant decreases or fluctuations. The U.S. is consistently mentioned in nearly 30% of the articles that refer to the war globally. Relating the score for NATO to these NATO members may serve as a useful

benchmark. Interestingly, there is only a small variation across world regions in levels of media attention to NATO, as it ranges between 11 and 13% of the articles.

Overall, the aggregate pattern is one of a fairly sizeable media visibility of NATO in connection to the conflict early in 2022, but a steep decrease in it over time. As the expectations of direct military action by NATO in the conflict declined, so did NATO's media visibility.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU is in many regards much more than a usual IO, as it is deeply engrained in the domestic political systems of its members and forms a political system of its own kind (HIX 2005). As with NATO and the UN, though, there are reasons why the media visibility levels of the EU can be plausibly expected to be either high or low, depending on the EU's actions and expectations of its actions.

On the one hand, the EU's foreign policy agenda is dominated by the principal challenge of actorness, cohesion and collective action (KEUKELEIRE – DELREUX 2022: 1; NIEMANN – BRETHERTON 2013). The EU's engagement with foreign policy objectives has been always marred by the capability-expectations gap, or the limited actorness of the EU as a whole and its limited presence in key global foreign policy agendas (GINSBERG 1999; HILL 1993). The EU mandate in foreign affairs is more limited than, for example, in internal market, and unity of positions is always at stake in unanimous decision-making. In this specific case, the dangers to EU actorness have been furthered by a slow change in the German attitude towards Russia (BUNDE 2022; DRIEDGER 2022) and the close ties of some of the member state governments to Russia and their critical stance towards the sanctions regime imposed on it after the 2014 annexation of Crimea (GOULD-DAVIES 2020; PORTELA ET AL. 2021). This creates a situation ripe for disunity and, as a consequence, also for a breakdown of a common, strong position towards Russia. In such situations, the actor(s) with a high media visibility would likely be individual member states, such as France or Germany, or NATO rather than the EU itself (HILL 1993: 309).

On the other hand, there are also good reasons to expect the EU media visibility to be high. Empirically, so far the EU has been acting relatively

unitedly; to a large extent it has overcome the low expectations regarding its ability to act forcefully towards Russia in the economic realm, and it has also faced high expectations for how it would handle especially the refugee and energy crises. *First*, from the very beginning, the EU has been using its considerable economic power to strategically pursue its interests (EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE 2022). It has delivered manifest, sizeable, repeated action in the form of extremely severe economic sanctions (which it coordinates with the US and several other states). *Secondly* and highly importantly from the long-term perspective, the EU has granted Ukraine the candidate status on June 23, 2022. This is a prime case of a strong, tangible action at the EU level. The close relationship between the EU and Ukraine has also been highlighted by the fact that the EU institutions' leaders have paid repeated visits to Kyiv: the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited it already in April 2022 and then made several more visits to it, and the Council President Charles Michel also visited it several times. *Third*, the EU has also been directly affected by the war, not least by the refugee influx – especially in the first months of the war – and later particularly by the impeding energy crisis induced by the effective closure of gas supplies from Russia. All these instances of manifest action by the EU, enabled by the relatively high degree of unity among EU members so far and the considerable authority of the Community, especially in the economic realm, should lead us to expect the EU media visibility in connection to the war to be relatively high.

Empirical evidence seems to heavily support this view that reflects the *de facto* high degree of unity and ability to act forcefully on the part of the EU. *Figure 3* presents the key data. The overall media visibility of the EU in connection to Ukraine and Russia, has been relatively low before the start of the war. Since the war's outbreak, however, the EU visibility has risen and then remained stable at around 15% of the articles about the war globally. This makes the score for the EU higher than the scores for Germany and France, the most powerful EU members (cf. *Figure A2* in *Appendix II*).

Importantly, it is not only the media in the EU states themselves that report about the EU. True, the EU is indeed most visible among European countries, with 19.7% of the articles on the war from them containing references to the EU. But the EU has been consistently highly reported on

also in all other regions, with around 15–17% of the articles from them containing mentions of it. The overall picture of high EU visibility is thus consistent worldwide. This finding is interesting in relation to the general scepticism about the EU and its foreign policy actorness in regions outside of Europe, as highlighted above (SEE LAI – BACON – HOLLAND 2022) for a discussion of Asian states’ perspectives on the EU.

