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Leveraging Crises: How the Russian Aggression in Ukraine Benefited the Populist Government in Hungary's 2022 Election Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the literature focusing on the relationship between crises and populism. It argues that the timing, the crisis type, and the contextual factor of whether populists are in power, matter for changes in the discursive strategies of populists and their ability to turn crises into opportunity structures. Guided by the constructivist literature on external shocks and a thematic content analysis of 561 online media news reports on the 2022 Hungarian national elections before and after the outbreak of the Russian aggression in Ukraine (RAiU), the article shows that this crisis helped to refresh the people-centrist elements of Fidesz's populist discourse while slightly downgrading its anti-elitist aspects. The absence of any material impact of the RAiU on Hungarian society at the time of the elections, combined with the dominance of Fidesz's 'pro-peace vs. pro-war' discourse, transformed the RAiU into an opportunity structure for Fidesz during the elections.

KEYWORDS	russo-ukraine war, Hungary, elections, populism, crisis exploitation, competitive authoritarianism
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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Viktor Orbán secured his fourth consecutive term as Hungary's prime minister as his party, Fidesz, maintained another supermajority in the parliamentary elections. This election occurred under extraordinary circumstances, just one month after the onset of the *Russian aggression in Ukraine* (RAiU hereafter). This aggression prompted a strategic shift in both the campaign discourse of the Fidesz-led government and that of the oppositional parties, which had united their forces in a national election to challenge the government for the first time. The elections unfolded amid a bitter competition between these two forces within the framework of an unusual 'external shock', which ultimately led to results in favor of Orbán's ruling bloc.

This article aims to shed light on why and how the RAiU created an advantage for the Fidesz government and a subsequent disadvantage for the united opposition in their election campaigns. Although the scholarship on populism acknowledges a close relationship between crises and populist politics, more research is needed to shed light on how populists respond to crises that happen in the form of *external shocks* and how they transform them into opportunity structures. The literature on populism understands crises as often being conducive to the surge of populism and or as even being an integral part of populism. Yet, it often defines crises as structural problems of the system that serve as opportunities for populists to trigger pre-existing feelings of frustration in the given society against the political elites. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, some studies started approaching crises as 'external shocks' in populism research but we still lack an understanding of under which conditions populists choose anti-elitist or people-centrist frames, why they make such choices and how they manage to transform external shocks into opportunity structures. Contrary to the prevailing arguments that populism often shifts the blame to the political elites and triggers anti-elitism during a crisis time period, this article reveals that crises can also prompt populists to downplay their anti-elitist rhetoric against the establishment and cultivate a new form of people-centrism. As the case of the Hungarian national elections demonstrates, the *timing*, the *crisis type*, and *the contextual factor of whether populists are in power*, matter for what choices populists make and whether the crises turn into opportunity structures. This article concludes that these three factors should

be considered when scholars attempt to build a relationship between crises and populism.

The crisis under scrutiny in this article is the *external shock* of the RAiU that emerged amid the 2022 Hungarian electoral campaigns. External shocks are exogenous events that are *"not fully controlled by actors"* (BROWNE ET AL. 1984: 180). They may occur in the form of sudden disasters, nuclear catastrophes or wars (SKIDMORE – TOYA 2002; HARMEL – JANDA 1994). Presenting a qualitative content analysis of 561 online media news articles covering the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the article reveals how the Fidesz government manipulated the discursive field in its favor. The RAiU occurring in the form of an external shock disrupted Fidesz's ongoing discursive strategy, which could have led to its electoral defeat. But Fidesz was able to transform it into an opportunity structure by preserving a novel form of people-centrism and downgrading anti-elitism in its populist discourse. The absence of a visible material impact of the RAiU on Hungarian society, and Fidesz's ability as a populist party in power to manipulate the media discourse, were the main factors in the transformation of the RAiU into an opportunity structure.

The article is structured as follows. We first present our overview of the literature regarding the role of crises in the surge of populism and introduce our contribution to this literature. In doing so, we also borrow the analytical toolkits of the literature on constructivist analyses of crises and external shocks. Second, we present the RAiU, which started amid the Hungarian national elections in 2022, as our case study. Third, we introduce the data and methods of our research. Fourth, we present the research findings and our discussion on these findings. We then conclude by deliberating the implications of our research for future studies.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND CRISES

The existing literature highlights the positive relationship between the emergence of crises and the growth of populism, despite certain deviations and nuances in this relationship due to divergent conceptual approaches to populism. The most established definition of populism sees it as a Manichean content that considers society to be ultimately separated

into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (MUDDE 2004; MUDDE – ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2013; STAVRAKAKIS ET AL. 2017). Yet, around this definition, the literature embodies different approaches to the question of whether populism is a strategy, a discourse, an ideology or a performative act. In an excellent review of this literature, Moffitt (2015) summarizes the relationship between crises and populism from the viewpoint of all four approaches. Weyland (2001) and Roberts (2006), who study populism as a political strategy, focus on the choices of personalistic leaders that seek or exercise government power based on unmediated and uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. Within this approach, crises of popular representation or economic crises provide an opportunity structure for the populists to build a strategy of blaming the authorities and presenting themselves as the true guardians of the people (LEVITSKY – LOXTON 2013). The second, discourse-theoretic approach shifts the focus from the contents of populism to how populism articulates those contents, inspired by the Essex School or more traditional definitions of discourse (LACLAU 2005; HAWKINS 2009; DE CLEEN – STAVRAKAKIS 2017). Within this approach, Laclau (2005) links the root of populism with the emergence of a social crisis or a crisis of the dominant ideological order, while Stavrakakis (2005) similarly associates the rise of populism with the crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders. The third, ideational approach defines populism as a thin ideology and primarily seeks to understand the populist elements in public attitudes or party programs (MUDDE 2004, 2007; MUDDE – ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2017). The ideational approach is the one that is most critical of the relationship between crises and populism. It does not really reject the concept of a crisis, as Moffitt (2015: 193) argues, but notices the significant correlation between the variables that are associated with a crisis – for example, economic instability, unemployment and political dissatisfaction – all of which are utilized to explain the surge of populism. It therefore questions the ambiguity embedded in the definition of a crisis, which cannot be used to explain the surge of populist actors by itself.

Finally, a fourth approach studies populism from the performative-stylistic perspective. According to this perspective, the communication style or discourse is emphasized, and the politico-cultural and relational aspects of populism take precedence over others; it sees populism as something performed in verbal, behavioral or postural aspects (MOFFITT 2016;

(OSTIGUY ET AL 2020). As Moffitt (2015) argues, while the other three approaches see crises as being external to populism, positing an either weak or strong causal relationship between them and it, the performative approach sees crises as integral to the concept of populism. More specifically, he puts the key focus on populist actors' ability to *construct* a sense of crisis and perpetuate it to underline the Manichean content of their message. He creates a framework of the populist performance of crises. According to him, the performance starts with the populists' identification of the failures of the political elites, then moves on to an elevation of these failures to the level of a crisis, continues with framing the people's interests against those responsible for the crisis and ends with a heavy usage of media (or social media) to propagate this performance (MOFFITT 2015: 198).

While this article follows Moffitt's steps in understanding a crisis as something constructed by the populists, it highlights that *the type* and *timing* of the crisis as well as *the contextual factor of whether populism is in power or not* matter for their choice of how to construct it, hence ultimately affecting the success of their performance. A crisis in the literature on populism is often understood as something structural, i.e., a crisis of representation, political dissatisfaction or economic emergencies. The literature rarely sees it as an exogenous shock or an external event that happens outside of the control of the politicians (BROWNE ET AL. 1984: 180; CALCA – GROSS 2019). An environmental catastrophe, an earthquake and an outbreak of war in a neighboring state are examples of such exogenous shocks. Yet, the meaning attributed to these exogenous events by populists also has the potential to influence their performance in transforming them into opportunity structures. This is in line with the agent-centered constructivist analyses of wars and crises which put a greater focus on persuasion as an intersubjective contestation among both elite and mass public agents. The extant research has shown that wars or crises cannot be defined simply in terms of their material effects, but also by agents' intersubjective understandings of such material changes (WIDMAIER ET AL. 2007). Wars and crises can create a profound sense of threat or uncertainty among the people and impact their understanding of both policies and politics. These events have the potential to undermine or consolidate the authority of those in power, or lead to no significant change, depending on how they are interpreted by both the elites and the masses. For instance, the Bush administration received high levels of public support for sending American troops to Iraq

after framing the 2003 war in Iraq as an extension of the 'war on terror' following the 9/11 attacks (GERSHKOFF – KUSHNER 2005). Some have even argued that the prolonged effect of 9/11 on American politics (through the war in Iraq) helped Bush to get re-elected in 2004 (NORPOTH – SIDMAN 2007). On the flip side, certain crises can erode the power of incumbents, as exemplified by the Spanish prime minister who experienced a significant electoral defeat in the immediate aftermath of the Madrid train bombings in 2004.

Although the populism literature has seldom addressed crises as external shocks in this manner, recent research on the global Covid-19 pandemic has provided insights into how populists might perform during such external crises. For instance, highlighting some key coverages from journalists and academics during the Covid-19 pandemic, Galanopoulos and Venizelos (2022) argue that certain dichotomies emerge in public discourse. During the Covid-19 crisis, for example, a dichotomy between a science and an anti-science position emerged, whereby the populist heads of government such as Trump and Bolsanaro were often associated with the latter position. There was also a dichotomy of responsible vs. irresponsible leadership. While some populist leaders were categorized in the latter category, thus intensifying the polarization between the populist worldview and scientific evidence, some others were categorized in the former category (WONDREYS – MUDDE 2022). Some studies also showed that many right-wing populist leaders chose to downplay the severity of the crisis in the beginning in order to confront their political adversaries (TARAKTAŞ ET AL. 2022). In various cases, it was reported that the populists in power used expertise instrumentally to bypass institutionalized channels to combat crises and thus reinforced their personalized ties with the voters (BUŠTÍKOVÁ – BABOŠ 2020; LASCO 2020). Yet, a review of all such analyses showcases that the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and populism was much more complex and there was not just one single way of handling the crisis among populists (ZULIANELLO – GUASTI 2023). Despite presenting thought-provoking inferences on why populists cope with external crises in the way they do, this recent body of research on the Covid-19 pandemic does not draw attention to the types or timing of the crises, which could potentially help us understand the variance in populist responses to crises. It merely underlines why populists try to bypass the mechanisms of institutional accountability, and create new 'anti-elitist' perspectives directed against scientific institutions. Not all external shocks prompt populists to adopt

a new anti-elitism discourse and, as evidenced by the electoral loss of Trump, not all crises confer electoral advantages to them (MENDOZA – SEVI 2021). Just as in the cases of other politicians, the way the populists 'exploit crises' for their own political purposes depends on the types and timing of the external shocks and on whether they are in power or in the opposition.[1] Depending on the type, timing and context, populists may interpret an external shock positively, as an opportunity, or negatively, as a threat. Under some circumstances, they may not frame it as a 'crisis' at all, which can affect their future political success (BOIN ET AL. 2009).

Contrary to the earlier accounts which underline populists' construction of anti-elitist discourses pitting the people against the elites during crises, this article shows that crises can also lead the populists in power to downgrade their "anti-elitist" approach in order to transform the crises into opportunity structures. As the case of the RAiU during the Hungarian national elections will illustrate, the emergence of such different discursive strategies is attributable to the timing, type and context of the crisis.

THE CASE OF THE 2022 HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

While the post-2010 Hungary is presented as a genuine case of populist governance in the existing literature (JENNE – MUDDE 2012; BATORY 2016), there is also an emerging consensus that Hungary is not a democracy anymore, but a competitive authoritarian hybrid regime (BOZÓKI – HEGEDŰS 2018; LEVITSKY – WAY 2020). In such a context, the political agency of the party leaders and their populist discourse play a major role in the mounting polarization (ENYEDI 2016; VEGETTI 2018). While negativity, character attacks and fear messages oftentimes constitute an established pattern in the electoral campaigns of populist actors (NAI 2021), the centralization of power in the hands of a populist government, and the abolishment of institutional checks and balances, transform an electoral process into an even more aggressive form of contest under competitive authoritarianism (ARBATLI – ROSENBERG 2021).

By the time of the 2022 national elections, the Hungarian government composed of the coalition of Fidesz and the KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party) had already been controlling a substantial proportion of the media market (BÁTORFY – URBÁN 2020). Yet, alternative sources of information still existed and reached out to the supporters of the

opposition through social media in Hungary. Amidst a strong wave of politicization within Hungarian society, a stark division emerged in the media landscape between the pro-government and independent (and often pro-opposition) outlets. Indeed, throughout the majority of the 2022 national election campaigns, the popularity of the opposition paralleled Fidesz's popularity, although polls consistently recorded a notable count of "undecided" votes (SCHEPPELE 2022).

This situation lends greater significance to the case of Hungary in terms of understanding when and how populists can transform crises into opportunity structures. The RAiU created an external shock over the campaign strategies of the populists in power and the united opposition that was close to defeating the populists just a few weeks before the election. How did the populists create an advantage out of this crisis for themselves? The battle of constructing the RAiU between the populist government and opposition outlets in the weeks leading up to the national election provides important insights into this question. The RAiU could also have been an opportunity for the opposition to transform the competition into a 'Putin or Europe?' referendum. By then, all entities associated with Western liberal alliances (the EU and NATO) were scapegoated as 'out-groups' by the populist government, especially in relation to the Hungarian nation-state (LAMOUR 2023: 8–9). Prime Minister Orban was a close ally of the Russian president Vladimir Putin. Yet, in this crisis, it was Russia that was the aggressor while Ukraine, allying itself with Europe and liberal alliances, was the so-called 'victim.' Orban could have paid the price for siding with the aggressor as he had visited Moscow just two weeks before the war. Indeed, a poll conducted between February 28 and March 3 found that 72 percent of the population considered Russia's attack unjustified, including two-thirds of Fidesz voters (MADLOVICS AND MAGYAR 2023: 270). Hence, how and why did the RAiU turn into an opportunity for Fidesz but not for the united opposition?

Existing accounts of the relationship between the RAiU and the Hungarian elections show that Fidesz-KDNP government propounded national security concerns and presented its electoral promises as expressions of the will of the Hungarian people during the elections (ÖZOFLU – ARATO 2023). Orbán portrayed the Russian invasion as a Slavic internal affair which Hungary had nothing to do with (MADLOVICS – MAGYAR 2023). A recent

study analyzing the social media accounts of Orbán and key oppositional leaders also found that Orbán owned the issue of the RAiU vis-à-vis the opposition leaders during the campaign and stressed it much more than the opposition in the weeks leading up to the elections (FARKAS ET AL. 2024). All these accounts are worthwhile in shedding light on how the Fidesz government created an opportunity structure out of the RAiU for their electoral gain. However, they do not delve into the populism literature; most importantly they do not investigate how and why the main elements of populism – anti-elitism and people-centrism – change direction during a time of crisis. The following sections, providing the data and methods of the research, fill this gap.

DATA AND METHODS: THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

In our research, we studied the changing theme of the electoral campaigns on the part of the pro-government and the pro-opposition media outlets in the pre-RAiU and post-RAiU phases. To break down the campaign roll-ercoaster Hungarian voters experienced, we examined the time period of the six months leading up to the elections in April 2022. More specifically, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the relevant Hungarian online news media articles and items published between October 16, 2021, which was the last day of the 2021 Hungarian opposition primary, and April 3, 2022, which was the day of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections.

As detailed in Appendix I, the 105 media outlets included in the analysis were selected through a multi-step process. The online news sites were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: The news sites had to (1) have a readership statistic of a minimum of 20,000 visits per day, and (2) feature quotes or campaign messages from the governing Fidesz-KDNP coalition and its related organizations (communication agencies, public opinion polling institutes) as well as from United for Hungary and its related organizations. The search was conducted between February and May 2022 by using a search string on Google. The search included keywords referencing the two competing political blocs, the elections, and the war in Ukraine. This study utilized data from the initial page of Google search results, as these entries are typically the most widely viewed and accessed by users and thus represent the most encountered information on the given topic. It also included posts from Facebook and video speeches as long as

they contained direct references to one of the popular electoral campaign themes. This data collection included only original content posted for campaign purposes by the politicians and excluded shared posts and content that was not created by the owner of the given social media profile. One exception to this, however, is the inclusion of the *"Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere"* Facebook page, which distributed Russian disinformation since the Covid-19 pandemic and quickly became one of the most visited pro-Fidesz fake news sites on social media, and was even occasionally cited by government-affiliated television programs (TV2, Pesti TV) as well (CZINKÓCZI 2022). Altogether only four Facebook posts are included in the study as these posts featured important aspects of the campaigns of both sides; namely these are the main campaign message of Marky-Zay Peter (about the anti-corruption fight), the campaign video of Fidesz disseminated throughout all social media platforms (primarily on Facebook and YouTube) and two posts representing how the government has outsourced its anti-Ukranian messages to third parties such as Balázs Németh (a former correspondent of the national television channel M1) and the *"Számok – a baloldali álhírek ellenszere"* page. The inclusion of these posts gives a more nuanced picture of the campaign messages most often encountered by the voters. However, we avoided a more comprehensive examination of social media platforms for two reasons: First, our primary focus is on online media outlets, and social media is regarded as an extension of traditional media formats. Second, the content of traditional media frequently incorporates references to social media posts, thereby enabling us to indirectly capture relevant social media data without the need for a dedicated analysis of social media platforms. This approach helps us to maintain a focused examination of the core online media landscape, while still accounting for the interplay between traditional and emerging digital media channels. After all, a mixed-media thematic content analysis *"is a reflexive style of content analysis that aims to be 'systematic and analytic, but not rigid'"* (ALTHEIDE 1987: 68).

Following the selection of these news sources, we categorized them according to their affiliations (independent, government-aligned, opposition-aligned). This categorization was based on an assessment of each outlet's editorial line, ownership structure, and prior reporting patterns, which were cross-referenced against existing media bias ratings and expert assessments of the Hungarian media landscape. In Appendix II, we provide some illustrative examples of the content and messaging from

a subset of these media outlets, representing the coding scheme captured in the analysis.

Manual coding was deemed necessary for the study, as not all the displays of campaign messaging were explicit and searching for a limited number and combination of keywords could miss more subtle information. Human coding allowed us to filter out spam messaging, grey-zone news (often containing gossip) and duplication of data. For the last category, we narrowed down the sample; hence, the comparative analysis of different news outlets did not generate significant differences. In the newspaper articles published by sites owned by the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), we often found – word-by-word – the same content, and therefore these repeated articles were eliminated from the study. Moreover, the analysis took into account each code for each indicator only once per article, even if it occurred multiple times in the news item. This process enabled us to more accurately capture the complexities and multifaceted nature of the campaign coverage, particularly since the majority of the news articles analyzed contained multiple messages as both the united opposition and Fidesz were regularly coupling together various campaign messages.

The final sample for coding included a total of 561 news stories (see Table 1). Each news story was treated as a single unit of analysis. These news stories were coded according to the four main code categories explained in Appendix II. First, the context of the news story, whether it was focusing on domestic or international issues, was examined within the **Code 1** category. This code allowed us to compare Fidesz and the united opposition in terms of their respective media outlets' coverage of international affairs before and after the RAiU. The **Code 2** category included the anti-elitism aspect of populism. It coded whether the electoral coalitions (the government and the opposition coalition) embraced a strategy of negative campaigning against the other side, and therefore measured their anti-elitism (Codes 2a and 2c). These codes were then divided into sub-codes regarding the specific ways Fidesz and United for Hungary condemned one another. In instances where Fidesz and United for Hungary were not engaged in negative campaigning, they embraced their 'own agenda' (Codes 2b and 2d), which were then divided into subcodes pertaining to specific programmatic issues or promises.

TABLE 1: QUANTITY OF MEDIA NEWS ITEMS SUBJECT TO ANALYSIS

	Before the RAiU (16/10/2022–23/02/2022)	After the RAiU (24/02/2022–03/04/2022)
Pro-Government Outlets	141	128
Pro-Opposition (Independent) Outlets	123	169
Total	264	297

We also separated messages adhering to the concept of people-centrism (i.e., safeguarding the national interests), labeling them as Code 3. Both the opposition and the government's positions as defenders of the 'Hungarian people' and their 'interests' were coded to highlight the contrast in the 'people-centric' messages from both sides before and after the RAiU. The biggest challenge of the coding process was to balance the pro-government and oppositional/independent news items due to the large imbalance of the Hungarian media landscape (POLYÁK 2019; POLYÁK ET AL. 2022). Another challenge was the careful categorization of grey-zone media, which is not yet pro-government but financially dependent on the government. Appendix I provides the details of each news source and the categories that they fall under.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THE SHIFT IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE RAIU

The results of the thematic content analysis of 561 online news items approximately six months before the national elections (264 before and 297 after the RAiU), show significant changes in the campaign messages of both Fidesz and United for Hungary, as is evident in both the pro-government and the independent media outlets. First of all, as demonstrated by Table 2, during the four months of the pre-RAiU stage, Fidesz's dominant strategy was to intimidate United for Hungary and their PM candidate Péter Marki-Zay. Yet following the RAiU, there was a marginal decline in the proportion of Fidesz's negative campaign targeting of the opposition (i.e., anti-elitism) and a noticeable effort on its part to amplify the volume of messages promoting its own agenda. On the other hand, while United for Hungary was paying equal attention to promoting its own agenda and delivering negative messages against Fidesz before the RAiU, after it, there was a noticeable shift toward increasing the number of negative messages against Fidesz while downgrading the emphasis on its own agenda.

TABLE 2: NEGATIVE VS. OTHER CAMPAIGN MESSAGES DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Fidesz's Negative Messages against the United for Hungary	*Fidesz Promoting Its Own Message*	*United for Hungary's Negative Messages against Fidesz*	*United for Hungary Promoting Its Own Message*
Before the War	**44.07** (%) 119/264	**8.1** (%) 22/264	**32.59** (%) 88/264	**33.3** (%) 90/264
After the Outbreak of the War	**35.88** (%) 108/297	**29.57** (%) 89/297	**46.18** (%) 139/297	**28.57** (%) 86/297

Table 3 below compares the types of negative campaigning (i.e. attacks against United for Hungary) on the part of the Fidesz-KDNP government before and after the outbreak of the war. What is particularly significant in these findings is the noticeable decline in the number of attacks by the government against key opposition figures based on their personality characteristics (especially the PM candidate Péter Márki-Zay). Prior to the war, Fidesz's negative campaigning strategy included choosing a target within the coalition of parties and demonizing all members of the coalition based on this target. The opposition coalition included the DK (*Demokratikus Koalíció* – Democratic Coalition), which was established by the deeply unpopular former prime minister of Hungary Ferenc Gyurcsany. Gyurcsany's continuing activism through the DK, as well as his wife Klara Dobrev's participation in the primaries as one of the top three candidates for the premiership in 2022, had given an advantage to the Fidesz campaign. When Dobrev took an early lead in the primaries vis-à-vis the liberal Budapest mayor Gergely Karacsony and Marki-Zay, who was a mayor in the rural south-east of the country in October 2021, the Fidesz government was quick to cast aspersions on the entire opposition, stating that it had become a puppet of Gyurcsany. When Marki-Zay won the nomination against Dobrev in the oppositional bloc, Fidesz continued with this strategy. Within the frame of the approaching elections, it dominated all the pro-government media outlets, which portrayed the oppositional candidate Marki-Zay as a "mini-Feri", in other words, a puppet of Gyurcsany.

TABLE 3: TYPES OF NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING BY THE FIDESZ-KDNP COALITION DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Attacking the Personality of an Opposition Figure	**62.18** (%) 77/119	**47.2** (%) 51/108
Equating the Opposition with the Former PM Gyurcsány	**21.84** (%) 26/119	**23.15** (%) 25/108
Equating the Opposition with Liberal Internationalists	**13.4** (%) 16/119	**12.96** (%) 14/108
Attacking the Liberal Values of the Opposition	**14.29** (%) 17/119	**18.52** (%) 20/108
Criticizing the Political Program of the Opposition	**41.18** (%) 49/119	**46.30** (%) 50/108
Labeling the Opposition as 'Supporters of the War'	**2.5** (%) 3/119	**51.85** (%) 56/108

Table 3 shows that this strategy did not end following the outbreak of the war. Fidesz was consistent in highlighting this message in its electoral campaigns and there was a visible continuity in its anti-elitist discourse describing the opposition members as those that 'serve' Brussels or liberal internationalists. Five months before the war started (in October 2022), the government was initiating a campaign stating that 'sanctions from Brussels are destroying us.' After the outbreak of the war, it started promoting a language that labels the entire opposition as 'the supporters of the war.' This was a novel frame that built upon Márki-Zay's statements in the media regarding the support for NATO during the war. His statements was interpreted by the pro-government media as 'the opposition dragging Hungary into the war in Ukraine,' which appeared in approximately 51 per cent of the news items that were attacking United for Hungary in the post-RAiU phase, as shown in Table 3.

However, the continuity within Fidesz's anti-elitist discourse is less significant than the noteworthy increase in its people-centrism after the outbreak of the war. Within this period, Orban rolled the Ukrainian war along twin tracks, portraying the EU sanctions and other threats against Hungary's reliance on Russian gas and energy as paramount dangers while numbing millions of Hungarians to the humanitarian and geopolitical catastrophe next door. Media sources with more direct ties to the ruling party, such as the online sites of the state-owned television channels, the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* and the government's official site (kormany.hu), demonstrated a less overt pro-Russian position. Conversely, media

outlets with looser connections to the governing party attacked the opposition candidate's personal life and character more aggressively and displayed an overtly anti-Ukrainian stance, as observed on the Facebook pages of Fidesz members, the organization Megafon and pro-government tabloid-style outlets (*Blikk* and *Bors*) in the former case, and in HÍrTV, *Mandiner* and *Pesti Srácok* in the latter. However, it is important to note that occasionally, a seemingly looser connection to the government does not mean less governmental control, as it rather represents an effort on the part of Fidesz to diversify its own media landscape (see *Origo's* more balanced reporting or *Propeller's* pro-opposition articles). Furthermore, a divergence was noted between regional pro-government publishers and national-level pro-government publishers, as regional media under KESMA consistently displayed the narratives of the ruling party, while simultaneously giving no visibility to the program of the opposition.

Following the conflict, Fidesz adeptly established a distinct agenda, positioning Viktor Orban as a defender of Hungarian interests by maintaining a non-participatory stance regarding the war (see Table 4). Orban refrained from overtly endorsing either side of the conflict, asserting Hungary's non-involvement in the ongoing war, and stating: *"It's in our interest not to be pawns in someone else's war. In this war we have nothing to gain and everything to lose"* (COAKLEY 2022).

TABLE 4: FIDESZ PROMOTING ITS OWN MESSAGE DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Political Program	**100%** 22/22	**48.3%** 43/89
Pro-Transcarpathian and Anti-Ukrainian Agenda	-	**46.07%** 41/89
Peace: "Hungary must stay out of the war"	-	**57.3%** 51/89

Code 3, which measures the people-centrist aspect of populism, allows us to show that after the onset of the RAiU, Fidesz turned into a 'protector of Hungarian interests.' Prior to the war, Fidesz was mainly focusing on its own political program in terms of serving the people. Following the RAiU, it started representing itself as a champion safeguarding Hungarian national interests by promoting a "Hungary must stay out of the war" agenda that included Hungarians living in Ukraine's Transcarpathian region. This marked a fresh agenda for Fidesz, which unveiled rapidly after the

war's outbreak. Initially, the strategy revolved around a negative campaign against the opposition rather than emphasizing Fidesz's own aspirations.

On the other side, Table 5 illustrates the evolution of the opposition's negative campaign against the government, showcasing notable shifts in its focus and messaging. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the opposition primarily directed its campaign towards highlighting the government's corruption and its authoritarian tendencies. Following the occurrence of the war, the opposition's discourse retained its emphasis on the authoritarian practices of the Orban government, but a significant alteration occurred as these criticisms were now intertwined with a portrayal of the government as 'Putin's puppet,' and notably, the emphasis on government corruption diminished in the opposition's discourse.

TABLE 5: TYPES OF NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING BY UNITED FOR HUNGARY DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Referring to the Government as 'Putin's Puppet'	**15.91** (%) 14/88	**35.97** (%) 50/139
Underlining Government Corruption	**45.45** (%) 40/88	**15.83** (%) 22/139
Underlining the Authoritarian Practices of the Government	**44.32** (%) 39/88	**47.48** (%) 66/139
Accusing the Government of Lying	**17.05** (%) 15/88	**28.06** (%) 39/139
Criticizing the Political Program of the Government	**23.86** (%) 21/88	**36.69** (%) 51/139

Instead, the opposition increasingly accused the government of aligning with Russia and deviating from democratic norms and the rule of law. This shift in messaging was likely prompted by the government's attempts to portray the opposition as 'supportive of the war.' The opposition found itself compelled to counter these allegations and defend itself. There was a noticeable surge in accusations against the government stating that it was 'disseminating lies.' Márki-Zay, in particular, repeatedly clarified that his intentions did not involve deploying Hungarian troops to Ukraine.

TABLE 6: UNITED FOR HUNGARY PROMOTING ITS OWN MESSAGE DURING THE ELECTIONS

	Before the War	After the Outbreak of the War
Support for Democracy & Constitutional Reform	**27.78** (%) 25/90	**34.88** (%) 30/86
Support for the EU & NATO	**13.33** (%) 12/90	**38.37%** 33/86
Support for Liberal Values & Human Rights	**31.11** (%) 28/90	**39.53** (%) 34/86
Addressing Economic Issues & Unemployment	**15.56** (%) 14/90	**18.6** (%) 16/86
Addressing Gas & Utility Prices	**2.22** (%) 2/90	**11.63** (%) 10/86
Support for Ukraine	**1.1** (%) 1/90	**25.58** (%) 22/86

The opposition also shifted its focus toward the escalating gas and utility prices, while also taking a decisive pro-Ukrainian, pro-NATO and pro-EU stance within the ongoing conflict. In fact, the opposition's pro-EU and pro-NATO stance was not that salient in the pre-RAiU phase of the campaigns even though the discourse on the support for democracy and rule of law persisted in both periods. This discourse emerged as a result of the opposition's endeavor to reshape the electoral landscape into a referendum, vividly outlining the high-stakes choice between the Orban-Putin alliance and the values represented by the West and Europe. In other words, while the pro-Fidesz media propagated a discourse emphasizing the government's commitment to peace and contrasted it with the alleged pro-war stance of the opposition, the opposition crafted a message portraying the government as an ally of the aggressor Russia, while positioning themselves as being in alignment with Ukraine and the West.

In this respect, the fact that the war had not yet created a material impact on Hungary and Fidesz's control of its media channels warrants attention. A thematic analysis of the RAiU's media presentation on five Hungarian television channels demonstrates that on the three pro-government channels, especially the public service channel M1, Viktor Orban and other governmental figures were overrepresented (NMHH 2022: 14). Moreover, the main discourse about the conflict revolved around the refugee influx and the government's peace message. The combat between the pro-government and pro-opposition sides over how the RAiU would affect the energy prices remained salient at the discursive level, but since the RAiU had not yet created any visible effect on the society, it was not clear to what extent the criticisms of the opposition were approved of by

the public. The opposition's PM candidate criticized the Hungarian government's utility price reduction policy (*rezsicsökkentés*) and proposed viable alternatives, while Fidesz positioned itself as a vocal proponent of *rezsicsökkentés* without adjustments and made the policy a part of its recurring campaign themes even after the outbreak of the war. The Fidesz-KDNP administration had implemented a price-freezing approach to utility cost reduction since 2013, and on occasion even profited from it when global market prices fell down. In general, however, the utility price reduction policies disproportionately benefited higher-income population segments relative to low-income households, as was typical of the Orban government's financial nationalism. This dynamic was attributable to the latter group's reliance on lower-quality, market-priced fuels as well as their residence in less energy-efficient homes, which limited the impact of the regulated price decreases (WEINER – SZÉP 2022). Yet, Fidesz was able to spin the narrative in a way which depicted the government as a protector of low energy prices amid an international conflict. According to the Government Information Center, 64% of Hungary's crude oil imports originated from Russia. Furthermore, 85% of the country's natural gas consumption was supplied through Russian imports. The significance of this reliance was underscored by the fact that 85% of Hungarian households utilized natural gas in March 2022 (BRÜCKNER 2022). This substantial domestic dependency on natural gas, a commodity heavily sourced from Russia, can be argued to influence the government's cautious positioning on the RAiU.

On the whole, Fidesz adeptly incorporated the public's desire for security and stability into its campaign. By portraying the opposition as a potential catalyst for war, it steered the discourse towards themes of peace, security, and accessible energy. In an interview one month before the elections for the pro-government news outlet *Mandiner*, Viktor Orban accused the opposition of being not only incompetent but also supportive of the war: *"The opposition wants to send weapons to shoot at the Russians, or soldiers to fight the Russians. This shows that they have no routine, no knowledge, and no sense of responsibility. They are adding fuel to the fire with their irresponsible statements, and this is against Hungary's interests. Instead of adventurism, we need responsible politics, security and stability"* (KEREKI – SZALAI 2022). Through articulating that everything else is secondary to Hungarian interests, Fidesz's campaign unequivocally conveyed the message that an opposition victory could draw Hungary into the Ukrainian war. In

summary, during the post-RAiU phase, Fidesz effectively refreshed its agenda centered around 'the Hungarian people,' while subordinating its anti-elitist rhetoric against the opposition to this people-centrism associated with stability, security and prosperity of the Hungarians amid an international conflict.

DISCUSSION: HOW THE TYPE AND TIMING OF A CRISIS AND BEING IN POWER MATTER FOR POPULISTS

The analysis of the campaign discourses during the 2022 Hungarian elections reveals distinct shifts in focus within the pro-government and pro-opposition camps prior to and following the outbreak of the RAiU. In essence, the RAiU was an external shock for both the opposition and Fidesz, and it led them to change the momentum in their favor within a deeply polarized electoral landscape. Notably, Fidesz's discourse exhibited a downgrading of its anti-elitism (even though it persisted) while introducing novel elements of a people-centered approach based on Hungarian interests into that discourse. By portraying the opposition as a catalyst for war, the incumbent party effectively set itself apart by championing peace, security, and affordable energy. In contrast, United for Hungary's pro-EU and pro-NATO stance was coupled with a strong emphasis on the 'authoritarian practices' and 'lies' of the Orban government.

Our findings correspond with a research conducted on Viktor Orban's public speeches and statements that underlines how he invokes illiberal versions of sovereignty, namely extra-legal and organic sovereignty (PARIS 2022). However, in contrast with the existing literature that underlines the resilience of anti-elitist strategies such as blame-shifting (i.e., shifting the blame to the elite technocrats and scientists during the Covid-19 pandemic) in populist discourse, our analysis has shown that people-centrist elements of populism can be of more value to populists during certain crises. Hence, populists' ability to transform external crises into successful opportunity structures depends on the type and timing of the crisis as well as the contextual factor of whether they are in power or not. In this case, the crisis was an external shock, the onset of an international conflict between what Orban called 'liberal internationalists' and Hungary's ally Russia. One must consider that Fidesz took a cautious approach to it without publicly favoring a clear pro-Russian stance against its long-time 'liberal

internationalist' enemy. Instead, it highlighted a message of neutrality, peace and stability vis-à-vis taking sides, while also extending a protection over the Hungarian population living in the Trans-Carpathian region of Ukraine. Perhaps this was because Fidesz could neither side with Russia nor fully reject the EU in this war situation.

