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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama

Edited by
Jussi P. Laine
Bo Petersson

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RESILIENCE AS DETERRENCE: TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY PANORAMA

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Preface

The present volume contains a selection of revised and peer-reviewed proceedings articles from the NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme Advanced Research Workshop (ARW) entitled "Resilience as a Deterrence Strategy: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama," held in Joensuu, Finland, from October 1–3, 2024. The workshop was organised under NATO SPS Programme Grant G6206 and brought together over 130 international participants, including 47 speakers and 84 other participants from NATO and partner countries.

The timing of this workshop could not have been more critical. As Europe faces unprecedented security challenges stemming from Russia's aggressive behaviour and hybrid warfare tactics, there is an urgent need to develop comprehensive approaches to resilience and deterrence that extend beyond traditional military perspectives. This workshop addressed that need by focusing on the human and social dimensions of security, examining how resilience can serve as an effective deterrence strategy in our interconnected world.

The three-day event facilitated intensive discussions among leading experts from diverse fields, including political science, international relations, border studies, security studies, and policy analysis. The interdisciplinary nature of the workshop proved instrumental in generating new insights and fostering innovative approaches to contemporary security challenges. Participants engaged in roundtable discussions, interactive brainstorming sessions, and panel presentations that explored various aspects of the evolving security landscape in Europe and beyond.

The decision to organise this workshop in Joensuu, located in eastern Finland adjacent to the border with the Russian Federation, was particularly significant and symbolic. It is here, where the security challenges of the current era appear and materialise in their various forms with concrete, real-life consequences. As a new NATO Member State, Finland provides an appropriate and applicable laboratory to study and seek to enhance awareness of the severe security developments that Russia's increasingly assertive actions have sparked.

Finland's unique position as NATO's newest member, having joined the Alliance on April 4, 2023, after overturning its longstanding policy of military nonalignment, offers valuable insights into the contemporary security environment. The swift decision to apply for NATO membership on May 17, 2022, was a concrete manifestation of how fundamentally the security and operating environment has changed. The workshop's location underscored the reality that security challenges are not abstract concepts but lived experiences for communities along Europe's eastern borders.

The workshop addressed the multiplicity of security challenges posed by Russia in both conventional and hybrid realms, recognising that Russia employs a wide spectrum of hybrid threat tools ranging from culture and diplomacy to intelligence, information operations, instrumentalisation of migration, strategic coercion, and military action. This constantly expanding framework serves Russia's wider strategic goal of gaining global superpower status while legitimising its actions as necessary countermeasures to Western policies. Through high-level, intensive discussions, the workshop enhanced understanding of these evolving security dynamics.

The workshop placed particular emphasis on the human and social dimensions of security in relation to NATO's strategic objectives, aiming to deepen understanding of how information, perception, and communication shape emerging security challenges. It recognised that crises impact not only physical safety but also citizens' sense of identity and stability, highlighting the importance of linking ontological and physical aspects of security. By promoting a more nuanced view of geopolitical risk rooted in socially mediated experiences and narratives, the workshop advanced a holistic and multi-layered approach to security that captures current developments while enhancing early warning, preparedness, and resilience.

The chapters in this volume reflect the high-quality research and practical insights presented during the workshop. They cover a broad spectrum of topics, from Russia's shifting geo-strategic imaginaries and hybrid warfare tactics to the role of borders in building resilience, the human aspects of security, and NATO's collective identity in the post-invasion era. The diversity of perspectives, including academic research, policy analysis, and practical experience from border security professionals, provides a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities facing the international security community.

We extend our gratitude to the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme for their generous funding and support, which made this workshop possible. We are particularly grateful to the University of Eastern Finland and the City of Joensuu for their outstanding hosting and logistical assistance, as well as to the Joensuu University Foundation for their valued financial contribution. We acknowledge the valuable contributions of all participants, whose active engagement and expertise enriched the discussions and outcomes of this workshop. We hope that the insights and recommendations presented in this volume will contribute to more effective policy-making and enhanced security cooperation among NATO and partner countries.

The Editors

About the Conference

Conference Details

Title: Resilience as a Deterrence Strategy: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
Type: NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme Advanced Research Workshop (ARW)
Grant Number: G6206
Location: Joensuu, Finland
Dates: October 1–3, 2024
Participants: 131 total (47 speakers + 84 other participants)

Conference Organisation

- **Professor Jussi P. Laine** (Chair, Co-director), Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, Finland
- **Professor Bo Petersson** (Co-director), Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö University, Sweden
- **Dr. Alicja Fajfer** (Workshop facilitator), Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Keynote Speakers

- **Professor Maria Mälksoo**, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
- **Professor Mark Bassin**, Södertörn University, Sweden
- **Dr. Hanna Smith**, Senior Strategic Advisor to the OSCE Secretary General

Sponsors and Funding

- **Primary Sponsor:** NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme, Innovation, Hybrid and Cyber Division
- **Co-financing:** University of Eastern Finland, City of Joensuu, Joensuu University Foundation

Content Overview and Academic Standards

This Advanced Research Workshop brought together leading scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to address some of the most pressing contemporary security challenges through an interdisciplinary lens. Central to the discussions was the complex and evolving relationship between resilience and deterrence strategies, particularly in light of current geopolitical tensions and hybrid threat environments. The workshop combined rigorous academic inquiry with a strong commitment to practical policy relevance, ensuring that theoretical insights were grounded in real-world application. The interactive workshop format also provided opportunities for peer validation and

constructive feedback during the presentations, contributing to the refinement of the final written contributions. The workshop's thematic scope covered:

- Hybrid warfare and unconventional security threats
- Border security and cross-border dynamics
- Human and social dimensions of security
- NATO's evolving strategic landscape
- Regional security perspectives from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Arctic
- Resilience-building in borderland communities

Participant Distribution

- **NATO Countries**: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, UK, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Canada, USA, Türkiye
- **Partner Countries**: Ukraine, Moldova, Japan, Morocco

Institutional Diversity:

- Academic institutions: 75%
- Government agencies and policy institutes: 15%
- Private sector and civil society: 10%

Stakeholder Categories:

- University researchers
- Government officials and policy advisors
- Border security professionals
- Civil society organization representatives
- Graduate students and early-career researchers

Publication Standards

This volume comprises a selection of peer-reviewed papers presented during the workshop, chosen for their scholarly merit and relevance to the thematic objectives. It adheres to NATO Science for Peace and Security Series standards and guidelines. All contributions reflect the high-quality discussions and research presented during the workshop, maintaining academic integrity while addressing practical policy implications. All chapters in this volume have undergone peer review. These proceedings contribute to the NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - E: Human and Societal Dynamics, supporting NATO's strategic objectives through evidence-based research and international cooperation.

Contents

Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
J.P. Laine and B. Petersson (Eds.)

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Resilience as Adaptive Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Uncertainty

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Abstract. This volume examines the strategic transformation of NATO's borderland regions from perceived vulnerabilities to recognised strategic assets within the Alliance's collective defence architecture. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European security landscape has undergone profound changes, exposing limitations of traditional deterrence models and necessitating NATO's recalibration toward greater emphasis on civil preparedness and resilience alongside conventional military strength. Rather than viewing borderlands as vulnerable peripheries requiring protection, this work demonstrates how regions sharing direct frontiers with Russia have emerged as critical centres of security innovation whose proximity to threat vectors grants them unique experiential knowledge and adaptive capabilities essential for broader Alliance security. Borderland communities have developed sophisticated approaches to managing hybrid threats through whole-of-society defence models that integrate civilian and military efforts while maintaining democratic governance under pressure. Their lived experience with Russian aggression has produced practical knowledge about deterrence implementation, early warning systems, and cross-domain threat management that complements theoretical strategic planning with operational reality. The volume argues that resilience should be conceptualised not merely as recovery from disruption but as transformative capacity enabling systems to reorganise, innovate, and evolve in response to changing threat environments, positioning these borderlands as force multipliers within NATO's deterrence framework.

Keywords. Borderland resilience, security, NATO, hybrid threats, adaptive deterrence

1. Introduction

The European security landscape has undergone a profound transformation since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fundamentally altering our understanding of borderland regions and their strategic significance within NATO's collective defence architecture. This watershed moment has not only marked the return of high-intensity warfare to the European continent but has also exposed the limitations of traditional deterrence models that privileged static threat assessments and conventional military responses. In response, NATO is recalibrating its approach,

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placing greater emphasis on civil preparedness and resilience alongside traditional military strength.

In this evolving security environment, NATO's borderland regions, particularly those sharing direct frontiers with Russia, have emerged from the periphery of strategic thinking to occupy a central position in the Alliance's deterrence strategy. The present volume rests upon the fundamental premise that well-prepared and resilient borderlands – both as entire states bordering Russia and as specific border regions within these states – constitute strategic assets rather than liabilities within NATO's deterrence architecture. However, the challenge lies in translating this recognition into coherent institutional frameworks.

Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression has yielded invaluable strategic insights that are reshaping NATO's approach to borderland resilience and collective defence. Ukraine's rapid adaptation of civilian infrastructure for military purposes, its innovative integration of commercial technologies into defence systems, and its development of decentralised command structures under extreme pressure have demonstrated new paradigms for whole-of-society defence that NATO members are actively studying and incorporating into their own preparedness frameworks. The Ukrainian experience has particularly illuminated the critical importance of maintaining democratic governance and transparent communication during wartime, providing NATO with practical models for preserving institutional continuity while mobilising national resources for defence.

Moreover, Ukraine's successful coordination with Western allies in rapidly integrating diverse military systems and maintaining interoperability under combat conditions has offered concrete lessons for NATO's standardisation protocols and crisis response mechanisms. These innovations in adaptive defence, ranging from drone warfare tactics to cyber-resilience strategies, represent a living laboratory of borderland defence that is informing NATO's evolving strategic concepts and operational doctrines.

Ukraine's innovations in borderland defence have demonstrated that these regions are not merely passive frontiers but dynamic strategic assets. Borderlands are essential for NATO's deterrence strategy as they represent the most immediate line of defence against Russian aggression. Their role involves a sophisticated blend of military readiness, political unity, and societal resilience, ensuring that any hostile action against them is met with robust, collective, and multifaceted responses. This strategic recalibration represents more than a tactical adjustment; it embodies a fundamental reconceptualisation of how space, power, and security intersect in the contemporary international system.

The institutional complexity of implementing comprehensive civil preparedness across NATO's borderlands reflects deeper structural challenges within the Alliance. Unlike military capabilities that are benchmarked through NATO and managed by defence ministries, civil preparedness across NATO remains fragmented, nationally defined, and shaped by history, geography, threat perception, political systems, and economic constraints. With different countries handling these responsibilities through varied institutional structures and diverging national priorities, no multilateral body exists to align these efforts, creating risks of creative accounting and opportunistic prioritisation, and hampering transnational cooperation.

Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia has, albeit for long not recognised as such by Western academic experts and political practitioners alike [1], engaged in a systematic pattern of territorial revisionism and strategic coercion, combining conventional force with extensive hybrid operations to destabilise the wider

NATO neighbourhood, realign the European security order and challenge the liberal rules-based order in its favour. Through a combination of conventional military action and extensive hybrid operations, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, the instrumentalisation of migration, and economic pressure, Russia has actively destabilised the wider NATO neighbourhood, compelling the Alliance to reassess its strategic posture and priorities.

This reassessment has culminated in significant adaptations of NATO's strategic concept, reaffirming the Alliance's unity while explicitly identifying Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" to it [2]. This designation is not merely rhetorical; it signals a doctrinal and operational shift that prioritises resilience as a critical component of deterrence. Since the 2014 Wales Summit, resilience has become part of NATO's strategic vocabulary, with the 2016 Warsaw Summit adopting the Commitment to Enhance Resilience, defining it as a national responsibility guided by shared minimum standards covering continuity of government, essential services, critical infrastructure protection, and civil support for military forces.

Unlike static or reactive defence strategies, resilience offers a dynamic framework that prioritises societal preparedness, adaptability, and cohesion as essential components of comprehensive security. It extends beyond physical infrastructure or military readiness to encompass the socio-political and psychological capacities of member states to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to diverse shocks, whether kinetic, cyber, or cognitive in nature. Crucially, resilience should be conceptualised not merely as the ability to recover and bounce back as quickly as possible after a disturbance, but rather as the ability to adapt, acquire new capabilities, and emerge stronger from adversity. Resilience is not about securing against danger, pre-emption, or precaution, but about adaptive risk management [3, 4].

The evolution of NATO's approach to resilience reflects a return to principles established in the Alliance's founding treaty. As set out in Article 3, the rationale behind collective resilience is firmly established, with civil preparedness serving not only as a national responsibility but as a strategic function central to NATO's core mandate. In NATO's early decades, civil preparedness, formerly known as civilian emergency planning, was a central pillar of the Alliance, with the 1950s Senior Civil Emergency Planning Committee establishing functional planning bodies across transport, energy, communications and food systems [5].

Resilience has emerged as a central theme in contemporary European security, marking a strategic shift beyond traditional defence paradigms. For NATO, it is no longer a peripheral concern but a core principle that must inform all levels of security planning. Often, and rightly so, critiqued for its conceptual vagueness and booming multi-purpose use in everyday discourse, resilience should in our view be understood through its operational value: the capacity of societies to absorb and recover from shocks while maintaining political stability and institutional functions.

Efforts to operationalise resilience within NATO are hindered by the lack of a unified framework among member states. The resilience planning and review cycle, introduced after the 2021 Brussels Summit and formalised at the 2022 Madrid Summit, has been integrated into the NATO Defence Planning Process, renewing attention to civil preparedness. However, these initiatives remain secondary to the dominance of traditional military logic. During the Second World War and the Cold War, many NATO members developed total defence systems, but these diverged significantly after 1990. Western European countries largely dismantled or repurposed these structures, focusing on civil protection for non-military crises. Finland and Sweden adapted their total

defence models into broader societal resilience strategies, while countries such as Germany, Italy, and Spain either dismantled or never established comprehensive civilian defence systems. This historical divergence continues to complicate NATO's efforts to build collective resilience.

Resilience now defines NATO's identity as a security community, much as deterrence did during the Cold War – and continue to do in the face of Russian aggression and hostility toward the "collective West" [6]. After the Cold War, NATO's focus shifted from existential survival to resilience and adaptation. This includes NATO's political cohesion, democratic values, credibility, and institutional strength [6]. The first Trump presidency fundamentally challenged these foundational assumptions, creating internal disruption that tested alliance cohesion through transactional approaches to burden-sharing and questions about American commitment. Trump's return to office in 2025 has reactivated these tensions, forcing NATO to navigate both external threats and internal contradictions simultaneously. The ultimate ramifications of these institutional fissures for NATO's strategic evolution remain, as of summer 2025, fundamentally uncertain. This context renders imperative a systematic examination of both the enabling conditions that sustain organisational resilience and the destabilising forces that threaten to erode it – especially considering resilience's emergence as the *sine qua non* of alliance legitimacy and effectiveness in an epoch of sustained strategic uncertainty.

2. Adaptive Resilience in Borderlands: Continuity Amid Change

Reflecting the vicissitudes of prevailing geopolitical contexts, borderlands are in a constant state of change and becoming [3]. This perpetual dynamism distinguishes borderland regions from more stable interior territories, as they must continuously adapt to shifting political alignments, economic relationships, and security dynamics that emanate from across their borders. The traditional conception of borderlands as static defensive perimeters has given way to a more multifaceted understanding of these regions as dynamic spaces where multiple forms of interaction, competition, and cooperation unfold simultaneously across various domains of power. Borderlands have become accustomed to managing a plurality of disruptions to continuity, developing institutional reflexes and societal mechanisms that enable them to maintain essential functions while navigating uncertainty [7]. This reality stems from their inherent position as zones of contact between different political systems, economic structures, and cultural frameworks. As a result, border communities must constantly reassess their geographical imagination following various historical developments and policy changes in the wider international context that affect them directly and often adversely.

The populations residing in these regions often develop down-to-earth strategies to cope with changing political boundaries, shifting alliance structures, and evolving threat perceptions that may seem foreign to populations in more central locations. Their geographical imagination is not merely academic but translates into practical knowledge about managing cross-border relationships, understanding adversarial intentions, and maintaining social cohesion under external pressure. The adaptive capacity of borderland populations represents a form of lived resilience that emerges from generations of experience managing uncertainty and ambiguity. Border communities tend to be resilient essentially in terms of adaptation as a form of continuity rather than change [3].

Rather than seeking to return to a previous state following disruption, borderland communities have learned, perhaps more tangibly than the respective societies as a

whole, to maintain their essential functions and collective identities while continuously adjusting to new circumstances and challenges. This adaptive continuity becomes a strategic asset when confronting hybrid threats that seek to exploit social divisions, political vulnerabilities, and institutional weaknesses [7]. The experiential knowledge embedded in borderland societies provides practical insights into threat recognition, response coordination, and resilience maintenance that cannot be replicated through theoretical analysis or simulated exercises alone. This repository of practical knowledge offers valuable lessons for policymaking at both state and alliance levels, translating lived experience into strategic guidance for broader NATO implementation.

The strategic importance of borderland resilience extends beyond traditional security paradigms to encompass a comprehensive understanding of how societies maintain their essential functions and collective identity under persistent external pressure [8]. Resilience, in this context, is not a peripheral concern or aspirational concept. It constitutes an adaptive component of societal defence – one oriented toward managing uncertainty, mitigating complex threats, and sustaining alliance cohesion in the face of strategic disruption.

Defined in NATO doctrine as "the capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions, and ensure the continuity of the Alliance's activities" [2], resilience foregrounds societal preparedness, adaptability, and cohesion as integral to the broader security equation. It encompasses not only the robustness of infrastructure or the readiness of armed forces, but also the psychological and political resilience of democratic societies to withstand coercion and manipulation. Despite its growing strategic importance, resilience remains difficult to operationalise. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO adopted shared resilience objectives and introduced a classified dashboard to monitor preparedness using national reports, intelligence, and open-source data. However, the dashboard lacks clear benchmarks and measurable targets to assess allied performance.

In borderland contexts in particular, this definition must be expanded to account for the continuous nature of the threats faced and the need for sustained adaptation rather than periodic recovery. Borderland resilience involves the development of institutional mechanisms, social practices, and cognitive frameworks that enable sustained operation under conditions of persistent uncertainty and occasional crisis [8]. The multidimensional nature of borderland resilience encompasses political cohesion, institutional endurance, economic adaptability, social solidarity, and psychological robustness.

Borderland regions are often where threats materialise first and most acutely. Their communities are adept at navigating a multiplicity of disruptions and have developed forms of everyday resilience that can inform wider policy frameworks. These areas offer valuable empirical laboratories for examining the intersection of security challenges and lived experience and how resilience can be cultivated not through top-down directives but through bottom-up initiatives embedded in local contexts. Harnessing this borderland expertise is essential for developing early-warning capacities and responsive, adaptive security strategies across the Alliance. The diversity of national approaches to civil preparedness underscores the complexity of fostering collective resilience.

This volume seeks to highlight that borderlands of the Alliance, particularly those sharing direct frontiers with Russia, occupy a critical position in NATO's deterrence strategy. Rather than being viewed as vulnerable peripheries or distant, marginal zones, these regions should be understood as strategic assets. Their proximity to Russia places them on the frontlines of both conventional and hybrid threat vectors, but it also grants

them unique experiential knowledge and institutional reflexes that are indispensable to broader alliance efforts.

The challenge of establishing common standards for civil preparedness becomes especially problematic when concerns arise about the Alliance only being as strong as its "weakest link," as outlined in former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's [9] November 2021 outlook speech. This concern is amplified by the fact that civil preparedness agendas are handled by different institutions across different countries, reflecting varied political systems and creating coordination challenges. Countries such as Finland and the Baltic countries have long histories of managing tensions with Russia and have developed sophisticated mechanisms for detecting and responding to hybrid intrusions. Their societal models, which incorporate public education, community engagement, and interagency coordination, offer valuable templates for addressing the institutional fragmentation that undermines effective collective resilience across NATO.

Russia's hybrid operations target not only military or governmental entities but fundamentally seek to disrupt the social and political fabric of NATO member societies. Through sophisticated campaigns that exploit existing societal divisions, polarise political discourse, and erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions, Russia's hybrid warfare tries to undermine the trust and cohesion that are essential for effective collective defence. These efforts unfold within a complex, networked global environment, where seemingly remote developments can have immediate and profound local security implications. Traditional deterrence paradigms, which have often privileged tangible military assets and clear lines of conflict, have thus become inadequate for addressing threats that are ambiguous, multi-domain, and incremental in nature. Resilience must therefore be understood as a systemic capacity that encompasses not only recovery from disruption but also the ability to adapt, evolve, and strengthen in response to persistent and emerging challenges.

Although NATO's institutional capacity has been demonstrated through its navigation of significant strategic challenges, the Alliance's true resilience remains untested under conditions of direct territorial assault. Nevertheless, these experiences demonstrate considerable institutional adaptability and cohesion under pressure, suggesting robust capacity for collective response, albeit within parameters that fall short of existential crisis. Within this context, resilience has assumed a constitutive role in alliance discourse, fundamentally informing both threat perception and the conceptual architecture of collective security responses.

Ultimately, resilience must be understood as more than a buzzword or aspirational ideal; it is a practical, operational imperative that underpins NATO's capacity to deter, respond, and adapt in a dynamic security environment. It constitutes an adaptive form of deterrence, oriented toward managing uncertainty and navigating complexity. In this volume, resilience is conceptualised not merely as the ability to recover from disruption but as a transformative capacity, one that enables systems to reorganise, innovate, and evolve in response to changing threat environments.

Whereas politics is commonly reduced to responding to and managing what are understood as the consequences of previous human actions, assuming a transformative resilience-oriented approach can be regarded as a depoliticising effort, because it emphasises conditions of responsiveness, adaptability, inventiveness and flexibility necessary to navigate catastrophic scenarios [10]. This perspective requires moving beyond linear notions of cause and effect and embracing a more systemic understanding of security, wherein military, political, social, and technological dimensions are deeply intertwined. Resilience is not, however, a universal magic bullet for a complex set of

challenges or threats, nor is its capacity to deliver security irrefutable [4]. It is not a straightforward concept that offers ready solutions to societal challenges but requires that we work with our uncertainties and recognise the changing nature of the world. Thinking in terms of social resilience potentially situates us as navigators and attenuators of difference either real, imagined or manufactured [4].

3. Alliance Integration and the Strategic Role of Borderlands

The integration of borderland expertise into Alliance-wide security planning represents more than operational improvement, it fundamentally enhances NATO's collective understanding of contemporary threats while improving the Alliance's capacity to respond to unconventional challenges that transcend traditional domain boundaries. This integration process transforms the Alliance's approach to deterrence by incorporating practical experience with hybrid threats into broader strategic frameworks. The challenge of integration is complicated by the current institutional landscape [5], where NATO provides an institutional framework with the potential to structure national strategies and promote a shared understanding of societal security, but as we pointed out, civil preparedness still lacks a common institutional home. Since the Cold War ended, NATO has scaled back its civil emergency planning role and no other institution has fully stepped in to fill the gap.

Borderlands' contributions serve dual strategic functions within NATO's deterrence architecture. They not only contribute directly to deterring Russian aggression through their unique capabilities and positioning but also strengthen NATO as a cohesive and adaptive alliance capable of responding effectively to diverse security challenges across the contemporary threat spectrum. The transformative potential of geographical proximity, when combined with comprehensive preparation and societal resilience, enables borderlands to function as force multipliers within the broader deterrence framework rather than as vulnerable points requiring protection. Where multinational consensus exists, such as in NATO's baseline resilience requirements, it is often framed broadly to secure agreement from all members, which can dilute its effectiveness.

This strategic reframing recognises that effective deterrence in the contemporary security environment requires not merely conventional military capability but also societal resilience, adaptive capacity, and the demonstrated ability to maintain democratic values and institutional integrity under sustained pressure. Through this comprehensive approach, borderlands emerge as strategic assets that enhance NATO's collective security posture while demonstrating the Alliance's capacity for adaptation and innovation in response to evolving threats.

The geostrategic importance of NATO's eastern borderlands cannot be overstated in the contemporary security environment. Their proximity to Russia places these regions at the frontline of the Alliance's deterrence posture, where they function as the first line of defence against potential aggression while simultaneously serving as platforms for intelligence collection, threat monitoring, and early warning systems [11]. This forward position provides NATO with critical strategic depth and enhanced situational awareness that extends the Alliance's defensive perimeter and improves its capacity to respond rapidly to emerging threats. The geographical advantages of borderland regions extend beyond simple proximity to include strategic control over key terrain, transportation networks, and communication corridors that are essential for both defence and power projection. These regions often control access to important maritime domains, airspace

corridors, and land bridges that connect different parts of Europe and link Europe to other regions. The strategic geography of borderlands thus provides NATO with valuable leverage in crisis situations while creating multiple options for diplomatic signalling and military positioning. The proximity of borderland regions to Russia provides critical opportunities to monitor Russian activities, gather intelligence, and detect hybrid threats such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and irregular military movements. Their closeness, both geographical and in terms of cultural familiarity and historical experience, enables innovative analysis of Russian intentions, capabilities, and operational patterns that would be difficult to achieve from more distant locations.

These regions play a pivotal role in strengthening NATO's situational awareness and fostering early warning capabilities across the Alliance. Their intelligence services have developed specialised expertise in Russian military doctrine, political decision-making processes, and hybrid warfare tactics that proves invaluable for Alliance-wide threat assessments and strategic planning. The cultural and linguistic competencies present in these regions enable more nuanced analysis of Russian communications, media narratives, and political discourse than would be possible relying solely on technical intelligence collection methods. The early warning capabilities of borderland regions extend beyond traditional military indicators to encompass the full spectrum of hybrid threats. Their monitoring systems can detect subtle changes in information environments, economic pressure tactics, social manipulation campaigns, and other indicators of hostile activity that might escape notice in other contexts. This comprehensive threat detection capability provides NATO with critical strategic warning time that can prove decisive in formulating effective responses to emerging challenges.

4. Cross-Domain Integration and Borderland Resilience Against Hybrid Threats

The borderland experience with hybrid threats provides invaluable insights into the integrated nature of contemporary security challenges and the requirements for effective cross-domain responses. Unlike traditional military threats that can be addressed through conventional deterrence mechanisms, hybrid threats require coordinated responses across multiple domains simultaneously, including the political, economic, social, informational, and technological spheres. Borderland regions have developed sophisticated approaches to such integration, serving as laboratories for developing Alliance-wide capabilities. Their experience managing complex, multi-faceted security challenges yields practical insights into the coordination mechanisms, institutional arrangements, and operational procedures necessary for effective response. This accumulated experiential knowledge from borderland contexts thus constitutes a strategic asset that enhances NATO's collective capacity to address unconventional threats while navigating the inherent tensions between institutional diversity and coordination effectiveness [7].

Information warfare campaigns directed against borderland regions have driven the development of sophisticated counter-narrative capabilities, media literacy programs, and cognitive defence measures [12]. These defensive innovations recognise that information warfare targets the cognitive domain and requires responses that engage with target audiences at the level of perception, belief, and social identity. The counter-information warfare capabilities developed in borderland contexts provide valuable tools and techniques that can be adapted for Alliance-wide application.

Economic warfare tactics, including energy coercion, trade manipulation, and financial pressure, have exposed critical vulnerabilities in NATO's borderland regions, prompting a strategic recalibration of economic security practices. Rather than viewing these regions merely as passive recipients of external pressure, it is essential to examine the innovative coping strategies they have developed and assess the potential for scaling these approaches across the Alliance [7]. These borderlands have emerged as strategic assets and vital test grounds for adaptive planning, cooperation, and policy innovation, demonstrating how economic vulnerabilities can be transformed into sources of strategic advantage. Through diversifying trade partnerships, investing in resilient supply chains, and pursuing alternative economic frameworks that reduce dependence on adversarial actors, these regions have pioneered approaches that could serve as blueprints for broader NATO economic security strategy. Such measures reflect a deliberate shift toward embedding economic resilience within national and regional security strategies, converting potential weaknesses into capabilities that strengthen both individual nations and the collective deterrence posture and comprehensive defence architecture of the Alliance.

These strategic transformations are evident across multiple domains. Following the 2007 cyberattack, Estonia not only immediately adopted a comprehensive Cyber Security Strategy but successfully advocated for NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, converting a moment of acute vulnerability into Alliance-wide cybersecurity leadership. The Baltic states eliminated Russian gas imports by 2022 and completed their historic disconnection from the Soviet-era BRELL electricity grid by February 2025 [13], while Poland terminated gas dependence and invested heavily in LNG infrastructure and renewable energy capacity [14]. Lithuania's pivot toward Taiwan in semiconductor and laser technologies, combined with enhanced logistics infrastructure, demonstrates how supply chain diversification creates new partnerships that strengthen both national and Alliance resilience.

The development of robust systems of societal resilience represents one of the most significant contributions that borderland regions make to NATO's collective security. These regions have pioneered comprehensive, whole-of-society defence models that integrate civilian and military efforts to counter the full spectrum of hybrid threats while maintaining democratic governance and social cohesion under pressure. Whole-of-society defence approaches recognise that modern security challenges cannot be addressed through military means alone but require the active participation of entire societies in defending against hybrid threats [15, 16, 17]. These approaches emphasise the importance of civil-military cooperation, public-private partnerships, and citizen engagement in maintaining national security and social resilience.

Education and awareness programs constitute critical components of societal resilience, as they enable populations to recognise and respond appropriately to various forms of hostile activity. These programs include media literacy training, cybersecurity education, crisis response preparation, and civic education initiatives that strengthen democratic institutions and practices [18]. The emphasis on preparedness, redundancy, and adaptability creates societies that can maintain essential functions even under severe stress. The integration of digital technologies with traditional security measures represents an increasingly important dimension of societal resilience. Advanced digital infrastructure, combined with comprehensive cybersecurity education and awareness programs, creates populations that are both technologically sophisticated and security-conscious.

Borderland regions possess exceptional, yet underutilised, expertise developed through their lived experience of navigating complex security environments, hybrid threats, and cross-border dynamics. Through specialised exercises and scenario-based simulations that capitalise on this indigenous knowledge, these regions provide realistic preparation while distributing capability development costs across multiple Alliance members. The deep operational understanding developed in borderland areas should be systematically leveraged to transform Alliance doctrine and standard operating procedures. These regions have developed sophisticated approaches to hybrid threat detection, cross-domain coordination, and societal resilience through necessity and real-world application. By actively harnessing this knowledge base, the Alliance can create adaptable methodologies that enhance effectiveness throughout NATO, establishing continuous improvement cycles that strengthen overall capabilities far beyond theoretical frameworks.

The diplomatic acumen and political networks that borderland regions have cultivated represent another critical asset meriting greater investment. These areas possess nuanced understanding of regional dynamics and have established relationships that extend beyond traditional alliance structures, providing the Alliance with additional channels for engagement with regional partners, international organisations, civil society networks, and private sector entities that offer supplementary resources for addressing complex security challenges.

5. Borderland Resilience: Adaptive Capacity for Future Challenges

The dynamic evolution of hybrid threats, characterised by their proliferation and coordinated execution that overwhelms traditional defences, demands continuous adaptation and innovation in border security strategies. As adversaries develop sophisticated new techniques and exploit emerging vulnerabilities across multiple domains simultaneously, they creatively manipulate our own democratic principles, legal frameworks, and institutional processes to achieve malicious objectives. By weaponising concepts like freedom of speech to spread disinformation, exploiting due process to delay countermeasures, leveraging transparency requirements to gather intelligence, or deliberately instrumentalising migration to strain border resources and social cohesion, they turn the foundational logic of open societies into attack vectors. Security frameworks must therefore evolve to address these complex, multi-layered challenges that subvert the very democratic values and systems designed to protect society.

This imperative for continuous adaptation extends beyond current hybrid threats to encompass broader transformational forces reshaping the security landscape. Climate change, technological development, demographic shifts, and changing geopolitical relationships will continue to create new challenges that require creative responses and adaptive solutions [19]. The adaptive capacity demonstrated by borderland regions provides a strong foundation for managing these emerging challenges effectively. Their experience with continuous adaptation and innovation creates institutional mechanisms and cultural practices that facilitate rapid response to new threats and opportunities, enabling the Alliance to maintain effectiveness in a rapidly changing security environment.

Building on this foundation of adaptive capacity, borderland regions are uniquely positioned to leverage emerging technologies that enhance Alliance security effectiveness. The integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and space-

based capabilities into security systems offers transformative opportunities for threat detection, accelerated response times, and enhanced decision-making processes. Furthermore, the growing importance of maritime domains in hybrid warfare requires enhanced integration between land-based borderland capabilities and naval forces. The combination of maritime and terrestrial security measures creates comprehensive domain coverage that enhances overall security effectiveness while providing multiple options for response to various threats.

The strategic recalibration examined in these few pages reflects NATO's broader adaptation to contemporary security challenges and demonstrates the Alliance's continued capacity for innovation and strategic learning. By recognising and leveraging the unique capabilities of borderland regions, NATO can enhance its overall deterrence posture while creating new opportunities for cooperation and capability development that strengthen collective security. The transformation of borderlands from peripheral concerns to central strategic assets provides a model for addressing other security challenges, but it also highlights the need for institutional reforms that can support effective collective resilience. The lessons learned from borderland experiences must be translated into Alliance-wide capabilities through improved coordination mechanisms and standardised frameworks for civil preparedness.

The resilience demonstrated by NATO's borderland regions offers hope for the future of democratic societies facing authoritarian pressure and hybrid threats. Their success in maintaining democratic institutions, economic prosperity, and social cohesion under pressure demonstrates that free societies possess inherent strengths that can be mobilised effectively against external coercion. The future success of NATO's borderland strategy will depend on the Alliance's ability to learn from these experiences and translate them into effective collective capabilities. This requires not only recognising the strategic value of borderland regions but also developing the institutional frameworks necessary to support their continued development and integration into Alliance-wide security architecture.

6. Structure of the Book

This volume examines the strategic transformation of NATO's borderland regions from perceived vulnerabilities to recognised strategic assets within the Alliance's collective defence architecture. Rather than being viewed as vulnerable peripheries requiring protection, these regions, particularly those sharing direct frontiers with Russia, emerge as critical centres of security innovation whose proximity to threat vectors grants them unique experiential knowledge and adaptive capabilities essential for broader Alliance security. This transformation reflects a fundamental shift in strategic thinking that moves beyond traditional centre-periphery models to recognise how geographical proximity to adversaries generates distinctive competencies in threat assessment, early warning systems, and crisis response. Their lived experience with Russian aggression and hybrid warfare has produced practical knowledge about deterrence implementation that complements theoretical strategic planning with operational reality.

The fundamental argument advanced throughout this collection is that NATO's eastern borderlands represent strategic assets that provide essential contributions to collective defence through their experience managing complex security challenges. Their proximity to adversaries creates opportunities for intelligence collection, threat detection, and deterrent signalling that cannot be replicated elsewhere, while their

adaptive innovations offer practical insights that benefit the entire Alliance. The chapters that follow present a comprehensive analysis supporting the placement of resilience at the centre of strategic thinking, not as an afterthought to traditional military deterrence, but as its essential complement and, in many cases, its foundation. Each chapter explores different dimensions of this transformation, analysing how borderland regions contribute to deterrence, manage hybrid threats, and enhance Alliance capabilities through their unique characteristics and proven adaptability.

This volume brings together experts with wide knowledge not only of the currently evolving security dilemma and Russia's strategic discourse, but also of Russian internal developments, priorities, and motives – insights that prove essential for enhancing early warning capabilities and predicting future challenges. Through interdisciplinary perspectives and comparative analysis across diverse borderland contexts, the following chapters examine these themes in greater detail, providing theoretical analysis, empirical investigation, and practical insights into how borderland resilience contributes to NATO's collective security. The four parts of this volume systematically build this argument through conceptual foundations, social analysis, empirical evidence, and strategic implications, ultimately advancing our understanding of contemporary security challenges while identifying opportunities for enhanced cooperation and capability development within the Alliance and beyond.

Part I consists of brief reflections that set the scene for the deeper analyses in the sections to come. This foundational section establishes the conceptual framework for understanding resilience as NATO's new strategic paradigm. Maria Mälksoo demonstrates how resilience has evolved from peripheral concept to central strategic imperative, moving beyond Cold War binary deterrence logic to embrace continuous adaptation against hybrid threats operating below traditional military thresholds. Mark Bassin analyses Russia's ideological transformation from classical Eurasianist autarky to "Greater Eurasia" integration, revealing how adversaries also adapt strategically and can instrumentalise resilience frameworks for revisionist purposes. Jussi P. Laine reframes borderlands from vulnerable peripheries to strategic assets, emphasising their unique experiential knowledge and adaptive continuity as valuable resources for Alliance-wide security rather than territories requiring protection. The analysis reveals that resilience represents a paradigmatic shift in security thinking that extends beyond NATO's defensive posture to encompass continuous adaptation against evolving threats. Critically, this section demonstrates that adversaries can also employ adaptive strategies, suggesting that resilience frameworks must account for dynamic rather than static threat environments.

Part II explores the social foundations that make resilience effective, revealing how community-level dynamics shape security outcomes. Nour Zanjer and Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu expose limitations of state-centric approaches through examining women refugees' resilience strategies, showing how informal networks and grassroots expertise create distributed capabilities often overlooked by formal institutions. Bjarge Schwenke Fors reflects upon cognitive resilience through Norwegian-Russian memory politics, demonstrating how communities can resist external narrative manipulation while revealing the need for coordinated national support. Sandra Hagelin critiques securitised border discourse that marginalises citizen contributions, advocating for more inclusive approaches to resilience planning, while Martin Lačný and Jozef Džuka establish community well-being as security infrastructure, developing measurement tools that link satisfaction deficits to hybrid threat vulnerabilities. Together, they establish that authentic resilience emerges from community agency and grassroots expertise rather

than top-down institutional design alone. The section demonstrates how inclusive approaches that engage diverse stakeholders beyond state institutions prove essential for developing sustainable security frameworks that can withstand multifaceted pressures.

Part III provides empirical evidence of how resilience operates in practice across NATO's most exposed regions. Sara Svensson and Péter Balogh reveal resilience's temporal complexity through the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland, showing both "bouncing-back" and "bouncing-forward" dynamics across different timescales. Eiki Berg, Allan Allik, and Helen Urmann demonstrate that technological surveillance cannot substitute for vibrant communities, with Estonian depopulation creating security vulnerabilities that require human presence and community vitality. Marcin Dębicki documents contradictory resilience dynamics in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, where social rebordering coexists with infrastructural integration. Katarzyna Stokłosa reveals psychological dimensions of hybrid warfare through Polish-Russian experiences, showing how populations manage cognitive dissonance under sustained uncertainty. Tatiana Zhurzhenko illustrates "bouncing-forward" resilience through Ukraine's western regions' transformation from Soviet periphery to European gateway. Lastly, Octavian Țîcu warns how frozen conflicts like Transnistria create persistent vulnerabilities that can be activated during broader campaigns. In together, the empirical evidence presented in this section reveals that resilience manifests through complex dialectics that operate differently across contexts, scales, and temporal dimensions. These frontline experiences demonstrate that effective policy approaches must acknowledge local agency while managing contradictory dynamics, moving beyond uniform solutions toward nuanced frameworks that can accommodate diverse regional circumstances.

The final Part IV situates borderland resilience within broader geopolitical transformations and strategic implications. Damian Strycharz analyses Russia's "managed pluralism" information warfare strategy, showing how authoritarian systems manipulate democratic discourse and requiring enhanced Alliance capabilities for cognitive defence. Tomasz Stępniewski frames Russia's actions as systematic neo-imperial challenge rather than opportunistic aggression, demanding comprehensive deterrence approaches that exploit adversary weaknesses while reinforcing democratic resilience. Akihiro Iwashita and Yesbol Sartayev provide Asian perspective showing how geographic and cultural distance creates different resilience possibilities, highlighting the need for regionally-adapted approaches rather than uniform strategies. The geopolitical analysis presented here establishes that effective resilience requires comprehensive approaches that understand adversary strategies while adapting to regional variations. This section demonstrates how successful deterrence must combine resilience-building with strategic pressure on opponents' vulnerabilities, moving beyond reactive measures toward proactive frameworks that can anticipate and counter systematic challenges to the existing order.

The volume is concluded by two synthesising contributions that work in concert to distil the volume's collective insights: Jussi P. Laine's reflection on borderland dynamics traces the fundamental conceptual transformation from static deterrence models toward adaptive resilience approaches that characterise contemporary security thinking. It integrates the theoretical foundations with empirical evidence to demonstrate how lived borderland experiences generate strategic knowledge applicable to broader Alliance security frameworks. The analysis concludes with Paul B. Richardson's afterword examining the interconnections between economic determinism and inclusive resilience in borderland development. Richardson underscores that sustainable resilience cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying economic structures and social equity

imperatives that determine whether these critical regions can thrive as genuine strategic assets rather than merely survive as defensive peripheries.

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PART I

Framing the Terrain: Rethinking Resilience and Threat

Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
J.P. Laine and B. Petersson (Eds.)

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Resilience Is the New Black: NATO in and Beyond the Grey Zone

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Abstract. The trope of resilience has emerged as a staple in NATO's grappling with the many hybrid challenges it is currently facing both in the so-called grey zone of coercion, below the threshold of traditionally conceived violent attacks, and beyond. NATO's coming to terms with the hybrid challenges through the past decade has been persistent, if somewhat piecemeal. There was a notable delay in recognising the nature and scope of the threat posed by Russia up until its brazen full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 on behalf of the North Atlantic allies. NATO's framing of the Russia-challenge as primarily "hybrid" was paralysing the Alliance's strategic diagnosis of its historical antagonist's revisionist ambitions too long, thus delimiting the Alliance's readiness and response to such a large-scale conventional challenge, at a tragic expense of Ukrainian lives. As the continuum between resilience and traditionally conceived deterrence by denial is shrinking, NATO's tailorship of effective countermeasures to complex modern threats and challenges in and beyond the grey zone can only benefit from embracing resilience thinking, with an emphasis on anticipation, creative and flexible adaptation and the inclusivity of diverse decision-makers.

Keywords. Resilience, NATO, hybrid threats, grey zone, post-post Cold War

What are the prospects for the institutional embodiment of the transatlantic security community with the post-Cold War international order unravelling against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing large-scale conventional war on Ukraine, its demands for NATO to return to the pre-eastern enlargement boundaries and an ever-expanding cross-domain coercion repertoire capitalised on against the allies, on top of the resurgent crisis of leadership, challenges to democracy and the contestations of the multilateral foundations of the liberal order at large [1, 2]? Can NATO weather the perfect storm with the infamously NATO-sceptic US President Trump holding no horses in questioning and undermining allied solidarity at the start of his second term in the office – arguably, a defining moment for the North Atlantic Alliance?

I take heed of the suggestion that the question about NATO's resilience "must be asked periodically" to "sharpen our theories while simultaneously improving our

[1] Corresponding Author: Maria Mälksoo, maria.malksoo@ifs.ku.dk. The writing of this essay has been supported by the European Research Council Consolidator Grant no 101043468 RITUAL DETERRENCE. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

understanding of an important, real-world event" [3]. Considering that the Alliance is still standing – against the grain of a major conventional war in its immediate neighbourhood, reckoning with the 20-year counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan and the hurried withdrawal therefrom, and intensified hybrid interferences in the allied air, maritime, cyber, land, as well as political and information spaces – NATO's combined elasticity and strength appear to be a-okay. Resilience has emerged as the chamber tone for NATO as a security community, just as deterrence and defence set the pitch for it as a military alliance during the Cold War and do so now again, in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the militant rhetoric hurled at the "collective West". If the immediate post-Cold War question of the day concerned NATO's survival, the existentialist undertones of the Alliance's self-reflection and the strategic discussions surrounding it soon gave the way to a more measured resilience thinking and adaptation-oriented stance. In NATO's parlance, resilience entails "the capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions, and ensure the continuity of the Alliance's activities [4]." The Alliance's repertoires of resilience have subsequently entailed NATO's political cohesion, its democratic fabric, external credibility, and institutional endurance [5]. While NATO is busy with its political self-renewal [6] and reinventing its allied deterrence and defence posture for the post-post-Cold War era since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the trope of resilience has emerged as the "new black" in NATO's grappling with the many hybrid challenges it is currently facing both in the so-called grey zone of coercion, below the threshold of traditionally conceived violent attacks, and beyond.

