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The implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Euro-Atlantic and Russian strategic cultures – A comparative study of the shifts in geopolitical locus of control

ABSTRACT

This study applies the concept of the culture of national security (security culture) to delve into the interests and priorities of the state members of the Euro-Atlantic community, as well as Russia, in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Referring to interpretive and normative approaches alike, the research incorporates identity transformation as a dependent variable and evaluates it among more and less powerful states. It corroborates the argument that whereas a great power's identity may change gradually and slowly over time, under the pressure of domestic societal actors, a similar identity change may happen to a small state much more quickly, due to the imperative for survival in an anarchic environment. The study establishes that transitions in strategic culture within regional security communities happen in a differentiated way along new lines of subgroup division, yet these transitions are conditioned by opportunism rather than a rationalised metamorphosis of identity.

KEYWORDS: strategic culture; Russo-Ukrainian war; Euro-Atlantic security community; rationality; identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has moved Europe's security perceptions and reflexes back to square one, that is, to the fundamentals of survival and self-help. Not until February 24, 2022, did the Europeans begin to problematise the "peace dividend"¹ as taken for granted. This led them to familiarise themselves with the fact that they are no longer living in a pluralistic security community – a community that has eliminated war and

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¹ N. P. Gleditsch et al. (eds), *The Peace Dividend. Contributions to Economic Analysis* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 1996) 1–13.

the expectation of war within its boundaries via “processes of political communication, some machinery for rules enforcement, and the habits of compliance”.² For more than three decades, since 1989, European integration appeared to have left the troubles of a confrontational European past far behind. But the war has reversed the debate on security, taking it back to its foundations.

Metrics of ‘civilisation’ have so far been established as the benchmarks when evaluating Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, an incursion which quickly developed into a full-scale war, swinging between offensive and counteroffensive initiatives for more than three years now. The qualification of the Kremlin’s aggressive act as barbarism draws a distinct red line between the two conflicting parties. At first glance, any attempt at civilising the discourse on war by linking it to the culture of national security may seem impertinent. A second glance, nonetheless, reveals the relevance of such an interpretation, especially with a view to the frequent disregard for rationality and black-and-white labelling in what is presumed to be cold-blooded power politics.

This study employs the strategic culture concept to analyse interests and strategic priorities, which, although independent variables in realpolitik policy-making, are determined by the complex interplay of exogenous structural factors. The war in Ukraine is a case in point for this critical event affects both the Russian and Euro-Atlantic strategic cultures. Referring to interpretive and normative approaches alike, the research incorporates identity transformation as a dependent variable and applies it among more and less powerful states. It corroborates the argument that whereas a great power’s identity may change gradually and slowly over time, under the pressure of domestic societal actors, a similar identity change may happen to a small state much more quickly due to the imperative for survival in an anarchic environment. Therefore, it seeks answers to the following main research question: *What kind of impact does a systemic threat associated with the external security environment have on national security cultures and what are the differences in its implications – first, for the two parties in the conflict (Russia and Ukraine), and second, for several members of a related defensive alliance (NATO) and an integrative community (the European Union)?* The study applies a comparative method in combination with content analysis of strategic documents in the national security domain.

² O. Dityrych, Security community: A future for a troubled concept? (2014) 28 (3) *International Relations*, 351. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814545952> Ref. to: K. W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area. International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957).

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural approaches to security theory and practice have existed for centuries. Lantis, for one, traces the influence of culture on national security policy back to classic works, including the writings of Thucydides and Sun Tzu.³ The evolution of the modern concept of strategic culture had its starting point in the first “national character studies” created after the end of the Second World War, which made correlations between culture and state behaviour by applying anthropological methods.⁴ They were heavily criticised, though, for stereotyping, and further differentiated by political scientists during the behavioural revolution in international studies in the 1960s and 1970s in three categories: first, the cognitive one, which includes empirical and causal beliefs; second, the evaluative one, which consists of values, norms and moral judgments, and third, the affective one, which encompasses emotional attachments, patterns of identity and loyalty, and feelings of affinity, aversion, or indifference.⁵ A breakthrough in the development of studies on strategic culture was Snyder’s seminal research on Soviet nuclear strategy, which is presented through the prism of the socialisation process of a certain set of beliefs in the national security sphere.⁶ This laid the groundwork for the first generation of positivist studies on strategic culture, which encompassed research on strategic orientations based on nationality, geography, and military capabilities (material factors).⁷ Snyder’s contribution resonated among constructivists and gave rise to the next post-positivist generation of studies on the culture of national security.