These critical issues held significant weight for undecided and economically challenged voters who did not yet know but only assumed the upcoming effects of the war. In this sense, the timing of the crisis, which took place only four weeks before the pre-determined election date, also mattered. The refugee wave and the increase in energy prices did not yet have time to affect the election result. This possibly makes the Hungarian case less comparable with other cases - for instance, those of Poland and Slovakia, whose national elections were held in October 2023 and March-April 2024 respectively, as the material effects of the RAiU on their societies were much more visible in those periods (ŠITERA – KOCHLÖFFEL 2024). In Hungary, the concerns over energy prices could not go beyond a discursive battle between the pro-government and pro-opposition forces, and the uncertainty about the future more or less favored the Orbán government. According to a survey published by the pro-government Nézőpont Institute (2022), 61 percent of Hungarians believed that PM Orbán could stand up for Hungarian interests better than Péter Márki-Zay, the opposition frontrunner in the 2022 election. The war was a relatable concern for a substantial portion of the voting population (BOJAR ET AL. 2022). Ultimately, foreign policy decisions based on morality (as the opposition framed the war in moral terms) were outweighed by those based on the perceived impact of the war on voters' own material well-being.

Finally, the overrepresentation of Fidesz's messages and its high visibility in the media landscape are attributable to its status as the ruling party. Fidesz's ability to transform the discursive field into a battle between a pro-war and a pro-peace position (with Fidesz representing the latter and the united opposition representing the former) in such a short period should not be neglected. Fidesz's control over the discourse on the RAiU in the media often placed the opposition in a defensive position leading to an increase in its negative campaigning tone and also leading it to accuse the government of lying more often. This might have given relatively less energy to the oppositional camp for coming up with novel frames regarding

people's interests during the time of an international conflict. Hence, in order to pursue a correct reading of the relationship between crises and populism, scholars must pay attention to whether populism is in power or in opposition during the outbreak of the given crisis, which is ultimately related to the populists' ability to control the dominant discourses.

CONCLUSION

Our article aimed to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between populism and crises, highlighting that the populists' performative success in transforming a crisis into an opportunity structure depends on the type and timing of the crisis as well as the contextual factor of whether they are in power. As demonstrated in the Hungarian case, by refreshing the 'people-centrist' elements of its discourse and spreading such new frames as 'peace' and 'security' as a party in power, Fidesz maintained an advantage in the 2022 national elections during the onset of the RAiU. It paid attention to highlighting 'neutrality' in its electoral campaign even though one side of the conflict was its outspoken ally (i.e., Russia) and the other side was Ukraine, which was receiving support from the 'liberal internationalist' enemy. Due to the difficulty of taking sides, Fidesz paid more attention to people-centrism than anti-elitism. This finding contrasts with the prevailing arguments in the existing literature, namely that populism often shifts the blame to the political elites and triggers anti-elitism during a crisis time. The RAiU was an unexpected external shock which ultimately led to the adoption of this novel strategy by Fidesz. It should further not be forgotten that the timing of the RAiU and Fidesz's ruling party status also mattered. The war had not produced any material impact on Hungarian society at the time of the 2022 national elections and Fidesz was easily able to transform the discursive field into pro-war and pro-peace positions. Hence, Fidesz' performance regarding the construct of the RAiU may not be the same as those of populists in other electoral contexts.

It is important to underline a few implications of this election for the future of Hungarian politics. With the material effects of the RAiU currently being much more visible than at the time of the 2022 national elections, we observe that PM Orban reinforced his anti-elitist messages targeting the EU and liberal internationalists in the months after the elections. For

instance, in his speech on the CPAC in Budapest, May 2023, PM Viktor Orban called on his international allies to follow his populist strategy as *"U.S. and Hungarian conservatives must join forces in the 2024 elections to 'take back' the institutions in Washington and Brussels from liberals who threaten western civilization,"* and *"there will be the European Parliament (EP) elections, where we can finally topple the progressive elite and drain the Brussels swamp"* (CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2023). Perhaps the escalation of the people-centrist aspect of Fidesz's populism was only specific to the 2022 national elections; yet there is a need for more research that would analyse the discursive strategies maintained in the 2024 European Parliament and local elections and how they differed from those of the 2022 national elections. As Krisztián Ungváry, a chronicler of the 1956 rebellion, put it: *"Orban says that for us Hungarians, Hungarian interests are the most important thing and all else is secondary. Many people are all right with this concept"* (THE GUARDIAN 2022). This discourse of Orban being a 'freedom fighter', a 'defender of traditional conservative values', and a 'defender of Hungarian interests and sovereignty' was not only well-integrated into the established populist discourse of the ruling party, but it transformed into the main message of Fidesz's campaign during the 2022 Hungarian national elections.

ENDNOTES

1 *Crisis exploitation* is defined as *"the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office holders and public policies"* (Boin et al. 2009: 83).

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Emotions and Feeling Rules in Political Discourse. The Case of NATO-Russian Relations over Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The article highlights the potential of emotions to influence political reality and observes the psychological climate fostered by Russian and NATO leaders over the current NATO-Russia-Ukraine relations. Firstly, it does so by analyzing the occurrence and the frequency of used emotions in political speeches of the Russian Federation and NATO, and commenting on the relationship of the two parties, their shared interests, and their disagreements on various political and security issues, all directly tied to Ukraine as a third party that has stood between these two blocs for many years. Secondly, the authors observe how political leaders use specific emotions in their public speeches to foster their distributive power politics, thus maintaining a particular psychological climate among citizens or member states. Using the public speeches of Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov, representing the Russian Federation, and Jens Stoltenberg and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, representing NATO as its current and former Secretary Generals, the analysis reveals the hidden role of emotions in an individual's discourse and connects them to a broader social and security context. The use of emotions in political communication can shape reality and disguise or, conversely, reveal the intentions of an individual, a group, or an entire state. Producing knowledge about the current war in Ukraine and the reasoning about its outbreak and progress fostered by political leaders (primarily through fear, indignation, and resentment) may be seen as normalizing some of the worst acts of violence. Emotions are therefore considered a powerful, effective, and inseparable tool of political communication, the importance of which is often overlooked.

KEYWORDS	emotions, political discourse, NATO, Russian Federation, Ukraine, psychological climate, power politics.
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INTRODUCTION

"But leaving unanalyzed the feelings behind the thoughts, the issues of sympathy and approbation, of solidarity, and, unfortunately, also of hate, is not simply an omission: it is to fail in the very effort of providing a coherent account of social reality."

(KRATOCHWIL 1994: 503)

The intentional use of emotions in political communication is currently on the rise. The significance attributed to language in political communication, along with its frequently emphasized influence on international relations and security, has led to an increasing recognition of emotions as a vital and extensively studied factor that impacts the perception of political reality. Until recently, the importance attributed to language in the field was minimal, as international relations and politics were predominantly studied and analyzed from a traditional perspective (KRATOCHWIL 1994). In this aspect, the underlying context concealed behind words and sentences in political speeches held little or no weight.

However, a notable shift in thinking occurred following the end of the Cold War – it was around this time that language and discourse started to be accorded greater significance, not only as an integral component of culture, but also as a tool that carries, shapes and redefines meaning.

This phenomenon grants language a significant social influence. Through language, for example, politicians can unsettle or instill fear in the public, exacerbate a negative public opinion, perpetuate prejudices, or evoke negative associations (MARKWICA 2018). When it comes to sensitive matters like national and international security, engaging in such actions can result in public condemnation or even an undermining of the given politician's reputation when their manipulative tactics are revealed to the public (YONGTAO 2010). On the other hand, when certain communication elements are used in moderation, they can lead to various political successes. The language in political speeches, for instance, can be utilized to reassure a concerned population, alleviate panic, or foster a sense of unity. Hence, it is evident that language, speech, and communication hold an inseparable and significant position within the political environment and psychological

climate. They possess the ability to influence public perception, shape political agendas, and even impact international relations (IBID.).

Observing emotions in connection with high political representatives offers many possibilities for researching patterns of behavior. As Patalakh (2018) states, if the actor uses strong positive emotions toward his group (or even the state), there is often an opposite emotion towards the others, who are often perceived as rivals or enemies. The result can significantly strengthen positive emotions towards one's own group, while negative emotions towards others multiply considerably. The strong influence of emotions on the actor can cause a loss of sober, factual reasoning. In this direction, historical trauma often plays a role. If it was present in the community in the past, it acquires social significance, influences community behavior, and mobilizes emotions that force the group members to stick together within the same psychological climate, and thus strengthen their identity.

Substantial research has already been conducted on the role of emotions in political discourse (E.G. SANCHEZ SALGADO 2021; BURKE 2017; GUSTAFSSON – HALL 2021; HUTCHISON – BLEIKER 2014). Additionally, many scholars have investigated how political figures can utilize emotions to influence public opinion and manipulate the public in order to achieve their own goals (E.G. CISLARU 2012; WILDMANN 2022; GILL 2016). However, no relevant literature has explored the concept of psychological climate and its formation by individuals in the context of public communication in crisis situations, or specifically in connection with the current war in Ukraine. Psychological climate refers to the overall atmosphere or environment within a particular setting or group that influences the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals within it. It encompasses the collective perceptions, attitudes, and emotions shared by the people in that context, which can greatly impact their well-being, motivation, and interactions. As Rego and Pina e Cunha (2006) define it, the psychological climate can be positive, in which case it fosters a sense of trust, support, and inclusivity, or it can be negative, in which case it is characterized by fear, hostility, and tension. It plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' experiences and can significantly affect their performance, satisfaction, and overall mental health. For instance, a positive workplace climate characterized by support, trust, and collaboration can enhance employee satisfaction and performance. In contrast, a negative

climate marked by hostility or unfairness can lead to stress and disengagement. Even though the authors defined the concept of psychological climate predominantly by applying it to workplaces, it can just as well be applied to international relations and politics.

Conducting research on the psychological climate in relation to political communication during crisis situations has the potential to yield intriguing and credible findings. These findings can greatly contribute to a deeper comprehension of the complex dynamics underlying ongoing international conflicts, which pose a direct threat to global security. The war in Ukraine, initiated by the invasion of Russian troops on Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022, stands out as a prime example of such a crisis. This conflict not only marks a significant historical event as the biggest war on European soil since the end of the Second World War but also represents a deeply concerning conflict that jeopardizes the sovereignty and very existence of an independent nation. However, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began well before its escalation in 2022. In 2014, the Russian Federation unlawfully annexed Crimea, a region belonging to Ukraine, and subsequently adopted a confrontational rhetoric not only towards Ukraine but also towards NATO, which had been its historical adversary during the Cold War. Despite the official end of the Cold War, it appears that the mutual misunderstanding, ideological differences, and historical grievances continue to widen the gap between these factions, with Ukraine caught in the middle. This conflict appears to be driven by strong emotions rooted in historical events, indicating that there are deeper underlying factors at play beyond the immediate situation in Ukraine.

Previous research on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has only scratched the surface when it comes to understanding the significance of emotions in this complex situation. Reinke de Buitrago (2022), for example, focused on investigating the interplay between visuals and emotions, as well as the impact of emotions on behavior and policy. Her study specifically examined how visual framings of the war in Ukraine in (social) media, created by Ukrainians and their Western supporters, contribute to shaping a particular understanding of the conflict, evoking emotions, and mobilizing individuals. Ventsel, Hansson, Madisson and Sazonov (2021) analyzed the power of fear in politics and the military. The authors used the 'Zapad 2017' military exercise, the largest recent Russian war games on

NATO's eastern borders, as a case study to illustrate how fear narratives can be interpreted. They specifically focused on the narratives formulated by Russian official spokespeople in relation to the exercise and conducted a thorough analysis to uncover the underlying meaning-making tendencies. Their research revealed some more sophisticated and indirect ways in which fear is employed to shape perceptions and manipulate outcomes. Also, the utilization of the Russian-NATO relations by Simon Koschut (2018A) served as a prime example of an exploration of emotions within political discourse. These studies suggest that integrating emotions as an additional category of analysis expands the scope of meanings that can be derived from a discourse analysis.

No previous research has comprehensively assessed how the psychological climate is shaped by individuals within the framework of public communication during crisis situations, or particularly in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine. This article seeks to address this issue and uncover the concealed influence of emotions in an individual's discourse within a wider social or security context by addressing the following research questions: 1) *How frequently were various emotions used in the political speeches of the Russian Federation and NATO?* 2) *How were specific emotions used by the selected political leaders in their public speeches to form the psychological climate as a part of their distributive power politics?* 3) *In what ways did the selected political leaders strategically employ specific emotions within their public speeches to shape the psychological climate?*

The authors explored the political ramifications of emotions in the context of the NATO-Russia relations over Ukraine from 2014 until the present. By applying emotion discourse analysis, they analyzed the usage and frequency of emotions in political speeches delivered by the selected Russian Federation and NATO leaders, specifically focusing on sections that addressed the relationship dynamics, shared interests, and disagreements tied to Ukraine. Furthermore, they observed how the selected political leaders, namely Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov from Russia, and Jens Stoltenberg and Anders Fogh Rasmussen from NATO, strategically employed specific emotions in their public speeches to bolster their power politics and create a particular psychological climate.

Within the realm of political communication, it is commonly acknowledged that emotions can play a significant role in shaping perceptions and either disguising or unveiling the intentions of individuals, groups, or even entire states (CISLARU 2012). In this article, emotions are regarded as a potent and indispensable tool for political communication, whose significance is frequently underestimated. Acknowledging the inherent difficulty of comparing the expressions of individuals representing international organizations and those representing their own states, this analysis presents a valuable contribution to the study of emotions in the context of international politics. Moreover, it enriches the field of the examination of crises by offering a discursive perspective, as discourse is a relevant part of the political and security reality.

The first section of the article develops the debate about the importance of identifying and acknowledging emotions in political communication and the broader political discourse. The second section conceptualizes emotions within the framework of emotion discourse analysis, specifies its operationalization, and explains the selection of the analyzed speeches. Finally, the third section interprets and discusses the emotions used in the analyzed speeches and contextualizes them within the notion of distributive power politics.

EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The concept of emotions has been generally applied to individuals and their internally experienced feelings. However, how individuals understand their emotions, act based on them, and recognize emotions in others is cognitively and culturally conditioned (CRAWFORD 2014: 537). Thus, emotions are commonly discussed in connection with their ontological and epistemological dichotomy. They can be seen as rational or irrational, biological or cultural, personal or cultural, or spontaneous or strategic (KOSCHUT 2018A: 277). Consequently, emotions are studied as an epiphenomenon, as a source of irrationality, as a tool for strategically minded actors, and most recently as a necessary aspect of rationality (MERCER 2006). The article follows Mercer's assumption that emotion *"can undermine rationality even while it is necessary to rationality"* (IBID.: 299).[1]

Furthermore, the article follows R. Markwica's definition of emotions: *"emotions are transient, partly biologically based, and partly culturally conditioned responses to a stimulus, which give rise to a coordinated process including appraisals, feelings, bodily reactions, and expressive behavior, all of which prepare people to deal with the stimulus"* (MARKWICA 2018: 58). Thus, emotions are ascribed to individuals but performed collectively. When, why, and how emotions appear are questions of socially recognized and learned patterns. Jonathan Mercer advocates the existence of group emotions, which he understands as ideological structures and which, at the same time, create structures of relationships between people as well as larger groups, organizations, or states (MERCER 2014: 521–523).

When we accept the premise of the social life of emotions and *"their existence as socially meaningful elements of human lived experience"* (GUSTAFSSON – HALL 2021: 974), emotions become political. In this context, group emotions as ideological structures are understood through representation (HUTCHISON – BLEIKER 2014). From this perspective, emotions are studied as represented in our expressions, discourses, and social practices, which are influenced by what Hall and Gustafsson called a distributive politics of emotions, which they defined, in connection with Harold Laswell's aphorism *"who gets what, when, how"*, as *"who gets to feel what, when, and how, and whose feelings matter"* (LASWELL 1936).

Authors often focus on the use of emotions in times of crisis – Sanchez Salgado (2021), for example, explored how emotions contribute to comprehending the decision-making processes during crisis situations, and how emotions can manifest and reflect power dynamics and status in various crises (2022). From this perspective, emotions can influence crisis situations by constraining the range of policy solutions considered. Zilincik (2022) expanded this premise and focused on observing the relationship between emotions and the development of a military strategy – emotions can, for example, play a crucial role in maintaining the domestic support for a war effort as they can serve as a powerful motivator for strategists and their societies to persevere until victory is attained. Burke (2017) also contributed to the research of emotion in the political sphere and confirmed the relationship between emotion and sentiment as a driving tool for the creation of the postwar human rights program at the UN.

The second area of research that authors often focus on in this regard is the role of emotion as a tool for public manipulation. According to Cislaru (2012), emotions serve as a rhetorical instrument employed by politicians, media discourse, and even citizens themselves to influence or shape public opinion. As the author states, although both positive and negative emotions can be spread in society, fear, anger, and guilt are among the most shared emotions. This idea was confirmed by Gill (2016), who explores how psychological mechanisms are exploited by social entrepreneurs to advance their own agendas, such as reinforcing in-group bonds, generating a sense of crisis, or retaining power. According to the author, the emotion of fear becomes vulnerable to political rhetoric and manipulation, resulting in what is known as the "biopolitics of fear." The individual use of emotions by politicians is a very frequent topic of academic debate. Kornblit (2022) demonstrates that politicians can harness the power of emotion to foster a sense of collective identity by demonstrating shared authority at both the federal and decision-making levels, expressing empathy towards the populace, and calling for solidarity.

The power of emotions can be observed not only on the individual but also on the state and international level. Hall (2015) defines the concept of emotional diplomacy and explores how state actors strategically use emotional behavior to influence how others perceive "them". Emotions used in political discourse are, according to the author, not only cheap talk but also a relevant strategy for states to use to defend their interests and position in the international arena. Emotions therefore enter the decision-making process in realms of economic and military aid, great-power cooperation, and even the use of armed force. Hall examines three distinct types of emotional diplomacy: those driven by the emotions of anger, sympathy, and guilt.

A somewhat more abstract and extensive concept of emotions was defined by the author Claire Yorke (2020). It is the concept of atmospherics - the author investigated to what extent a correct reading of the mood and emotions of the population is important for building a more effective policy. Similarly, Beauregard (2022), who focused on the long-term effects of emotions in the study of international relations, defined the term "emotional intensity" as a term that encompasses the length of the emotion, the intensity of the physiological arousal, repeatedly reliving the emotion,

strong urges to take action, and extreme behavior. When applying this concept to the adoption of economic sanctions against Russia during the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the author explained how emotions can support and foster cooperation against the "enemy".

ANALYZING EMOTIONS

Although there is currently quite an extensive number of works that link international relations, politics, and security with the phenomenon of emotions and acknowledge their importance, there are still doubts about how to systematically research them. Recently, two comprehensive monographs have been published that try to fill this gap and propose several relevant methods (VAN RYTHOVEN – SUCHAROV 2019; CLÉMENT – SANGAR 2018). To choose a sufficient method, Clément and Sangar (2018) suggest first identifying the analytical position of emotions by placing them within three overarching questions:

- What effects do emotions have on other empirical phenomena (such as perceptions or behavior)?
- Why and how are specific emotions used by political leaders and institutions?
- How to detect the inseparable yet partly hidden role of emotions within larger discursive dynamics?

It is important to note that these questions are not mutually exclusive. The research questions asked in the introduction of the article are ontologically focused on the discourse, specifically the political discourse. Thus, can be placed within the second and third questions asked above. Subsequently, emotion discourse analysis, as defined by Simon Koschut, was chosen as a relevant method to be applied in the article.[2] Koschut links political discourse with emotions and applies them to a wider political or security context. There are also other authors who have employed the connection between discourse and emotions in their research during the last two decades (E.G. AHÄLL – GREGORY 2013; EBERLE – DANIEL 2019; EDKINS 2003; ROSS 2014; SOLOMON 2014; VAN RYTHOVEN 2015).

Nevertheless, Koschut's emotion discourse analysis represents a comprehensive methodological framework for studying emotions that

allows one to portray the role of emotions that reinforce *"relational structures of dominance and resistance but can also lead to transformations of social hierarchies in world politics"* (KOSCHUT 2018B: 495). The framework is based on three steps*: "(1) selecting appropriate texts, (2) mapping the verbal expression of emotions, and (3) interpreting and contextualizing their political implications"* (KOSCHUT 2018A). The present article follows these steps.

Selecting Appropriate texts

To obtain appropriate and relevant data, a collection of credible documents or speeches was required. For the Russian speeches, the annual addresses to the Federal Assembly were used as the main source of the data analysis. The annual address is made in front of the Russian Parliament, which is called the Federal Assembly. Although the addresses do not have any legal force, the head of state, as the main custodian, summarizes a current internal and foreign problems and proposes subsequent solutions to them for the upcoming years. The addresses are influential not only for members of the parliament but also for other authorities of the Federation and the whole society because the solutions and visions mentioned during the addresses by the president are seen as proposals for changing already existing policies or new policy concepts. As the speeches are about both domestic and foreign affairs of the given year, only the parts about foreign affairs were chosen for this study. Apart from the annual addresses, Putin's speeches given at the Valdai Discussion Club were also analyzed. This Moscow-based think-tank represents a famous discussion forum closely associated with President Putin, where formal meetings are held annually and topics of international relations, politics, and security are commonly discussed. Furthermore, the speeches of Sergei Lavrov and Vladimir Putin from the Munich Conference were also analyzed, as the conference serves as a meeting point between the Russian leaders and other European and world leaders. Furthermore, Putin's published article from July 2021 about the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians and his speeches from the 21st and 24th of February 2022 were also included in the analysis as they represent a peak of the conflict right before the war. The total number of the relevant Russian speeches in the pre-invasion period was 29.

To provide a complex illustration of the role of emotions in the policy-making process, a few documents from the post-invasion period were observed as well. More precisely, to compare different phases of the emotional discourse of President Putin, the authors added the following speeches to the analysis: "The Victory Parade on Red Square" from May 2022, "The Address by the President of the Russian Federation" from September 2022, and "The Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly" from February 2023.

To obtain relevant data from NATO speeches, we selected and analyzed various documents. The focus was put on the NATO Annual Reports and official Addresses to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, both of which were delivered by the Secretary-General, and represent the most formal documents commenting on various security challenges and issues. Apart from them, important data were extracted from press conferences and releases that respond to current events in real time and are therefore suitable for capturing raw emotions in texts. NATO Speeches and Remarks also appear to be suitable data sources and are usually arranged when it is necessary to comment on important events over time. Some interesting conclusions can also be drawn from the panel discussions, where it is common that experts outside of NATO address security and political issues, and thus contribute to the relevance of the discussion itself. The total number of relevant NATO speeches in the pre-invasion period was 38.

Similarly, as in the case of Russia, three post-invasion NATO speeches were added to the analysis to see how the emotional discourse of Jens Stoltenberg either remained consistent or changed over time. More precisely, the following documents were analyzed: "A statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the International Crimea Platform" from August 2022, "the Keynote speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Berlin Security Conference" from December 2022, and "the Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the release of his Annual Report" from March 2023.

All the data were obtained from the archives of the official websites of the Russian Federation and NATO (<HTTP://EN.KREMLIN.RU, HTTPS://MID.RU/EN/, HTTPS://RUSSIAEU.RU/EN, AND HTTPS://WWW.NATO.INT>). *All the data were from the period from 2014, when the Russia-Ukrainian crisis started with the annexation of*

Crimea by the Russian Federation, to 2023, when the world already witnessed one year of the war in Ukraine, but with one exception: Putin's famous speech at the 2007 Munich Conference. The authors started the analysis of the texts in March 2023, and almost 2 months were devoted to this stage of the research.

Mapping the Verbal Expression of Emotions, Their Interpretation and Their Contextualization

The authors looked for occurrences of emotions[3] in the given texts, with a focus on their frequency. Due to the amount of pre-selected texts, the Atlas.ti software was used for this purpose. Based on Koschut's framework (2020: 9), the authors looked for specific emotion terms in various forms, such as nouns, verbs, or adverbs. Then they searched for emotional connotations, emotional metaphors, comparisons, and analogies. In this case, a phrase, a sentence, or a whole paragraph could be interpreted as expressing an emotion. It was also possible to mark multiple emotions in the same part of the text. The focus was also put on the intentions of the speakers – what the narratives behind the emotions were, why specific types of emotions were used, what the implications of repeatedly used emotions for the political reality could be, what the audience could "feel" from the speeches, etc. All of that leads to emotional othering, stigmatization with naming and shaming and showing the intertextuality and performativity of emotions (KOSCHUT 2020: 10–12). This helped to contextualize the emotions across the discourses of the selected speakers.

Even though the authors followed the divisions of specific emotions provided by Demszky et al. (2020) during the mapping of the verbal expressions of emotions, the appraisal processes in emotions need to be acknowledged to adhere to specific emotions in their explicit or implicit form within a given text. The term "appraisal processes in emotions" means how the authors stuck to selected emotions, or specifically, how the connotations, analogies, etc. evoked emotional reactions which could be seen as subjective interpretations. Therefore, it is important to show examples of such appraisal processes along with examples of mapped emotions to transparently show the whole process. As Koschut stated, *"By making the emotional potential of the text explicit and transparent via text insertion, the reader may either ascribe to my particular reading of the text or*

reach an alternative conclusion and, in the latter case, may wish to empirically challenge the analysis put forward here" (KOSCHUT 2018A: 290). The following sections discuss what the results mean according to the observed political reality. They discuss excerpts from the analyzed speeches and comments and correspondingly show how NATO and Russian leaders have gradually formed a psychological climate based on mostly recognized emotions.

ANGER, RESENTMENT AND OUTRAGE AS EMOTIONS OF INJUSTICE AND MISAPPREHENSION

At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin's proclamations about the Western partners mirrored the feelings of the Russian leadership and further Russian activities on the international stage. He openly expressed his anger and bitterness toward the NATO countries. He made the statement *"Incidentally, Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason, those who teach us do not want to learn themselves"* (PUTIN 2007). Putin's indignation is emphasized by his use of the phrase 'constantly being taught' and the reference to NATO members, whom he does not consider to be eligible role models. Anger is also the main feeling connected to the topic of NATO enlargement, for which Putin uses the term 'expansion'. A process of expansion may evoke negative connotations as it may refer to encroaching and intruding on the territory of other nations. The NATO enlargements after 1990 are also seen as causes of guilt and regret, and the feeling of injustice is present every time the Russian leaders talk about NATO. *"I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?"* (PUTIN 2007). Putin explicitly talks about a provocation from NATO and the rhetorical question emphasizes what Putin portrays as an obvious fact, namely that NATO considers Russia as a threat. In 2014, when the NATO-Russian relations over Ukraine escalated, Putin again fostered anger through indignation, misapprehension, and disappointment. On several occasions, he claimed that Russia understood the actions of NATO as a threat because Russia was being fooled repeatedly. All of this was while Russia was still open to dialogue and improving relations. In his 2014 speech, he stated, *"We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian*

integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West. We are constantly proposing cooperation on all key issues; we want to strengthen our level of trust and for our relations to be equal, open, and fair. But we saw no reciprocal steps" (PUTIN 2014). In this excerpt, Putin stressed the unity of Ukraine and Russia while blaming and showing anger toward the West for not responding to Russia's initiatives.

Another example of a speech expressing anger is a 2015 speech by Sergei Lavrov. In this speech, Lavrov warned against the spread of neo-Nazism in Ukraine. The warning related to a repeated reproach, indignation, and, once again, expecting misapprehension from the NATO counterparts. As he put it, *"Regretfully, our Western colleagues are apt to close their eyes to everything that is said and done by the Kiev authorities, including fanning xenophobic attitudes.[...] Those statements failed to evoke any reaction in the Western capitals. I don't think present-day Europe can afford to neglect the danger of the spread of the neo-Nazi virus"* (LAVROV 2015).

Both Putin and Lavrov previously repeatedly stated that NATO identifies Russia as its enemy; however, they were cautious about directly calling NATO an enemy or an aggressor. That position changed in 2018 with the then Russian progress in weapons development – Putin moved his anger to a new, more specific phase when he changed his rhetoric and called NATO a potential aggressor. *"I hope that everything that was said today would make any potential aggressor think twice since unfriendly steps against Russia such as deploying missile defenses and bringing NATO infrastructure closer to the Russian border become ineffective in military terms and entail unjustified costs, making them useless for those promoting these initiatives"* (PUTIN 2018).

Lavrov's speech in 2019 instigated anger and evoked deeper resentment by referring to the "links in a chain" that are halting all Russian intentions to improve the mutual relations between Russia and NATO. Furthermore, he expressed disappointment with the unsuccessful cooperation initiatives for forming common spaces between the EU and Russia for areas ranging from economy and justice to science and education, which were once again halted by the European states. *"The illegal bombing attacks on Yugoslavia, its partition and the unilateral recognition of Kosovo independence, which recurved state borders on the continent for the first time after WWII, support for the armed coup in Kiev, the reckless expansion of NATO and*

the deployment of US ABM defenses, the EU's refusal to accept the reciprocal visa renunciation decision that had been coordinated between Moscow and Brussels, and the discrimination of Russian PACE deputies are like links in a chain" (LAVROV 2019). This sentence evokes anger in all its parts, as, for example, 'illegal bombing attacks' refers to breaking a taboo, 'partition and the unilateral recognition' refers to an action without the other side's consent, 'reckless expansion' refers to threatening the whole regional system of balance of power, and 'refusal to accept' and 'discrimination' refer to unjust treatment.

At the 56th Munich Security Conference in 2020, Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's position towards Europe and the NATO activities there. However, this time, his indignation, misapprehension, and disappointment were covered up by the hostility expressed in his warning to stop defining Russia as a threat, which could be understood as a serious deterrence. Thus, both anger and fear can be felt in his speech. In his words, *"The credibility crisis is especially acute when it comes to European affairs. The escalation of tension, the eastward advancement of NATO's military infrastructure, the unprecedentedly massive military exercises near Russia's border, and pumping inordinate amounts of money into defense budgets create unpredictability. The Cold War patterns have once again become a reality. Before it's too late, it is time to say no to promoting the 'Russian threat' phantom or any other threat for that matter, and to go back to things that unite us"* (LAVROV 2020). In this excerpt, Lavrov emphasizes the hostility by using the words 'escalation', 'advancement', 'unprecedentedly', 'inordinate' and 'unpredictability', all of which refer to NATO actions.

In January 2022, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lavrov, still following his 'links in a chain' narrative, expressed his outrage as the USA and European countries imposed unilateral sanctions on Russia and supported Ukraine. *"We only need to review the ever more provocative military maneuvers near our borders, the efforts to draw the Kiev regime into NATO's orbit, the supplies of lethal weapons to Ukraine, or how it is being incited to direct provocation against the Russian Federation. In this context, demands that we stop holding exercises on our own territory – something we have an uncontestable right to do – sound particularly cynical. The double standards in this situation are beyond reason, but we have, unfortunately, long since become used to it"* (LAVROV 2022). Here by using words such as 'provocative', 'orbit', 'lethal', and 'provocation', Lavrov emphasizes his explicit outrage towards NATO.

Furthermore, he expresses Russia's determination to continue with its actions and a justification for them by using the phrase 'an uncontestable right to do'.

The time when it was 'too late' happened to be in February 2022. Firstly, on 21 February Putin recognized the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic. In his speech from this day, he clearly stated that the continuing 'links in a chain' from the Western counterparts did not provide any other option for the Russian Federation but to sound the last deterrence note before the invasion. He stated that *"NATO documents officially declare our country to be the main threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Ukraine will serve as an advanced bridgehead for such a strike. If our ancestors heard about this, they would probably simply not believe this. We do not want to believe this today either, but it is what it is. I would like people in Russia and Ukraine to understand this"* (PUTIN 2022A). Putin's outrage can be felt in his characterizing Ukraine as a bridgehead for a NATO strike against Russia while calling out to the common ancestors of both Russia and Ukraine.

Contrary to the case of Russia, where anger in many of its forms was present during the whole analyzed period, in the case of NATO, its anger could be perceived mainly right before and after the outbreak of war in February 2022. It was connected to the low effectiveness of NATO's efforts to keep an open dialogue with Russia and its readiness to defend itself if Russia attacks any member of the Alliance. As Stoltenberg stated, *"The Russian regime is aggressive abroad and oppressive at home. Any Russian aggression will come at a high price. With serious political and economic consequences for Russia"* (STOLTENBERG 2021). He repeated this idea in 2022, when any attempt to have a constructive dialogue with Russia was seen as almost impossible, emphasizing that diplomatic channels were then currently closed: *"NATO Allies have worked for a meaningful dialogue with Russia for many, many years, Russia has walked away from that dialogue. So that is not functioning. It is not possible to have a meaningful dialogue with Russia when they are conducting an illegal war of aggression against Ukraine"* (STOLTENBERG 2022A). The outrage is emphasized by the repeatedly used words such as 'aggressive', 'oppressive' and 'illegal'. Furthermore, similarly as in the Russian case, here anger is evoked mainly because of disappointment with the other side and its reluctance to communicate.

AFFECTION, CARING AND COMPASSION AS THE EMOTIONS OF UNITY AND SOLIDARITY

As mentioned earlier, in the pre-invasion NATO speeches, the emotions of affection and caring were the most dominant emotions that appeared in the given documents. These were strongly present in the NATO speeches since 2014 – following the annexation of Crimea, NATO sought to express its unequivocal support for Ukraine, and support its efforts to make free decisions and choose its future. At the same time, NATO emphasized the importance of Russia's recognition of Ukraine's new development. The situation was similar in 2015, when NATO needed to show that, despite its condemnation of Russia's efforts, the Alliance's goal was to maintain open communication with the Russian Federation and seek a solution to the dispute. At the same time, NATO again openly supported Ukraine as an invaded country. Efforts to show NATO's merits in relation to its common history with Russia came to the fore: *"We are continuing to stay very focused on how we can work with Ukraine. Our support for Ukraine is taking place now. So we continue to support a negotiated solution to the crisis"* (STOLTENBERG 2015). In this paragraph, affection and caring are expressed by the will of NATO to support Ukraine and seek a solution to the crisis. Stoltenberg indicated that NATO stands by Ukraine in this conflict and is determined to continue in its support.

These emotions can be found in all the analyzed NATO speeches throughout the years. However, right after the invasion, NATO had to carefully clarify the meaning of its support, as the wrong narrative would mean placing NATO members at the brink of war. Therefore, it was trying to express its support and compassion for Ukraine, but with emphasis on the fact that NATO was not currently part of the conflict and therefore did not plan a military conflict with Russia: *"We condemn the attacks on civilians. We provide support to Ukraine. At the same time, NATO is not part of the conflict. NATO is a defensive alliance. We don't seek war, conflict with Russia"* (STOLTENBERG 2022B).

A few months after the invasion, the discourse moved towards the position of Ukraine in the conflict and its importance for maintaining global security: *"Ukraine has suffered six terrible months of the war. But you have also shown your incredible ability to resist brutal aggression. To strike*

back, retake territory, and impose major costs on Russia. There can be no lasting peace if the aggressor wins. If oppression and autocracy prevail over freedom and democracy. So the best way to support lasting peace is to support Ukraine" (STOLTENBERG 2022C). In Stoltenberg's speech, compassion is strongly present in the form of admiration for the resistance of Ukraine in the crisis while it is suffering oppression. By his saying phrases such as *"your incredible ability to resist brutal aggression",* this emotion comes to the fore as a central rhetorical element.