Indeed, resilience and deterrence are complementary rather than either/or goals for NATO, as contractually attested already by Article 3 of the Washington Treaty, which states that Allies, "separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack". The historically ingrained requirement for resilience in meeting armed attack and the broader contemporary demands for resilience against hostile acts short of war go increasingly hand in hand in NATO's present-day rhetoric and practice. The resilience logic has become blended with that of deterrence "as the new denial kid on the block [7]."

Practically speaking, the newly fashionable staple of the Alliance's discourse and practice entails many shades of grey, fittingly for the challenges emanating from the eponymic zone. Conceptually, resilience as a recipe for hybrid threats embodies the intertwining of the Alliance's physical and ontological security-seeking [8]. A resilient society and government are concurrently part of deemed effective deterrence and defence [9]. For the allies' critical infrastructure, resilience effectively pertains to the built-in defence to ensure the ability to promptly bounce back after an attack or debilitating intrusion. The combination of hybrid and conventional attacks can have incapacitating consequences, if the allied reinforcement capacity is undermined by simultaneous assaults on transportation, communication and energy networks. Sorting out effective deterrence and defence, particularly on the more exposed eastern fringes of the Alliance, will consequently need to be worked out in conjunction with devising NATO's readiness for the hybrid threat spectrum [10].

Institutionally, efficient decision-making procedures and their well-oiled practicing across the board of all sorts of contingencies are key. There is also a host of legal challenges and limitations for hybrid countermeasures, calling for NATO's harmonising and aligning of the allies' peacetime and crisis laws with an eye on building legal resilience in *jus ante bellum* [11]. Politically, the ambiguity and frequent anonymity of the

said threats create further dilemmas of attribution, pushing the Alliance to define its specific role in responding to the hybrid challenges both distinctly from and in collaboration with other international organisations (such as the EU) and the private sector [12]. The pre-emptive readiness imperative translates into the active and wide-scale societal awareness of the potential threats and vulnerabilities, situational awareness of state structures through advanced intelligence, as well as the general future-proofing of the Alliance against all kinds of political eventualities. Evidently, a total political resilience remains a pipe dream for an international organisation of NATO's size and internal diversity. It also comes with a notable flip side of generating paranoid societies, invited to live in an atmosphere of constant vigilance and a potentially paralysing fear of ever-present dangers.

Resilience of such multi-dimensional calibre would be a tall order for any organisation. Even if NATO has never quite delimited itself to the scope of a traditional military alliance [3], the panoply of the challenges in and beyond the so-called grey zone complicate its central mission at the institutional level as the hybrid nature of such threats call for complex, rather than purely military, responses. The Alliance keeps grappling with these threats, having established the Emerging Security Challenges Division in NATO's International Staff to facilitate ways of developing policies against challenges of non-traditional kind already in 2010. NATO's Intelligence Security Division further entails a unit for analysing hybrid threats. In response to Russia's invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO allies established resilience guidelines, committing themselves to meeting seven baseline requirements for national resilience in 2016 (namely, assured continuity of government and critical government services, resilient energy supply, ability to deal effectively with uncontrolled movement of people, resilient food and water resources, ability to deal with mass casualties and disruptive health crises, resilient civil communications systems, resilient civil transportation systems).

NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept argued for "layered resilience", combining military and civilian resilience, as one of the five "warfare development imperatives" to persevere and prevail in an era of persistent competition below the level of war [13].The Strengthened Resilience Commitment was further adopted in 2021, reiterating national and collective resilience as "an essential basis for credible deterrence and defence and the effective fulfilment of the Alliance's core tasks" [14]. At the landmark NATO Madrid summit of 2022, allies agreed to define national resilience goals and implementation plans, with a commitment to share these through the newly established Resilience Committee. Taken together, the Alliance's "counter hybrid toolbox" includes enhanced intelligence sharing, Counter Hybrid Support Teams, combined with a stronger focus on national resilience, tailored exercises and pertinent public diplomacy efforts, with a tighter collaboration with the European Union (EU) on the counter-hybrid front [15]. A NATO-EU taskforce on resilience and critical infrastructure protection was established in March 2023, with targeted recommendations presented a few months later on the cross-cutting sectors of energy, transport, digital infrastructure and space.

Most recently, resilience as a "new art of governing complexity" [15] has been put to test in the efforts to counter increasingly frequent hybrid intrusions in the allies' maritime space, particularly vis-à-vis the sabotage acts against critical undersea infrastructures in the Baltic Sea. Since the full-scale war in Ukraine began, there have been numerous instances of cutting submarine telecommunications cables, connecting Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, and Sweden, with separate incidents of a foreign commercial vessel damaging an underwater electricity cable and a gas pipeline by dragging an anchor on the seafloor. [16]. Following the sabotage of the Nord Stream

pipeline in 2022, Allies have stepped up their military presence in the Baltic Sea region. In February 2023, NATO set up a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell to map pertinent vulnerabilities and harmonise efforts between NATO Allies, partners, and the private sector [17]. In 2024, NATO launched the Maritime Centre for Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure as a networking and knowledge centre based at NATO Allied Maritime Command. In mid-January 2025, the Alliance launched a naval operation "Baltic Sentry" as an emergency measure to confront attacks on the energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. Such move followed the unprecedently decisive action by NATO's new ally Finland on Christmas Day 2024, boarding and ceasing the Cook-Islands'-flagged Eagle S oil tanker. This vessel, part of the Russian shadow-fleet, evading sanctions on Russia's crude oil export, had been involved in cutting the submarine electricity cable ESTLINK 2, connecting Estonia and Finland, alongside 4 telecoms lines. The Alliance's trajectory is evidently shifting from enhancing general maritime situational awareness to a hands-on "denying of deniability" in the Baltic Sea space, illustrating the growing intertwining of its resilience and deterrence missions [18].

NATO's coming to terms with the hybrid challenges through the past decade has been persistent, if somewhat piecemeal. There was a notable delay in recognising the nature and scope of the threat posed by Russia up until its brazen full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 on behalf of the North Atlantic allies. NATO's framing of the Russia-challenge as primarily "hybrid" was paralysing the Alliance's strategic diagnosis of its historical antagonist's revisionist ambitions too long, thus delimiting the Alliance's readiness and response to such a large-scale conventional challenge, at a tragic expense of Ukrainian lives. "Hybrid" should not be a political fig leaf for postponing difficult decisions on the Alliance's military, political and financial commitments. As the continuum between resilience and traditionally conceived deterrence by denial is shrinking, NATO's tailorship of effective countermeasures to complex modern threats and challenges in and beyond the grey zone can only benefit from embracing resilience thinking, with an emphasis on anticipation, creative and flexible adaptation and the inclusivity of diverse decision-makers.

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From Russia-Eurasia to Greater Eurasia: The Evolution of a Geopolitical Imaginary

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Abstract. This paper examines the evolution of Russian geopolitical imaginaries through a critical comparison between classical Eurasianism and the contemporary concept of "Greater Eurasia" [*Большая Евразия*]. While both paradigms share a common lexicon and spatial referent, they diverge fundamentally in their underlying assumptions and strategic orientations. Classical Eurasianism – developed in the 1920s and revived in neo-Eurasianist discourse after 1991 – posits Russia as an autonomous continental civilization rooted in internal coherence, self-sufficiency, and geopolitical isolation. In contrast, the Greater Eurasia project, emerging prominently in the 2010s and accelerated by Russia's war against Ukraine, rejects autarky in favor of deep transnational integration, particularly with Asia. This new vision emphasizes Russia's structural weakness and dependency, especially in relation to China, and reframes Eurasia not as a unique civilizational space but as a transcontinental zone of cooperation. The paper explores these transformations across three dimensions: the geographical scope of "Eurasia," Russia's relationship to external powers, and the shifting dynamics of its strategic partnership with China. Ultimately, it argues that Greater Eurasia constitutes a break from the Eurasianist paradigm, reflecting a pragmatic and unprecedented acknowledgement of Russia's subordinate status in a Sino-centric order, and marking a profound shift in the country's geopolitical self-conception.

Keywords. Greater Eurasia; Eurasianism; Geopolitical imaginary; Russia–China relations; Russian foreign policy

1. Introduction

For over ten years, Russia's leadership has talked about a "turn to Asia." This discussion has been accelerated by the war in Ukraine, and the question of Russia's connection to Asia, especially China, has become an existential priority. The realignment of Russian geopolitical interests is both reflected and facilitated by the elaboration of a new spatial or geo-imaginary: *Большая Евразия*, or Greater Eurasia [1, 2, 3]. This novel geographical idea is developed by political analysts and international relations commentators and has received particularly focused attention in the analyses of the influential thinktanks such as the Valdai Discussion Club.

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The terms "Eurasia" and "Eurasianism" are of course familiar. They were introduced into Russian political and nationalist discourse a century ago, in the 1920s, and have gone through a series of iterations since then: first a "neo-Stalinist" Eurasianism developed by the historian and geographer Lev Gumilev in the 1960s and 1970s, and then a broader discourse of "neo-Eurasianism" since the 1990s [4, 5]. While there are differences between these iterations, there are also certain essential common themes, and it is possible to speak of a single "Eurasianist paradigm". The continued deployment of the term Eurasia as Greater Eurasia could be seen as evidence for the persistence of this paradigm. However, in this brief chapter I challenge this assumption. I argue instead that Greater Eurasia in fact departs in very significant ways from the basic Eurasianist imaginary up to this point, representing what is effectively a new paradigm. I will illustrate these differences by comparing these two Eurasianist paradigms in terms of three variables: geographical location (where exactly is Eurasia?); Russia's/Eurasia's relationship with the external world; and the significance of Russia's connection to China.

2. Where is Eurasia?

The Eurasianist discourse that emerged in the 1920s began by identifying a new continental space called Eurasia, a term that was borrowed from the fields of geology and plate tectonics. The geologists created the term to emphasize that the notionally separate continents of Europe and Asia were in fact joined as a single massive landform. The Russian Eurasianists, by contrast, had precisely the opposite in mind. For them, Eurasia referred not to the totality of Europe plus Asia but rather to an entirely separate continental space, a geographical middle zone situated between Europe and Asia but belonging to neither. Although they did not produce any maps, they nonetheless had a clear sense of Eurasia's boundaries: with the exception of Russia's western borderlands (the Baltic states, Poland and Finland), their Eurasia was congruent with the boundaries of the new Soviet state [6].

Thus, the geographical space of their Eurasian continent was closely identified with the political space of the Russian state. To emphasize this, they created a new term: "Russia-Eurasia". This congruence between politics, nation, and geography was then heavily emphasized as the most important factor shaping Russia's identity, in terms of its historical experience and its social and political development. The Eurasianists argued that the geographical unity of Eurasia had conditioned Russia's social and cultural unity as a distinct civilization.

Today's discourse of Greater Eurasia, by contrast, offers a very different geographical vision. No longer a middle space between Europe and Asia, Eurasia is now seen to extend beyond Russia itself, in one of three possible configurations. Most ambitiously, Greater Eurasia returns to the original geological sense of Eurasia as a single undivided landmass encompassing all of Europe and Asia. Thus, Greater Eurasia can be described as a trans-continental entity extending "from Jakarta to Lisbon" via Tokyo, Seoul, and other Asian and European capitals. Since 2014, this perspective has been increasingly abandoned, and in 2017 Vladimir Putin called for a "Greater Eurasian partnership" that was exclusively pan-Asian, to include China, Pakistan, India, the Koreas, Iran, the Central Asian countries, Turkey, and of course Russia. Finally, there is what might be called a "core Greater Eurasia" that is focused on the bi-lateral axis between Russia and China [7].

3. Russia's Relationship to the External World: Isolation or Integration

The original Eurasianists were strongly influenced by the civilizational model set out at the end of World War I by Oswald Spengler in his *Decline of the West* [8]. They saw Russia as a great world-historical civilization with a unique character, different and separate from all others. Its traditional geopolitical unity had been shattered through the territorial fragmentation brought on by revolution and civil war, and they saw their first challenge as the restoration of its territorial integrity and the creation of a united trans-continental political unit. When that had been accomplished, Russia-Eurasia should then develop as an autonomous continental civilization, isolating itself from the external world and directing its energies inwardly. It should focus on internal development and work to revive and modernize Russia's political, economic and military potency by utilizing its own natural resources, industries, and populations [9, 10]. In the 1920s and 1930s, the ultimate goal was described as self-sufficiency, or autarky – a very popular concept at the time. As a continental, land-locked fortress, the Eurasianists believed that Russia would be able to regain global power precisely by relying on its own strengths. The Soviet victory of 1945 and the subsequent emergence of the USSR as a global superpower served to confirm this confidence in the Russia's internal capabilities.

If we fast-forward to *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, we see the same preoccupations as in the post-revolutionary period: a determination to reverse the fragmentation of the Russian state, reassemble its traditional spaces and restore its territorial integrity. Post-Soviet neo-Eurasianism continued to view Russia as a continental civilization and continued to insist on Russia-Eurasia's uniqueness and distinction from all other civilizations [11, 12, 13]. Moreover, it refreshed "classical" Eurasianism by incorporating the perspective put forward in the 1990s by Samuel Huntington. Huntington re-confirmed Spengler's picture of world-historical civilizations, and he radicalized it by describing what he called the "Clash of Civilizations" [14, 15]. Civilizations were not only unique and autonomous; more than this, they were by their very nature inherently hostile to each other.

The prophet-in-chief of neo-Eurasianism was, and remains, Aleksandr Dugin [16, 17], but there were many other ideologues as well. In their theories, they modified the strong isolationism of the original Eurasianists and recognized that Russia-Eurasia had important interactions with other civilizations. But neo-Eurasianism continued to believe that the power and dynamism of Russia-Eurasia derived most fundamentally from its internal energies and the synergies of its various regions. In their eyes, Russia-Eurasia continued to stand alone in the world, as an integrated and coordinated powerhouse. The neo-Eurasianists believed that Russia's greatest challenge in the present day was to reclaim its status as a Great Power, as it had been in the 1920s and 1930s, and as in the earlier period they insisted it would do so by relying on its own internal strengths. Indeed, the expectations in the post-Soviet period exceeded those of the classical Eurasianists. It was now imagined that Russia-Eurasia could emerge as the global civilizational leader. As Dugin put it loudly in the title of one of his publications: *Евразия превыше всего* – "Eurasia above everything" [18].

It is in regard to the question of external relations that the Greater Eurasia paradigm departs most significantly from Eurasianism. Where the latter emphasized Russia's civilizational uniqueness and the need and ability to stand alone, Greater Eurasia insists that international and even cross-civilizational connections are existentially necessary for Russia's national survival. The reason for this is Greater Eurasia's most radical and disruptive insight: in the present day, Russia is not strong but weak. To be sure, in the

1920s and the 1990s, classical as well as neo-Eurasianism recognized that Russia was in an exhausted condition and needed to be revived and resurrected. But in both cases, it was believed that Russia could do this alone, by relying on its own domestic strengths and resources. Greater Eurasia's evaluation of Russia's current condition and potential is far more negative.

Any prospect of Russia's development as a self-contained, autarkic entity has been emphatically and unconditionally abandoned. Despite Russia's great size, natural resource wealth, and abundant population, its state power is now said to depend existentially on external connections, external support, and infusions from abroad—for the present and into the future. Russia simply cannot stand alone. I would argue that this avowal of sustained national weakness and dependency is entirely unprecedented in Russian nationalist discourses, which makes the repeated and emphatic emphasis on it in the Greater Eurasia discourse all the more striking and significant. To survive and be strong, Russia needs deep and far-reaching integration precisely in the complex trans-national and cross-civilizational system that is the Greater Eurasian network – described as a "space of civilizational cooperation" and "zone of civilizational integration" [19].

4. Russia and China

The full contours of Russia's dependency emerge most clearly in regard to its relationship with China. The significance of this connection has come fully into focus most sharply since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For the Eurasianist paradigm, China was for the most part not a major issue. Spengler's original scheme distinguished China as an autonomous civilization, and the classical Eurasianists had little to say about it or its relationship to Russia. Lev Gumilev, it is true, was outspoken about China in his version of Eurasianism. Reflecting dominant Soviet attitudes, he was hysterically anti-Chinese, and he formulated his position precisely in civilizational terms. Indeed, Gumilev anticipated Huntington, making an early argument for what was effectively a clash of civilizations [20, 21].

Interestingly, although the Soviet authorities were highly critical of Gumilev and severely limited the publication of his work, his books on ancient China, which described a historical scenario of primordial antipathy between Chinese and the civilizations of the Eurasian steppe, were seen as useful in supporting official policy and thus widely disseminated in large print runs [22]. In the post-Soviet period, neo-Eurasianism was similarly critical of China, if in rather more moderate terms. In his early Eurasianist writings, Aleksandr Dugin described China as an enemy of Russia and a potential ally of Russia's Atlanticist Anglo-American adversaries. Sketch maps in his 1997 textbook made it clear that he played with the idea of extending Russian-Eurasian influence across northern Manchuria [16].

In the Greater Eurasia narrative, however, this traditional Eurasianist perspective on Russia and China is completely reversed. Now, the connection between the two powers is depicted in terms that are exuberantly positive. Indeed, it projects the enhancement of all dimensions of bi-lateral engagement with the PRC as Russia's single greatest foreign policy priority. It is not too much to say that, in many ways, the entire narrative of Greater Eurasia revolves primarily around it. Specifically, the narrative has developed through two phases. Originally, the Russia-China connection was depicted as genuine partnership of equals, in which Russia operated with its own strategic interests [23, 24]. For example, Russia wanted to participate in the One-Belt-One-Road initiative in order to develop its

collaboration with China, but in addition believed that this could serve as a means of developing its own global interconnections and as a strategy for counterbalancing and neutralizing China's growing influence in Central Asia. This "equal partnership" model is reflected in the notion, much discussed for several years at the Valdai think tank, of a Russo-Chinese "tandem" in the form of a balanced distribution of competences across the space of Greater Eurasia as a whole. In this arrangement, Russia would be responsible for military security, while China would contribute economic power and dynamism for the development of the greater region [25].

However, in recent years this picture of careful balance has been destabilized by the increasing appreciation of Russia's relative weakness as described above. Although the term "partnership" continues to be used, there is in fact an increasingly open acknowledgement of the asymmetrical nature of the Russia-China relationship and of Russia's de facto subordinate status as the junior partner. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has deepened Russia's dependency on China, as a market for its commodities, a source of vital imports, and as its most important diplomatic partner. With the rapid reduction of the West's reliance on Russian natural resources, the significance of China as a trading and political partner will only grow.

The Chinese, for their part, have encouraged the notion of a relationship that is not only special but indeed "unlimited." Xi Jinping first used this formulation at a meeting with Putin in Beijing three weeks before the Russian invasion and then reaffirmed during a more recent visit in February 2025 [26]. But despite these expressions of fraternal solidarity, Russia's recognition of its subordinate position and its status as a dependent client was very visibly on display during the latter meetings. Russia's dependency on China, the core axis around which the entire Greater Eurasia project revolves, has been noted by the French president Emanuel Macron, who recently observed that "De facto, Russia has entered a form of subservience with regards to China." Predictably, Russia hit back angrily at this statement, insisting that its relationship with China continued to represent "a special, strategic partnership [27]. Nonetheless, the fact of Russia's subordination is obvious to all, and it is formalized ideologically in the discourse of Greater Eurasia. It is this position that forms the most fundamental difference between Russia's two "Eurasia" imaginaries.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Redefining the Front: Borderlands as Strategic Asset

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Abstract. This chapter challenges traditional security paradigms by reframing borderlands from peripheral liabilities to strategic assets within NATO's deterrence architecture. Against the backdrop of Russia's renewed aggression and hybrid warfare campaigns, the analysis demonstrates how borderland regions, particularly those adjacent to Russia, serve as critical laboratories for developing adaptive security responses. It argues that contemporary security challenges transcend conventional inside/outside divides, requiring comprehensive approaches that integrate governmental coordination with societal resilience. Borderlands possess unique capabilities derived from their geographical proximity, experiential knowledge of adversarial behaviour, and adaptive capacity developed through managing persistent uncertainty. These regions contribute to Alliance security through five interconnected dimensions: enhanced intelligence collection and early warning systems, practical knowledge of adversarial patterns, innovative problem-solving approaches, psychological deterrent effects, and tested models of cooperative security. The chapter emphasises that well-prepared borderland communities demonstrate successful resistance to hybrid threats, creating force multiplication effects that enhance overall Alliance credibility. This strategic reframing represents a fundamental shift from protecting vulnerable peripheries to leveraging borderland expertise for collective defence, highlighting the transformation of security thinking in an era of persistent hybrid challenges.

Keywords. Borderlands, hybrid warfare, strategic deterrence, resilience, security

1. Introduction: The Transformation of Security Paradigms

One of the defining messages of the new millennium is the resurgence of realist geopolitics, which has reasserted itself with marked intensity. While it is debatable whether the primacy of "hard power" ever truly receded, its current prominence underscores a broader disillusionment with earlier visions of a multilateral, cooperative global order [1]. The hope that liberal internationalism would prevail has been supplanted by renewed strategic competition and the entrenchment of zero-sum logics in international affairs. This shift is most visibly embodied in Russia's increasingly assertive and revisionist behaviour under President Vladimir Putin's leadership. Russia has invaded two neighbours, Georgia and Ukraine, illegally annexing territory from

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Ukraine and recognising the independence of Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in attempts to prevent their alignment with NATO and the West. Alongside its war in Ukraine, Russia's hybrid threat activities have intensified throughout its neighbouring countries and across the entire NATO alliance, raising escalating concerns about regional security preservation.

Russia's aggressive posture – manifested through territorial annexations, military interventions, and hybrid operations – has destabilised its immediate neighbourhood while symbolising a broader erosion of the normative structures that once underpinned international cooperation. The Kremlin's actions complicate everyday socio-economic interaction and restrict avenues for constructive engagement, particularly between Russia and the European Union (EU). Consequently, realist assumptions about power, sovereignty, and strategic interests have become increasingly central to understanding and addressing contemporary security threats. As a global actor, Russia challenges the rules-based international order, influencing security dynamics across multiple regions through strategic partnerships with authoritarian regimes, cyber operations targeting democratic institutions worldwide, and interference in electoral processes across various nations. This transnational reach of Russian influence operations underscores the interconnected nature of contemporary security challenges and highlights the need for cross-regional collaboration. Insights gained from studying diverse borderlands facing Russian pressure can enhance global security strategies and foster stronger partnerships among NATO, its allies, and democratic partners worldwide.

In the context of rising tensions and the return of war to Europe, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept affirmed the strength and unity of NATO and asserted the alliance's new and enduring objectives. These included the identification of Russia as "the most significant and direct" threat to the alliance and a new emphasis on building resilience in bolstering deterrence and defence [2]. Within this strategic framework, it has become increasingly difficult to conceive security in terms of national sovereignty alone or in traditional national security vocabularies that are based on strict inside/outside divides. Security is a process that is neither linear nor unidirectional. It emerges through the contingent and contested interaction of multiple elements in flux. In an interconnected, rapidly changing world, it has become difficult to conceive of security solely in terms of national sovereignty or to address complex, multidimensional challenges through conventional security vocabularies based on rigid inside/outside divides.

Attempts to impose control through traditional bordering practices often prove both inefficient and politically destabilising, especially when faced with transnational challenges such as hybrid and cyber threats, disinformation campaigns, climate crises, pandemics, and migration flows. Information enclaves, citizens physically present but primarily consuming foreign state media, create internal vulnerabilities, enabling hybrid operations, social disruption, or political interference without ever crossing physical borders. These phenomena defy containment within fixed territorial borders, rendering conventional border security approaches increasingly obsolete. They demand more relational, networked, and adaptive security imaginaries built on cooperation, flexibility, and the integration of diverse actors and knowledge systems.

2. Borderlands as Strategic Laboratories

Borderlands are more than peripheral zones; they are strategic laboratories where the complexities of modern security are most vividly tested and observed. Security is not

merely a military concern or about physical protection; it is deeply intertwined with the well-being and cohesion of societies [3, 4]. The contemporary global security scene is characterised by pronounced unpredictability as well as a complex combination of traditional geopolitical challenges and new security threats. In these liminal spaces, the fragility or strength of societal security becomes especially visible. As the global security environment grows increasingly unpredictable, shaped by both conventional geopolitical tensions and emerging, non-traditional threats, borderlands often experience these pressures first. In our interconnected world, crises such as armed conflict may originate far away but quickly manifest in border regions, turning them into critical arenas for experimenting with and adapting new security responses.

Russia uses a wide spectrum of hybrid threat tools, ranging from the domains of culture and diplomacy to intelligence, information, instrumentalisation of migration, strategic coercion, and the military [5, 6]. Many of these pose challenges that cannot simply be fenced away. In a world beyond control, bordering the uncontrollable seems both inefficient and counterproductive. A comprehensive approach to security is thus needed. Russia's hybrid activities often target the human and social fabric of nations, aiming to erode trust, amplify divisions, and weaken resistance. Understanding the social and psychological impacts of these threats is crucial for crafting holistic security strategies. Borderland communities, frequently at the epicentre of such challenges, offer a wealth of knowledge on how to maintain social cohesion and counter divisive narratives. However, much of this knowledge remains uncapitalised.

At the more general level of society, it is quite evident that security is not only about security policy in the strict sense or the role of armed forces but also an issue of public perception and feeling. Neither is security merely about threats but also about possibilities and new horizons that physical safety and predictability may open. It is precisely the "soft" and fuzzy area of security that is the most vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. The accentuation of perceived difference between people, cultures and states increases within contexts of socio-economic stress and geopolitical instability. Borderlands, where national, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries converge, function as strategic laboratories in which these dynamics are most visibly tested. They reveal both the fragility and the potential of societal resilience, offering vital insight into how inclusive, adaptive, and forward-looking approaches to security can be cultivated.

A key aspect of understanding contemporary security lies in recognising how external and internal dimensions are deeply interwoven, an entanglement that becomes particularly visible through the prism of borders [7]. Borders are an interface between domestic concerns and wider interstate and intercultural contexts that have fundamental impact on security of our societies at various levels. The state of the art that has been achieved in border studies reminds us of that realities of territorial borders extend into many realms of everyday life. Far from merely linear and static, state borders are actively appropriated through vast repertoires of political, cultural and social practices. Around the globe, we have witnessed a consistent drive for ever-stricter border and migration policies that have not only changed the role borders play but become inherent parts of a wide range of policies and societal practices. Indeed, despite many appealing aspirations to the contrary, political borders have proven their persistence.

The current era of overlapping, constant crises, with the various elements of uncertainty they create, has underlined the role borders play in the constitution of difference and bringing order amidst the perceived dangers of chaos. A strong state is being offered and broadly accepted as a solution to the perceived chaos, simplistic

politics as a cure for the complexities it has cultivated. We have witnessed a thickening of the international demarcation in the name of "national security", construction of borders as protective yet vulnerable defences against the various "ills" seeking to infiltrate and paralyse the very body of our "national" societies, producing the sense of security, stability, and order amidst paralysing anxieties [8]. Borders, that is, provide reassurance that the "we" and the here are still physically distanced from and protected against the perceived threats [9]. Rather than mere independent variables in the analysis of political processes, borders are co-constitutive of political agency: borders are not given but emerge through socio-political and cultural bordering processes that take place within society [10].

Borderlands, then, can be taken as illuminating laboratories to study broader socio-political change, prone to the vicissitudes of the prevailing geopolitical contexts [11, 12]. Borderlands facing Russia should not be instinctively seen as fragile, marginal or peripheral – vulnerable to external influences, international disputes, crises and instability. Rather, many borderlands have decades of experience from dealing with their neighbour and, thus, provide us with illuminating laboratories to study broader change. As many issues occur in borderland earlier and in sharper relief than in the rest of the society [13], the importance of borderlands becomes heightened.

The borderlands facing Russia occupy a unique position in the global security framework, serving as pivotal spaces where the first signs of Russian assertiveness often manifest rather than merely peripheral zones. Their proximity to Russia transforms them into frontline laboratories for studying the effectiveness of deterrence measures, hybrid defence strategies, and societal resilience, yielding insights directly applicable to NATO's broader strategy and cohesive defence posture. There is a critical need to shift attention to these entangled borderlands as key sites where antagonistic threats and societal insecurities intersect across spatial dimensions. While often under-theorised, borderlands are central to how security is experienced and contested, and by examining how threats emerge within layered and interrelated spaces of risk and control, we can develop a holistic, contextually grounded understanding of contemporary security challenges.

3. From Liabilities to Strategic Assets

Well-prepared and resilient borderlands – both as entire states bordering Russia and as concrete border regions within these states – constitute strategic assets rather than liabilities within NATO's deterrence architecture. Against both conventional and hybrid threats, these regions reinforce the Alliance's overall credibility and deterrence posture through their unique capabilities, experiential knowledge, and adaptive capacity. Rather than being peripheral and fragile zones requiring protection from more secure interior regions, borderlands possess distinctive characteristics that enable them to make major contributions to NATO's ability to deter aggression, manage hybrid threats, and project stability across the entire eastern flank. This reframing represents a fundamental shift in strategic thinking that recognises the transformative potential of geographical proximity when combined with comprehensive preparation and societal resilience.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the security and operating environment has changed in Finland, a concrete manifestation of which was the swift decision to apply for NATO membership on 17 May 2022. Once all NATO members had ratified Finland's Accession Protocol and Finland had accepted its accession, Finland became a member of NATO on

4 April 2023, having completed the fastest accession process in the organisation's history, and overturning the country's longstanding policy of military nonalignment. The NATO membership is expected to strengthen Finland's security in the changed security environment and improve stability and security in the Baltic Sea region and Northern Europe, yet it is expected that Finland's strong defence capabilities and comprehensive security approach will also in turn strengthen NATO and the collective defence of the Alliance.

The strategic significance of borderlands must be understood within the context of contemporary threat dynamics, which reveal a fundamental paradox in current international security [14]. While many democracies maintain some of the world's most advanced conventional military capabilities, they simultaneously represent "the type of states most frequently targeted by hybrid measures" and remain highly vulnerable to non-kinetic threats [15]. This vulnerability emerges not from military weakness but from the inherent characteristics of democratic governance itself.

Democratic states, bound by constitutional principles such as the rule of law and individual freedoms, face structurally greater exposure to indirect attacks that exploit these foundational values. For weaker adversaries seeking to challenge democratic states, hybrid tactics represent a more rational strategic choice than full-scale conventional or nuclear confrontation. This dynamic fundamentally alters the nature of security challenges, shifting the focus of allied responses from opposing traditional military combatants to protecting entire societies from within [16]. Consequently, threats increasingly emerge from within rather than outside state borders, necessitating a fundamental reconceptualisation of security frameworks.

This transformation in the threat environment demands broadening the range of actors involved in security responses – encompassing policy, research, training, and operational domains – while developing comprehensive approaches to how democracies organise to counter hybrid threats. Crisis management below the threshold of conventional war requires robust theoretical frameworks capable of helping states systematically analyse and respond to complex, evolving threats through three critical stages: recognition (acknowledgment), mapping, and addressing [17]. Each stage plays a vital role in developing adaptive resilience frameworks capable of responding to the complex and evolving nature of hybrid threats, enabling policymakers and stakeholders to more effectively protect democratic values and preserve societal integrity amid shifting challenges.

Against both conventional and hybrid threats, borderlands reinforce NATO's overall credibility and deterrence posture through unique capabilities that emerge from their geographical position and accumulated experience. The strategic value of borderlands emerges from five interconnected factors that reflect the distinctive functions they serve within the Alliance. *First*, their proximity to potential adversaries provides unparalleled opportunities for intelligence collection, threat detection, and early warning capabilities. *Second*, their extensive experience managing complex security relationships with adversarial actors provides practical knowledge about adversarial behaviour patterns, escalation dynamics, and effective response strategies that proves invaluable for Alliance-wide planning and preparation. *Third*, the adaptive capacity developed through managing persistent uncertainty and ambiguous security environments fosters creative problem-solving capabilities and creates innovative approaches to security challenges that often find broader application within the Alliance framework. *Fourth*, the demonstration of successful resistance to external pressure creates psychological deterrent effects that influence adversarial calculations and enhance overall Alliance

credibility. *Fifth*, the networks of cooperation and mutual support that develop organically in borderland contexts provide tested models for broader Alliance cooperation and solidarity, strengthening NATO's capacity for collective action under stress.

The comprehensive security models developed in borderland regions integrate government agencies, private sector entities, civil society organisations, and individual citizens into coherent security frameworks that distribute responsibilities while maintaining centralised coordination. These models recognise that resilience must be built from the ground up, with communities, organisations, and individuals all playing active roles in maintaining societal security and functional continuity. Borderland communities develop resilience not solely through transformative change, but also through the preservation and adaptive continuation of existing practices. In this context, resilience must not be reduced to a reactive posture but instead developed as a proactive, inclusive, and dynamic capacity to navigate uncertainty, uphold democratic values, and sustain social cohesion amid volatility.

The strategic value of borderland regions extends significantly beyond their direct contributions to include substantial force multiplication effects that enhance overall Alliance capabilities and effectiveness. These multiplier effects emerge from the integration of borderland expertise, capabilities, and resources into broader Alliance structures and operations, creating positive spillover effects that benefit the entire collective defence system. The specialised knowledge and unique capabilities of borderland regions create positive feedback loops throughout the Alliance, as their experiential insights inform doctrine development, training programs, and operational planning across multiple domains. The practical knowledge gained through managing complex security challenges in demanding environments offers insights that cannot be replicated through theoretical analysis or simulated exercises alone.

4. Psychological Deterrence and Holistic Security

The psychological impact of resilient borderland regions extends far beyond their immediate geographical boundaries to influence adversarial calculations and Alliance confidence in fundamental ways. The demonstration of successful resistance to hybrid threats creates powerful deterrent effects by raising the perceived costs and reducing the expected benefits of aggressive actions while simultaneously enhancing the credibility of collective defence commitments. This psychological dimension of deterrence represents an important force multiplier that enhances the overall effectiveness of Alliance security measures. When borderland regions successfully resist external pressure and maintain their democratic institutions, economic prosperity, and social cohesion, they demonstrate that hybrid warfare tactics have limited effectiveness against well-prepared societies. This demonstration effect influences adversarial decision-making by reducing confidence in the success of hybrid operations.

The confidence and morale effects of successful borderland resilience contribute significantly to Alliance cohesion and solidarity. When borderland regions demonstrate their ability to manage security challenges effectively, it reduces concerns about Alliance vulnerability while enhancing confidence in collective defence capabilities. This psychological reinforcement strengthens Alliance unity and resolve, making collective responses more credible and effective. The cognitive warfare capabilities developed in borderland contexts provide valuable tools for protecting Alliance societies from

manipulation and coercion. The experience of managing sophisticated information warfare campaigns has led to the development of cognitive defence measures that can be applied across the Alliance to protect democratic discourse and decision-making processes from external interference. The narrative and communication strategies developed by borderland regions offer valuable lessons for Alliance-wide strategic communication efforts. The experience of countering adversarial propaganda while maintaining social cohesion under pressure provides practical insights into effective communication strategies that can maintain public support for Alliance policies and operations.

A broader understanding of security requires attention to both supranational shifts in the international order and the processes that shape everyday life. It is essential to understand how security-related decisions by the EU, its member states, and international organisations such as NATO and the United Nations are interconnected. At the same time, local interpretations of global security concerns and the broader perceptions of threat that underpin them are closely tied to social and political stability, economic conditions, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. There is a clear need for a more nuanced understanding of security that incorporates socially constructed and perceived notions of geopolitical risk, helping to assess whether security-oriented policies and measures genuinely make people feel safer. Crises can profoundly influence how citizens experience security in their daily lives, and this everyday sense of security can be politically decisive, as recent events have shown. As societies become increasingly fractured internally, this fragmentation itself poses a security challenge. It is therefore more urgent than ever to understand the multiple drivers of security that operate across societal and international levels.

5. Towards Adaptive Deterrence in an Era of Uncertainty

The strategic reframing of borderlands from peripheral liabilities to central assets represents a crucial evolution in contemporary security thinking. In an era where hybrid threats blur traditional boundaries between internal and external security, borderland regions offer unique laboratories for developing and testing adaptive deterrence strategies that can enhance Alliance-wide resilience and effectiveness. The comprehensive security models developed in borderland contexts, combining government coordination with societal engagement, provide tested frameworks for building resilience from the ground up. The psychological and cognitive dimensions of deterrence that emerge from successful borderland resistance [18] create powerful force multiplication effects that enhance overall Alliance credibility and effectiveness.

As the security environment continues to evolve, the insights gained from studying borderland adaptations to hybrid threats will become increasingly valuable for maintaining democratic values and societal cohesion in the face of persistent uncertainty. The transformation of borderlands from perceived vulnerabilities into strategic assets represents not merely a tactical adjustment but a fundamental reconceptualisation of how deterrence and resilience can be built and sustained in the contemporary security environment. The future of collective security will depend increasingly on our ability to recognise and harness the unique capabilities that emerge from the intersection of geographical proximity, experiential knowledge, and adaptive capacity that characterises well-prepared borderland regions. In this context, the continued study and support of borderland communities represents not just a regional security imperative but a global

strategic necessity for maintaining stability and democratic governance in an age of persistent uncertainty and hybrid challenge.

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PART II

Resilience from Within: Society, Identity, and Memory

Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Engendering Resilience in Times of Conflict: Lessons Learned from Syrian and Ukrainian Women

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Abstract. The resilience experiences of women during conflict and displacement offer valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of resilience, particularly given the protracted nature of conflicts, their wide-reaching impact, and situational complexity. Since the onset of the wars in Syria and Ukraine, refugee women have acquired significant experience and played a central role in fostering resilience – both within war-affected regions and during cross-border mobility and asylum in host countries. Drawing on fieldwork findings, the lived experiences of Syrian and Ukrainian refugee women, and critical literature, this chapter introduces an engendered understanding of resilience in times of conflict. It explores the resilience practices and strategies employed by refugee women to foster both local and cross-border resilience. The study highlights gendered, bottom-up resilience practices developed by displaced women, mobilised at strategic, social, informal, and survival levels. Lessons learned from these women provide valuable insights for advancing gender-informed societal resilience planning within NATO and its member states.

Keywords. Gender, resilience, refugee women, Ukraine, Syria

1. Introduction

"Women turned into strong women; they became fighters," said Rama, a Syrian refugee and mother of three who arrived in Germany in 2015. She was describing the women she encountered during her clandestine cross-border journey from Syria to the European Union. Rama is one of the six million Syrians who have fled the country since 2011 [1]. Rama's words highlight the transformative potential and acts of resilience among women affected by war and conflict. Syrian women have endured prolonged insecurity across multiple stages – from the outbreak of conflict to border crossings, the asylum process, and the challenges of post-war return. The Syrian conflict gradually escalated into an armed struggle involving international powers, terrorist organisations, and local factions,

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creating a highly complex and dynamic war landscape. As violence became concentrated in cities and urban areas, both public and private spaces collapsed, triggering economic, social, and environmental crises, mass killings, and repeated waves of displacement. The rise of ISIS underscored a critical truth: war, conflict, and displacement are not experienced equally by all individuals. Yet, humanitarian aid and emergency responses are often delivered in standardised, gender-blind ways.

The wars in Syria and Ukraine have revealed how the victimisation of women in conflict zones results in increased vulnerability and prolonged dependency on humanitarian aid, undermining prospects for sustainable self-reliance and resilience. Recent research on borders, violence, and gender – drawing on the experiences and strategies of Syrian and Ukrainian women – demonstrates that gender shapes power relations and deeply influences both vulnerability and the capacity to foster resilience. Ukrainian women have actively contributed to border management and the security of Western Ukraine, led cross-border humanitarian and social efforts, organised transnational lobbying against the Russian invasion, and launched solidarity campaigns for the Ukrainian military and refugee support. These actions offer powerful examples of women's collective resilience and solidarity under conditions of war and forced displacement.

Both Syrian and Ukrainian women have shouldered the responsibility of providing security and care for their families, often in the absence of men mobilised in conflict. They have also faced war crimes and gender-based violence—both in transit and during internal displacement. While their experiences share many commonalities, the contexts of their cross-border mobility differ. Ukrainian women primarily moved across Eastern European and EU borders, while Syrian women navigated complex routes involving internal militia checkpoints and militarised crossings into Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and across securitised EU borders in the Mediterranean, Aegean, and the heavily patrolled Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek borders.

Although approximately 70% of Syrian women initially found refuge in culturally similar neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, millions continued to seek safety and dignity in the European Union. This journey often involved deadly and dangerous routes across multiple international borders. Along the way, refugee women were exposed to gender-based violence, including trafficking, kidnapping, sexual exploitation, and rape [2]. Both Ukrainian and Syrian refugee women encountered multi-dimensional vulnerabilities – such as lack of access to information, resources, and social networks, compounded by poverty – during their search for asylum, and throughout the processes of reception, detention, and settlement. Despite these adverse conditions, they continued to fulfil caregiving responsibilities for children and elderly relatives. These compounded challenges catalysed novel gendered forms of resilience, prompting displaced women to emerge as "fighters" and community defenders.

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has been adopted by the EU and, more recently, by NATO, in line with its shift toward comprehensive security and whole-of-society resilience. In this context, this chapter argues that sustainable resilience, peace, and security can be achieved through an intersectional, gender-sensitive, and bottom-up approach that recognises the strategic role displaced women can play in strengthening local, cross-border, and regional resilience and security. It explores the novel gendered understandings, forms, and strategies of resilience developed by Syrian and Ukrainian women during exile and conflict in Syria and Ukraine. Following a brief introduction to critical and feminist approaches to resilience, the chapter examines the security and

resilience strategies of Syrian and Ukrainian women and concludes with key lessons learned, future implications, and directions for further research on resilience.

2. Gendered Security and Comprehensive Resilience

Resilience is an abstract concept that can be traced back to ecology, where it is used to describe the ability of the ecosystem to recover from shocks [3]. With the growing global challenges, the concept evolved and shifted to social studies, including psychology, economics, policy development, and humanitarian literature. Resilience is often a crisis-driven concept associated with adversity and shocks. Resilience in psychology focuses on resilience at the personal level, where personal qualities, like self-confidence and openness, interact with the event to produce positive outcomes [4]. Resilience emerged as a dominant discourse embraced by international organisations, like the World Bank and humanitarian agencies, where building resilience is essential for sustainable development and long-lasting project impact, where it has been used in various contexts like migration, peacebuilding, and good governance. Resilience in the development literature has multiple models and indicators to measure the ability to survive and recover. It is helpful to highlight the BMZ model that recognises the three social resilience capacities: stabilisation and survival, adaptation, and transformation to achieve structural change [5].

In the security studies literature, resilience is often associated with states' risk management and national preparation to ensure state survival and deterrence in the context of uncertainty [6]. Under the pressure of globalisation, the resilience concept underwent reconstruction that brought a relatively new and broad conception to NATO's traditional block-centred discourse. While Article 3 of the Washington Treaty defined resilience as a capacity-building approach for member states for defence, after the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the resilience concept was introduced under seven baselines to assess civil preparedness in times of conflict [7]. In the 2021 Brussels Summit, NATO adopted a more institutionalised approach to resilience through its 2030 agenda and "Strengthened Resilience Commitment" of member states. Yet, a robust understanding of societal resilience and social cohesion was missing in the mainstream discourse. It was the critical security scholars who questioned the concept of resilience by addressing the relationship between power and empowerment, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the state-centric definition of security and insecurity. In this regard, resilience was understood as a neoliberal governmentality approach that burdens communities to carry the shocks and adapt, rather than addressing the root causes and structural inequalities [8]. Moreover, the critical security literature highlighted the need to expand the resilience understanding by shifting the attention from systems and adaptation objectives to societies and their "everyday resistance" to power structures across different time-space contexts and identities [9]. Women are usually exposed to various forms of gender-based violence at different stages of the conflicts and displacement, while often they respond and cope with these insecurities in various ways. So, gender leaves an impact on both security experiences and resilience as well. Feminist literature criticised the hegemonic discourse on resilience as it (re)reproduces gender stereotypes when it brings little contextual understanding, depoliticising their subjects and agency, generally addressing women in the global south's need for resilience-building and empowerment programs to reduce their vulnerability [10, 11].