This study adopts the interpretative approach to strategic culture (interchangeably: culture of national security) advocated by Johnston, who has been positioned as Gray’s symbolic opponent in the strategic culture academic debate. The culture of national security was gradually accredited the status of the dominant conceptual framework of social constructivism in the post-Cold War years, mainly due to Katzenstein’s seminal volume.⁸ As Onuf points out in his review, Katzenstein has broadened the traditional security concept, thus challenging “the normative

³ J. S. Lantis, *Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism*, in J. L. Johnson, K. M. Kartchner and L. A. Larsen (eds), *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction. Initiatives in Strategic Studies: Issues and Policies*. (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009), 33. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230618305_3

⁴ Lantis, *Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism*, 34.

⁵ See, among others: R. D. Putnam, *Political Culture: The Case of ‘Ideology’*, (1971) 65 (3) *American Political Science Review*, cit. in Lantis, *Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism*, 34, footnote 7.

⁶ J. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 1977), cit. in Lantis, *Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism*, 35.

⁷ C. S. Gray, *Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back*, (1999) (25) *Review of International Studies*, 49–69.

⁸ P. J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1996) 4.

underpinnings of security studies”⁹ Katzenstein has transformed the descriptive denotation of the concept as the protection of the existential material vital needs of the state, i.e., its survival, giving it a new normative meaning – the culture of strategic planning and policy-making – by analysing the security narrative and symbolic gestures. The culture of national security according to the hereby adopted definition also encompasses, apart from rudimentary ‘objective’ components such as national interests, two groups of subjective elements: first, evaluative standards in the form of norms and shared expectations for future proceedings, and, second, cognitive standards in the form of role models “that define what social actors exist in a system, how they operate, and how they relate to one another”.¹⁰ The culture of national security, or strategic culture¹¹ for short, could thus account for cases of limited rationality (simplifying reality through stereotyping), cases of pragmatic rationality (narrowing the alternatives by prioritising), or cases of adaptive rationality (referring to historical analogies or metaphors). Notwithstanding all the conceptual controversies, the culture of national security contributes, on the one hand, to contextualising the discourse and practices in the field, and, on the other hand, to sensitising the public to the evolution of security threats and measures.

III. RUSSIA’S EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL AGAINST UKRAINE’S INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

Russian strategic culture seems to have conserved the Soviet identity, and since Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, it has become even more retrograde. It relies on two seemingly antithetical, but in fact complementary tenets. The first tenet is related to a perceived and deep-seated vulnerability to external attack,¹² which necessitates control of the immediate geographical vicinity through the buildup of buffer zones, neutral regimes, and the pursuit of strategic depth “as the only way to guarantee its survival”.¹³ The obsession with preventing great-power rivals (Napoleonic France, Nazi

⁹ N. Onuf, *The New Culture of Security Studies*. Reviewed Work(s): *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* by Peter J. Katzenstein, (1998) 42 (1) *Mershon International Studies Review*, 132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/254450>

¹⁰ Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, 6.

¹¹ A. I. Johnston, Thinking about Strategic Culture, (1995) 19 (4) *International Security*, 32–64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.19.4.32>; J. S. Lantis, Strategic Culture and National Security Policy, (2002) 4 (3) *International Studies Review*, 87–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.t01-1-00266>

¹² E. Götz and J. Staun, Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives, (2022) 43 (3) *Contemporary Security Policy*, 484–485. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2082633>

¹³ F. Lukyanov, Putin’s foreign policy: The quest to restore Russia’s rightful place, (2016) 95 (3) *Foreign Affairs*, 30–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43946855> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

Germany or the imperialistic USA) establishing a foothold in Russia is reflected in the persistent othering of the so-called “collective West”.¹⁴ This is why all strategic documents (military doctrines and national security strategies), as well as the official political discourse,¹⁵ have identified NATO’s eastward ‘expansion’ and Western ‘hegemony’ as a potential danger (*opasnost*). Since 2013–2014 (the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine) and later in 2022 (Moldova’s EU application), even the claims for a European perspective on behalf of the ‘near abroad’ have been securitised, which means that they are represented as an existential threat that requires urgent measures in response (*ugroza*).