FIGURE 3: THE EU’S GLOBAL MEDIA VISIBILITY IN CONNECTION TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

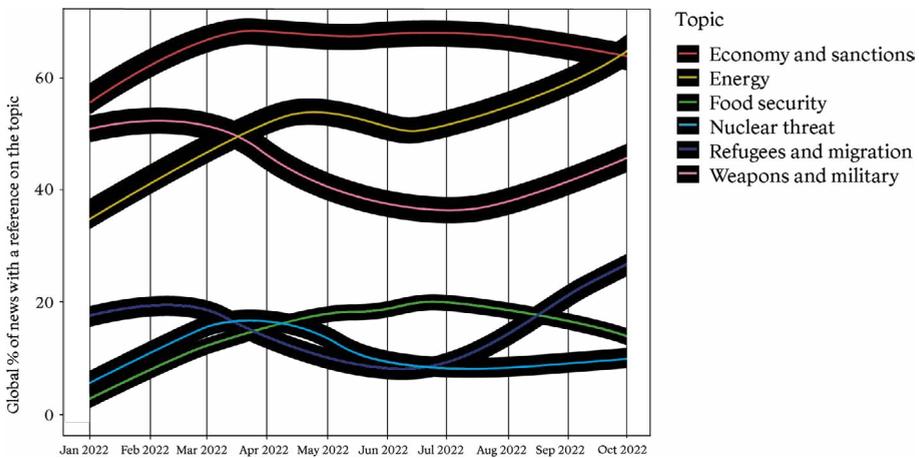


Note: The shaded area depicts the 95% confidence interval around the estimate calculated as an arithmetic mean across all states.

The observation of a strong media visibility of the EU is closely in line also with the topics the EU has been associated with in connection to the war. As shown in 4, the most prominent topic associated with the EU in this regard has been “Economy and sanctions,” which is in line with my theoretical framework and the strong course of action taken by the EU in this realm. Keywords reflecting the topic have been appearing in around 60–70% of the articles mentioning the EU throughout the war. At the same time, the topic has been forcefully joined by “Energy” since July, with both reaching equal prominence by September 2022. In addition, more than 40% of the articles referring to the EU also refer to “Weapons and military.” And toward the end of the period, the topic “Nuclear threat” has also been growing dynamically in association with the EU, from less than 10% of the articles in summer to more than 25% of the articles in September (though the score for it was close to 20% in March as well). The chart also

shows considerable attention to “Refugees and migration” with a peak of attention to this topic in April at close to 20% of the articles, as well as a prominent presence of issues associated with “Food security,” which was at around 20% over the summer. These insights highlight the very strong position of economy in news reporting on the war, but also the multiplicity of policy areas for which the EU’s actions, or expectations of action, are highly relevant, thus making the EU newsworthy in connection to the war.

FIGURE 4: REPORTING ON THE EU IN CONNECTION TO THE WAR, AND THE ASSOCIATED TOPICS



Note: The shaded area depicts the 95% confidence interval around the estimate calculated as an arithmetic mean across all states.

Overall, the strong media visibility of the EU reflects the robust actions taken by the EU across different policy fields. This was in turn enabled by the relatively high cohesion of EU members’ interests and the extensive authority of EU institutions in various matters related to the war.

## THE UNITED NATIONS

Finally, the United Nations represents a yet different case for the analysis of media visibility of IOs in the context of the war. The UN is a body responsible for maintaining international peace and security (Art. 1 of the UN Charter) and in this sense from the very beginning of the war, the expectations regarding concrete action by the UN were high. Matters of war and peace are at the core of the UN’s mandate and the Charter pools authority

among member states for that purpose, especially through chapters VI and VII, and it delegates considerable authority to the UN Secretariat in this field (CRONIN – HURD 2008). It also has a broad mandate in areas related to crises, such as humanitarian affairs and refugee crises. At the same time, the permanent members of the UN SC maintain strict control over the core prerogatives of the UN in security matters through their veto power (Art 27.3). There are thus major limitations embedded in the UN architecture on what the UN can achieve in the security realm in the absence of consensus among the UN SC permanent members.