Feminist literature has expanded the concept of resilience by examining how power relations shape the gendered experiences of insecurity, as well as individuals' and

communities' capacities to cope and recover. In this context, resilience is not merely a matter of personal survival or a system's ability to withstand shocks. A gendered understanding of resilience highlights the power structures underlying insecurity and recovery. Gender influences access to resources, opportunities, and social networks, thereby exposing persistent structural inequalities and questioning the role of patriarchy in shaping resilience during conflict. In this sense, resilience acquires transformative potential by challenging the status quo of structural violence and gender inequality through bottom-up collective action, solidarity, agency, and mutual care – extending beyond patriarchal and institutional governance structures. By centring the everyday experiences of marginalised groups and politicising their voices, feminist approaches assert that the personal is political and that acts of resistance offer critical insights for resilience studies.

In contrast to mainstream conceptions, gendered resilience emphasises bottom-up knowledge, mechanisms, and strategies aimed at long-term justice and liberation. This approach is especially important today, as two-thirds of the displaced population consists of refugee women and children who are disproportionately affected by armed conflict and gender-based violence – In their countries of origin, during transit, at borders, and in host countries.

3. Methodology

In addition to academic literature and international reports, this chapter draws on data, observations, and accumulated knowledge from fieldwork and research activities conducted with Syrian and Ukrainian women between 2014 and 2024. The researchers both have refugee backgrounds. Their positionalities have facilitated access to refugee communities and enabled more empathetic and effective engagement with displaced women.

The research relied on snowball sampling to reach Syrian and Ukrainian women, and the collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. The first set of data was gathered during the Raoul Wallenberg Institute Grant for Engendering the Syrian Refugee Crisis fieldwork in 2014–2015. In this phase, 25 face-to-face, semi-structured, women-to-women in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian refugee women, along with 5 interviews with LGBT refugees in Istanbul.

Between 2018 and 2023, Nour Zanjer conducted online semi-structured interviews with 15 Syrian refugee women residing in Germany as part of the Borders and Gender in Mediterranean and Balkan Migration Routes research project supported by Istanbul University BAP. Additionally, 21 semi-structured interviews in Arabic were carried out with 16 Syrian women living in various Turkish cities (Istanbul, Gaziantep, Iskenderun, and Konya), and 5 Syrian women residing in Austria, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands during the Syrian Women's Solidarity Strategies research project (September–November 2020).

In April 2023, Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu participated in a JSPS-funded project on migration and borders in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, conducting field research along the Ukrainian borders. This included observations and short interviews with Ukrainian women engaged in humanitarian aid across the border regions. The field visit was followed by a NATO-funded seminar, Women for Peace: Objectives, Strategies, Experiences, organised by the authors of this chapter on May 3, 2023. During the seminar, valuable insights were gathered from the presentations of prominent Ukrainian

women activists and experts, including NAKO Director Olena Tregub, Tisza EGTC Director Andrea Cap, and Istanbul University faculty member Dr. Oleksandra Kalmykova. Finally, in April 2024, additional data were collected from presentations delivered by Ukrainian refugee women in Istanbul during a UNHCR-funded Intercultural Project workshop held at Istanbul University's Beyazıt Campus.

Two key considerations emerged in the course of conducting research with conflict-affected women. First, there is the risk of retraumatisation, as discussing war, displacement, and gender-based violence can trigger painful memories. Many women, especially among the Syrian participants from conservative backgrounds, were hesitant to share their experiences. To mitigate this risk, the researchers paid close attention to nonverbal cues, asked indirect questions, and avoided sensitive topics when necessary. Second, capturing grassroots knowledge can have a transformative impact on both personal and strategic levels. Many interviewees reported that sharing their stories and having their voices heard was an empowering experience. Strategically, the inclusion of grassroots knowledge is essential for inclusive planning and the formulation of sustainable, gender-sensitive policies.

4. Understanding Resilience Through the Eyes of Refugee Women

The wars in Syria and Ukraine have caused territorial fragmentation, widespread human rights violations, protracted displacement, and severe humanitarian crises. As of February 2025, there are 3.7 million internally displaced people in Ukraine and 6.9 million Ukrainian refugees worldwide. Since 2021, approximately 12.7 million Ukrainians have required humanitarian assistance, including nearly 2 million children [15]. More than half of the Syrian population – 14 million Syrians [16] – were either internally displaced or refugees, constituting the largest refugee population in neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. About 70 % of the Ukrainian refugees are women [12], 90% of this war-driven population lives below the poverty line and faces constant structural violence. Only 14 % of Ukrainian women are officially employed [13,14], while a study shows that only 6% Syrian women in Türkiye have a paid job [15]. Illegal employment, social exploitation and poverty often intensifies the gender-based violence in different forms including sexual attacks, abduction, rape and sexual violence, women trafficking [16], early marriages, domestic violence, survivors' stigmatisation and culture of shame, as observed in the case of Syrian women. In both conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, disrupted state infrastructure hindered women's access to social and economic resources and basic needs like food, education, healthcare, and reproductive health, thus obstructing their gender roles in the household. Most of the refugee women live under temporary and fragile protection status provided by the neighbouring countries. Both Ukrainian and Syrian refugees face xenophobia, precarious protection, and limited social services in the host countries [17].

In the context of the EU externalisation policies, border securitisation, and widening militia controls along the borders in the Middle East and North Africa, many refugee women sought dangerous routes and clandestine, deadly journeys across the Mediterranean Sea and various land borders [18]. Numerous reports have highlighted the insecurities women face when crossing international or local militia-controlled borders, including exposure to death, psychological trauma, violence, sexual exploitation, and transactional sex perpetrated by smugglers, security personnel, or other male counterparts [19]. Single women on the move and in transit camps are at higher risk of

human trafficking and sexual exploitation compared to men [20]. These conditions are reflected in refugee women's understanding of resilience during conflict and displacement. Gender power dynamics have shifted for refugee women due to their new economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities, which have fostered their agency and visibility in the public sphere. These changes are evident in the structural reconstruction of refugee women's understanding of resilience.

Besides its mainstream state-centred definition, resilience is a concept with multiple meanings that are often culturally embedded, especially at the societal level. Resilience frequently operates invisibly through informal activities and everyday efforts. This is why the meaning of resilience for refugee women is often expressed through their testimonies, expressions, experiences, practices, art, and meaning-making. For refugee women, resilience has both personal and collective dimensions. It reflects an inner strength developed and realised through and after adversity, nurtured by emotions, principles, and private connections.

Resilience as inner personal empowerment is well expressed by Tasneem, a Syrian woman in Germany: "I was able to know the dimensions of my personality, the dimensions of my strength, and the dimensions of how persistent I am." Resilience as the ability to successfully adapt to stressors and maintain psychological well-being in the face of adversity is directly connected to women's experience of exile: "Resilience is my title as a refugee. If I'm not resilient, I'm not going to be a refugee," said Fatima, a Syrian woman in Istanbul.

Unlike traditional gender-neutral approaches to family resilience, engendered resilience links family resilience to the strengthened role of women as protectors, caregivers, and keepers of faith. For both Ukrainian and Syrian women, resilience is closely intertwined with their social roles as mothers and caretakers of children: "I have to be very strong. I have to hold on to my family and not be weak," said Wardah, a Syrian mother in Germany. In this way, refugee women demonstrate sustainable personal and collective mechanisms for building not only physical resilience but also mental, emotional, and social resilience.

There are numerous cases where these personal efforts and responsibilities are connected to solidarity networks of resilience, as in the case of Nata Ellis, a Ukrainian mother who organised Ukrainian refugee women in Plovdiv and turned an abandoned hospital building into a living space for thousands of refugee families. Or there is the case of Andrea, a Hungarian woman from the border city of Záhony (Western Ukraine) who gathered other refugee women, expanded her family resilience efforts across Hungarian-Ukrainian borders, and established a cross-border network for the provision of medical and food supplies to war-affected children and women in Ukraine. In both Syrian and Ukrainian refugee women's communities, the resilience showed a strong collective nature.

There are numerous examples where personal efforts and responsibilities are linked to broader solidarity networks of resilience. For instance, Nata Ellis, a Ukrainian mother, organised refugee women in Plovdiv and transformed an abandoned hospital building into a living space for thousands of refugee families. Similarly, Andrea, a Hungarian woman from the border city of Záhony (near Western Ukraine), brought together other refugee women, extended her family resilience efforts across the Hungarian-Ukrainian border, and established a cross-border network to provide medical and food supplies to war-affected children and women in Ukraine. In both Syrian and Ukrainian refugee communities, resilience clearly demonstrated a strong collective character.

Given the communal nature of Syrian society [21], Syrian women sought to protect their families but also joined other networks and initiatives for solidarity under displacement or during their cross-border journeys. The fieldwork revealed numerous grassroots transnational solidarity networks sharing life-saving knowledge, experience, expertise, and needs at every stage and context of conflict and displacement. As observed in the cases of Ukrainian women in Istanbul, Záhony (Hungary) [22], Szelmenc (a border city between Ukraine and Slovakia), and Plovdiv (Bulgaria), resilience among Ukrainian women refugees represents an intersectional, dynamic process, performance, practice, and strategy, encompassing a wide range of collective solidarity experiences and self-reliance capabilities and efforts [23].

Shaped by the experiences of refugee women, the understanding of resilience in this chapter challenges the dominant state-centric paradigm by highlighting the concept's societal, culturally embedded, and intersectional aspects. The following section presents a variety of bottom-up resilience strategies developed and implemented by displaced women during the wars in Ukraine and Syria. These strategies provide valuable insights for developing a social, intersectional, and inclusive approach to resilience.

5. Engendered Strategies of Resilience: Lessons Learned from Ukrainian and Syrian Women Security and Comprehensive Resilience Heading

Ukrainian and Syrian women have developed resilience strategies that offer valuable insights for strengthening social resilience and reshaping security architectures along the Eastern European and Mediterranean axis. These strategies, developed and implemented at the local level and often in the absence or failure of state institutions, provide rich bottom-up perspectives on the mechanisms, capacities, and lessons that women contribute to the processes of stabilisation, adaptation, and transformation within resilience frameworks.

5.1. Social Infrastructure Substitution

The conflicts in Syria and the Russian invasion of Ukraine had a severe impact on the civilian infrastructure and the functioning of the public domain. The direct targeting of civilian facilities damaged access to basic human rights, health, education, and transportation facilities, while rendering many hospitals and schools out of service [24]. Since most of the men were involved in the war, women have borne the brunt of caregiving and crisis management under both siege and displacement. An example of this can be illustrated in Eastern Ghouta, the region that has been under prolonged siege for more than five years by the Syrian regime and its allies [25]. Syrian women in Eastern Ghouta bridged the gaps in the education and health sectors by forming networks to sustain schooling and healthcare for their families and communities. Women in Eastern Ghouta converted their houses into informal schools and clinics. They formed home-based education and basement schools for children whose education was interrupted. Moreover, under low health conditions, shortages in supplies, and fear, women were able to maintain healthcare in their basements and establish informal home clinics [26].

As observed in the refugee centres in Plovdiv, Istanbul, and Záhony, displaced women maintained their roles in offering care work and creating conventional lives for their children under siege. They converted the basements into safe spaces, decorating them for their children, to mitigate their fear and ensure their survival [27]:

> *The basement is basically a warehouse, but I prepared one corner of it and brought a board and chalk for my children to write and draw on. I decorated it with their drawings and what remained of their toys, and we lit it with LEDs to reduce the darkness as much as possible. When the shelling intensifies, I tell them stories, we read the Quran together, we sing the songs we have memorised, and I draw for them so they can be busy colouring. I try to compensate them as much as I can for the parts of their lost childhood and their shattered security.*

Syrian women played a crucial role in smuggling food, water, and medicine into besieged regions, as they were less likely to be subjected to security checks at the predominantly male checkpoints [28]. Similarly, Ukrainian women in Istanbul and many European countries collected and delivered medical supplies and immunisations for childcare to war-affected cities in Eastern Ukraine. A transnational group of Ukrainian refugee mothers also developed regional breastfeeding solidarity networks to support Ukrainian mothers and unaccompanied babies in the war-affected zones [29]. The reception centre established by Ukrainian women in Plovdiv, coordinated by Nata Ellis, provides a remarkable example of building self-reliance and sustainable resilience in exile. Ellis and her grassroots supporters successfully brought together various stakeholders from local and global governance, the private sector, education, and health institutions to launch a collective initiative for building the centre. As described by Ukrainian refugee women[30], it became a life-saving space for all refugees in the region: "The centre is very much like a little village or community in the sense that everyone helps with everything, from cleaning to looking after each other's children when they need to go to work. People are each other's support network here, not only during the time they are staying at the centre but even when they decide to leave and rent a flat on their own". This centre became a community-building space where women, children, and the elderly affected by the war could share their problems, find healing, and strengthen their personal and psychological resilience. Most initiatives aimed at building resilience through providing stability and safety were started by single refugee women or small grassroots groups that, in many cases, grew into strong civil society organisations and cross-border social networks.

5.2. Self-Organisation and Community Building

Women-led civil society organisations have filled the gaps left by failed public services during the conflict. In this context, and due to shifting gender roles, refugee women who previously had no involvement in public affairs took on new responsibilities by offering humanitarian aid and development support to their communities. They engaged in organising assistance, community building, initiating grassroots networks, and mobilising efforts both under siege and across borders. One example is Nada Samie, whose husband was killed and who was wanted by the Syrian regime. After overcoming her own psychological crisis, she founded the first women's volunteer organisation in Idlib, which helped support women who had lost their breadwinners by providing training in psychological support, medical care, and education [31]: "Now I am a strong woman. When I see a child's joy when it receives a gift or a lesson, my self-confidence increases, and I can challenge the whole world, and I have a greater desire to give."

These feelings and the belief in societal self-resilience surpassed the militarised borders and connected refugee women with the women under siege and internal displacement. Such was the case of the Syrian journalist Samar Yazbek, who sought refuge in France and established "Women Now for Development" in 2012 in Paris to provide advocacy, protection, and empowerment support for Syrian women under siege. Her organisation provided training workshops in development project management, home farming for self-sufficiency, and distance education strategies. Hundreds of Ukrainian women all over the world became intermediaries and connected displaced women in Ukraine with funding, humanitarian aid providers, and global networks, as in the case of women in Beirut who connected Ukrainian mothers with the La Leche movement and facilitated the survival of hundreds of newborn Ukrainian babies. Social media or street protests [32], signing petitions as a means of engaging in transnational political activism, fundraising events, and social media campaigns, globalised the local problems, calls, and needs, inspired others to join their cause, and furnished critical material support to those on the frontlines. Thousands of refugee women initiated or supported community building and called on the international community to end the war in Syria, force an immediate ceasefire, and preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity, and advocated for ensuring accountability at the international tribunal for Putin's and Assad's war crimes and crimes against humanity. Women's involvement was not merely about raising their voices but was about ensuring resonance not only among fellow Ukrainians worldwide but also with global audiences following their narratives through the media.

Transnational community building broadened women's opportunities for online employment and entrepreneurship as a primary means for coping with poverty and reaching self-realisation. Ukrainian kindergarten teachers and medical sisters opened kindergartens and health centres to enable the rest of the refugee women to work and build their self-reliance. Women entrepreneurship [33] became a widespread practice among Syrian women who did not use to work before the war in Syria. Many Syrian women faced challenges of a patriarchal nature, especially those residing under conservative pressure in Syria. Women's solidarity networks carried out advocacy and offered vital support in cases involving limited resources and logistical challenges. Many Syrian women opened their homes for workshops, courses, training sessions, and local initiatives aimed at employment and psychological empowerment. These examples of women's engagement in self-organisation and civil initiatives played a key role in facilitating the adaptation and resilience efforts of Syrian and Ukrainian women throughout the conflict.

5.3. Sustaining Security Through Informal Networks

Both Syrian and Ukrainian women prioritised building survival and protection mechanisms rooted in family ties, maintaining their roles in hosting, feeding, and caring for their families throughout all phases of conflict and displacement. They developed informal networks to sustain the security and survival of their families, and in the case of Syrian women, often extended these networks to support their broader communities. For example, many Syrian women provided safe haven for regime dissidents fleeing security forces. They opened their homes to soldiers who had defected from the regime's forces, offering them food, healthcare, and logistical support. Through these informal networks, Syrian women also created safe corridors for men to either flee the country or join opposition forces. Across the country, many women opened their homes and private

spaces to protesters escaping persecution, using these spaces to store essential logistical items such as banners and cameras [34]. Many Syrian women were actively involved in developing early warning informal networks during the demonstrations in the early years of the conflict. They participated in neighbourhood surveillance, informing the community about the approach of security forces and providing timely alerts about checkpoints. As one of our interviewees [35] said:

> *There was a revolutionary movement by Syrian women who were also very active on social media, whether through warnings or coordination. During the demonstrations that took place, we worked on warning, for example, about the places from which the security forces would enter... You know how the security forces enter in an ugly way and spread out in the streets and destroy.*

Similarly, Ukrainian women mobilised to produce military equipment and clothing for Ukrainian soldiers. Hundreds of medical professionals remained at health centres located along the military frontlines. Many Ukrainian women also established lobby groups opposing Russian armament. Both Syrian and Ukrainian women actively mobilised to combat gender-based violence and human trafficking across borders, one of the most dangerous and uncertain phases of asylum journeys due to increased border securitisation. Virtual solidarity networks played a critical role by sharing reliable information about asylum routes to the EU, saving many refugees' lives and serving as preventive measures against trafficking and gender-based violence. Numerous women's WhatsApp and Facebook groups provided guidance on the journey, including information about destination countries, border procedures, coping with smuggling and trafficking, the safest routes and associated costs, risks, and strategies to avoid violence and ensure safe passage and legal status in host countries [36]. These online virtual networks generated reliable knowledge, provided access to trustworthy information, and helped deter potential gender-based exploitation. These examples of resilience demonstrate women's capacity to adapt to insecure conditions and challenging circumstances.

5.4. Narrative Resistance and Memory Record

Mainstream literature often portrays women primarily as victims, reconstructing their roles as objects of vulnerability and suffering. Such narratives tend to lead to the pacification and dependency of women trapped in conflict. In contrast, the narrative resistance developed by women's rights activists and intellectuals has played an emancipatory role by restoring refugee women as agents of change and resilience. Both Syrian and Ukrainian women employed narrative solidarity and strategies to challenge dominant discourses and amplify the voices silenced by patriarchal and masculine power structures. Narrative resistance thus became a vital tool for survival, justice, and the preservation of collective memory from erasure.

The narrative resistance developed by refugee women took many forms, including writing testimonies and documenting war crimes, producing documentaries, conducting archival projects, storytelling [37], preserving oral histories, publishing stories and reports, academic research, social media activism, and running disinformation or counter-propaganda campaigns within women's networks. One example is the social media campaign "Survivors or Not Yet," launched in 2019 to raise awareness about former

female detainees and the barriers they face to reintegration in Syrian society [38]. Another example is the Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA), an oral history project that presents an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and local narrative of the Syrian conflict, challenging the official pro-Assad discourse [39]. Documenting survival and resistance became a powerful deterrence mechanism that fostered trust-building, human rights emancipation, and justice. Refugee women played a central role in recording and preserving collective memory, laying the groundwork for justice, accountability, and peacebuilding.

5.5. Advocacy and Peacebuilding

For long years, women were left out of formal peace talks and negotiations. After the mass displacement of women and children in Syria, the Global Women for Peace movements and the Syrian Refugee Women network called for Syrian women's representation at the peace talks [40]. In 2019, the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, formed the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB), which included 15 women who advocated for the inclusion of women in peace processes, finding consensus on controversial issues critical to stability, including aid delivery and the release of detainees. Besides the WAB, the Syrian Constitutional Committee hosted the highest percentage (30%) of women representatives in the Middle East. According to the data collected by the Council on Foreign Relations, peace talks and negotiations in Syria involved the highest rate (%28) of women's representation when compared to the ongoing conflicts in the world [41].

Despite these positive developments on behalf of Syrian women, refugee women continue to face systemic marginalisation and silencing. Ukrainian women also formed their political networks – like the Syrian Women's Political Movement – and continue working on channelling their voices to influence the process of peacebuilding and engage in informal and formal peace negotiations. It was surprising to see that women's participation in the formal peace talks in Ukraine remained zero. However, the rate of Ukrainian women represented in informal peace-making and peace negotiations is expected to be higher. Refugee women's political activism at the international level promoted the institutionalisation of their voices and activated their political agency in boosting sustainable peace and security.

As local agents of resilience, refugee women developed the capability to bring local knowledge and expectations to the fore of international politics. Their participation in local governance, municipal councils, and mediated ceasefire negotiations leaves a constructive impact on policy choice and design. One example is in the Damascus suburb of Zabadani, where women mediated a temporary ceasefire between the opposition and the regime forces [42]. Their role was instrumental in convincing the parties to adopt the ceasefire. Syrian women's efforts to restore local order, build trust, and join peace talks advanced the security agenda during the conflict. These efforts reflected their resilience and transformation capacities.

6. Conclusion

This chapter explored the gendered meanings and strategies of resilience developed and exercised by Syrian and Ukrainian women, highlighting their contributions to engendering mainstream resilience and security frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that resilience for refugee women extends beyond personal strength, caregiving, family,

motherhood, and faith; it also involves emancipation, cross-border solidarity, community building, and political activism for peace. Despite facing local and regional challenges, refugee women embraced adversity and developed their own approaches to self-realisation and resilience. The engendered concept of resilience challenges the dominant, state-centric paradigm by emphasising its societal, culturally embedded, and contextual aspects. The chapter suggests that sustainable resilience, peace, and security can be achieved through an intersectional, gender-sensitive approach that recognises the strategic role displaced women play in enhancing local, cross-border, and regional resilience and security. Contributing to the growing literature on social approaches to resilience, this chapter offers bottom-up insights into lessons, mechanisms, and capacities that women have developed to strengthen resilience planning and implementation.

Multi-dimensional and dynamic, the resilience strategies developed by refugee women encompass activities such as substituting social infrastructure, self-organisation, community building, sustaining security through informal networks, narrative resistance and memory work, advocacy, and bottom-up peacebuilding. Through these strategies, refugee women demonstrated not only their capacity for everyday survival but also their abilities to adapt and redefine preparedness in gendered terms – capacities often overlooked by formal military institutions.

Both Syrian and Ukrainian women participated in various aspects of the conflict as border guards, service providers, humanitarian workers, lobbyists, and monitors on the ground. They contributed to documenting human rights violations, organising and joining demonstrations, providing humanitarian relief, and mobilising resources for development initiatives within and beyond Syria and Ukraine. The cross-border community initiatives led by Syrian and Ukrainian women, including their roles in mediation, peacebuilding, and advocacy, influenced power structures by gaining visibility and a voice that led to transformative change. In this regard, it is essential to support women-led cross-border initiatives and allocate dedicated funding to bridge formal and informal response systems.

Refugee women have built local models of resilience. Their experiences in enhancing everyday security and integration offer lessons not only for Syria and Ukraine but also a broader call to rethink the narrow, defensive, and formal understanding of resilience. Their experiences highlight the need to expand the definition of resilience beyond state-centric approaches and incorporate a gendered perspective to develop sustainable strategies for security, civil preparedness, conflict resolution, and self-reliance. Therefore, it is recommended that women's local knowledge and expertise be systematically included in civil preparedness planning. Further research on the gender-resilience nexus and investment in women's capacities at the grassroots level is crucial. There is a particular need for comparative analyses of resilience strategies across different conflict contexts, as well as for scaling best practices through pilot programs to develop a more representative and inclusive resilience framework and approach.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Memory Politics in the Norwegian-Russian Borderland: From Diplomacy to Deterrence

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Abstract. This chapter explores memory politics in the Norwegian-Russian borderland, focusing on how memorials and commemorative practices have shifted from fostering diplomacy to becoming tools of geopolitical contention. Initially, Norway employed memory diplomacy to maintain low tensions with the Soviet Union and later Russia, emphasising shared narratives of World War II, such as the Soviet liberation of Kirkenes. In the borderland, this diplomacy resulted in the cultivation of a memoryscape of monuments and commemorations symbolising Norwegian-Russian brotherhood. However, since 2014, Russia has increasingly exploited both monuments and commemorations in order to advance its own nationalist narratives. Consequently, the function of the memoryscape has changed from a tool of security to a source of insecurity, potentially undermining Norway's interests in the borderland. The Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point, ending joint commemorations and sparking local resistance against Russian memory offensives. Grassroots actors have employed creative and symbolic measures to reclaim the memoryscape, exposing propaganda and asserting Norwegian sovereignty. Despite these efforts, the absence of a coordinated national strategy leaves local actors vulnerable and highlights the need for stronger national engagement. The chapter underscores the importance of memory politics, both with regards to national identity, security and resilience.

Keywords. Memory politics, memory diplomacy, mnemonical security, deterrence, Norway-Russia relations

1. Introduction

In geopolitically sensitive regions like the Norwegian-Russian borderland, history is not merely remembered – it is weaponised. This chapter examines the intersection of memory politics and security, focusing on how memorials and commemorative practices in Norway's border region with Russia have been transformed from tools of diplomacy into instruments of subversion and deterrence.

During World War II, the Red Army liberated parts of Northern Norway from German occupation, an event that has since shaped the region's commemorative landscape and bilateral relations. For decades, Norway engaged in memory diplomacy, using shared commemorations to reduce tensions and foster goodwill with its eastern

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neighbour. Central to this effort was the cultivation of a memoryscape – a symbolic and physical landscape of war memorials and ceremonies that emphasised narratives of Norwegian-Russian brotherhood.

Since 2014, however, this memoryscape has become a contested space. Russia has increasingly co-opted the commemorative practices to disseminate propaganda and assert nationalist narratives, both within and beyond the border region. This memory offensive was largely unchecked until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which underscored the urgent need for mnemonical security and resilience.

In response, local actors have adopted creative and symbolic measures to counter Russian narratives and reclaim the memoryscape. By examining these dynamics, this chapter highlights the dual-edged nature of memory politics: while shared commemorations can build bridges, they can also be exploited, and become battlegrounds for narrative control, with profound implications for national identity, security, and resilience.

2. Memory Politics and Security

Security is not limited to physical security. It encompasses a wide range of dimensions, including ontological security, which, in a broad sense, can be understood as the "security of identity" or the "sense of Self [1]." Mnemonical security, security relating to memory and memorialisation, can be considered an important dimension of ontological security [2]. As Gustafsson [1] notes, "collective memory provides group members with a feeling of sameness and a sense of who they are, i.e., with ontological security," and "memory is central to the creation and preservation of collectives." Mälksoo [3] has referred to mnemonical security as "the idea that distinct understandings of the past should be fixed in public remembrance and consciousness in order to buttress an actor's stable sense of self as the basis of its political agency." For states, mnemonical security involves protecting collective national memories – the story of who we were and who we are – from manipulation and appropriation.

The mnemonical security of states is influenced by international memory politics, which involves instrumentalising the past through narratives and commemorations for present geopolitical aims. On an international level, memory politics is, as Gustafsson and Mälksoo [2] note, "intertwined with geopolitics." Memory politics plays a significant role in geopolitical practices and relations. It can manifest as memory diplomacy, fostering cooperation and alliance-building, or as aggressive memory offensives, where states attempt to impose narratives of the past on others.

Memory diplomacy can be defined as "political actors' identification, creation and development of commonalities of memory for geopolitical purposes and/or bilateral relations [4]." McGlynn [5] defines it as "a form of public diplomacy in which states or political groups try to improve relations and reputations by exporting commemorative practices and historical narratives and by allying their own historical narratives with those of another country." Memory diplomacy is a constructive tool in bilateral interactions, benefiting both parties to some extent.

In contrast to memory diplomacy, memory offensives aim to impose specific narratives on other states or undermine their narratives. Such offensives are evident in so-called "memory wars" or more subtle incursions and influence operations. Memory offensives threaten mnemonical security and necessitate mnemopolitical deterrence. Gustafsson and Mälksoo [2] define mnemopolitical deterrence as "the ways in which

states seek to dissuade other political actors from taking actions that threaten the collective memory narratives underpinning the ontological security of the deterring actor." States are, however, not the only actors that may engage in such deterrence. Local non-state actors may also play a role as will be demonstrated in this chapter. Unlike military deterrence, which is primarily physical, mnemopolitical deterrence is largely performative, operating through political rhetoric, declarations, diplomatic insults, commemorative practices, and punitive memory laws [2].

Given the importance of memory for national identity and ontological security, mnemopolitical deterrence is crucial. As Gustafsson and Mälksoo [2] note, "memory-political deterrence matters greatly as it provides meaning and ontological security to collective actors in search thereof." Strengthening mnemopolitical deterrence is essential for enhancing resilience, particularly in volatile regions like borderlands, where state sovereignty may be challenged. Conversely, neglecting mnemopolitical defence and deterrence can have perilous consequences, as this chapter will demonstrate.

3. Norwegian Memory Diplomacy: Building Bridges in the Borderland

The Norway–Russia border holds a profound history of geopolitical significance. During the Cold War, it was one of only two borders separating NATO from the Soviet Union, symbolising the stark divide between East and West. Today, it remains a NATO–Russia border and serves as an external Schengen border.

On the Norwegian side of the border lies the Varanger region, a historic borderland with deep ties to neighbouring Russia and Finland. The region's main towns – Vardø, Vadsø, and Kirkenes – reflect its unique cultural and historical heritage. In Kirkenes, just a few kilometres from the Russian border, stands the Soviet Liberation Monument. This two-meter-high bronze statue of a Red Army soldier, atop a slightly taller stone pedestal, was erected in 1952 by the Norwegian state and local authorities. The monument bears the inscription: "To the Soviet Union's brave soldiers in memory of the liberation of Kirkenes 1944." The monument is one of the few monuments dedicated to the Red Army outside Russia and its satellite states.

Until 2022, the monument stood out among Soviet memorials abroad for being largely free of controversy. This can be attributed to the unique local perception of the Soviets as liberators. During the war, the area was occupied by German forces, who used it as a bridgehead for their failed attempt to capture the Soviet port of Murmansk. In 1944, Soviet forces expelled the unpopular German occupiers, aided the displaced local population (whose houses had been burned by the Germans during their retreat), and peacefully transferred control back to Norwegian authorities once stability was restored [6]. This positive memory stands in stark contrast to the Soviet army's role as an occupying and suppressive force in other countries after the war.

Since its unveiling, the monument has served as the site of commemorations marking the Soviet liberation, with participation from both Norwegian and Soviet—later Russian—authorities. These commemorations typically occur on October 25, the anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Kirkenes, and, in recent years, also on Victory Day (May 9). Every fifth year, larger commemorations are held, featuring more prominent participation from both sides [7].

The erection of the Soviet Liberation Monument, along with the subsequent commemorations where Soviet delegations were invited to take part, serves as an early example of Norwegian memory diplomacy in its relations with the Soviet Union in the

borderland. As Markussen [6] observes in an article on the monument's establishment, "the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs learned how to use the collective memories of the Soviet liberation to ensure Norway's security-policy goal of maintaining low tension in its relations with the USSR." The monument and the ceremonies held there "became important tools with which Norway developed a critical dialogue with its great-power neighbour [6]." During the Cold War, Norway's security policy toward the Soviet Union was characterised by a careful balancing act: leveraging the deterrent effect of NATO membership while simultaneously offering reassurance [8]. Memory diplomacy, centred on the shared history of the Soviet liberation, became a key element of this reassurance strategy. It complemented military measures, such as self-imposed restrictions on troop deployments and exercises near the border, by fostering a sense of mutual respect and dialogue.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Norway sought to build good bilateral relations with Russia by expanding its memory diplomacy in the borderland. Thematically, Norwegian memory diplomacy continued to focus on World War II. However, in addition to the history of the Soviet liberation, the memorialisation also focused on the Partisans, a regional Norwegian resistance movement who fought for the Soviet Union behind enemy lines during World War II and whose efforts were only acknowledged by the Norwegian state in the 1980s [9]. Other historical epochs unrelated to the war were also highlighted, such as the 18th and 19th-century Pomor Trade between Northwest Russia and Northern Norway. All these themes were cultivated to evoke Norwegian-Russian commonality, peace, and friendship in the borderland. Importantly, they also resonated with local heritage and history: the Soviet liberation in Kirkenes, the partisans' history, and the Pomor Trade in Vardø. As a result, the Norwegian-Russian memory diplomacy garnered considerable support from local communities.

This renewed efforts from the Norwegian side resulted in the erection of additional monuments and commemorative objects related to the war. For example, a monument commemorating the local population's greeting of the approaching Red Army in 1944 was unveiled in Kirkenes in 2008. In Vardø, two monuments commemorating the Partisans were erected as recently as 2018 and 2019 [10, 11]. Today the borderland is saturated with World War II related monuments. Only in the municipality of Sør-Varanger there are no less than 20 such monuments [12]. Museums related to World War II were also established, such as the Borderland Museum (Norwegian: *Grenselandmuseet*) in Kirkenes, which opened in 1997. Its permanent war exhibition documents and celebrates the Soviet liberation, with a Soviet World War II warplane, donated by the Russian state, displayed prominently at its centre.

The old and new memorials served as focal points for joint Norwegian-Russian commemorative events, often featuring high-level participation from both sides. For the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Kirkenes in 1994, King Harald V visited the Soviet Liberation Monument, accompanied by the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, the foreign minister, and the defence minister. Russia was represented by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. In 2008, the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers, Jonas Gahr Støre and Sergei Lavrov, made a joint visit to the monument. Five years later, in 2013, the two countries' prime ministers, Jens Stoltenberg and Dmitry Medvedev, also visited the site together [13]. For the anniversaries in 2014 and 2019, King Harald was once again present, accompanied by Prime Minister Erna Solberg. On both occasions, Foreign Minister Lavrov represented Russia. These commemorative events typically included wreath-laying ceremonies, public speeches emphasising the historical brotherhood between the two countries, and expressions of Norway's gratitude to the

Soviet Union and Russia for liberating Kirkenes. The events also involved public celebrations with broad participation from local communities [7].

Thanks to the intense memorialisation after the Cold War, a unique and distinct memoryscape gradually emerged in the Norwegian borderland, constructed and reproduced both through the material marking of space and through the commemorations and more ephemeral performative practices.

The construction of the memoryscape and the joint commemorations continued even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In fact, "they were enlarged both in terms of celebratory content, political representation, and public participation [14]." The 2014 liberation commemorations turned out to be the biggest ever, with a program encompassing more than 60 events. This paradoxical upscaling can be attributed to two main factors. First, from a Norwegian perspective, memory diplomacy was seen as even more critical as Norwegian-Russian relations deteriorated and sanctions limited the scope for practical cooperation**.** As Myklebost et al. [14] point out, the commemorations became "a question of preserving what little was left of relations with Russia." Second, following its aggression in Ukraine, Russia intensified its memory politics abroad, focusing heavily on World War II. Recognising its strategic value, Russia began investing heavily in the memoryscape, leveraging it as a tool to advance its narrative and influence.

4. Russia's Memory Offensive in the Norwegian Borderland

Under Vladimir Putin, memory politics has become a key component of Russian security policy [15]. The Kremlin cultivates a heroic narrative of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany [16, 17]. This narrative idealises Russia while omitting problematic historical facts, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, mass rapes, and military failures [5]. The narrative has been intensified since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and is used to justify contemporary actions, such as the war in Ukraine, by drawing parallels between WWII and the current "fight against Nazism [18]." Attempts to challenge the official narrative are treated as threats to national security and sanctioned by law [3, 19].

Internationally, this has led to more assertive memory politics. In some cases, Russia has engaged in "memory wars" against countries that reject or oppose its narratives [20, 21]. In others, it has sought to promote its narratives and form memory alliances with sympathetic states [4]. In Norway, Russia's approach has primarily followed the latter strategy. As Markussen [10] observes, Russia's goals in Norway have been twofold: first, to reshape the memoryscape to align with its own interests, and second to "inscribe Norway as an ally in Russia's ongoing memory wars in Europe."

As Markussen [10] and Myklebost [11] demonstrate, Russian official and semi-official mnemonic actors – including the Russian Consulate General in Kirkenes, the FSB, the Russian Geographical Society, and the Russian Orthodox Church – have significantly intensified their mnemopolitical activities in the Norwegian borderlands since 2014. They have also shifted their strategy. Whereas they previously collaborated closely with Norwegian authorities, from 2014 onwards, they began to operating more independently and proactively.

Since 2014, Russian actors have initiated the construction of additional World War II monuments, particularly those commemorating Soviet soldiers and Norwegian partisans. Some of these initiatives have succeeded in gaining support from both national and local authorities [10, 11].

Russian actors have also stepped up the organisation of commemorative events across the Norwegian borderland. Both new and old memorials have increasingly been visited by Russian dignitaries. Since 2014, Russian Victory Day celebrations have even been introduced on the Norwegian side of the border [10]. Furthermore, Russian state and state-affiliated actors have organised so-called Russian-Norwegian patriotic memory tours to the Norwegian borderland [11]. All these commemorations have featured Russian military-patriotic symbolism. Soviet flags and stars, and Saint George's ribbons have been prominently used by official representatives during ceremonies [10, 11].

The rhetoric at these events has shifted from a balanced tone, addressing both Norwegian and Russian interests, to an increasingly nationalist Russian perspective. A striking example is Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speech during the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Kirkenes in 2014:

> *Today, on the 70th anniversary of the defeat of the German fascist occupiers, we could not, of course, fail to touch upon the problem of neo-Nazi tendencies in Europe, including in Ukraine. We note at that time the will of our Norwegian friends to prevent radical, including neo-Nazi, tendencies in Europe. Russia is convinced that it is necessary to stop the rise of new Banderas, Shukhevychs and Quislings* [11, 22]

This conflation of World War II with the war in Ukraine illustrates Russia's use of historical narratives to legitimize contemporary actions. It also reflects an effort to position Norway as a mnemopolitical ally in the fight against Nazism. Lavrov echoed this message five years later during the 75th anniversary, describing the ongoing war in Donbas as a consequence of "the neo-Nazis in Ukraine unfortunately continuing to wreak havoc [10]."

As Markussen [10] observes, prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there were few, if any, efforts to counter the Russian memory offensive. Instead of opposing these initiatives, Norwegian authorities often facilitated them. This lack of resistance allowed Russia's memory offensive to proceed largely unchallenged for nearly a decade. Consequently, Russia was able to symbolically appropriate and manipulate the memoryscape, inscribing it with new meanings that served its geopolitical objectives.

The symbolic appropriation of the memoryscape has had two major outcomes: First, Russia has exploited the Norwegian memoryscape to promote its World War II narrative, using it as a tool to justify the invasion of Ukraine and wage memory wars against other states. By incorporating war memorials in Northern Norway into its official storyline, Russia has been able to depict Norway as an ally in its fight against what the Kremlin describes as the falsification of Soviet war history [10]. Second, the aggressive promotion of the Russian victory narrative on Norwegian soil has overshadowed Norwegian and local narratives about the war, particularly those highlighting the less favourable aspects of Soviet-Norwegian wartime relations. For instance, there has been little focus on the Norwegian partisans who were abducted or later imprisoned by the Soviets [10].

As a result of Russia's symbolic appropriation, the memoryscape's function has shifted. Originally intended as a Norwegian tool to maintain low tensions and bolster national security, it has been transformed into a source of insecurity. Over time, Russia's actions have turned the memoryscape into a destabilising force, effectively functioning as a "Trojan horse" to subvert Norway's historical narrative from within. As McGlynn [15] explains, "memory alliances" are informal or formal associations built on shared historical narratives. During the Cold War, Norway and the Soviet Union managed – albeit with occasional difficulties – to establish a modus vivendi, a common narrative

that facilitated cooperation [7]. However, since 2014, this shared narrative has disintegrated, with no apparent interest from the Russian side in restoring it.

5. Memory Politics Post 2022: Increased Awareness and Local Resistance

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has heightened awareness of Russian activities and motives in the Norwegian borderlands. Since then, the memory politics of the borderlands, particularly Russia's interests in the region, have come under increasing scrutiny and analysis by regional scholars and journalists. A research project titled Memory Politics of the North, 1993–2023: An Interplay Perspective (NORMEMO) at UiT The Arctic University of Norway has focused on the role of memory politics in Russia's relations with Norway throughout the post-Soviet period [23]. Researchers from the project have actively contributed to public debates in the region. Regional news outlets, such as The Barents Observer, Nordlys and iFinnmark, have also published numerous articles on the topic.

The invasion marked the definitive end of the era of memory diplomacy in the Norwegian-Russian borderland. Following the invasion, Norway ceased participating in joint commemorations, and no new war memorials have been erected. However, Russia has continued its mnemopolitical activities on Norwegian soil. As Markussen [10] notes, there are no indications that the Russian Consulate General in Kirkenes will scale back its propagandistic use of war memorials in the region. The Consulate General continues to organize commemorations at the Soviet Liberation Monument for both Victory Day and the anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Kirkenes. Additionally, the consul general frequently visits various other World War II memorials in the area.

Some local politicians have called for stronger mnemopolitical deterrence and measures to reduce Russian influence. For example, Tor-Erik Labahå, the mayor of Vardø, has advocated for the removal of war memorials erected by Russian actors in recent years [24, 25]. "I want them removed as they are misused by sympathizers and Russian authorities," the mayor stated, adding that "the commemorative activism carried out over the last decades has been used by our neighbour in the East in a completely different way than what was intended [25]. "

So far, no one has suggested removing or demolishing the most iconic monument of the memoryscape, the Soviet Liberation Monument. However, this monument has become the focal point of the most active attempts to deter the Russian memory offensive and reclaim the memory landscape of the borderland from below. Two such incidents, which occurred during the annual marking of the liberation of Kirkenes in 2022 and 2023, illustrate an emerging local resistance against Russia's use of the memoryscape.

6. Protests at the Soviet Liberation Monument

In October 2022, Norwegian authorities chose, for the first time, not to commemorate the liberation of Kirkenes at the Soviet Liberation Monument. However, the Russian Consulate General in Kirkenes organised its own commemoration. Nikolay Konygin, the consul general, led the ceremony, which was attended by a small group of Russians residing in Kirkenes and a delegation from across the border. During the ceremony, Konygin placed a wreath in the colours of the Russian tricolour at the monument and delivered a speech emphasising the "common history" of Norway and Russia. He stated

that the "people of the Soviet Union, together with Norwegian partisans, liberated East Finnmark and started the liberation of Northern Norway [26]."

However, the consul general's actions were overshadowed by a well-organised protest. Local protesters – Norwegians, Russians, and Ukrainians – had placed a wreath in the Ukrainian blue-and-yellow colours in front of the monument, with an attached note reading, "To our Ukrainian heroes from 1944 and 2022 [26]." Nearby, a car painted in blue and yellow, with slogans such as "Stop war" and "Stop Putin," was parked. As the consul general arrived, the car's owner, a local Russian resident opposed to the war and the Kremlin regime, played the Ukrainian song *Not Your War* (2015) by Sviatoslav Vakarchuk. A sizeable crowd of local citizens, carrying Ukrainian and Norwegian flags, turned their backs on the consul general as he began speaking. Harald Sunde, a local representative of the Socialist Left Party and a member of the municipal council, joined the protest. He told the press that "Russian diplomats should stay away from this monument until they end their bloody war on Ukraine [26]." He also expressed concern about Russia's attempts to appropriate Soviet war memories, emphasising the importance of marking that "this monument is not just for Russia [27]."