Drawing an analogy with the Brezhnev doctrine, which justified the sometimes bloody (as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968) suppression of the ‘counter-revolutionary’ movements within the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War, is simply inevitable. Moscow’s recent claims for formal guarantees that former Soviet republics will not be accepted into NATO have actually objectified the neighbouring Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as legitimate pawns in its grandiose sphere of influence. Despite some misgivings that this bunker mentality is being cultivated on purpose in order to mobilise Russian society (and ironically, male citizens have regularly been mobilised in a literal sense since the beginning of the war), the defensive-offensive mindset is so deeply imprinted in popular conscience that it has become its inherent feature. Therefore, rational interests in Russian strategic culture remain subsidiary compared to the primacy of anti-Western hostility, which may be described as a case of limited rationality. This discourse of othering is a specific self-isolation technique that very much resembles the social distance fixation of the Kremlin authoritarian leader. Moreover, Russian strategic culture is institutionalised within the exclusive circles around Putin (the *camarilla*, including the ‘nomenklatura’, the clergy and the ‘siloviki’), and the latter consistently reassert the external locus of control in the geopolitical misperceptions of the Russian people. The use of force is authorised top-down, without any democratic control, as in a repressive regime, through a single president’s or his proxy’s speech act.

Content analysis of the discourse¹⁶ strikingly reminds one of Hitler’s mentality with regard to self-determination by referendum (the Sudetenland plebiscite) and the

¹⁴ A. Sunami, Non-realistic elements in the Russia / “collective West” conflict, (2023) 57 (2) *Социолошки преглед/Sociological Review in Serbian*, 519–540. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1165138> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

¹⁵ Cf.: *Военная доктрина Российской Федерации / Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (2014), Art. 12 a), <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.); *Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации / National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (2021), Art. 35, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/media/files/file/l4wGRPqJvETSkUTYmhepzRochb1Jljqh.pdf> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

¹⁶ Cf.: A parallel glossary on the justification of an invasion as a self-defense – Georgia, 2008: ‘the Russian peacekeepers’, ‘a blitz-krieg’, ‘genocide’, ‘recognition by the Russian Federation of South

annexation of linguistically identical ethnicities (*der Anschluss*). The argumentation is focused on emotions stemming from WWII historical analogies such as the Great Patriotic War, and, therefore, adaptive rationality. There is an apparent dualism between the liberal and the conservative strands, but while the neoliberal critique is associated with the negative impact of Western decay, conservatism is recognised as the authentic root of Russia's 'sovereign democracy'. The problem with this sort of binary thinking was diagnosed nearly two decades ago by Putin's former key political adviser, Gleb Pavlovsky, as follows: "the enemy of Russia is a complex construct, and we have done very little to distinguish between friends and enemies".¹⁷ Such entrenched discourse on national security is dichotomous in nature because it harks back to the Cold War security dilemma of bipolar antagonism.

The second tenet of Russian strategic culture is the quest for great power status, which, with the advance of the war in Ukraine, seems more like a strenuous effort. This great power quest resonates with Putin's constant call for a multipolar world, which, for the time being, is definitely asymmetrical in favour of China and India. Still, Russia has failed to become "a great (but normal!) Eurasian power in all its aspects"¹⁸ or a bridge between the West and East, as the Russian former foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev (a co-author of the Budapest memorandum) optimistically prophesied in 1992. This failure is due to confrontational foreign policy ever since the Chechen war and the openly conflictual relations with Georgia and Ukraine. Since smaller states in 'the near abroad' equivocated in their acceptance of Russian hegemony, Russia has turned toward building the world-historical project of a Greater Eurasia that will bring together the emerging power of the non-Western international order.¹⁹ The conventional idea of great power status contradicts claims of privileged interests in historically significant territories. It is more in line with the Eurasian geopolitical doctrine about

Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence', President of Russia Official Site, *Statement by President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev* (The Kremlin, Moscow, August 26, 2008), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1222> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.). Ukraine, 2022: 'we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means', 'that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people', 'decision to recognise the independence of the Donbass people's republics', 'far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine', President of Russia Official Site, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin* (Kremlin, Moscow, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

¹⁷ G. Pavlovsky, Sudorogi Rozhdenia Natsii, (2004) *Russkiy Zhurnal*, 2004. Cit. in S. Prozorov, *Understanding Conflict between Russia and the EU. The Limits of Integration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 8.