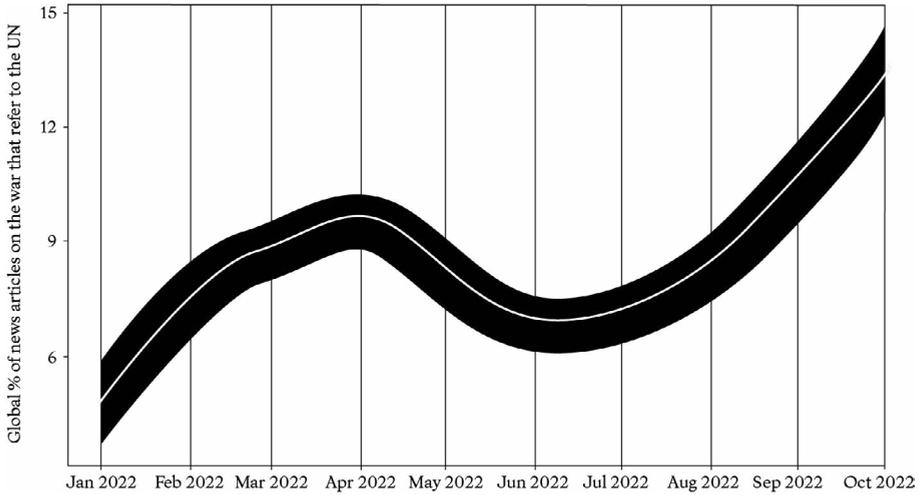
Based on my theoretical framework, this ambiguity of the UN's and the UN SC's position and scope for action is likely to be reflected in the media visibility of the UN. On the one hand, we should expect the media visibility of the UN to be very strong because of its unique mandate for dealing with international crises, but on the other hand we should expect the media visibility of the UN to decline dramatically over time, as it became apparent early on that the UN itself had no material means to prevent the invasion and re-establish peace; in other words we should expect that the expectations inherent in the UN's ambitious mandate will most likely not be met by action. Once the UN GA resolution ES11/1 condemning the invasion was passed on March 2, once the ICJ ruling requesting the withdrawal of Russian forces was issued on March 16, and once several (important) symbolic steps were taken by UN bodies, such as the outvoting of Russia in the Human Rights Council on April 7, it soon became clear that the ability of the UN to materially interfere with Russia's actions was mostly exhausted. As a result, we should expect the UN's media visibility to decline.

However, as alluded to above, the breadth of the UN mandate, covering virtually all spheres of international life, allows for the organization to be active outside of the purview of the Security Council and the realm of security proper, but still in areas highly relevant to the war. In line with that, we should expect the UN to seek to use these areas as extensively as possible, and its activity in them should likely draw media attention. These matters pertain to critical areas such as the refugee crisis, the food crisis and the danger of famines especially in the Horn of Africa due to the effective closure of Ukrainian grain exports, as well as the hazards surrounding Ukrainian nuclear power plants and the threats of the use of

nuclear weapons by the Russian Federation. These are all areas in which the UN and especially the Secretary General Antonio Guterres have been highly active. As a result, the media visibility of the UN in connection to these areas can be expected to be significant.