At the end of 2022, NATO repeatedly stressed the need to stay focused and take Russia as an equal and powerful partner to which the rhetoric and actions of the West should be adapted: *"Thanks to the heroic resistance of the Ukraine people [sic], and the unprecedented support from NATO Allies, Ukraine has made significant gains. But we should not underestimate Russia. Russian missiles and drones continue to rain down on Ukrainian cities, civilians, and critical infrastructure. Causing enormous human suffering, as winter sets in"* (STOLTENBERG 2022D). In this particular paragraph, affection, caring and compassion are expressed by using phrases with strong adjectives such as *"heroic resistance", "unprecedented support"* or *"significant gains"*, which indicate the power of the partnership between NATO and Ukraine. On the other hand, the phrase *"causing enormous human suffering"* highlights the compassion towards the people of Ukraine.

In March 2023, more than one year after the invasion, Stoltenberg emphasized the unity of NATO and its plan to accept new members which had expressed a request to join. Stoltenberg, therefore, expressed that Russia's efforts to reduce the influence or tarnish the reputation of NATO had not been successful even a year after the conflict began: *"He [Putin] thought he could break NATO unity. But NATO Allies are standing strong and united, and providing unprecedented support for Ukraine. And he wanted less NATO. But he has got exactly the opposite. More NATO"* (STOLTENBERG 2023).

In the case of Russia, the emotions of affection and caring were slightly present only in a few speeches – mainly to promote and support the bond between Russia and Ukraine and show that the two nations were and still are close to each other. The article by Putin published in July 2021 about the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians can be seen as an unprecedented manifesto of distributive power politics of emotions. In the

analyzed speeches from the previous years, the references to unity were mostly in connection with Russian internal domestic issues. However, in the article, Putin expresses a strong unity with Ukraine: *"It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people"* (PUTIN 2021B). Here affection and caring are expressed by his use of strong and powerful phrases such as *"hearts and the memory"* or *"the blood ties that unite millions of our families".* The emotions are even more strengthened by his use of words and sentences indicating the unity of Russia and Ukraine, such as "together", or *"we are one people".*

Such a feeling of unity with Ukraine was seen as *"a historical, political, and security predicate for invading it – if and when that ever became necessary"* (RUMER – WEISS 2021). Amplified emotions of unity and belonging were used along with the moving Russian troops near the Ukrainian borders as a manipulative form of deterrence.

FEAR, ANXIETY AND APPREHENSION AS EMOTIONS OF URGENCY AND DETERRENCE

The emotion of fear was primarily present in the analyzed speeches through tertiary emotions like fright, panic, anxiety, tenseness, and apprehension. In both cases, these emotions were employed by the speakers to create a sense of urgency or deterrence, while also demonstrating a sense of responsibility and genuine concern for the current situation or events. In the 2016 speeches, when Russia's relations with the West were very tense, mainly due to the unfavorable situation in Syria, NATO verbally pushed for a dialogue between the two sides, as well as pushing for the Alliance and its members to respond flexibly to new security challenges: *"...when tensions are high as they are now I think it is of particular importance that we keep channels of political dialogue open with Russia [...] and we have to adapt when we see that our security environment is changing..."* (STOLTENBERG 2016). When Stoltenberg explicitly says, *"tensions are high"* and *"our security environment is changing"*, emotions of fear and anxiety come to the fore in this particular speech. Even though the choice of the selected words is quite modest, the context indicates the increasing nervousness of NATO members.

At the same time, NATO was beginning to step up efforts to show that it is ready to defend itself if Russia attacks any member of the Alliance. This point has gradually intensified over the years, along with the point of the low effectiveness of NATO's efforts to keep an open dialogue with Russia: *"…We worked for a strategic partnership with Russia, but then Russia decided to use force against neighbors. We saw it in Georgia, but we saw it also in Ukraine. And this is Russia's decision that they have chosen not to cooperate, but to confront"* (STOLTENBERG 2018). In this particular sequence, apprehension and fear are the main emotions present in the speech. Stoltenberg stressed the previous conflicts in which Russia was involved and expressed that the next confrontation is still on the table.

Furthermore, emphasis was placed on showing why NATO is an influential rival to the Russian Federation. Stoltenberg clarified that NATO is a major guarantor of security in Europe and the world: *"To keep our people safe in today's unpredictable world, we must continue to strengthen and modernize our deterrence and defense. This is a collective responsibility. Because we are only as strong as our weakest link"* (STOLTENBERG 2021). Anxiety coming from the Russian activities can be also seen in the phrases that aim to show how strong, powerful and united NATO members are. It is a common strategy in hiding the real negative emotions which can make the states look weak.

The emotion of fear played a crucial role in highlighting the alliance's dedication to being proactive and adaptable in the face of emerging security challenges: *"We live in a time of uncertainty. We cannot predict the next crisis. So we need a strategy to deal with uncertainty. We have one. NATO. One for all, all for one"* (IBID.). These feelings became even more intensified in the post-invasion period – the fear of being dragged into the conflict can be seen in some passages of the speeches, where the determination to face the aggression is accompanied by an awareness of possible losses on both sides: *"We must stand ready to do more. Even if it means to pay a price. Because we are in this for the long haul"* (STOLTENBERG 2022). As words such as *"uncertainty"* and the plural pronoun *"we"* are repeated, the fear can be felt in this paragraph, indicating the need to cooperate in order to overcome Russian threats.

In a similar vein to the discourse of NATO countries, the war in Ukraine holds broader implications for Russia. In the speeches of Putin and

Lavrov, it is not solely about Ukraine, but it is rather a catalyst for transforming the flawed international system and safeguarding the future of the Russian population. Fear serves as a powerful driving force behind these motivations. However, it is noteworthy that the Russian discourse often veils the emotion of fear, as other emotions are employed to mask true intentions and sentiments in it. For example, in 2022, Putin's speeches tried to emphasize the need for unity as the fundamental premise for Russian survival, but still, the emotion of fear is evident in some paragraphs: *"The threat grew every day. Russia launched a pre-emptive strike at the aggression. It was a forced, timely, and the only correct decision. A decision by a sovereign, strong, and independent country"* (PUTIN 2022C). Similarly to the previous example, here fear and anxiety are the primary emotions stressed by words such as "threat", "strike" or "aggression". Russia took these actions to strengthen its position and to show how powerful it is.

The latest Address to the Federal Assembly was given in February 2023, a year after the invasion of Ukraine, and it expressed similar emotions: *"One year ago, to protect the people in our historical lands, to ensure the security of our country and to eliminate the threat coming from the neo-Nazi regime that had taken hold in Ukraine after the 2014 coup, it was decided to begin the special military operation. Step by step, carefully and consistently we will deal with the tasks we have at hand"* (PUTIN 2023). Apprehension was also strongly present in Putin's speeches – in this particular example, the Russian president explained his violence as a necessary step to keep his country safe and sovereign, while stressing negative words such as *"threat"* or *"neo-Nazi regime"*.

PRIDE AND OPTIMISM AS EMOTIONS OF HOPE AND SECURITY

In the preselected speeches, joy was found to be present solely in the speeches of NATO, manifesting as either the secondary emotion of pride or the secondary emotion of optimism. Interestingly, joy was not identified in any of the speeches delivered by Russia. Over several years, NATO representatives have maintained an optimistic outlook on Russia's relationship with the West and the alliance itself, firmly believing that cooperation is inevitable and only a matter of time: *"NATO decided to suspend practical cooperation with Russia, but we have decided at the same time to maintain, to continue political dialogue with Russia. It is about how to use what we already have,*

and that is the NATO-Russia Council [...] because we never closed or suspended a political dialogue with Russia" (STOLTENBERG 2015). Stoltenberg expressed the emotion of optimism by still having both options open and ready – not only the military response but also the diplomatic activities. The hope still present in this conflict is the main feature of several NATO speeches.

NATO was well aware that the establishment and preservation of security and peace in the European region required the active involvement of Russia, which was previously regarded as an equal partner: *"...but we don't want confrontation with Russia, we don't want a new cold war and we will continue to strive for dialogue and [a] more constructive relationship because we think that it is important for us but in the long run [it] also will benefit Russia and all of us living here in the Euro Atlantic area"* (IBID.). NATO remains optimistic about the long-term relationship with Russia, as the cooperation of these two sides is required and necessary for international security.

As tensions escalated, however, NATO gradually relinquished this optimism and instead began to highlight the values and accomplishments that the alliance had achieved collectively: *"NATO is active. NATO is agile. NATO is adapting. And we have just implemented the largest reinforcement of collective defense since the end of the Cold War, with high readiness of troops"* (STOLTENBERG 2019). In the last selected example, the emotion of pride is strongly present through the highlighting of how powerful and ready NATO is. The strategy is evident – to deter Russia from escalating the conflict even more.

SADNESS, DISAPPOINTMENT AND GUILT AS EMOTIONS OF FAILURE AND ADVOCACY

The speeches primarily conveyed the emotion of sadness through the secondary emotion of disappointment and the tertiary emotion of guilt. In the case of NATO, Stoltenberg has consistently attributed the prolonged absence of a mutual dialogue to Russia's lack of interest in cooperation, placing the blame on it for both sides' inability to establish a meaningful communication: *"We worked for a strategic partnership with Russia, but then Russia decided to use force against [its] neighbors. We saw it in Georgia, but we saw it also in Ukraine. And this is Russia's decision [:] that they have chosen not to cooperate, but to confront"* (STOLTENBERG 2018).

In 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, sadness was the most dominant emotion in the speeches of NATO: *"We are facing a new normal in European security. Where Russia openly contests the European security order. And uses force to pursue its objectives [sic]"* (STOLTENBERG 2022A).

An important moment was when Stoltenberg admitted that any attempt to have a constructive dialogue with Russia would probably not be successful, emphasizing that the relevant diplomatic channels are currently closed: *"NATO Allies have worked for a meaningful dialogue with Russia for many, many years, [but] Russia has walked away from that dialogue. So that is not functioning. It is not possible to have a meaningful dialogue with Russia when they are conducting an illegal war of aggression against Ukraine"* (IBID.).

Both Lavrov and Putin, much like their NATO counterparts, would frequently assign blame to the opposing side for the escalation of tensions, pointing fingers at the other side as the cause of the increased strain. In 2016, Lavrov pointed to the deteriorating relations and the persistent refusal to cooperate from the NATO side: *"I think it is obvious to everyone that the baffling complexity of entwined conflicts and expanded conflict areas require a coherent mutual approach. However, joint efforts are being hindered by artificial restrictions, much like NATO and the EU's refusing full cooperation with Russia, creating the image of an enemy, and arms deployment to harden the dividing lines in Europe that the West had promised to eliminate. It appears that old instincts die hard"* (LAVROV 2016).

In 2021, the main theme of the Valdai Discussion Club was the 'Global Shake-up in the 21st Century'. Putin opened his contribution by stating that *"we are living in an era of great change."* He claimed that this change started *"about three decades ago,"* when the Russian Federation had to adjust to the new way of being. Here, he fostered feelings of disappointment with and attributed guilt to the Western countries: *"A search for a new balance, sustainable relations in the social, political, economic, cultural, and military areas, and support for the world system was launched at that time. We were looking for this support but must say that we did not find it, at least so far. Meanwhile, those who felt like the winners after the end of the Cold War (we have also spoken about this many times) and thought they climbed Mount Olympus soon discovered that the ground was falling away underneath even there, and this time it*

was their turn, and nobody could 'stop this fleeting moment' no matter how fair it seemed" (PUTIN 2021A).

On 24 February 2022, Putin summarized what he and Lavrov were saying the past couple of years. The long-lasting sense of injustice and disappointment resulted in the necessity of the invasion. In his narrative, the responsibility for it lies on Ukraine, which was drawn into NATO's sphere of influence and thus represents a direct threat from the USA, the 'empire of lies' as Putin called it: *"It is a fact that over the past 30 years, we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border"* (PUTIN 2022B).

In September 2022, when Putin announced a partial mobilization, he only confirmed and continued with the discourse on emotions of guilt: *"They turned the Ukrainian people into cannon fodder and pushed them into a war with Russia, which they unleashed back in 2014. They used the army against civilians and organized a genocide, blockade, and terror against those who refused to recognize the government that was created in Ukraine as the result of a state coup"* (PUTIN 2022D).

Even in 2023, Putin's rhetoric did not change much: *"Let me reiterate that they were the ones who started this war, while we used force and are using it to stop the war"* (PUTIN 2023). As is evident from his recent speeches, Putin persistently shifts the blame onto the West and the alliance, actively rationalizing his actions as a justified response to NATO's activities: *"We are defending human lives and our common home, while the West seeks unlimited power"* (IBID.).

Sadness, disappointment and guilt were accompanied by anger in all the speeches. Both NATO and Russia used these emotions to advocate their decisions and actions derived from their opponent's incompetence and malpractices.

CONCLUSION

Misuse of emotions risks normalizing certain feelings as societal standards and influencing the psychological climate and public opinion so that they would align with a leader's vision. Internationally, the emotional conduct of political leaders not only represents their nations but also has the potential to shape foreign perceptions and relationships. The strategic use and misuse of emotions by political figures can escalate tensions or foster antagonism between nations, which underscores the importance of scrutinizing their role within the political and security domains.

The article emphasized the occurrence and frequency of used emotions in the political speeches of the Russian and NATO leaders. Consequently, it also emphasized how the leaders used specific emotions in their public speeches and statements to form a psychological climate as a part of their distributive power politics.

The results of the emotional discourse analysis showed that the leaders of both NATO and Russia used emotions relatively consistently. Over the years the emotional discourse has not changed, except that in 2022 and 2023, there was a slight change in the preference and frequency of the used emotions – due to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. In both cases, the speeches of the specific political figures were focused on current political and security events. At the same time, the emotions served either to confirm their position in relation to the second or third party or to justify their actions (present or future).

In the case of Vladimir Putin and Sergej Lavrov, the most recognized emotions were anger, sadness, and fear. This indicates the presence of long-unheard and unresolved emotions as a part of the thinking of the Russian officials. These strong emotions may influence the Russian identity and serve as a driving force for Russian activities at home and abroad. Compared to the NATO speeches, the Russian ones seem much more emotional and inconsistent, as they emphasize a negative perception of the world. In the context of the whole analysis, this seems to be a tool to justify the actions of the Russian Federation, which are based on an effort to help the nation, the people, and the world. The emotions of affection and caring were present only in connection to the internal unity of the

Russian Federation and the unity and sense of belonging between Russian and Ukrainian people.

On the other hand, Stoltenberg and Rasmussen strongly emphasized the composition of speeches that promote unity and cooperation and express an opinion that affects all members of the Alliance. This strategy is a logical tool that underlines the grouping of many nations into one whole while emphasizing their common power and influence in the world. Such mild communication covering the emotions of caring, affection, and compassion that is not provocative, offensive, or arrogant aims for a de-escalation of tensions and a search for compromise. An important aspect of NATO is building a good image of the Alliance globally, primarily through solidarity, support for the weak, and expressing sympathy when the situation is challenging. In the case of Ukraine, this was particularly present in statements that condemned the Russian actions and supported Ukraine's independence and freedom.

Nevertheless, in both analyzed cases, emotions of joy and optimism were not present at all when each side referred to the other. Pride was present only in connection to their own capabilities or, in the case of NATO, praising Ukraine as a protector of shared values. For Putin and Lavrov, the NATO activities were not surprising or expected, just disappointing. As for Stoltenberg and Rasmussen, their position towards Russia could be referred to as 'pray for the best, prepare for the worst'. Consequently, the psychological climate spread by the analyzed leaders lacks the most important emotions needed for a stable and prosperous relationship, such as joy and empathy in all their forms expressed towards others. On the contrary, the formed psychological climate supports the positioning of NATO and Russia as adversaries without a chance for their mutual recognition and understanding.

In conclusion, it is also important to note that the conducted analysis has several limitations. Firstly, emotions concerning international relations are still not widely acknowledged as a significant research factor, which poses challenges in both theoretical and empirical approaches. Along with that, another limitation is the subjective nature of emotions, which can compromise the objectivity of the findings. Additionally, the lack of a universally accepted definition of emotions and a standardized

empirical research approach hampers progress in this field. Therefore, further research in this area depends on improving the theoretical framework and developing more robust methodologies that could be not only plausibly reproduced but also accepted by scholars from various schools of thought within IR but also other disciplines.

ENDNOTES

1 This assumption is derived from findings in neuroscience during the 1990s, when emotions ceased to be understood as a factor influencing negative or positive rational thinking, but became *"important components of rationality"* (Mellers et al. 1999: 343). Authors from various fields who hold this opinion widely refer to the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio and his colleagues (Damasio 1994, 1999, 2007; Damasio et al. 2000, 2005).

2 It was defined, for example, in his works "No Sympathy for the Devil: Emotions and the Social Construction of the Democratic Peace" (2018b), *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (2020a) and "A Critical Perspective on Emotions in International Relations" (2020b).

3 Emotions were considered as specific categories in the analysis. It is crucial to be aware of their "fuzzy boundaries" (Fehr – Russell 1984; Shaver et al. 1987). As Fehr and Russell stated, *"everybody knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition"* (1984: 464). Therefore, the emotion categories were selected based on social psychology studies exploring the hierarchical organization of emotion concepts and specifying so-called prototypes of basic emotions (Shaver et al. 1987; Parrott 2001). They expand on studies about the set of basic or primary emotions that underlie biological substrates (Ekman 1992; Epstein 1994; Izard 1977; Plutchik 1980; Roseman 1984; Tomkins 1978) with the sub-clusters of socially conditioned understandings of emotions. Specific emotion categories can be thus seen as "the result[s] of repeated experiences" (Parrott 2001) that conceptualize people's knowledge about emotions. The list of emotions recognized in the hierarchical cluster analysis by Shaver et al. (1987) together with some additional emotions that were recognized by Demszky et al. (2020), which were used as emotion categories for the emotion discourse analysis, can be found in appendix. Specific emotions are understood here according to how they are defined by Demszky et al. (2020: 4051).

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APPENDIX

SHAVERS TREE-STRUCTURED EMOTION CATEGORIES WITH ADDED CATEGORIES OF SECONDARY EMOTIONS FROM GOEMOTIONS

Basic Emotion	Secondary Emotion	Tertiary Emotion
Anger	Irritation	Annoyance, Agitation, Grumpiness, Aggravation, Grouchiness
	Exasperation	Frustration
	Rage	Anger, Fury, Hate, Dislike, Resentment, Outrage, Wrath, Hostility, Bitterness, Ferocity, Loathing, Scorn, Spite, Vengefulness
	Envy	Jealousy
	Disgust	Revulsion, Contempt, Loathing
	Torment	-
	Disapproval	-
Love	Affection	Liking, Caring, Compassion, Fondness, Affection, Love, Attraction, Tenderness, Sentimentality, Adoration
	Lust	Desire, Passion, Infatuation
	Longing	-
Fear	Horror	Alarm, Fright, Panic, Terror, Fear, Hysteria, Shock, Mortification
	Nervousness	Anxiety, Distress, Worry, Uneasiness, Tenseness, Apprehension, Dread

Joy	Cheerfulness	Happiness, Amusement, Satisfaction, Bliss, Gaiety, Glee, Jolliness, Joviality, Joy, Delight, Enjoyment, Gladness, Jubilation, Elation, Ecstasy, Euphoria
	Zest	Enthusiasm, Excitement, Thrill, Zeal, Exhilaration
	Contentment	Pleasure
	Optimism	Eagerness, Hope
	Pride	Triumph
	Enthrallment	Enthrallment, Rapture
	Relief	-
	Approval	-
	Admiration	-
Sadness	Suffering	Hurt, Anguish, Agony
	Sadness	Depression, Sorrow, Despair, Gloom, Hopelessness, Glumness, Unhappiness, Grief, Woe, Misery, Melancholy
	Disappoint	Displeasure, Dismay
	Shame	Guilt, Regret, Remorse
	Neglect	Embarrassment, Insecurity, Insult, Rejection, Alienation, Isolation, Loneliness, Homesickness, Defeat, Defection, Humiliation
	Sympathy	Pity
Surprise	Surprise	Amazement, Astonishment
	Confusion	-
	Curiosity	-
	Realization	-

Source: Imran et al. (2022). Table based on Demszky, D. et al. (2020).

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Orthodox Christianity and Multiple Modernities: The Case of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT	This study explores the ways in which two Orthodox churches (the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine) construct their own versions of modernity while reacting to the Russian-Ukrainian war. One tries to develop its own idiosyncratic and strongly anti-Western, but still essentially modern project, while the other aligns itself with Western modernity, albeit also on a selective basis. Theoretically, the article draws from the literature about multiple modernities, arguing that this framework can shed new light not only on these religious actors' attitudes to Western modernity, but also on the internal competition within the Orthodox world. Methodologically, the study builds on a qualitative discourse analysis of online communication of the two churches in the period of January 2022-December 2023.

KEYWORDS	Orthodox Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, modernity, religion and politics, multiple modernities, the Russian war on Ukraine, anti-Western discourse
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INTRODUCTION

The XXV World Russian People's Council, the largest public forum in the Russian Federation, recently approved a decree of fundamental importance. The decree, titled The Present and the Future of the Russian World, addresses Russia's authorities while also offering the clearest and most explicit formulation of the concept of the Russian World and its significance for the Russian war on Ukraine. The person standing behind the document is Kirill II, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. The Patriarch brought the Council into existence in 1993, and he continues to serve not only as the Council's President but also as its "spiritual leader" (WORLD RUSSIAN PEOPLE'S COUNCIL 2024). This, together with the fact that the Council operates under the umbrella of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), gives ample justification to reading the document as an expression of the dominant view within the ROC's leadership. The document's most discussed statement is the declaration that *"from the spiritual-moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War"*[1] (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2024). The document claims that the only acceptable solution to the conflict is the full subjugation of Ukraine, its inclusion in the exclusive zone of influence of the Russian Federation and the removal of even the possibility of a hostile government in Kiev (IBID.). To justify this radical declaration, the decree claims that the three Russian "sub-ethnicities" (the so-called Great Russians, Little Russians and White Russians) have to be reunited, not only spiritually, but also politically.

What is fascinating is that the decree heavily relies on a sharp critique of the West, and selected modern Western political principles, but also an advocacy of (a specific type of) Russian modernization.[2] On one hand, it describes Russia in highly idiosyncratic, pre-modern terms, seeing it as the biblical "katechon", the mysterious power that "withholds" the end of the world and restrains the arrival of the Antichrist. On the other, it translates this vision into concrete recommendations for the current foreign policy of the Russian Federation. It claims that the West has fallen under the spell of Satanism, but the fight against this blasphemy has to be carried out through modern political means, a 'conservative modernization' (cf. the argument proposed by (TRENIN 2010)). The curious mixture of modern and anti-modern elements is, however, also visible in the description of the key term used in the document – the Russian World. The Russian World is, for example, not seen as the sphere comprising those belonging

to the Russian Orthodox Church or professing the values of Orthodox Christianity. Instead, the Russian World *"includes everybody for whom the Russian tradition, the shrines of the Russian civilization and the great Russian culture constitute the highest value and meaning of life"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2024A). Here, the Russian World is in fact interpreted so much in line with the Western version of secularized modernity that Christianity (Orthodox or otherwise) is not even mentioned.

The sharp critique of the West and the rejection of the Western type of modernization that the ROC's pronouncements often contain, frequently lead to the conclusion that the ROC's political stance is, in its entirety, anti-modern (for an excellent overview of the debate, (SEE STOECKL 2020). Especially if this interpretation is superimposed on the current Russian-Ukrainian war, a temptation arises to reduce the intra-Orthodox conflict to a dichotomous struggle between the acceptance and rejection of modernity. In this understanding, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) (and, by extension, Ukraine itself, as well as the Ecumenical Patriarchate) represent the position which is fully in line with Western modernity. The ROC, in its turn, is also essentialized, becoming the embodiment of the purely anti-modern stance. The modern vs. anti-modern dichotomy is then reinforced by the tendency to Orientalize Orthodox Christianity, which is often – especially in its Russian guise – *"cast in the role of the 'Subaltern Other'"* (ROUDOMETOF 2014: 1).

This article puts forward a different argument; in fact, three interrelated arguments. First, it claims that each of the two sides in the conflict (the ROC and the OCU) advocates a particular type of modernity: one trying to develop its own strongly anti-Western and yet *modern* project, the other aligning itself with Western modernity, albeit also on a selective basis. Second, it argues that the notion of multiple modernities is a useful lens for the endeavour also because it makes it possible to shed more light on the interactions between different modernizing actors and also on the mutual influences among various modernization projects (SEE GÖKSEL 2016: 246–267; ROSATI – STOECKL 2012). Versions of non-Western modernity are not, after all, mere derivatives of or reactions to the Western modernity project, but they also consider local conditions, including the different attitudes to religion (CASANOVA 2011: 252–267). This means that to explain the difference between the versions of modernity advocated by the OCU and the ROC,

we need to take into account not only their attitudes to the West, but also their mutual othering, which has accelerated in recent years. Finally, on the most general level, this study aims to contribute to the growing literature that shows that, unlike in the simplified Orientalist reading of Orthodox Christianity, this tradition is capable of modernization (BUSS 2018).

The article consists of seven parts. It starts with (1) a short overview of the scholarly discussion about modernity, focussing mainly on the concept of multiple modernities as proposed by S. N. Eisenstadt. In the two sections that follow, the article links this debate to Orthodox Christianity: One describes (2) the overall attitude of Orthodox Christianity to modernity and the other shows that there is (3) internal differentiation within the Orthodox world in regard to modernity, as recently exemplified by the conflict between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church. While these two sections do not bring novel empirical findings, they are important for understanding the context in which the contestation between the ROC and the OCU plays out. Then comes (4) the research design, which also shows how the discourse analysis is reflected in the structure of the empirical part of the article. This section is followed by the empirical part, which is divided into (5) the analysis of the ROC's relationship to modernity and (6) an analogical section on the OCU. While the ROC's attitude is relatively well researched (this study brings new empirical evidence confirming that the same position is expressed in its online communication as well), the article sheds new light on the complex positioning of the OCU. The study's main findings are then summarized in (7) the conclusion.

MODERNITY AND MODERNITIES

Modernity describes the situation in which a society defines itself in terms of a radical reflexivity that posits a fundamental difference from its past, *"an historical condition of difference"* (GIDDENS – PIERSON 2018: 15). A modern society has not lost its customs and traditions, but these customs and traditions become plural and progressively less authoritative, losing their sway over the society as they are continuously critically re-examined, adapted or rejected (BECK – LASH – GIDDENS 1994: 6–8). The role of human agency thus becomes more significant than in previous eras: The awareness of the possible different outcomes of the future development of the society increases and the nature of the envisioned social order is increasingly contested. This

means that the future cannot be taken for granted; it has to be actively fought for and shaped. Social actors, even those who oppose some dimensions of modernity, perhaps wishing for the return of a single dominant tradition, are aware that they have to actively influence their societies to achieve their preferred end state. Social differentiation is then not so much the primary defining feature of modernity, but rather the outcome of the process of growing reflexivity, individualization and the increased power of human agency, for an overview of this and related debates see Raymond Lee (2006: 355–368).

The Western European version of modernity remains its oldest and most influential guise. Four of its features continue to remain central: It begins with (1) heightened reflexivity, which leads to an increased confidence in human agency and its power to transform the social order; it has produced (2) specific political institutions and practices (including the modern state and liberal democracy), created (3) new and largely autonomous economic institutions (leading to the emergence of modern market practices and the increasingly globalized market economy), and introduced (4) the existence of a largely independent secular sphere (see (STOECKL 2016) for secularization, post-secularity and modernity, but see also the argument about multiple secularities in (BURCHARDT – WOHLRAB-SAHR – MIDDELL 2015: 1–15)).

As famously argued by S. N. Eisenstadt, some aspects of modernization appeared everywhere, including the accelerating process of individualization, the introduction of modern education, the dissolution of extended family structures, and urbanization. Nonetheless, the process was not uniform and instead significant variations have taken place, producing *"multiple institutional and ideological patterns"* (EISENSTADT 2000: 2). In other words, instead of a single modernity based on the Western template, various configurations have emerged which combine elements of Western modernity with local ingredients. While the West remains *"the crucial reference point"* (IBID.) for all these projects, the references are as often negative as they are positive. This othering of the West has played a key role in the birth of anti-modern movements: contemporary versions of religious fundamentalism are often unintelligible without understanding the negative role the West and Western modernity play in their discourses and practices. But crucially, anti-Westernism (as well as the related Occidentalist attitudes – see (BURUMA – MARGALIT 2004)) has, in most cases, never translated into

a wholesale rejection of modernity, as non-Western modernization projects often build on idiosyncratic combinations of Western-type modernization measures and a strongly articulated anti-Westernism.

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNITY

Orthodoxy is the one large branch of Christianity in which modernization was often seen as externally-induced. Typically, it was explicitly linked to Western Europe, as exemplified by the reforms carried out by Tsar Peter the Great. Even today, a sense of resistance to the project of modernity as something external is felt – to a lesser or greater degree – everywhere in the Orthodox world. Anti-modern attitudes remain *"deeply encoded in the Orthodox cultural tradition"* (ROUDOMETOF 2014: 2), and the relationship between Orthodoxy (and historically Orthodox societies) and modernity continues to be a politically sensitive issue. This sensitivity is heightened by (1) the resurgence of religion in the public sphere of many Orthodox countries and (2) the growing doubts about whether Western modernity is a model worth emulating (IKENBERRY 2018: 7–23). At the same time, the continued pressure of globalization generates new incentives to modernize as the diffusion of modern political and cultural but also economic practices does not abate, and Orthodox societies have to adapt to them.[3] It is therefore no surprise that the relationship of Orthodoxy to pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity has now become a popular academic topic (SEE MAKRIDES 2013; LEUSTEAN 2014).

What this wave of scholarship on Orthodoxy and modernization reveals is not only that Orthodox churches and societies have a large potential for adaptation to modernity, but also that historically, Orthodoxy underwent significant modernization processes (see many of the contributions to the special issue of *Religion, State and Society* published in 2012). In fact, the very establishment of national Orthodox churches can be understood as a product of modernization (ROUDOMETOF 2019). This does not apply only to the emergence of national churches in the Balkans, but also to the more recent developments in Eastern Europe. The key problem related to this process lies in the requirement of the separation of the church and the state as an essential part of Western modernity. It is true that the absolute state-church separation is more of an ideal type and even in the most secular Western states, some differences in the treatment of various religious actors persist

(ROY 2007). But in Orthodox countries the cooperation has been significantly more intense, so much so that the stronger church-state relations have become one of the most distinctive hallmarks of the Orthodox projects of modernity (see (KÖLLNER 2019), particularly the introduction).

Although pressures from the outside have had homogenizing effects on the Orthodox churches/societies (ROUDOMETOF 2014: 76), the Orthodox world has nonetheless never subscribed to a single project of "Orthodox modernization", not least simply because Orthodoxy was never united in a single political space. Historically, two empires and their modes of governance shaped Orthodox modernization (or the resistances to it) – the Russian and the Ottoman Empire, leading to *"multiple modernizations pursued in the Orthodox religious landscape"* (IBID.: 11; CF. BUSS 2018). Importantly, these intra-Orthodox differences and struggles have substantially accelerated recently, and as a result of the public resurgence of religion, they have become more visible, making the exploration of Orthodox modernities not only an interesting academic subject, but also a politically relevant one.

THE INTRA-ORTHODOX STRUGGLE AND THE VISIONS OF MODERNITY

The various Orthodox attitudes to modernity influence virtually every aspect of Orthodox politics. The most important example of this trend is the long-term divergence between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the two most significant religious institutions in the Orthodox world. We argue that the conflict between Moscow and Constantinople is not merely a dispute over ecclesial jurisdictions or a simple contestation over territories and resources (even though both of these dimensions are also contained within it), but a fundamental disagreement over how far the Orthodox modernity project should emulate the Western one or diverge from it. This struggle is thus the culmination of the contestation over Orthodoxy's preferred modernization project; it is a struggle over what type of modernity Orthodox Christians should pursue.

The Orthodox world and the positioning of individual autocephalous churches within it are, of course, more complex and there are various ideological groupings within each of the churches as well (about this, see footnote 6). But the recent developments, such as the establishment of

the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in December 2018 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, have had two major effects. First, they contributed to a further polarization of the Orthodox world, as the pressure to choose sides in the conflict increased and the retaliatory measures against those choosing the other side also became more common (MORINA – WILSON 2022). The second effect is related to the attention dedicated to the conflict by other political actors and its public visibility. The dispute between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchate had been simmering for decades before the current events. Few outside the ecclesial circles remember that the communion between the two churches was already broken in the 1990s, when a short-term schism between them appeared and lasted from February to May 1996 as a consequence of their disagreement over the status of the Orthodox Church in Estonia. After the establishment of the OCU and especially after the Russian full-scale invasion, however, secular media, political leaders as well as other actors suddenly started to pay focussed attention to the previously overlooked intra-Orthodox struggle (SHERR 2019; MANDAVILLE 2024).

An additional point should be made about the sharply different views held by the unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). At its formation in 2018, the OCU unified the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (the Kiev Patriarchate) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. But the UOC rejected the move and remained part of the Moscow Patriarchate. The UOC has been criticized by the OCU for its tacit support of the invasion and maintaining the dependence on Moscow, as documented by, among other things, its breaking of communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its lack of condemnation of Patriarch Kirill for his support of the war, and its not demanding Kirill's ouster (Orthodox Church of Ukraine 2022a). The controversy over the ties to Moscow culminated in August 2024, when the Ukrainian parliament approved the Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on the Activities of Religious Organizations in Ukraine (No. 8371) with the aim *"to ban the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and religious organisations affiliated with it in Ukraine"* (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE – UKRAINIAN PARLIAMENT 2024).[4]

As far as the ROC's role in the conflict is concerned, it is heavily influenced by its changing position in Russia and the post-Soviet space. In the post-Cold War era, the ROC re-emerged as a strong and confident

political actor which often took a course of action independently of Russian state authorities and at times even acted in a critical manner towards the state (RICHTERS 2012A). But the proximity between the state and the church has been continuously, even if unevenly, increasing (SHAKHANOVA – KRATOCHVÍL 2020; SEE ALSO KÖLLNER 2020). The more intense cooperation between the state and the ROC already started during the period of Patriarch Aleksey II, significantly strengthening the church domestically (KRINDATCH 2006), and also equipping it with new informal tools of influence in its activities abroad (PAYNE 2010). The mutual collaboration accelerated substantially around 2008–2009 with a change at both the ecclesial and political level: The term of President D. A. Medvedev commenced in 2008 and Patriarch Kirill was installed in February 2009 following the death of Patriarch Aleksey II in December 2008. During President Medvedev's years in office, a three-tiered arrangement between the state and religious institutions solidified, with the ROC on top, other "traditional" religions in the following positions and the "non-traditional" ones at the bottom (BLITT 2010).