¹⁸ A. Kozyrev, Russia: A Chance for Survival, (1992) 71 (2) *Foreign Affairs*, 1–16.

¹⁹ See S. Karaganov and D. Suslov, *Protecting peace, earth, and freedom of choice for all countries. New ideas for Russia's foreign policy* (Higher School of Economics Publishing, 2020). Cit. in A. Krickovic and I. Pellicciari, From "Greater Europe" to "Greater Eurasia": Status concerns and the evolution of Russia's approach to alignment and regional integration, (2021) 12 (1) *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 86–99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998808>

the heartland and Dugin's quasi-occultist paradigm about 'russkiy mir'.²⁰ Such symbolic speech acts have led the Kremlin camarilla, the hardcore constituency and the post-Soviet people as a whole, to self-radicalization. As Herd puts it, Russia has "a very well-developed sense of historical entitlement, centred on its role at the heart of an exceptional world civilization".²¹ Russian strategic culture can therefore be stereotyped as deeply historical because historical mysticism is the main driver of the state's existence.

The outlined strategic discourse has inflated Russia's national interests beyond its vital needs, which reminds us of a new (Eurasian) 'Lebensraum' in the context of an anti-pragmatic rationality. This is the reason why the facile targets of the aggressive actions are countries which, though situated entirely in Europe, through their annexation or submission could move Russia to NATO's eastern border in practical terms. The frozen conflicts in Transnistria and Abkhazia, as well as the political and economic dependence of Central Asian autocrats, keep Soviet reminiscence alive and kicking, and may ultimately lead to a return to Cold War-type brinkmanship in conceptual terms. To recap, for the last two decades, Russian strategic culture has encapsulated itself, both on the perceptual (the carefully cultivated sense of victimisation) and normative (the ethic of self-exclusion) level, which defines the defensive reasoning underlying its aggressive foreign policy.

What is astonishing in relation to Ukraine's counter-offensive against Putin's imperialistic aspirations is the country's tenacious resilience. Prior to 24 February 2022, Ukraine's culture of national security had vague conceptual contours and elusive policy aspirations. In the 1990s, Ukraine was still fence-sitting between adhering to its neutrality status, which was difficult to maintain as regards its geostrategic position, and engaging in a debate about a geostrategic U-turn involving becoming both a NATO and an EU member. The first option seemed the easier to accomplish because of the basic conditionality and the irrevocable stance of the pragmatist political élites around former president Kuchma who were wary of the possible erosion of their ties with Russia; at the same time, public opinion remained confused and ill-informed because the reformist élites sought to emulate the Baltic states' Euro-Atlantic reorientation, aside from the regional disparities.²² Such a balancing exercise along the

²⁰ A. G. Dugin, Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities: Interviewed by M.A. Barannik, (2022) 22 (1) *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 142–152. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2022-22-1-142-152>. Putin alludes to "Russia and Ukraine, [...] the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space" in his quasi-historical article published preceding the aggression. V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (President of Russia, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

²¹ G. P. Herd, *Understanding Russian Strategic Behaviour. Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (Routledge, Oxon and NY, 2022) 36.

²² T. Kuzio, Ukraine and NATO: The evolving strategic partnership, (1998) 21 (2) *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399808437715>

continuum of the political spectrum was hard to manage, but there was still a self-awareness of the need to maintain distance from the Russian sphere of influence because of the risk of direct control that was elevated at the time.

The initial geopolitical optimism in Ukraine's strategic documents of the early 1990s involved an entirely defensive direction for its security policy, and a non-nuclear status through the relinquishment of its nuclear arsenal in 1991 (wrongly perceived to be compensated by its inclusion into an all-European security system, OSCE, with Russia as the main veto player). These collective security guarantees (echoing the futile mutual guarantees of the 1925 Locarno Pact) were expected to become a substitute for nuclear deterrence, but some 30 years later, they proved to have hamstrung the country when confronted with a game of chicken involving the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons. Very much similar was Ukraine's post-2014 disenchantment with the anticipated demilitarisation of the Black Sea and its conversion into a nuclear-free zone.²³ Since the coloured revolutions, Ukrainian strategic culture has become more democratically oriented due to its commitment to the priority of sustaining human rights and freedoms, as well as more open-minded in relation to Euro-Atlantic integration. The territorial dispute in the Kerch Strait in 2004 urged Kyiv to become apprehensive of Moscow's challenges to its sovereignty, and to take practical steps in its security strategy that led to the prohibition of military bases in the Black Sea.