This was the first time a commemoration at the Soviet Liberation Monument had become an occasion for protest and discord. The event marked a clear break from the era of Norwegian-Russian memory diplomacy. While local citizens had previously participated in joint commemorations, they now used the occasion to express resistance against Russia's narrative of the war and its appropriation of the memory landscape. Thanks to the use of powerful symbolism, the protests attracted attention far beyond the local community. One year later, in 2023, the place became the site for another confrontation, later known as "The Wreath War" (Norwegian: *Kransekrigen*).

7. The Wreath War

In October 2023, local Norwegian authorities decided to commemorate the day of liberation independently, without inviting Russian participants. Early in the morning, Magnus Mæland, the newly elected Conservative mayor of Sør-Varanger, laid a blue-and-yellow wreath in front of the monument. The wreath, identical to the one used by protesters the previous year, was a deliberate homage to Ukraine [28]. In a brief address, Mæland expressed gratitude to the Soviet soldiers – including, as he emphasised, those of Ukrainian nationality – for liberating Kirkenes from Nazi occupiers [29]. The mayor's main speech was delivered in the town square, next to the Monument to Wartime Mothers, which honours women's efforts during World War II. In his speech, Mæland drew parallels between the suffering of civilians during World War II and in Ukraine today**:**

> *There is a war in Europe today and the aggressor is Putin and his regime. It is Putin's regime that has the responsibility for a war based on lies and propaganda, a war where mothers and children are killed, and civil society and civilians suffer like during the 2WW (...) My message to the Putin regime is the following: stop the war in Ukraine!* [29]

Two hours after the mayor's ceremony, Consul General Konygin arrived unannounced at the Soviet Liberation Monument. To many locals, his decision to visit the site again this year was seen as provocative. Prior to the event, both the mayor and

other local politicians had requested that he refrain from attending. The message conveyed was that Russian commemorations were unwelcome in Kirkenes [30]. Despite these requests, Konygin delivered a speech honouring "the memory of warriors and liberators who fell in the battle against Nazism [29]." He then placed a large wreath in red, white, and blue – twice the size of the municipal wreath – directly in front of the mayor's wreath. Ignoring complaints from bystanders, he then left the site.

When informed of the consul general's actions, Mayor Mæland returned to the monument and, in front of the press, expressed strong dissatisfaction with Konygin's lack of respect for the municipality's official wreath. "This is not the way to behave," Mæland stated [31]. He then moved the Russian wreath to the side. A local pro-Kremlin activist attempted to intervene, trying to reposition the Russian wreath, but the mayor firmly moved it again, declaring, "I am the Mayor of Sør-Varanger, and you have no right to move our official wreath!" The mayor sternly explained that the monument was a national monument and that the municipal wreath should be placed at the front and not be covered [31].

The events surrounding the 2023 commemoration sparked significant reactions both locally and internationally. The mayor's actions were not universally supported within the local community. Some criticised his approach as overly provocative. Two members of the municipal council from the Labour Party, Guro Brandshaug and Robert Nesje, accused the mayor of politicising the event and creating unnecessary polarisation. "It was an undignified and sad day. Instead of celebrating freedom and honouring those who gave us freedom, it became a day of demonstration that builds on polarisation. This can, unfortunately, be used in Putin's propaganda about Norway as an enemy country," they stated [32]. While they supported the decision to avoid joint commemorations with Russian representatives due to the war in Ukraine, they argued that official Russian representatives should still have the right to mark the day of liberation. They also suggested that the municipality should have engaged in dialogue with the Russian consulate to avoid conflict [32].

The response from the Russian side was significantly harsher. Teimuraz Ramishvili, the Russian Ambassador to Norway, claimed that the conflict had been provoked by "Russophobic politicians [33]." The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the mayor of Sør-Varanger of vandalism and summoned Norway's ambassador to Moscow over the incident. The ambassador was "sternly informed that it was unacceptable to restrict the rights of Russian representatives to hold memorial ceremonies." The ministry described the mayor's actions as "an act of vandalism, an example of Russophobia, disrespect, and trampling on the memory of the liberating soldiers [34, 35]."

Non-official Pro-Kremlin actors also reacted. On October 27, members of the Volunteer Company (*Volonterskaya Rota*) staged a "patriotic event" outside the Norwegian embassy in Moscow. Dressed in Soviet uniforms, they laid a wreath at the embassy's doors. On the group's social media page, they wrote that the activists "decided to remind forgetful European officials to whom they really owe their lives [36, 37]."

Two weeks later, pro-Russian activists placed more than 1000 flowers in front of the Soviet Liberation Monument in Kirkenes. Allegedly, this "sea of flowers" was organised by a Facebook group called *Nasha Norvegia/Vårt Norge* ("Our Norway"). Olga Smirnova, the activist who had intervened during the wreath incident, claimed that many Russians and people from former Soviet republics had contacted her, leading to a spontaneous action. In the end, 173 people from 14 countries contributed flowers [38]. Whether, or to what extent, the Russian government was involved in these initiatives remains unclear.

8. Grassroots Mnemopolitical Deterrence

The actions described above exemplify bottom-up, local protests against Russian manipulation and exploitation of the memoryscape. The strong reactions they provoked from Russia suggest that these protests were impactful and made a difference. It can be argued that these actions were effective in several ways, playing a critical role in addressing memory politics in the Norwegian-Russian borderland.

First, the local protests and commemorative actions directly challenged Russian narratives that sought to conflate World War II with the invasion of Ukraine, exposing these narratives as propaganda. The mayor explicitly stated that a key objective of his commemoration was to "deal with the Putin regime's memorial policy [39]." In an interview with the Barents Observer, Mæland emphasised his intent to "stand up against the Putin regime and its memory policy, the way symbols from the Second World War are used to legitimize authoritarian rule and draw parallels between WWII and the war in Ukraine, something that is pure lies and propaganda [35]." The mayor also highlighted how, during the previous year's commemoration, the Russian consul general had claimed that there was a "flourishing of Nazi symbols." According to the mayor, such rhetoric aligned with the narrative the Putin regime seeks to propagate [39].

By emphasising the contributions of Ukrainians and other Soviet nationalities in the liberation of Kirkenes, local actors disputed Russia's exclusive claim to the historical narrative. In his speech, the mayor deliberately stressed that the liberating soldiers were not only Russians but also Ukrainians and people from across the Soviet Union [28]. This challenge to Russia's "monopoly" on the liberation narrative was further underscored by the deliberate use of blue-and-yellow wreaths, rather than the traditional red, white, and blue.

Second, the local actors successfully advanced alternative narratives that shifted the focus from Russia's military-patriotic victory narrative to broader human experiences. The mayor chose to emphasize "the atrocities that a civilian population goes through during a war [30]." He delivered his speech at the Monument to Wartime Mothers, which honours women's efforts for children and homes during World War II, rather than at the Soviet Liberation Monument, as had been the tradition [30]. This decision highlighted civilian resilience and suffering during wartime, drawing parallels between the experiences of Kirkenes during World War II and those of Ukrainians today. By doing so, the mayor presented a more inclusive and nuanced historical narrative, countering Russia's nationalist military-patriotic framing. The use of blue-and-yellow wreaths and references to Ukrainian soldiers further reinforced this alternative perspective.

Third, through their actions, the local actors effectively reclaimed sovereignty over the memoryscape, challenging Russia's perceived ownership of the narrative. The mayor made it clear that the Soviet Liberation Monument is Norwegian property and that it is Norway's right, not the Russian consulate general's, to determine its management and use. Symbolic actions, such as moving the Russian wreath aside, physically *and* symbolically asserted Norwegian authority over commemorative practices. These gestures underscored Norway's determination to protect its memoryscape, deterring further attempts at appropriation.

Fourth, the protests and commemorations also served as acts of resilience-building. They mobilised the local community, bringing together diverse groups – Norwegians, Russians, and Ukrainians – in a shared resistance against external manipulation. These

actions fostered solidarity and demonstrated collective resistance, while also serving as a model for how local actors effectively may counter future foreign memory offensives.

Finally, these actions successfully raised awareness of the geopolitical significance of memory politics both within the region and beyond it. The creative and symbolic use of performances – such as laying blue-and-yellow wreaths, people turning their backs to the consul general's speech, the playing Ukrainian protest songs, and the mayor's deliberate decision to change the location of the speech – drew significant attention. The dramatic and visually striking nature of these actions, combined with extensive press coverage, helped spreading the story and its imagery to a broader audience.

9. The Need for National Engagement in Mnemopolitical Deterrence

Local initiatives, such as those mentioned above, play a crucial role in resisting foreign memory offensives, reclaiming historical narratives, and asserting sovereignty. These efforts act as a frontline defence in memory politics, fostering resilience, promoting inclusive narratives, and addressing pressing geopolitical challenges. However, while local actors have demonstrated determination in developing mnemopolitical deterrence, the absence of a coordinated national strategy reveals a significant gap. National authorities have yet to establish a robust approach to counter Russian memory politics in the borderlands.

During the events in question, Norwegian national authorities maintained a notably low profile. There was no public endorsement or support for either the protesters in 2022 or the mayor's actions in 2023. Later, Mayor Mæland has repeatedly emphasised the need for stronger national engagement, urging greater support from the national government. "– I can no longer accept that a municipality on the border with Russia will handle the government's monument policy," he stated in 2024 [40]. In 2025, he proposed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) establish an office in Kirkenes, stating: "I simply want a stronger state presence by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kirkenes to ensure that the nation's interests are better safeguarded here where the great powers meet [41]."

The lack of national involvement is problematic for several reasons. First, the absence of national support places local actors in a vulnerable and unsustainable position. There is a stark asymmetry between the resources of the Russian state on one side and the limited capacities of local municipal authorities and citizens on the other. Over time, local actors cannot effectively counterbalance the well-organised, state-backed Russian memory campaigns. By failing to intervene, national authorities shift the responsibility of managing a highly sensitive and geopolitically charged memoryscape entirely onto local authorities. This approach is neither fair nor viable.

Second, Russia's memory offensive is not limited to local challenges—it has significant national implications. The appropriation of Norway's memoryscape jeopardises the country's control over its commemorative practices and allows foreign actors to manipulate its historical narratives. Collective memory serves as a cornerstone of national identity and ontological security. Allowing external forces to distort these narratives endangers Norway's "sense of self," which is fundamental to its societal cohesion.

Finally, Russia's memory offensives in Norway are part of a larger strategy to legitimize its actions – such as the invasion of Ukraine – and to undermine its geopolitical rivals, many of whom are Norway's allies. Without a coordinated mnemopolitical

deterrence strategy, Norway risks being symbolically co-opted as an ally in Russia's memory wars. This could damage Norway's international credibility, reputation, and alliances.

National authorities could play a critical role in memory politics and deterrence to safeguard Norway's sovereignty, identity, and geopolitical interests. By engaging in proactive and coordinated efforts, they can support local actors, counter foreign influence, and ensure that Norway's historical narratives remain under Norwegian control. A unified national strategy would protect Norway's collective memory from external manipulation, preserve its historical integrity, and strengthen its alliances in the face of geopolitical challenges. National engagement in mnemopolitical deterrence is not only a matter of responsibility – it is a necessity for ensuring Norway's long-term security and sovereignty.

10. Conclusion

The Norwegian-Russian borderland serves as a good example of how memory politics may intertwine with security. Initially, the Norwegian memory diplomacy fostered cooperation and low tensions through shared commemorations of World War II, particularly the Soviet liberation of Kirkenes. However, since 2014, Russia has increasingly exploited this memoryscape to advance its own nationalist narratives and geopolitical aims, culminating in the symbolic appropriation of Norwegian war memorials. The memoryscape turned into a trojan horse sort of, undermining Norway's historical narratives and sovereignty in the borderland.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 effectively ended the long era of joint commemorations and sparked heightened awareness of the use and misuse of memory in the region. Local actors, through creative and symbolic actions, have taken the lead in resisting Russian memory offensives, reclaiming the memoryscape, and advancing alternative narratives that emphasize inclusivity and human resilience. These grassroot efforts have proven effective, exposing Russian propaganda, and asserting Norwegian sovereignty over its historical narratives.

However, the absence of a coordinated national strategy remains a critical gap. Local actors face significant asymmetries in resources and influence when countering the state-backed Russian memory campaigns. Moreover, the implications of Russia's memory offensive extend far beyond local challenges, threatening both Norway's and other countries' national identity and sovereignty. A unified national approach is essential to support local efforts, safeguard Norway's historical integrity, and counter external manipulation.

Ultimately, strengthening mnemopolitical deterrence at *both* local and national levels is vital for enhancing resilience, preserving collective memory, and ensuring long-term security and sovereignty in the borderland.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Resilience Through Border Discourse in Northern Europe

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Abstract. The shifting geopolitical landscape of the Baltic Sea Region, intensified by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has reinforced the centrality of resilience as a defensive strategy among Nordic and Baltic states. Resilience, once associated primarily with disaster preparedness or infrastructural robustness, is now increasingly conflated with national security and total defence. This chapter approaches resilience not as a technical measure but as a discursive practice, asking how it is constructed through governmental border communication. Drawing on findings from Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Lithuania, the chapter first illustrates how borders are discursively entangled and layered with geopolitical meaning. Secondly, using the securitisation framework, the chapter explores how resilience is articulated in these border discourses across military, political, and societal sectors, revealing how states define threats and envision protective measures. The analysis shows that resilience, as constructed through border discourse, is less about societal empowerment and more about securing national sovereignty and anticipating external threats. Ultimately, the chapter offers a critical contribution to understanding how border discourse shapes contemporary security governance in Northern Europe under conditions of perceived existential risk.

Keywords. Border discourse, entanglements, resilience, threat articulations, Northern Europe

1. Introduction

The shifting geopolitical landscape of the Baltic Sea Region and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to heightened emphasis on resilience as a defensive strategy among the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. In response to various vulnerabilities the Nordic and Baltic countries are increasingly prioritising resilience in national total defence [1]. As such, resilience has come to be conflated with notions of security and defence [2] through which military and civil defence preparations to a greater extent include activities that seek to prepare societies to manage wartime challenges [3].

While resilience is often approached in the literature as a technical or administrative concept associated with disaster preparedness or infrastructural robustness [4, 5], this chapter approaches resilience in security through the lens of

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discourse. It asks how resilience is constructed in the language of border governance, and what that language reveals about evolving state rationalities in times of uncertainty.

The chapter examines how border discourse functions as a site for articulating resilience in Northern Europe. It draws on findings from the author's doctoral research on the entanglement of national and EU borders in governmental communication from Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Lithuania during the so-called "migration crisis" of 2015-2016, the instrumentalised "migration crisis" in 2021, and visa restrictions of Russian citizens following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to these findings, borders are discursively entangled in ways that reflect and reinforce geopolitical imaginaries through the layering of different types of borders. This, in turn, makes it possible to critically engage with the logics of resilience: how, where and from what a society needs to be kept safe. Resilience is examined from a discursive perspective; a way of speaking about risk, security, and belonging that shapes both policy and perception. Through this lens, the chapter offers a critical contribution to understanding the role of border discourse in shaping contemporary security governance in Northern Europe.

More specifically, the chapter utilises the securitisation framework [6] to explore how threats and resilience are constructed across three key sectors: military, political, and societal. Each of these threat framings contributes to a specific vision of resilience, with implications for policy, public engagement, and the inclusiveness of security narratives. Hence, by examining how states speak about borders, this chapter engages with the notion of resilience, revealing how it is deeply intertwined with concerns about sovereignty, control, and geopolitical positioning. As such, resilience through border discourse is revealed as a matter of protecting the society by securing borders.

2. Conceptual Frames: Borders and Resilience through Discourse

This chapter rests on two strands of literature, the first being border studies and specifically that of discursive borders. The second relates to conceptualisations of resilience within a security context. The chapter understands border discourse as the representations and imaginaries that are communicated about borders and borderlands. It is worth to mention that while this chapter looks specifically at governmental discourse, border discourse is not limited to state perspectives but may emerge from a number of different stakeholders and across different platforms.

The examination of border discourses is grounded in the understanding that borders are not fixed or merely physical entities, but are continuously brought into being through acts of communication [7]. Acknowledging the performative nature of borders [8, 9], repetitive discursive practices are taken to give shape and meaning to borders, rendering them a socio-political construct actively made and remade through language [10]. As such, what a border is understood to be or signify can shift significantly over time, depending on the political, cultural, and historical context in which it is articulated. These changes also alter how borders are perceived, enacted, and imagined, whether as sites of control, contact, or exclusion. By examining how governments speak borders into being, we can trace the evolving logics that underpin border practices and better understand how borders are mobilised to define not only territory, but also identity, belonging, and threat. This highlights the deeply situated and contingent nature of borders as discursive constructs that respond to shifting geopolitical dynamics and societal anxieties. Seen from this perspective, borders, physical or otherwise, function as sites of identity

construction in that border imaginaries contribute to articulations of difference [11], but similarly as sites of security construction by narrating the threat of that difference.

Given the discursive lens adopted in this work, security and threats are similarly understood as socially constructed, realised through discursive practices grounded in the articulation of (in)security and perceived dangers [6]. In critical security studies, and specifically the framework of securitisation, such discursive practices are often conceptualised as *speech acts*, which, much like the logic of discourse, direct the analysis towards a few key questions: who is making these claims, for what audience, and with what effects? Consequently, this chapter does not engage with whether security constructions can be considered empirically accurate or not; rather, it recognises that by imagining certain threats, these threats become politically real within their specific context.

Additionally, this chapter draws upon resilience literature. Resilience as a concept is applied across a number of scholarly fields leading to variations in conceptualisations and analytical operationalisation [4], yet a shared meaning recognises resilience as an adaptive capacity to withstand external shock and uncertainty ranging from natural and environmental disasters, institutional disasters such as large-scale accidents, terror threats, and military threats [12–14]. Notably, resilience "fundamentally relies on an acceptance of the future as uncertain [2]." Within a security perspective, resilience has prompted an emergent attention to the everyday security needs of individuals, instead of the traditional state-level perspectives [14]. Resilience has, albeit to a limited extent, been explored through the lens of borders. Much of this research tends to frame the border or border region as a site where resilience is tested and shaped in response to shifting patterns of cross-border mobility and cooperation. These studies often emphasise the adaptive capacities that are specific to the contextual realities of local border communities being located close to a border shared with another country. Thus, examining how border communities navigate resilience through cross-border cooperation patterns in light of different challenges [15–17]. In contrast, this chapter will examine the articulations of threats and resilience as they appear in governmental border communication.

While my doctoral research on border discourse has not specifically focused on articulations of resilience, the discussion here will draw upon this analysis to engage with resilience from the perspective of threat articulations. Relying on the work of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde [6], the analysis identifies distinct yet overlapping sectors in which articulations of (in)security are pronounced. Three sectors are of particular relevance here: the military, the political, and the societal. The military sector is concerned with threats to the state's sovereignty; the political sector with threats to the stability and legitimacy of the state and its institutions; and the societal sector with threats to societal identity and cohesion. These distinctions form the analytical foundation for the discussion below, allowing me to make inferences of resilience through border discourse.

3. The North European Space in a Shifting Security Landscape

Northern Europe is a space with a long history of fluctuating unity and separation; the space has been configured and reconfigured as local hegemonic powers throughout history have struggled to control the region and its trade routes [18–20]. The region is thereby also a space of fluctuating borders and of changing significance of borders. In

modern times, despite extensive cooperation trends emerging in the region following the end of the Cold War, some distinctions have traditionally remained between the Nordic and the Baltics with regards to discursive imaginaries of borders and how these are nested within geopolitical identity formations. This is particularly noticeable in how the different countries of the Nordic-Baltic region have approached Russia prior to 2022. While Finland and Sweden opted for cooperation with Russia as a means to subdue geopolitical tension following their EU accession, the Baltics, inversely, adopted a more stark position towards their eastern neighbour following their independence in 1991 [21, 22].

A greater focus on security has emerged in response to demonstrations of Russian aggression, initially in 2008 with the war in Georgia, followed by the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, which further solidified with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 [3 ,23]. The so-called instrumentalised migration crisis that erupted along the borders between Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland in 2021 similarly contributed to a shifting security landscape; more importantly, it sparked more intensified bordering practices in the region [24]. Nevertheless, the effects of February 24 are the most evident in the region's security and geostrategic architecture, largely due to the NATO membership of Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024), that furthermore consolidated the notion of a northern flank of NATO [25]. Hence, as illustrated by Makarychev and Romanshko, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought Finnish and Estonian border narratives on their Russian neighbour closer to one another, thereby demonstrating how crisis can transform the political significance of borders [26]. While this brief overview is far from exhaustive, it serves as a reminder that shifting border discourses in today's Northern Europe should be examined with attention to the region's long history of shifting spatial reconfigurations, grounded in the awareness of the temporal nature of borders that stipulates that earlier borders leave traces behind [27, 28].

4. Border Entanglements in Northern Europe

Northern Europe can be characterised by the presence of numerous types of borders that both unite and divide the region, including but not limited to physiographical, functional, operational, cultural, and historic borders [29, 30]. To understand the interconnectedness of these different types of borders there is a need to engage more actively with how these borders entangle in one another, in discourse and otherwise. Borders entangle by means of overlapping or layering when coexisting in the same space, or through temporal means as borders leave traces also after being physically removed [8, 27, 31–33]. In this sense, entanglements are unstable, reflecting the fluidity of borders and their conceptualisations.

Governmental communication tends to bundle different types of borders together [34]. In the Nordic and Baltic contexts, border communication entangles conceptualisations of national borders, internal and external Schengen borders, NATO borders, and sub-regional cooperation boundaries. Through this conflation, borders are imbued with symbolic and strategic significance beyond their administrative roles. Such entanglements render borders meaningful not only as physical demarcations but also as sites through which broader visions of belonging and political orders are communicated [35], and likewise notions of security and resilience. This creates opportunities to interrogate how states imagine their place in various overlapping political communities, such as national, European, or transatlantic, and how space is reconfigured through border articulations [36].

In Nordic and Baltic governmental discourse, during times of crisis, the borderland is often represented as a space of intensified vulnerability and subject to growing threats. These threats have come to be identified in increasingly ambiguous terms when comparing the so-called migration crisis in 2015 with responses to the instrumentalised migration crisis along the borders with Belarus in 2021, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reflecting concerns of growing possibilities for hybrid threats of various kinds. My own work focuses particularly on how the movement of people, in contexts deemed irregular or uncontrolled, is interpreted as a source of insecurity. This framing is especially evident in the discourse surrounding so-called "instrumentalised migration," where migration is depicted not merely as a humanitarian or administrative issue but as a weaponised threat to national and regional security. This discursive shift transforms the migrant from a subject in need of protection to a vector of destabilisation. In other words, migrants become perceived and represented as weapons [37]. Simultaneously, this also reflects a shift in threat articulations, from threats of individuals to threats of antagonistic states utilising human movement [35]. While this is not the only form of securitisation present in the region, it is a highly salient one, especially in moments of heightened tension and crisis.

The semantic entanglement of different types of borders serves to highlight the urgency and geopolitical relevance of any one border, or a certain stretch of overlapping borders, among the most frequent being national borders, the EU's external border, and the NATO border. This is especially evident in Estonia and Lithuania, partly because their respective governmental communication appears more descriptive than similar communication from Finland and Sweden. A notable difference is that Estonia and Lithuania more frequently position themselves as frontline defenders of Europe and EUrope through the entanglement of different types of borders by emphasising their eastern borders as the outer limits of the EUropean project. This narrative both reinforces their role within the EU and reflects their perception of heightened security threats, particularly from Russia. In this context, Estonia and Lithuania use border discourse to assert both their sovereignty and their centrality within the EU.

Despite the entanglements between national borders and other types of borders, the national borders appear less frequently in border communication than communication on the EU's external border across the four countries examined, although Swedish border communication focuses on its national border to a larger extent than the other country cases. Swedish communication tends to emphasise the social implications of cross-border movement rather than the border itself, especially in the context of migration. This is noteworthy as it highlights a different approach to how borders are presented to the public, focusing on certain aspects of borders through this communication. Ultimately, this shapes the understanding of borders, and what aspects of borders are "spoken into existence" through border communication. The relative omission of national border articulations is especially noteworthy for Baltic border communication in response to the instrumentalised migration movements in 2021 emanating from Belarus. It seems that the eastern borders of both countries are framed within the context of the EU's external border and the NATO border as a means to portray border challenges not as national issues but as a shared European one. Thus, shifting attention to the human movement despite relatively low absolute number of border crossings when compared, for example, to the 2015–2016 migratory numbers.

Interestingly, border entanglements are not limited to places where borders physically coincide. It also emerges in symbolic and strategic references to neighbouring states. For instance, Estonia frames its own security as beginning at the borders of other

EU states like Poland and Latvia: "The security of Estonia begins at the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. We stand firm with our neighbours and help them cope, especially through political and diplomatic support. We are also ready to offer practical support to Poland [38]." This reflects a broader discursive strategy of imagining a layered, shared European border space. Governmental border communication from Sweden further establishes the entangling of the mental border space of Europe. Although Sweden is the only country case examined that does not lie along the EU's external border, its border communication still reflects an entanglement of national and EU border concerns. This is largely due to the structure of the Schengen system, which interlinks external and internal Schengen border management. Hence, Sweden's border discourse connects national border policy to broader European dynamics by emphasising that, "The management of the EU's external border /.../ plays a major role in Sweden's overall assessment of border controls [39]." While the national and EU external borders are conceptually distinct, the close cooperation and legal interdependence between national authorities and EU frameworks contribute to the discursive merging of different types of borders. One reason for this is that national actors are central to enforcing EU border policies, which blurs the line between the articulations of different borders and border regimes, it also reinforces the idea of border security as a collective European responsibility.

One way in which border entanglements surface is through the securitisation of borders and border regions. The rationale for securitising a border is often connected to the overlapping or the entanglement of various borders. To exemplify, the securitisation of a national border along the eastern EU border in Northern Europe is frequently justified by referencing both the external EU border and the NATO border. In such instances, the process of entangling borders emphasises the significant location of the national border, while also justifying border management policies that take heed of this significance. Thus, the entanglement of different types of borders is not simply a rhetorical device but may reshape the institutional architecture of border governance.

Across the Nordic and the Baltic region, emergency measures and extraordinary interventions explicitly designed to control or restrict movement across borders are justified by means of their temporary nature. Nevertheless, they tend to reinforce long-term border-restrictions. This is exemplified by the prolonged border controls in Sweden, or by the legal amendments introduced in Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland. A notable example of this dynamic is the instrumentalised migration crisis at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, where the influx of migrants, framed as part of a hybrid attack, triggered legal and procedural transformations in Lithuania [40]. The border zone was redefined as an emergency area, thereby justifying the exclusion of journalists, humanitarian actors, and observers from the area. This not only limited the transparency of governmental actions but also restricted the circulation of alternative narratives[41]. Interestingly, similar pre-emptive legislative measures have been introduced in both Estonia and Finland, despite these states not facing the same level of immediate pressure of human movement [42–44]. This illustrates how securitisation of borders is often anticipatory, with states enacting changes in expectation of future crises based on regional precedent.

Crucially, securitisation at the border should not be seen only as a temporary or reactive phenomenon. Instead, this institutionalisation of exceptional measures can normalise a perpetual state of heightened alert, transforming the long-term governance of borderlands. It furthermore shifts the baseline of what is considered appropriate or necessary in border policy. While initially framed as proportional responses to acute

events, these practices often entrench new norms of surveillance, exclusion, and centralisation of control.

Another significant form of entanglement of borders emerges from the explicit geopolitical emphasis of the eastern borders as signifying civilisational difference, framed as sites of global significance. In governmental, but also in media discourses [41], the external Schengen and the NATO border are presented not merely as functional delimitations but as markers of civilisational boundaries separating the civilised from the uncivilised. An example from Estonian governmental border communication notes that "We must never forget that when European countries turn their back to each other's problems, turn against each other, then the independence of Estonia – *here at the edge of the Western world* – will be among the first victims [*emphasis* added] [45]". Another example comes from the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, framing the particularity of Russian threats in contrast to challenges along the southern stretch of the EU's external border: "Although equally relevant, threats from the South and the East are different. Unlike terrorism and migration, Russia poses a challenge to the entire international system. This should be taken into consideration when making decisions on relations with Russia [46]." The eastern border is invoked as a barrier that protects the values, identity, and cohesion of the European and transatlantic community. Notably, this positioning is particularly pronounced in the Baltic states but increasingly echoed by their Nordic neighbours. The border, in this framing, is no longer a peripheral concern but a core site of geopolitical contestation. As such, it becomes a symbol of the resilience of the individual countries, and of the West alike.

Such framings imbue the border with a sense of urgency and existential importance. The emphasis of a civilisational divide appears as a discursive tool to mobilise public attention and political will, legitimising extraordinary measures in the name of security and survival. All the while, it is important to emphasise the realities of both historic and current displays of Russian aggression. It remains the case that the experiences and knowledges of the smaller states that gained sovereignty and new alliances as the Cold War came to an end have largely been overlooked in literature that instead has reminisced on the "lost opportunity" of creating a different kind of world order following the end of the Cold War [47]. All the same, this nevertheless raises questions concerning how civilisational border narratives might risk perpetuating divisions and entrenching binary logics that may be counterproductive in the long term. The challenge is to develop responses that can contain threats while also fostering the conditions for eventual stabilisation, without exclusively relying on narratives that deepen division or reinforce a permanent sense of existential confrontation.

Some of the entanglements of borders stem from shifting dynamics of knowledge production within the EU, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the post-invasion context, the discursive authority to speak about Eastern European security has partially relocated from the traditional Western centres of power to the Eastern member states. The Baltic states, Poland, and other so-called eastern peripheries have claimed a form of epistemic legitimacy rooted in their geographic proximity and historical experience of Russian aggression [36, 47, 48]. This may be seen as part of a broader decolonising movement within the EU and elsewhere, whereby previously marginalised voices challenge existing hierarchies of expertise and assert their own narratives [49]. This reorientation allows for a reassertion of agency in shaping the discourse of resilience, transforming border regions from objects of security policy to subjects of knowledge production. It also means that interpretations and imaginaries

of borders will be shaped by the specific contextual and temporal awareness of borderlands, thereby producing (or emphasising) new forms of border entanglements.

5. Border Discourse as a Site of Resilience Construction

As borders are imbued with a multiplicity of meanings shaped by geopolitical, institutional, and historical contexts, these articulations influence the conceptualisation and implementation of resilience by means of threat articulations. There is a growing societal awareness of resilience in Northern Europe, although more broadly known in the public debate as preparedness. While the terms "crisis preparedness" and "civil preparedness" are used relatively interchangeably across the Nordic and Baltic total defence strategies, they capture different dimensions of response capacity and responsibility. Crisis preparedness generally refers to institutional capacity to manage acute disruptions, such as natural disasters or armed attacks. Civil preparedness, by contrast, emphasises the role of non-military actors, including local governments, communities, and individual citizens, in maintaining societal functions during crisis and building everyday resilience to disruptions, especially those caused by hybrid threats [50]. Even though broader discussions of resilience highlight the importance of local and individual contributions, the prevailing border discourse centres on state-centred narratives, often overlooking local experiences. Thus, the language of resilience tends to reinforce a statist and militarised framing when filtered through border discourse, limiting interpretations that recognise the agency of citizens and border communities. In this context, resilience risks being conflated with national control and containment, rather than local capacity and adaptation.

In governmental border communication, representations that engage with notions of resilience predominantly centre on securing the state from perceived external threats. This narrow interpretation of borders focuses heavily on crisis preparedness through the reinforcement of border control and surveillance. Less prevalent, however, is civil preparedness; as a result, citizens are thereby invoked as passive beneficiaries of the resilience articulated in border discourse. Alternatively, citizens are absent from border discourse altogether. This is quite contrary to broader interpretations of preparedness in Nordic and Baltic contexts, where resilience is envisioned as a whole-of-the-society approach[51,52]. It should however be emphasised that this likely reflects the specific data which this chapter draws upon. If one were to examine discourse from various state agencies instead, it is highly probable that wider conceptualisations of resilience would emerge. This is especially true for state agencies focused on civil contingencies.

To demonstrate how resilience relates to border discourse, the remainder of this section will outline threat articulations in border communication from the perspective of military, political and societal sectors[6]. Although the threats are identified here within distinct sectors, in reality they more often overlap different sectors.

5.1. Military Threats

Perceived threats in the military sector entail threats against the sovereignty of the state through the use or potential use of force and violence, rendering these threats prioritised due to their existential nature. Borderlands are securitised through the discursive entanglements of borders as a means to emphasise their significance as a protective

barrier, thereby invoking broader security imaginaries. In governmental communication, regions adjacent to contentious borders, such as those with Russia or Belarus, are frequently portrayed as being under acute and persistent threat. Such threat articulations invoke resilience interpretations that overlooks societal capacities in favour of state defence capabilities. One dominant frame, especially in the Baltic states and Finland, is that of the borderland as a frontline of hybrid warfare. In border communication on human movement, migration is a primary vector through which this securitisation takes shape. Irregular migration flows, and particularly instrumentalised migration events like the one occurring along the borders with Belarus 2021, are depicted not as humanitarian challenges but as deliberate acts of aggression. This framing may serve short-term political or security goals, but it contributes to the dehumanisation of vulnerable populations and raises serious questions about the compatibility of resilience strategies with democratic values and human rights.

The process of securitisation occurs not only through security imaginaries, but also through the notion of tangible security measures. In border discourse from Northern Europe, the most commonly proposed solution to deal with human movement is through the means of increased control of borders, including infrastructure such as fences and surveillance, increased border controls, as well as legislative amendments. The justification for these measures is to prepare for future scenarios such as hybrid attacks similar to the ones instigated in Belarus in 2021, thereby codifying resilience as a matter of anticipatory securitisation. Resilience, and especially border resilience, in this sense, is represented as the strengthening of borderlines.

Similarly, through recurrent references to military capacity and cooperation within the scope of the EU and NATO (also referenced as transatlantic cooperation in border communication) the centrality of military threats is emphasised. In Baltic communication, the notion of "never again alone" is commonly articulated to signify the importance of the countries' alliances both with the EU, but in security terms more so with NATO. This relies on historical contextualisation of Soviet imperial practices to render Russian aggression a continuation of a long history of imperial ambitions, thereby highlighting the severity of Russia as a threat to its neighbours. This describes threats in traditional security language and identifies threats from another state in an existential language.

Overall, military threat representations in border communication invoke resilience primarily as defence and deterrence, emphasising the need for robust infrastructure, capacity building, and strategic interoperability. This overwhelmingly interprets preparedness in terms of military crises, shifting the focus to building and maintaining military capabilities. In this framing, resilience is not merely about recovery from disruption but about actively anticipating and deterring threats before they materialise. While this type of resilience aligns with North European total defence strategies, in the sense that it aims to address various crises that could disrupt societies, the heavy emphasis on military threats diverts attention from other forms of crisis preparedness. This includes threats of natural or infrastructural nature, which pose legitimate risks to many local communities, and which do not take heed of state borders.

5.2. Political Threats

Political threats are understood to challenge the organisational stability of the state or the political community, this encompasses threats that endanger the state and its political

order, including political institutions, and undermine political authority. In border discourse, political threats are envisioned as threats against democratic political institutions, but also against the operative capacity of state services.

In Swedish border communication on the 2015–2016 migration crisis human movement is framed as a political challenge to the functions of society. This overwhelmingly relates to the society's capabilities to provide adequate resources to individuals applying for asylum (such as housing, health care, and education), but also with regards to capabilities to maintain control of national borders. While these threat perceptions are largely national in nature, the entanglement of migratory pressures at the national border with the perceived lack of control at the external Schengen border also produce supranational threat articulations. Framing political threats as a challenge for the functions of society invoke more comprehensive understandings of resilience akin to civil preparedness introduced above.

Another example is Lithuanian border communication from 2021, which identifies political threats predominantly as hybrid threats, represented to undermine state sovereignty and erode the rules-based international order. More specifically, instrumentalised migration is depicted as a political provocation to test the EU's resolve, and the integrity of the Lithuanian state. In contrast to Swedish border articulations of resilience, Lithuanian border communication more strongly emphasises resilience as a society's capacity to maintain political order, which becomes a domain of technocratic and legal control, rather than participatory efforts shared between authorities and civilians.

Notably, Estonian and Lithuanian border discourse address political threats in terms of a civilisational divide, especially so in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The civilisational divide is articulated predominantly through the entanglement of various borders overlapping along the borderline with Russia. This emphasises that the threat is not local to the border region or the countries bordering Russia and Belarus but rather EU wide. As a result, the borders (national, external EU, and the NATO border) are portrayed as lines separating democracy from autocracy, the West from the East, or civilisation from barbarism. These narratives imbue borders with existential significance, representing them as the outer edge of Western values and order. It also signifies that border discourse is not merely concerned with physical security but is invested in the symbolic construction of Europe itself.

Political threat articulations in border communication frame resilience primarily as the state's and society's ability to adapt to challenge while preserving its legitimacy and institutional stability. In this context, resilience involves safeguarding sovereignty, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring the continuity of governance. It is expressed through flexible implementation of legal and policy frameworks while simultaneously reaffirming core commitments to EU values. Threat articulations in this sector also highlight the importance of maintaining political identity and institutional credibility under pressure, positioning resilience as the capacity to respond decisively to challenges, and current and future threats.

5.3. Societal Threats

Societal threats relate to identity, culture, and the coherence of the political community, they thereby include threats against the collective identity and cohesion of the society. This includes threats such as migration or multiculturalism. Articulations of societal threats invoke resilience as the preservation of social cohesion and collective identity. It

emphasises value-based boundaries, often portraying exclusion as a necessary form of protection and engaging in cultural filtering to define who belongs.

As the data underpinning this work relates to human movement, it is inevitable that the discourses from the four country cases envision security threats of societal character, out of which migration is among the most prominently articulated threats. Through the entanglements of national borders and the EU's external border migration movements are presented as a challenge not only to individual member states, but also to the EU as a social and moral entity. Given the structure of the Schengen border regime, it is not surprising that EU member states approach migration with a dual perspective, considering both national and supranational implications. This, nonetheless, has implications for articulations of threat and resilience. The latter is not only imagined in the scope of a national collective but underpinned by imaginations of the uniqueness of EUrope. This demonstrates how threat perceptions often overlap, as this converges with political threat interpretations that narrate civilisational divides.

In response to the migratory pressures of 2015–2016, border discourse from Estonia and Lithuania articulate demographic anxieties and fears of cultural dilution. This might reflect demographic concerns accompanying large minority populations. This is less apparent in governmental border discourse from Finland and Sweden in 2015, although increasing from 2016 onwards reflecting that both countries have come to experience a securitisation of mobility over time [53, 54]. All the while, as exemplified by the earlier quote from the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry, the Baltic countries maintain that migration threats are less severe than the threats emerging from Russia which threaten the existential cohesion of the countries neighbouring Russia, as well as the value-based cohesion of the EU.

In 2022, border discourse on visa restrictions against Russian citizens justify these restrictions by pointing to the potential threats Russian citizens pose against societal cohesion and European values. This is furthermore underpinned by moral justification, which stipulates that "[s]anctions must be reflected in the everyday lives of ordinary Russians. It is not right that while Russia kills civilians in Ukraine, Russian tourists travel freely in Europe [55]." In this context, resilience is not solely about structural robustness but also about maintaining normative coherence through shared values and moral consensus. Such an approach seeks ideational unity in the face of perceived cultural or identity-based threats. This conceptualisation of resilience is the most distant from the resilience found in total-defence logic as it largely relates with a form of ideational resilience, which is also less tangible.

In the context of societal threats, one should ask: whose perspectives are included in the dominant border discourse, and whose are overlooked? The analysis in this chapter is based on governmental communication, which tends to privilege institutional narratives of security and resilience. The perspectives of inhabitants of the borderlands or marginalised groups, such as migrants, ethnic minorities, or stateless individuals, are therefore mostly missing. This absence matters, because resilience is not just a technical or institutional matter, it is a lived, everyday experience. Different communities within a society are likely to identify different societal threats, and as a result, the solutions to address these threats will also vary. Hence, if resilience strategies are to be effective and legitimate, they must be informed by diverse forms of knowledge and rooted in the lived realities of those most affected by different challenges.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how border discourse may function as a site for articulating and constructing resilience. Border discourse generates threat articulations, highlighting interpretations of what a society needs to prepare for and defend against. The chapter indicates that the current focus of border discourse often priorities state-centred, securitised understandings of resilience that obscure the contributions and needs of citizens and marginalised groups. Thereby, there appears to be a slight dissonance between the resilience emerging from border discourse, and broader understandings of resilience within North European total defence logics which encompass a wider understanding of crisis and preparedness. Herein lies a challenge for governments, regional organisations, and the civil society to ensure that resilience strategies reflect the full scope of identified challenges, and that preparedness capacity adequately corresponds to these challenges. This includes not only strengthening institutional capabilities but also empowering individuals and communities with the knowledge, tools, and voice to shape the future of resilience in the region.

The discursive entanglement of borders in the Nordic-Baltic context reveals a complex interplay between securitisation, knowledge production, and geopolitical narration. Borders are not merely lines on a map but dynamic sites where multiple imaginaries intersect and compete. Governmental discourses contribute to constructing these meanings, often without clear distinctions or acknowledgment of their implications. As such, border discourse becomes one of the arenas for shaping how resilience is imagined, communicated, and institutionalised. Recognising and critically engaging with these discursive formations is essential to develop more inclusive, transparent, and adaptive approaches to resilience in Northern Europe.

What are the potential paths forward? Resilience is a complex and often ambiguous concept, and this debate becomes even harder to navigate due to the various ways resilience is underpinned by threat articulations occurring beyond resilience debates. Additionally, government communication regarding borders and threats is typically abstract, reactive, and hard to access. This can hinder ordinary citizens' ability to understand and engage with resilience as a collective societal initiative.

One of the key issues concerns how to mentally prepare citizens for varying threats and crises, including the possibility of hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, or politically motivated migration crises, without causing undue alarm. This raises important questions: Are NATO and the EU doing enough to make their institutions accessible and intelligible to a wider public? Are information channels reaching vulnerable populations in appropriate formats and languages? These are not marginal concerns. They go to the heart of what it means to build a resilient and democratic society. Effective communication that engages with the broader public in a manner that acknowledges and navigates the entangled imaginaries of borders, threats and resilience is therefore essential. In a context where hybrid threats blur the lines between military and civilian domains, citizens must be equipped to identify and respond to subtle disruptions. This is particularly important in border regions, where minority communities may face barriers, language or otherwise, to access reliable information and as a result may be more vulnerable to disinformation. A resilient society is one where individuals are both well-informed and critically engaged. This demands a broadened understanding of security, one that integrates interdisciplinary insights on resilience as concept and operational procedure across different domains in the society.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Community Well-Being as a Security Foundation: A Life Satisfaction Index for Border Resilience

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Abstract. The chapter looks at the development of a life satisfaction index of the residents in two Slovak self-governing regions bordering Ukraine. Conducted during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the research provides a critical real-world testing ground for understanding how border communities experience security challenges in practice. 37 items categorised into 7 domains included the satisfaction with one's economic situation, social conditions, the state of environment, relationships between people in the region, how local authorities work in the city/municipality, security in the region and with contact with neighbouring Ukrainian region. The questionnaire was administered to $N = 884$ persons. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) indicated four components. As a low-order construct (LOC), they were combined into a formative higher-order construct (HOC) and tested using PLS-SEM. All four LOCs met the standard criteria of reflective measurement models with the loading values of all items, reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. The research offers an operational framework for assessing baseline conditions that either support or undermine regional resilience. The standardised 12-item instrument allows for longitudinal and cross-regional comparisons, making it valuable for monitoring regional development and policy effectiveness.