The increased proximity between the church and the state also led to a gradual transformation of the attitude of the ROC toward the government's plans for Russia's modernization (RICHTERS 2012B). During the third and especially the fourth presidential term of V. V. Putin (2012–2018 AND 2018–2024), the church's role in the state-sponsored conservative modernization became increasingly central. The ROC started to serve as the main vehicle for the domestic patriotic campaign as well as the militarization of education (SHAKHANOVA – KRATOCHVÍL 2020). In the process, it was also transformed into one of the key sources of the legitimacy of the President and his idiosyncratic and increasingly autocratic mode of governance. The state, in its turn, supported the ROC's "moral entrepreneurship" regarding LGBTQ+ people and family policies in general (STOECKL 2016) and translated the church's conservative moral values into state policies and legislation (SOROKA 2022). The overall result is unambiguous: The once relatively well-defined dividing line between the church's spiritual claims and the state's expansionism started to blur. If in 2015 a scholarly study could still claim that the two spheres (the political and the spiritual) were relatively distinct (PETRO 2015), the difference has almost entirely disappeared by now.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study explores the topic of multiple Orthodox modernities with a focus on the Russian-Ukrainian war and the way two Orthodox churches (the OCU and the ROC) publicly react to it. We explore whether and to what extent modernity is – explicitly or implicitly – accepted by the two churches, and how their own versions of modernity are defined, but also how themes related to modernity are present in their rhetorical strategies of identity construction and othering. Specifically, the study explores selected online communications of the two churches in the period of January 2022-December 2023. As they use multiple platforms for online communication, the sources of data differ in the two cases. As far as the OCU is concerned, we analyzed materials from its Facebook page (PRAVOSLAVNA TSERKVA 2024); all the primary sources can be found in the Appendix published online). All the posts that alluded to or otherwise dealt with the Russian invasion and the ensuing crisis, were collected. Altogether, the analysis yielded 109 published posts, some of which additionally contained a video or links to other documents. These sources were subsequently manually analyzed (for more about the analysis, see below).

In the case of the ROC, collecting data from Facebook was not an option as the church is officially not present on the platform, so instead, we collected data from its VKontakte page (RUSSKAYA PRAVOSLAVNAYA TSERKOV 2024). As any references to the "war" are illegal in Russia, we searched for documents related to the term "Ukraine/Ukrainian," etc. However, only 38 ROC posts from the two-year period qualified for use in the study. To increase the number of available texts, additional texts from the church's official website were used as well (patriarchia.ru). The search on the website yielded an additional 124 textual units. These sources (as well as those which were hyperlinked to these sources) were also manually analyzed. All the collected texts and videos were read and viewed in their original languages – Ukrainian in the case of the OCU textual/visual corpus and Russian in the case of the ROC.

Methodologically, the article draws on critical discourse analysis (in particular, following Ruth Wodak's approach (CF. WODAK 2014, 2020)). The orientation of critical discourse analysis is generally qualitative, and as a result, unlike some corpus-oriented discourse analytical methodologies

or content analysis (KRIPPENDORFF 2018), it is not primarily interested in quantifying numbers of occurrences of key *topoi* or rhetorical strategies (for an example see chapter 3 (WODAK – PELINKA 2002)). Instead, it explores general themes and their roles in the discourse: thus, rather than focussing on *"isolated words and sentences"*, it is focused on the hermeneutics of large textual units: *"texts, discourses, conversations, speech acts, or communicative events"* (WODAK – MEYER 2009: 2). We analyzed the selected texts qualitatively, searching for references to modernity in them. But our preliminary analysis showed that direct allusions to modernity were rare, and so we were also searching for indirect references from which the churches' attitudes to modernity could be gleaned. Based on this analysis, we created four categories that also structure this text. The first of these was the strategies of othering, i.e. the utterances which described how different the other church and the other country are from "our" church and "our" country. Particular attention was dedicated to affectively tinged adjectives (predicate analysis), often in a dichotomous form (such as civilized vs. barbaric). The second, related category contained strategies of self-identification and the modern/anti-modern aspects therein: Who we are, what principles we defend, which values are sacred to us, what we consider holy, etc. The third category included the churches' views of modernity based on their references to related political concepts, such as democracy or the (modern) state, and also included their views of human agency in history and the malleability of the social order (even though again, these were rare). The fourth category contained the passages where the relationship to Europe or the West was discussed (e.g. the EU as an ally of Ukraine, the West as Russia's enemy, the corrupting influence of the West, etc.). The following empirical sections on the ROC and the OCU are organized along the same lines. Each starts with an analysis of the strategies of othering and modernity, and it is followed by an exploration of the self-identification of the church, the church's own project of modernity and, finally, its attitude toward the West. The section on the ROC thus contains four parts, but the section on the OCU includes only three as we merged the last two (the preferred project of modernity is largely based on the convergence with Europe in this case).

THE ROC, THE WAR AND MODERNITY

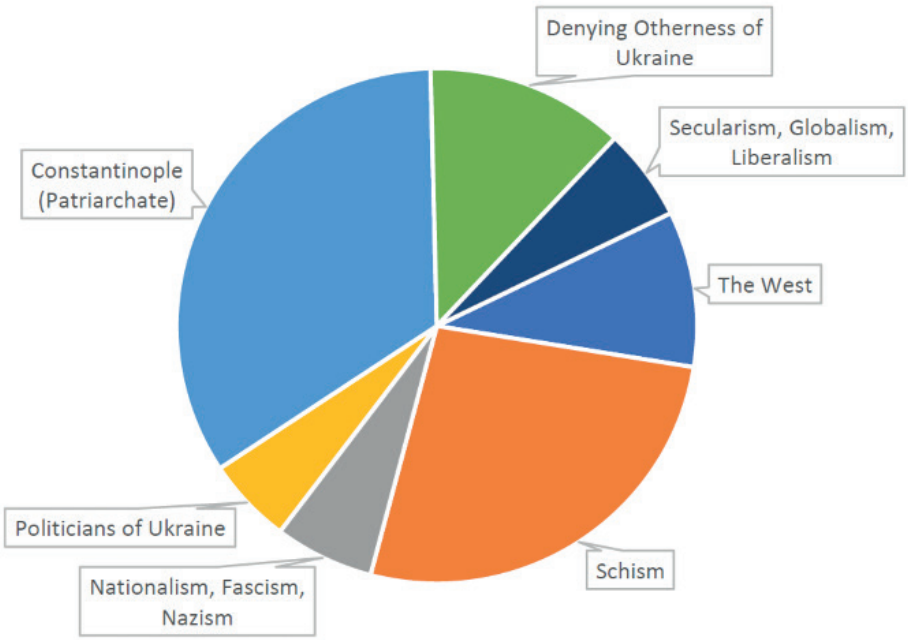
The ROC'S strategy of othering

Overall, the ROC's discourses about the war (without, of course, explicitly employing the word) are built around a strategy of intense rhetorical othering, i.e. the construction of a strict us vs. them distinction. Here, the identity of Russia is built upon the triad of being in favour of unity and peace, defending normalcy and common sense, and being civilized. Ukrainians are depicted as a spiritually related fraternal people who are currently threatened by a dangerous propaganda that sows division and incites a fratricidal conflict, is extremist and fanatically nationalist, and is cruel and brutal to the point of madness. A similar stress on division is applied to the church: The OCU is typically labelled as *"a schismatic structure"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2022A) or *"a schismatic Orthodox church"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2023A) and the situation around it is labelled as *"the Ukrainian schism"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022F). The spiritual division advocated by the OCU is often seen as just another facet of the extreme nationalism of the Ukrainian government, and the linkage between the Ukrainian schism and Ukraine's nationalism is repeatedly stressed. As a result, the rationale of the "special military operation" is to defend historically Russian lands from "the bloody errors of nationalism" which the Ukrainians are perpetrating (*Russian Orthodox Church 2022h*). The double – spiritual and political – division threatens the foundations of what Russia is built upon: For instance, the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra as the cradle of *"our civilization"* (SYNODAL DEPARTMENT 2023C) is now under a brutal attack by the Ukrainians.

Ukraine's nationalism is contrasted with Russia's patriotism – described as the love for Russian culture and traditions, etc. As a consequence, the evils connected to Ukrainian nationalism can be judged through the lens of Russia as a bastion of human rights: Russia is a modern state where the rule of law prevails, and which needs to defend itself exactly because of Ukraine's *"nationalist provocations"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022I); it is forced to intervene in Ukraine exactly because of human rights violations. A typical example of this communication strategy is the address of Patriarch Kirill in relation to the situation in the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra from 16 March 2023. Kirill states that *"it is regrettable that while the government of Ukraine declares its adherence to democratic norms, the European path of development,*

and respect for human rights and freedoms, these rights and freedoms are violated [by it] in the most blatant way" (SYNODAL DEPARTMENT 2023C).

GRAPH 1: THE OTHER AS IDENTIFIED BY THE ROC



Source: Authors' work.

The ROC self-identity: The unifier and protector of the Holy Rus'

If the OCU is an agent of division sowing quarrel and hatred and inciting religious persecution, the ROC is a civilized and peaceful actor with a deep respect for human rights. The ROC sees itself as an essential institution that strives for harmony and unity in the nation and between Russia and Ukraine. There are two complications, however. First, the arguments in the ROC's posts oscillate between claims about the purely spiritual unity between the two nations and the more explosive political claim which establishes a linkage leading from spiritual unity to cultural unity and finally to political unity. Since the two nations are spiritually united through the Kievan baptismal font, they have become one nation (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022A). What starts as a purely spiritual claim (framed as the insistence on

the *"spiritual unity of all the people of Holy Rus"*) (KIRILL, PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA 2022A) quickly transforms into a full-fledged support for the war as the Russian government is seen as fighting against an artificial separation of Russians and Ukrainians: *"This is the reason why we all must support our President and the task that he is fulfilling. To our great regret, this task cannot be fulfilled without shedding blood. People in Ukraine also understand this and we accept some of them as refugees"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022B).

The second complication pertains to the various combinations of the designations the ROC uses. While "Holy Rus'" is often used when referring to spiritual matters (KIRILL, PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA 2022A), "Rus'" frequently becomes a transitory element that bridges the spiritual meaning, history and the current conflict. As a result, Ukraine becomes part of "the space of *'historical Rus'*" (PRESS SERVICE 2022A), while also being the force that attacks "Holy Rus'": *"These difficult times when those eager to fight have turned against Holy Russia, wishing to divide and destroy its united people"* (SYNODAL DEPARTMENT 2023A). In a similar vein, Patriarch Kirill could argue in his sermon shortly after the start of the invasion (27 February 2022) that when he talked about the Russian land, he meant the land to which *"Ukraine, Belarus and other ethnicities and nations belong"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022C).

As a result of the merger of the spiritual and the political meaning, a clear political message appears about what kind of nation-building the church has in mind. The ROC bishops' conference meeting of July 2023 produced a document which stated that the church *"prays to God to reconcile Rus', to stop internecine warfare so that Holy Rus' can be reunited"* (PRESS SERVICE 2022A), clearly indicating the preferred outcome of the conflict. The nation that the church wants to sustain is *"one nation of one 'Holy Rus'"*, with the ROC playing the role of *"the great protector"* of its united spiritual culture and the Orthodox faith (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022D); cf. also Patriarch Kirill's sermon about the unity of the Russian land: (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022E)). Ultimately, the two notions of Rus' and Russia (Русь and Россия) merge. To strive for the unity of one necessarily means wishing to unify oneself with the other – *"'Rus'-Russia has been dramatically weakened"* and *"its one state has been divided"* – and to prevent a repetition of these tragic events or even the very destruction of Holy Rus', unity must be ensured again (KIRILL, PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA 2022A).

THE ROC'S VIEW OF COMPETING MODERNITY PROJECTS

In its online communication, the ROC offers its own version of the project of modernity (even though the notion itself is almost never mentioned), which, according to a detailed paper published on the ROC's website shortly after the invasion (in March 2022), has as its basic principles *"justice, real democracy, the non-acceptance of the right of the 'stronger', the moral criterion of legal institutions, respect for the state, [and] faithfulness to traditional values"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022J).[5] The church thus offers a project of conservative modernity that is conceived as *"an alternative to secular fundamentalism,"* as *"the 'universal' values of secular modernity and postmodernity have failed the test of time"* (IBID.). The project of civilized, conservative modernization, as defended by Patriarch Kirill, is, according to the document, based on the rejection of *"all forms of fundamentalism, both religious and secularist, and of extremist views, relativism, cynicism, transhumanism, and Russophobia"* (IBID.).

Ukraine, on the other hand, is described as a country that has adopted the wrong version of modernity, having fully emulated the flawed Western model. As a result, following the rejection of Christian humanism, secular humanism is rejected as well and replaced by a radicalized "liberal globalism," of which one expression is supposedly the Black Lives Matter movement and the other Nazism, with Ukraine being *"the clearest example"* of this trend (IBID.). The consequence of this rejection of fundamental humanist values, according to the ROC, is that the Ukrainian government attacks and terrorizes its own population (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2023B), including its most vulnerable segment – the believers and the clergy of *"the most important and only canonical church, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2022B). *"The regime of Zelensky transformed into an authoritarian dictatorship"* which persecutes those with a different opinion, opposition leaders, and also church representatives (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2023C).

Two criteria are typically used in assessing Ukraine's failure to live up to the standards of a civilized nation. One is reasonableness, as Ukraine's ruling class and political decision-makers, according to the ROC, have lost *"even the last traces of common sense"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2022B). But the second criterion is again that of modern human rights, both individual and collective ones, such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and

freedom of assembly. Here, the ROC implicitly assumes the role of a modern, civilized actor which upholds and supports these human rights while Ukraine violates them openly. So, for instance, the Ukrainian legislation that would target the Ukrainian Orthodox Church *"is in contradiction of legal norms, such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights"* (IBID.). The pressure against the UOC is unacceptable as instances of it are examples of *"discrimination and violations of the rights of the faithful"* (PRESS SERVICE 2022C); the removal of the UOC monks from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is considered *"a blatant violation of all rights and laws, which will lead to tragic consequences in the society"* (SYNODAL DEPARTMENT 2023E).[6] While the references to human rights violations may be seen as a mere instrumentalization, or an adaptation of the church's argument to make it more appealing, it nevertheless shows that the church is willing to at least appear as an actor which defends these legal norms – in other words, it ostensibly stands up for a version of the modern discourse on individual and collective rights.

What is, however, particularly fascinating about the ways in which the ROC employs the rhetoric about internationally acknowledged legal norms to support its case, is the specific context in which these pronouncements are uttered. They are used almost exclusively in relation to the conflict between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine or in regard to the conflict between the UOC and the Ukrainian government. They are never discussed in connection with the "special military operation". If one were to judge the severity and importance of international norm violations in Ukraine based on the frequency with which the references to them appear in the ROC's online communication, the conclusion would be clear: The alleged persecution of the UOC is by far more serious than any legal problems related to the Russian invasion, the killing of Ukraine's citizens, the destruction of the country's infrastructure, etc.

The corruption of Ukraine by western modernity

The final link in the ROC's narrative about Ukraine and modernity connects the country's problems to the broader picture in two ways. Firstly, it argues that Ukraine is not an actor with its own free will, but rather a puppet of the West. Secondly, it claims that the Western influence does not extend only to the military or economic domination of the country, but also to the West's cultural and spiritual hegemony. The narrative

about the origins of the Russian-Ukrainian war closely resembles that produced by Russian state media. As Patriarch Kirill argued in a key message to the World Council of Churches, the root cause of the conflict *"should be sought in the relations between Western countries and Russia"* ((RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022K), and a similar view is expressed in (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 202L)). Promises to respect Russia's security and dignity were allegedly broken and NATO continuously expanded in Russia's vicinity. Importantly, the West also *"tried to make enemies of the fraternal peoples – Russians and Ukrainians… But the worst thing is not the weapons, but an attempt at 're-education', a mental transformation of Ukrainians and Russians living there into enemies of Russia"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022K).

However, according to the ROC, Ukraine's corruption by the West is not, as we mentioned above, simply a matter of military or economic dominance, but the most insidious aspect of the Western influence is a spiritual disease with Satanic influences. So according to a high-ranking representative of the church, *"the enemy of the human race does not sleep, sowing division in Ukraine"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022M), and this enemy comes from the West, as it was *"some forces of the Western world"* which, *"under the influence of Satan… have succeeded in sowing hostility between the fraternal nations – Russians and Ukrainians"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022N). As a result, it is not only Ukraine, but also the ROC that is under the threat of division as *"some of our brethren,… moved by the force of the dark side, work towards the division of the one body of the Russian Orthodox Church"* (KIRILL, PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA 2022A). This same corruption then reaches spiritual actors who have accepted Western modernity as well. Two of these stand out – one is the Roman Pontiff and the Catholic Church at large and the other is the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Church warns that the Orthodox "schismatics" in Ukraine are in contact with the *"Pope's Uniates, preparing a union. Soon they will replace the Byzantine calendar with a papal one"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2023E). The ROC also warns that *"according to the Russian secret service, Kievan authorities and UNESCO have reached an agreement to export Christian valuables […] planning to give them over to museums in Italy, France, Germany, and the Vatican"* (PRAVOSLAVIYE.RU 2023F).

If the critique of the Catholic Church is intermittent, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is targeted with a substantially higher frequency. The EP has become *"one of the tools of political forces that are hostile to Orthodoxy"*

because it was *"blinded by its need to satisfy its own private interests and ambitions"* (SYNODAL DEPARTMENT 2023A). Particularly harsh words are often used in this regard, such as "the treachery of Constantinople" (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022O) and *"the invasion of Ukraine by the Constantinople Patriarchate"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022P). The explanation of the actions by the EP is again linked to its acceptance of Western modernity with the consequence of its de-Christianization and overall corruption (cf. for instance, (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022Q)). This critique is connected with the ROC's presentation of the difference between the Western version of modernity and its own. Importantly, the ROC does not deny that the West is also, in a certain sense, modern. Poland, for instance, is described (even if with some underlying irony) as *"a Western, enlightened nation"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022D). But the problem of Western modernity, as seen by the ROC, is excessive secularization, the divorce of moral values and the society's life: *"They teach children in early school years that homosexuality is a good thing; […] that if you want to belong to the other gender, doctors will help you and carry out the surgery"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022F). Subsequently, the "militant secularism" turns, with the support of Protestants, against the Catholic and Orthodox Christians (PAYNE 2010). The ultimate expression of the submission of people to this aggressive secularism is the demand *"to hold a gay pride [parade] […] as a test of loyalty to that very powerful world"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022R). In the end, "the minority dictates its will to the majority…, which is the great tragedy of Western society" (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 2022F).

The ROC, on the other hand, holds that to be a modern, cultured nation presupposes the acceptance of a special place of religion in the society and, with it, the natural morality that religion teaches. This also means that the majority should not accommodate the views of minorities which deviate from these moral principles. Only then will people lead a happy life: *"The faith teaches us what mass culture of today does not. It teaches us the main thing – how to be a happy person… and have faith in the future"* (PRESS SERVICE 2022E). This is in line with the previous statements that argue for the compatibility between the religious neutrality of the government and the *"Christian idea about the role of the church in society"* (RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH – DEPARTMENT FOR EXTERNAL CHURCH RELATIONS 2024A). A similar argument pertains to (Western) democracy as one of the ultimate expressions of the allegedly excessively secular version of modernity. The Western model is flawed, but it cannot be transformed into a more religious arrangement without *"a spiritualization*

of the society itself," as the former without the latter would *"necessarily lead to a lie and hypocrisy"*. It is only *"a spiritual renaissance of the society"*, an elevation to a more religious consciousness, that can be the foundation of a more mature form of society (IBID.).[7]

TABLE 1: SELECTED KEY NOTIONS DISCUSSED IN THE ROC DISCOURSE IN RELATION TO MODERNITY

Most frequent notions	**Occurrence frequency**
ROC's strategies of othering:	
Criticism of the division and conflict between the people of Holy Russia and the Church is central for the narrative; the attitudes causing the unnatural "otherness" of fraternal Ukraine (nationalism, Nazism, fascism) are to blame; so are Ukrainian and Western politicians (only Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić are the exceptions), Constantinople (*"the canonical crimes of Patriarch Bartholomew, who promoted schism"*), the OCU, and unnamed "forces", "external curators", and enemies who wish to weaken Russia and deepen the split with Ukraine. The West is virtually always portrayed negatively.	
Nationalism, fascism, Nazism	31
Schism	133
ROC's self-identification:	
The ROC as a unifying, legitimate link of the natural spiritual and historical whole – the people of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. A strong emphasis on the image of a fraternal and merciful ROC and on its humanitarian aid: Ukrainians are often portrayed as refugees and victims of militant nationalism and the "situation" in Ukraine, to whom the ROC, the various dioceses and the believers offer their help.	
Unity/unification	158
Refugees	987
Competing modernities, political concepts:	
Secularism is denounced; *"the so-called 'universal' values of secular modernity and postmodernity have failed the historical test"*; the secularist myth *"claims that [...] the Church should preach not love and salvation but abstract political freedoms and technocratic fatalism instead of moral and real social progress."* Rights are mentioned most often in regard to the restrictions of the rights of believers and the Church itself; humanism is indirectly linked to the care of Ukrainian refugees seeking protection in Russia.	
Rights	20
Secularism and secularization	19

Most frequent notions	Occurrence frequency
ROC's attitude toward the West:	
A wider range of issues are linked to the West: economic sanctions, US troops in Europe, *"sowing enmity between brotherly nations"*, the claim that *"we live in two completely different information spaces"*. Moral condemnations: e.g., Europeans' attitude towards refugees *"borders on disgust"* (in contrast to the Christian *"brotherly love"* shown to them in Russia); criticism of *"the Western demands to organize a gay pride parade"*. All this contributes to *"the historical mission and responsibility of Christian Orthodoxy in the conditions of the dechristianisation of the West."*	
The West	49
LGBTQ+	7

Source: Authors' work.

THE OCU, THE WAR, AND MODERNITY

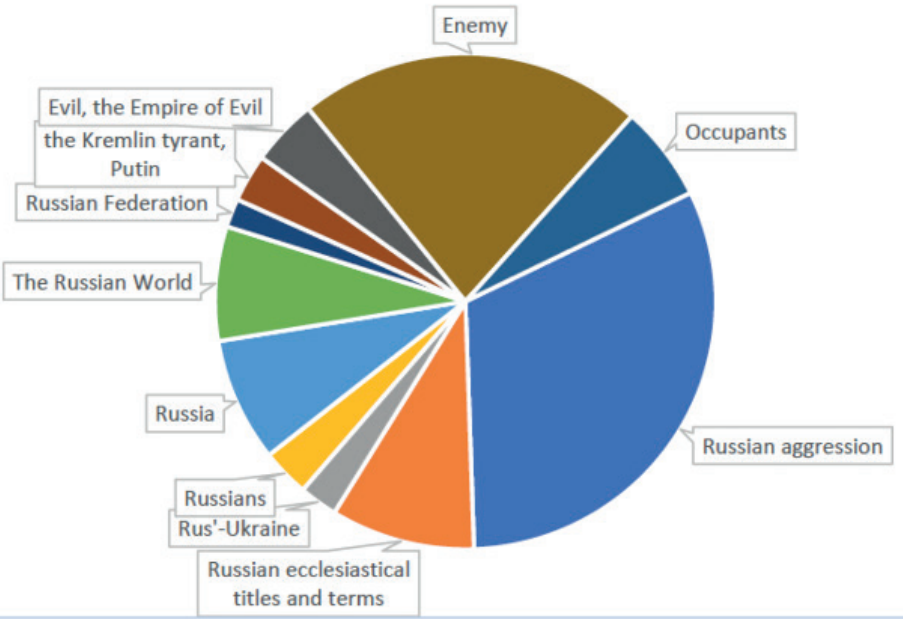
The OCU'S strategy of othering

The single most visible distinction between the OCU's online communication and that of the ROC consists in the OCU's focus on the war and the related difference between the OUC and the ROC. The process of othering in the OCU's online communication consists of three interlinked elements. First, the self-other constructions are more varied in terms of defining who is the enemy against whom the church's (and Ukraine's) identity is constructed. The second channel through which the OCU builds the self-other distinction is stressing the fundamental difference between aggression and defence. These two are very different phenomena; the former is seen as anachronistic, and the latter as an expression of modernity as it contributes to establishing free nationhood. The war is thus not a necessary, unprovoked reaction to the Western encroachment on Russia's vital security interests. Instead, it is Russia's imperialist aggression against its peaceful neighbour, an independent country that wants to follow its own path. Third, the war is also seen as a spiritual struggle in this case, but while the ROC's interpretation is related to the sacredness of the Russian World, the OCU sees the struggle more straightforwardly as a defence of the values of freedom and self-determination against the tyranny of Moscow.

The OCU attempts to differentiate between the Russian society and the country's leadership, focussing in particular on the Russian President and the Russian state. Hence, the harshest expressions of the OCU are related to the person of President Putin, who is compared to the greatest villains

of human history in them (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023A). More specifically, President Putin is seen as the driving force behind the war and also as a leader who exploits the Russian church for his war aims (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023B). The ROC is typically called the "Moscow Patriarchate" or "the Moscow church" in the OCU's discourse, and it is associated with "Moscow's influence" or directly with "hybrid warfare" (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023B; CF. ALSO ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023D; ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022B). This reinforces the position of foreignness of the ROC and the need to "liberate" Ukraine not only militarily, but also in terms of ecclesial independence: *"The Church is the soul of the Ukrainian nation. And the body cannot be Ukrainian and the soul Russian"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022S).

GRAPH 1: THE OTHER AS IDENTIFIED BY THE OCU



Source: Authors' work.

THE OCU'S SELF-IDENTIFICATION: A HOLY MISSION OF DEFENDING A FREE UKRAINE

In the OCU's online communication, the war defence efforts and nation-building are two closely interrelated tasks – Ukrainians as a nation are brought together by having to defend their freedom and their values against the invader. The OCU is careful in stressing that it supports the war, but its backing is again conditional upon the war's defensive nature (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023G). The OCU explains that it can bless Ukrainian soldiers, again using the opportunity to establish the distinction between Ukraine and Russia – *"unlike the occupiers, our soldiers are defenders. They do not… commit acts of aggression"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023H). On the other hand, against the ROC's claim about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict being a holy war, the OCU does not posit a pacifistic rejection of war. Instead, the OCU argues that *"historically, the Orthodox Church has never insisted on a strictly pacifistic response to war, violence or oppression, nor did it forbid believers to serve in the army or police"* (IBID.). The church often repeats that while it is in favour of what it calls true peace, creating peace by giving in to Russian demands might be in fact *"a deception, an illusion, something temporary and uncertain"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023I).

And yet, the ultimate goal for both the OCU and the nation, after repelling the aggressor, is to continue *"to build our united, independent, strong, and democratic Ukraine"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022D). In other words, the OCU's narrative revolves around the construction of Ukraine as a modern nation. The modernity that is stressed here is the "European" one (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022E), which is often contrasted with Russia's approach to the conflict. The OCU is then a key tool for the nation-building project – it sees supporting the independent statehood, building a strong army and establishing an independent church as three interrelated matters which are all essential (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022F; CF. ALSO ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022G; EPIPHANIUS I OF UKRAINE 2022).

History plays a special role in both the OCU's self-description and its treatment of nation-building. The church and, in particular, its Primate, often underline the need to study history, and *"learn from the past in order for the Ukrainian nation to be strengthened"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022E). The history of Ukraine is often venerated, and a strong connection

between Kyivan Rus' and Ukraine is ascertained. Hence, the OCU talks about Ukraine's *"more than thousand-year-old history, which the aggressor is now trying to falsify, depriving us of the right to statehood"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022E). The historical importance of Ukraine is then linked to the right of the country to sovereignty and the right of the OCU to independence. In an attempt to counter the Russian argument that Kyivan Rus' is the antecedent of the Russian Empire and today's Russia, the OCU sometimes also uses the label of "Rus'-Ukraine". So, for example, it speaks about the commemoration of Volodimir of Kyiv and the 1034th anniversary of the baptism of Rus'-Ukraine (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022H). Similarly, when describing the links between Rus' and the Byzantine Empire, it speaks about *"the powerful and rich state of Rus'-Ukraine",* adding, *"let's be proud of our roots, a glorious thousand-year history. And we will not let anyone appropriate it! Glory to Ukraine!"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022I).

Overall, the othering between Ukraine and Russia in the online statements is often carried out by stressing the civilizational difference between the two countries, with Ukraine being seen as ancient, spiritual, and modern and Russia being described as aggressive, destructive or expansionist. If the ROC's narrative sees the war as a spiritual struggle, the OCU does not contradict the claim, but it interprets the struggle differently. The OCU conducts *"its own spiritual battle"*: Since President Putin exploits his country's religious institutions, particularly "the Moscow church," and tries to impose his Russian World ideology on Ukraine, the OCU is defending the foundations of Ukraine's statehood, to which an independent church belongs: *"The spiritual fundament may be invisible, but without it, it is impossible to build a strong 'body' of the Ukrainian state"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023B). The conflict is thus not seen as a war over territory, but as a sort of cosmic war: God is with Ukraine in this battle since Ukrainians *"are fighting for truth and the good against demonic hatred and tyranny"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022K).

The ideology of the Russian World is also interpreted spiritually: It is seen not only as "criminal" (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 202L), but as a force *"with a demonic essence"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022M) and a heretic doctrine (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022U). The same spiritualization pertains to President Putin and Patriarch Kirill as well. Symptomatically, Putin's name is rarely mentioned explicitly. His personal role is likened to the biblical

tyrant and murderer Herod or to Cain, *"whose deeds are condemned by God, whose memory will be damned forever, and whose fate is with the devil, whose servant he is."* Similarly, the Patriarch Kirill as *"the preacher of the 'Russian World'"* blesses the *"war of aggression and aggression against his neighbours, serving not God but the Antichrist"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022T).

The overall framing of the OCU's positioning within Ukraine is unambiguous – a symbiotic relationship between the church, the state, and the society: The independence of the church is essential for the independent statehood, and the independent statehood is essential for the independent church. That is why the church's spiritual struggle cannot be separated from the overall victory of Ukraine over the invading forces. And vice versa, the defeat of Russia also implies the rejection of "the Moscow church" (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022K, 2023N; CF. ALSO ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022O).[8]

THE OCU'S VIEW OF WESTERN MODERNITY

If the ROC rejects Western modernity and instead advocates for the implementation of Russia's own modernity project, the OCU not only argues for a clear alignment of Ukraine with the West, but in fact claims that Ukraine has always been, at its core, part of civilized Europe, a part that was captured by Moscow but which has to return to its rightful place. In recent statements of the ROC, it said that the borderline between true Christian civilization and the area that bows to Satanism and does not even follow the ethos of its own modernity lies on the Western border of Russia (or more precisely, on the border of the Russian World's influence). The OCU reverses this geopolitical imagination. Connecting the current war with liberation from *"the yoke of the 'Russian World' and its darkness of spiritual slavery"* imposed by the *"empire of evil"* (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023F), it argues that Ukraine became the easternmost "outpost of Christian civilization" more than a millennium ago (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022H). Ukraine is seen as simultaneously becoming modern by *"returning to Europe"*, turning into *"an inseparable part of the family of European nations"* (IBID.) and reasserting its Christian heritage.

The overall acceptance of European modernity is affirmed in general terms, however, and the most sensitive issues are not discussed. For instance, while the ROC's online communication is heavily focused on LGBTQ+

topics, these issues are virtually never mentioned by the OCU, arguably in order not to anger the more conservative part of the Ukrainian society. Gender equality is also not given any significant space, but non-traditional roles of women, such as the presence of women in the army, are tacitly accepted (CF. ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022P). The belonging to the West is reflected in the more practically oriented statements about the church's ties with both ecclesial and political leaders from the West. The churches that support the OCU's independence are mentioned, in particular the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Patriarch's support for Ukraine's fight for freedom and a just peace is stressed (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022A, 2023M). The identification with the West is also confirmed by references to various interactions between the OCU's representatives and the West, in particular the United States, such as the meetings of the Metropolitan Epiphaniy with US President Joe Biden (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023N) and State Secretary Mike Pompeo (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2023O) but also the President of the European Parliament (ORTHODOX CHURCH OF UKRAINE 2022V).

TABLE 2: SELECTED KEY NOTIONS DISCUSSED IN THE OCU'S DISCOURSE IN RELATION TO MODERNITY

Most frequent notions	**Occurrence frequency**
OCU's strategies of othering:	
Russia's attack is a combination of barbaric violence (*"torturers and murderers"*, *"barbaric invasion"*, *"trying to cause as much destruction as possible"*) and dehumanized modernity (*"terrorizing with the most modern"* weapons). The active historical roles and intentions of some individuals (Putin as a tyrant, Herod and Cain in the service of the Antichrist) and the absence of reflexivity and moral values (*"it is useless to appeal to the conscience and mercy of the Russian occupiers"*).	
Russian aggression	51
Enemy	36
OCU's self-identification: A holy mission of defending a free Ukraine:	
The very existence of the OCU depends on the defence of Ukraine's sovereignty. The active role of the defenders is valued – their activity is at the same time in accordance with the divine order (the sacrifice of the defenders as an expression of love). Calls for an active civilian involvement (fundraising campaigns). A spiritual presence in all spheres of life (*"We are a nation that has a special relationship with God. He is always present in our hearts, churches, traditions and culture."*). An affective identification of the OCU with the goals of the state and the nation (*"the gift of freedom and independence, both state and church"*).	
Defence, defenders	58
The Russian World	12

OCU's attitude toward the West; political concepts:	
Modernity and the future of Ukraine are associated with Europe rather than the West in general (*"We will continue to have our own independent state and move towards European development"*). A transhistorical belonging to Europe on Christian spiritual foundations. The West is not explicitly mentioned. A modern(izing) reflexivity demonstrated by reformulating tradition and linking it to national interests: supporting the state and opening up to European modernity.	
Europe	20
Freedom	28

Source: Authors' work.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the complex attitudes of the ROC and the OCU toward modernity. It challenged the received view that while the Ukrainian church fully accepts modernity (including the modern insistence on the role of the individual, the central role of human agency as well as the church-state separation), the ROC fully rejects these notions as Western corruptions and defends a return to a pre-modern worldview instead. The OCU does indeed align itself with the West and implicitly accepts the basic tenets of the Western modernity project, but it carefully avoids a deeper involvement in those issues where divergences might appear, such as LGBTQ+ rights or minority rights in Ukraine. The ROC has chosen an entirely different strategy, that of a conservative modernization. This means that it tries to reject some aspects of Western modernity, while also relying on modern socio-political notions. Its approach contains both elements borrowed from the West (especially the stress on human rights, particularly freedom of expression and belief) and a critique of other such elements. Among its frequent targets are especially the church-state separation, the "aggressive secularization", and the allegedly excessive power of (sexual) minorities.

The Ukrainian church has chosen to support the state in its embrace of European modernity, while skilfully avoiding controversial issues. The version of modernity it supports is thus relatively easy to comprehend as it does not deviate much from the one spelt out and represented by the European Union. The ROC's situation is more complex. Both the Russian state and the ROC have now clearly expressed their belief that Russia is capable of producing its own version of modernity which overcomes the alleged flaws of the Western project. Hence, the ideal vision for the Russian

society that the ROC is trying to offer is not based on a version of Orthodox premodernity, but on a conservative modernity of its own, with Russia being depicted as an enlightened, civilized alternative to Western decadence and aggression. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has only reinforced the Russian church's attack on the West and its criticism of the OCU. At the same time, however, the war has made it increasingly difficult for the ROC to reconcile its claims with the continued aggression and the new atrocities coming to light on a regular basis.

That the ROC continues to embrace a type of modernity is evident in, among other things, its treatment of human agency, particularly in the political sphere. Borders of collective identities are not seen as given but as contested. In its view, even the most desirable communities, including the sacralized ones (such as that constituting the Holy Rus'), cannot be taken for granted; they too need to be actively shaped. The Russian World is thus an essential component of what the Holy Rus' is about, but simultaneously also a notion contested by Ukraine and the West, at least in the eyes of the ROC's leadership. Hence, it is not this sacred community itself that is central to the ROC's support of the war, but the need to fight for the re-establishment of its validity. The same modern consciousness is typical for the ROC's view of its role on the domestic level, namely in the Russian society. The society needs to be returned to the right track and this return has to be actively supported by the state and the church, lest Russia experience moral ruin. Hence, the social order is not unchanging and given, and the church must fight for the right social order to assert itself against its challengers – a notion that is again quintessentially modern.