The year 2005 saw President Yuschenko's resolution to reevaluate Ukraine's status as a no-man's land by reinvigorating dialogue with NATO. However, constant internal turmoil aborted any coherent dialogue on security matters between the presidential and the governmental branch of power, which dissuaded some influential NATO members from extending their invitations after the announcement of the Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. An external shock that presumably further swayed the Euro-Atlantic partners was Russia's invasion of Georgia several months later; the situation further deteriorated with Yanukovych's election and the adoption of new strategic security documents in 2012, which pointed at specific threats emerging from Russia's foreign policy but considered an escalation into a regional war improbable.

However, the radical transformation of the perception of threats happened *ipso facto* after the flagrant violation of international law by Russia after the Crimea annexation and its intervention through hybrid operations in Donbass from 2014. President Petro Poroshenko enacted a new security strategy in 2015, which delineated Ukraine's existential needs for the next ten years – the protection of territorial integrity, the maintenance of inter-confessional dialogue and respect for human rights, as well as the pursuit of European prospects. The normative framework helps identify the salient

²³ H. Maksak, The security perception and security policy of Ukraine, 1991–2018, (2020) *Defense & Security Analysis*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2020.1831232>

institutional shortcomings in the security sector, such as the inadequacy of the rule of law and the omnipotence of corruption, the shortage of military professionalism and inefficient democratic control, structural disparities, energy dependence, and cyber-vulnerabilities.²⁴ A second and more fundamental turning point came after Russia's large-scale invasion in February 2022, which prompted Ukraine to implement the reforms in the White Book on the Defence Policy of Ukraine²⁵ on the battlefield, while defending its own sovereignty.

This is how an external attack on the country's national security consolidated Ukraine's identity through the pooling of resources from EU and NATO partners, and by channelling nationalistic motivation under the charismatic leadership of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the context of pragmatic rationality. In comparison to Russia's strategic culture, Ukraine has crystallised under the external tangible pressure of an existential threat and has further developed regarding the need to safeguard its intrinsic characteristics of humanism and civilised coexistence, which are the legitimate elements of the international order. Besides this, Ukraine's radically transformed strategic culture has also reshaped the regional security structure.

IV. OLD DIVERGENCE OR NEW CONVERGENCE WITHIN THE CULTURE OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE EURO-ATLANTIC REGION?

Differentiation is what defines, in both essential and structural terms, any regional community, especially those that are evolutionarily aimed at achieving common goals and sharing values. Both the European Union and NATO fall under the rubric of pluralist regional communities because sensitive and even parochial issues often lead to the unbundling of the community of members when individual states seek to make sovereign decisions (e.g. Turkey's decision not to support the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003). On a community level, the European Union has toughened its discourse from soft through civilian to hard power: it had an open outlook on the international security environment in its European Security Strategy of 2003 and pursued the objective of an effective multilateralism; in 2016, the European Union Global Strategy tracked several ruptures in the 'fragile' security environment; the most recent Strategic

²⁴ O. Lytvynenko, P. Fluri and V. Badrack, *The Security Sector Legislation of Ukraine* (Third Edition, Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, Kyiv, 2017), https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Security%20Sector%20Legislation%20Ukraine%202017_eng.pdf (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

²⁵ *The White Book 2021. Defence Policy of Ukraine* (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Kyiv, 2022), https://www.mil.gov.ua/content/files/whitebook/WhiteBook_2021_Defens_policy_of_Ukraine.pdf (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

Compass for Security and Defence of 2022 depicts a murky world of ‘conflicts, military build-ups and aggressions’ where ‘interdependence is increasingly conflictual’ and war has returned to Europe.²⁶ NATO security concepts have also shifted their moving target since 1991 when the Alliance adopted a broader approach in terms of membership and issue-areas; the 2010 Strategic Concept iterated a cooperative security concept with an emphasis on a strategic partnership with Russia and deepened the issue areas with crisis management and risk governance; the latest 2022 Strategic Concept has narrowed the alliance to a traditional defensive union that tackles direct counterparts such as Russia and China and asymmetrical challenges in both military and non-military fields.²⁷ The differentiation within the Euro-Atlantic community is along the dividing line between Atlanticists and Europeanists.²⁸ The current study does not focus on the two regional communities as a whole, but rather on the dynamics among their members; all in all, an overlapping pattern of behaviour among NATO states who are predominantly EU members may be registered.