Keywords. border regions, Schengen border, life satisfaction index, PLS-SEM

1. Introduction

After the expansion of the European Union in 2004, the border relationships of the new members with their eastern neighbours changed considerably with the border between Slovakia and Ukraine being no exception. In terms of human mobility and inter-regional cooperation, the dividing (exclusion) functions of the border prevail compared to the previous period of the eighties and nineties. The implementation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, has brought a qualitatively new situation in the development of border

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regions and regional societies on both sides of the Schengen border since 2016 [1]. In addition, the EU has taken the decision to apply and support various models of cross-border cooperation to compensate for the "dividing" functions of the border as well as to strengthen its "unifying" functions (inclusion). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused re-bordering or "covidfencing" [2], in addition to the recent war in Ukraine, have become significant exogenous factors affecting cross-border cooperation in the last five years. This relationship has also been hampered by the socioeconomic conditions of communities in the border regions [3]. Both the pandemic and war have led to restrictions and/or modifications of cross-border ties, bringing the resilience of border regions and the regional social capital into the focus of border studies in Europe [4,5]. Resilience is understood here as an ability of a community to self-organize and mobilize skills and resources to create opportunities when faced with adversity, and to act in solidarity when the community is disturbed and even disrupted, while perceived social and political stability, economic conditions, cohesion of societies and social capital has been widely recognised as enabling resources playing key roles in building and maintaining social resilience [6].

2. The Economic, Social and Political Aspects of Life in the Self-Governing Regions Bordering Ukraine

The border regions of Ukraine and the neighbouring EU countries can be typically considered peripherals and not the most important centres of economic activity. Their development potential largely depends on the nature of the border and the conditions for mutual trade and cross-border cooperation. Indeed, they could draw on productive advantages and economic development opportunities from their mutual proximity and connections [3]. Yet, the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands, including the Prešov and Košice self-governing regions in Slovakia and the Transcarpathian region (Zakarpattia Oblast) in Ukraine, have produced the lowest per capita GDP in their respective countries (i.e. the Prešov Region as well as the Transcarpathian Region ranked among the least performing regional economies in Slovakia and Ukraine, respectively) in recent years. In addition to unemployment exceeding national averages, the low disposable incomes below average national income levels are further factors contributing to the low level of purchasing power in these regions. At the same time, it is possible to note the persistent disparities between the Slovak and Ukrainian border regions.

The performance of the Transcarpathian regional economy significantly lags behind the level of the regional economies in eastern Slovakia with the disposable income in Transcarpathia being about one-third of that in the Prešov and Košice regions [7]. Slovakia ranks among the top five EU destinations in terms of work migration flows from the Transcrapathian Region of Ukraine [8]. However, the lack of transport connectivity and long waiting times at the border are not conducive to collaborations requiring physical contact such as labour market commuting, small cross-border trade and face-to-face personal meetings. Obstacles related to cross-border economic relationships are still hindering factors with regard to foreign investment, trade relations, value chains and supplier networks as well as business development [7]. While there has been progress in the development of social conditions (social infrastructure, accessibility of health care, social services, education), these regions still lag behind the more developed regions in Slovakia. Although social and health services are largely dependent on the respective national policies, their implementation still takes place at the level of

regional and local authorities [9, 10]. Among the most significant environmental issues in both the Prešov and Košice regions is the need to complete adequate environmental protection and waste management infrastructure. These regions have shown little progress in terms of joint energy management, efficiency and renewable energy resources in recent years despite the level of greenhouse gas emissions falling [7]. There is a relatively safe situation in both regions regarding criminality, fire protection and flood protection. However, the war in Ukraine has led to the security of the Schengen border becoming a key issue [9, 10].

One of the reasons for getting to know and understand the life of people living in the self-governing regions bordering Ukraine is to obtain statements regarding their satisfaction with important areas of life, representing the baseline conditions that either support or undermine regional resilience. The economic situation, social conditions, state of the environment, relationships between people in the region, activity of local authorities in the city/municipality, security in the region and the contact of residents with those in the neighbouring Ukrainian region were considered as such (see the part 4.1 for detailed explanation). In response, a satisfaction questionnaire has been developed with the properties of an index given the nature of the phenomenon surveyed. It is assumed that satisfaction with different areas of life does not share a single common cause as is typical with scales but generates a common effect. The questionnaire's development during Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides a critical real-world testing ground for understanding how border communities experience existential security challenges. This timing offers unique insights into measuring community stability and resilience when traditional deterrence mechanisms are under stress, making the tool potentially valuable for assessing baseline conditions that either support or undermine deterrence strategies.

3. Measuring Life Satisfaction using an Index

An index is a form of questionnaire whose items are designed and verified regarding their properties based on a formative measurement model. The measured concept is based on the assumption that life satisfaction represents the sum of the total score of people's responses to all index items. It is believed that a scale, which is the result of a reflective measurement model, would be inappropriate for obtaining an overall score covering satisfaction with various areas of life. The mixing up of scale and index is often overlooked, although the need to distinguish between the two has long been pointed out. Despite this, it is not generally considered when developing questionnaires [11, 12, 13].

It should be clarified as to why the information about overall life satisfaction is represented as a total score and why the total score will be created using a formative measurement model. The starting assumption is that it is useful to have this type of survey and data available as it both quantifies the current situation and is a suitable comparative basis for repeated evaluation. This makes it possible to identify and compare differences or similarities later. This could be in different contexts or as a result of changes in society. As an immediate neighbour of Slovakia, changes in Ukraine can be anticipated with one of the potential causes of such changes seen in the impacts of the country's steps toward EU accession. At this point it should be noted that the analysed data from this research come from the period shortly after the positive evaluation of the European Commission was known, resulting in the acceleration of further accession steps. In the interest of simplification, further reasons for using the total score will not

be discussed. In terms of justifying combining the responses of the individual questionnaire items into a total score, it can be noted there are two alternative procedures described in the literature. These are founded on conceptually different assumptions: "(a) when items share a common cause and (b) when items share a common effect (e.g. Bollen, 1989; Bollen & Diamantopoulos 2017a). Where items share a common cause, they reflect the variable that is driving them. Where they share a common effect, they define or form that aggregate variable" [14]. It is also possible to have a combination of both, a so-called hybrid measurement.

In terms of the first approach, the term *scale* is customarily used while the term *index* is used in the second. There are two alternatives used in the case of an index. The first is a *formative composite index,* which is made up of a list of items that have no conceptual unity, while the second is a *formative causal index,* which has items conceptually linked by a theory. In the current study, the idea is that the satisfaction of residents who live in the Slovak-Ukrainian border region is a concept made up of several specific areas of satisfaction. It is thus a summary of various specific satisfactions that can be aggregated into a total score using a formative causal index. It is worth highlighting that conceptual unity is typical for scales that use reflective measuring models. In the case of measuring overall life satisfaction, this approach predominates. The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale is a prominent tool [15] with the conceptually unifying theory being that there is an "overall life satisfaction" that a person expresses based on the responses to the five items of the scale. These items are mutually interchangeable and the responses are a product; they are caused by a single latent variable (with the answers having a common cause). However, in the case of satisfaction with life in the regions bordering Ukraine, uniform overall satisfaction caused by mutually interchangeable satisfaction with different areas of life (relationships between people in the region, the economic situation, the state of the environment, the work of local authorities in the city/municipality, security in the region and contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region) cannot be assumed. The items of the index representing different areas of satisfaction are not manifestations of a common cause or a single causal latent variable.

In summary, if a person evaluates satisfaction with his/her life in general or in one specific area of life, then it is very likely that their responses will represent one common factor, the common cause behind the rating. If a person expresses his/her subjective evaluation of various areas of his/her life in which he/she currently lives or has lived for a long time, then the evaluations can be relatively independent, depending on which evaluation areas were chosen for the questionnaire. In this case, it is not appropriate to select items that would be mutually interchangeable as a sample of all possible items, but rather to have knowledge of the assessed areas to best cover them as potential formulations that will comprise the index. The items of an index that represent different areas are about different things and are thus not interchangeable. In considering an instrument where each area is represented by only one item, changing any one item would change the aggregated variable while the other items would not be affected. If individual specific domains are comprised of several items, they can have the properties of a scale, whereas the combination of different domains into a total score can have the properties of an index. In such a case, this is a higher-order construct (HOC) whose domains are reflective in nature and the total score formative in nature. This is thus a hybrid measurement with a reflective-formative nature [14]. It is necessary to fully comprehend and understand the process of creating an index in order to select the most appropriate method of analysing the items and procedure for creating an overall score.

4. A Life Satisfaction Index in the Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia Bordering Ukraine

4.1. Choice of Areas of Satisfaction, Choice of Items and Preparation Processes

a) The selected areas and potential items related to satisfaction were based on an analysis of the literature and other preliminary research. The choice of areas was facilitated by a previously published instrument related to life satisfaction called the National Index of Subjective Well-Being [16]. This contains two scales[2], the first of which comprises seven items - standard of living, health, achieving in life, personal relationships, how safe you feel, community connectedness and future security. The mean scores of these items are then averaged to give a Personal Well-being Index (PWI) (Slovak version by Cummins, Džuka and Arita 2003) [17]. The second scale comprises three items (in a later version expanded to six) with the average score forming the National Well-being Index (NWI). The three original items (economic situation, state of the environment and social conditions) were supplemented by satisfaction with the government, business and national security. The thirteen items of the National Index of Subjective Well-being are relatively broad formulations in terms of content. The first item of the NWI is: "How satisfied are you with the economic situation in Australia?" These items were used as the basis for the selected areas of satisfaction in the current index where the following seven areas were selected: the economic situation in the region, the social conditions of life in the region, the state of the environment, relationships between people, the work of local governments, the state of security and contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region. For four of these areas, specific formulations of the future items were obtained based on preliminary research with the target group of people.

In November 2022, thirty adults from the Košice (12) and Prešov (18) self-governing regions were administered two questions in a written form: "1) What do you consider important for the life of people in border regions?" with the possibility of freely stating their responses in relation to different groups of people (adults of productive age, pensioners, youths and children or other persons). The second question was: "2) What do you consider important for cross-border cooperation?". There were frequently occurring themes based on the written responses selected for four domains. For *Economic situation in the region*, the following five formulations were used: satisfaction with job opportunities, conditions for doing business, one's own financial situation, the availability of goods and services and with the region's level of economic development. For *Social conditions in the region*, seven formulations were used: satisfaction with the availability of social services and their quality, the availability of health care and its quality, the availability of schools and kindergartens and their quality and with the availability of cultural institutions and events. For *Work of local authorities*, four formulations were used: satisfaction with the contribution of the local authority to the development of the area, the correctness of the decisions made by the local authority, the publication of information and with the contribution to the development of cross-border cooperation. For *Security in the region*, the following seven formulations were used: satisfaction with the crime rate and security, protection against organised crime, protection against terrorism, protection against military conflict, protection against illegal migration, protection against the spread of diseases and against natural disasters. Regarding the *State of the environment in the region*, three items taken from the

[2] The terminology is left aside, which refers to the names "index" and "scale" used by the authors.

Territorial Analysis for the future programme CBC INTERREG NEXT Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine [7] were used. For the area *Relationships between people in the region*, six items were formulated based on the World Social Capital Monitor [18]. With regard to the final area of *Contact with the neighbouring region across the border*, there were five items taken from the EXLINEA questionnaire [19].

b) The comprehensibility of the proposed items and their grammatical correctness were checked. The 37 formulations were subjected to discussion with 4 selected respondents from the border regions in order to verify their understanding (a male university student aged 18–29 from the Košice region, an employed woman aged 30–39 from the Košice region; a self-employed man aged 40–49 from the Prešov region and a retired woman aged over 60 from the Prešov region). There were only minor rewordings made and thus further details are not provided. The final wording of the entire questionnaire was checked and corrected by a professor in the field of Slovak Language and Literature, and the document finally validated by four experts from the analysed regions.

4.2. Selected Domains of Satisfaction and Procedures for Item Selection

As this was a formative causal index, the research relied on the concept of satisfaction with the specific areas of life that defined the boundaries of the variable and guided the selection of items. There were potential limitations associated with this, because what was not included in the concept did not make it into the index in the form of items. While a larger number of items of the future index was formulated in the design phase, their potential redundancy was not considered useful, as is common with scales. There was therefore an effort made to word the items in that they would capture and cover different areas and aspects of satisfaction as a unifying concept. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that some of the proposed items would not be suitable for two reasons. Firstly, the survey contents would not be sufficiently known to all persons, or they would not have sufficient or even any experience with them at the time of being asked. The second reason was the redundancy of certain items within the individual areas. DeVellis and Thorpe [14] have noted that even one clear and effective item that describes the domain resulting from the definition of the concept may suffice, and that adding more items is not necessary.

The 37 proposed index items comprised seven domains (the wording of 37 indicators organised into 7 domains and the number/percentage of responses “I can’t judge” within the indicator are, due to space reasons, not included in the chapter and are available from the authors upon request). For the sake of clarity, the individual domains have been listed in the order in which they were arranged in the questionnaire. The abbreviated names and number of items in the domain are given in parentheses:

1. Satisfaction with the economic situation (ECON, 5).
2. Satisfaction with social conditions (SOCIAL, 7).
3. Satisfaction with the state of the environment (ENVIRON, 3).
4. Satisfaction with the relationships between people in the region (RELAT, 6).
5. Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality (LOCALGOV, 4).
6. Satisfaction with security in the region (SECURITY, 7).
7. Satisfaction with contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region (CROSSB, 5).

The respondents expressed their answers to all items by marking one number on the scale “no satisfaction 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 complete satisfaction”. Apart from the

responses on the indicated scale, the respondents could also mark the answer "x", which represented the possibility of not expressing any satisfaction assessment: "If you do not know an area or have no experience with it, mark the option x." Given that convergent validity (redundancy) is assessed during verification of the formative measurement model, an alternative measurement of the construct must already be planned in the research preparation phase for the purposes of evaluation. Cheah, Sarstedt, Ringle, Ramayah and Ting [20] have stated that it is sufficient to have even a single global item that captures the essence of the measured construct. For spatial and practical reasons (none of the domains were defined as a formative measurement model based on the PCA results), the wording of the seven global items that were included in the questionnaire at the end of each of the seven domains is not provided. In order to test the convergent validity of the whole formative model as a higher-order construct (HOC), a general global formulation of satisfaction was given at the very end of the questionnaire: "How satisfied are you with your overall life?" The respondents could express their response to this question on a scale: "I am not satisfied at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 I am completely satisfied".

4.3. Data and Procedure

The data were collected through an agency. The respondents ($N = 884$) had online access to the questionnaire through the agency's email. The sample selection ensured a proportional representation of people from the two self-governing regions of Slovakia that border Ukraine: the Prešov Self-governing Region (793,182 inhabitants) and the Košice Self-governing Region (767,685 inhabitants). Along with proportional representation of the population from both regions, a quota selection was applied in relation to age. Persons from five age categories (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59 and 60 and over) were proportionally represented. There were no quotas used for the selection of persons with regard to their education or type of economic activity, although approximate proportions were considered regarding the size of their place of residence. The data collection ran from 29 January to 15 February 2024. The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents ($N = 884$).

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Women	506	57.2
Men	378	42.8
Age		
18–29	168	19.0
30–39	170	19.2
40–49	151	17.1
50–59	164	18.6
60 or more	231	26.1
Education		
Primary	52	5.9
Secondary without school-leaving exam	227	25.7
Secondary with school-leaving exam	382	43.2
University	223	25.2
Type of economic activity		
Permanent employment	424	48.0
Self-employed	65	7.4
Unemployed	92	10.4

Student	49	5.5
Pensioner	219	24.7
Other	35	4.0
Size of residence		
Fewer than 1,000 inhabitants	202	22.9
1,000 to 4 999 inhabitants	255	28.8
5,000 to 19 999 inhabitants	145	16.4
20,000 or more	282	31.9
Region bordering Ukraine		
Prešov Self-Governing Region	450	50.9
Košice Self-Governing Region	434	49.1

4.4. Analytical Approach

Prior to the statistical analysis, it was considered how to process the "I can't judge" responses. An example of this was when a person had to evaluate satisfaction with the conditions for doing business. In the case of having no experience with business and not doing business him/herself, s/he had the option of marking the "I can't judge" response. The items marked as such were approached in two ways. Firstly, in order to account for the requirement of content validity – that is, that the index sufficiently covers the surveyed area – the given item was omitted from the analysis if the number of people who responded "I can't judge" was higher than 10% of the total number of responses. From the total number of 37 items, 20 items remained for further analysis. The occurrence of the "I can't judge" responses goes well beyond the 10% mark in the case of domain 7 *Satisfaction with contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region*. As a result, this entire domain was left out of further analysis. Similarly, six of the seven items could not be used in domain 6 *Satisfaction with security in the region*.

The exclusion of domain 7 had a significant impact on the current research. The domain items refer to an explicitly formulated relationship to the neighbouring country which respondents were unable to assess. This is something which will be commented on in the discussion section. However, the implicit dimension of life satisfaction in the other analysed items of the index enables sufficient knowledge to be gained regarding the satisfaction of the respondents. Secondly, in case of 20 of the remaining items we excluded missing responses using the pairwise method when calculating correlations and the PCA (the person and all their other responses were not omitted from the analysis, only the specific missing response). IBM SPSS Statistics 29 software was used for the statistical analysis. For the purpose of verifying the metric properties of the formative index, PLS-SEM structural modelling was used.[3] This approach was considered appropriate for the construction of the index, in which the total score is represented by a higher-order construct of a hybrid nature, a construct of a reflective-formative nature [21]. SmartPLS 4 software was used for the statistical analysis [22].

[3] For the differences between CB-SEM and PLS-SEM, see e.g. Hair et al. *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).* (Sage publications, 2022).

5. Results

5.1. PCA (Principal Component Analysis)

PCA was used to verify whether the theoretical assignment of the 20 items to the postulated domains can be empirically confirmed. The PCA components are derived from the items, with the result representing an optimised reorganisation of the information in these items. After verifying the PCA conditions (KMO =.929 and Bartlett's test highly significant), it is possible to identify four components that explain 81% of the variance together. This is based on the number of values with an eigenvalue greater than 1 as well as on the basis of the scree plot (for space reasons, the image is not shown). The result of the PCA after the promax rotation and the four identified components are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. PCA results. Promax rotation (pairwise deletion).

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
RELAT4	.970			
RELAT2	.968			
RELAT5	.961			
RELAT3	.916			
RELAT1	.882			
RELAT6	.589			
ECON1		.929		
ECON3		.831		
ECON5		.795		
ECON4		.696		
ENVIRON2			.924	
ENVIRON1			.912	
ENVIRON3			.884	
LOCALGOV2				.959
LOCALGOV3				.944
LOCALGOV1				.907

Note. Items with loadings less than .300 are not shown.
RELAT - Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, ECON - Satisfaction with the economic situation, ENVIRON - Satisfaction with the state of the environment, LOCALGOV - Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality

There are 16 of the 20 analysed items listed in Table 2. Four items were left out after the first PCA calculation for the following reasons. One item from the SECURITY domain could not be assigned to any of the domains which is partly in line with theoretical assumptions. At the same time, a loading was found on the ENVIRON component (.420) and on the domain RELAT (.328). Other three items that came from the SOCIAL domain were omitted from the analysis because they formed a common component with the four items of the ECON domain which was not in line with the theoretical expectation. All three also had factor loadings (.510 to .418) and order of magnitude lower when compared to EKON. An additional verification was related to the metric properties of the four identified components and the possibility of aggregating them into a total score as the sum of the scores of the four domains: satisfaction with relationships between people in the region (RELAT), satisfaction with how the local authorities work in the

city/municipality (LOCALGOV), satisfaction with the state of the environment (ENVIRON) and satisfaction with the economic situation (ECON).

5.2. Measurement Model

Conceptual unity, which is the essence of a formative causal index, is the basis of scales that are based on a reflective model of measurement. The difference between the two lies in the fact that while the items are not mutually interchangeable in the case of a formative causal index, a common latent factor is assumed in the case of the reflective model, with the items being mutually interchangeable. The primary means for deciding whether to specify a measurement model reflectively or formatively is a matter of theoretical consideration [23].

5.3. Properties of the Measurement Models of the Four First-Order Constructs

Before the combination of low-order constructs (LOC) and the formation of a higher-order construct (HOC) were tested, it was essential to verify the properties of the measurement models of the low-order constructs. The measurement of satisfaction with the four different domains permitted the assumption that each of these distinct assessments is "driven" by its own common factor. The high values of the PCA factor loadings can be considered as empirical support for the reflective nature of measurement models within the domains. In the case of assessing the reflective measurement models, the standard criteria in PLS-SEM are the loading values of individual items, the reliability (Cronbach's alpha), the convergent validity (AVE) and the discriminant validity [24]. The results in Table 3 show that the loadings of items of all reflective constructs exceeded the threshold value of 0.70, the values of internal consistency exceeded the threshold value of 0.70, and the values of convergent validity were higher than the threshold value of 0.50. In terms of omitting items, item ECON4 was primarily left out for content reasons with the wording (availability of goods and services) related to a specific aspect associated with trade (its loading on its own component in the PCA was the lowest compared to the others, .696). It was also left out for technical and analytical reasons because the use of the approach with repeated indicators is planned when creating the HOC, and this estimate works effectively if the LOCs have the same or a similar number of items [25].

Three further items were also omitted from the RELAT scale for technical and analytical reasons: six items showed a higher internal consistency value (.0.959) than is appropriate (thresholds of reliability measures in exploratory research is 0.95 to avoid indicator redundancy) [26]. However, these exclusions were primarily due to the content of the items: items RELAT3 (the willingness to cooperate expresses similar content to the willingness to help each other – RELAT2) and RELAT5 (hospitality is similar to the item friendliness of people – RELAT4). Item RELAT6 (the willingness of people to share in common goals) differs in terms of content from the remaining items and also showed a relatively high percentage of "I can't judge" responses (9.3%). For the purpose of verifying the discriminant validity, a Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio Analysis (HTMT) was carried out. The discriminant validity can be confirmed when all the values of HTMT ratio are less than 0.85. The results in Table 6 confirm that none of the detected values exceeded the threshold value. It can thus be concluded that all four lower-order constructs provide reliable and valid results.

Table 3. Reflective measurement model assessment of loading, reliability (alpha) and average variance extracted (AVE).

Construct	Item	Loading	Alpha	AVE	Item deleted
ECON	ECON1	.885	.836	.760	ECON4
	ECON3	.852			
	ECON5	.879			
ENVIRON	ENVIRON1	.920	.908	.845	
	ENVIRON2	.901			
	ENVIRON3	.936			
RELAT	RELAT1	.944	.944	.903	RELAT3
	RELAT2	.958			RELAT5
	RELAT4	.948			RELAT6
LOCALGOV	LOCALGOV1	.962	.945	.907	
	LOCALGOV2	.961			
	LOCALGOV3	.934			

Note. ECON - Satisfaction with the economic situation, ENVIRON - Satisfaction with the state of the environment, RELAT - Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, LOCALGOV - Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality

Table 4. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Analysis for Checking Discriminant Validity of First Order Constructs.

Construct	ECON	ENVIRON	LOCALGOV	RELAT
ECON				
ENVIRON	0.499			
LOCALGOV	0.604	0.611		
RELAT	0.518	0.566	0.661	

Note. ECON - Satisfaction with the economic situation, ENVIRON - Satisfaction with the state of the environment, RELAT - Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, LOCALGOV - Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality

5.4. The Establishment of the Higher-Order Construct Overall Satisfaction with Life in Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia Bordering Ukraine (OVERALLSAT).

The reliability and validity of the reflective low-order constructs (LOC) have been verified, which made it possible to proceed with the verification of the theoretically postulated reflective-formative model of the higher-order construct (HOC). In the HOC, the indicators are low-order constructs with the higher-order construct employing repeated use of items from the low-order constructs [21].

Table 5 shows the results of the analyses of the tested model. The analysis of the convergent validity (redundancy) of the formative construct was based on one global item which summarises the essence of the formatively measured construct: "How satisfied are you with your life overall?" The path-coefficient threshold of 0.7 was not reached (0.635), which is likely associated with the fact that the global item expressed a high measure of generality and did not sufficiently correspond to what the formatively measured construct was supposed to summarise. Regarding the collinearity of the low-order constructs whose critical levels influence the estimates of the higher-order model, the VIF values were lower than the strict critical value of 3 (1.534 to 2.189). The relationship of the four LOCs to OVERALLSAT was expressed by the LOC weights. All four values were found to be statistically significant, supporting the assumption that all four LOCs significantly contribute to explaining the overall satisfaction with life in the self-governing regions of Slovakia bordering Ukraine.

Table 5. Formative measurement model assessment of Higher-Order Construct (HOC): redundancy, VIF and outer weights.

HOC	LOC	Redundancy	VIF	Outer weights
OVERALLSAT	ECON	.635	1.534	.323***
	ENVIRON		1.663	.321***
	RELAT		1.851	.336***
	LOCALGOV		2.189	.284***

Note. *** indicate $p < .001$
OVERALLSAT - Overall satisfaction with life in self-governing regions of Slovakia bordering Ukraine, ECON - Satisfaction with the economic situation, ENVIRON - Satisfaction with the state of the environment, RELAT - Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, LOCALGOV - Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality

6. Discussion, Practical Implications and Further Development of the Index

A short 12-item economic instrument was developed for determining the satisfaction of Slovak residents living in the self-governing regions bordering Ukraine (the questionnaire is not included here for space reasons and is available from the authors). The original aim was to create a causally formative index, making it possible to determine satisfaction not as isolated items representing separate variables but as a stable set of areas of satisfaction representing one variable. This effort was motivated by the fact that the instrument may be used repeatedly in research over time due to expected changes; therefore, it will be appropriate to measure satisfaction using a stable set of indicators with a set formula to combine them into a summary score. This also creates conditions for comparing results across different studies. Since this is a measurement instrument which detects changing life satisfaction, the idea is reinforced that it should be used without changes. This consistency would stabilise the definition of the satisfaction variable, and if different studies use the same index without modifications, researchers will be certain that studies are dealing with the same variable [14]. Clearly, this does not mean that the 12 items of the instrument, which make up four different domains, cannot be supplemented with other items, or domains. However, for comparison purposes it will be important that the basic 12-item version of the instrument remains. This would be then assessed separately and independently of any further additions.

The formative index approach recognises that resilience components don't necessarily correlate, acknowledging that communities might have strong social relationships but weak economic conditions. At the same time, this measurement instrument serves comprehensive security by identifying vulnerability patterns that adversaries might exploit as the satisfaction deficits in specific domains may create openings for hybrid threats, information warfare, or social destabilisation efforts. It is understood that an unstable border community with low resilience is likely to become easy prey in the event of security pressures [5]. In the case of Slovak-Ukrainian borderland context we can observe for example the effects of social cohesion shortage manifested in border communities' life satisfaction that weaken the ability to resist manipulation. Unfavourable economic situation and persistent regional disparities exacerbate border communities' vulnerability to coercion, while lack of institutional trust hinders effective crisis response.

The first version of the developed index is associated with limitations that can be corrected upon re-administration. First, the monitored metric indicators of the four LOCs of a reflective nature can be considered fulfilled: the item loadings of all the reflective constructs, the internal consistency values and the convergent validity values exceed the recommended threshold values with the discriminant validity of the individual LOCs also demonstrated. However, the formatively specified HOC, represented by four LOCs as its indicators, does not meet one of the three criteria. While the values of collinearity for all four LOCs were low and their relationship with the HOC statistically significant, the convergent validity (redundancy) determined by the single global item "How satisfied are you with life overall?" did not achieve the threshold value. Even though the value of 0.635 is only marginally lower than the threshold value of 0.70, the following wording of the global item is proposed for further verification: "How satisfied are you overall with life in the area where you live?" Second, the domain represented by items that explicitly express satisfaction with contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region could not be integrated into the index due to the high proportion of "I can't judge" responses (40.5–55.8%). This involved five originally proposed formulations that express satisfaction with specific activities in relation to the neighbouring region: satisfaction with the opportunity to travel across the Slovak-Ukrainian border, the opportunity to shop on the other side of the Slovak-Ukrainian border, the opportunity to commute to work across the Slovak-Ukrainian border, the opportunity to cooperate across the Slovak-Ukrainian border and with the opportunity to do business across the Slovak-Ukrainian border.

As it turned out, the residents of the two neighbouring self-governing regions of Slovakia bordering Ukraine were unable to judge these activities at the time of the research. An additional survey of a small sample showed that a very large percentage of respondents had no direct experience with them. As was pointed out in the results section, the implicit assessment using the remaining 12 items of the index provides information on four different areas of satisfaction among the respondents. It is of future interest to consider the ways in which the missing information on satisfaction with contact with the neighbouring Ukrainian region can be integrated into the index. Two options are considered, the first of which is simple: during repeated research, administer together with the 12 existing indicators the existing wording of five items that relate to the originally formulated activities. While this may appear to be a repetition of the same mistake, it can be expected that the inhabitants of the two neighbouring regions will gain experience with some of the surveyed activities in the foreseeable future due to expected changes. However, the second approach is more challenging and would require proposing new indicators of a different nature instead of identifying specific activities. These would be items that would express a subjective perception or idea about the area of Ukraine beyond the Slovak border without taking direct experience into account.

There were six of the seven formulations related to satisfaction with security in the region, more specifically with protection against specific threats (against organised crime, against terrorism, against the risk of war, against illegal immigration across the border, against the spread of diseases and against natural disasters (floods, fires, etc.), which were omitted from the index for the same reasons (a high share of answers "I can't judge" 11.0–21.7%). The item *Satisfaction with the crime rate and the safety of residents* was often answered, but in terms of the content and results of the PCA, it could not be assigned to any area of satisfaction. Here, there are also two possibilities which can be considered in the future development of the index. The first would be to include all seven items without any changes in the repeated research, and the second would be to

reformulate the mentioned threats in the sense of the subjective threat evaluation instead of satisfaction with protection.

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PART III

Resilience at the Frontline: Borderlands Under Pressure

Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Resilience-Building Along NATO's Eastern Flank: The Case of the Ukrainian-Hungarian Borderland

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Abstract. The chapter analyses resilience-formation in borderlands and its relation to societal security. By investigating the case of regions located at the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, we argue for a nested borderland perspective which views this as an increasingly important cross-border region in the context of the NATO Eastern flank. The chapter starts with a theoretical discussion on resilience and how it can be conceptualised in a borderland setting, emphasising the distinction between bouncing-back and bouncing-forward capacities. After an analysis of the bordered realities of this part of NATO's eastern flank, the chapter continues with a scenario-based analysis of how resilience might develop in the short- and long-term in the selected border region and the implication for NATO policy-makers at different levels of government. The chapter concludes with the argument that resilience-building needs attention to the sub-national level in general, and borderlands in particular.

Keywords. Resilience, border areas, Ukraine-Hungary relations, Ukraine-Hungary borderland

1. Introduction

In spring 2025, we live at a time when the world can witness first-hand the strains in the Transatlantic security alliance, as well as surprising bonding with actors beyond it. Emotions of anger, admiration, and loyalty between leaders play out in front of TV cameras and are broadcast live, including talks between figures such as US President Trump, Russian President Putin, Ukrainian President Zelensky, and French President Macron. In this context, it is easy to think that actions elsewhere and lower in the hierarchies of complex governance systems that hold and divide the globe do not matter. That would be, however, to ignore what has been learned over the last decades about the

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importance of long-term perspectives as well as locally produced knowledge and resilience. This applies also to places that one tends to see from certain angles.

The close relations between Hungary and its prime minister Viktor Orbán with President Putin and (presumably) with President Trump are well known, and almost as well-known is the related reluctant support – sometimes outright criticism – directed toward Ukraine by Hungary. At the same time, this is not the whole picture. In this chapter, our aim is to contribute to the scholarship on the nexus of security and border(land)s with an analysis of resilience-formation at a small but strategically important part of the NATO alliance's eastern flank, namely the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland. We start with outlining our use of the concept of resilience, building on previous scholarship (section 2). We then continue with a short background on borders, a key factor in the case study (section 3) before moving to our analysis of current conditions (section 4) and prospective developments (section 5). We conclude with the argument that resilience-building needs attention to the sub-national level in general, and borderlands in particular.

2. Resilience as a Theoretical Lens

Before moving into how we handle the concept of resilience in this chapter, we should highlight that there is an abundance of definitions of resilience applied across different academic disciplines. These include it being "a stable trajectory of healthy functioning after a highly adverse event; a conscious effort to move forward in an insightful and integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience; the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function, and development of that system; and a process to harness resources in order to sustain well-being" [1].

On societal level/s it is worth noticing that resilience bears similarities to other concepts that try to capture non-material resources, and which have captured the attention of policymakers, such as "social capital". Popularised in the 1990s by Robert Putnam and subsequently disseminated for policy use by the World Bank, the allure of social capital lay precisely in its non-materiality coupled with its distinction from the somewhat tainted explanatory factors like "culture". While less associated with a particular scholar or a specific policy actor, resilience may have been picked up for similar reasons. It has also received similar criticisms, such as making regions responsible for their own development regardless of the structural disadvantages they face.

More recently, the concept has been applied to borderlands, demonstrating how uncritical adoptions can be counter-productive or hide dynamics beyond those taking place within clearly demarcated places. As noted by Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola: "Contrary to the narrative that presents borders as a solution to domestic and global disturbances, a considerable amount of research originating from various disciplines suggests open borders and diversity increase societal resilience" [2]. Furthermore, "the view from borderlands complicates the prevailing territorially bounded understandings of social resilience" by showing "that resilience is not inherently bound to any particular bordered administrative unit" [3].

As we have argued before [4], Hungary constitutes a good case to investigate how resilience plays out in borderlands. This is partly owing to the plurality and diversity of its borderlands, which have been subject to major crises and disruptions as well as slow-moving threats. It is therefore possible to see how resilience can occur in response to a

multiplicity of disruptions [5], investigating how borderlands can self-organize and mobilize skills and resources to create opportunities in the face of adversity and to act in solidarity in times when their communities are disturbed or disrupted.

In this chapter, we use an understanding of resilience that is open to change, going beyond mere coping and adaptation [6]. We make a distinction between "bouncing-back capabilities" and "bouncing-forward capabilities". The former is a somewhat traditional approach and refers to the capacity of communities to maintain structures after instances of crisis or long-term changes. It may also be characterised as robustness. Bouncing-forward capabilities, on the other hand, indicate flexibility, the ability to adapt to new circumstances, and the capacity to move forward [7], and is the one taken in this chapter. We also emphasize the importance of making an ontological distinction between resilience as a process, which can only be assessed in hindsight, or resilience as a "stock of something" that can be measured at any given point. The latter is implied in numerous sorts of contexts comparing and ranking different places and communities. The underlying assumption there is that the investigated objects can have quantitatively measurable, objective resilience values, although the methodological challenges are sometimes admitted [8]. Such an understanding of resilience is the cornerstone of recent, competition-oriented models of regional development, leading to efforts to develop indices and other yardsticks on resilience [7]. Although we see the value of both conceptualisations, for the purpose of this chapter preference will be given to the process-oriented approach.

The concept of resilience has been adapted and applied to the context of Hungarian borderlands in several studies. Notably, in Hungarian the foreign-sounding and directly translated term *reziliencia* has been applied together with the term *rugalmasság*, better translated as flexibility. For instance, Pirisi [9] discusses the role of resilience in the development of small towns, and there is an abundance of semi-academic practitioner reports, often linked in some way to EU funding and/or influence mechanisms. Such semantic distinctions are not unique to the concept of resilience but serve as a reminder that citizens and actors of borderlands may interpret their own actions differently, perhaps precisely because of such distinctions. Moreover, Hungarian scholars usually treat resilience as a resource (a stock of something) and not a process, for instance by discussing and proposing methodologies for measuring what leads to resilience in regions [10]. Resilience has been discussed taking the border revisions in 1920 as a starting point.

Lovas Kiss [11] argues that today's pattern of migration from "historical Hungary" in Romania is a manifestation of resilience that draws on long-accumulated adaptation capacities. Migration, on the other hand, can also be seen as a vulnerability, as argued by Urbančíková and Zgodavová [12] who also point out that the border factor is key in explaining why resilience patterns vary in regions located at the Hungarian-Slovakian border. A study of how regions reacted after the 2008 financial crisis found that non-metropolitan regions were more resilient in Hungary [13] (indicating an economic bouncing-back capacity). As per Benke and colleagues [14], resilience can be predicted by a model of learning based on competition and innovation, leading them to demonstrate variation in this between municipalities located at the borders of Hungary. While there are larger stretches of high-performing communities, for instance along the northwestern border and concentrated around Szeged in the south, there are also small pockets of high-performers in terms of learning capacity embedded even in low-performing border regions. Finally, resilience has also been used to understand identity and how it can last over time, focusing on the western parts of Romania, bordering Hungary [15].

As is clear from this section, it is hard to ignore the component of time when it comes to studying resilience, making it imperative not only to see *the bigger picture* (or, with a less used but equally potent expression, *the bigger map)*, but also the *pictures behind the pictures* (and the maps behind the maps) to understand and draw inferences for action about current geopolitical conditions.

3. Hungary and Ukraine in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

Hungary's current borders stem from the peace treaties following WWI, but the names and territorial structures of its neighbours have changed multiple times and significantly since then. After the Balkan wars in the 1990s again changed the maps of the region, the country borders seven countries. Hungary joined NATO in 1999, though none of its neighbours was or became a member at that time. That soon changed significantly though with the 2004 accession of Slovakia, Romania, and Slovenia, and that of Croatia in 2009. As of then, Hungary neighbours four NATO countries and three non-member ones; Austria, Serbia, and Ukraine. Further, from the perspective of borders and free movement it is important that five of Hungary's neighbours are in the EU and the Schengen Area, though this too was a long, multi-step process between May 2004 and January 2025. The two neighbours outside the latter two entities are Serbia and Ukraine, though both having official EU candidate status since 2012 and 2022, respectively. Further, Serbian citizens have been visa waivers to the Schengen area since 2009 and Ukrainian citizens since 2017. In other words, Hungary and most of its neighbours have over the past decades become deeply integrated in western structures. The twist is though that in recent years, high-level leaders of Hungary itself have repeatedly questioned their commitment to these, sometimes only rhetorically but sometimes also by vetoing joint policy proposals – for instance, regarding Ukraine.

Wedged between Russia and NATO, Ukraine finds itself in a difficult geopolitical location. Hence, although not uniquely, Ukraine has been described as a borderland nation by a number of different scholars and commentators [16, 17, 18]. This description is contested though, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it reflects the perspectives of its larger and more powerful neighbours. On the other hand, labels like border nation or cusp state [19] have been coupled with descriptions pointing to internal divisions. The latter may to some extent have characterised Ukraine in the past, but the nation has become much more united since Russia's 2014 partial invasion and especially since its 2022 full-scale invasion [20, 21]. Indeed, Ukraine's ability and willingness to withstand the latter – initially solely on its own – has impressed much of the western world, evoking solidarity and soon support. The high levels of resilience in Ukrainian society are also confirmed in large, representative, country-wide surveys [22,23]. At the same time, in one of these [19] the authors also found lower levels of resilience in areas of Ukraine where minority languages prevail, thus calling on policy-makers to encourage interpersonal trust and provide appropriate support to these citizens as well.

Infamously, in recent years Hungary's government has been systematically blocking Ukraine's NATO as well as EU membership prospects and even support. This was not the case up until 2016, but Balogh and Kovály [24] have argued that the deterioration of bilateral relations has been the outcome of the following processes. On the one hand, Ukraine's policies toward its ethno-linguistic minorities – including the Hungarians – imposed restrictions on language-use rights. On the other hand, Hungary's now long-incumbent government has been maintaining warm relations with that of Russia even

since Ukraine's full-scale invasion. Beyond pragmatic economic ties, what the two leaderships have in common is an instrumentalisation of their transborder kin – although by very different means, of course. This has nevertheless led to not a few Ukrainians perceiving also Hungary as a threat to its sovereignty, potentially even in a territorial sense. Additionally, (pro-)Russian ties have also been discovered behind the spread of unfounded conspiracy theories on Hungary potentially invading western Ukraine. In its turn, the Hungarian government has recently been flooding its electorate with anti-Ukrainian campaigns [25], further exacerbating a general feeling of distrust between the two nations. How all this impacts resilience in the borderland, as well as implications for policy, will be the subjects of the remainder of this chapter.

4. Resilience in the Ukraine-Hungary Borderland

4.1. A Brief Overview of the Study Area

The regions surrounding the Ukraine-Hungary border constitute textbook examples of areas where citizens over time have been heavily impacted by redrawn borders, and today a hard border in the sense of being a NATO border and an EU external border. Taken together, this makes it a fruitful case to investigate resilience. In this and the subsequent sections we provide an analysis of how resilience has developed and may develop in the future of this borderland, as well as implications for NATO policy-makers at different levels. We do so while applying a definition of resilience as practice-based processes rather than as a stock of something that is measured (e.g., as attempted in opinion polls about citizens' willingness to "try again", or the use of proxies such as trust).

We rely on secondary sources as well as a re-analysis and interpretation of in-depth interviews with 23 local and regional elites in the borderland, carried out by one of the authors of this chapter in November 2021 [24]. Fourteen of the interviews took place on the Ukraine side (eight ethnic Hungarians and six Ukrainians, including one Ukrainian-Ruthenian), and nine on the Hungary side (eight Hungarians and one Ukrainian).

Ever since the political changes in the early 1990s, the two respective counties on both sides of the Ukraine-Hungary border have belonged to the poorest ones within their respective countries. Hungary's easternmost county (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg) used to be a gateway to the USSR but was later suffering from the post-socialist economic collapse and its new position, with Hungary's eastern regions benefitting less from the country's westward orientation and flows. Ukraine's westernmost county (Zakarpattia Oblast or Transcarpathia) was strategically important for the old Soviet military but lost that role in post-independence Ukraine. Both border counties have thus suffered from disinvestment and emigration – at least until recently.

4.2. Toward Resilient Cross-border Cooperation

Cross-border contacts were very limited until 1990, though this has radically changed since then. One factor behind that is the similar ethno-linguistic character of both sides. Beyond ethnic-kin visits and some limited tourism, the post-transformation hardship has pushed not a few locals to engage in smuggling tobacco, petrol, or liquor on a regular basis [26]. Cross-border flows have particularly picked up since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its citizens becoming a Schengen visa waiver in 2017. Still, the Hungary-Ukraine boundary remains an external EU and Schengen border with concomitant strict

checks. During the fieldwork in 2021, informants reported that the border can take anything between fifteen minutes and eight hours to cross, even though the latter is rare. Moreover, they have lamented that not a single new crossing point – in addition to the existing five – has been opened for decades despite the large growth of traffic. These circumstances make cross-border life and cooperation very difficult to organize even in peaceful times, let alone at wartime.

Despite the severe challenges, resilience has been mobilised to "bounce forward" toward a more coherent and developed borderland. Actions have been undertaken by regional elites, NGOs, organisations operating semi-independently from government (QUANGOs), and local citizens alike. Already in 1993, the Carpathian Euroregion was established by the regional administrations in eastern Hungary, western Ukraine, southeast Poland, and eastern Slovakia, soon joined by northern Romanian entities. The Euroregion has undertaken many cross-border projects and is still in operation [27] but its unusually large territorial coverage has hindered efficient cooperation. As a sort of remedy, and explicitly also because the Hungarian government then still supported Ukraine's European integration, the much smaller Tisza European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation was set up in 2015 [28]. The organisation still appears dynamic and despite their narrower focus on the Ukraine-Hungary border area, some of their projects involve neighbouring Slovak and Romanian regions as well.

Although Hungary's position not to aid Ukraine militarily is well-known and remains contested, a number of QUANGOs, NGOs, and numerous other civilians have helped Ukrainian refugees upon arriving in large numbers to or transiting through Hungary. This was particularly salient at the border, though also throughout the country. Such acts were of course omnipresent across Europe, but they can perhaps at least to some degree nuance an image of Hungary all-hostile toward Ukraine.