At first glance, the two churches share some similarities in their attitude to modernity and their approaches to the war may seem superficially symmetrical. For instance, both sides see the war as a spiritual struggle between good and evil: For the ROC, the struggle is about the reassertion of the Russian World and the aim is to purge the immorality emanating from the West; for the OCU, the goal is independence and alignment with Europe and its values, and the enemy the tyranny of Moscow, both political and ecclesial. But below the surface, there are fundamental differences. The OCU stresses that it can endorse the war only because it is defensive in nature, thus being in line with a traditional Orthodox position on the issue, while the ROC openly commends a war of aggression or makes

a rather complicated argument about the need to attack Ukraine as part of a broader defensive war against the West and its alleged aggression.[9]

All in all, both the OCU and the ROC have thus embraced versions of modernity. Both churches strongly believe in the malleability of history, accepting the key role of human agency in it, and both see themselves as playing a significant role here. Both the OCU and the ROC thus see themselves as substantially contributing to the process of nation-building/nation-renewal, which, as we have seen above, is another typically modern attitude. However, the ROC's version is highly idiosyncratic and more ambiguous, and its belief in the necessity of the country's modernization less forceful. But the fact that the ROC's hesitant acceptance of (Russia's specific) modernity is complemented by its competition with the other main project of Orthodox modernity, the one propounded by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and now also supported by the OCU, makes the position of the Russian church even more delicate. While no result of the conflict between the two competing visions would lead to the adoption of a single version of modernity across the Orthodox world and various modernities will continue to be expounded, the actual result will undoubtedly tilt the scale in one direction or the other.

ENDNOTES

1 "The special military operation" is the official designation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

2 Modernization, in this article, is understood as a process of accepting and spreading the fundamental principles of modernity (cf. Eisenstadt 2000). For the definition of modernity see below (and cf. Eisenstadt – Ridel – Sachsenmaier 2022).

3 Indeed, globalization incentivizes modernization to such an extent that some authors focus on the triangular relationship between globalization, modernization, and religion instead of just religion and modernity (cf. Roudometof 2014).

4 In our analysis we focus on the OCU and the ROC, the churches that consider themselves 'national' or 'representative' in the two countries. Moreover, the unified OCU is a relatively new institution, which makes it an even more interesting object of research from the point of view of scholarship – this is one of the reasons why we are focusing on its discourse in particular detail. This notwithstanding, it would be interesting to see how the position of the UOC has evolved, especially as its position in Ukraine has recently changed quite dramatically.

5 The document draws heavily on "The Fundamentals of Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church" (Russian Orthodox Church – Department for External Church Relations 2024a).

6 A similar argument is then directed not only at Ukraine, but also at the United States: "Does the State Department know about this? Typically, the corresponding section of the US State Department reacts swiftly to cases of religious oppression" (Synodal Department 2023f).

7 A caveat is necessary here. The analysis above reflects the dominant position in the ROC as it is presented in the official communication channels of the church. Dissenters, nevertheless, exist. While the precise numbers of those who oppose the official church position are unknown, their numbers seem to be significant. The project Christians Against the War lists the names of more than a hundred Christians who have been persecuted because of their opposition to the war; out of these, several dozen belong to the ROC, including a number of priests (Christiyane 2024; cf. also Chapnin 2023 and Luchenko 2024). (We would like to thank one of the reviewers for drawing our attention to this.)

8 Interestingly, the issue of language (i.e. Ukrainian vs. Russian) is not commonly discussed in the OCU's online communication. However, we found a few references that connect the Ukrainian language to Ukraine's identity (e.g. Orthodox Church of Ukraine 2023b).

9 We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this point.

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Forum: Czech Foreign Policy towards Israel, Gaza and Palestine

Czech Foreign Policy towards Israel, Gaza and Palestine: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This text introduces the special forum focusing on the Czech foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine in the wake of the Hamas' October 7 attack and the ensuing Israeli war in Gaza. It discusses the Czech political elites' statements and decision-making regarding the Middle East that have been largely defined by starkly pro-Israeli positions. The introduction goes on to note how Prague's decisions and steps on the EU and international level have become increasingly remarkable due to their uncritical support for the Israeli conduct in spite of the global criticism aimed at its breaches of international and humanitarian law. The introduction further briefly outlines individual contributions, arguing that the forum overall speaks to IR-relevant issues pertaining to the notion of a special relationship, the role of the domestic context for foreign policy, and the EU's international position vis-à-vis the recent major conflict in its neighborhood.

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GAZA, THE WORLD, AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In November 2024, the International Criminal Court published arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israeli ex-Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant and the senior Hamas leader known as Deif. While many experts and governments across both the Global South and North heralded the judicial decision as an implementation of justice, the reaction of European states was rather mixed, and the decision was heavily criticized by the US establishment and conservative pundits (SMOLAR 2024). Still, many of these critiques were veiled in somewhat ambiguous language.

This was generally not the case for the Czech elites, who were not evasive but rather articulate in their condemnation of the ICC warrants. Already in May 2024, Prime Minister Fiala described the ICC decision to indict the Israeli representatives as *"horrible and absolutely unacceptable"*, while in November he condemned the warrants as *"unfortunate"* (SVORNÍK 2024). Although the spokesperson of the Czech MFA announced that Czech law enforcement agencies would respect the international obligations stemming from the country's signature of the Rome Statue, many political figures voiced a strong criticism of the court in this regard (HUMPÁLOVÁ 2024). Several days after the announcement of the warrants, the Czech media reported that the government was contemplating withdrawing the Czech funding of the ICC (KŘÍŽOVÁ 2024B). Moreover, the key foreign-policy advisors of the Prime Minister and President mulled either ignoring the ICC decision or considering withdrawing the Czech Republic from the Court as such (ČT24 2024; KŘÍŽOVÁ 2024A), and the Minister of Defence Jana Černochová invited Yoav Gallant for an official visit to Prague (HORÁK 2024). No Czech politician from the parties currently present in the Parliament made a statement explicitly praising the decision, which was a marked difference from the Czech reaction to the previous ICC arrest warrant on the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This was only the latest development in the Czech policies related to Israel, Palestine and the war in Gaza, which had been marked by the staunchly pro-Israeli stances of the Czech government, diplomacy and political elites in general. The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský was the first foreign dignitary to visit Israel after the Hamas attack on October 7 in a resolute manifestation of the Czech sympathies. In the

months following the attack and during the start of the Israeli bombing and later the ground invasion of Gaza, the Czech Republic consistently voted against UN GA resolutions that were pressing for a ceasefire, positioning itself in the small camp of countries aligned with the United States and Israel (ČTK 2023). Perhaps most notably, the Czech Republic obstructed the EU resolution that was supposed to sanction several violent Israeli settlers (ČTK 2024A) and blocked a resolution that called for a ceasefire in Lebanon (ČTK 2024B) – propositions which were, in contrast to those regarding Gaza-related issues, largely uncontroversial across Europe. These concrete steps were accompanied since October 7 by expressions of unconditional support for the Israeli conduct by Czech leaders as well as members of major Czech political parties and Czech public figures. In one of the more striking statements, the Minister of Defence Černochová called for leaving the UN in reaction to the UN General Assembly Resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza in October 2023 (URBANOVÁ 2023).

Even if somewhat more pro-Israeli than those that came before, these statements and positions of Czech politicians following the October 7 attacks are hardly surprising to any long-term observer of Czech foreign policy and, more specifically, Czech-Israeli relations. Among the members of the EU, the Czech Republic has been, despite some internal debates (DANIEL – ZÁHORA 2020), firmly situated in the pro-Israeli camp (Asseburg – Goren 2019). Czech politicians have repeatedly considered moving the Czech embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (KŘÍŽOVÁ 2022), while the Czech Republic declared that it, in practice, recognizes Jerusalem as the Israeli capital city (MFA 2017). The Czech parliament explicitly and overwhelmingly condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (ČTK 2019). In a telling example of the state of the Czech public sphere, in 2021, many commentators mused whether the Pirate Party nominee for the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský, was sufficiently pro-Israeli to assume the post (DANIEL – HUSSEIN 2022: 71–72). In fact, despite the nominal support for the two-state solution and official relations with the Palestinian Administration, the pro-Palestinian voices amongst Czech politicians have been scarce and, lately, virtually non-existent.

This forum engages with this exceptional level of Czech support for Israeli government policies from several different perspectives. While the Czech Republic is an outlier in the European context, the main aim of the

forum is to unpack the political and social context in which such foreign policy moves are made. In this regard, what makes the Czech case notable is how wide the support for Israeli actions is across most of the political board, and how steady it remained even as much of the global public opinion grew increasingly critical of the Israeli conduct in Gaza and later in Lebanon. On the other hand, the Czech Republic emerged, often along with Hungary, as a notable exception in terms of blocking the EU's foreign policy goals. As such, we aim to situate the post-October 7 developments in larger histories of the Czech(oslovak) relations towards the Israeli state as well as the Czech public and elite attitudes in this respect. By involving a debate on the Middle Eastern foreign policy of Poland, the Czech Republic's counterpart in CEE, we further highlight the Czech distinctiveness in a regional context and provide an example of a public sphere which was originally supportive of the Israeli actions, but became more critical of the Israeli actions as the campaign in Gaza progressed and Israeli public diplomacy increased its assertiveness. While what follows is at this point merely tentative inquiries into the determinants of the current shape of the Czech foreign policy in the Central European context, the collective aspiration of this forum is to contribute to a better understanding and contextualization of the current Czech foreign policy line.

In this introduction, we first outline the topics and dynamics which run through the individual contributions in the forum. We begin by noting that the strength of the Czech pro-Israeli positions is becoming unique not only on the European, but even on the global stage. We then engage the notion of the special relationship, a constellation which is often said to characterize the Czech-Israeli relations. This is followed by highlighting how these relations are highly salient for the domestic context as well. We then briefly reflect on the larger disciplinary implications of the forum's main insights. As a way of concluding, we consider the political stakes of the current steps of the Czech diplomacy.

THE CZECH EXCEPTIONALISM, THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP AND THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

We already highlighted the fact that when it comes to voting patterns and decision-making in the international and European fora, as well as the shape of the elite political discourse, the Czech Republic sides

overwhelmingly and often uncritically sides with the Israeli government regardless of its orientation. Such a strong commitment to a pro-Israeli position is visible across the ideological spectrum of the main political parties, begging the question of why it is so. Admittedly, both of us, the editors of this special section, have been asked about this very issue multiple times, both in the Czech Republic and abroad. Our motivation to put this collection together is partly a result of these discussions and our struggle to find a straightforward answer to them.

Therefore, this special forum aims to explore the different contexts that have shaped the Czech position towards Israel, Palestine and the Middle East region after October 7. More specifically, we want to bring together contributions focusing on its historical determinants as well as its political and social contexts and compare them with the debate held in Poland, which has shared many historical developments with the Czech Republic (CF. DYDUCH 2024). The ambition is to offer, via these different perspectives, a multifaceted picture which is definitely not complete but should provide at least some answers regarding the reasons for the Czech position on Israel/Palestine.

In discussing these issues, the forum builds on the existing investigations of the Czech attitudes towards the Israeli state, some of which were pursued by the authors featured in the forum. Marek Čejka has previously discussed Czech-Israeli relations in the light of EU policies (ČEJKA 2017), while other works have considered the Czech positions in the larger debate on the EU member states' divergent policies towards the Middle East and Israel/Palestine in particular (ASSEBURG – GOREN 2019; DYDUCH 2018; GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). The historical roots of the Czech policies have also been discussed by scholars, who traced how the policies developed in the context of the 1940s and the following decades (TATEROVÁ 2022A) and how these histories and their understanding inform the Central European and Czech official positions (KALHOUSOVÁ 2023). Furthermore, other studies highlighted the public-elite divide in values and perceptions of the Israel and Israel-Palestine conflict (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025), traced the role of antisemitism in the mutual relations between the two countries (TATEROVÁ 2022B), or discussed the academic attitudes towards Israel/Palestine in the Czech context (ZÁHORA – KOLÁČEK – PLÍŠTILOVÁ 2024). While these studies thus pointed out the role of historical narratives and singled out the long-standing exceptional Czech

position, this forum aims to specifically put some of these different explanations into mutual conversation and highlight how they played out in the post-October 7 context.

With regard to the most recent political developments, the forum also speaks to how the particularly Czech policies – and their determinants – figure vis-à-vis arguably the most serious challenges that Europe has faced over the last few decades: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the overall destabilization in the Middle East in the wake of the Hamas attack. As Zora Hesová argues in her contribution, the Czech Republic's attitudes towards conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East reveal two starkly different approaches, which are, in her analysis, embedded in geopolitical calculation as well as the country's civilizational imaginary. This resonates with some of the still rather rare comparative studies of the EU policies towards the war in Ukraine on the one hand, and the conflict in the Middle East on the other (SEE OLEART – ROCH 2025), but adds a specifically CEE and Czech angle to debates on reverberations of civilizational thinking in contemporary Europe (AUER ET AL. 2024; BAKER ET AL. 2024; EBERLE – DANIEL 2022).

Still, even if the European debate and practical steps can be criticized for their double standards in confrontation with the Russian aggression and the Israeli breaches of international law, the case of the Czech Republic deviates from the European overall foreign policy direction. The existing works reviewed above have already highlighted some peculiar features of the Czech-Israeli relations and showed how the Czech position differs from the European mainstream position, which has been supportive of the Israeli state but gradually voiced an increasingly strong criticism of the Israeli conduct of the war in Gaza (and Lebanon) or its actions on the occupied West Bank (BATEMAN 2024; FRANCE 24 2024; GEGOUT 2024). In this regard, Joanna Dyduch's contribution to this forum is important as it shows that this is the case not only with Western Europe, but with Poland as well, which has, for various reasons, grown increasingly condemnatory towards the Israeli state since October 7. No such criticism could be heard from the Czech side.

Although they focus on various aspects and sub-dynamics of Czech attitudes and policies towards Israel, Gaza, and Palestine in the wake of October 7, several threads run through most of the forum contributions.

First, the strength of the Czech pro-Israeli commitment and the consensus amongst the country's political elites on staunchly supporting Israel has by now become a unique phenomenon in Europe if not the entire globe. We already noted that the Czech Republic refused to condemn the Israeli actions in Gaza or in Lebanon in most of the UN General Assembly Resolutions concerning the war in Gaza or to condemn the situation in the West Bank, and blocked joint European positions towards the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon. Such a strong policy decision demands renewed scrutiny, especially when it clashes with the long-standing declared Czech support for universal human rights and multilateral institutions, as Zora Hesová points out in this forum. Moreover, as emphasized in the contribution by Marek Čejka, the latter policy developed from the more critical and peace-process-focused discourse of the 1990s. The contribution by Dyduch then highlights the differences between the Czech policy on the war, which stresses the value dimension of the mutual relationship with Israel, and the more distant Polish perspective, which is strongly animated by the notion of national interest.

Second, the case of the Czech ties with Israel presents an opportunity to revisit the problem of a "strategic relationship" in international politics and its shaping in a new light. Indeed, the fiercely pro-Israeli stance of the Czech Republic is usually justified by a recourse to the notion of a "special", "historical", or "strategic" relationship and a long-standing friendship between Czechia and Israel. This point has been repeatedly voiced on the part of the political elites, and it frequently circulates in the Czech media discourse as well. While the notion of a special relationship with Israel and narratives connected to such a relationship have been dissected often in studies of US-Israeli (MEARSHEIMER – WALT 2009; SALTZMAN 2017) or German-Israeli relations (OPPERMANN – HANSEL 2019; TKOCZ – STRITZEL 2024), the Czech-Israeli relationship is, in fact, more recent and more puzzling. At the same time, the more recent close bonds between Israel and countries such as Hungary have been interpreted through the ideological alignment between the illiberal politicians in power in both countries (DYDUCH 2021; KALHOUSOVÁ 2023). We acknowledge that the notions of historical guilt, strategic interests, foreign-policy lobbies, and ideological alignment, employed to make sense of the relationships between Israel and other states, have an explanatory power in the Czech case as well. However, we maintain that they do not fully explain the Czech foreign policy positions, or the shape of the public

discourse. As Taterová and Čejka show in their contributions to the forum, the development of the Czech-Israeli relationship has been far from straightforward throughout history, as it has gone through multiple reinterpretations. What is thus politically and analytically remarkable is the solidity of the Czech position on Israel over the last few decades, and even more so now in the context of the global and even the European critique towards Israeli policies.

Lastly, the forum shows how the issue of Israel is salient for domestic discussions and features multiple blind spots and distortions. While, to our knowledge, there is no comprehensive analysis which would empirically demonstrate this, the lack of critical debate on the Czech policy on Israel/Palestine suggests that at least the majority of the Czech political elites are rather uncritically pro-Israeli. The piece by Tereza Plíštilová suggests that this is not fully a reflection of the popular opinion, which is, in fact, more nuanced in terms of its sympathies (and, importantly, also relatively uninterested in the topic). But still, it appears that a pro-Israeli affiliation can be a source of significant political capital as many politicians in the centre and right-wing, but also the populist parties proudly state their support for Israel. In this regard, the domestic dimension of the Czech foreign policy bears some similarities with other contexts, most notably that of Germany, whose public discourse is also marked by a clearly articulated pro-Israeli orientation (GRIMM 2024; YOUNES – AL-TAHER 2024). But what needs to be noted is that the historical and domestic conditions that valorize the relationship with the Israeli state in the Czech Republic are starkly different from the situation in Germany. Here, the contribution by Joanna Dyduch is important in drawing attention to the major role of domestic conditions in the shaping of the narrative on Israel/Palestine in Poland, while providing a comparative – and somewhat contrasting – perspective from the CEE region.

THE STAKES OF THE CZECH POLICY

In what follows, the forum provides a series of reflections on the Czech policies towards Israel in their historical, social and regional context and in the specific post-October 7 moment. While the individual contributions and the forum as a whole mostly seek to offer an empirical overview of the said policies, they also relate to several larger debates.

First, the forum serves as a basis for and an invitation to debates on the challenges and domestic variants of the EU foreign policy under the current geopolitical shift marked by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the instability in the Middle East and the growing trans-Atlantic rift following the election of Donald Trump. Vis-à-vis the series of these unprecedented developments, the Czech case, probed here, shows that we need to pay attention to the bifurcated and, at least in some regards, incoherent interpretations of these crises on the domestic level. The forum can thus encourage more comprehensive debates regarding the foreign policy-making on the EU level in the context of the widely different perceptions of international crises among its member states. Such debates are definitely not new, but in the present moment they gain a new urgency.

Second, the contributions here provide fertile ground for further critical appraisals of the notion of a special relationship in international politics. The contributions in the forum show how this foreign policy orientation and bond might be a result of the ideological affinities of a relatively small political group, demonstrating how its genealogy and current state need to be situated in a particular social and historical context. It further generates the question of the extent to which the figure of a "special relationship" can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, essentially in the sense of an aspiration which works to conjure particular foreign policy steps. The regional comparison highlights the importance of local experiences and conditions in the shaping of foreign policies in this regard.

This leads to the third area probed by this forum: the discrepancy between political elites' and the citizenry's opinions regarding these issues of foreign policy. How come that a foreign policy issue becomes a source of such political capital while it is not widely endorsed by the voters? And how can foreign policy steps feed back into this valorization of this international orientation amongst the political elites? The Czech case appears to provide an intriguing starting point for the appraisal of these questions.

However, in addition to the disciplinary reflections, the forum is also an invitation to consider the political stakes of Czech policies. The fact that the Czech Republic has consistently voted against what amounted to the EU consensus on issues pertaining to humanitarian concerns, its refusal of political extremism and the need for a de-escalation of violence in the

Middle East has, arguably, put into question the country's self-professed dedication to human rights and multilateralism. Globally, what many see as the hypocrisy of double standards and a selective emphasis on human rights tarnishes the Czech reputation, in particular in the Global South. Crucially for the governmental support for Ukraine, the Czech uncritical embrace of Israeli policies leaves Prague open to criticism. These repercussions will be engaged with in future analytical and academic texts. This forum seeks to provide a stepping stone for them by opening debates on Czech foreign policies and the main factors which shape them.

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NOTE

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Czechoslovak Support for the Founding of Israel in the Late 1940s: the Myth of Everlasting Friendship?

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ABSTRACT	The war between Israel and Hamas that began in October 2023 deeply polarized public and political opinion worldwide. In contrast to many EU countries, the Czech Republic adopted a position of unwavering support for Israel, referencing their shared values and long-standing friendship grounded in the historical ties between the Czech and Jewish peoples. This article explores this narrative by examining the commonly cited example of Czechoslovakia's support for the establishment of Israel in the late 1940s, which included providing arms supplies, military training, and diplomatic backup. However, such reflections on history often overlook important international and domestic factors of the time, including the Eastern Bloc's efforts to expand communism into the newly decolonized Third World countries and its pursuit of financial gain. As a result, Czechoslovakia's pro-Israeli position during the Cold War was short-lived, and was quickly reversed when the political circumstances changed. Ignoring these facts leads to distorted historical interpretations and even the development of some historical myths.

KEYWORDS	Czech Republic, Israel, arms supplies, First Arab-Israeli War, Cold War history
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INTRODUCTION

"I want to make it very clear: the Czech Republic stands with Israel, now and ever. And like 75 years ago, you can count on our voice and support" (JNS 2023).

Petr Fiala, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, October 2023

Since the end of the Cold War, the mutual relationship between the Czech Republic and Israel has been characterized by an extraordinary level of friendship. Some suggest that this extraordinary relationship is not merely driven by economic or geopolitical interests but is rather rooted in shared values – such as a commitment to democracy, a cultural affinity between Czechs and Jews, and, importantly, the historical connections between the two countries. The shared history between the Czech and Jewish nations is long and complex, encompassing both positive and negative elements (WEIN 2015). However, the current Czech and Israeli political leaderships as well as the countries' publics often tend to emphasize the positive aspects of this history, frequently downplaying or omitting the negative ones, which include the discrimination of Jews in the Czech lands, open antisemitism, medieval pogroms and riots, the Czech complicity in some events of the Holocaust, and, last but not least, the persecution of Jews under the communist regime during the Cold War (ČAPKOVÁ – KIEVAL 2021).

Instead, the focus is placed on more favorable narratives, particularly those related to the brief period of friendship in the late 1940s, when Czechoslovakia played an active role in supporting the establishment of the State of Israel through diplomatic backing, arms supplies, and the training of Jewish volunteers, despite existing embargoes. From the Czech perspective, this historical episode is often invoked to justify providing similar support to Israel in the times of the recent crisis. This narrative has been prominent since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the restoration of diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel in February 1990 (ČEJKA 2017: 24–43).

Since the outbreak of hostilities on October 7, 2023, the Czech political establishment, including both the government and most opposition parties, along with much of the public, has strongly supported Israel. Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský was the first foreign official to visit Israel after Hamas' attack – in fact, he did so just three days after it, which

prompted some Israeli figures to compare it to Czechoslovakia's early support for Israel in 1948 (ŠÍDLOVÁ 2023). Similarly, in February 2024, Czech Minister of Defense Jana Černochová made an official visit to Israel, and reaffirmed this stance by stating, *"Israel is our closest ally in the Middle East. Just as in 1948, we stand by your side now and are ready to provide assistance according to your needs"* (MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2024). During his visit to the United States in April 2024, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala emphasized the Czech Republic's unwavering support for Israel in a speech at the Hudson Institute: *"The Czech Republic is a long-time friend of Israel – and its most important advocate in Europe. This was evident in 1948, when we provided the young Israeli state with arms for its defense. This assistance started a special Czech-Israeli relationship which is now stronger than ever"* (GOVERNMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2024).

These three examples, among many similar instances, demonstrate that the narrative justifying the Czech Republic's unconditional support for the State of Israel and pointing to their everlasting friendship, which is rooted in the historical precedent of the late 1940s, has gained significant momentum since the onset of the Gaza conflict. The story of the support in the 1940s has apparently been chosen not only to show the historical roots of the mutual relations but also to reference an example of Czechoslovak aid to Israel during a time of significant security threats to the existence of the Jewish state. The dominant perspective among the majority of Czech political representatives, as well as within the broader public and media, has drawn upon the historical precedent of the Czech aid to Israel in 1948 as a significant argument to legitimize the current extraordinary Czech support for Israel.

However, a closer examination of the history of the bilateral relations reveals that the period of friendship between Czechoslovakia and Israel in the late 1940s was not only brief but also motivated by a complex set of factors influencing military aid, diplomatic support, and other forms of cooperation. This paper aims to thoroughly explain and evaluate this early Cold War history chapter in their mutual relations, analyzing the contemporary geopolitical context of the late 1940s, as well as the international and Czechoslovak domestic factors that were crucial for this cooperation to occur. It will then assess whether this historical cooperation truly serves as the foundation for the extraordinary friendship between the two countries that exists today.

THE CZECHOSLOVAK MOTIVES FOR SUPPORTING ISRAEL IN THE LATE 1940S

Modern Jewish nationalism, like Czech nationalism, emerged in the late 19th century, with the two movements reflecting certain parallels in their aspirations for self-determination and nationhood. In the aftermath of World War II, Zionist leaders intensified their efforts to promote the vision of an independent Jewish state. While the international community generally recognized the tragic genocide of the Jewish people during the Holocaust with considerable compassion, the Zionist objective of establishing the State of Israel in the Middle East – specifically in British Mandatory Palestine – was met with significant opposition, particularly from local Arabs and, more broadly, from countries with majority Muslim populations worldwide (SEE MORRIS 2008; MILLER 2016).

Complicating matters further, the Middle East quickly became a critical arena for the Cold War rivalry of the United States of America and the Soviet Union, and the question of creating a Jewish state in this strategic region became entangled in the broader geopolitical struggle (SIMON – TAKEYH 2016: 25–52). Rather than seeking a balanced, sensitive, and fair resolution to this uneasy situation, both superpowers often pursued their own political agendas and interests in this regard. As the Cold War escalated, the United States and the Soviet Union each sought to establish a network of regional allies in the Middle East that would align with its respective ideological and political framework (SORBY 2010: 61–80).

Under these circumstances, the Soviet Union sought to expand communism into the Middle East. However, in the late 1940s, the Soviet opportunities for expansion in this region were limited, as most of the regional countries were monarchies – a political system fundamentally opposed to the ideological principles of communism, which emphasized a classless society and equality for all (AMZV 1952: 1). In this context, the emerging Jewish state appeared to be one of the very few potential allies for the Soviet Union, as a significant portion of the Zionist movement was left-wing, with the Labor Party (Mapai) serving as the most influential political force in the emerging state at the time (RUCKER 2001: 114–119).

While the Soviet Union offered open diplomatic support for the Zionist ambitions, it refrained from direct military or material assistance. Instead, the Soviet leader Joseph V. Stalin chose to rely on intermediaries for providing military aid and other forms of support. Eventually Czechoslovakia emerged as a key intermediary in this context (Taterová 2023: 115–116). Post-war Czechoslovakia underwent a complex process of state restoration and over time, the country became politically and ideologically integrated into the Soviet bloc under the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, a process that culminated in the communist coup d'état of February 1948 (SMETANA 2007: 125–134).

In regard to the region of the Middle East, Czechoslovakia was able to revive its interwar experience with it and its contacts that it had already established there, which were only disrupted by the war. For these reasons, in the late 1940s Czechoslovakia soon became very active in the region in terms of both the political and economic agenda. Following the restoration of the Czechoslovak state in 1945, the Czechoslovak General Consulate in Jerusalem began submitting regular reports on the situation in British Mandatory Palestine, where tensions and violence were steadily escalating because of clashes and riots between Jewish and Arab communities (TATEROVÁ 2023: 116–118).

In these circumstances, Great Britain announced its plan to withdraw from Palestine by May 15, 1948, transferring the issue to the newly established United Nations (UN), which sought to find an appropriate solution for the future status of this unstable and volatile territory. In response, the UN established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), tasking its commissioners with investigating various aspects of the situation in the disputed region. Czechoslovakia was one of the eleven countries represented in this committee, with the diplomat Karel Lisický serving as its representative (BEN-DROR 2023: 34–35). In November 1947, UNSCOP proposed the well-known *UN Partition Plan*, recommending the division of the disputed territory of British Mandatory Palestine into two sovereign states – a solution supported by both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union which, however, ultimately failed (UN 1947).

Although the USA as well as the UN had imposed an embargo on the supply of weapons and other military equipment to Palestine, local actors actively sought external sources of armament. This issue was particularly pressing for the Zionist movement, which at the time faced significant shortages in military equipment and lacked sufficient numbers of soldiers with relevant combat experience (TATEROVÁ 2022: 82–84). In response, David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Mapai Party, initiated secret negotiations with various countries. Ultimately, as a result of previously established contacts, Ehud Avriel, a special envoy of Ben-Gurion in Europe, traveled to Prague, where he met with several Czechoslovak leaders to discuss potential arms deals (AVRIEL 1975: 332–333; AMZV 1948A: 1).

Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk genuinely endorsed the vision of an independent Jewish state in the Middle East, a vision shared to some extent also by President Edvard Beneš (BIALER 1990: 174). However, other members of the Czechoslovak government held divergent views on this. Certain members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, such as Masaryk's deputy Vladimír Clementis, supported aiding the creation of Israel, but only under the condition that the newborn Jewish state would become an integral part of the Eastern bloc or at least a close ally of the East in the Middle East. Consequently, the initial plan was to offer military training only to Jewish communists, as this was presented as part of the struggle against British colonialism. (AMZV 1948B: 1–2).

For other influential Czechoslovak political figures like Bedřich Reicin, the then Deputy Minister of National Defense, and Zdeněk Toman, the then Chief of Foreign Intelligence, the situation presented primarily a financial opportunity. They viewed the transports of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe to the future State of Israel and the sale of obsolete Czechoslovak military equipment to it as lucrative ventures (HAGGAI – KLÍMA – GOLDSTEIN 2017: 131–134). Despite occasionally contradictory opinions, in 1947–1948, various contracts totaling 144,757,928 USD were signed between Czechoslovakia and Mapai to provide the new state with weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment primarily produced by Czechoslovak companies such as Zbrojovka Brno and Avia (AMZV 1954: 17).

The first shipments occurred in April 1948, and the final supplies were delivered in August 1948, some under highly dramatic circumstances. In certain cases, the goods were misdeclared as unrelated items, such as scrap iron or onions. In reality, these shipments contained infantry rifles, machine guns, pistols, mortars, howitzers, grenades, Spitfire aircraft, ammunition, and other military equipment that proved to be crucial for Haganah, the Zionist militia that later evolved into the Israeli Defense Forces (BULÍNOVÁ ET AL. 1993: 87–88). These agreements also included the provision of military training for about 1,500 Jewish volunteers in Czechoslovakia, especially pilots who were trained mostly in České Budějovice, Libavá, and Žatec (AMZV 1951).

After the State of Israel was unilaterally declared on May 14, 1948 by the provisional Israeli government in Tel Aviv, Czechoslovakia, following the Soviet Union's lead, was among the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of the new state, doing so on May 18. On July 28, 1948, the Israeli embassy in Prague was opened, with Ehud Avriel serving as the first ambassador (ZÍDEK – SIEBER 2009: 128). Eduard Goldstücker, the first Czechoslovak ambassador to Israel, arrived in Tel Aviv on January 3, 1950 (GOLDSTÜCKER 2005: 40–42). However, this period of extraordinary friendly relations was short-lived. As early as August 1948, the Czechoslovak government ordered an immediate halt to military supplies to Israel. Although the legal immigration of Czechoslovak Jews to Israel continued for a time, it was severely restricted by the communist regime already in the early 1950s (GILBERT 2002: 275; NAČR 1951: 1–2).

This tightening of policy soon even intensified, particularly after Israel's first parliamentary election in January 1949, which made it clear that Israel would not become the first communist state in the Middle East. The Israeli government, led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, refused to invite members of the Communist Party of Israel into the government, signaling Israel's preference for alignment with the West rather than the East (KRAMMER 1974: 46–47). This shift was perceived by the Eastern bloc as an ultimate declaration that Israel had become an adversary in the context of the ongoing Cold War. As a result, the initial friendship and support from Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, gave way to hostility toward Israel, which also manifested in the oppression of the Jewish community within Czechoslovakia, and political purges targeting not only prominent politicians of Jewish origin but also non-political members of the Jewish

community. Official activities of Zionist organizations in Czechoslovakia were halted, and state-sponsored antisemitism became an everyday reality until the collapse of communism in 1989 (KUBÁTOVÁ – LÁNÍČEK 2018: 169–237).

CONCLUSION

The Czechoslovak aid to the establishment of the State of Israel in the Middle East in 1948 was undeniably crucial. Particularly during the initial phases of the First Arab-Israeli War, Israeli aircraft, the majority of whose pilots had received training in Czechoslovakia, played a vital role. However, it is important to underscore that the motivations behind the extraordinary Czechoslovak support for the Zionist movement were multifaceted. While the tradition of mutual friendship may have been a factor, it applied only to certain segments of the Czechoslovak political leadership and society. More significant were the pragmatic interests that the Eastern bloc had in the Middle East. Czechoslovakia's diplomatic support for the establishment of the State of Israel, while influenced by the aforementioned factors, must be understood within the broader framework of Eastern bloc policy, both in the context of the Cold War and in that of the Arab-Israeli conflict specifically.

The Soviet influence over Czechoslovakia intensified after 1945 and became increasingly visible in fundamental foreign policy decisions, particularly in the summer of 1947, when Czechoslovak leaders initially agreed to participate in the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) only to later withdraw under Soviet pressure. A few months later, in November of 1947, secret negotiations between Czechoslovak and Zionist representatives over an arms deal began, albeit unofficially with Soviet approval. This process culminated in the Communist coup of February 1948, which cemented Czechoslovakia's subordination to Soviet foreign policy for the next 41 years. Accordingly, Czechoslovakia followed the Soviet Union's position on Israel and the Middle East during the late 1940s.

Given these historical dynamics, should the notion of the Czech-Israeli everlasting friendship in the 20th century be considered a myth? Not necessarily. Even in the late 1940s, a significant part of Czechoslovak society expressed sympathy for the Jewish people, particularly in light of the tragedy of Holocaust. Concurrently, many saw the creation of the

Jewish state as analogous to Czechoslovakia's own difficult path to independence. While no precise statistical data is available, historical sources indicate that many Czechoslovaks maintained positive attitudes toward Israel even after the brief period of official cooperation between the two states ended (WEIN 2015: 170–175).

From the early 1950s until the political regime change in 1989, the Czechoslovak government officially prioritized cooperation with Arab states and regarded Israel as a hostile entity – a policy driven not only by Cold War geopolitics but also by state-sponsored antisemitism. This shift was symbolized by the landmark Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal of 1955, through which Czechoslovakia – under Soviet patronage – began supplying weapons to Israel's opponents, setting a precedent for similar agreements with Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and others. Despite this alignment, some segments of Czech society continued to support Israel, grounded in the belief that the Jewish people have a right to their own sovereign state in the Middle East. This was particularly true of the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, but to some extent also of those who viewed support for Israel as a form of opposition to the regime, a sentiment that grew stronger after the Six-Day War in 1967, when Czechoslovakia severed diplomatic relations with Israel in response to the conflict (POLÁČKOVÁ – VAN DUIN 2020: 861–887).