Atlanticism shapes decisions about resource allocation through three mechanisms of strategic culture, as Berger and Malesky see them: a shared normative understanding of a Western-led international order; a belief in the importance of the United States in European security (as a counter-weight to Trump’s Eurosceptic rhetoric); and a preference for NATO as a platform for coordinating force planning and operational deployment. The quantitative metrics are grounded in so-called burden sharing or the assessment of the efficiency of collective action; the latter is based on the measurement of national military expenditure compared to that of the alliance (the minimum proportion required being 2%) and includes equipment, operating and maintenance, personnel, and infrastructure.²⁹ The variations in this economic data compared to aggregate expenditure can give some insights into qualitative criteria, such as boosted solidarity within the regional community.

Ever since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Atlantic trend in the strategic culture of most states has become the predominant one, whereas the European

²⁶ *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World* (2003), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.); *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe* (2006), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf (last accessed: 31.12.2024.); *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (2022), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

²⁷ *Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of NATO*, Adopted in Lisbon, 19–20 November 2010, <https://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.); *2022 Strategic Concept*, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

²⁸ This conceptual distinction is applied to the analysis of EU agency in the security area: O. Costa and E. Barbé, A moving target. EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, (2023) 45 (3) *Journal of European Integration*, 431–446. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183394>

²⁹ J. Becker and E. Malesky, The Continent or the “Grand Large”? Strategic Culture and Operational Burden-Sharing in NATO, (2017) 61 *International Studies Quarterly*, 163–180.

trend has been an auxiliary characteristic of the non-military aspects of security. The European pursuit of strategic autonomy has proved to be no longer viable because this might damage transatlantic relations by establishing a cleavage between the European Union and the US³⁰ and thus entitle external adversaries to disrupt the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole. Moreover, European strategic autonomy suffers from susceptibility in terms of deficient resources and logistics that are not able to compensate for the military pre-eminence of the aggressor.

Looking for more operability to overcome their immediate exposure to the greater Eurasia strategy, the Baltic and the Nordic subregional groups, together with Poland, have made consistent efforts to militarily strengthen the northeastern flank by engaging NATO's capability to deter Russia. Contrary to the popular belief about alliances, a critical external event such as the invasion of Ukraine has not merely increased the coherence of interests but transformed the community's identity; member states have not rushed to deploy commonplace strategies such as balancing and jumping on the bandwagon, but have rather focused on leadership and assertiveness.

The Central European subgroup is perceived to be under the auspices of Germany, and the latter has been undergoing a slow but steady evolution in its national strategic culture in four areas. First, since the late 1990s, in the wake of the Kosovo crisis, Berlin has forsaken the rudimentary anti-militarism imposed by the denazification conditionality the country assumed after 1945. Former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer changed the formula from 'never again war' to 'never again Auschwitz' in order to morally justify Germany's participation in wars, framed as aligned with its *Zivilmacht* strategy, undertaken for humanitarian reasons.³¹ Second, the German culture of national security counts on multilateral decision-making and coalition-building, whereas unilateral measures, such as economic stimuli or sanctions, may question its legitimacy. This accounts for Germany's joint venture with France in relation to the Eurocentric approach in NATO; both countries accordingly insist on the EU's strategic autonomy, especially after the increased security liability after Brexit. Third, German strategic culture has a bedrock in the disavowal of the early 20th century's revanchist policy, which leads it into confrontation with the Kremlin's reactionary imperialistic policy on the basis of principles. During Merkel's chancellorship, relations with Putin were conducted in line with the stick and carrot logic, with the sanctions regime being the stick, and bargaining on energy megaprojects the carrot. After 24 February 2022, Olaf Scholz was faced with assuming the leadership role while at the same time taking into consideration small states' mistrust of Russia's

³⁰ G. Česnakas and J. Juozaitis (eds), *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security. In the Shadow of Power* (Routledge, London and New York, 2023) 1–2.