4.3. The Resilience of Multiethnic Coexistence

Turning to the microlevel, individuals, families and relatives have adopted an unusually wide ray of coping strategies to bounce forward resilience in the borderland. This may be related to the observation that Transcarpathians feel strongly attached to their native region, with many declaring pride in its historically deeply-rooted multicultural character [24]. As one Hungarian informant described his region:

> *There is a high level of tolerance. This has always been there: the coexistence of these peoples was indoctrinated into us in Soviet times and has remained that way. I believe this is a good heritage. Its content is different today, but I believe that Transcarpathia remains an island of peace where the co-living of peoples has been realised. There are lots of mixed marriages and families.* (R1)

Another Hungarian informant portrayed her region in a similar vein: "We are living here together. There are Russians, Kazakhs etc. in my family as well, since my siblings have married them. But I have absolutely no problems with them – we are finding a common language" (R2). Yet another, this time Ukrainian, respondent also stressed the multicultural traditions of Transcarpathia:

> *We've got all kinds of people here; even Czechs, Slovaks, and Romanians. And this needs to be taken into account, because we are one community. Our interethnic relations have been very adequate for centuries. That's because living in this area,*

which has always been a crossroad of cultures, we've all come to clearly grasp that if we won't coexist peacefully here, we'll surely end up in trouble. (R3)

The sense of regional cohesion and the concomitant desire for resilient multiethnic coexistence are also evidenced by the recuring local account that whenever interethnic tensions are stirred, these are usually performed by outsiders. In the words of a Hungarian community representative:

While Ukrainian politics and media are presenting Transcarpathian Hungarians in an ever-more negative light, I do not see such a negative echo and approach here on the county level. Surely it appears here and there, yet in many cases it is imported provocateurs and activists. But in the County Council, for instance, I don't see anything like this – I do not see the sort of hatred and negativity that Ukraine at large is trying to communicate against Hungarians. Yes, I believe that on the county level the situation is much more stable. (R2)

4.4. Resilience Despite but Also Through Migration

Despite the regional pride, the severe economic situation has been pressing and contributing to all kinds of migration and mobility patterns. Yet even here, emigration is not necessarily always seen to benefit the receiving regions only. According to a Ukrainian regional analyst: "People go abroad to work and make money, but which they are taking back home, thus enrichening the state budget. Yes, this is a lagging region, there are no jobs, but so we're working abroad but bringing the money back here" (R4). Accordingly, the severe challenges of the region have not just led to emigration but also to intensive back-and-forth movements, concomitant remittances, and even considerable in-migration, though by different groups.

The migration and mobility flows have namely got some clear ethno-linguistic and gender dimensions as well. Because of the much lower wages than in the Visegrad countries, let alone western Europe, native Transcarpathians have extensively migrated to work westward for decades. Similarly to elsewhere, men are overrepresented among migrants and an important aim is the possibility to send remittances back. As a result of the ongoing war, a more recent and specific phenomenon has emerged which is that of men of conscription age relocating and/or reregistering to the Hungary side of the border as well as other safe places.

This has resulted in an unusually vibrant borderland where families and relatives come together from places near and far, often for temporary visits but in some cases for longer-term dwelling [29]. This was facilitated by a practice among Transcarpathia Hungarians to buy cheap and often decrepit housing in Hungarian villages already from the 2010s on. They did so with the original purpose of acquiring a possibility to register residence in the EU country Hungary but later enabling them to renovate these houses to contemporary requirements of comfort [30]. This process has also been alleviated by Hungary's simplified naturalisation procedure that has been criticised in Ukraine but also taken advantage of by members of different ethnicities in Transcarpathia. In the description of a Ukraine Hungarian academic:

To the Hungarians, the Hungarian passport is a matter of national identity, with many having awaited it and taken advantage of it. To the Ukrainians, it's a survival tool with which they can more easily get a job in the EU. I think there are many with

> *Hungarian ancestors who don't really speak the language anymore, but for whom the passport is important to be able to work abroad. Hence, many non-native Hungarians have obtained it.* (R2)

Accordingly, the long-peripheral eastern parts of Hungary now offer not just a safe haven but also the opportunity for former residents of Ukraine to occasionally return to their country of origin to check on their homes and remaining relatives. In these frequent movements between Hungary and Transcarpathia, ethnic Hungarians are overrepresented. Their outflow has led to their proportional decline in Transcarpathia from 12% in 2001 to appr. 5% by 2023, thus making the region less ethnically diverse [27].

While it is well known that millions of Ukrainians have fled or migrated abroad, from the perspective of the borderland it is important that hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have found refuge in Transcarpathia, the county that remains the most distant from the front and thus less directly affected by the war. Given that not a few of these recent arrivals are Russian-speaking Ukrainians, multilingualism in Transcarpathia was recently reported to have picked up again [31]. Unlike in the rest of western Ukraine, the presence of Russian speakers is not new in Transcarpathia and was also common in Soviet times. Whether the region's new and old minorities will feel a pressure to gradually turn toward using Ukrainian (only) will be a litmus test for the resilience of its long-cherished tolerant atmosphere. Following our definition of resilience, tolerance will be demonstrated if multilinguistic practices and composite identities continue to exist and if there is openness to opportunities in adversity, such as framing the geographical location as a gateway rather than a periphery.

4.5. A Borderland Bouncing Forward

The resilience of especially Transcarpathia but also bilateral ties more generally will also to some extent depend on Hungary's stance vis-à-vis Ukraine. Surveys show that ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine are divided in their opinions about the Hungarian policy but the majority support Ukraine. For instance, a 2023 survey [32] found that 53.6% would favour Hungary supporting Ukraine militarily, with only 28.8% responding the opposite. Notably, the high demand for Hungarian passports is not at all paralleled with support for any border revisions or separatist initiatives [24]. In fact, opposite sentiments are reinforced through occasionally spread imagery of Transcarpathian Hungarian soldiers fighting in the Ukrainian army. In December 2024, one of them was appointed Ukraine's ambassador to Hungary: Sándor Fegyir has emphasised in statements that there are no strains between the ethnic groups in the borderland and that conflicts come from above [29]. This experience echoes similar sentiments in other borderlands, where tensions – if any – are related to centre-periphery divides rather than interethnic ones, as also testified by the following quote of a Ukrainian regional analyst: "Kyiv as well as Budapest would need to grasp that this community should develop by the way of free choice rather than by chauvinistically enforcing something on it." (R4)

Finally, while Transcarpathia has received policy, media, and scholarly attention, less research has so far appeared on the impact of the full-scale war on the Hungarian side of the border. This economically disadvantaged region has had the potential to benefit from labour addition to the local job market and some impetus for growth in the housing market in less-attractive areas. And indeed, already before the full-scale invasion not just Transcarpathia Hungarians but also thousands of Ukrainians have settled there

[24, 26]. The coexistence of old and new residents has been reported as peaceful, with new life pumped into this long-peripheral region. In sum, with the war, the borderland has not bounced back to its earlier status as a peripheral and neatly divided area but bounced forward to becoming a dynamic hub of peaceful coexistence and mobility crossroads.

5. What Lies Ahead: Putting Resilience to Use

In the previous sections we have outlined the processes that have led up to the situation in early 2025. We now enter the realm of future and foresight, which naturally comes with many uncertainties. How can existing resilience play out and prove beneficial under current circumstances, and how is resilience itself impacted by the war in Ukraine? We will analyze this using a combination of the concepts of bouncing-back resilience and bouncing-forward resilience, a long-term and short-term perspective, and in relation to the scenarios of Ukraine or Russia gaining the upper hand in the war.

Relations between Ukraine and Hungary: From a classic bouncing-back understanding of resilience, bouncing-back could be understood as going back to relations as they were before 2017, the year when relations between Ukraine and Hungary started to deteriorate. This could be possible even in a short-term perspective, if the war de-escalates or ends with Ukraine still an independent democratic state, and Hungary seeing the advantages of nurturing a beneficial relation. In a long-term perspective, however, we argue that relations cannot fundamentally change without a different approach to the borderland itself.

Integration in the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland: The borderland has long-standing traditions of tolerance between ethnic groups and flexibility in identity constructions. (This is not to deny the existence of darker chapters in history but to highlight that there has been tolerance as well). This is part of a local resilience that provides a good steel-spring equipped trampoline canvas enabling a *bouncing-forward* trajectory toward short- and long-term scenarios in which local narratives are acknowledged and the experience gained by local governments and regions involved in cross-border initiatives in the past decade put to use. In a case in which Ukraine remains strong and proceeds quickly with its EU candidacy status, there are several likely outcomes. In the short-run we could expect more flows across the border, increased number and intensity of cross-border institutional initiatives and changed patterns in the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. Increased traffic of goods and people across the border would be enabled by the opening of more border crossings, revamped and extended rail capacity, and an improved border management infrastructure. One of the driving forces for this would be the visibility of the bottleneck function created by the challenges for traffic from Ukrainian Black Sea ports during the war. Cross-border initiatives would enhance potentials for economic growth using EU and national funding schemes, and local knowledge. At the same time, there would be challenges caused by the one-sided direction of people flows. Migration to Hungary or circular movement between Ukraine and Hungary are intertwined with the attractiveness of having a Hungarian passport, but that also means a declaration of affiliation with this minority, which can turn into real affinity. In the long term the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland could become akin to the German-Polish border, i.e. a borderland characterised by high mobility but also by economic, cultural and linguistic asymmetries.

Security: In a geopolitical security environment where hybrid warfare becomes ever more important, relationship at far-away borders can have larger security implications. The resilience of local border communities has so far been manifested mainly in the capacity to survive, adapt and resist political narratives stirring up adversarial relations. If this does not hold, we see a long-term scenario in which conspiracy theories on Hungary potentially invading western Ukraine or narratives about how a stronger/ winning Ukraine would drain Hungary of resources (through for instance diversion of EU funds from Hungary to Ukraine) could continue to take hold in local populations and beyond.

These scenarios draw on a scenario of attaining a solution in the war that is at least partly favourable to an independent and democratic Ukrainian state. In the scenario of a continued or frozen Russian-Ukrainian conflict, or a Russian full take-over or instalment of a puppet Russia-friendly regime, the outcome for Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, for borderland socio-economic integration and for western security will be significantly different. The relations between Hungary and Ukraine would then diminish in importance, giving favour to relations with the aggressor. Security would worsen, from a western perspective. For the borderlands, we would see accelerating decline in the Hungarian minority populations as well as emigration among majority and other population groups to the extent that it is possible. However, even in this dire scenario, it is likely given past historical experiences from rocky times that pockets of resilience will endure, for future generations to make use of.

6. Conclusion

Above, we outlined potential future scenarios for the Ukrainian-Hungarian borderland amid ongoing war in Ukraine. We explored how local resilience – both bouncing-back to previous conditions and bouncing-forward to new forms of integration – might evolve depending on the war's outcome. We did so through using a process-oriented definition of resilience, favouring interpreting long historical timelines with the addition of recent qualitative fieldwork data over the use of quantitative measures of resilience as a "stock of something". In a favourable scenario for Ukraine, increased cross-border mobility, economic cooperation, and better treatment of minorities could emerge. In contrast, a prolonged conflict or Russian-dominated outcome would strain Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, worsen security, and accelerate demographic decline. Yet, even under adverse conditions, the resilience showed in the past offers hope for future rebuilding.

We conclude with some implications for policy based a nested borderland perspective which views the area investigated in this chapter as an increasingly important cross-border region. It is important to recognize geography and Hungary's border with Ukraine constitutes a crucial part of the NATO Eastern flank and is likely to continue to be so for a foreseeable future. *Firstly*, minorities are important and play a key role. At the same time, one should be wary of instrumentalising them, especially not doing so in the ways Russia does. Therefore, more knowledge about the sub-national level is important. We need more information on the evolving consequences of Ukrainian policies toward minorities, which largely revolve around the question of Russian speakers, but has (perhaps unintended) consequences for other minorities as well. *Secondly*, it is essential that NATO allies put effort into supporting the improvement of

the national-level relations between Hungary and Ukraine. Hungary's fairly Putin-friendly policies sour relations between the countries, with consequences on the ground. We recognize the difficulties of this, not least due to the strains in the transatlantic relationship since the start of the Donald Trump US presidency.

However, and as a *third* and final point, increased support for cross-border cooperation at the ground level could be one way in which other NATO allies, especially European ones, could act toward this goal. It could be done within European schemes such as the cross-border cooperation program Interreg, a program from which Hungarian actors are not excluded and to which Ukrainian actors have access, but also bilateral support is possible. Good relations at the local level constitute a kind of para-diplomacy [33] that under certain conditions can lead to enhanced opportunities for municipalities and regions to bypass nation-states [34] in pursuit of specific goals.

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R3: Representative of Zakarpattia Oblast (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod
R4: Regional analyst and academic (Ukrainian), Uzhhorod

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Shrinking Borderlands Under Surveillance: Technological and Communal Aspects to Border Security

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Abstract. This paper takes a closer look at the shrinking borderlands in Estonia, where there is a tendency to introduce new surveillance technologies, and at the same time reduce the reliance on human factor. Whereas the national authorities may turn a blind eye on depopulation or even encourage depopulation in certain cases, as the human factor can be compensated by cameras, distance monitoring, and drones, our collected data from the field research in Southeast Estonia and analysis of various data registries allow us to state the opposite. Namely, technological solutions may be only complementary to the traditional border security approaches, which usually have overlooked the importance of communities' interactions with border guards. Furthermore, we argue that comprehensive border security is shaped by the very same interactions between locals and border guards and negatively affected by the growing depopulation in the border zone.

Keywords. Borderlands, border security, depopulation, border communities

1. Setting the Scene

Borders are fundamental to the national agendas of states, established through raw power, legitimised by international agreements, and frequently contested through individual actions. They function as institutionalised zones of regulation, enforced by an array of mechanisms, including border patrols, barbed-wire fencing, military checkpoints, biometric databases, surveillance technologies, and official identification systems such as visas and passports [1]. These measures reflect the dual nature of borders: as both protective barriers and contested spaces where sovereignty, security, and mobility intersect. Increasing feelings of insecurity lead to the construction of tall, opaque, and rigid barriers that integrate human oversight with advanced technological solutions. Consequently, new walls are erected, and fewer personnel are employed for border security duties.

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Border zones, situated along or near political boundaries, represent the frontline where state jurisdiction meets external influences. These areas are shaped by distinct social, economic, and political dynamics arising from their proximity to international borders. Economically, they can directly influence local livelihoods and trade patterns [2]. Socially, they serve as spaces of cultural exchange, where diverse communities interact, and hybrid identities emerge [3] Politically, border zones act as transitional spaces where governments assert legal and administrative control, reinforcing national sovereignty through regulatory and enforcement measures. This is where one jurisdiction ends and the other jurisdiction begins, as defined by intergovernmental agreements.

Despite their strategic significance, border zones also present a range of challenges. Stringent security measures can disrupt local communities, while geopolitical tensions may lead to militarisation [4]. In some cases, buffer zones or demilitarised areas are established to reduce hostilities along contested boundaries. Beyond their role in defining territorial limits, border zones shape economic opportunities, social cohesion, and international stability. The increasing prioritisation of border security reflects broader concerns over terrorism, crime, and regional instability, reinforcing the evolving role of borders in contemporary global politics. In this context, national security can be upheld by establishing and maintaining secure borders and border zones.

Border security encompasses measures implemented to enforce national border control policies [5]. These measures address a range of concerns, including customs violations, illicit trade, and the prevention of unauthorised migration. The specific strategies adopted by a jurisdiction depend on national and local priorities and are shaped by social, economic, and geographical factors. Authorities may overlook border region depopulation, pursue militarisation, or replace human presence with technological solutions. Alternatively, involving and cooperating with border communities can serve as a preventive approach to enhancing border security. This perspective is supported by the idea that aligning security efforts with the interests of local populations fosters mutual benefits.

More precisely, the "weapons of mass migration" [6], along with Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, has shifted attention from borderless spaces to heavily protected and militarised border regions. The potential for migrants to be used as tools to exert pressure and destabilize liberal democracies makes these destination countries particularly vulnerable, and prone to explore new avenues in dealing with border security. Similarly, with a full-scale war unfolding at the EU's doorstep, relying solely on national border agencies and technological surveillance for border security would be premature. This raises concerns about whether advanced surveillance systems alone can effectively control depopulated border areas. A pertinent example is the 2021 Belarus–European Union border crisis, during which the Belarusian government was reported of orchestrating the movement of migrants towards EU borders in retaliation against sanctions, thereby creating a humanitarian crisis to exert pressure on neighbouring states [7]. This tactic blurs the lines between humanitarian concerns and security threats, challenging traditional frameworks of international law and border governance.

Border communities, with their deep knowledge of the terrain, serve as the "eyes and ears" of their states. Their physical presence and attachment to the land help prevent potential claims over so-called "no-man's land." While national authorities increasingly recognize the strategic role of border communities within broader security frameworks, these communities' own security depends on socio-economic development, with a focus on livelihoods and welfare. From this perspective, the essential needs of border communities would take centre stage in border security, enabling border agencies to view

borderlanders as individuals whose interests directly influence their responsibility to safeguard the border [8]. In this framework, security and development concerns become intertwined, with border communities serving both as key contributors to national security and as the primary subjects of security.

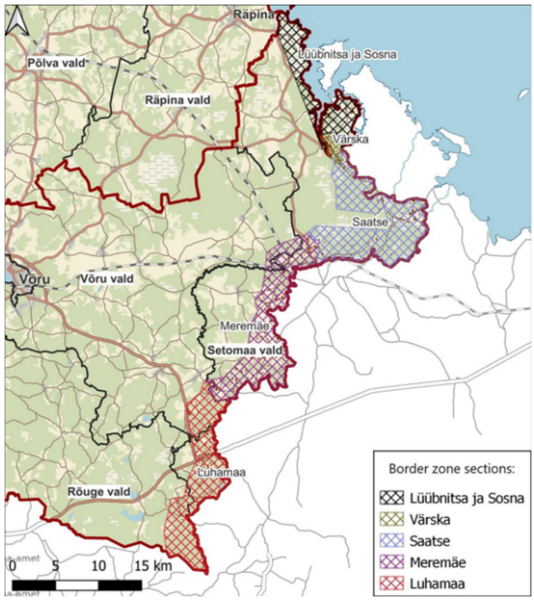

Figure 1. Estonia's southeastern border zone.

This chapter takes a closer look at the Estonia's southeastern border zone with some areas lacking natural barriers such as water bodies, forests, or wetlands – characterised by depopulating settlements and easily accessible terrain from across the border – is particularly vulnerable and, presumably, contributes most to feelings of insecurity. We start by reviewing different border security approaches, especially having community-driven strategy in mind. After weighing of both technological and communal aspects of border security we present our findings from an empirical case study. The study focused on the Setomaa, Rõuge, and Võru parishes, forming a narrow, sparsely populated strip of land approximately 85 km long and 2–3 km wide (Fig. 1). To develop a comprehensive understanding of the region's sociodemographic and economic conditions, we compiled background data from various registries and GIS sources. This was supplemented by 102 fieldwork interviews and participant observations conducted over a two-week period in August-September 2022. These interactions provided valuable insight into the social dynamics of border life, including residents' perceptions of (in)security and their engagement with border guards. The paper concludes with findings of how the relationship between border guards and a resilient local community, along with technology-driven depopulation, has influenced border security in Estonia's southeastern border zone.

2. Different Border Security Approaches

Border security approaches vary widely based on the geopolitical context, resources, and security objectives of a state. Traditional methods focus on "hard" security measures – physical barriers like walls and fences, military checkpoints, and intensified border patrols designed to deter unauthorised crossings. In parallel, many countries now employ advanced technological systems, such as surveillance cameras, drones, sensors, and biometric databases, to monitor borders and gather actionable intelligence. Additionally, integrated border management strategies have emerged, which combine these physical and technological measures with administrative and cooperative practices, including intelligence sharing and joint border management with neighbouring states. This approach often incorporates "soft" security measures, such as diplomatic efforts, legal frameworks, and community engagement, recognising that local populations can play a vital role in identifying and mitigating security risks. Ultimately, effective border security typically requires a tailored blend of hard, soft, and technological elements that address both immediate security threats and long-term stability challenges. The way how border zones are affected by different border security approaches can be described as following:

a) Deterrence-based strategies

Deterrence-based strategies focus on discouraging potential violators from attempting to cross a border illegally. This approach typically involves increasing the certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment or consequences for those caught committing border-related violations [9]. What sets deterrence-based border regimes apart is that the harm and risks they generate are not merely unintended consequences – they are deliberately designed features [10]. These regimes intentionally seek to increase the difficulty and danger of crossing borders to dissuade potential migrants from attempting certain routes. Rooted in classical utilitarian notions of deterrence, the underlying logic is that by amplifying the hardship and suffering associated with unauthorised border crossings, prospective migrants will be less willing or able to take the risk. Regarding migration, states have adopted various self-styled deterrence policies aimed at discouraging the arrival of unwanted migrants [11]. One such policy is the Prevention Through Deterrence, which was instituted by the U.S. to deter the illegal crossing of its southern border with Mexico [12]. Deterrence-based strategies can also involve deploying military forces or equipment near contested borders to discourage any attempts at intrusion or aggression, such as the policies outlined by the Department of Homeland Security for the Northern Border [13].

b) Cooperation-based strategies

Cross-border cooperation refers to the structured collaboration between actors – most often public authorities, but also businesses, NGOs, and community groups – located in adjacent regions on either side of an international boundary (see e.g. Perkmann [14]). It primarily involves sub-national governments (e.g., municipalities, provinces) working together outside the framework of formal international treaties while civil society and private-sector partners often joining these efforts. It seeks to address shared, day-to-day challenges – transport and infrastructure planning, environmental protection, public health, tourism development, or emergency services – by pooling resources and expertise. By loosening the symbolic and practical grip of national borders, these partnerships foster intercultural dialogue, build mutual trust, and can help reduce tensions in

historically contested areas. McCall [15] suggests that cross-border cooperation plays a vital role in easing conflict by weakening the nation-state's control over borders and encouraging intercultural and intercommunal engagement. In sum, cross-border cooperation contributes to the ongoing stabilisation and regularisation of cross-border interactions by transforming national frontiers from barriers into bridges – enhancing regional development, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. As seen from this perspective, cooperation-based strategies emphasize cross-border cooperation and collaboration between countries to improve border security. These strategies may involve sharing information, intelligence, and resources, as well as conducting joint operations to address threats such as terrorism, smuggling, and illegal immigration [16]. For example, the United Nations' Border and Security Management programme aims to prevent the cross-border movement of terrorists and foreign terrorist fighters by enhancing cooperation among nations to improve border security [16].

c) Technology-driven strategies

Technology-driven strategies focus on utilising advanced technologies to bolster border security efforts. These technologies may include surveillance systems, drones, biometric identification systems, and artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse data and identify potential threats [17, 18]. Efficient, automated surveillance drones – armed with night-vision cameras, reliable communications, extensive flight autonomy, and advanced data-processing capabilities—perfectly embody this remote-control logic. For example, the Department of Homeland Security's counterterrorism efforts include using technology to detect and disrupt threats [16]. Additionally, technology-driven strategies can involve employing a Defence in Depth (DiD) approach, which entails layering multiple defensive mechanisms to protect valuable data and information. This mirrors current global security trends, where high-tech systems are deployed to monitor, deter, and manage migrant flows at external borders. The past two decades have seen borders become increasingly militarised, technologically advanced, and privatised—as symptoms of the post-9/11 security paradigm [19]. Rather than merely reacting to an unpredictable threat environment, this approach emphasises prevention, outsourcing control functions, and extending domestic security governance beyond national territory [20], often promising technological "silver bullets" for emerging challenges [21]. Yet questions remain about the actual impact and effectiveness of these technologies in enhancing border and homeland security [22]. Efficiency alone does not guarantee excellence or full objectivity, as these systems can malfunction and embody socio-political biases [23].

d) Community-driven strategies

The effectiveness of national security is significantly influenced by border protection and the management of border communities. Community-driven strategies focus on incorporating border communities into practices of surveillance, (b)order enforcement and policing, in general. By participating in collective surveillance border communities serve as co-producers of local and national security [1]. Engaging remote border communities offers vital behavioural insights that enhance officials' situational awareness and help identify suspicious activity. Because locals understand the terrain, illicit networks, and extremist actors operating nearby, they can supply actionable intelligence to border services. While fostering connections with border communities it is vital to promote collaboration between remote areas and central government agencies [24]. Building these connections through initiatives like Border Community Policing

strengthens collaboration between communities and central agencies, fostering mutual trust and resilience. This would entail a shift of focus to the "real people in real places" [25] "citizen-detectives" enjoined to be on the lookout for suspicious activities at the border [26], or "border watches" dedicated to securing the nation's borders [1]. Complementary development projects that improve infrastructure and access to services not only bridge the gap between authorities and residents but also counter radicalisation by promoting social and economic integration. By valuing local knowledge and working hand-in-hand with community members, community-driven strategies can more effectively tackle transnational threats, bolster public safety, and improve the quality of life in border regions.

To conclude this section, border security strategies encompass diverse approaches shaped by geopolitical contexts and security priorities. Deterrence-based methods create barriers to dissuade unauthorised crossings, cooperation-based strategies promote collaboration between nations, technology-driven methods enhance surveillance, and community-driven strategies empower local populations. Effective border security blends these elements into a comprehensive framework. As security practices evolve, technology and community engagement are playing increasingly crucial roles in shaping modern border management. The next chapter will delve into these dimensions, examining how innovations like surveillance systems and biometric identification intersect with local communities, transforming both security operations and everyday life along border zones.

3. Man vs. Machine: Weighing Technological and Communal Aspects of Border Security

Border surveillance typically combines human involvement with advanced technology. Recent technological developments have transformed border monitoring, offering more efficient and effective methods to deter illegal activities, control migration, and ensure safety. Border control agencies now employ tools such as phone hacking, license-plate scanning, and iris recognition to boost their surveillance capabilities [27]. A range of sensing technologies – cameras, thermal sensors, radar, and seismic sensors—are incorporated into integrated surveillance systems [28]. Drones, with their high-resolution imaging, thermal detection, and extensive coverage, offer an efficient and cost-effective solution for monitoring border activities; these systems can detect movement and automatically rotate to track moving objects [29]. Furthermore, by interconnecting various sensors through the Internet of Things (IoT), overall surveillance is enhanced, providing real-time data on intrusions and triggering necessary alerts [30].

It is important to note, that while technology-oriented security policies provide more efficiency and enhanced security, there are several challenges and concerns that arise in its application. For instance, they provoke debates regarding privacy and rights; this could raise ethical and human rights concerns [31]. The implementation of border technologies often encapsulates a securitised understanding of migrants [32]. As automated systems can lead to misidentification or generate false positives, the success of technology-driven border surveillance is heavily dependent on the reliability and robustness of the technologies deployed [33]. As such, surveillance results may not accurately represent the overall situation or trends at the border.

Recent developments in high-tech border surveillance, including sensors and drones, have improved capabilities for detecting and responding to illegal crossings. However,

international experiences reveal critical vulnerabilities: technological systems are susceptible to cyberattacks, communication breakdowns, and environmental interference [34, 35]. False alarms caused by animals and weather, as well as the difficulty of installing equipment in complex terrain, reduce operational reliability [36, 35]. Additionally, rapid technological obsolescence demands continuous investment in updates and maintenance [34]. The complexity of modern border systems also requires flexible procurement strategies and modular architectures to adapt to evolving threats and innovations [37].

Technology-driven border surveillance has significant implications also for border communities; it can shape social, political, and economic dynamics in various ways. For instance, the increased use of surveillance technologies like sensors and cameras has often driven illegal migrants into harsher, more remote regions [38]. This can impact border communities by facing illegal intruders out of border guards' reach. Border communities may find their privacy being intruded upon, leading to a sense of being under constant watch and infringing on their rights to privacy [39]. Advanced surveillance technologies can also shape geopolitics by altering the power dynamics and relationships between countries sharing a border [40]. This can have downstream effects on border communities, influencing their border-crossing patterns and cross-border kinship ties. There is a significant impact on the migrant border crossers who may challenge this digital frontier, their lives being affected by the technology used to manage borders [31].

Overall, the technology discourse ranges from those who support increased surveillance in the name of security to those who argue that these measures are undemocratic or unjustified [41]. While technology has the potential to greatly enhance border surveillance capabilities, these limitations need to be acknowledged and addressed to ensure that technology serves as a reliable, ethical, and effective tool in managing border security. Moreover, the use of technology-driven border surveillance can significantly affect border communities, shaping their experiences of privacy, migration, geopolitics, and the everyday dynamics of life near a border.

Border communities are pivotal to border security. When these areas are ungoverned, they can pose significant risks to national security [42]. In various countries of Global South, border communities are seen as instruments of border security by serving as the first line of defence and providing crucial local intelligence [43]. This is especially the case where central authorities do not have full control over peripheries, where technology is not supportive enough [8], or where harsh geographical conditions combined with low population density make security of borders challenging [44]. Abovementioned research suggests that community-based surveillance enhances formal border control measures, as locals are often best positioned to detect subtle changes and unusual activities in their environment. Their deep knowledge of local geography and social dynamics enables them to identify potential threats that may elude standard technological surveillance. Moreover, collaboration between local residents and state security agencies fosters mutual trust and facilitates rapid responses to emerging security challenges.

In Global North, on the contrary, citizens have been activated as agents of surveillance in the context of global war on terror [26] or unwanted immigration [1]. The Minutemen, a U.S.-based grassroot movement dedicated to securing the nation's borders via "border watches", is perhaps the best example of border communities in action to contain illegal migration and to ensure the permanent fortification of borders. Academic research has examined these efforts, noting that such grassroots surveillance can both supplement official border security measures and influence public perceptions of national security. Involving border communities in the development and implementation of security policies not only improves operational effectiveness but also enhances the

legitimacy of state actions in these sensitive regions. Overall, integrating community-driven initiatives into border security strategies has emerged as a best practice for building resilient and adaptive security frameworks.

The differences between technology- and community-driven border surveillance lie in their distinct approaches to security. Technology-driven methods prioritize efficiency and precision, employing tools like drones, sensors, and biometric systems to monitor and control borders remotely. While these innovations enhance surveillance capabilities, they also raise ethical concerns and can unintentionally push migrants into more dangerous areas. In contrast, community-driven strategies rely on local knowledge and active participation, empowering border communities to detect threats and support security efforts. This human-centred approach fosters trust and responsiveness but may lack the technological reach needed for comprehensive monitoring. Together, these logics offer complementary strengths, shaping modern border security in complex and nuanced ways.

Despite automation, human factors remain central to border security. Skilled personnel are needed to interpret data, operate systems, and respond to incidents on the ground [45]. Understaffing, insufficient technical support, and public concerns about surveillance complicate effective implementation [36]. Border authorities have learned that balanced integration of technology and trained personnel is essential [37]. A sustainable border management strategy requires resilient infrastructure, adaptive project governance, and ongoing capacity building. Technology can support, but not replace, the role of human judgment and rapid response in border protection.

4. Shrinking Estonian Border Zone in Focus

The sustainability of Estonia as a country is unequivocally linked to the state's ability to manage borders, cross-border activities, and life in border zones. The enhancement of state functionality has been pursued through the implementation of administrative-territorial reform and improved capacity to act. The quality of life in the centre and periphery of Estonia still shows significant differences, with the latter getting the shorter end of the stick. While broadband internet infrastructure may mitigate some issues, the distance of relevant public services from the locals in the border zones amplifies the depopulation of areas. Due to military conflicts in the vicinity, as well as the radical effects of climate change on migration flows, there is an inevitable rise in attempts of illegal border crossings that may have destabilising impact on the country in times of hybrid warfare.

Foundations of Estonian security policy affirm that "life must be liveable and safe everywhere in Estonia; unfavourable demographic processes and excessive concentration of significant socio-economic, security, and safety risks in certain areas must be avoided or prevented" [46]. It outlines that "security is strengthened by a socially cohesive society and the more extensive involvement, support, and empowerment of various community actors". In the longer term, the demographic condition of the state, population decline, ageing, and concentration in individual centres are seen as significant security risks. When discussing border management, the Internal Security Development Plan 2020–2030 focuses on the question "How to develop integrated border management to cope with persistent illegal immigration, smuggling, increasing border traffic, and the pressure of cross-border crime?" mainly through technical means. Thus, security and regional development are heavily interconnected. It is significant that the strategy not

only prioritises physical infrastructure, such as fencing and patrol roads, but also relies on remote surveillance technologies, including radar systems, drones, camera towers, and motion sensors. The policy narrative accompanying this shift suggests that physical human presence along the border is no longer seen as the primary guarantor of security, but rather as part of a broader hybrid approach, where technology can, at least in part, "compensate" for demographic and geographic vulnerabilities. This technologisation has not been confined to general vision documents. It has been concretely operationalised through multi-phase investment programmes and cross-agency coordination, with the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA) as the leading implementing body. Funding has come from a combination of national sources, European Union internal security funds, and bilateral aid—most notably from the United States, which in 2023 funded new radar and camera installations on the Narva River section of the border. Total investments for the period 2018–2027 are projected to reach €320 million, with maintenance costs estimated at €15 million annually thereafter.

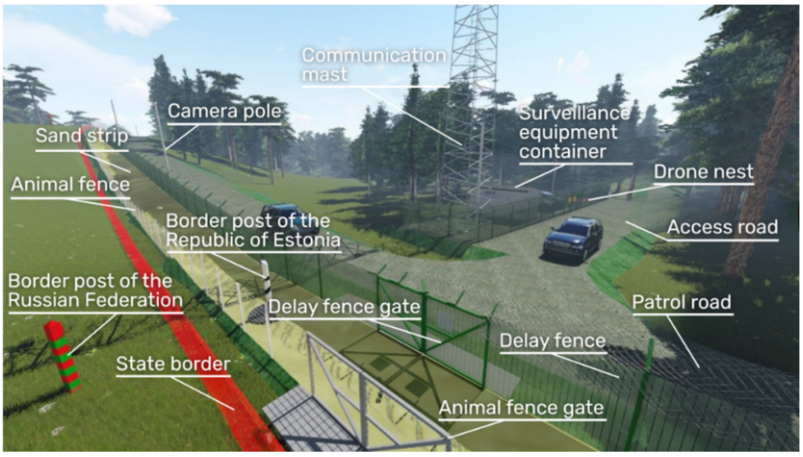

Figure 2. Technological and physical components of the Estonian–Russian border infrastructure, including surveillance systems, fencing, and patrol access roads. Source: Police and Border Guard Board

Preparations for the development of the eastern border (i.e. the construction of the physical infrastructure, including electronic surveillance equipment) started in 2015, with pilot sections in late 2016. Real construction activities at the border started in summer 2020 and the main physical barriers are set to be completed by the end of 2025 (see Fig. 2). In areas along the land border with a higher likelihood of illegal crossings, fences have been installed based on the terrain and natural conditions, particularly near populated areas, roads, and high-risk border sections. In critical locations with frequent illegal crossings, narrow sand strips (approximately two meters wide) are established to detect footprints. To prevent accidental crossings and delay intentional breaches, delay fences are constructed, providing border guards with additional response time. Animal fences have been installed where necessary to prevent false alarms, and, as needed, barriers and lighting are added. A patrol road, at least two meters wide, has been built along the border, with some sections accommodating off-road and other patrol vehicles. Access roads, including bridges have been constructed to ensure rapid access to border

areas. Upon completion, a modern technical surveillance system will be deployed along the border, offering comprehensive coverage and enabling timely detection and response to incidents [47].

Technical surveillance systems include sensors and monitoring devices installed along the border. As part of the eastern border construction project, a combination of technologies is planned: stationary video cameras (including day- and night-vision/thermal cameras), radars, motion and acoustic sensors, and other detection devices capable of identifying activity near the border. For instance, the radar positions planned along the Narva River are designed as integrated solutions equipped with radar units, cameras, communication links, backup power systems, substantially enhancing coverage of the water boundary. In the forested sections of southeastern Estonia, concealed ground sensors are also used to detect unauthorised border crossings in terrain. By 2019, approximately half of the land border was already covered by technical surveillance; in subsequent years, this share has increased as new monitoring systems have been deployed. By the end of 2023, the 126 km section along Lake Peipsi was nearly fully covered with surveillance technology, and additional monitoring posts are currently being constructed along the 76 km stretch of the Narva River, with the aim of achieving full technical coverage there as well.

A particular emphasis has been placed on anti-drone infrastructure, often referred to in public discourse as the "droonimüür" (drone wall). This system entails a layered network of detection technologies – radars, RF detectors, optical cameras, and acoustic sensors – intended to ensure total aerial awareness over border areas. The rationale is derived not only from criminal threats such as smuggling, but increasingly from military scenarios, including cross-border reconnaissance and sabotage operations carried out via drone [39, 31]. The implementation of drone neutralisation technologies remains, however, a work in progress, as authorities acknowledge the legal and operational complexity involved in actively disabling aerial systems

When it comes to Estonia's south-eastern border zone, the population is clearly declining. Our fieldwork documented a large over-representation of the 50–65 age group, and that only a third of working-age residents are employed. In some villages, there is no-one left: the old have died, the young have moved out to bigger centres. Emptiness "invites" foreigners across the border to settle down and get rooted. Only 56% of the working-age residents have formal employment in Estonia. There are fewer jobs in the border zone than there are working-age residents and officially employed people, so there is also more work-related commuting out of the border zone than in the opposite direction. By sector, the vast majority of companies in the region are related to the primary sector, i.e. agriculture and forestry. Non-working residents receive state allowances or are related to the shadow economy or have jobs abroad. The provision of key public services such as education, medical care, public transport, and retail sales is unsatisfactory. Internet transmission and telecommunication coverage are insufficient. Many residential buildings in use are over 60 years old, in a mediocre state and without modern amenities. Despite stabile electricity supply across the region, about a quarter of households have diesel generators, and only a small number use solar panels. Most homes rely on dug wells for water, with approximately 20% having drilled wells. Most residents maintain food reserves, allowing them to be self-sufficient in case of emergencies.

In comparison to 2000, both the number and proportion of Estonians in the border zone have decreased. In certain border segments, the population has been entirely or predominantly replaced by non-Estonians: 13% of property transactions between 2017 and 2022 involved foreign residents. Moreover, signs of a lower average educational

level and incomes below the Estonian average by 27% as of 2021 persist in the border zone. According to the optimistic scenario, the population of the border zone will remain at the level of 1,880 people in 2035 and in the most pessimistic scenario there will be 25% less people living in the border zone as compared to today's situation. The uncertainty surrounding the future of local schools discourages families with children from staying in the area. Additionally, declining social interactions among remaining residents indicate a weakening sense of community, with low participation in paramilitary or civil defence activities.

What does it mean for the local resilience and border security in Estonia? How is border security intertwined with community's viability? How and to what extent can technological solutions to border security blend with community-driven approaches?

4.1. Sense of (In-)security in the Border Zone

It can be argued that living near the border might pose certain risks and fears. While serving as the first line of defence, border communities are daily experiencing the activities of law enforcement and military structures, including non-militarised border guards.

In the spring of 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a significant shift occurred in the security environment across Europe, particularly affecting the Baltic states. Estonia positioned itself clearly as a frontline state, with its border regions – especially in the southeast and along the eastern frontier – gaining heightened strategic importance. In the foreign policy address [48], Russia was defined as a direct and long-term threat to both regional and broader European security. The document emphasised that Estonia must strengthen its attention to border protection and ensure the resilience of its border communities. A key element of this updated security policy was the recognition that effective border defence is not solely reliant on physical infrastructure and technological surveillance but also deeply intertwined with the vitality and stability of local communities in the border areas.

This emphasis is clearly reflected in Estonia's southeastern borderlands, where cooperation between border guards and local residents remains a critical component of security. Although technological systems have expanded significantly, the human factor continues to play an indispensable role. Border guard stations such as those in Luhamaa, Piusa, and Värska coordinate continuous patrolling, but local inhabitants, integrated into early warning networks, often serve as the first to detect anomalies that technology might miss. This practice demonstrates a hybrid security model where human networks and technological solutions mutually reinforce one another. Regular interaction and trust-building between border guards and local communities further enhance situational awareness and resilience, underlining that sustainable border security in Estonia relies as much on human cooperation as on technological innovation.

However, while national security policy strongly highlights the threat posed by Russia, everyday perceptions among local residents in the border zone reveal a more nuanced picture. Although residents were aware of their proximity to Russia, this did not generally translate into an increased sense of threat, as they believed that intruders were more likely to target larger cities rather than the border zone. As a result, Russia was not perceived as an immediate local threat. However, when considering Estonia's broader security landscape, residents in the border zone most strongly associated vulnerability with Russia's efforts to reassert its sphere of influence. Notably, 75% of respondents firmly regarded Russia as a tangible security threat (Fig. 3). In contrast, the economic

and military dominance of the U.S. was perceived as the least significant global security concern. Beyond Russia, most respondents identified China's rising economic and military power, Islamic extremism, global climate change, and cyberattacks as major security challenges. When assessing potential threats, respondents interpreted the response category "to some extent" as a cautious "maybe," acknowledging that, despite limited personal exposure, organised crime and illegal immigration could pose some degree of risk.

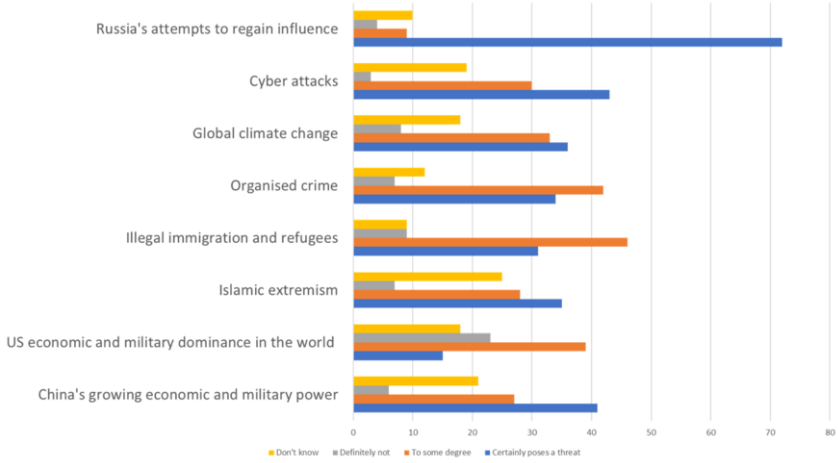

Figure 3. "What is in your view a global security threat?"

Living in a border zone did not necessarily lead to an increased sense of insecurity among local residents. Among the surveyed population, 81% reported encountering border guards regularly or frequently in their area. Instead, a greater sense of security was closely tied to the consistent presence of border guards. Notably, 90% of respondents viewed these interactions positively, associating them with an enhanced sense of security. Respondents explained that the presence of border guards reassured them of not being left behind by state authorities. On the one hand, their visibility contributed to this sense of security, and on the other, their prompt responses to incidents – such as border violations or unfamiliar individuals in the area – reinforced this perception. However, this sense of security was not solely based on the visual presence of guards; their active communication with locals and the knowledge that they monitored the area via surveillance cameras also played a role. Trust in border guards was exceptionally high, with community members appreciating their assistance in everyday matters, such as helping pull vehicles out of ditches or escorting lost people home from the forest.

While many respondents acknowledged that life in a border area was "special," this realisation often emerged during the interviews rather than being an immediate perception. Living in the border zone required certain daily adjustments, such as carrying identification cards, monitoring restricted areas, and notifying authorities about visitors. The constant presence of border guards was seen as a distinctive feature contributing to overall safety. However, for many, these aspects had become routine rather than exceptional, integrated into daily life. As a result, residing near the border was not initially perceived as a factor influencing their sense of security. This may be due in part

to cultural perceptions of the border as an unremarkable feature, shaped by historical ties and longstanding customs, rather than a defining element of community identity.

Figure 4. Word cloud reflecting a response to the question "Do you feel that life in the border zone is 'special'? If yes, then how would you explain that?"

The prevailing sentiment among respondents was that living in the border zone did not evoke insecurity; rather, it fostered a sense of safety, largely attributed to the constant presence of border guards and their swift response to incidents (Fig. 4). As a result, only a small number of surveyed residents identified specific measures that could further enhance their security. Some suggested completing the border fence, reinforcing border fortifications, and increasing personnel in the area as key steps toward strengthening security. Beyond these concerns, respondents emphasised the need for a more comprehensive crisis plan and clearer communication protocols to guide actions during emergencies, including designated shelter locations and specific response procedures. Additionally, there was a call for the introduction of alert systems and general warnings to enhance preparedness. In some cases, residents also expressed the need to improve access to emergency services, noting that response times for medical assistance and other types of emergency support were sometimes too lengthy to be effective.