In conclusion, while Czechoslovakia's aid to the creation of the State of Israel in the late 1940s was based on a combination of various political, economic, ideological, and geostrategic reasons and its characterization as an act of pure friendship is indeed a myth or at best an oversimplification, a historical sense of friendship or at least a closeness between the two nations does appear to have existed. Even though the antisemitism during the communist era was not limited to the actions of the communist leadership, as anti-Jewish prejudice and popular antisemitism also existed in the Czechoslovak population (SOUKUPOVÁ 2020: 310–326), the pro-Israeli sentiment, which remained important for at least some parts of society, helped form the basis for the reestablishment of friendly relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel after 1989.

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Václav Havel's Zionism? The Role of New Political Elites in the Transformation of Czech Policies Towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict after the Fall of Communism

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ABSTRACT	This essay analyzes the causes and conditions that led Czech political elites to form a strong bond with the State of Israel after the Velvet Revolution. This bond gradually developed into a strategic alliance. This relationship became increasingly accompanied by the Czech Republic's clearly uncritical stances towards Israel and its policies in the Middle East. In this context, the important role of Czech political elites – initially led by Václav Havel – is examined, while the shifts in their thinking that contributed to today's approaches in Czech diplomacy are illustrated.

KEYWORDS	Václav Havel, Czechoslovakia and Israel, Czech Republic and Israel, czech foreign policy, zionism, pro-israeli policy, counterelites and politics
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Czech public discourse, the positive relations between the Czech Republic and Israel are often simplified and reduced to a something "historically given." In reality, the roots of these political positions are different. The modern history of Czech and Czechoslovak relations with Jews, the Zionist movement, and Israel is marked by both numerous positive moments and instances of an entirely opposite nature. It was primarily the positions of the new political elites after the fall of communism in 1989 that contributed to the shift in the Czech foreign policy toward Israel to its current level. An important part of these new Czech political elites – especially those within the circle of President Václav Havel – had previously been dissident counter-elites. Already during their time in the dissident movement, they held strongly pro-Israeli views, which they later transformed, in their role as new political elites, into a distinctly pro-Israeli political agenda.

When the pre-1989 Czechoslovak counter-elites – those who would later become the post-communist political elites – discussed and imagined Israel, certain symbolic and historical reference points came to be particularly formative. These included the legacy of Czech-Jewish cultural figures, the views of T. G. Masaryk on Jews and Zionism, the perceived parallels between the 1938 Munich Agreement and the international situation of Israel, the post-World War II Czechoslovak military assistance to the nascent State of Israel, the antisemitism of the Eastern Bloc during the late Stalinist period, its Cold War support for Israel's Arab adversaries, and the intellectual responses to the Six-Day War and the Prague Spring (SEE, E.G., WEIN 2015; PITHART 2024), (SEE ALSO TATEROVÁ IN THIS FORUM).

At the same time, official Czechoslovak policies of that period were in line with Soviet Cold War foreign policy, which was focused on maintaining good relations primarily with people's democratic regimes and national liberation movements fighting against pro-Western forces, including the State of Israel. Czechoslovakia thus cooperated with the PLO, for example, and, in contrast, severed diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967 (TATEROVÁ 2022A; ZÍDEK – SIEBER 2009: 143, 242).

The counter-elite imaginary of Israel, rooted in the dissenting cultural memory and political identity of the 1970s and 1980s opposition, came to the forefront after the fall of Communism. Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, a significant diplomatic realignment took place. Relations between Czechoslovakia and Western states, including Israel, improved markedly. This transformation was largely driven by the ascent of these new political elites, whose earlier opposition to communist domestic and foreign policy translated into a fundamentally different orientation in international affairs.

This imaginary can be understood as natural within its historical context, though it was not always well-contextualized or accurately interpreted, as views of it at times even bordered on romanticized mythologizing. Nevertheless, these attitudes significantly influenced the thinking of the Czechoslovak/Czech post-1989 elites and the public on the topic of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Importantly, figures such as Václav Havel exemplify the fluid boundary between the roles of *counter-elite* and *elite*: once positioned in the cultural and political opposition to the communist regime, individuals like Havel became central actors in shaping foreign policy after 1989. This transition did not erase their earlier frameworks of perception, however – it often reinforced them.

NATURAL SYMPATHIES

One of the first steps of the "Havelian"[1] foreign policy was the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, which occurred on February 9, 1990. Czechoslovakia thus became, after Hungary, the second former Soviet satellite state to renew diplomatic ties with Israel. This led to the mutual opening of embassies in Prague and Tel Aviv and reciprocal visits of heads of state (CZECH EMBASSY IN TEL-AVIV 2019). This development was accompanied by an atmosphere of great optimism stemming from the broader context of the Eastern Bloc's collapse. At the same time, the Israeli-Palestinian relations were transforming, with early significant signs of the peace process emerging in the 1990s.

Under Václav Havel, Czechoslovak foreign policy quickly became very friendly towards Israel. For instance, Havel was among the world leaders who pushed for the repeal of UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 from

1975, which equated Zionism with racism (RUBY 1990). However, Havel's foreign policy of the 1990s was not reflexively one-sided. For example, since the second half of the 1970s, the PLO has maintained a representation in Czechoslovakia, which gained the status of the Embassy of the State of Palestine in 1988 (TATEROVÁ 2022B). Havel's diplomacy, and later Czech diplomacy, respected the original recognition of the State of Palestine.

Havel also sought to understand the deeper complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (hereafter referred to as "the conflict") and was critical of certain aspects of Israeli policy. For example, such criticism concerned the Israeli government of Yitzhak Shamir, which, according to his views, was not active enough in peace efforts (CZECH RADIO 1990). He met with Yasser Arafat several times, including during Arafat's 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia, which had been planned under the Communist regime. Havel even considered mediating the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, but this proposal soon proved unrealistic, as Czechoslovakia began facing growing internal tensions, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the federation into two independent states in 1992 (VÁCLAV HAVEL LIBRARY 2015). Havel also began inviting not only Israeli but also Palestinian intellectuals to the international human rights conference Forum 2000, which he founded to promote dialogue. For example, the Palestinian journalist and diplomat Leila Shahid was invited already to the first of these conferences (FORUM 2000 2021).

FROM CULTURAL AFFINITIES TO PREJUDICES

Havel's sympathies towards Israel drew upon many sources, not just the dissident counter-cultural positions. Throughout his life, Havel was inspired by the cultural aspects of Judaism and Jewish Prague (including the works of Franz Kafka, which influenced Havel's writing), and he formed friendships with numerous figures in Czech Jewish life, many of whom were signatories of Charter 77. He was also inspired by the legacy of T. G. Masaryk and his fight against anti-Semitism (POJAR 2016). To some extent, Havel linked his sympathies towards Judaism with support for Zionism, helping to create an attractive but somewhat romanticized and thus inaccurate blend of Judaism and Zionism.

Havel sometimes, for example, compared the position of dissidents in communist Czechoslovakia to that of Jews in ghettos or likened the Czech

and Jewish nations to each other by referring to their *"eternal struggle for survival"* (HAVEL 2012). Such comparisons, however, due to their generality, can hardly be considered anything more than loose metaphors. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, during his presidency, Havel showed considerable empathy towards the Palestinian cause within the context of his support for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Havel's cultural sympathies can thus be seen as strongly influenced by his perception of Judaism/Jewishness, which also extended to his support for Israel. At times, he tended towards simplifications or stereotypes. For example, he occasionally depicted Israeli society as an idealized embodiment of democratic resilience and moral clarity in contrast to its Arab neighbors, which he often portrayed in more abstract or essentialist terms as victims of authoritarianism or radicalism (SEE E.G. CZECH RADIO 1990). It is generally possible to summarize that in the public discourse of the 1990s, Havel and other Czech elites sometimes reduced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a scheme that could approximate a struggle between the "civilized West and the backwards East" or between "democracy and autocracy" without sufficient nuance.

While Havel's attitudes may have influenced others, the more significant stereotyping and outright misleading positions regarding Israel and Palestine were more characteristic of the generation of politicians who rose to power after his departure from the presidency (as will be expanded upon in the next subsection).

THE SHIFT TOWARD IMBALANCE

Havel's views on Israel were not rigid; they evolved over time. To some extent, they illustrate the shifts in the thinking of Czech politicians, intellectuals, and other opinion-makers during the first decade of the 21st century. This was not a random phenomenon but was influenced by two crucial events at the start of the new century. The first was global in nature: September 11, 2001. The second was specific to Israel: the intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the late summer of 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, which essentially buried any continuation of the peace process. These events shifted many liberal intellectuals in the West towards a convergence with right-wing, particularly neo-conservative,

positions, stronger support for U.S. interventionism and security policies in the Middle East, and the drawing of new parallels between Islam/Islamism and totalitarian ideologies (SEE, E.G., BERMAN 2003; PODHORETZ 2008).

These shifts toward greater support for the then U.S. administration of G. W. Bush were also noticeable in the thinking of Havel and other former Eastern European dissidents. For Havel, this was particularly true during the last phase of his presidency and afterwards when he played a role of an important public intellectual. In the context of the strengthening of right-wing positions on Israel, Havel was significantly influenced by the former Soviet dissident of Jewish origin and later right-wing Israeli politician Natan Sharansky. For example, in June 2007, Havel co-organized, together with Sharansky and the former right-wing Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, a conference in Prague on democracy and security which was supported by several neo-conservative think tanks (DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY 2007). In 2010, Havel, together with several neo-conservatives, endorsed Aznar's "Friends of Israel" initiative, which aimed to *"counter attempts to delegitimize Israel and its right to live in peace and defendable borders"* (JERUSALEM POST 2010).

Havel's positions in this regard intertwined with the Atlanticist views of Czech right-wing politicians who sought to strengthen Atlantic ties, particularly partnerships with the U.S. and the Czech membership in NATO. It is also essential to note that the U.S. Republican right had at that time become more pro-Israel than in the past. In another example of this broader trend, other Czech politicians also shifted in a similar direction – many of them originally associated with Havel's dissident circle, such as Alexander Vondra, Michael Žantovský, and Petr Pithart (PITHART 2024). This also included a younger generation of right-wing and/or conservative politicians and diplomats like Petr Nečas, Mirek Topolánek, Tomáš Pojar, and Miroslav Kalousek, who reached top political positions mostly after the Havel era.

This extension beyond Havel helps to illustrate that while his positions were formative, the transformation of the Czech policy towards Israel became a broader and more systemic phenomenon. The one-sided support for Israel did not become exclusive to the Czech right but began to enjoy a broad consensus across the entire political spectrum. One of the most prominent and least balanced advocates of it was the Prime Minister

(1998–2002) and President (2013–2023) Miloš Zeman, originally a Social Democrat. His comments during a visit to Israel in 2002, where he compared Yasser Arafat to Adolf Hitler (KROUPA 2012), and his later strong support for the move of the Czech embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which has yet to happen (CZECH RADIO 2013), were highly publicized. In many ways, Zeman could also be defined as an Atlanticist, but his views on Israel and the Middle East were also strongly influenced by cultural prejudices linked to Islamophobia (NOVÁK 2013). Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) also repeatedly expressed pro-Israel stances, although they were less ideological and more pragmatic, which was in line with his center-right populism.

The pronounced Czech pro-Israeli stance – and, to a large extent, its shifts – are well illustrated by the personal nominations for the post of ambassador to Israel. Based on the author's own interviews, while in the 1990s this post was filled by open and consensual personalities, such as Miloš Pojar or Jiří Schneider, later it was filled by personalities with a harder pro-Israeli stance, such as Tomáš Pojar or Michael Žantovský. Recently, this trend has continued with the diplomat Veronika Kuchyňová-Šmigolová, whose publicly expressed statements have leaned in a strongly pro-Israeli direction.

In particular, the aforementioned Michael Žantovský, who describes himself as a follower of Havel's tradition and has long referred to his personal connection with Václav Havel, was one of the main proponents of a strongly pro-Israeli line of the Czech foreign policy. Although his positions follow the cultural and moral framework formulated by Havel, their specific political content has often demonstrated a more one-sided character.

A CULMINATION OF ONE-SIDEDNESS?

The unbalanced pro-Israel stances reached their high-water mark during the tenures of two center-right governments: those of Nečas (2010–2013) and Fiala (from 2021 onwards), who in their own right represented both a rejection and a continuation of Havelian foreign policy values.

Under Nečas's government, the intensity and quality of the Czech-Israeli relations were evident both in the rhetoric used and practically, as seen in the strategic partnership established with Israel in 2012. Values shared by both the Czech Republic and Israel were mentioned by Prime

Minister Nečas – for example, in parliamentary interpellations (PARLIAMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2011). The strengthened cooperation included joint Czech-Israeli government meetings and the deepening of the countries' bilateral cooperation, especially in areas of trade, innovation, research, shared political goals, and security cooperation.

Establishing a strong bilateral cooperation and maintaining historical partnerships is not unusual or controversial. There are many foundations for strong Czech-Israeli ties, but what is controversial about Nečas's stances is the almost complete lack of criticism from the Czech side regarding Israel's long-standing controversial approaches to Palestinians. This absence of criticism sometimes bordered on sycophancy. For example, in 2012, the Czech Republic was the only EU country to vote against Palestine's admission as a non-member observer state at the UN (CZECH RADIO 2012). In subsequent votes at the UN General Assembly, the Czech Republic generally acted in a similar manner.

This approach is paradoxical for several reasons: The Czech Republic is one of the few countries in the world that *de iure* recognizes the State of Palestine. Since the 1990s, the Czech Republic has also officially declared its support for a two-state solution to the conflict. However, its voting behavior at the UN General Assembly effectively contradicts the spirit of a two-state solution, rendering the official Czech declarations mere meaningless clichés and manifesting the one-sidedness of the Czech position. Shortly after the 2012 vote, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the Czech Republic personally to express his gratitude, having already visited the country previously, and brought along a part of the Israeli cabinet for a joint meeting with the Czech government.

The pro-Israel policies continued, though less ideologically and without overt references to Havel's ideas, under the subsequent center-left governments of Bohuslav Sobotka and Andrej Babiš[2]. It wasn't until 2020 that the Czech foreign minister Tomáš Petříček, and two former Czech foreign ministers – Lubomír Zaorálek and Karel Schwarzenberg – co-authored an article that, in a very diplomatic manner, criticized some actions of Israeli governments (DANIEL – ZÁHORA 2020). However, the article was not well-received by the political establishment and was criticized by President Zeman, Prime Minister Babiš, and several right-wing opposition politicians.

The most recent point of culmination in the pro-Israel bias came under Petr Fiala's government when the joint Czech-Israeli meetings were resumed, after a long pause, in Prague in June 2022. Paradoxically, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lipavský as well as, occasionally, Fiala himself openly referred to a re-establishment of Havelian values in foreign policy. Following the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent military operation in Gaza, the Czech government adopted a firmly pro-Israel stance, which has not fundamentally changed since, essentially reflecting only official Israeli positions.

CONCLUSION

The current state of the Czech-Israeli relations and their tendency toward one-sidedness is a fairly complex matter. However, they can be interpreted in the context of the transformation of foreign policy, as it was shaped by political regime changes, shifts in foreign policy, and the rise of new elites in Czechoslovakia – and later the Czech Republic – after 1989.

The direction of the Czech foreign policy towards Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is closely tied to the political stances and roles of the former dissidents who became key figures and opinion-makers in Czechoslovak/Czech politics and public opinion after 1989. Among these, the influence of President Václav Havel stands out, though there was a notable shift in his positions – from a relative balance during the 1990s, in the time of the Middle East peace process, to a more pronounced pro-Israeli bias at the end of his political career. The growing pro-Israeli stance of Havel and his circle – as well as the emerging next generation of Czech political elites – was linked to two international events at the turn of the 21st century. This period saw the outbreak of the Second Intifada in summer 2000, which effectively ended the peace process, and the 9/11 attacks a year later. The interplay of these two events played a crucial role in shaping the thinking of Czech political elites, contributing to the shift from a more balanced pro-Israeli stance to a distinctly one-sided position.

The increasingly pro-Israeli positions aligned with the neoconservative thinking of the U.S. administration at the time, influenced Czech Atlanticist politicians, including Havel and other prominent figures across the spectrum of Czech political and public life. The increasing one-sidedness

of Czech politics and public opinion was, therefore, a natural progression within this framework, and was further intensified around 2015 by the rise of Islamophobic prejudices associated with the refugee crisis in Europe.

From the perspective of the main line of interpretation of this text, the key factor in the unilateral shift in the Czech policy towards Israel can be considered a combination of several international events – in particular the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These events led to a change in the thinking of a part of the Czech elite, who began to perceive the Middle East through the prism of security threats and cultural clashes. This development was amplified by the influence of neoconservative thinking and Atlanticism, with which both some former dissidents and the then new conservative politicians identified. The gradual dominance of these positions led to the institutionalization of the pro-Israel orientation as a political mainstream.

ENDNOTES

1 The term "Havelian" is used somewhat loosely in the Czech public debate and refers to both a wider ideological current and Havel's foreign policy practice. The primary responsibility for formulating the Czech foreign policy lies with the government. However, the president's role in foreign policy is important in terms of its symbolism and Havel enjoyed exceptional prestige and influence on the international stage. Moreover, many of the foreign ministers and other government officials during the "Havelian" years were either Havel's friends from the dissident movement or people close to him who shared a similar ideational orientation.

2 During this period, two joint meetings between the Czech and Israeli governments took place on November 25, 2014, and May 22, 2016. Both were held in Jerusalem.

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International Principles or Crude Geopolitics? The Incoherence of Czech Foreign Policy Towards Ukraine and Gaza

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ABSTRACT	Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Czech Republic's foreign policy has gained an unprecedented salience in domestic politics. While strongly supporting Ukraine based on international law, the Czech government stands unreservedly behind Israel in the conflict with Gaza and Lebanon, ignoring international humanitarian law. The article argues that this inconsistency undermines the credibility of Czech foreign policy, and its commitment to human rights and international law, and threatens its partners and interests. The framing of the two wars by foreign policy representatives suggests that this discrepancy is driven by civilizational geopolitics. The neglect of universal principles leads to inconsistency with the position of the majority of the European Union and contributes to the weakening of the international order.

KEYWORDS	Czech foreign policy, Ukraine war, Gaza war, international law, human rights, civilisational geopolitics
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INTRODUCTION

"The international system based on international law and the UN Charter is under unprecedented pressure. One of the permanent members of the Security Council has openly torn apart the very UN Charter it is supposed to protect. This is another reason why the world needs an effective and well-functioning Human Rights Council" (ČRO 2023B). These words of Jan Lipavský, the head of Czech diplomacy, were uttered at the UN Human Rights Council meeting that the Czech Republic chaired in November 2023. In the UNGA in 2022, Lipavský defined the *"Czech Republic's priorities"* as *"defending Ukraine, ensuring energy and food security, and promoting democracy and human rights";* he further condemned *"the illegal annexation of Crimea"* and listed *"atrocities such as the 'filtration' camps, the horrors in Mariupol, Bucha, Irpin"* etc. (LIPAVSKÝ 2022). Only a year later, however, considerations for international law and human rights were conspicuously absent in the Czech Republic's reaction to the unprecedented escalation of violence and human suffering in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon.

This article engages with this discrepancy between the Czech Republic's positions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the one hand, and the wars in Gaza and Lebanon on the other, as well as the consequences for the Czech priorities in the international arena. The article points to the unprecedented salience of foreign policy in Czech politics since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It then outlines the Czech policies on behalf of Ukraine since 2022 and then those towards Israel, Palestine, and Gaza since October 8. Comparing the Czech Republic's voting in international fora brings out the contrast between the two and the Czech foreign policy's fundamental incoherence. By situating them vis-à-vis the "traditional" Czech emphasis on human rights issues, the article suggests that Prague's unflinching support for Israel, which effectively disregards international law and the main tenets of the humanitarian concerns, is motivated by a civilizational geopolitics that revolves around purported civilizational differences between the civilized, democratic West and the barbarous, authoritarian East.

FOREIGN POLICY'S UNPRECEDENTED SALIENCE

The Czech Republic has systematically promoted its foreign policy as dedicated to human rights and focused on democratization. Unsurprisingly, it has been systematically criticized for, softly speaking, *"underusing its potential"* (BÍLKOVÁ 2018). Diplomatic inconsistencies are common in the Czech Republic and elsewhere (CUHOVA – NESIBA 2023), especially when domestic issues trump foreign policy. Yet foreign policy matters greatly when it suddenly assumes a prominent role in a government's overall agenda, as happened in Czechia in the past two years. After the most important foreign policy aims were achieved two decades ago, namely NATO membership (1999) and the EU accession (2004), the Czech role on the international scene has been a secondary issue for Czech politics and public debates. This changed drastically after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, with the Czech EU presidency in 2022 and also when the Czech government assumed the role of the defender of Western values in the face of Russia's aggression. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has made the defense of Ukraine the government's priority. Countering Russia domestically and internationally, as well as dealing with the presence of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, has dominated Czech politics for almost three years now. The government has devoted a lot of symbolic, personal and financial resources to this – e.g., raising Ukrainian flags on government buildings, investing in diplomatic efforts, and the so-called Czech munition initiative: the national security advisor Tomáš Pojar and his team search the globe for available munitions to purchase and deliver to the weakened Ukrainian army.

The sudden importance of this policy initiative has highlighted the discrepancy between the principled Ukraine policy and the principle-free support of the Israeli government's military course in Gaza and Lebanon. When it comes to Israel, the Czech government has been unusually active as well, especially in symbolic and diplomatic terms: its activities in this regard included raising Israeli flags, sending military material to Israel, vocally supporting Israel's government in the EU and the UN and entertaining very active and visible diplomatic and political relations with the country. While Czech foreign policy officials continue to pay lip service to international law and human rights, the Czech unconditional support of Israel's military course in international fora arguably isolates the Czech Republic from the Western mainstream. It stands in contrast to the principled and

Europe-centered Ukraine policy. As this article will argue, this undermines the role of international law in the Czech foreign policy and goes against the Czech Republic's very foreign policy partners and interests.

CZECHIA'S SUPPORT OF UKRAINE'S DEFENSE BY LEGAL AND MATERIAL MEANS

Under the leadership of Petr Fiala, the Czech Republic has become active on the international scene. Unlike the painful experience of the first Czech EU presidency in 2009, the 2022 presidency was successful. In the latter case, at the helm of the European Council, the Czech Republic has faced the most significant foreign policy challenge to this date. It weighed in with other Central and Eastern European countries for a decisive and unified EU response to the Russian aggression. The Czech team contributed to pushing through concerted energy policies in the meetings of the European Council that helped to wean European states off Russian gas and contributed to the coordinated European stance on the financial and defense support to Ukraine.

After decades of passivity, Ukraine finally allowed the Czechs to assume a more visible international role. Moral and geopolitical considerations were part of that role from the beginning for good reasons. The Russian invasion highlighted Central and Eastern Europe's positive contribution to EU politics. The Czech Republic and other EU post-Communist countries were also vindicated in their scepticism towards Russia because of it. The Czech Republic drew on the moral appeal of a smaller country defending itself against the overwhelming force of a neo-imperialist power. It also argued in favour of defending a country that had chosen the European path and whose freedoms and inner accountability stand in stark contrast to Russia's aggression and violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

In his support of Ukraine's rightful defense against the Russian aggression, the Czech PM found himself a special foreign policy issue that was unequivocally moral, legally sound and geopolitically clear-cut. Conversely, the European unity (barring Hungary) around a principled, economically costly and politically vigorous stance on Russia has been highly appreciated in the Czech Republic, as well as by Petr Fiala's conservative party (the Civic Democrats), which has otherwise been known for its Euroscepticism.

As the Russian aggression became a priority in Czech foreign policy, the EU and European unity rose in value.

The coordinated support for Ukraine's defense rests on the qualification of the Russian invasion as an unequivocal case of interstate aggression that violates the UN Charter. That it is a violation of international law has been established in the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's aggression and confirming the validity of the ban on the use of force, which was passed with an overwhelming vote on February 28, 2022. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) further ruled that Russia must immediately suspend its military operations on March 16, 2022, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened a full investigation into past and present allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Ukraine.

This legal qualification and its large acceptance within the UN organs are the grounds on which a coalition of states supported the Ukrainian war effort with financial and military means, confiscated of Russian state and private property and imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russian businesses and citizens. International law is based not on enforceable sanctions but on interstate agreements and individual state commitments. Hence, the effectiveness of international law rests upon the legitimacy of the claims, the breadth of support, and the decisions made by UN organs. That is why UN resolutions are vetoed and actively contested by Russia and its allies in the UN SC (Security Council) and the UNGA, respectively – to diminish the perceived validity of international law.

The Czech government has duly supported all major UN decisions in this matter, including the ICC arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin in March 2023. The UN vote on Ukraine was defined as crucial for the Czech foreign policy: the Czech Foreign Minister has appealed to undecided UNGA members to condemn the Russian invasion and call on Russia to withdraw. In Jan Lipavský's words: *"We fight for every vote"* in the UNGA in an effort to isolate Russia and to mobilize for a special criminal tribunal for Ukraine (ČRO 2023A). The former was successful: UNGA votes have twice condemned Russia's aggression with a clear majority (in March and September 2023). Minister Lipavský commented: *"The future of the international order is being decided right now. Ukraine defends not only itself and its people but also the basic principles of the UN Charter"* (NOVINKY 2023).

THE CZECH GOVERNMENT'S SILENCE ON GAZA AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Echoing the resoluteness of the stance towards Russia and Ukraine, in 2023, the Czech government adopted a strongly supportive position on Israel's course of action in Gaza and later in Lebanon. Foreign Minister Lipavský was one of the first European politicians to visit Israel and was soon followed by the Czech President in this respect. The Czech support for its ally Israel was understandably strong in the immediate wake of the October 7th Hamas attack, in line with the positions of all other EU countries. While most European states continued to support Israel, however, they balanced their support with humanitarian considerations, legal caveats, political reservations, or even criticism, calling for abiding by humanitarian law and for a ceasefire and expressing support for the UNRWA (EC 2024). Unlike the stance of the majority of the EU, the Czech stance has not changed when it was gradually confronted with the unprecedented numbers of civilian casualties in Gaza, the accusation of genocide in the ICJ and the mounting evidence of war crimes committed by the Israeli army as provided by human rights and UN agencies (UNHRC 2024).

Instead, the Czech foreign policy has stood out with its unreserved defense of Israel's policies. The Czech government has indeed become, in PM Fiala's words, the *"voice of Israel in Europe"* (ČRO 2023C). It has done so at the cost of sidelining international humanitarian law. The Czech Republic, as will be argued below, has, in fact, consistently opposed resolutions that sought to establish an international response to the war in Gaza and Lebanon in the UNGA. It has cast doubt on UN agencies such as the International Court of Justice and blocked common European decisions on Gaza and Lebanon.

The Czech stance has not changed after the International Court of Justice issued an order for Israel to take steps to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza in January 2024, when it requested Israel to halt its military offensive in Rafah and secure the unhindered provision of humanitarian aid in May 2024 or after it put out an advisory opinion qualifying Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory as unlawful. The contracting parties, such as Czechia, had the obligation to prevent acts of genocide and to differentiate between Israel in its 1967 borders and the occupied territories. The Czech government did not openly acknowledge that these facts have legal consequences.

Instead, it has consistently rejected public criticism of its unconditional support for Israeli war policies (HÜBSCHEROVÁ 2024) and continued to exhibit its active relations with the Israeli government, overlooking the immense humanitarian cost of the Israeli military operations (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024).

In the UN General Assembly, the Czech Republic has voted against resolutions calling for a "humanitarian truce" in October 2023 and December 2023, and also against a resolution calling for the end of the Israeli occupation in September 2024 (UN 2023; UN 2024). In the September UNGA vote, the Czech Republic's representative claimed to support the *"political horizon towards a two-state solution"* but referred only to Israel's *"security challenges"* and not the overall legal situation the UNGA addressed (MFA 2024). More specifically, the September UNGA vote followed the July 2024 ICJ advisory opinion that declared Israel's legal obligation to end its "unlawful" presence on the occupied territory and asked the UNGA to *"consider the modalities and further action"* (MISHRA 2024). The UNGA did this by calling on Israel to end the occupation within a year.

The Czech Republic assumed a marginal position in this regard alongside Israel, the USA and several small states – along with Austria in December 2023 and Hungary and Croatia in October 2023. In the words of Petr Fiala: *"There are only a handful of countries that are prepared to stand up for Israel in international fora, and I am proud that the Czech Republic is one of them"* (FIALA 2023). In the vote on ending the occupation, the Czech Republic and Hungary were the only EU states to vote against a request based on an authoritative legal opinion. The Czech Republic ignored the option to abstain. Other European states, such as Germany, may have had reservations about the practicality of the resolution but recognized the legal consequences of the ICJ's advisory opinion and did not vote against the resolution. By putting a political partnership above the law, the Czech Republic has done precisely that against which Mr Lipavský campaigned in the vote on Russia's aggression. The Czech Republic was arguing then against the weakening of the authority of international law.

The Czech government officials have further openly defied the UN system. The Czech PM rejected the International Criminal Court's (ICC's) Prosecutor's request for an arrest warrant for Israeli politicians alongside the Hamas leaders. The PM Fiala called the request *"appalling and utterly*

unacceptable" (FIALA 2024). The National Security Adviser Tomáš Pojar, a former ambassador to Israel, said that the Czech Republic would not hand over a democratically elected leader to the Hague (ŠAFAŘÍKOVÁ – HORÁK 2024). Earlier, the defense minister reacted to the UN resolution by calling for the Czech Republic to leave the UN (ECHO 2024). There is a discrepancy, however, between the rhetoric of the two leading Czech foreign policy makers – PM Fiala and his national security adviser Pojar – and the positions of the MFA representatives: In June 2024, the Czech MFA joined a statement of 90 countries in support of the ICC, and Minister Lipavský acknowledged *"the independence of the court's decision-making"* and called it an *"essential international institution"* (ČRO 2024). While the government representatives symbolically defied the binding character of international norms, the MFA officials and even the FM continue to honor them.

The Czech government has framed the war in Gaza solely in terms of Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism (ČRO 2023D) and has ignored the international humanitarian law, the Palestinian claim to rights and humanitarian needs, and the positions of UN organs. This omission has contrasted with the Czech stance on Ukraine. In its efforts to justify the military support of Ukraine's defense against Russia, the Czech government has appealed to international law, used venues such as the UNGA to strengthen these appeals, and supported organs of international justice. But in the case of Gaza, it chose to ignore or oppose them. The incoherence is not just a matter of logical inconsistency. The ignorance of international law betrays short-sightedness and directly undermines the Czech Republic's (other) foreign policy priority of the defense of Ukraine.

The Czech Republic and the West, in general, rejected the imperial and geopolitical justification for the Russian-Ukrainian war and appealed to international law, international courts and the UN to condemn the aggression. Initially, there was a broad sympathy for Ukraine, and most third-world countries have indeed voted to condemn Russia and uphold the law. However, after the US, along with the Czech Republic, denied the recognition of humanitarian considerations and rights for the Palestinians and supported the war even after the intervention of international courts, many were sobered by the proof of Western double standards (EISENTRAUT 2024). Politically and militarily, the US and the Czech Republic explicitly supported Israel's efforts to achieve total military control of the surrounding

area without regard for the legitimate interests, rights and even lives of the local population and international law. At the same time, most Western countries remained silent, save for a handful of "moderate" EU members (KONEČNÝ 2024). The consequence is, among other things, a profound delegitimization of international legal standards and procedures, and the marginalization of the UN and its agencies in the region, including the silence over the killing of 200 UN employees in Gaza. The weakening of the UN has already had consequences beyond Gaza: its weakening as a platform for conflict resolution has allowed the escalation of the immensely destructive and destabilizing wars in Sudan: *"Europe and North America seem only able to focus on Gaza and Ukraine [while] underestimating the geopolitical risks that these supposedly 'second tier' conflicts are generating"* (SHEA 2024).

A CLOG IN THE EU'S UNITY

Besides voting against resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the UNGA, the Czech representatives have taken positions in European institutions that also put the alliance with Israel before humanitarian and legal considerations. In October 2023, along with the rest of the EU, the Czech Republic endorsed a common declaration condemning the October 7th Hamas attack in Israel and supporting *"Israel's right to defend itself in line with humanitarian and international law"*, and called for the return of hostages, the protection of all civilians and the provision of humanitarian aid (EC 2023). However, as the Israeli operation unfolded and its violence and humanitarian cost intensified, the concern about the gross violations of humanitarian law and the Palestinian plight also grew. A division started to appear already in the fall of 2023, namely that between pro-Israeli EU countries which would endorse Israeli policies by flying Israeli flags on official buildings, such as the Czech Republic, and the "moderates" that condemn both Hamas and the violations of humanitarian law by Israel, and try to balance Israel's need for security with Palestinian rights. Some have since recognized Palestine (Spain, Ireland and the EU's partner Norway). In contrast, others (such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria) have only intensified their unconditional support of Israel's government's course of war (KONEČNÝ 2024). In the middle, most EU countries do voice their support for Israel. However, some quietly stopped providing weapons to it or slowed down their exports to it and recognized the risk of complicity in humanitarian law violations (JONES 2024A).

Due to these divisions, the EU was noticeably slower in expressing a common stance than the UN. The European Council called for a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza in March when there were already 32,000 dead in Gaza. Among the reasons for the delay was a blockage by the Czech Republic and Hungary (JONES 2024B). The Czech Republic and Hungary have repeatedly opposed and vetoed almost unanimous declarations by the EU on Israel and Palestine. In February 2024, the Czech Republic blocked a plan to sanction extremist Israeli settlers (SOUSA 2024), and then Hungary kept blocking the declaration on ceasefire (JONES 2024C). Both have lifted their veto in the European Council after the US announced it would support a resolution in favor of a ceasefire in the UNSC. In October 2024, the Czech Republic again blocked a common EU declaration calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah (ČTK 2024) and, several days later, blocked another EU declaration condemning the Israeli law that intended to outlaw the UNRWA's presence in Gaza. Here, alongside Hungary, the Czech Republic chose to fragment the EU foreign policy due to its support of Israel's government (SCHARF 2024).

The Czech Republic is a small state that usually has little influence on most international issues. However, in policies that require international coordination and consensus building, even a small state can have substantial leverage, especially when it is derived from a strong ally like the USA or Israel in the UN (LONG 2017). In its resistance to attempts to restrain the Israeli conduct of war by international humanitarian law, the Czech Republic had a disproportionate impact on EU policies, which was decisively negative in terms of the rules and values of the international order. International law and human rights were at the core of Europe's soft power. As so many have noted, the EU failed to express a principled stance on Israel (DEMSEY 2024; ISLAM 2024) while it acted unanimously on Ukraine. The discrepancy between the reference to law and morality in one case and not referring to them in the other has undermined long-standing efforts to use the EU's soft power to cultivate its neighborhood, such as through cooperation with civil society representatives, human rights organizations and parliaments (LYNCH 2024). With their stubborn refusal to value lives and acknowledge the political rights of Palestinians and the Lebanese, the Czechs framed the war in Gaza solely as a fight against terrorism. In doing so, the Czech Republic has risked alienating partners in the EU's southern neighborhood in regard to what

many see as a hypocritical approach to Gaza and undermined efforts towards its declared goal of funding a negotiated settlement in the Middle East (CAFIERO 2024).