³¹ P. Daehnhardt, German Foreign Policy, the Ukraine Crisis and the Euro-Atlantic Order: Assessing the Dynamics of Change, (2018) *German Politics*, 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1448386>

go-getting stance. The initial response to Russia's aggression was defined as feet-dragging instead of taking control by giving support to Ukraine and exerting resistance against Russia. Still, the quick ripening in the perception of the scope of the threat to the survival of the international order has inverted several aspects of German strategic culture through the so-called *Zeitenwende*. For example, Germany withheld permission for opening Nord Stream 2 and thus revised its attitudes not only to its own geo-economic interests, but also to its reconciliatory identity via *Wandel durch Handel*. The unprecedented multi-billion rearmament of the *Bundeswehr* and the military assistance to Ukraine, hand in hand with collaboration with Poland within the tank coalition, has also shaken the stereotypical misperception of the Bundesrepublik as wedded to an anti-militaristic strategic culture. Germany has taken the informal leading role in this concerted Eurocentrism, as France, as a nuclear power, has always had more complicated relations with the US within NATO.

The Atlanticist informal leader within the Central European subgroup is Poland,³² which maintains a self-conscious strategic interest in the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. An advocate for NATO primacy in the security area, Poland is more sceptical regarding the homogeneity and operability of EU strategic autonomy since it recognises its restrictions as juxtaposed with those of the evolving great powers. The war in Ukraine has prompted Poland to intertwine strategic autonomy with energy independence and diversification, and to champion the modernisation of military potential. Poland is a staunch supporter of the self-help policy, especially in view of the 'Russian syndrome', which alludes to the painful historical memory of the three partitions of the Polish state.³³ Poland binds its security culture to 'national identity, rooted in [its] Christian heritage and universal values',³⁴ which emphasises the voluntarist component of its otherwise deterministic security strategy.

The Baltic subregional group, apart from being on the same Atlanticist page as Poland, reframes the significant topic of small borderland states' survival in the context of aggression from a neighbouring center of power. Long before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (actually, since the collapse of the USSR), the main vulnerability of these states has been the risk of being manipulated via the Kremlin's hybrid narrative and activities – this refers as much to the socioeconomic grievances in Lithuania as the ethnic and linguistic segmentations in Estonia and Latvia. This vulnerability explains why all Baltic republics are predominantly concentrated on the internal locus of control

³² I. Gajauskaitė, Poland's Resilient Atlanticism, in G. Česnakas and J. Juozaitis (eds), *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security. In the Shadow of Power* (Routledge, 2022) 63–80.

³³ S. Zarobny, Changes in Polish Strategic Culture in the Context of Challenges and Threats of the 21st Century, (2020) (34) *Security Dimensions. International and National Studies*, 122–144. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=981397> (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

³⁴ *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland* (Warsaw, 2020), https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

through the buildup of societal security rather than seeking external shelter.³⁵ Estonia is a textbook example of how a nation can transform a drive for survival into the core of its national strategic culture, based on sovereignty. Such an interpretation of the strategic identity with respect to self-interest presents the state with a certain quandary when competencies are to be delegated to supranational institutions, e.g., the EU. The same ambivalence can be observed with Latvia – the country is quite reticent to support a monolithic European identity regarding common security policy because it perceives this as a manifestation of the German-French geostrategic vision. Lithuania is a peculiar case owing to its traditional historical ties with Poland and Ukraine, which are mirrored in the identity of its strategic culture. This proximity has refocused Lithuania's efforts towards the Eastern flank, which has been ostensibly neglected in the last few years and has grown closer to transatlantic partners. The Polish-Lithuanian link has gained strong traction due to the external threat, which has helped both states overcome negative sentiments based on national identity. At the same time, the three Baltic republics take into consideration the strategic utility of a common European policy against hybrid (non-military) threats.