4.2. Border Residents as Guardians of Border Security

Participation in border security is influenced by various factors, including trust in the armed forces, interactions with state institutions, and overall attitudes toward the central government. Insights from the 2022 national defence survey [49] shed light on the

willingness of border-zone residents to engage in defence efforts and their anticipated responses in times of crisis. Confidence in Estonia's armed forces among border area residents is largely attributed to the perceived security provided by NATO and Estonia's independent defence capabilities. Daily interactions with border guards further reinforce a strong and positive connection between the community and the state.

However, trust in the central government among border zone residents remains low, likely due to recent health and energy crises. The 2022 defence survey shows that two-thirds of respondents expressed readiness to contribute to national defence efforts based on their abilities and skills. Regional differences emerged, with 74% of southern Estonians and 79% of southeastern border zone residents expressing willingness to participate. Despite this, only 15% of respondents in the border zone reported involvement in voluntary defence or internal security organisations.

Since February 24, 2022, the majority of southeastern border zone respondents believed that their community's responsibility for security had either remained the same or increased. Similarly, interest in community defence efforts showed little change, though one-third of respondents reported heightened engagement. Interviews indicated that after the onset of the Russian military operations in Ukraine, informal discussions among local men took place to consider contingency plans in case of an escalation into Estonia. While one-third of border-zone residents felt a stronger inclination to engage in voluntary security efforts, two-thirds reported no change in their level of commitment.

When considering potential responses to an external threat, clear patterns emerged. Nationally, 31% of Estonians indicated they might leave the country, while 55% preferred to stay. Southern Estonia reflected similar sentiments, with 28% considering departure and 57% choosing to remain. However, in the southeastern border zone, only 15% expressed a desire to leave, whereas a notable 73% were resolute in their decision to stay. Interestingly, despite their proximity to the border, residents of southeastern Estonia did not perceive themselves to be at a greater risk than the rest of the Estonian population.

Our survey indicated that residents of border areas perceive themselves as playing a role in monitoring the border and ensuring local safety. Around 50% of respondents reported incidents of illegal border crossings near their homes within the past three years. In-depth interviews revealed that locals primarily learn about such violations through media sources or personal observation, rather than through community word of mouth. In some cases, respondents recounted direct encounters with unauthorised border crossers on their property. Notably, three-quarters of respondents expressed a willingness to report suspicious individuals to border authorities, emphasising the importance of having access to the relevant contact information for the border guard station.

The findings illustrate a complex relationship between southeastern border zone communities and the Estonian state. High levels of trust in the armed forces and strong day-to-day connections with local border guards foster a sense of shared responsibility for security, even as scepticism toward the central government persists. Willingness to participate in national defence efforts is notably higher in the southeastern border regions compared to national averages, yet actual membership in voluntary defence organisations remains low, suggesting that engagement is often informal and situational rather than institutionalised. The proximity to the Russian border does not appear to amplify perceptions of vulnerability; rather, residents express a strong attachment to place and a determination to remain in their communities even in the event of external threats. The active, albeit informal, role that locals assume in border monitoring highlights the significance of community-based security practices alongside formal state

structures. Together, these patterns underscore that while technological advancements and centralised policies shape Estonia's border security environment, the resilience and commitment of local communities remain indispensable to its effective functioning.

5. Conclusion

The depopulation of border areas is, to some extent, an unavoidable process, especially when the border disrupts and fragments potential markets for goods and services. As a result, the availability, diversity, and quality of these services and goods often fail to meet the threshold necessary for sustainable economic activity. Consequently, service provision tends to concentrate in larger population centres, leading to a decline in economic opportunities in border regions. This economic downturn prompts migration, leaving mainly the elderly behind – until, over time, these areas become completely abandoned.

However, the depopulation of border areas also raises security concerns. The presence of stable communities plays a crucial role in maintaining territorial attachment to the state, often more so than international agreements, which can be subject to change. To counteract the decline of border villages, the state must create conditions that encourage people to stay, ensuring that rural life is both sustainable and affordable. Key factors include employment opportunities, financial support, and the provision of essential services such as healthcare, education, policing, and emergency response. Accessibility to these services – through well-maintained roads, public transport, and communication networks – is equally important. Television, radio broadcasts, and mobile connectivity also play a role in maintaining ties between border communities and the rest of the country.

The integration of newcomers into border communities largely depends on their willingness to engage with the local population and participate in community activities. Despite the region's proximity to Russia, residents generally do not perceive an immediate security threat. Cooperation with border guards is widely supported, and NATO's collective defence, along with the continuous presence of border security forces, is seen as a key factor in maintaining security. While most border residents express a willingness to contribute to defence efforts in the event of an armed conflict, many may lack the physical fitness or skills required for direct participation in military activities.

Border communities acting from their own initiative can broaden the border security perspective. Life in border zones must be sustained and actively supported by regional policy. It is necessary to engage in place marketing that attracts young people to rural areas through more favourable loan conditions, as well as to improve living and working conditions. As a priority, the state should support the settlement of border guards, members of the Defence League, rescue workers, and other community- and state-relevant actors in areas near the border. Directing strategic investments into the housing stock, enabling better technical infrastructure for residential buildings, and ensuring access to public services by applying regional adjustment factors in border zones can help maintain the vitality of local communities and thereby contribute to national border security. In other words, the provision of public services by the state fosters a reciprocal relationship, whereby the community supports state institutions and governance in the border zones.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Resilience in the Wake of War: The Polish-Ukrainian Borderland After 2022

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Abstract. This chapter explores practices of resilience in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Rather than simply cataloguing these practices, the chapter offers a nuanced and multidimensional analysis, situating them within their broader historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. Given the diversity of events unfolding in the borderland differing in form, scale, and underlying causes, the chapter is organised around three temporal perspectives: short-, medium-, and long-term. These analytical lenses allow for a more layered understanding of how resilience is enacted and sustained over time. Finally, the chapter also offers a modest contribution to the broader discussion on Central European borderlands, suggesting that these territories at times operate within a regionally specific model shaped by shared histories, vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacities

Keywords. Poland, Ukraine, borderland, resilience, Russian invasion

1. Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 directs the attention of many observers to issues of the ongoing hostilities, humanitarian crisis, international security or the reconstruction of political order, all of which also translate into the realities of the current functioning of the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood, including the borderland. At issue is the type of relationship between the societies living on both sides of this EU's external border – a factor that has played an overwhelming role in the two decades of its existence between the two states. Moreover, these communities, although close to each other in some ways, have for a long time and for various reasons been deprived of the chance to seriously discuss their painful past.

This unusual threefold intertwining – the functioning of the EU external border, cutting it off from the state at war, and between partially antagonised communities – results in the creation of a particular type of local reality: the divergent trajectories of the social processes taking place there as compared to those inherent in the intra-Schengen

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borderlands. The sources of this distinctiveness lie both inside and outside the area and entail the limited scale and character of local initiatives for the development of the common borderland and for the revelation of its strengths. Whether bottom-up or top-down in nature, these are produced, activated and used to alleviate the pains of war time and everyday functioning and thus can be captured as elements of borderland resilience.

In line with these premises, this chapter is set to identify and contextualise the phenomena treated as indicators of the resilience of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland (i.e. only its Polish part) in the era of a full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine. Although this characterisation covers just three years, it aspires to consider the short-, medium- and long-term perspective, i.e. also pointing at areas where such actions will be possible in the future. With these objectives in mind, the chapter includes, firstly, the theoretical framework for consideration; secondly, a brief reflection on key events in the past of the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood and borderland – events which provide an important context for a better understanding of the contemporary shape of these relations; thirdly, an overview of phenomena that can be framed within the category of current local resilience; fourthly, suggestions for desirable future directions. In this sense, the chapter aims to provide a set of empirical manifestations of specific forms of resilience, triggered by unique events, occurring at a particular time and in relation to a defined place.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Frame

The concept of resilience has been theorised and conceptualised in the literature on border(lands) from a variety of perspectives reflecting specific research requirements and contexts [1]. It has also been empirically present in the studies of many scholars and experts, becoming a "travelling concept" of a polysemic nature [2], and therefore deserves a brief conceptual note.

For the purposes of this analysis, resilience will be understood as the ability to recover from a difficult situation and even to use it for the future benefit of the local community or affected people; in other words, the category of resilience capital will be used, denoting the resources and potentials possessed by a community [3]. Thus, I refer to the distinction between resilience understood as a bouncing back to the previous state versus the bouncing-forward one, which entails a taking steps forward. It should also be emphasised that it is not always possible to determine which of these situations is being referred to [4], as the reality of war analysed here remains quite dynamic and unpredictable. In a similar vein, I will focus on the diagnosis of the current state of affairs, being fully aware, however, of the abovementioned limitations.

Of an outstanding importance in this context is also the distinction between instrumentalist versus critical narratives of resilience [2]. The former, associated with pragmatism, emphasises mobilisation for immediate but short-term action, especially in the face of acute shocks; it tends to be driven by fear and a desire for safety and "dominated by disaster-oriented thinking." At the same time, this narrative becomes "blind to broader systemic issues as causal factors of slow stressors which underlie the long-term impact of crisis events." Critical narratives of resilience, on the other hand, derive from the suggestion "that the risks in the modern world are overestimated" by those in power. As they are interested in maintaining the status quo, they recommend focusing on "the mitigation of external threats to the existing system rather than offering pathways to transformation [2]." This assumption, as will be shown, seems to have underpinned, especially with time, much of the work undertaken in the Polish-Ukrainian

borderland, and will therefore be highlighted in the chapter, even though it generally draws on both approaches.

It is also advisable to bring up the local perspective that is exposed in the voluminous borderlands literature. This entails an emphasis on the diverse temporal and cultural settings to which the concept of resilience can be applied, along with the cultural values of a given time and space. For values "are vital to understanding what resilience can deliver and for whom" [2] – with policy goals of different types and scales, pursued by different actors (state versus local, for instance), often being serious correlates of such values gaps [5]. We may therefore be dealing here with the intersection of objective resilience and its subjectively understood desirability; both filtered through a given local context. It means that certain solutions may be accepted by one circle and not necessarily by another, depending precisely on their aims or values [6]. The whole issue inevitably relates also to changes in border areas that push borderlanders towards certain vernacularly determined actions, a theme that remains underdeveloped in the literature on resilience [7].

In line with this bottom-up approach – i.e. bearing in mind the political circumstances, local history, values, daily life, the attractiveness of the border and neighbours, etc. – this chapter features some of the ways in which resilience expresses itself in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland. Part of the question is also this (signalled above) fundamental issue that the border region in question is substantially different from the ones inside the Schengen area, which can be showcased in a threefold manner. Firstly, for the reasons that I will outline below, this reality, as a periphery of the EU, is not fully compatible with the intra-Schengen ones, and thus with the border(lands) concepts developed for them.

Secondly, the Polish-Ukrainian frontier is discussed here in an exceptional moment of war, which always invalidates or undermines the relevance of theoretical considerations applicable to ordinary circumstances. Consequently, many steps that could be taken regarding the cross-border dimension in such a context, need to be validated on a national and supranational scale now, which means that bottom-up initiatives have a limited role to play here. In other words, even though it is the borderland itself (and not Poland, Ukraine, the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood or the EU) that is referred to in the title of this chapter, and even though there has been a lot going on in this area, in my analysis all these levels are closely interlinked, making it sometimes difficult to separate the signs of resilience that are inherent to the borderland from those that reflect what is happening elsewhere, especially in the Polish national inland. The relationship between discourses and borders plays an important role here, with social reality and language mutually constituting and shaping each other [8]. All this follows from an approach that postulates contextualising border regions and considering them at different scales [9, 10], which means that much attention is paid here to a territorially bounded administrative unit whose character is shaped at the central (state) level.

Thirdly, it is important to mention two competing approaches to borderlanders: normative (value-laden) and descriptive. Advocates of the former argue that living next to border neighbours generally entails solidarity and tolerance [10]. The latter position puts it in a more nuanced way: some borderlanders are more open, tolerant and so on, while others are not. These attitudes usually depend not only on the differences between individuals and the type of international relations between respective countries (both obvious), but – even more – on the local, socio-cultural context of this coexistence. Several factors usually matter here: the type of everyday culture on the part of the

neighbours', understood as individuals and not as an abstract aggregated group; the level of political, economic or civilisational (a)symmetry between both groups; the type of short-term and/or long-term relationship (including the common history) between their members; the generally perceived balance of gains and losses, etc. For then, it may turn out that borderlanders, compared to the inhabitants of the respective interior, often differ, both in plus and in minus, in their stance towards their national neighbours, evidence of which can be found in Poland, both twenty-five years ago (e.g. in relation to its eastern neighbours [11]) and in recent years (e.g. in relation to the Germans [12, 3]). Put differently, Poles' mindset to Ukrainians may depend on "which" Poles one has in mind, and the outcome of such a comparison remains an open question.

As for the narratives themselves, all these local goals or values will be described here also in terms of imaginaries, i.e. contextualised ideas or beliefs, either situationally invented or derived from larger political ideologies or worldviews and relating to the ways in which social relations are imagined by local agents [13]. The need to consider people's interpretations of shock situations "and how this influences their responses," although defined differently, is emphasised by other researchers, too [7].

My research is mainly based on various forms of desk research. I rely on media coverage, think tank reports, Polish Border Guard newsletters and statistics, as well as the literature on current Ukrainian migration to Poland. In addition, I conducted two field observations in the borderland itself, during the initial and current (early 2025) phases of the Russian invasion. Given the unique circumstances mentioned above (the area's location on the EU's external border and the timing of the war), it is even more important – in line with the requirements of qualitative methodology – to use an inductive (emergent) mode of empirical data collection in order to remain open to a "bottom-up and people-centred approach" and thus go beyond pre-categorised resilience practices [14, 15].

3. The Polish-Ukrainian Borderland (and Neighbourhood): In Search of Major Singularities

In this section, I will look at the past of the discussed area through the prism of the complexity-oriented approach, which assumes that "borders are not static, but changeable and take on very different forms and functions [16]." Some of these changes, taking place in the EU-Ukraine-Russia triangle, have led to the loosening of the border regime and the rapprochement of local communities (debordering), others have contributed to the opposite (rebordering), but the common denominator is the fact that most of these changes have made this borderland somehow unique. When approaching this issue, it is desirable to draw up at least a cursory characteristic of the south-eastern part of Poland, adjacent to the discussed border.

The region (Podkarpackie Voivodeship) is one of the least developed economically compared to the national average, one of those whose inhabitants (especially in smaller towns and villages) are right-wing (including populist and extreme), following "traditional" patterns of life. As in many other places in Poland, areas outside larger centres are becoming depopulated, here partly to the benefit of the capital city of the region – Rzeszów, which differs from the rest of the region. Its inhabitants have, too, second-hand knowledge and sometimes even direct experience (i.e. other than textbook knowledge) of the crimes committed here against their compatriots, family members, relatives or neighbours by Ukrainian nationalists in the years 1943–1945. As a result of

these actions, according to Polish historians, on both sides of this borderland, especially in present-day Western Ukraine, up to 100,000 mostly defenceless Polish civilians were brutally killed. This kind of local inter-ethnic neighbourhood (complex and difficult – mainly between Poles, Ukrainians and Jews) of the past is now a "factor that hinders rather than supports proper multicultural relations [17]." This may contextualize forms of local resilience in times of war in Ukraine.

When discussing the specifics of the contemporary Polish-Ukrainian borderland, we should start with the fact that contemporary Ukraine emerged, in 1991, from the ruins of the USSR as one of its former republics. For thirty-five years, this fact has cast a sinister shadow over Ukraine, culminating in Russia's full-scale aggression against it in 2022. But even without these dramatic events, Moscow's pressure was constantly present in discussions about the geopolitical and civilisational path that Kyiv was supposed to follow. And so, the first serious, and still irreversible, sign of the country's separateness from the course of Central Europe appeared in 2003, i.e. on the eve of the region's countries' accession to the EU (2004) and the Schengen Area (2007), which resulted in Poland's unilateral visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens. Despite various reasons for keeping the common border more permeable (long history of coexistence, Poles living in Ukraine, Ukrainians in Poland, intensive bilateral cooperation at various levels), the border regime here became tightened more rigorously than in the case of, for example, the Western Balkan countries, which also remained outside the EU and the Schengen area.

Even though in 2009 an agreement on local border traffic came into force, giving the borderlanders the right to cross the border on simplified terms, Ukrainians felt cut off from their western neighbours. For almost fifteen years (2003–2017), the socio-cultural consequences of the rebordering could be observed here, because it was not only about the aforementioned regime, but also about the insufficient number of border crossings and the way they operated: seven out of eight Polish-Ukrainian road crossings were inaccessible to pedestrians. At the same time, Kyiv's geopolitical drift only confirmed the abandonment of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland on the margins of the processes that had shaped the reality of analogous areas in Western Europe.

A significant change occurred only in 2017 with the abolition of visa requirements for Ukrainian citizens. This measure can be interpreted as a consequence of the imaginary of Ukraine as having been attacked by Russia, which had annexed Crimea and occupied the eastern territories of the country – events that symbolically brought Ukraine much closer to the EU [18]. However, the time when the border was much less permeable, and both states and societies followed separate political, economic and cultural paths, made Polish-Ukrainian cross-border relations at the grassroots level even much more one-sided than they had been prior to 2003, perpetuating their schematism: it is mainly Ukrainians who cross this border, visiting Poland, however, primarily for trade purposes. Given the ambivalence of Polish borderlanders regarding the profits generated by cross-border trade and smuggling of Ukrainian products, it should come as no surprise that their general attitude towards closing the border with Ukraine during the COVID-19 pandemic was more reserved than it might seem to an outsider [19]. Therefore, while the ability of Western European borderlanders to cross the border has become an asset worth defending [20], the same is more questionable regarding the residents of the Polish part of the borderland with Ukraine.

With the outbreak of a full-scale war in February 2022, the Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood, including the borderland, experienced a profound change in mood. Since we will discuss specific indicators of resilience in this region in the next section, here we

will only note that the general attitude of Poles towards Ukrainians was then full of various forms of help and compassion that could not have been easily imagined before. In appreciating these acts of selfless solidarity, however, it is also necessary to consider at least three important factors. Firstly, it was also Ukrainian migrants living in Poland (at that time there were up to one million of them) who greatly supported their fleeing fellow nationals, including their family members and friends, which did not always resonate sufficiently in media reports. Secondly, there were a number of circumstances that strengthened the Polish motivation to help Ukrainians, especially in view of the sentiments towards refugees from Africa and Asia who had tried to get to Poland through the green Polish-Belarusian border [8, 21, 22]. Thirdly, after several months, Poles began to show signs of so-called compassion fatigue, then continued to support Ukraine rather than Ukrainians [23], and eventually began to advocate ending the war even if it meant Ukrainian territorial or sovereignty losses [24]. All of these circumstances contributed to the issue of resilience and hence will be discussed in the following sections.

Regarding Ukraine and its position in relation to the EU, including Poland, much has changed also after February 2022, yet – again – more at the state or institutional level than at the border (except for the first few extraordinary months). And why is this change not so clearly observable at the border itself? First, before February 2022, local cross-border relations had not reached a high enough level of development to now witness a sharper decline of these cross-border and good-neighbourly assets; for years, it was the process of rebordering, albeit with some interference from debordering, that shaped this borderland. Second, in the long run, the war has not changed much about how this region functions, as the number of Ukrainians who orient mostly at the very borderland remains more or less stable. Hence, while border researchers try to describe "how border communities (attempt to) restore the status quo [7]," it can be said that there is not much of a pursuit of restoration, mainly because the region suffers from vulnerabilities that have been pivotal for a longer time than just since Russia's full-scale aggression, and their negative impact is still visible.

4. A Short-term Perspective: Signs of Resilience After February 2022

As indicated, a large part of the resilience of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, although observed in this area, results from processes taking place at various levels: national (Polish central authorities), international (Ukraine, USA), supranational (EU, NATO), "deterritorialised" (non-governmental organisations). Therefore, many types of resilience can be considered in terms of locality only to a certain extent, and more likely – as parts of phenomena of broader scales.

It is also important to remember that it is not possible to enumerate all the elements of resilience. Instead, I will mention just two blocks of initiatives that I found particularly interesting or original: local, bottom-up (individualised) forms of assistance, and state-led, top-down (formal) steps to improve cross-border mobility. Additionally, I will try to contextualise them historically and socio-culturally.

4.1 Local, Grassroots Help

As noted, residents, local activists and authorities of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland were involved in helping refugees from the first days of the full-scale war. Among these initiatives were: launching information centres, welcome points and special units in

offices dedicated to serving refugees; exempting newcomers from fees for various services; providing them with food, clothing, hygiene products and medicines; taking refugees home; many good ideas and warm feelings directed at them; creating a kind of community between helpers, hosts and guests. That this support is widely appreciated among the Ukrainian borderlanders [25].

More generally, there has been a lot of activity here, partly similar to the engagement observed elsewhere, e.g. at the Hungarian-Serbian-Romanian border, in the face of migrants following the so-called Balkan route around 2015 [4]. At the same time, however, there are several dissimilarities between the two cases that explain the different background of resilience developed in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland. Roughly speaking, here it was supported by a number of relevant imaginaries derived from different levels of argumentation, embedded in the local context and values. These levels are the following:

- geopolitical, with Russia as the invader, following its (neo)imperialist path, which most of its neighbours are well aware of, here with pro-European Ukraine as its victim [13];
- ethical, represented by compassion and the internalised need to support those in need, especially – speaking in micro-cultural terms – this plight was experienced by "real," flesh-and-blood individuals, associated with neighbours from across the border, rather than as an abstract, collective entity that we know only from media footage;
- reactional, as there may have come up a sense of guilt generated by the fact that African and Asian refugees at the Polish-Belarusian border – treated as "alien" or "other" – had not been receiving enough help from Poles [21], which could be somehow compensated for here, i.e. in relation to Ukrainians;
- macro-cultural, with the myth of the Polish-Ukrainian historical brotherhood having possibly been activated here;
- practical, as various aid measures, including funds, were also supported by agents located at higher administrative levels.

With a form of stabilisation of the military situation and a subsequent change in sentiment, many of the initiatives mentioned, especially those from below, began to fade away. Therefore it is important to highlight the ventures that have survived throughout this time, proving to be embedded in certain high-level values and resistant to disinformation or short-term enthusiasm: the continued raising money for Ukraine, the collection of relief items for ordinary people, keeping the whole issue alive in the public space, local efforts to increase the permeability of the border (on special occasions, sometimes only once or twice a year) as has happened before, which illustrates this specific concept of people's resilience [7].

Local initiatives as signs of resilience are particularly valuable because they run counter to major traditional difficulties: unhealed historical wounds that are most visible and tangible at the grassroots level; the lack of deeper interest of Polish borderlanders in what is happening on the other side of the frontier [19]; the atmosphere of fear created by the missile that fell on Polish territory a few kilometres from the border in late 2022, killing two civilians; the subsequent sense of disappointment with the Ukrainian authorities refusing to cooperate sufficiently with their Polish counterparts on the details

of the event.[2] All the aforesaid forms of assistance have contributed to the integration of this borderland, but it is difficult to determine its depth in the medium and long term.

4.2 Making the Border More Permeable

In order to make the border more permeable, from the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion, Poland opened all its road crossings to Ukrainian refugees, who were, moreover, subject to simplified control. In addition, in January 2023, one more crossing was partially opened, the construction of which had not been completed by then (i.e. with some work still ongoing at the same time). If these circumstances do not seem worth mentioning, it should be remembered that prior to February 2022, only one of the eight Polish-Ukrainian road crossings was also accessible to pedestrians. Although the situation soon returned to its previous state, the border and the authorities managing it showed, at least for a while, a more human face, and this precedent may make it easier to introduce such changes regularly in the future.

In the same vein, mention should be made of several cross-border rail connections, launched temporarily in the first months after February 2022, including on routes that were not used at the time or were only used by freight services. This was accompanied by the upgrading of existing crossings and tracks leading to the border, the launch of new regular cross-border service, including reopening of one passenger railway crossings that had for some time been out of use (and preparation for the same as regards two others) or an increase in the number of domestic trains terminating near the border. All these improvements are in line with the traditional socio-ecological perspective of resilience [7, 26].

This change, too, is noticeable mainly in contrast to the previous status quo (for which the aforementioned status of the Polish-Ukrainian border is partly to blame), yet with the situation being even worse for rail links than for road crossings. For many years, from the late 1990s onwards, we saw a decline in cross-border rail provision in the area, although there were some elements of debordering as well. This only started to improve in the second half of the 2010s, on the wave of labour migration of Ukrainians to Poland after Russia's hostilities started in 2014, which allows one to speak here of a resilience developed earlier [27].

In both cases, the pace of infrastructure improvement is inherently slow, as individual initiatives are subject to formal procedures required primarily at national and supranational scales. This makes the whole less spectacular than the current bottom-up initiatives, but at the same time those achievements are often more sustainable, after all they do not easily succumb to social and political turbulence. It is worth noting that both bottom-up and top-down levels of resilience and activity meet when local authorities seek to open a new border crossing in their municipality, the establishment of which is left to the central administration – especially if it is to serve temporarily pedestrians and cyclists only, as it is the case in some localities in this border region.

[2] Therefore, according to the Polish prosecutor's office, it is not possible to determine definitively whether it was a Russian missile or, as some Polish officials have indicated, a Ukrainian one.

5. A Mid-term Perspective: Change of Moods and a Prelude to a Case Study

Over time, a gradual change in the attitude of Poles towards Ukrainian migrants could be observed, both in the borderland and nationwide. It can be attributed to a number of factors, the importance of which, however, has been reinforced by Russian propaganda (which remains active in other fields as well, creating additional points of contention). So why have the once warm feelings cooled?

Firstly, these are real, tangible everyday problems, mainly related to social welfare; sometimes they were simply ineffectively dealt with by the Polish authorities, sometimes they resulted from simple jealousy of the support given to refugees. Secondly, Polish-Ukrainian historical antagonisms started to be exploited (or re-exploited, as they had been present in the public space also before February 2022) by some political circles to achieve political gains. Thirdly, one could observe competition on the Polish labour market (mainly among beauty industry workers, taxi drivers or baby-sitters), reinforced by the vision of future competition between Polish and Ukrainian entrepreneurs and producers (mainly agricultural and logistics) also on the common EU market. Fourthly, there were some "minor issues," such as the matrimonial one, in which Ukrainian women were accused of picking up Polish men (including husbands – with questions about the fidelity of these men, however, echoing much less).

Most of these problems also apply to the borderland itself; therefore, with local resilience in mind, it is worth looking at the preliminary case study of the city of Przemyśl. It is located in south-eastern Poland, about 12 kilometres from one of the Polish-Ukrainian border crossings, with a population of about 55,000 (one of the two biggest cities in this border area). However, the local reality and its perception have been shaped over the last thirty years rather by such factors as the administrative degradation of the city, the closure of local enterprises and, therefore, the fact that young people, having completed their education in larger academic centres, usually do not return here (accompanied by the general demographic decline in Poland). All these circumstances make the city, according to commonly accepted criteria, rather peripheral [28].

Since 2014, on the wave of Ukrainian migration to Poland, Przemyśl has grown in importance as a transport hub – a rather unique location close to a triple border crossing: road, pedestrian (the only one on the entire Polish-Ukrainian border) and rail (only two at the time), with many direct national and international rail links in operation. The city's importance increased significantly in February 2022, when it began to serve refugees, at times as many as 100,000 people per day. Moreover, without an overall coping strategy, the city reportedly managed the challenge [29].In this context, it is worth noting that there are currently five categories of Ukrainians to be enumerated in and around Przemyśl: representatives of the autochthonous Ukrainian minority, people from abroad who visit the area mainly for family, trade or work purposes, and Ukrainians who settled here in three migration waves (in the 1990s, after 2014 and after February 2022), differing, among other things, in the level and type of motivation to leave Ukraine and stay in Poland, as well as in their competences and expectations. Relations between Poles and this national group, no matter how internally diverse, have never been easy here.

While talking to the inhabitants of Przemyśl at the beginning of 2025, I got the impression that there is not much left of the city's significance from three years ago. The impact of migration is rather weak, as Przemyśl does not have much to offer them or they simply head for other places in Poland and abroad. Moreover, in addition to the general associations that Poles have begun to have with these people ("ill-mannered,"

"demanding," and "ungrateful" or "they expose their high economic status"[3]), one can hear in the borderland about Ukrainians buying up cheap products, exporting them to Ukraine and then selling more expensively in the villages there. The latter observation contrasts with the local population's commitment to helping the refugees in the first weeks after February 2022, leaving these helpers, in their words, with a feeling of bitterness (to put it no higher). Over time, reportedly fewer and fewer Ukrainians are coming to Przemyśl rather passing it on the way. To make matters worse, the number of Polish tourists in the city is said to have declined, as many of them were only stopping in Przemyśl on their way to the Ukrainian city of L'viv, which has no longer been a destination due to the war; some visitors, moreover, would not feel safe even in the Polish part of the borderland.

Now the city may feel that it was exploited as a welcome point or hub and then – when the volume of transfer mobility through the city significantly dropped down – symbolically abandoned, once again losing out to Rzeszów, the regional capital?[4] For it is this centre that, thanks to the airport there, became the hub that for the last three years has attracted the attention of the media, experts, analysts and all people involved in the logistics of various forms of assistance to Ukraine, rather than – as in the case of Przemyśl – attracting only migrants being mostly just on the way. From February 2022 onwards, there has been time for the city to prove its importance, change its unfavourable image and become more internationally recognised, yet, as for now, there is hardly any strong evidence that Przemyśl will be able to go beyond its limitations.

Overall, the area, as perceived by its residents, does not seem to be a place that can be recommended. In the case of Przemyśl, this means that the durable shift from a peripheral and Ukrainian-sceptical city to a migrant hub or proverbial "welcome point" has not so far been achieved. It appears that the local resilience capital [3] that developed, against many odds, in the early 2022 was later lost or at least overshadowed by the inherent and systemic limitations of the city, among others. In other words, the Polish part of this borderland proved once again to be too dependent on macro-level conditions.

6. A Long-term Perspective: Measures to Be Taken

The longer the war in Ukraine lasts and the more its course is subject to geopolitical conditions, the less can be said about local and grassroots initiatives considered as signs of resilience in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland; in this respect, time is not an ally of either Ukraine or the processes taking place here. One cannot but assume that the region could develop better in this respect if some dramatic events (e.g. a further escalation of Russian aggression) were to occur, which would again force Ukrainians to leave their country en masse; simultaneously, however, given the current emotions aroused by migrants, it is not easy to predict what the reactions of the borderlanders would be then.

Thinking about future action more generally, it is reasonable to point to four interrelated areas: (dis)information, materiality, ideas and behaviour. As for the first of

[3] Some Ukrainian borderlanders show an understanding of the reservations of Poles raised on this issue. As they were given the opportunity to observe similar phenomena in western Ukraine themselves, they attribute these behaviours to Ukrainians from the eastern part of the state. [25]

[4] I refer to the city's loss of its status as the capital of the voivodeship to Rzeszów in 1999 and of a range of benefits accompanying that position; this degradation had a serious negative impact on Przemyśl, from which it has not recovered to this day.

these, local resilience should be built on efforts to increase resistance to the creation of fake news, the use of (half)true and troublesome facts, and the excessive dissemination of both types of messages (outlet for Ukrainian crops, problems in the labour market, overburdened education system, regulations for Ukrainian truck drivers, the situation at the front, etc.), also treated as an element of Russian hybrid warfare.

However, it is not enough to keep track of such narratives, and hence steps must be taken to neutralise the (sometimes real) pains of (inter-ethnic) coexistence in the borderland. It requires serious interest on the part of the central administration, together with material support; otherwise, a bitter feeling may grow among the borderlanders – that this area is abandoned as being located "at the end of the world," with only Ukrainian (i.e. inferior) influences present there. For such imaginaries [13] tend to symbolically cross the border and, as it were, also cast a shadow over the Polish part of the borderland.

It should then be easier to manage the world of ideas, as people who accept their material condition are more willing to appreciate the symbolic benefits of their location. In creating counter-narratives about this borderland and neighbourhood, efforts should be made to combat the orientalising discourse about Ukrainians and their state. Here, it is extremely important to develop a more mature, i.e. less one-sided, approach of people to some of the difficult issues in Polish-Ukrainian history (especially antagonising in the borderland), resulting in a clash of two historical memories and contemporary narratives. A dose of courage and good example from central authorities is more than welcome here, but much can also be achieved at the grassroots, interpersonal level. Coming to terms with the past increases the likelihood of developing long-term resilience, especially as "it seems that the multicultural traditions of Central European societies are the crucial elements which could be used as the component of the policy of resilience that could positively reshape local communities [17]." In the early stages of Russian aggression, such voices on behalf of Poles as a collective were possible but were later drowned out.

Given the possible integration of Ukraine into the EU, all these measures should be accompanied by a fundamental relaxation of the border regime: an increase in the number of border crossings (also for pedestrians), improvement of their infrastructure and the general atmosphere prevailing at these points. This could make Polish borderlanders feel less affected by all the inconveniences at border crossings and, perhaps, more interested in further debordering; indeed, bouncing-forward resistance is then more likely as a result of growing familiarity with Ukrainian neighbours and cross-border cooperation. Otherwise, on the Polish side, we will be faced with top-down material debordering (new border crossings launched, used mostly by migrants, tourists or businesspeople), juxtaposed with bottom-up mental rebordering, with residents of the region interested – mainly and at best – in cheap cigarettes and alcohol smuggled in by Ukrainians, but rather disinterested in Ukraine and its people themselves.

There is also a geopolitical dimension to the issue (the end of the war), which is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, there is also a direct, physical and lethal threat to borderlanders, such as, for example, rockets falling on Polish territory. These images are at odds with any consideration of the kind of adaptation, resistance or coping mechanisms that might be developed by these communities. While it is true that "people living next to geopolitically sensitive borders are somewhat socialised to a specific border mentality and practical approach towards border-related high geopolitics [5]," the aforementioned type of threat has more to do with traumatic and post-traumatic experience. As a result, while in certain contexts the border can generate positional benefits by separating individuals from an "insecure world" and therefore can be treated

as an asset [30], in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland it loses even this attribute, as it cannot be treated as a reliable barrier against this shock and its consequences.

7. Resilience to the Unknowns: Towards the EU Eastern Borders

With the escalation of the war by Russia in February 2022, Poland as a state has supported Ukraine in its defence against Russia, offered various forms of protection to refugees, made its border with Ukraine more permeable and promoted Kyiv's accession to the EU. It was also "ordinary" Poles as a group that became involved in helping their Ukrainian neighbours. As for the borderland, the countless forms of grassroots resilience developed on this occasion are even more valuable given the shape of the local interactions. Due to many circumstances, after three years little of these warm feelings remained and people began to approach this effort with growing scepticism. All these factors, however, make the conclusions on this borderland resilience – also as compared to the one at EU internal frontiers – rather unequivocal.

Viewed socio-culturally, this area features now rebordering thinking that favours exclusivity and proximity, in line with trends in some EU countries. Threats commonly associated with the war – the influx of Ukrainians, their position in Poland, Ukraine as a competitor for the Polish (primarily) agricultural market, etc. – seem to lead borderlanders to mental rebordering. They demand a symbolic fencing from their eastern neighbours, strengthen their sense of national belonging, and hence perceive resilience in their own way: as measures taken to prevent Ukrainians from destroying a more comfortable pre-war local world, proving that the social dimension of resilience here is more of the bouncing-back type.

Simultaneously, infrastructurally speaking, the Ukrainian border with Poland has become more permeable over this time. And even though we are only talking about initial steps towards Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU, this form of limited debordering makes the resilience processes at the Polish-Ukrainian border different in character from those observed in Western European borderlands. Whilst the state of affairs before the migration issue and the COVID-19 pandemic, although far from ideal, was at least satisfactory there, for the studied area the previous situation was bad enough not to return to it, with no chances for such projects as "the world without borders". Paradoxically, this means that, in terms of border infrastructure, the region is turning the past misery into a small-scale success.

Given the increasing permeability of the Polish-Ukrainian boundary – to the benefit of outsiders, yet at the expense of locals – this borderland may thus be challenged (especially in the context of the future integration of Ukraine into the EU) by dialectical thinking similar to that at the German-Polish border: while top-down narratives promoted the opening of this boundary within the Schengen area, grassroots perceptions of uncontrolled movement of Poles fuelled local fears [13]. This would be in line with such value-laden conceptualisations of resilience linked to locality, where the attitudes and interests of borderland residents do not necessarily coincide with those formulated at other scales, thus reflecting one of the crucial questions of such analyses: who decides what a threat is [15]?

One is thus tempted to conclude that the Polish-Ukrainian borderland displays elements of bouncing-back resilience on a social level, and of bouncing-forward resilience as far as the border permeability and infrastructure are concerned. This is further evidence of the uniqueness of this borderland compared to many of the EU's

external borders [5,20] and further confirmation that the EU's external and internal frontiers follow different trajectories and may be subject to different regimes, values and relationships [28].

Finally, taking into account all the nationalising phenomena observed on the borders inside the EU [31], the future of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and its ability to grow resilient against the Russian invasion depends not only – still to a greater extent than on the borders inside the Schengen zone – on the prosperity of the EU or 'nationalising globalisation' (i.e. globalisation driven by national politics), but also on the timing and conditions for the eventual end of this aggression. Over the past decade, the EU has been far more preoccupied with pushing back the African and Asian migration challenge than with Russia's neo-imperial posture, even though both directions have been hinted at in strategic documents on EU policy toward its neighbourhood [7]. February 2022 confirmed that it is also its eastern flank and external borders, with their specific resilience needs, that pose a real threat to EU security.

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Resilience in the Polish-Russian Borderlands amid Russia's War on Ukraine

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Abstract: The chapter explores how people have survived and lived together in the Polish-Russian border region, particularly since the onset of the war against Ukraine. This border holds significant importance not only because it marks the boundary between the EU and a non-EU country, but also because Kaliningrad serves as a strategic military base. The author examines the behaviour of ordinary residents in this region across various periods of both closed and open borders, spanning from 1945 to 2024. While Russia's annexation of Crimea, the conflict in Donbas in 2014, and the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the region's development, the escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022 brought profound changes. Nevertheless, like people everywhere, the inhabitants of the Polish-Russian border region have strived to adapt and survive under all circumstances, often relying on resources provided by their proximity to the border. Adopting an anthropological approach to analyse these empirical conditions, the author interprets her findings through social science paradigms such as resilience, crises, inclusion, and exclusion.

Keywords. Poland, Russia, Border, Ukrainians, Resilience, Inclusion, Exclusion, Daily life

1. Introduction: Borders and We-Identities

Two Ukrainian women who have experienced firsthand the war against Ukraine shared their perspectives with the author on those individuals who chose to remain in Ukraine despite the conflict. One woman, who now lives abroad while her parents and brother remain in Ukraine, describes her family's decision as an act of resilience. The other woman, who left Ukraine at the start of the war with her parents and children, views those who stayed as displaying ignorance. What one interprets as courage, the other sees as a failure to take the dangers of war seriously. This contrast highlights a broader perspective: for Ukrainians who stayed, facing the daily risk of death is seen as resilience, while for those who left, it may be perceived as ignorance. These opposing viewpoints underscore the complexity of resilience from a social science perspective, illustrating that it cannot be so easily categorised.

This chapter examines how people in the Polish-Russian border region have adapted to life and survival following the outbreak of the war against Ukraine and the subsequent

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changes to life in the border area. Unlike other border regions in Poland, this area has historically maintained close economic ties with Russia, making the sudden closure of the border in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic – and again in 2022 following the outbreak of the war – a profound disruption to daily life. Local inhabitants have long relied on cross-border trade and mobility as part of their economic survival, and the abrupt end of these interactions has reshaped their perceptions of both their Russian and Ukrainian neighbours. The complexity of resilience in this area is therefore evident.

There is a growing scholarship on borderlanders and their way of achieving resilience [1,2]. Borderlands can be taken as illuminating laboratories to study broader socio-political change, prone to the vicissitudes of the prevailing geopolitical contexts. It is unquestionable that people in border regions use various resources to improve their living standards; they try to survive [4], recover, reposit [5] or "avoid falling into unacceptable living conditions [6]." Apart from its clinical roots, resilience has become an explanation within various policy fields to manage "a world of rapid change, complexity, and unexpected events [7]." Coping with such critical situations varies from place to place, [1] from border region to border region.

Since the 1970s, social scientists have explored resilience as an active, dynamic process rather than a fixed trait. Psychologist DeMarco [8], who studied resilience across diverse fields including the sciences and humanities, identified seven pillars of resilience Her seventh pillar, "dynamic balance," is especially evident in border regions. She stresses that there is no resilience DNA; rather, resilience is an active process. This perspective aligns with resilience thinking, which frames security as a system's capacity to reorganize spontaneously in response to disturbances. It requires the transcendence of boundaries and binaries that traditionally define separation, thus envisioning a world always in a state of becoming [2].

While various disciplines have long discussed different meanings and forms of resilience, the specific role of borders and their impact on resilience has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention [9]. Historically, research focused primarily on economic resilience in Eastern European border regions. The social and economic transformations that swept through Central-Eastern Europe in the early 1990s had profound effects on these border areas. In response, resilience partnerships emerged to help these regions survive and maintain functionality. As border regions on the periphery [10], their inhabitants developed unique skills to adapt and reorient themselves over time, navigating the challenges posed by their geopolitical and economic contexts.

The resilience of borderland people [11], often understood as societal resilience, has increasingly become a focus of study across various border regions experiencing different crises. Prokkola introduced the concept of "border regional resilience," emphasising that the geopolitical situation, along with formal and informal border institutions, partly shapes the ways border communities adapt and cope [12]. Hannonen further highlights that borderlanders develop a unique form of resilience centred on defending their hard-won ability to cross borders. However, unexpected economic, political, and health crises – such as pandemics – can disrupt cross-border mobility, introducing significant risks and losses [13].

This distinctive resilience of borderlanders is closely tied to their unique knowledge and access to opportunities on both sides of the border. They are familiar with their neighbours and the resources available across the boundary, allowing them to navigate and benefit from these transborder connections. Principled pragmatism often characterizes daily life in many border regions [14]. As sociologist Bobryk observes, the border can also affect the creativity of the local residents [14], fostering adaptive strategies

and innovative solutions in response to the challenges and possibilities that borders present [2].

Resilience in border regions involves both inclusion and exclusion, as people tend to perceive social dynamics through group identities rather than individual distinctions. In the border region under study, Russian inhabitants have been accepted as part of the local community [Leon], bonded through shared economic hardship and historical familiarity, while Ukrainian newcomers have faced exclusion and marginalisation, with symbols of support for Ukraine, such as flags or signs, largely absent. My analysis focuses on social resilience at the local level, showing how borderlanders often maintain their everyday lives and businesses despite the ongoing war initiated by Russia against Ukraine. However, resilience alone may not fully explain the complexities of their situation and resources; a multifactorial approach is preferable, one that also considers the concept of crisis – despite its "inflationary use" [15]. This is especially relevant given the Russian aggression as an existential turning point for borderlanders along the Polish-Russian border, marked by re-bordering processes and subtle resistance aimed at preserving a semblance of prior normalcy. I intend to incorporate multiple perspectives to capture this nuanced reality.

Recent research suggests that despite the presence of "cognitive polyphasia [16]," the coexistence of contradictory beliefs, some respondents do not resolve their cognitive dissonance by smoothing out ambivalent views. Instead, they construct and maintain perspectives they can endure amid conflicting thoughts. Faced with an overwhelming flow of narratives from social media and lobbying groups, individuals employ various cognitive strategies to navigate ambiguous realities. Many attribute responsibility for crises to collective entities such as "the West," "wealthy elites," or "capitalists," while others blame specific political figures or embrace conspiracy theories. These perceptions often stem from social or class-based self-identification rather than national affiliation, framing a division between "us, the ordinary people" and "them, the powerful [16]."