CIVILIZATIONAL GEOPOLITICS RATHER THAN A HUMAN RIGHTS-INSPIRED FOREIGN POLICY?

The Czech Republic has traditionally defined its foreign policy as driven by universal human rights in its documents (MFA 2019). The Czech government has also actively engaged with Václav Havel's human rights legacy, e.g. by supporting annual human rights awards for human rights defenders. It has generally invoked human rights as a special feature of the country's foreign policy. The Czech Republic's Transition program was proudly presented as part of a larger EU soft power strategy intended to strengthen civil society's human rights groups and democratization efforts, mainly in the South-European and Eastern neighborhoods (MFA 2015). In 2023, the Czech Republic successfully applied to lead the UN Human Rights Council.

The emphasis of human rights was nevertheless contradicted by the staunchly pro-Israeli policies of and statements by leading Czech representatives that ignored the international law and humanitarian considerations. They have increased under President Zeman (2013–2021). To give one example, in 2020, President Zeman raised the idea of moving the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This and his generally uncritical stance towards Israel's violations of international law were then criticized by some former foreign ministers in 2020 (LIDOVKY 2020). In the immediate aftermath of Hamas' attack in October 2023, the idea was revived by PM Fiala (IDNES 2023). This time, it went unopposed in the political classes.

The contradiction between the Czech appeal to international law and human rights in the matter of Ukraine's defense and the country's disregard in the matter of Israel's course of action in Gaza and Lebanon appears to have a common ground: a civilizationist and geopolitical perspective of international relations. Petr Fiala has consistently framed the war in Israel as *"not just an attack on Israelis, on the Israeli state and society, [but] an attack on humanity, [and] an attack on our civilization"*, concluding that *"that is why we must be unequivocal in our condemnation of this attack; we must be unequivocal in our support for Israel"* (FIALA 2023). By separating the Palestinians and

the Lebanese from "our civilization", he made it possible to take into account only the Israeli "security challenges" (MFA 2024). Doing so, he conflated the terrorist part of Hamas with all Palestinians and the military wing of Hezbollah with all Lebanese.

The concept of "civilization" clearly does not express the pursuit and defense of universal rights and principles by "civilized" nations. Rather, it refers to a geopolitical division of the world along civilizational lines where the "democratic" West opposes an "authoritarian" East. Minister Lipavský used the same words in his account of Russia: *"We live in a time when Russia is disrupting the world order, attacking the very essence of European civilization, and we too feel a responsibility to defend the UN Charter. We therefore want to contribute to maintaining international order and security"* (MENŠÍK 2023). Hence, the defense of rights and security is validly evoked only on account of Ukraine, which is seen as part of the democratic West, and not on account of the Palestinians, who do not belong in it.

The Czech government abandoned its former attachment to the universality of human rights by adopting a Huntigtonian civilizationist framing (BRUBAKER 2017; BETTIZA ET AL. 2023). In its refusal to consider Arabs as bearers of legitimate claims to rights and security, the Czech Republic went even further than Israel's main partners. The sense of political attachment and historical responsibility that the USA and Germany pledged to Israel was somewhat rhetorically limited by the recognition of principles of international law and a sense of responsibility as to regional stability: Joe Biden has openly criticized Israel's violence against civilians in Gaza and Germany temporarily reduced its sales of weapons to Israel.

The Czech government, on the other hand, defined itself as being among the "greatest supporters of Israel" (CZECH GOV. 2023). Well before the terrorist attacks of October 7th, 2021, Petr Fiala wrote that Israel is *"the only democratic state in the region"* and that *"facing terrorist attacks by Hamas… it also defends European freedom and security"* (FIALA 2021). Under Petr Fiala, the Czech government has adopted a civilizationism of a similar kind: more precisely, a civilizationism *"closely tied to geopolitical thinking"* (BETTIZA ET AL. 2023: 22), where the "West" is squarely defined by Western culture and democracy and the "East" by authoritarianism. Its position was consistent with its voting in alliance with Hungary, an ideological civilizationist regime

under Viktor Orbán (ENYEDI 2024). The turn to civilizational geopolitics reflects the importance the newly salient foreign policy plays in domestic policy, where identitarian and civilizational politics have been on the rise since the last decade.

CONCLUSION

As Czech foreign policy has become a defining governmental policy in the past few years, it has grown inconsistent and self-defeating. The Czech government's incoherence has undermined the very pillars of Czech and EU positions on Ukraine: by weakening the legitimacy of international law and by hindering European unity, it has promoted the type of politics the Czech Republic has claimed to oppose. Petr Fiala and Jan Lipavský's announcements on behalf of Israel and Ukraine and the Czech Republic's voting patterns in international fora force us to conclude that Czech foreign policy is motivated by adherence to a geopolitically defined civilizational perspective rather than by multilateralism and universal principles of international law. However, it suggests a rather crude rendering of Western geopolitical interest that relies on the Manichean division of the world into the civilized West and the barbarous East, and that focuses solely on the competition with Russia and China. The Czech government's idea of the Western agenda thus omits broader issues such as multilateral security and climate change. It is arguably in the interest of the West and the Czech Republic that the international order be based on law, cooperation and common interests, and not on confrontation. The Czech government's attitude towards the Israeli disregard for international order and human rights makes the pursuit of this larger set of interests much more elusive.

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Reassessing the Czech Public Attitudes towards Israel and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

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ABSTRACT	The Czech political elites have traditionally maintained an unwavering support for Israel, and it has been popularly assumed that this view is widely translated into the Czech public opinion. In this review essay, I contest this popular assumption and argue that the Czech public opinion is more nuanced and less uniformly pro-Israel than previously believed. Drawing on public opinion data and original surveys, this paper highlights that many Czechs adopt neutral or even maintain some pro-Palestinian stances in this regard despite a dominant pro-Israel media narrative and a unified political consensus. The empirical evidence confidently shows that there is a significant gap in public and elite attitudes towards Israel and Palestine. The Czech case thus goes against the theoretical assumption that an undivided elite discourse favoring a particular policy should translate into a general public support.

KEYWORDS	public opinion, surveys, elite cues, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Czech foreign policy
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INTRODUCTION

In world politics, and particularly within the European Union, the Czech Republic stands out as one of the staunchest supporters of Israel. While experts and political scientists often highlight the unique diplomatic and material ties between Israel and the United States, Czech politicians emphasize the "strategic" nature of their alliance with Israel. Much like its American counterpart, Czech foreign policy is distinctive for its consistent diplomatic backing of Israel in international bodies, especially in the voting patterns observed at the United Nations General Assembly (KALHOUSOVÁ – RUBÍNOVÁ 2020). While others in this discussion forum investigate the historical and political underpinnings of Czechoslovak and, later, Czech policies towards Israel, my contribution lies in examining to what extent these strong elite views are reflected in contemporary public attitudes.

Whether and why public opinion matters in foreign policy has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Although early theorists dismissed public opinion as being ill-informed, incoherent, and overly moralistic (LIPPMANN 1955; ALMOND 1962), the premise that public opinion indeed affects foreign policy, although in varying degrees, is widely accepted among scholars today (RISSE-KAPPEN 1991; HOLSTI 1992; MILNER – TINGLEY 2013; KERTZER – ZEITZOFF 2017). The intriguing question in this debate is why the public often holds strong opinions on foreign policy issues that are far removed from people's daily lives. A prominent strain of scholars popularly argued that members of the public turn to "trusted" political elites to form political judgments about foreign affairs (ZALLER 1992; BERINSKY 2007, 2015). Public opinion is thus, in this logic, primarily structured by partisan and group-based preferences in domestic politics. Simply put, what citizens think about foreign affairs is primarily driven by what politicians say about them.

In this essay, I explore the extent to which the unwavering support for Israel among political elites is translated into the general public's attitudes. Via examining existing as well as original public opinion data, I argue that Czechs are less supportive of Israel than is widely assumed. In fact, the Czech public tends to adopt more neutral and, to some extent, even more critical positions on it than the political elites. Moreover, despite formidable obstacles such as the dominant political discourse, pro-Israel news media reporting, and a lack of anti-Israel or pro-Palestinian social

movements, the Czech public maintains certain levels of pro-Palestinian attitudes (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024). In contrast to the theoretical assumption that an undivided elite discourse favoring a particular policy should translate into general public support (BERINSKY 2015), the Czech public holds significantly contrasting opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thus goes against this assumed logic.

THE UNSHAKEABLE SUPPORT OF CZECH POLITICAL ELITES TOWARDS ISRAEL?

The Czech political elites have been remarkably unified in their support for Israel since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Apart from the Communist Party, politicians across party affiliations have consistently endorsed pro-Israeli positions. Surprisingly, neither the numerous conflicts between Israel and various Palestinian groups nor the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank had any impact on the Czech Republic's official stance towards Israel, for a detailed overview, see Čejka (2017) and Kalhousová (2019).

While strong pro-Israel sentiments have been particularly pronounced on the conservative center-right, even liberal left-wing parties have rarely challenged this consensus regardless of their voters being critical or less supportive of Israel. Let me illustrate it with a recent example. The appointment of the foreign minister Jan Lipavský (the Pirate Party) in December 2021, who was believed to hold at least some critical views towards Israeli policies, sparked a short-lived hope for a shift towards a more balanced foreign policy. However, despite a certain critique from the liberal left wing of his party, he quickly embraced the mainstream political discourse of the center-right government in fully supporting Israel. This may be quite surprising in the context of the European Union, where liberal left parties traditionally voiced pro-Palestinian sentiments (GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). Close followers of Czech foreign policy may nevertheless find this behavior less surprising. Despite previous challenges mostly coming from the Social Democrats (ČSSD), once the most potent force in Czech parliamentary politics, aiming to align the Czech foreign policy closer to the European mainstream, any attempt to reform the pro-Israeli position failed to bring any meaningful change (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025: 4).

The October 7 attack by Hamas and the following escalation in Gaza only further solidified the Czech unwavering support for Israel. With the increasing violence towards Palestinian civilians, the Czech Republic did not join the chorus of the EU countries criticizing Israel for the destruction of Gaza. In fact, the Czech Republic was among the ten countries voting against the immediate ceasefire in Gaza (UNITED NATIONS 2023) and, yet less surprisingly, against the proposition to end Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (UNITED NATIONS 2024).

For over three decades, Czech political elites have offered only a few incentives to cast doubt on their friendly stance towards Israel, let alone criticize it publicly. It was thus vastly uncontested that these predominant views were mirrored in the Czech public attitudes (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025). When discussing public views on the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict with journalists and experts, I often encountered the assumption that nearly every Czech has an opinion on the matter (E.G., VIZINA, 2022). Thus, for years, it was popularly believed that Czechs are generally strongly pro-Israeli in their attitudes despite having arguably little knowledge about the conflict or the two nations. In the following section, I explore public opinion data from the past two decades to evaluate the merits of this claim.

WHAT DO CZECHS THINK ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE? AND DO THEY CARE?

Considering that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents a salient issue in global politics, research on international public opinion regarding the conflict is relatively scarce. Quite naturally, the few existing studies of this sort predominantly focus on Israel's closest ally – the United States (CAVARI 2012, 2013; CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2019, 2020). However, one of the rare comparative perspectives confirmed that the Czech Republic belongs to the so-called "pro-Israeli camp" next to the United States (BENLEVI ET AL. 2019).

In 2007, 1respondents in 45 countries across the world were asked which side in the Middle East conflict they sympathized with more: Israel or Palestine. The Czech Republic ranked among the top countries supporting Israel, with 45% of the Czech respondents sympathizing with Israel and only 17% with the Palestinians (IBID.: 1011). This may seem like a significant difference. However, the percentage of those who, in fact, held neutral

positions was nearly as high as the percentage of those who sympathized with Israel (38%). In contrast, only 26% of the American citizens remained neutral compared to 61% of those who stated that they felt sympathy for Israel. Bearing in mind that the data are surely outdated, they reveal an important pattern suggesting substantial variation even among the staunchest supporters of Israel in world politics.

The data published by the national polling agencies reveal a more nuanced image and up-to-date assessment of the Czech public attitudes towards Israel and Palestine. One way to evaluate whether Czechs follow or simply care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to gauge their general interest in Middle Eastern affairs. According to the most recent report published by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) in February 2024, more than one-third (35%) of Czechs expressed interest in information about developments in the Middle East (ČERVENKA – AVČR 2024). Czechs thus showed surprisingly less interest in the region during the early months of the war in Gaza than in other turbulent events in the past such as the Second Intifada in 2002 (42% were interested) or the early months of the Arab Spring (53% were interested), as was documented by earlier CVVM surveys in the times of the events.

In our original study, we observed a similar trend when we asked the respondents directly whether they were interested in the news, this time specifically news about Israel (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2024). In the survey conducted in January 2024, just three months after the October 7th attack, we found that 40% of Czechs expressed interest in news about Israel, compared to just 24% the previous year (IBID.). While it is a common finding that the public tends to pay increased attention to the news in the early stages of a conflict (ENTMAN 2004; BAUM – GROELING 2009), are Middle Eastern affairs more salient for Czechs than other foreign policy issues?

In February 2024, CVVM researchers asked, analogously to how they asked about the Gaza war, whether Czechs followed developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The results showed that almost twice as many people were interested in the war in Ukraine as were interested in the war in Gaza (ČERVENKA – AVČR 2024). This finding is quite impressive yet less surprising for a closer observer. While the crisis in Ukraine sparked widespread solidarity within the Czech society from the early days, the

increasing humanitarian crisis in Gaza had nearly no mobilizing effect on the Czech public, unlike in other European countries.

ARE ELITE VIEWS TRANSLATED INTO CZECH PUBLIC ATTITUDES?

Surveying the public interest in various conflicts forms a good basis to assess whether a public opinion exists in the first place. The next step is to evaluate individual attitudes and the levels of support for the warring parties.

In our longitudinal series of surveys (2022–2024), we asked the respondents which side historically bears a greater responsibility for the conflict: Palestinians or Israelis. We observe that, in general, there is an inclination to blame the Palestinians (21%) rather than the Israelis (10%); see Table 1 for details. A similar pattern emerged when we asked the respondents about the responsibility for the ongoing war. After the Hamas attacks on Israel, we noticed that Czechs more often blamed the Palestinians compared to the previous year, while nearly the same percentage blamed the Israelis. However, immediately concluding that the Czech public is strongly pro-Israel would be impetuous. In fact, most Czechs do not know which side to support (43% on average) or believe that both sides share equal responsibility for the conflict (27% on average)

TABLE 1: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Survey question: Who do you think bears a greater responsibility for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians or Israelis?

	Historically		Currently	
	2023	2024	2023	2024
Definitely Palestinians	4%	8%	6%	15%
Rather Palestinians	11%	13%	14%	17%
Both nations equally	29%	30%	25%	24%
Rather Israelis	5%	7%	5%	6%
Definitely Israelis	2%	3%	2%	3%
Do not know	49%	40%	47%	36%

Source: Kalhousová et al. (2024); reproduced with the authors' permission.

The assumption that Czechs are strongly pro-Israel becomes even more contestable when the respondents are asked about a future reconciliation and potential pathways for peace. According to our study, the so-called two-state solution remained the most preferred option (46%) for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2024 (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2024). In addition, more than one-third of Czechs (37%) agree that Palestine should be recognized as a sovereign and independent state in contrast to 20% opposing it (IBID.).

Even though they are purely observational, the recent public opinion data suggest that Czechs hold more varying opinions on the conflict than previously assumed. While we admit that there is still a general leaning toward supporting Israel, an insignificant portion of the population also holds opposing views, and many remain indifferent despite the increased media coverage. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, as was discussed earlier, where the majority of people hold favorable views of Israel, and far fewer remain undecided (CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2020).

However, purely observing public opinion data may seem insufficient for confidently concluding that the public views are distinct from the political elites' views. In our latest study, we thus provide the first systematic account to statistically assess[2] whether there is a significant gap between the views of the elites and public opinion by utilizing an original survey of both the Czech parliamentarians and the population (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025). Our empirical results reveal that Czech parliamentarians are significantly more likely to support pro-Israel policies and less likely to support pro-Palestinian policies than the general public. The elite respondents were significantly more likely to support moving the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem than ordinary citizens ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.69$) and less likely to agree with the statement that Palestine should be recognized as an independent and sovereign state ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -0.61$), allowing us to conclude that Czechs are thus less strongly pro-Israel than previously believed (IBID.: 9).

This new empirical evidence also does not lend itself to the conclusion that the Czech public necessarily takes cues from elites despite sustained political alignment. To illustrate it on an example, Czech politicians have occasionally questioned the possibility of relocating the Czech embassy

from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. One of the most prominent proponents of this step was former President Miloš Zeman, who repeatedly advocated for its relocation (ČTK 2018). The current prime minister, Petr Fiala, although from an ideologically and politically distinct position, supported the relocation just two days after the Hamas attack on Israel (ČTK 2023). Such a solid political cue does not seem to translate into public opinion, though. The Czech public leans towards not relocating the Czech embassy (24%), compared to 15% who would support it. At the same time, the rest of the population remains without a clear opinion on the issue.

WHAT DOES OR DOESN'T SHAPE THE CZECH PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISRAEL AND PALESTINE?

Until this point, I have primarily focused on showing the gap in public and elite attitudes toward Israel and Palestine. I aimed to demonstrate that Czechs hold neutral and even critical attitudes toward Israel despite a unified elite consensus. In the final section, and by way of conclusion, I want to discuss the key factors that shape the division in public attitudes.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a dominant line of work argues that ideological alignment plays a key role in shaping public attitudes (JENTLESON 1992; BAUM – POTTER 2008; HOLSTI 2009; CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2018). In Europe, left-wing voters have traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, mainly in opposition to Israel and its policies (SHINDLER 2012; GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). Surveys in Western European countries showed that respondents who identify as left-wing express strong support for the Palestinians, while those on the political right express weaker though distinct sympathies for Israel (PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2009). This argument also appears to hold in the case of the Czech public. In our survey, we confirmed that left-oriented individuals are generally more critical of Israel than supporters of parties on the right side of the political spectrum (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025).

Nevertheless, political preference alone cannot fully explain the divisions in public attitudes. Previous studies have identified that religious identity is another important factor influencing the global attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (BENLEVI ET AL. 2019). In the Czech context, however, the potential influence of religion appears limited as Czechia regularly scores among the least religious3 countries in the world (GALLUP 2022). Thus,

religion is rarely included as a sociodemographic factor in Czech population surveys since sociologists have found little empirical support for the idea that religion drives Czech attitudes.

Czech society is also relatively homogeneous, with rare engagement with Middle Eastern cultures. Scholars have suggested that Czech attitudes towards other cultures are heavily influenced by perceived cultural proximity. Although the Jewish as well as the Muslim communities in the Czech Republic are strikingly small, Arabs and Muslims, in particular, are often viewed by Czechs with suspicion and as those who oppose "European values" (ČEJKA 2017: 38). In contrast, Jewish culture is commonly accepted as part of a shared "Judeo-Christian" tradition in Europe, a narrative that gained prominence only after World War II (BERGER 2013).

Although the empirical evidence supporting this assumption is limited, the existing public opinion data hints at the influence of cultural perceptions on attitudes toward Israel. In the 2022 survey, we asked the respondents to share their spontaneous associations with Israel (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2022). The most frequent associations included religion, culture, historical landmarks, and the concept of Israel as a nation. In comparison, political topics were rarely mentioned, which suggests that for many Czechs, historical memory and a perceived cultural affinity play a more prominent role than political considerations in the shaping of their opinions.

Despite a certain level of mythologizing Israel, the empirical evidence also points to the persistence of stereotypes within Czech society. When asked about potential neighbors from different nationalities and ethnicities, over 80% of Czechs expressed no objection to having a Christian or Jewish person as their neighbor. Yet, more than half (54%) indicated discomfort with the idea of having a Muslim neighbor (IBID.). Although positive attitudes toward Jews and Israel are prevalent among Czechs, certain prejudices remain entrenched. In the same survey, nearly two-thirds of Czechs agreed with the statement that "Jews are good with money," and 37% believed that "Jews differ from others in their physical appearance."

In addition to these stereotypes, the Czech public's views are aided by a one-sided media landscape. The mainstream media, on which most Czechs rely for information, tends to focus predominantly on negative

issues like war, terrorism, and political violence while presenting a largely pro-Israel narrative in regard to Middle Eastern affairs (ČEJKA 2017: 38). This bias was particularly evident during the early months of the Gaza war, when pro-Palestinian voices were almost entirely absent from the public discourse. Moreover, anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian movements have had little influence in the Czech Republic. Movements such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign have gained minimal traction, and organizations like the Czech branch of the International Solidarity Movement have struggled to mobilize any meaningful public support.

Despite the limited presence of anti-Israel movements, the strong pro-Israel stance of the political elites, and the predominantly pro-Israel media coverage, the Czech public opinion remains more nuanced. As discussed in this essay, while the public tends to lean pro-Israel, there are significant segments that hold more balanced or pro-Palestinian views. However, compared to Western European countries, where the growing dissatisfaction with Israel's policies in Gaza has fueled protests and public demonstrations, Czechs have been more hesitant to engage in collective action in this respect. Even university campuses, traditionally seen as drivers of social change, have remained relatively inactive. Czech university students did not participate in the so-called encampment movements, unlike their counterparts in Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, or the United States. A small exception can be found in a handful of academics and public intellectuals who, after October 7, have called for a more balanced and critical discourse on Middle Eastern affairs (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024). However, their efforts have so far had little impact on the broader public or political discourse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this brief essay, I attempted to contest and deconstruct the widespread belief that Czech public attitudes are inherently one-sided in their support for Israel, especially when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By utilizing available public opinion data as well as original surveys, I showed that despite a uniform political consensus among the elites, the Czech public tends to adopt more neutral[4] and, to some extent, even critical positions towards Israel. While recognizing that there is indeed a general

leaning toward supporting Israel, a noticeable portion of the population holds ambivalent attitudes towards issues such as the historical responsibility for the conflict, the future reconciliation of the two nations, or the potential relocation of the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

In the review, I primarily focused on observational data. However, employing survey experiments could prove to be even more fruitful in advancing our understanding of what drives public preferences, which is a critical step in other foreign policy areas as well. While it was established that there is a significant gap between elite and public attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, future research scrutinizing to what extent public preferences can affect policy is highly needed. And finally, such a non-negligible disconnect between the public and political elites' preferences may invite a normative debate on its long-term implications in domestic politics.

ENDNOTES

1 In their study, BenLevi et al., 2019 use observational data from 2007 collected by the Pew Research Centre.

2 Using a series of Welch two-sample t-tests.

3 According to the latest population census, over two-thirds (68%) of Czechs report no religious affiliations, while only 19% identify with a religious group (ČSÚ 2021).

4 However, "neutrality" in this context should be interpreted with caution, since stating the middle ground in surveys is often driven by a lack of information or knowledge on a given matter (Sturgis et al. 2014; Nadler et al. 2015).

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Poland's Attitudes and Policy Towards Israel and Palestine after October 7th: Continuity and Change

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ABSTRACT	Poland's response to the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after October 7th, 2023, showed considerable continuity, though notable signs of change were also evident. Among the key transformative variables, one can point out: the post-election government change and the consequent realignment with the EU-Brussels stance, and the reorienting public attitudes due to the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Gaza that were accompanied by new social phenomena as pro-Palestinian street protests and campus campaigns. The paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change in Poland's relations with Israel and its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This paper argues that the interplay of international developments and domestic circumstances has led Poland to distance itself from Israel. If this trend becomes a harmonized and institutionalized foreign policy approach, it may ultimately redefine the Poland-Israel relations. Against this backdrop, the paper examines key drivers of this shift and its potential short- and medium-term consequences.

KEYWORDS	Poland, Israel, Palestine, October 7th
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INTRODUCTION

The Czech Republic and Poland are often understood as having somewhat similar historical experiences and sensitivities in connection with their similar positions in CEE. However, the Polish debate after October 7 shows how these experiences might lead to markedly different narratives circulating in the public sphere than those analyzed in the previous contributions. The public spheres in both countries naturally interpreted the war in Gaza through their own lenses and meaning-making referents. While discursive connections to the Communist past and Russia, and arguments foregrounding human rights could be found in both countries, they were attached to different parties of the conflict as the Polish public sphere reacted more negatively to the Israeli actions. As opposed to the Czech value- and identity-laden debate on Israel, the Polish case also features a perspective more focused on safeguarding Polish interests and Polish citizens. This contribution to the forum thus moves the attention out of the Czech Republic to its northern neighbor, partly to provide a counterpoint to and a comparison with the Czech discourse outlined by the other authors, and partly to highlight intra-CEE differences in the public spheres of two CEE states.

Although Poland's policy vis a vis Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – as often highlighted by state officials – continued to follow the same key policy parameters, it was also gradually marked by significant elements of change. Poland's Middle East policy and relations with Israel have long been shaped by a set of intertwined factors, among which the rich and complex heritage of Polish-Jewish history played a significant role and influenced Poland's view of Israel, which it primarily sees as a Jewish state (MAHLA 2016). Additionally, post-communist Poland's pro-Western foreign and security policy – closely tied to European integration and strategic alliances with the United States – was another factor (ABADI 2005). Reestablishing (in 1991), normalizing, and consolidating positive relations with Israel became a key element of Poland's foreign policy, as the fight against antisemitism was emphasized as a remarkable sign of Poland's democratization (GEBERT 2014). Simultaneously, Poland's support for Palestinian national aspirations remained consistent. Its diplomatic ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), established following Poland's recognition of an independent Palestinian state in 1988, were neither questioned nor reconsidered after the Cold War. In the post-transition period, Poland

aimed to maintain a balanced stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which aligned with the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) launched in the 1990s (SZYDZISZ 2014).

As Poland's European integration progressed, the country aligned with the EU's collective stance on the MEPP. Among the challenges of Poland's foreign policy was the need to reconcile the pressure of Europeanizing its foreign policy with the strengthening of its political ties with Israel (ASSEBURG – GOREN 2019). This challenge was driven by the growing crisis in the MEPP, exacerbated by the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu's successive governments, which supported the occupation and the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank; the activities of radical Palestinian organizations like Hamas and the dysfunctionality of the Palestinian Authority (DYDUCH 2018).

Before October 2023, Polish-Israeli relations were significantly influenced by the dominance of right-wing political ideologies in both countries. Hawkish and nationalist coalitions in Poland and Israel initially fostered a common ground, particularly in their shared critical stance toward the EU and Europeanized Middle East policy objectives (MOLNÁR 2019). However, the ethnonationalist approach to historical memory and international cooperation, and their divergent views on their respective roles and interests soon created challenges (SOKOL 2018; CEBULSKI 2021). This shift was gradually reflected in Poland's attitudes towards Israel on the international stage, where Polish diplomacy has noticeably moved away from narratives explicitly supporting Israel, instead adopting a moderate and pragmatic stance (DYDUCH – MÜLLER 2021). Poland's foreign policy apparatus faced the October 7, 2023 events and their aftermath somewhat at a crossroads. The October 15, 2023 parliamentary elections shifted the power from the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government to a left-liberal coalition led by the Civic Coalition, with Donald Tusk as Prime Minister and Radosław Sikorski assuming the role of Foreign Minister in mid-December 2023.

The paper aims to examine the internal socio-political dynamics, focusing on domestic public attitudes, debates, and narratives surrounding the conflict and its implications for Poland (and Europe). It also highlights symbolic instances where state authorities engaged with domestic audiences, responding to societal demands. The paper argues that a specific

interplay of international developments and domestic circumstances has driven Poland to distance itself from Israel and its strategic foreign and security objectives, which is probably the most prominent symptom of the change. The *distancing phenomenon* that is noticeable both internally and internationally, if consolidated into more harmonized and possibly institutionalized patterns of foreign policy practices, may, in a longer time perspective, effectively redefine the nature of Poland's relations with Israel in both a bilateral and a multilateral – namely European – perspective. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to identify key drivers of this *distancing phenomenon*, as well as to address its potential short- and medium-term consequences.

THE DOMESTIC DIMENSION – 'OUR PEOPLE FIRST' – DISTANCING BY EMPHASIZING THE NATIONAL INTEREST

A careful observation of Poland's stance towards the escalating Israeli–Palestinian conflict reveals that immediately after October 7, the primary focus of Polish authorities and public opinion was on safeguarding their country's own nationals remaining in the conflict zone. The public reactions, which crosscut with the peak of the electoral campaign, emphasized the diplomatic obligations towards Polish citizens rather than the overreaching international political preferences of Poland (MSZ PL 2023A). Poland was among the very first countries which organized a state-sponsored evacuation operation coordinated by their military forces, which ensured that by mid-October, every Polish citizen wishing to leave Israel (MFA RP 2023b) was evacuated. The relatively swift evacuation mission, which involved 1,504 citizens (DOWÓDZTWO GENERALNE 2023), was well-received domestically as a fulfillment of the fundamental duty of foreign service – serving the national interest by assisting and protecting the country's citizens. At this same time, Polish authorities also identified 29 Polish citizens, including 18 children, who requested an evacuation from Gaza (RPO 2023A; MFA RP 2023C). As time passed and the Israeli retaliatory operation in Gaza intensified, impatience and concern grew, which was evident both in the statements of Polish politicians and the broader public discourse. During the meeting hosted by deputy foreign minister Paweł Jabłoński on November 6th with the ambassadors of Egypt, Israel, and Palestine, the minister stressed that *"the evacuation of Polish citizens from the Gaza Strip remains a priority for the Polish authorities"* (IBID.). The operation took place on November 12th, but it

included only 18 out of the 29 people. The remaining 11 Polish citizens of Palestinian origin were hoped to be evacuated in another round, but this was blocked by Israel, and the mission was not continued (RPO 2023B). 'Polish Palestinians' and their families expressed deep disappointment, accusing the authorities in Warsaw of treating them as second-class citizens (MIKULSKA 2023).

Meanwhile, the families of the Israeli hostages kept in Gaza, who sought to intensify the international political and diplomatic pressure to support the efforts leading to the release of their relatives, approached Polish authorities regarding this matter. The most publicized story of this sort, that of the well-known and highly respected educator and historian Alex Dancyg,[1] highlighted that among the kidnapped Israelis were other individuals with Polish citizenship and some whose families had petitioned Polish authorities to confirm their right to citizenship in absentia. Despite efforts undertaken by Poland's diplomacy, including multilateral actions in coordination with the American administration (WHITE HOUSE 2024), this did not lead to the release of the hostages, notwithstanding the fact that the fate of the Israeli-Polish hostages had taken a dramatic turn. Only one of them, Almog Meir Jan, was rescued alive. Alex Dancyg was confirmed dead, as were Elad Katzir, Amir Cooper, Chaim Peri and Yotam Haim, who was among the three hostages killed by IDF 'friendly fire'.

One could, however, argue that neither the fate of the 'Palestine Poles' nor that of the 'Israeli Poles' captured the Polish public opinion as intensely as the issue of ensuring the safe return of Poles from Israel immediately after the Hamas attack. First, this reflects the tendency of shocking events to gradually fade out from the public agenda. Secondly, it could be argued that Palestinians and Israelis with Polish citizenship were, to some extent, perceived as 'others' or at least as less like 'one of us' and rather as sides of the conflict.

In April 2024 a Polish volunteer with the international humanitarian organization World Central Kitchen, Damian Soból, was killed in an Israeli drone strike. Israeli politicians and diplomats commented on the event by saying it was a type of "unintentional accident" that "happens during war time" (POLITICO 2024). While Israeli Ambassador Ya'akov Livne expressed regret, he did not issue an apology. Both the strike and the Israeli authorities' response provoked critical – and later outraged – reactions

from the Polish public, media, and politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties. PM Donald Tusk criticized Livne's handling of the matter, calling for a formal apology and a "full and immediate explanation" of the tragedy, along with compensation for the victim's family (RZECZPOSPOLITA 2024). President Andrzej Duda called Livne's comments *"outrageous,"* adding that the ambassador had become *"the biggest problem for Israel in relations with Poland"* (PAP 2024A; 2024B).

The Israeli ambassador was summoned to the Polish MFA in a diplomatic gesture expressing dissatisfaction and condemnation. Deputy Foreign Minister A. Szejna confirmed Poland's firm stance and announced an official diplomatic note protesting the killing of the Polish aid worker. Foreign Minister R. Sikorski, in discussions with his Israeli counterpart, called for an impartial investigation and emphasized the Polish prosecution's involvement, framing the incident in criminal terms (MFA RP 2024B). Poland continued its efforts in this matter, which culminated in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission in June 2024 concerning the events of April 1, 2024 in Gaza (MFA RP 2024C).

The killing of the humanitarian worker resonated strongly in the Polish public sphere and played into the confrontational style of communication between the diplomats of both countries – which was particularly heated in April–May 2024 – and the preexisting animosity in the mutual Polish-Israeli relations. Moreover, the strike was connected with humanitarian concerns, particularly the protection of human rights during wartime, which always had a high priority in Poland, yet gained new meaning in the context of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine. Poles, witnessing the tragedy of Ukrainian civilians, were deeply concerned about the fate of civilians deprived of food, shelter, and basic civil services such as healthcare and education. These parallels between the two wars – the 'Russian war in Ukraine' and the 'Israeli war in Gaza' – which were established in the Polish public narratives then influenced the Polish-Israeli relations. In connection to that, albeit indirectly, two further points resonated in public discourses: 1) Israel's reluctance to provide military support to Ukraine and 2) its refusal to explicitly condemn the Kremlin. Both were transformed into a Polish grievance against Israel for its stance on Ukraine and arguably influenced how the public saw the war on Gaza (HASZCZYŃSKI 2024B).

However, one of the key narratives surrounding the death of the Polish volunteer D. Soból, and the earlier evacuation operations, focused on ethno-national sentiments and highlighted Poland's commitment to protecting "one of our own". In this respect, the lack of compassion shown by the Israeli official in response to the death of the Polish volunteer was widely seen as deeply disappointing. In the following public debate, a new cognitive and emotional context of the mutual relations was defined.

A pivotal example of this development was a two-hour online interview with Ambassador Y. Livne conducted by Robert Mazurek, a well-known journalist and political commentator who openly acknowledges his pro-Israel sympathies. Despite these sympathies, the conversation, held just two days after the tragic death of D. Soból, took on an emotional and, at times, confrontational tone. As the tensions rose, Mazurek criticized Livne for his alleged anti-Polish bias. He argued that the ambassador's refusal to condemn the tragic event, apologize, or denounce Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz's remark that Poles *"sucked anti-Semitism with their mother's milk"* (EURONEWS 2019) signalled a rejection of honest Polish-Israeli relations, fostering anti-Polish prejudice instead (ZERO 2024A). In a follow-up article titled *"Israeli Ambassador: Who He Is and How He Came to Warsaw. A Controversial Diplomat with Russian Roots"*, policy expert Agnieszka Bryc traced the personal story of Yacov Livne. Bryc highlighted the assumed anti-Polish and pro-Russian sentiments of the ambassador and his revisionist approach to history, which came close to Kremlin narratives (BRYC 2024). Both Bryc and Mazurek were well-versed in Polish-Israeli relations, having participated in several debates and being respected by experts. Their opinions were also closely followed by the broader public, while their argument strongly resonated in the wider debate. As noted by another public opinion leader, *"it's hard to say whether the Israeli attack on the convoy in the Gaza Strip had the greatest impact on Poland's stance toward Israel. But without a doubt, Ambassador Jakov Livne's response to Polish reactions after the attack eliminated fears of accusations of anti-Semitism. Livne pushed the argument of anti-Semitism to the point of absurdity, which, sadly, also made genuine anti-Semites feel emboldened"* (HASZCZYŃSKI 2024A).