The Nordic subregional group is a case in point regarding the role of neutrality as a stable attitude in strategic decisions about involvement in conflicts and military-political alliances. The non-alignment strategic culture has three variants. First, Denmark enjoys partial neutrality, being a NATO member state with a defensive identity, but it still remains neutral in terms of global commitments in accordance with its niche diplomacy of mediation and reconciliation (very much like Norway). Moreover, Denmark has taken advantage of the opt-out clause related to the European security and defence policy; however, following the 2022 referendum, Danish citizens relinquished this clause in the face of the most prominent threat to the European continent since the end of the Second World War. Denmark, together with Sweden, preserves its specific perspective on EU strategic autonomy – for example, its unanimity of decision-making makes it more of a European pillar in NATO. Second, Finland, relying on its principle of self-determination in the security sphere since Soviet times, successfully balanced its neutrality between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Its accession to NATO in 2023 turned this long-standing logic upside down. Third, Sweden maintained its neutrality by remaining on the bandwagon with the Western bloc prior to 1989.³⁶ After the onset of Russia's invasion, Sweden bid for fully

³⁵ M. Šešelgytė and N. Bladaitė, How to Defend Society? Baltic Responses to Hybrid Threats, in A.-M. Brady and B. Thorhallsson (eds), *Small States and the New Security Environment* (Springer, 2021) 84–85.

³⁶ D. Howlett and J. Glenn, Epilogue: Nordic Strategic Culture, (2005) 40 (1) *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association*, 133–134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836705049737>

fledged NATO membership but was delayed by Hungary and Turkey due to their oscillating position between the two parties in the conflict.

Not only Hungary, but also Slovakia and Bulgaria, represent the ambiguities in European strategic culture. The narrative of the populist leaders is incongruous with the solidarity norm in the region. For Slovakia, this ambivalence can be attributed to the reshuffle of the domestic context, which brought the far-right nationalist Fico, with his strong anti-Western rhetoric, back to power in 2023. In Bulgaria, the conservative president Radev, with his outright pro-Russian sentiments, has been fiddling with the idea of neutrality, just like Orbán, and has persistently stated that Ukrainians should have ‘not another bullet’, just like Fico. The Bulgarian president and his two caretaker governments have professed a peace-making stance which echoes Putin’s reasoning; for example, his criticism of the National Assembly’s decision about the provision of additional military aid to Ukraine later in 2022 was based on the rhetoric of the so called ‘warmongers’, and thus, absurdly, passes the buck for the aggression to the assaulted country. Bulgaria’s strategic culture does not stem from a solidified national identity since the political élites and societal actors have not reached a consensus on its nearly totemic Soviet past. Bulgaria’s strategic culture has normative foundations in a few basic documents, such as the National Security Strategy³⁷; however, the latter requires an update in terms of the clearer restructuring of threats and more precise strategic prioritisation of committed membership in both the EU and NATO, without free-riding.

V. CONCLUSION

The war in Ukraine has reconstructed nearly all European states’ strategic cultures. It has demonstrated the preeminence of subjective factors in times of crisis. The limits to rationality can be deduced in three areas: first, the black-and-white generalisations in several populist leaders’ speech acts and gestures; second, the pragmatic accelerated shifts in the Nordic states’ security priorities; and third, the stability of adaptive rationality in historical stereotyping in Russia and the Baltic states alike. Probing the three hypotheses has verified them only partially. First, systemic shocks do exert pressure, but regimes of limited rationality still attribute everything to the structure of the system through the psychological mechanism of the external locus of control. Next, great powers seem to remain stable in the face of revolutionary changes in strategic culture compared to vulnerable small states. However, this correlation is heavily dependent on the openness of the domestic environment, which may allow for more

³⁷ *An Updated version of the National Security Strategy of Republic of Bulgaria* (2018), https://parliament.bg/bills/44/702-00-48_aktualizirana_Strategiya_NSRB_s_PR_za_pri mane.PDF (last accessed: 31.12.2024.).

accelerated shifts through public discourse. Last but not least, transitions in strategic culture within regional security communities happen in a differentiated way, according to new subgroup-based lines of division (e.g. the Visegrád Four no longer functions in the same way), but these transitions are conditioned more by opportunism than sudden metamorphoses in identity.

To sum up, a counterfactual scenario of a perceived lack of a consolidated response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine would not only have weakened the Euro-Atlantic community strategically but also have delegitimised it through the prism of the integrity of its values. The factual course of events is unavoidable, and unfortunately, it forces the pluralist security community to return to basics, i.e., the security dilemma, where the accumulation of more and more power entrenches states in a vicious circle of insecurity. All in all, the principal dilemma of the affected countries is whether to be progressive by attempting to uphold the normative and institutional framework of the legitimate international order or to move counter-clockwise towards some conservative grand design coherent with a deeply polarised world of zero-sum games.