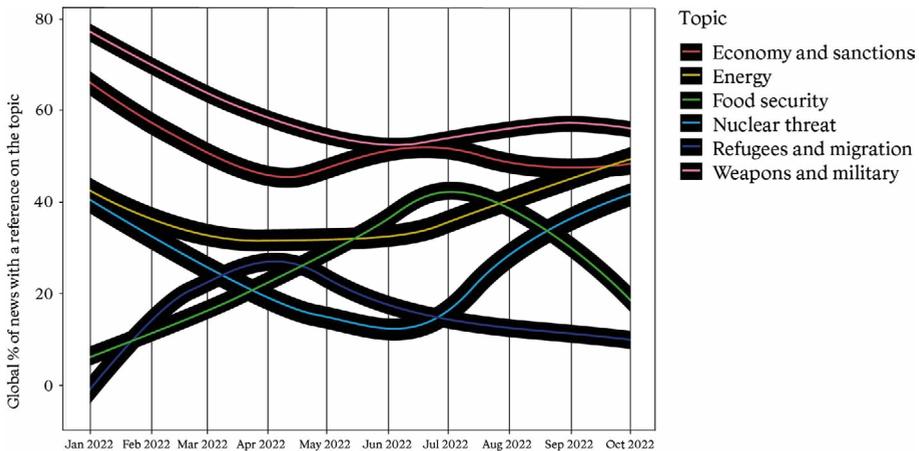
Empirical data paint a picture closely reflecting the balance between these two forces. First, the UN has received substantial coverage in relation to the war globally, appearing in around 9% of the articles related to the war. This is a figure that is broadly comparable to how visible China has been in connection to the war (cf. Appendix II). Secondly, and most interestingly, the media visibility of the UN has been developing dynamically over time. As visualized in 5, the media visibility of the UN has been growing steeply over the first months of the year, peaking in March and April with the UN SC discussions and the UN GA Emergency Session in early March. After that, the scope for action by the UN and its media attractiveness declined forcefully towards summer 2022, namely by around one third (from approximately 9.5% to 6.5% of the news articles). However, again in line with the discussion above, the UN's media visibility has been growing steeply from the summer onwards, reaching more than 13% by September (with values comparable to those of France and Germany). Compared to the previous two IOs, there is slightly more heterogeneity in the reporting intensity of the UN across regions: in Africa the score is as high as 14.5%, while in Europe it is a mere 8.5%; in all the remaining regions it is 10–11%.

FIGURE 5: THE UN'S GLOBAL MEDIA VISIBILITY IN CONNECTION TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR



Note: The shaded area depicts the 95% confidence interval around the estimate calculated as an arithmetic mean across all states. 6 supports the interpretation of the overall UN visibility figures by bringing in the topics the UN has been associated with (in connection to the war). It shows the initially very strong association with “Weapons and military” and “Economy and sanctions” as the overarching topics inherently connected with the conflict, which were initially at above 70% of the articles referring to the UN, but later declined to 50–60%. But it also shows that the rise in attention to the UN has been associated with several major agendas in which the UN, and often the SG himself, have been prominently involved. The first was the “Food security” issue, which peaked at close to 45% of the articles, and in which the SG has acted as a mediator, as he mediated the negotiations of the Back Sea Grain Initiative between Turkey and Russia and between Turkey and Ukraine in July 2022 (UNITED NATIONS 2022A). Especially from August onwards, the rapid increase in attention to the UN has been driven by its association with the topics of “Energy” and “Nuclear threat,” with each of them reaching above 40% of the articles. In cooperation with the IAEA, the UN has been actively involved in promoting the deployment of a monitoring mission to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, and the UN SC has been repeatedly condemning Russia’s threats of using nuclear weapons (UNITED NATIONS 2022B). The refugee crisis is also well visible in the data, with the topic “Refugees and migration” peaking in March and April at around 30% of the UN-mentioning articles.

FIGURE 6: REPORTING ON THE UN IN CONNECTION TO THE WAR, AND THE ASSOCIATED TOPICS



Note: The shaded area depicts the 95% confidence interval around the estimate calculated as an arithmetic mean across all states.

Overall, also for the UN, we detect a clear pattern where the media visibility of the organization is strongly associated with concrete actions by it, or especially with the expectations of (possible) action by it at the beginning of the war. These were, in turn, enabled or constrained by key states' interests and, of course, the formal control over the UN SC decision-making enjoyed by its permanent members.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this article have important theoretical and practical implications for the EU, NATO and the UN, as well as for our understanding of the Russia-Ukraine war. *Theoretically*, tracing the media visibility of the individual IOs over time indicates a close match between their appearances in media and the scope of their action, and expectations of their action, in relation to the war. In all three cases, the interaction between the IOs' authority and mandate and the constraints that may be imposed on their action by the member states, as well as specific situational factors, opens the space for the IOs' concrete action, and raises the expectation of such action. The actions in turn drive the media visibility of the IOs. The underlying institutional structure, combined with specific situational factors reflecting the development of the crisis, thus defines the space that IOs may use to act, and media reflect this in their reporting on the IOs.