The mutual *distancing* was also noticeable in another gesture. The following day after the interview, which electrified the Polish public debate, Mazurek issued a personal statement. Apart from commenting on the

interview's unconventional course and reception (the material had over 1.2 million viewers and was commented on by almost all the media in the country), he also referred to the change in Polish-Israeli political communication. Wearing a T-shirt featuring the image of Shevah Weiss – the charismatic and widely respected Israeli ambassador to Poland (2001–2003) – he stressed the change in Polish-Israeli relations, which, in his view, are increasingly less rooted in the nostalgic atmosphere of the Polish-Jewish history, as both countries are becoming more and more distant from one another (ZERO 2024B).

According to Polish journalist Krzysztof Stankowski, the arrogant way in which the Israeli ambassador communicated with the Polish public resulted in the rise of support for Palestine causes in Poland (IBID.). Public opinion polls from April 2024 confirmed this assessment. When asked, "Who should Poland support in the ongoing conflict?", 66.7% of the respondents believed Poland should remain neutral. Only 6% favored supporting Israel, while 10.9% supported the Palestinians, with this figure rising to 20% among respondents aged 40–49 (KACPRZAK 2023).

This sheds light on a new phenomenon in Poland's perception of Israel and the Middle East conflict. For the first time, Polish cities saw street protests related to the conflict, with a notably higher turnout on the pro-Palestinian side. Additionally, Polish academic campuses became hotspots for pro-Palestinian activism. In May 2024, students launched occupation strikes at various universities, including Jagiellonian University in Krakow, the University of Warsaw, and the University of Wroclaw, rallying under the informal "Academy for Palestine" movement. Their demands included severing ties with Israeli academic institutions. Initially, the protests received some degree of acknowledgement and acceptance from the faculty members and university authorities. This, however, changed over time as the occupational protests continued and became disruptive to the normal functioning of the campuses and more radicalized in terms of the form and content of the protesters' demands and lack of readiness for negotiation. What stands out in the 'records' as an unprecedented outcome of the pro-Palestinian student activism is the public and institutional legitimization of the protest movement by university authorities and their broader communities. This is particularly evident at Jagiellonian University and the University of Wroclaw, where there has been a notable condemnation of the civilian

casualties, accompanied by empathy for the Palestinian cause (JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY 2024; UNIVERSITY OF WROCLAW 2024).

Nevertheless, except for the case of the activists, the process of distancing among Poles applied to both the conflict itself and the parties involved. The key mechanism at play here was the apparent difficulty in identifying with either side. While earlier circumstances stemming from Polish-Jewish history provided a basis for greater sympathy towards Israel, the Israeli conduct in Gaza, combined with the Israeli communication with the Polish public, reversed this trend. This, in turn, interacted with the country's foreign policy and its evolving international relations orientation.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION – 'DISTANCING' BY ADVOCATING FOR MULTILATERALISM AND A NORMS-DRIVEN WORLD ORDER

In immediate response to the October 7th Hamas atrocities, Polish politicians mostly expressed solidarity with Israel and its citizens, condemning the attack as an "act of war" and extending condolences to the victims' families (WP.PL 2023). Yet already on October 10th, Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, when participating in an EU foreign ministers' meeting, emphasized not only Poland's condemnation of Hamas' "barbaric acts" but also called on the EU *"to explicitly show its protest against the attacks by both sides targeting civilians"* (MFA RP 2023A). Moreover, he emphasized Poland's support for maintaining the EU assistance to Palestine, citing the need to stabilize the West Bank and provide humanitarian aid to Gaza (IBID.). This has been further emphasized in a statement by Poland's MFA released on October 18 calling Hamas and Israel to de-escalate the conflict, protect civilians and condemn the *"unacceptable toll of innocent civilian lives"* (MFA RP 2023D). Later diplomatic interventions contributed to a more consolidated narrative in which *"Poland strongly condemns terrorist acts and other criminal activities by Hamas[…],"* yet *"any military action must be carried out under the applicable rules of international and humanitarian law, ensuring the protection of the civilian population"* and *"strongly condemning actions which take the form of[a] collective punishment inflicted on innocent residents of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank"* (MFA RP 2023C).

As noted in the introduction, the events of October 7th occurred just a week before Poland's parliamentary elections on October 15th, which led

to a transition of power and the formation of a new left-liberal government, which assumed power only on December 13th. The two-month governmental transition obviously impacted Polish diplomacy and its international performance, which, during this time, was rather reactive. It could be argued that Poland lacked any meaningful policy priorities other than protecting its own citizens at this time. The absence of a 'solidarity visit' to Israel by Poland's highest representatives (e.g., the Prime Minister or the Minister of Foreign Affairs) could be a consequence of this. However, the lack of an official conversation between the newly appointed Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, and his Israeli counterpart after the former assuming office in December indicated a more profound distancing. What is worth noting is that the Polish ruling coalition's criticism of illiberal tendencies has positioned them as natural opponents of Netanyahu's government.

Nevertheless, Donald Tusk's government, with Radosł aw Sikorski heading Polish diplomacy, stated that its Middle East policy would maintain continuity while introducing certain changes. In his first conversation with his Israeli counterpart, Israel Katz, on January 10, 2024, Sikorski expressed Poland's *"unwavering solidarity with Israel in the wake of Hamas's attacks"* but emphasized "the obligation to keep the military response moderate" (MFA RP 2024A). This signalled continuity, but also a strong emphasis on the EU's position. Sikorski himself adopted a more proactive approach at the European level (E.G., MFA RP 2024E, 2024F) and aligned his position with an emphasis on the two-state solution (EU EEAS 2024). Poland's foreign policy, both conceptually and operationally, thus shifted towards a more Europeanized modus operandi. While it was not simply anti-Israeli and/or pro-Palestinian, it became much more moderate than before.

At the same time, Poland was vocal on some of the polarizing issues, especially the recognition of Palestinian statehood which Poland has maintained since 1988. A closer look at Poland's UN voting patterns on MEPP-related issues, however, reveals a notable shift. Historically, Poland often leaned toward Israel, abstaining in key votes such as that on Palestine's UNESCO membership in 2011, the 2012 UN GA vote on upgrading Palestine's status to a non-member observer state, and the vote on a 2017 resolution following the U.S. decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem (KALHOUSOVÁ – RUBÍNOVÁ 2020). Most recently, already during the first post-October 7th UN GA debate (OCTOBER 27, 2023), namely the debate on a ceasefire

in Gaza and Israel's actions in occupied territories, Poland again abstained (DOBOSZ-DOBROWOLSKA 2023). Its unequivocal support for Palestine at the UN GA vote in May 2024, indicated a shift in its foreign policy orientation and a significant element of novelty in its relations towards Israel.

This change was noted by Israel. The Israeli ambassador to Poland again sharply criticized Poland's move, stating that *"this is a wrong and harmful decision for security, stability, and for Poland"*, which is a continuation of *"the 1988 Soviet-led anti-West decision of recognizing [the] 'Palestinian state'"* (LIVNE 2024). Yet, Minister Sikorski responded firmly, emphasizing that it is Poland itself, not foreign ambassadors, that decides on its interests, and pointed out that Poles do not appreciate a patronizing tone (NFP 2024). Sikorski recalled similar argumentation when commenting on Ireland, Spain and Norway's announcements regarding their intentions to recognize the Palestinian state (REUTERS 2024).

Nonetheless, when reviewing[2] the initiatives and activities of Polish diplomacy over the past months, it appears that Israel's war in Gaza and the escalating regional conflict were not priorities of the Polish foreign policy agenda. Although these issues were present in political and diplomatic discourses, they took a backseat to matters such as the situation in Ukraine, the migration crisis and, most of all, the efforts of advancing security cooperation within existing institutional frameworks, particularly NATO.

Poland, as a member of the EU and NATO with its own history of occupation and war, supports the international liberal order but also considers geopolitical factors. Therefore, Poland's position on the situation in the Middle East needs to be seen also in the context of the developments in its eastern neighborhood, particularly Ukraine. Since the war in Ukraine began, Poland has become one of Ukraine's main allies, providing diplomatic and military support to it. Poland's support for Palestinian self-determination shall be seen as part of its broader commitment to resolving international conflicts based on international law. Given its history of occupation and brutal conflicts, Poland emphasizes civilian protection and adherence to the laws of war. In regard to both Palestine and Ukraine, it advocates for the protection of the civilian population and supports solutions based on the recognition of a multilateral liberal order rather than on politics of unilateralism and power. On the other hand, the eruption of

the war in the Middle East was also seen in Poland as a part of the re-focusing of American efforts and resources from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, which Poland's politicians and public opinion have seen as a major security threat.

Those considerations shed light on the course of the recent political and diplomatic turmoil related to the possible attendance of the Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu at the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz German Nazi death and concentration camp when he was facing the risk of being arrested under an International Criminal Court warrant. At first (in December 2024), Poland's MFA officials publicly expressed their stance on the potential execution of the International Criminal Court's warrants, as Poland is not only a signatory to the Rome Statute, but recently (December 3rd, 2024) it concluded an Agreement with the ICC on the Enforcement of Its Sentences. Importantly, Poland's diplomacy was highly interested and active in the execution of the arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin issued by the ICC judges in March 2023. Later, however, with the active engagement of President A. Duda, the Polish government stance shifted toward enabling senior Israeli officials to attend the Auschwitz memorial service and even ensuring their attendance with a blanket guarantee of security to all. In an attempt to explain this controversial and highly contested move, two main arguments were presented. The first one referred to the upcoming presidency of D. Trump – a critic of the ICC and a supporter of Israel – and Poland's security strategy, which is heavily based on Euro-Atlantic ties and the aim to maintain or even expand the US political interest and military presence in Central Eastern Europe. The second argument referred to Polish politicians' fear of massive accusations of antisemitism (coming from the worldwide Israeli/Jewish Diaspora and the relevant American political circles).

CONCLUSIONS

The article considered developments occurring at both the international and domestic levels, with particular emphasis on the evolving attitude of Polish society towards the ongoing conflict and its parties. Poland's shifting attitudes and preferences underscored, on the one hand, the significance of emotions. On the other hand, they revealed the interesting process of connecting two unrelated conflicts. Both phenomena contributed to and fueled the process of "distancing from Israel", which already started with the diplomatic crisis of 2018 unfolding around historical memory disputes. Yet the process itself was primarily driven by domestic dynamics. At the same time, Poland's shift toward the "Palestinian cause" appeared more closely aligned with Warsaw's preference for safeguarding a normative, multilateral international order grounded in international law and indirectly resonated with Poland's engagement in advancing Ukraine's interest in the international fora. However, taking into account a broader perspective of analysis, one can see that this change may not be permanent. On the contrary, factors such as the strategic perception of the role of the United States in shaping the security regime in Central and Eastern Europe and the still significant socio-cultural proximity to Israel may lead to a correction of the preferences manifested by Poland.

ENDNOTES

1 Alex Dancyg emigrated from Poland to Israel in 1956 and later settled in the Nir-Oz kibbutz, from where he was kidnapped on October 7th.

2 The assumption is based on a careful examination of the frequency, content, and scope of communications from Poland's foreign policy institutions – information, event reports, and statements on the Middle East – publicized through official social media channels and websites, including those of the President, the Government, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Book Reviews

Obituary: Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1937–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This obituary pays tribute to Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1937–2025), one of the most influential thinkers in international relations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It traces his intellectual evolution from the early critique of realist orthodoxy to the formulation of key concepts such as soft power, smart power, and neoliberal institutionalism. The text highlights Nye's dual role as a scholar and a policymaker, emphasizing his ability to translate theory into actionable foreign policy, notably during his service under the Carter and Clinton administrations. It reflects on Nye's enduring efforts to embed ethics and legitimacy into strategic thinking and leadership, which ultimately shaped the global vocabulary of power. The obituary also situates Nye's work in dialogue with figures such as Henry Kissinger, and revisits his influence on U.S.–Asia relations, NATO enlargement, and debates on American decline. The text concludes with some reflections on Nye's legacy as a moral voice in foreign policy and a diagnostician of the changing nature of power in an interconnected world.

KEYWORDS	Joseph S. Nye Jr., soft power, smart power, neoliberal institutionalism, IR theory, U. S. foreign policy
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INTRODUCTION

Few figures have reshaped the global understanding of power as profoundly – or as enduringly – as Joseph S. Nye Jr., whose passing on May 6, 2025 at the age of 88 marked the closing of a career that bridged scholarship and strategy, ethics and influence.

Educated at Princeton (1954–1958), Oxford (1958–1960), and Harvard (1964–1968) – where he would spend the majority of his academic life (1968–2004) – Nye developed his ideas in reaction to history's turning points: the Cold War (KEOHANE – NYE – HOFFMANN 1994), the unipolar moment (NYE 2002), the global war on terror (NYE – WELCH 2017), and the rise of China (NYE 2015). His work was not confined to classrooms or think tanks, as Joseph S. Nye served as Deputy to the Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology (1977–1979) under President Jimmy Carter. In this role, he contributed to U.S. nuclear non-proliferation policy and strategic arms control (notably SALT II), and integrated science and technology into foreign policy. Later, under Clinton's administration, he helped shape U.S. responses to the shifting global landscape as Chair of the National Intelligence Council (1993–1994) and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1994–1995).

Joseph Nye's intellectual influence transcended borders as surely as it transcended disciplinary boundaries. As both scholar and practitioner, Nye navigated the fraught terrain between theory and policy with unusual clarity. Nye's thinking emerged from a deep conviction that in the modern world, power could no longer be understood solely in terms of military or economic force. He spoke instead of "the changing nature of power" in an interconnected, media-saturated, and increasingly multipolar world.

His books have been translated into over a dozen languages, and his core concepts have become part of the strategic vocabulary not only in the United States, but also in China, Japan, the European Union, and beyond. While he never intended soft power to serve as a blueprint, his work shaped how governments understood legitimacy, persuasion, and global reputation in the post-Cold War era. *"What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies"*. And he

continues: *"When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced"* (NYE 2004: X). For Nye, influence depended as much on narratives, values, and legitimacy as on troops or trade.

In some cases, his ideas were adopted for purposes quite distant from his own liberal convictions – an irony Nye acknowledged with his characteristic clarity, noting that *"soft power is not good or bad in itself. Value judgments depend on the ends, means, and consequences of an action. [...] Osama bin Laden neither threatened nor paid the men who flew aircraft into the World Trade Center in September 2001: he attracted them by his ideas to do evil"* (NYE 2017A).

Nye's appointment as Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (1995–2004) marked a new phase in his intellectual journey – one focused increasingly on leadership and ethics. As Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School, he reoriented the school's mission for a global century, building programs that trained leaders from emerging democracies and fragile states alongside those from established powers.

In shaping a generation of global policymakers, Nye confronted a recurring question: how should leaders exercise power in a world that defies easy choices? It was this concern that animated *The Powers to Lead* (NYE 2008) and culminated in *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (NYE 2020). These works reflected his conviction that influence divorced from responsibility is ultimately corrosive. As dean, he institutionalized his belief in ethical leadership through curriculum, cross-border fellowships, and policy labs. Nye did not view ethics as the antithesis of realism, but as its necessary complement: leaders need to understand not only the instruments of power, but also the principles that give those instruments meaning. This moral dimension became the closing arc of his intellectual life – one that sought not just to redefine power, but to humanize it.

THE ARCHITECT OF A NEW LANGUAGE OF POWER

Nye's time at Harvard was not merely academic; it was formative. Appointed to the faculty in the late 1960s, he came of age intellectually during a moment when American power was being questioned – both abroad and on campus. Harvard became for Nye a crucible of

interdisciplinary ferment: surrounded by nuclear theorists, economists, and area specialists, he absorbed debates that would later inform his challenge to realist orthodoxy. At the same time, he grew skeptical of abstraction untethered from policy relevance. His early work on nuclear non-proliferation, energy diplomacy, and international regimes already reflected a pragmatist's concern: theory should guide decision-makers, not merely describe the world (ALLISON – CARNESALE – NYE 1988). It was in this environment, and in collaboration with Robert Keohane, that Nye's vision of power as institutional and relational first crystallized.

Together with Robert Keohane, Nye helped found what came to be known later as the neoliberal institutionalist school of thought. Their landmark book *Power and Interdependence* (KEOHANE – NYE 1977) and their earlier co-edited volume *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (KEOHANE – NYE 1972) broke with the prevailing realism of the time by arguing that the international system was not defined solely by conflict and zero-sum competition, but by a dense web of cooperation, institutions, non-state actors and mutual vulnerability. *"Realism bore the brunt of our critique, and our quarrels with aspects of liberalism were subdued. As a result of our rhetorical barbs at realism, our approach is sometimes labelled simply as 'liberal.' Yet this characterization of Power and Interdependence is highly misleading..."* (IBID.: XXI). Power and Interdependence was not just a theoretical intervention; it was an argument that even in an anarchic system, structure matters, and so do ideas.

Regarding realism, Nye spent his career in a sustained yet evolving dialogue with its core tenets – which was nowhere more clear than in his engagement with Henry Kissinger, whose towering presence defined an earlier generation of American foreign policy thought. While Kissinger's realism emphasized balance-of-power logic and raison d'état, Nye proposed an alternative model, one that brought institutions, legitimacy, and ethical reasoning into the strategic calculus. As a young scholar, he studied Kissinger's diplomacy with a measure of admiration for its historical sweep and intellectual rigor, but also questioned its moral detachment and limited conception of influence. Where Kissinger saw a world shaped by hard constraints, Nye perceived the growing importance of norms, perception, and mutual interdependence.

In later years, Nye's evolving theories of soft and smart power served not as a repudiation of Kissinger's realism but as its necessary adaptation to a more complex and interconnected world. Rather than dismissing Kissinger's statecraft, Nye broadened the strategic vocabulary to include intangible assets: cultural attraction, institutional trust, and moral credibility. Their occasional public dialogues were marked by principled disagreement and mutual regard – with Nye critiquing Kissinger's neglect of norms, and Kissinger acknowledging Nye's insights into a world increasingly governed by information flows, global narratives, and asymmetric threats. In this intellectual interplay, Nye positioned himself not as a rival, but as a successor who sought to update American grand strategy for an age where power flowed not only from coercion, but also from consent.

Such a reconceptualization of power introduced several key features that distinguished *Power and Interdependence* as a foundational work. First, it identified multiple channels of interaction – not just between governments, but also among transnational actors such as corporations, NGOs, and international institutions. Second, it challenged the notion of a strict hierarchy of issues, arguing that economic, environmental, and social concerns could rival military issues in importance. Third, it emphasized that military force was often ineffective or irrelevant in many areas of international relations, particularly where interdependence made coercion costly or counterproductive.

This intellectual move laid the groundwork for Nye's broader rethinking of what power means in the modern world. In *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (NYE 1990), he took aim at the then-fashionable narrative of American decline, arguing instead that the United States retained immense resources of influence – as long as it understood how to use them wisely. Building on his earlier work, *Bound to Lead* advanced Nye's thesis by distinguishing between hard power – the ability to coerce through military or economic means – and what he would later coin as soft power: the ability to attract and co-opt rather than compel. In this 1990 volume, Nye systematically dismantled the popular "declinist" literature of the 1980s, arguing that metrics of decline overlooked America's structural advantages, such as its global network of alliances, cultural appeal, technological innovation, and institutional leadership. He emphasized that in a post-industrial, information-driven world, true

power derives not only from traditional resources but also from credibility, values, and the legitimacy of policy objectives.

Crucially, *Bound to Lead* reframed power as a multidimensional concept: military strength mattered, but so did education systems, pop culture, and diplomatic norms. This analytical shift anticipated the post-Cold War world, in which dominance would not be ensured by force alone. Nye's argument carried powerful implications for U.S. foreign policy: it was not just about overwhelming rivals but also about setting the international agenda, shaping narratives, and commanding global respect. Nye's vision remains a cornerstone for understanding how modern states must cultivate influence in both material and ideational dimensions.

That insight became the foundation for Nye's most influential idea: soft power. In *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (NYE 2004A), he gave full form to a concept he had previously introduced, offering both a theoretical framework and a practical guide to understanding how influence functions in an age of global media, transnational civil society, and digital saturation. He argued that a country's ability to attract – through its culture, political values, and moral legitimacy – could achieve what coercion or payments could not. Soft power, as Nye described it, was non-coercive by nature. It worked not through commands but through credibility; not through force, but through attraction. In a world increasingly shaped by perception, the consistency of a nation's actions with its declared ideals, its capacity to inspire admiration and emulation, and the resonance of its cultural output became central to its strategic influence. From universities and film industries to public diplomacy and NGOs, Nye emphasized that the tools of modern power were dispersed far beyond the traditional realm of statecraft.

Linking back to the evolving discussion of power in *Bound to Lead*, *Soft Power* served as both a warning and a prescription for U.S. foreign policy: military and economic tools alone were inadequate for maintaining leadership in a world of rising powers and competing narratives. Nye cautioned that abusing hard power – through unilateral interventions or disregard for global norms – could undercut America's soft power by breeding resentment and skepticism. Today, this framework remains acutely relevant and Nye's concept provides a lens for understanding why perceived legitimacy,

moral authority, and narrative framing are as vital to international influence as aircraft carriers or trade agreements.

BRIDGING POWER AND POLICY: THEORY IN ACTION

Joseph Nye was not only a theorist of power – he was one of the rare scholars who repeatedly stepped into the arena to test his ideas against the realities of policymaking. Moving with ease between Harvard and Washington, Nye embodied the role of the public intellectual who refuses to remain on the sidelines. His government service, spanning two presidential administrations, reflected his belief that theory should not merely interpret the world but help shape it.

Under President Jimmy Carter, Nye served as Deputy to the Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science, and Technology (1977–1979), an office that reflected his early concern with the intersection of innovation, diplomacy, and strategic stability. A decade later, in the 1990s, he returned to the government in more senior roles: first as Chair of the National Intelligence Council (1993–1994), and then as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (1994–1995) under President Bill Clinton. In these positions, Nye helped articulate U.S. strategy during a time of profound transition – from the Cold War bipolarity to a more fragmented and uncertain global order. He helped craft key post-Cold War strategic forecasts for the U.S., influencing the Clinton-era foreign policy toward Russia, China, and emerging powers. He was closely involved in shaping the policy toward East Asia, and navigating the relations with a resurgent China and a nuclear North Korea, while also contributing to frameworks for post-Soviet security and nonproliferation. Nye was a leading figure in the enlargement of NATO and the deepening of U.S. security alliances, especially those in Asia.

Nye maintained a particularly influential relationship with Japan, where his ideas on soft power and strategic credibility found receptive ground. As Assistant Secretary of Defense, he authored the 1995 "Nye Report," officially titled "The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region," which reaffirmed America's security commitment to East Asia and became a cornerstone of the U.S.–Japan alliance. The report explicitly recommended maintaining a forward-deployed presence

of approximately 100,000 U.S. troops in the region – primarily stationed in Japan and South Korea – as a stabilizing force to deter aggression, reassure allies, and uphold the post-Cold War security architecture. In Japan, this meant reinforcing the importance of U.S. bases such as those in Yokosuka, Okinawa, and Misawa, while promoting a vision of shared responsibility and mutual strategic interests that redefined the bilateral alliance for a new era. In recognition of his contributions to the bilateral cooperation, the Japanese government awarded him the prestigious Order of the Rising Sun in 2004.

Nye's dual role as scholar and policymaker allowed him to test his theories under pressure. His service in the Carter and Clinton administrations came during periods of strategic recalibration from détente to post-Cold War transition. These were not abstract eras: they presented urgent challenges that demanded the very conceptual clarity Nye had long advocated. At the National Intelligence Council, he grappled with how emerging threats – from non-state actors to technological disruption – could undermine traditional deterrence. As Assistant Secretary of Defense, he helped frame the U.S. engagement in East Asia around both power and reassurance, anticipating the balance of hard and soft instruments he would later label "smart power." His writings from this period, including *Bound to Lead* and *The Paradox of American Power*, drew directly from these policy experiences, offering a framework that blended institutional insight with strategic foresight. Nye's career stands as a rare case where the laboratory of theory met the urgency of statecraft.

What distinguished Nye's approach was his conviction that strategic thinking must be informed by structural insight. His writings during and after his time in the government make clear that he viewed American power not as an unchallenged given, but as a resource that must be stewarded with foresight. In *The Paradox of American Power* (NYE 2002), Nye offered a strategic and structural critique of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, warning against the illusion of unipolar dominance in a world increasingly shaped by economic globalization, asymmetric threats, and the diffusion of information. While acknowledging the unprecedented breadth of America's military and economic capabilities, he argued that these strengths were insufficient for addressing emerging global challenges – such as terrorism, climate change, pandemics, and cyber threats – that could not be resolved

through unilateral action or brute force. In a world of growing complexity and interdependence, a dominance based on coercion alone would be both unsustainable and counterproductive. What mattered, Nye insisted, was legitimacy, partnership, and institutional credibility: *"The United States must realize that its success in a global information age depends on whether it can lead through attraction as well as coercion"* (NYE 2004A: 5).

The core paradox, as Nye framed it, was this: although the U.S. was the world's sole superpower, its ability to achieve its goals increasingly depended on cooperation with others. In a networked world where non-state actors, global markets, and information flows shape international outcomes, leadership requires more than dominance – it demands legitimacy, trust, and institutional alignment. Nye thus emphasized the importance of investing in international norms, alliances, and soft power assets that foster long-term influence rather than short-term compliance.

Nye's engagement in the Trilateral Commission offered a practical platform to translate these principles into institutional strategy very early on, which proved to be very beneficial. The Trilateral Commission, established in 1973 by David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski, was conceived as a forum to promote a closer cooperation between North America, Western Europe, and Japan in response to shifting global economic and political dynamics. It emerged from concerns that the United States could no longer manage global challenges unilaterally and needed a more structured dialogue with its key democratic allies. Nye, then a rising academic voice for interdependence, played a foundational role in shaping the intellectual framework of the Commission during its early years in the 1970s. His work on transnational relations and complex interdependence directly informed the Commission's agenda, emphasizing that global issues – such as energy, trade, and security – required coordinated, multilateral approaches rather than unilateral U.S. action. Nye remained actively involved in the Commission throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, helping to legitimize the Commission as a venue for an elite policy dialogue that influenced U.S. foreign policy thinking in the post-Vietnam era (NYE – BIEDENKOPF – SHIINA 1991).

Later, Nye approached the rise of Asia – especially China – not with alarmism, but with strategic prudence (Nye 2023). While acknowledging the dramatic economic and military ascent of China, he repeatedly cautioned against the narrative of an inevitable American decline or a great power conflict (Nye 2015: 46–70). Power, in his view, is not a zero-sum game, particularly in an age of complex interdependence and transnational threats. In a 2017 essay, Nye warned not only of the well-known Thucydides Trap (Allison 2017) – the risk of war being sparked by fear of a rising power – but also of the lesser-known Kindleberger Trap, in which the rising power fails to assume leadership responsibilities once held by the established hegemon (Nye 2017b). Managing China's rise, then, requires more than deterrence; it demands cooperation, rule-based engagement, and investment in global public goods. Nye argued that the U.S. should neither contain nor concede, but compete and cooperate simultaneously – sustaining alliances, projecting soft power, and strengthening institutions.

This perspective directly reinforces the structural insight: American power, to be sustainable, must be guided not just by capacity but by strategic restraint and systemic awareness. Nye's call for a "smart strategy" that would blend hard and soft power – what he would later label "smart power" – was a prescient warning against overreach in the post-9/11 era, when U.S. credibility was strained by military interventions and unilateralism. His conception of smart power proved especially prescient in this context, as it balanced strategic firmness with diplomatic agility. For Nye, the challenge was not who would dominate, but whether both powers could avoid the traps of history and co-author a stable, pluralistic order.

This concern for strategic balance culminated in *The Future of Power* (Nye 2011), where Nye introduced the concept of smart power – the ability to combine hard and soft power in ways that are responsive to context. In a world where cybersecurity threats, global pandemics, populist movements, and climate crises defy traditional power tools, leadership must be adaptive and multi-dimensional. Nye stressed that contextual intelligence – the skill to read environments, align instruments of power appropriately, and recognize the difference between influence and control – was the hallmark of effective statecraft in the new era.

In *The Future of Power,* Joseph Nye brought together decades of theoretical development and real-world policy experience to chart how power was evolving in the 21st century. He distinguished between power "over" others (coercive or commanding power) and power "with" others (collaborative or co-optive power), emphasizing that the digital revolution and the rise of non-state actors were transforming the international landscape. He argued that power was no longer held exclusively by states and militaries; it now flowed through networks, narratives, and technological platforms, shifting the global balance toward a more diffuse and decentralized structure.

This strategic vision tied directly into Nye's long-standing concern with legitimacy, perception, and institutional credibility. He warned against the seductions of unilateralism and brute coercion, urging policymakers to recognize that information environments amplify credibility and reputation, and that coercion without trust is often self-defeating. As in his earlier work, Nye underscored that power is not static or singular – it is relational, and its exercise must be strategic rather than impulsive.

In this synthesis of scholarly analysis and policy pragmatism, Nye offered a vision of statecraft that was strategic but not cynical, and principled but not naïve. He remained a consistent advocate for an America that led by example, understanding that in a globalized and increasingly contested world, influence would flow not only from might, but also from meaning.

CONSCIENCE OF STRATEGY: POWER, LEADERSHIP, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the later stages of his career, Joseph Nye increasingly turned to a question that he believed lay at the heart of enduring leadership: what does it mean to exercise power responsibly? Moving beyond structural theories of international relations, Nye began to explore the ethical dimension of statecraft: the ways in which leadership, legitimacy, and morality intersect in the real-world choices of presidents and policymakers.

In *The Powers to Lead* (Nye 2008), Nye brought together insights from political science, history, psychology, and international relations to examine not just what makes leaders effective, but what makes them ethical.

Advancing his lifelong inquiry into the nature of power, he turned inward: toward the psychology, ethics, and practical skills of individual leadership. Drawing on the idea of "soft power" at the personal level, Nye argued that leadership is not reducible to formal authority or positional power, but emerges from the ability to mobilize others around shared goals through credibility, empathy, and narrative framing.

In contrast to the dominant command-and-control models, Nye emphasized persuasion, emotional resonance, and moral clarity as essential attributes of leadership in a networked and interdependent age. This perspective echoed his broader argument that power is relational and co-dependent – governed as much by trust and legitimacy as by formal control – and the same principles apply to both global influence and domestic leadership.

Central to Nye's analysis was his concept of "smart leadership," a corollary to smart power. He posited that effective leaders must harness a blend of hard and soft traits – decisiveness and diplomacy, vision and pragmatism – and, most importantly, must possess contextual intelligence, the ability to assess environments and adapt strategies accordingly. This is not simply a matter of effectiveness but of ethical responsibility: leaders should be judged not only by their outcomes, but by how they use power: whether they manipulate or elevate, dominate or empower.

This ethical dimension connected seamlessly to Nye's long-standing concerns about legitimacy and attraction in statecraft. Where *Soft Power* and *The Future of Power* explored how states exert influence, *The Powers to Lead* mapped that logic onto individuals, showing that moral credibility, emotional intelligence, and narrative coherence are just as essential to presidents and policymakers as they are to diplomats and strategists.

In doing so, Nye illuminated a core insight running through all his work: power is most enduring when it is earned, not imposed. Just as nations cannot lead effectively without legitimacy, so too leaders cannot govern meaningfully without trust. In a time of disinformation, populist demagoguery, and institutional erosion, Nye's call for reflective, emotionally attuned, and morally grounded leadership remains more urgent than ever.

In *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (Nye 2020), Joseph Nye brought his lifetime of scholarship full circle by directly confronting the ethical dimension of international leadership. In this book, rather than relying on abstract theory or moralizing from a distance (Nye 2019), he assessed the foreign policy legacies of fourteen U.S. presidents through a structured, case-based framework. His "moral scorecard" evaluated the leaders across three dimensions: their intentions, the means they employed, and the consequences of their actions. The goal was neither to praise nor condemn, but to encourage thoughtful reflection on how ethics and strategic judgment intersect in real-world decision-making.

Nye approached this analysis with nuance, rejecting partisanship and moral absolutism. He commended leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman for combining strategic realism with moral purpose, while offering a tempered critique of more recent figures who, in his view, prioritized short-term advantage over enduring legitimacy. Central to the book was Nye's conviction that morality and effectiveness in foreign policy are not in conflict; rather, ethical considerations can reinforce a nation's strategic credibility and enhance its long-term influence.

This work reinforced a key theme running through Nye's later writings: that power, when detached from legitimacy and moral purpose, is ultimately self-defeating. Just as *The Powers to Lead* emphasized emotional and ethical intelligence in personal leadership, *Do Morals Matter?* extended this insight to the presidency itself. Nye challenged the idea that realism and moral reasoning exist in tension, arguing instead that ethical reflection is essential to any wise strategy in a complex and interconnected world.

In doing so, Nye expanded the intellectual terrain of international relations to include questions too often left aside – questions about responsibility, humility, empathy, and restraint. His moral framework did not seek to replace strategic thinking, but to enrich it, grounding power in purpose. In this, as throughout his career, Nye offered a vision of leadership that demanded clarity without cruelty, ambition without arrogance, and strength without blindness to the human stakes of policy.

With these works, Nye emerged not only as an architect of strategic thinking, but as a moral voice within the American foreign policy

establishment – a conscience that reminded power practitioners that choices made in the name of national interest must be accountable to a higher standard.

More than a theorist, Nye was a diagnostic thinker – a diagnostician of American purpose in a time of uncertainty. Above all, Nye believed in the power of ideas. He argued not only that ideas could shape reality, but that they should be tested in it. In a world increasingly marked by polarization, transactionalism, and distrust, his voice remained calm but insistent.

A LIFE IN THE AMERICAN CENTURY: MEMORY, POWER, AND RESPONSIBILITY

In his 2024 memoir, *A Life in the American Century* (Nye 2024), Joseph Nye offered not just a retrospective on a remarkable life, but a meditation on the arc of American power and the burdens of democratic leadership. The book blends the autobiographical with the historical, tracing Nye's journey from a civically minded childhood in New Jersey to the inner corridors of Harvard and Washington, and from Cold War diplomacy to the complexities of a multipolar world. As a scholar-practitioner, Nye occupied a singular vantage point – both shaping and chronicling the rise and recalibration of the American global leadership.

The memoir is deeply personal without being confessional, and expansive without losing its intimacy. Nye reflects on academic rivalries and the evolution of international relations theory, recounts bureaucratic battles in the Defense Department and the intelligence community, and recalls quiet moments of doubt in the face of moral complexity. His travels – from Tokyo to Riyadh, and from Geneva to Beijing – are not merely diplomatic anecdotes, but windows into how power is perceived, negotiated, and misunderstood across cultures.

What gives the book its lasting resonance is not just its narrative sweep, but its tone, which is reflective, modest, and morally engaged. Nye never confuses access with wisdom, or influence with infallibility. Instead, he returns again and again to a set of questions that animated his entire career: What kind of power is worth having? What kind of leadership is worth following? And how should a great nation behave in a world it cannot

control? In a time of growing cynicism, *A Life in the American Century* stands as a quiet affirmation that ideas, institutions, and individuals still matter – and that responsibility, rather than dominance, is the true test of power.

In the end, Joseph Nye did more than theorize the American century. He lived it, shaped it, and reflected on it with a depth of insight that few could match. His final legacy may lie not only in the concepts he coined, but in the intellectual integrity and ethical clarity with which he approached both scholarship and statecraft.

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