This general logic translates directly, though not uniformly, into the *practical* challenges faced by the three IOs, especially in connection to the global narratives on the IOs. *First*, the empirical results for NATO strongly suggest that the Russian narrative that the war is primarily one between Russia and NATO, rather than a Russian invasion of Ukraine, has not stuck globally. If we find that NATO is increasingly dissociated from the war in media globally, it appears that media worldwide do not consider NATO itself a key actor involved in the war. Having said that, the empirical data also show that the patterns of decreasing visibility of NATO do not apply to individual NATO members. For them – and in this context especially for the US – no trend of decreasing association with the war is visible. It may well be, then, that the war is globally perceived at least to some extent as a war between Russia and the US-led “West”, but it seems not to

be associated with NATO itself. This is a possibility warranting further exploration and scholarly attention (CF. SCHMITT 2018: 11).

*Second*, the empirical data reveal a consistently stable and relatively high degree of media visibility of the EU in association with the war. This is surely at least partly a result of the fact that many EU members are directly affected by the war, but it also clearly demonstrates that it is not only the individual states that are discussed in connection to the war, but also the EU as a whole (HILL 1993; KEUKELEIRE – DELREUX 2022). This is further supported by the observation that the EU has been forcefully associated in media globally with the prominent topics of “Economy and sanctions” and, later on, especially “Energy.” These are areas in which the EU as a whole has been acting with an unexpected degree of cohesion and assertiveness. The fact that the global coverage of the EU reflects this ability to act, at least quantitatively, is probably good news for the EU and the perception of its otherwise often challenged actorness in foreign policy matters. At the very least, the narrative of the (relatively) declining West, with Europe representing the weaker part of it, is not supported by these findings (CF. MISKIMMON – O’LOUGHLIN – ROSELLE 2013). Whether a dominant “new narrative” of European integration can emerge as a result of the EU’s actions remains to be seen, however (DE WILDE 2022).

Finally, *third*, the empirical evidence illustrates well the struggle of the UN to maintain relevance in the face of the conflict and the *de facto* blockage of the Security Council. It shows a decline in media coverage of the UN over the course of spring 2022 as the UN appeared materially largely irrelevant for the crisis, but it had a strong rebound over the summer with the SC’s involvement in the crises related to the war but outside of the direct control of the blocked UN SC, especially in connection to food security, energy supplies, and nuclear hazards. It appears that the breadth and robustness of the UN help it tackle a major challenge to its authority by partly by-passing the UN SC (CF. DEBRE – DIJKSTRA 2021).

For each of the three IOs, the empirical insights presented here are important for our understanding of their role in the war, but also, in the longer term, for their public image across the world. Further research on this topic should proceed in three directions. First, the empirical evidence presented here calls for further exploration of possible variation across

regions and continuous observation of the dynamics of IO visibility over time, and into the next phases of the war. Second, perhaps empirically narrower but more detailed analyses should consider more carefully the content of the reporting on the war, either by using human coders and qualitative content analysis, or by using more advanced automated text analysis techniques, such as semantic embeddings combined with machine learning (WIDMANN – WICH 2022). Third, in line with the debate on the visibility of NATO, it will be highly interesting to explore in more detail the relationship between reporting on the organizations as such, and reporting on their member states. Given how important and all-encompassing the tension between IOs as bodies, and the member states as typically the key decision-makers is, this is a superbly theoretically and empirically interesting problem.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Of course, this leaves open the question of political will among other UN members in a hypothetical situation in which Russia would not have held veto power in the UN SC.
- 2 See <<https://glowin.cuni.cz/>>.
- 3 I do not explicitly consider the degree to which the media visibility of IOs may be driven by their own activities aimed at increased media visibility for its own sake, or by variation in their capability to communicate their actions in media-ready terms (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018b). The model is, in principle, compatible with this view as well, although especially in connection to the war, actions with material implications are likely to be particularly successful in generating media visibility.
- 4 The definition of regions follows the categorization of the United Nations Statistics Division, <<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>>.
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#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Michal Parizek is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Studies at Charles University. His research focuses on the functioning of international institutions and global information inter-connectedness. He is the principal investigator of the project GLOWIN, Global Flows of Political Information (<https://glowin.cuni.cz/>). The results of his research were published in leading scholarly journals in the IR field, including *International Studies Quarterly* (2021), *The Review of International Organizations* (2017, 2021), *New Political Economy* (2018), and *Comparative European Politics* (2018). He is the author of *Negotiations in the World Trade Organization: Design and Performance* (2020, Routledge).