In this context, shared economic struggles have fostered a "we-identity" between Polish and Russian borderlanders, while Ukrainians are increasingly viewed as belonging to a separate social category. This dynamic not only reinforces solidarity among borderlanders but also redirects blame away from "ordinary people" toward powerful groups and influential individuals. In addition, widespread mistrust of official media fuels suspicion of misinformation, further shaping how people cognitively reconstruct their realities. Anderson and Aubry [17] advocate for new conceptual and methodological approaches to studying crisis that problematize the relationship between crisis and normalcy, emphasising agency, critical capacities, and the situated material conditions of life. Such perspectives offer promising avenues for deepening our understanding of borderlanders' experiences.

2. The Burden of History

To understand the complex neighbourhood in the Polish-Russian border region today, it is necessary to begin with the region's history. The Polish-Russian border is a construct of political decisions. In 1944, the new border between Poland and the USSR was drawn according to the wishes of the latter. Immediately following its establishment in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Polish-Soviet border was transformed into a hermetically sealed and exceptionally well-guarded frontier – a condition that remained largely unchanged until 1985 [18, 19, 20]. Heightened security measures were introduced in

the so-called Kaliningrad district, which was converted into a military base. Among all of Poland's borders, the one with the Soviet Union was the most impermeable; in fact, the first official crossing point was not established until 1955 [21, 22]. For ten years, the populations on either side of the Soviet-Polish border were completely cut off from one another, unable to maintain any form of contact. The economic effects of this separation, many sought to cross the border to reclaim former possessions, generated considerable dissent and protest. As in other parts of East Central Europe, the artificial and arbitrary nature of the border's delineation also resulted in the division of towns, villages, estates, and forests. However, while Poland's borders with Czechoslovakia and even East Germany permitted some movement of people and goods, primarily for economic purposes, the border with the Soviet Union remained sealed until 1955 [23].

The advent of de-Stalinisation, the Polish October, and the Hungarian uprising of 1956 led to a gradual relaxation of the strict controls along the Soviet-Polish border. Cross-border cooperation developed primarily between settlements near the frontier, but it remained limited to interactions between the two Communist parties; ordinary citizens were still unable to cross the border. Travel was also facilitated through school and university exchanges, as well as cultural and sporting associations [24, 25]. In the 1970s, regular border crossings were established under the framework of the so-called friendship coaches, which travelled primarily between the Kaliningrad district and Olsztyn Voivodeship. These official excursions offered Polish citizens the opportunity to purchase goods that were either unavailable or prohibitively expensive in Poland. These "journeys of friendship" were often also used as a means of supplementing income, enabling travellers to buy desirable or cheaper Soviet products to resell in Poland [26].

Despite such cross-border contacts, the Soviet-Polish border remained a closed, heavily militarised, and tightly controlled zone well into the mid-1980s. The limited interactions that did occur were always kept to a strictly regulated minimum. In fact, the introduction of a liberalised passport system in Poland during the 1970s created a situation where it was easier to travel to capitalist Western countries than to cross the border into the Soviet brother state. This began to change in the mid-1980s under Gorbachev's policy of Perestroika. In 1987, an agreement between the USSR and Poland established simplified border crossing procedures for inhabitants of the shared border region [27]. A four-year cooperation program from 1987 to 1990, led by the party committees of the Kaliningrad region and the Olsztyn Voivodeship, laid the groundwork for the first sustained cross-border contacts [28].

3. The Polish-Russian Border Region After 1990

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 reshaped Poland's eastern border, introducing four new neighbouring states: Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Following the political transformations of 1989 – including the Round Table Talks, the free elections of June 1989, and the subsequent transition period – Poland gradually distanced itself from the USSR. Post-1989 Polish foreign policy focused on opening borders and fostering cross-border cooperation [29]. However, there was no unified approach between the central and local governments regarding the practical implementation of these policies. While local authorities sought to strengthen cooperation with Russia by opening additional border crossings, expanding border infrastructure, and increasing the efficiency of economic exchange to develop the region, the Polish central government remained hesitant to support such initiatives [15].

Throughout the 1990s, the Polish-Russian border region began to capitalize on its geographic position and available resources. Both sides of the border remained economically underdeveloped compared to the central and urban areas of their respective countries. Cross-border travel was largely limited to residents of the border area, and while formal cooperation was minimal, informal trade – often in the form of smuggling – became commonplace. Poles and Russians regularly crossed the border to purchase goods within permissible customs limits. Although some scholars criticised this informal trade as corrupt and prone to exploitation [30], it nonetheless played a crucial role in stimulating the local economy and fostering closer interactions between citizens, thereby helping to break down barriers [15].

Since May 2004, when Poland joined the European Union, the Polish-Russian border region has benefited from the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). In 2010, the Lithuania-Poland-Russia trilateral Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) program was launched with the goal of strengthening ties between the EU and Russia. An earlier initiative, the Euroregion Baltic (ERB), was established in February 1998, bringing together border regions from Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and the Kaliningrad region. A significant milestone was reached on March 16, 2012, when Poland and Russia ratified the Polish-Russian Local Border Traffic (LBT) Agreement, which came into effect on July 27, 2012. The agreement facilitated border crossings for residents of Kaliningrad Oblast and selected Polish regions in the Pomerania and Warmia-Mazuria voivodeships. Under its provisions, Polish and Russian inhabitants of these areas could travel more freely across the border with a valid travel document [31].

The impact of the LBT agreement was immediate. The border, once seen as a restrictive barrier, was redefined as a valuable resource. Crossings between Poland and Russia increased dramatically, rising from just over one million in 2009 to more than four million in 2012 [32]. Beyond economic benefits, the agreement had significant political implications. As Kaliningrad is an exclave, improved border access fostered a stronger sense of connection with Poland and Europe. The agreement also stimulated the development of transportation and tourism infrastructure, leading to a gradual rise in cross-border tourism [33]. Seen as a step toward improving EU-Russia relations, the LBT agreement had a particularly profound effect on cross-border trade [32]. Between 2013 and 2014, approximately 50% of Kaliningrad residents used LBT cards to visit Poland. The primary beneficiaries of this policy were cross-border traders, who took advantage of the easier access to Polish markets [34].

3.1 Changes after the Annexation of Crimea

The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of conflict in Donbas, Ukraine, in 2014 also impacted the development of the Polish-Russian border region. In July 2016, Poland suspended local border traffic (LBT) with Russia for security reasons. In response, beginning on July 4, Russia ceased admitting Polish citizens under the LBT framework. Although the suspension did not prevent Russians from entering Poland entirely, it made cross-border travel more difficult and restrictive. Local Russian residents often combined shopping with tourism and recreation during their visits. They purchased goods such as foodstuffs, toiletries, and electronic equipment – items that were cheaper, of better quality, or unavailable in their own region [15]. For many, the LBT had symbolised a reopening of the door to Europe.

Likewise, in 2019, 95.8% of Poles crossed the border primarily for shopping purposes [35]. Polish residents often perceived Kaliningraders as distinct from other Russians, largely due to their frequent contact with EU citizens [32]. Polish visitors typically spent money on fuel, as well as on alcoholic beverages and tobacco. So-called tanker traders – who made up 75% of Poles entering the Kaliningrad region – would often drive only to the nearest petrol station, spend no more than one or two hours in Russia, and then return.

Although the LBT regime was also implemented in other parts of the EU's eastern border (e.g., Latvia–Russia, Belarus–Latvia, Hungary–Ukraine, Slovakia–Ukraine), it did not produce similarly significant results. Notably, in the Polish-Russian border region, the LBT had a measurable impact on local perceptions: it contributed to a more positive view of Russians living in the Kaliningrad region [34].

From 2014 to 2020, the Poland–Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Program served as the primary mechanism supporting cross-border collaboration. Its aim was to foster cooperation in the social, environmental, economic, cultural, and institutional spheres. The Euroregion Baltic (ERB) was again the most active participant, launching numerous projects focused on cultural exchange, entrepreneurial collaboration, innovation promotion, and environmental protection [28]. Several initiatives also targeted clean agriculture, medical tourism, and recreation, with notable clustering in the amber and construction industries [36].

Similar to the LBT, the Poland–Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Program had a notably positive impact on the region, particularly in municipalities along the Russian border that are often marked by social and economic challenges. In both the Kaliningrad and Polish border areas, there was a growing interest in learning the neighbouring country's language. Hotels and shops began employing Russian-speaking staff and providing information in Russian to attract more visitors from Kaliningrad [37]. Most Polish local governments recognised the potential benefits of proximity to the Kaliningrad region. This, in turn, contributed to a degree of tabooisation around discussions of the war against Ukraine. During bilateral meetings, political topics were often avoided or explicitly excluded in order to maintain a focus on regional cooperation [38].

The LBT and the Cross-Border Cooperation Program contributed to what has been described as "the revival of the borderland" [37]. For the Russian side, specifically the Kaliningrad region, cooperation with Poland played an important role in ensuring its economic security. This was largely due to its proximity to economically developed European countries, which were seen as prospective trade partners. As a result, the regional economy in Kaliningrad developed more rapidly than in many other Russian territories. However, this strong dependence on good relations with international partners also made the region more vulnerable during times of crisis. When sanctions against Russia were introduced in the spring of 2014, Kaliningrad's bilateral trade with former partners – Germany, Poland, and Lithuania – declined significantly [36].

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in January 2020, Russia was confronted with a new kind of cross-border threat. While the government responded swiftly with strong measures against China at the turn of 2019 to 2020, it initially hesitated to impose similar restrictions on its European borders due to economic concerns – particularly the potential impact on tourism. However, starting in April 2020, Russia began to implement stringent border controls across all its frontiers. As a result, borderlanders were forced to accept a dramatic reduction in the number of people permitted to cross. As noted, "for Russia and its foreign counterparts, curbing cross-border movement surely had serious

negative economic, social, and political consequences, including disruption of economic and social ties, individual hardships, and political complications [39]." This was likely true not only for Russia but also for Poland.

By the autumn of 2020, during the second wave of the pandemic, prolonged border immobilisation was no longer seen as a viable strategy, as it posed a significant threat to economic stability. In mid-March, Kaliningrad officials even expressed satisfaction that pandemic restrictions had suppressed the inflow of EU foodstuffs banned under Russian countersanctions since 2014. Nevertheless, by May 2020, regional media reported that these banned goods were once again appearing in Kaliningrad, likely transported by long-haul drivers. As one report noted, "informal cross-border business demonstrated adaptability to the pandemic conditions, being ready either to take advantage of new opportunities or to return as soon as conditions became more favourable [39]." Only a few rare cases were recorded in which residents of the Kaliningrad region attempted to cross the border illegally into Germany or Poland.

From the perspective of the Polish borderland, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the negative economic and social consequences of the sudden and unambiguous reinstatement of the border with Russia [37]. The reintroduction of "Covid-fencing" effectively revived the border zone's former isolation – an extremely stressful condition, even if considered a temporary measure. The previously promising development of trade, tourism, and cross-border mobility came to an abrupt halt, reinforcing the region's longstanding socio-economic marginalisation. Persistent issues resurfaced, including the area's low attractiveness, limited entrepreneurial activity, and poor living conditions. Perhaps most significantly, the friendly cross-border relationships and cooperation built over the years between borderlanders on both sides were severed almost overnight.

3.2 Polish-Russian Border Area after the Outbreak of the War against Ukraine

The escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally transformed the Polish–Russian border region. The conflict not only impacted the primary belligerents but also significantly worsened living conditions for those residing along this external EU frontier. Both Polish and Russian inhabitants, who had long awaited the reopening of the border, experienced renewed isolation, accompanied by a growing sense of insecurity and an acute inability to maintain economic stability. Prior to the invasion, living in a cross-border area and participating in cross-border cooperation had substantially improved the quality of life in the region, especially in adjacent cities. However, the reintroduction of a hard border effectively erased these advantages overnight.

On the Polish side, this shift exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic challenges: low entrepreneurial activity, limited professional qualifications, weak support for business initiatives, a lack of investment in urban infrastructure, and inadequate transport and tourism facilities. Many residents now perceive the closed border as a key factor accelerating the economic decline of the area. The sanctions imposed on Russia have had a direct and adverse effect on the region's economic conditions, particularly on tourism, which had been an essential source of income.

Studzińska refers to this phenomenon as the "de-marginalisation of the Polish border zone with Russia [35]," where the abrupt shift from cooperative to antagonistic border relations led to the collapse of previously functional frameworks. In 2022, border traffic amounted to only 6% of the volume recorded in 2014. Bilateral agreements were

cancelled by border communes, and local authorities reported that conditions were even worse than before 2014, given that regional development strategies had heavily relied on cross-border cooperation [35]. The geographical border has once again become a visible and tangible manifestation of state power [40].

In response to the heightened threat environment, Poland – mirroring Finland – initiated the construction of physical barriers along its border with Kaliningrad Oblast. Although the Polish–Russian border stretches only 230 kilometres, compared to Finland's 1,340-kilometre frontier with Russia [41], the implications for local residents have been profound. Securitisation measures now directly affect daily life, and the residents of Kaliningrad no longer benefit from proximity to the EU. On the Polish side, the region faces significant challenges, including depopulation, long-term marginalisation, and the difficulty of pivoting from reliance on Russian visitors to attracting EU and international tourism.

4. Methodology

A qualitative ethnographic study was conducted to investigate resilience in the Polish-Russian border region. Narrative inquiry, in the form of human stories of experience, seemed to be the most convenient form for this research [42]. This is an inquiry where lives meet in storied ways in which we intentionally come into relation with participants [43]. The fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in July 2024. The author used in-depth individual interviews. These concerned the approach to life, work, and a sense of belonging to the region. The interviews were conducted as open conversations. The respondents told their narratives of crisis and how they tackled the challenges they were confronted with.

The author used the grassroots perspective, and ethnography as the method: field observations, unobtrusive observations, and interviews with Polish inhabitants on the Polish side of the border region. Due to the visa restrictions, it was not possible to cross the Russian border. For this research, understanding how individuals act in difficult situations was more important than understanding how governments or institutions act. Based on the construct that personal ethics are situated within the control of individuals, individual points of view are more significant than an analysis of public policy in view of resilience. When people are persuaded by a moral argument to change their behaviour, they tend to decide and act accordingly. They do not need to convince the government [44]. For this reason, people's resilience is very strongly connected with their ethics. All interview citations in the chapter are anonymised and derived from the fieldwork.

5. Today's Resilience under War Circumstances. An Ethnographic Study in the Border Town Bezledy

The first stop en route to the Polish–Russian border today presents a strikingly different picture from the one that existed prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The visible changes in the landscape confirm the extent to which the war has altered the region. Just half a kilometre before the border crossing, a closed *Biedronka* supermarket – once frequented by Russian shoppers seeking essentials such as milk, baby formula, and diapers – now stands as a symbol of suspended cross-border exchange. In front of the shuttered store, I encountered two men standing by a Polish-registered truck.

Speaking in Russian, they explained: "The supermarket has been closed for four years" [45, 46].

Contrary to expectations, the Polish–Russian border crossing is not entirely deserted. During extended periods of observation and conversations at the *spedycja* (logistics) area near the checkpoint, I witnessed a modest but steady flow of traffic. Some cars and cyclists, granted special permissions, were allowed to cross. Particularly notable were small buses bearing German license plates, carrying passengers conversing in Russian. These individuals were Russian citizens residing in Germany, holding both German and Russian passports, which enabled them to legally cross the border.

Paradoxically, cross-border business activity appeared to persist – even intensify – under wartime conditions. While regular cross-border movement has largely ceased for local residents, transnational Russian communities continue to maintain cross-border connections, demonstrating the adaptability of mobility practices even in the context of conflict and heightened securitisation [47, 48].

Upon arriving by car at the Polish-Russian border crossing, I inquired whether it would be possible to speak with officials responsible for border control. A courteous female border guard took my passport and driver's license and proceeded to a large building situated on the Polish side beyond the checkpoint. After about an hour, she returned and escorted me to the office of the border commandant. Despite a cordial conversation, I was unable to obtain detailed or up-to-date information regarding the situation at the Polish-Russian border since the full-scale escalation of the war in Ukraine. However, the officer strongly advised me against crossing into Russian territory, explaining that the Russian border guards "don't like people who come and ask questions." He further cautioned that my laptop and mobile phone were at risk of confiscation. "If you decide to go anyway," he advised, "leave everything on the Polish side and take only your passport, a piece of paper, and a pencil" [49]. He did permit me to take some photographs of the border crossing.

The small border village of Bezledy, with approximately 850 inhabitants, presents a desolate scene. Since the escalation of the war, all exchange offices and restaurants have shuttered their doors. Only a modest supermarket and a bakery remain open, catering to local residents. This "regional misery" [13] is markedly more visible here than along the Finnish-Russian border. The absence of Russian tourists has had a devastating economic impact on this region, one of the poorest in Poland. Many residents struggle to make ends meet, having been heavily dependent on trade and cross-border connections with Russia. Similar to the Finnish-Russian borderlands, economic resilience manifests in the phenomenon of refuelling [50]. Since petrol prices on the Russian side are significantly lower, many Poles arrange visas through travel agencies to cross the border and purchase gasoline. Those engaged in this activity maintain communication via a Facebook group.

Interestingly, the fears of Russia appear to be more pronounced in Warsaw than in the border region itself. Two women I spoke to outside their apartment blocks in Bezledy denied harbouring any fears. "Right after the war started, there were some fears, but now we've gotten used to the situation," remarked one of the older women [51]. In the village bakery, when asked about fear related to Russia and the possibility of war, a shop assistant responded resignedly: "Whatever will be, will be [52]." These everyday sentiments align with Studzińska's research findings, which note that "as time passed and the feeling of a real threat to Poland's security began to fade, residents of the Polish border area started feeling more at ease in their surroundings." Moreover, she found that Polish inhabitants tend to perceive Kaliningrad residents as more ours than foreign [35]. The people of Bezledy also demonstrate considerable trust in the Polish state,

government, and military. A young man I met in a parking lot expressed confidence: "With all our military preparations, they won't dare touch us. If they decide to attack, it will be in Warsaw or Poznań. They fear us. We have many strong reservists [53]."

These examples vividly illustrate the concept of "dynamic balance" as described by DeMarco in her seventh pillar of resilience. She characterizes this pillar as "finding stability amid chaos or change by saying 'I'm okay, come what may' [8]." This resilience is precisely what the inhabitants of the Polish-Russian border region have embodied since the onset of the war in Ukraine. Most have adapted, finding ways to accommodate the new realities and maintain a sense of equilibrium. DeMarco compares this phenomenon to the changing seasons and the inevitability that "all things must pass." The capacity for dynamic balance is central to fostering a resilient spirit in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

6. Purposeful Exclusion and New Invisible Emotive Lines: Ukrainian Inhabitants in the Region

After Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, Poland demonstrated a notable degree of solidarity, most visibly by hosting millions of Ukrainian families, predominantly women and children. This response surprised many Western EU member states and, in some cases, contributed to reshaping Poland's image as a difficult EU partner. However, as the war dragged on, scepticism and doubts also grew within Poland, particularly concerning the impact of Ukrainian grain exports on Polish agriculture, a sector with significant political weight [54]. Additionally, competition from Ukrainian truck drivers, who often work for lower wages, exacerbated tensions with their Polish counterparts.

This complex dynamic was palpable at the local level in Bezledy, where many inhabitants preferred to mentally distance themselves from the war and its surrounding circumstances, perhaps as a coping mechanism. One might question whether this denial and the taboo surrounding the conflict represent a form of social resilience or simply a manifestation of ignorance. Notably, some residents seemed to have forgotten – or chose to forget – which party is the aggressor in the conflict, with some even directing blame towards Ukrainians. In extreme cases, residents attributed responsibility for the war to "the Western world," a troubling indicator of how effectively Putin's propaganda has permeated beyond Russia's borders.

A small Art Centre and Library in Bezledy, which once hosted exhibitions featuring paintings by regional artists and welcomed Russian visitors from Kaliningrad as part of cross-border cultural cooperation, now stands quieter. Since the escalation of the war, Russian visitors have ceased to come. A staff member expressed frustration: "There are many Ukrainians everywhere instead. They get all the support. And what about our people?" When asked about the closure of the border after the war began, an older librarian replied candidly, "To be honest, I don't know why they closed the border. They could have left it open. This is not our war. Why should we intervene? [55]."

Conversations with local residents revealed a greater empathy towards local Russians than towards Ukrainian refugees. The dominant perception was that Ukrainians receive excessive support from the Polish state, while Russians are viewed not as citizens of an aggressive regime but as "poor people from the other side of the border" – people who are very much like themselves [56].

These observations contrasted sharply with the more politically aligned narratives expressed by local politicians in Bartoszyce, who emphasised border securitisation as a necessary measure to manifest solidarity with Ukraine and enhance Poland's security [57]. A notable divide emerged between the official rhetoric of politicians and educators, who largely supported securitisation, and the views of ordinary residents, many of whom criticised the border closure as detrimental to the local economy.

Some scholars argue that a shared, in-between identity exists in this border region, reflecting a higher degree of acceptance and mutual understanding between Polish and Russian inhabitants than is seen elsewhere in their respective countries [58, 59]. Yet, this does not imply a more positive perception of Russians or less prejudice in the border region. Rather, the local narrative frames Polish and Russian border residents as sharing a common fate, with Ukrainians perceived as outsiders who drain local resources. The collective self-understanding is that the border communities on both sides are "victims" of Russian aggression [60]. The sense that their situation is as bad as ours strengthens a we-identity [61] between Poles and Russians in this area, whereas the relationship with Ukrainians is marked by a more pronounced "us versus them" mentality. These perceptual and emotional boundaries [62] permeate daily life in subtle, often invisible ways, influencing attitudes among certain segments of the population.

7. Conclusions

Although short, the Polish-Russian border plays an important role, by not just being a border between the EU and a non-EU country, but also by Kaliningrad being a military base so close to the EU. For this reason, good relations were strategically important. After the delimitation of the new border, Poland was immediately aware that the relationship with the bigger Eastern neighbour had to be developed pragmatically in order to avoid any larger conflicts directly in the region. After the first period of a hermetical separation after WWII, the first attempts at rapprochement followed in the 1990s. The Polish-Russian agreement on local border traffic in 2012 culminated in bilateral cooperation in the border region. While the closure of the Polish-Russian border in March of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic was planned to be temporary, the separation after the outbreak of the escalated war against Ukraine may last for a very long time.

How did people, ordinary inhabitants of the Polish-Russian border region, behave in all of these different periods of the closed and open border? The observations mentioned above, do open up additional explanations regarding borderlanders' behaviours. The emotions and interpretations of what has happened in the region demonstrate a strong need for the people involved to explain their fate in accordance with the changes in their lives. This phenomenon is well-known as the overcoming of cognitive dissonance [81]. People try to feel better in their consensus-building by re-interpreting the facts they are aware of. Of course, this is not a phenomenon exclusively empirically observable among borderlanders. The question in dispute arises as to whether this is different from other explanations, such as resilience. Is it not true that human beings strive to survive in all circumstances, and that they aim to rely on their adaptable capabilities rather than the narrowly defined traits emphasised by some interpreters? Resilience can cause ignorance or insensitivity towards a cruel fate.

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A Safe Haven? Ukraine's Western Border Regions Since the Full-Scale Russian Invasion

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Abstract. Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, the border with the European Union has been vital for Ukraine's survival. Military support from Western partners, economic cooperation with the EU and the delivery of humanitarian aid are dependent on the EU-Ukrainian border. How do local communities in western Ukrainian border regions experience the new war-related challenges? Thanks to the geographic proximity to the EU and NATO as well as the distance from the frontline, they enjoy relative security. For this reason, they have become a "safe haven" for IDPs and relocated businesses from the east and south of the country. At the same time, cross-border mobility and mass labour migration to the EU – popular economic survival strategies – have been affected by martial law, which introduced restrictions on leaving the country for male Ukrainian citizens aged 18 to 60. Drawing on focus groups and interviews conducted in western Ukraine in 2023-2024, this paper addresses multiple local perspectives on the recent changes in the Ukraine-EU borderlands.

Keywords. Ukraine-EU border, western Ukrainian border regions, Russian military invasion

1. Introduction

Western regions of Ukraine bordering the European Union (Figure 1) have gained new strategic importance since Ukrainian territories in the east and south were invaded and occupied by Russia. Part of the hardly permeable external Soviet frontier before 1991, Ukraine's border with the EU now serves as a "gateway to Europe". With the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, it turned into a life-saving corridor for millions of Ukrainian citizens. Given that Russian air strikes have damaged much of the country's transport and logistics infrastructure, the Ukrainian airspace has been closed for civilian transportation, and commerce through the Black Sea ports has been significantly hampered, the railway and road systems connecting Ukraine to the EU have become crucial for the country's survival [1]. Due to their geographical proximity to the EU and NATO, Ukraine's western border regions enjoy relative security. For this reason, they

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have become a "safe haven" for IDPs, relocated businesses as well as academic and cultural institutions evacuated from the occupied and frontline regions of the country.

Figure 1. Western regions of Ukraine bordering the European Union
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The Ukrainian government has supported business relocation programmes and recently adopted the "Strategy for the development and construction of the border infrastructure with the EU countries and the Republic of Moldova until 2030" [2]. A strategic vision of the western border regions as a new economic stronghold of Ukraine is presented, for example, in the Policy Insight "Stimulating Growth in Ukraine and Policies for Migrants' Return". The document (also published on the website of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine) proposes "creating fortified economic clusters in the relatively safer regions of Western and Southwestern Ukraine, shielded by geographical distance and enhanced with modern air-defence systems. Investment in these clusters

will be secured through comprehensive war insurance policies and bolstered by reliable supplies of energy and raw materials, ensuring uninterrupted production. To attract capital to these areas, Ukraine can rely on a combination of domestic private investment and foreign direct investment (FDI) that has the European Union and other external markets as destinations for output [3]." Such ambitious plans, however, face a number of challenges. The military security situation varies significantly on the ground: While the Transcarpathia and Chernivtsi oblasts are relatively safe, the Lviv oblast is quite often targeted by Russian missiles. The Volyn oblast is endangered due to its proximity to Belarus, while Odesa as a frontline region suffers from Russian attacks. The economic potential and administrative capacities of the regional authorities also differ significantly: While Lviv is a de facto second capital of Ukraine, Uzhhorod and Chernivtsi are peripheral oblast centres. New security and economic challenges posed by the war overlap here with persisting pre-war problems: mass labour migration to the EU, underdeveloped infrastructure and consequences of post-Soviet de-industrialisation.

Moreover, the western border regions are the first to experience problems regarding Ukraine's relations with its EU neighbours, such as the economic blockade of the border by Polish farmers and transportation companies, memory wars with Poland or tensions over the rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia (and to a lesser extent, ethnic Romanians in the Chernivtsi oblast). Ukraine's western neighbours – Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania – represent a plethora of attitudes to Russia and to EU-Russian relations. Moreover, in the context of Russian aggression, Ukraine's western border, historically a product of great power deals and now an external NATO border, is also a site of geopolitical contestation. According to the Kremlin's discourse on Ukraine as an "artificial state", eastern Galicia, Transcarpathia and northern Bukovina as well as Volyn and southern Bessarabia are post-World War II "gifts from Stalin" to Ukraine and can be ceded back to its neighbours in the event of Ukraine's territorial disintegration. Populist and far-right forces in the neighbouring countries are receptive to Russian geopolitical narratives and instrumentalize the EU's support for Ukraine in their Eurosceptic political rhetoric. The cross-border impact of such populist discourses and politics should not be underestimated; it overlaps with domestic populism reinforced by the clash of local conservatism with the influx of IDPs from the east and south. The border with the EU is an important economic resource for the local population of western Ukrainian border regions, compensating for their peripheral location. But cross-border mobility and mass labour migration to the EU – both popular economic survival strategies – have been affected by martial law, which introduced restrictions on leaving the country for male Ukrainian citizens aged 18 to 60.

Ukraine's national resilience in the face of the Russian aggression [4] [5] depends not only on the country's military capacities, the functionality of the state apparatus and trust in public institutions, but also on the economic sustainability of the western Ukrainian "hinterland" and on the resilience of local communities facing multiple challenges and security threats. The local communities at Ukraine's border with the EU share many problems with the rest of the country (e.g. energy blackouts, labour shortage due to emigration and conscription into the army, new socially vulnerable groups such as displaced persons, disabled veterans or families of fallen soldiers). And yet, these near-border communities also enjoy comparative advantages and sometimes even benefit from their geographical location. How is the war changing the role, functions and border-crossing regime of Ukraine's border with the EU and how are these changes affecting local communities? What is the impact of the war on cross-border shuttle trade, labour migration and the educational choices of young Ukrainians? Do local communities profit

from the relocation of business, the influx of human resources, and ambitious transport and logistics infrastructure projects? This article addresses these questions, drawing on focus groups and individual interviews collected in the Volyn, Lviv, Transcarpathia, Chernivtsi and Odesa regions in 2023-2024 as part of the ZOiS/SCRIPTS project "The Liberal Script in Ukraine's Contested Border Regions" (2021–2024). With the support of the local Ukrainian sociological agency Socioinform, we conducted eight focus groups, 11 interviews with mayors of border towns and 25 interviews with entrepreneurs who had relocated their companies to western border regions. The article also draws on my fieldwork in the Lviv oblast shortly before the invasion (September 2021).

2. Demographic Shifts and Their Impact on Local Communities

The full-scale Russian invasion triggered a mass forced migration of Ukrainians to other parts of the country and abroad. The western Ukrainian border regions witnessed various aspects of this dramatic crisis: 1) the mass out-migration of a significant part of the local population to neighbouring EU countries, especially in the first days and weeks of the invasion; 2) the mass arrival of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the war zone and occupied territories; and 3) transit migration from the war zone and occupied territories to EU countries. In practice, internal displacement and transit migration often overlapped in the first months of the invasion, as many forced migrants on the move were not sure about their immediate plans: to stay and wait, to cross the border, or to go back home when the imminent threat had passed. From a location near the border in relatively safe western Ukraine, many of them waited for the situation to become clear, for an opportunity to cross the border into the EU, or to reunite with other family members. All the mayors of the near-border towns we interviewed mentioned the major humanitarian challenge presented by mass forced migration during the first months of the war. Chernivtsi's mayor estimated that up to 80 000 IDPs were staying in the city in May-June 2022, 50 000 of them officially registered (before the invasion, the local population of Chernivtsi was 264 000). According to the mayor of Kovel, in spring 2022 around 30 000 Ukrainians fleeing the war passed through the city (a number roughly equal to half of its pre-war population). Mostyska (Lviv oblast), a small town of 9 000 people close to the Polish border, hosted 2 000 IDPs at the peak of the migration crisis. The mass influx of IDPs and forced transit migrants presented local authorities with the huge challenge of organising accommodation, catering, childcare and transportation to the border. At the time of our research, the peak of the arrivals had long passed, and only a small share of the IDPs who had arrived in spring 2022 (an estimated 10–20%) had remained. But as discussed below, the integration of IDPs and their place in the local communities remain controversial.

As newcomers from other Ukrainian regions were arriving, a significant part of the local population left for EU countries during the first weeks of the invasion. The uncertainty of the military situation – Russian troops were near Kyiv and an invasion from the territory of Belarus seemed highly probable – prompted people to leave the country, at least temporarily. In doing so, they profited from transnational social networks, local knowledge and years of experience of frequent border crossing. In a region where cross-border trade and labour migration are popular economic strategies, the majority of population has biometric passports, while many possess a *Karta Polaka* (a document confirming the Polish ancestry of the holder), or hold Hungarian or Romanian citizenship in addition to their Ukrainian one. This additional social capital

made the decision to leave the country easier. In the panic of the first weeks of the invasion, men often sent their families across the border for safety reasons. By summer 2022, with the new school year approaching, many of these families returned to Ukraine. Being reunited with their loved ones in times of great uncertainly turned out to be an important incentive to stay in Ukraine:

> *First, women were leaving in droves, but now... either we became stronger, or we adapted, or our fear is dulled... There is a strong need to be with your family, to be with your men and support them.* (Sheptytskyi, female)

At the same time, many families that had already been planning to move abroad were forced to make a final decision. Men who had already been working in the EU fetched their wives and children so that the latter could continue school or study – not least due to the blackouts and air raid alerts disrupting education at home [6]. While reliable statistics are not available, many focus group participants pointed to certain categories of the population which were more prone to leave (and stay abroad): young people, families with children and single mothers. Some families travel back and forth so as not to lose their social benefits in the EU countries. Quite a few members of local communities moved permanently to more distant countries such as the USA and Canada. While cases of people who had chosen to return to Ukraine for patriotic reasons (to join the army, to help as volunteers and to be together with their compatriots in difficult times) were often mentioned by focus group participants, with the war turning into a protracted conflict, a growing number of men are using semi-legal and illegal opportunities to leave the country (more on this in the next section).

The lack of a (male) labour force, especially qualified workers, is felt in western Ukraine as it is in the rest of the country due to 1) mass conscription into the Ukrainian army; 2) a preference for non-official employment as one strategy to avoid conscription; and 3) the above-mentioned departure of male Ukrainian citizens aged 18 to 60 using semi-legal and illegal means to cross the border. The effects of war and mobilisation exacerbate a traditional deficit of qualified labour in the western border areas before 2022 (due to cross-border labour migration). Both local mayors and representatives of relocated businesses pointed to the shortage of male workers as a serious impediment to economic development. Employing men over 60 and women is one popular yet not very satisfactory solution to the problem. In 2023, the Ukrainian government introduced a mechanism whereby employees liable for military service are temporarily exempt from conscription, but this only applies to companies that are "critically important" for the economy, the defence sector or the sustainability of a local community.

3. Crossing the EU Border under Martial Law

Even before the 2022 invasion, the Covid pandemic dealt a considerable blow to small cross-border trade. Since markets and shops in the border regions are dependent on supplies from across the border, local trade was significantly affected by the lockdowns, and the closure of the border disrupted supply chains. No wonder that some communities (e.g. Sambir in the Lviv oblast) saw mass protests against the Covid restrictions in 2020. In February 2022, the remaining Covid-related restrictions were lifted, and EU countries opened their borders for Ukrainian war refugees. At the same time, the martial law introduced by the government in Kyiv banned male Ukrainian citizens aged 18 to 60

from leaving the country. This ban has become a major disruptive factor for the local population, whose economic strategies have been traditionally dependent on crossing the EU border for seasonal jobs, small shuttle trade and regular shopping tours to neighbouring countries. In a society where traditional gender roles dictate that men should be breadwinners and women homemakers, women are now forced to take on tasks previously performed by men. In many cases, women have replaced men as drivers and shuttle traders:

> *My neighbour used to bring second-hand bicycles [from Poland – TZ]. Now his wife does it. First, she was afraid. But then they adapted somehow. They need to provide for the family, and this is their only source of income.* (Sheptytskyi, male)

Only some categories of men – persons with disabilities, those over 60 and fathers of more than two children – can cross the border without restrictions. For those who do not belong to these categories, permission to cross the border can sometimes be obtained based on uncertain and changing regulations. Such one-off permissions can, for example, be given to academics, sportsmen, artists and journalists who wish to participate in international events. More relevant for our case study, male drivers aged 18 to 60 can cross the border if they have obtained official permission from the *Shliakh* (Route) electronic system, which was created by the Ukrainian government before the invasion to simplify cargo traffic across the border. In March 2022, the system was adapted to manage permissions for male drivers to cross the border. International transportation companies apply for permissions for their drivers, but initially local NGOs and healthcare institutions could do the same for volunteers carrying humanitarian aid, medical equipment and supplies for the army. This regulation was of crucial importance, especially during the early phase of the Russian invasion, when the contribution of volunteers not bound by bureaucratic procedures helped to meet the most urgent needs. In practice, such permissions for volunteers often allowed them to combine official voluntary activities with some private cross-border trade and the transportation of goods for commercial purposes. Considering the intensity of the cross-border ties on both economic and societal levels, it is not surprising that the western Ukrainian border regions are leading in terms of the number of permissions issued via the *Shliakh* system. Some focus group participants hinted at the possibility of "buying" permissions for volunteers as a widespread strategy to get around the border-crossing restrictions for men.

> *Those who need to cross regularly have adapted. People are inventive and find ways. Loopholes in the border have long existed before, and they always will.* (Chernivtsi, male)

With the pressure of mobilisation rising, the volunteer permission became a highly desirable one-way ticket for those looking for a chance to leave the country and avoid conscription. An investigation by Ukrainian journalists in January 2024 found that in the Volyn oblast alone almost 900 men may have illegally fled Ukraine to avoid conscription with the assistance of local NGOs backed by regional officials [7]. Another investigation named 2 248 men who left the country using permissions obtained via *Shliakh* in the Lviv oblast and never returned [8]. According to a Ukrainian MP, as of June 2023 nearly 19 000 men had fled Ukraine by exploiting the *Shliakh* system [9]. In spring 2024, the government tightened the requirements for obtaining a volunteer permission and made NGOs and transportation companies applying for permissions subject to stricter controls.

Since February 2025, it is no longer possible to obtain the "volunteer permission" for crossing the border via the *Shliakh* system.

Misusing *Shliakh* is not the only way to leave the country for Ukrainian males aged 18 to 60. Other loopholes include fake illness or disability, fake marriage or child adoption, and last but not least, illegal border crossing (by bypassing official checkpoints). BBC journalists have established – by requesting data on illegal border crossings from Romania, Moldova, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia – that 19,740 Ukrainian men illegally crossed into these countries between February 2022 and 31 August 2023. Another 21,113 men attempted to do the same but were caught by Ukrainian border guards [10]. In addition to the age-old business of contraband, human trafficking of draft dodgers has become a highly profitable criminal activity which draws on local networks and the specific knowledge of near-border residents and encourages corruption on the regional level.

4. Labour Migration and Educational Tourism during the Full-scale War

Cross-border labour migration remains popular among residents of the western Ukrainian border regions, but the war has affected the traditional patterns in many ways. First, restrictions on crossing the border related to martial law (discussed above) rule out labour migration abroad for the majority of men aged 18 to 60 (and privilege women, retired and disabled men, and fathers with more than two children). Second, the influx of Ukrainians from other regions seeking refuge in the EU has increased the competition on the labour markets of neighbouring countries. This concerns Poland in particular, a traditional destination for Ukrainian labour migration, which since February 2022 has hosted over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees. Even prior to the full-scale Russian invasion, the EU-Ukraine visa-free agreement which came into force in summer 2017 allowed Ukrainians with biometric passports to stay in the EU for 90 days per year. In practice, that made short-term employment contracts possible without a working permit. While labour migration was already routine for the residents of border regions, the visa-free agreement opened the EU labour market to Ukrainians from other regions too. Moreover, the mass influx of Ukrainians after February 2022 made it more difficult to find accommodation and drove rents up. Many focus group participants also complained about less jobs being available and rising living costs in neighbouring EU countries (ascribing the worsening economic situation to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war).

These developments have made traditional cross-border labour migration and seasonal jobs less attractive for the residents of the Ukrainian border regions. The wages in Romania and Hungary are considered too low, while in Poland and the Czech Republic the labour market is saturated with Ukrainian refugees. Under these circumstances, new destinations for labour migration beyond the immediate neighbourhood have become popular: France, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Great Britain and Israel. New job opportunities are focused first of all on women as a potentially more mobile social group, not affected by the martial law restrictions. For many women, however, these new job opportunities do not compensate for the forced immobility of their men:

> *I very much wish that the border was finally open for all men, so that they could earn money, to feed [their families - TZ], to live a normal life as we did before. Because when a woman goes alone to earn money, the family suffers. It also suffers financially.* (Chernivtsi, female)

Another consequence of martial law is the changing visiting pattern of male labour migration: While before the invasion men working abroad visited their families in Ukraine on a regular basis, now male labour migrants who managed to leave the country prefer to stay outside its borders, while their wives (and children) visit them regularly (e.g. over weekends). Apart from the economic implications (less money earned by Ukrainian migrants is spent in Ukraine), this situation often prompts families divided by the border to reunite outside Ukraine and puts additional responsibility and the emotional work of sustaining the relationship on women's shoulders.

The full-scale war with Russia has also affected the university education choices of young Ukrainians: The option of studying abroad has become even more attractive. Outbound student mobility was already significant before the 2022 invasion: From some 25 000 in 2007, the number of Ukrainians studying abroad rose to around 78 000 in 2019. Of this number, 60% were attending various higher education institutions across the EU [11]. In 2019, Poland was top of the list of receiving countries by a wide margin (27 000), followed by Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. My fieldwork in the Lviv oblast on the eve of the Russian invasion (autumn 2021) confirmed that studying in Poland was a popular option, especially among residents of western Ukraine, not least due to their language competence. Many local Ukrainians possess a *Karta Polaka*, a document that gives its holders access to the Polish labour market and social welfare but also to the education system. Yet Polish universities, attractive first and foremost for those who planned a career outside the country, had to compete with Ukrainian ones, especially in Lviv and Kyiv. Most families preferred their children, especially undergraduates, to study not too far from home.

The war has perpetuated some of these trends but also set new ones. More than three years into the full-scale invasion, the uncertainty of Ukraine's future, security concerns, and the pressing issue of conscription for young men drive Ukrainians to study abroad, first and foremost in EU countries. With around 700 000 Ukrainian war refugee children enrolled in state schools across the EU, this trend is likely to continue in the near future. Studying abroad is an option also considered by many families who stay in Ukraine – particularly in the western border regions. For security reasons Lviv's universities, close to home and at a safe distance from the frontline, are often preferred to Kyiv's. But even Lviv is not spared by Russian missiles, and air-raid alarms can interrupt lectures everywhere across Ukraine. For those families who prefer more security for their children, but want to have them in relative proximity, the neighbouring EU countries have become increasingly attractive. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia remain popular destinations for educational tourism, not least due to the language proximity and still affordable living costs. Even small and provincial universities in these countries have experienced an influx of Ukrainian students. Hungary is less attractive due to the language barrier. Understandably, it is the main destination for ethnic Hungarians from Transcarpathia, but the Hungarian-language schools in this region have also been attracting growing numbers of pupils with an ethnic Ukrainian or mixed background, providing them with a chance to study in Hungary after graduation. Romania remains the least popular option for Ukrainian students (except for the border areas of the Odesa oblast).

5. Border and Logistics Infrastructure as a Resource for Local Communities

Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union a heavily securitised and militarised western border which did not facilitate the cross-border mobility of people and goods. With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the liberalisation of the border regime, Ukraine faced the task of modernising and developing its border, transport and logistics infrastructure: crossing points, roads, railways, cargo terminals, etc. While for new EU member states, funding from Brussels was available for such projects, Ukraine's western border regions often had to contend with financial problems and the disinterest of the Kyiv government. Since 2014, Ukraine's political and economic re-orientation away from Russia and towards the EU (including the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement) has made the development of the logistics and transport infrastructure at its western border even more urgent. Some projects started even before 2022. Under a 2015 Polish-Ukrainian agreement, the Polish government provided a loan which allowed Polish companies to modernize checkpoints and roads infrastructure at the Ukrainian-Polish border (construction work on the Ukrainian side of the border only started in 2021 due to some bureaucratic obstacles). As part of the Great Construction Programme [*Velyke Budivnytstvo*] initiated by President Zelenskyi in 2020, 14 000 km of roads and 350 bridges were built, with special attention given to the western border regions.

The full-scale Russian invasion brought these plans to a new level. Transport corridors across the EU border now have to compensate for the interruption of commerce via the Black Sea ports, facilitate growing Ukrainian exports to the EU, and channel military supplies and humanitarian assistance into the country. They are also supposed to streamline the greatly increased flow of passengers as millions of Ukrainians currently staying in the EU frequently travel across the border. Since Ukraine closed its entire airspace to all civilian traffic, Ukrainians have been flying to European and other destinations from airports close to the border: Lublin and Rzeszow (Poland), Debrecen (Hungary), Kosice (Slovakia), Chisinau (Moldova) and Suceava (Romania). The EU is investing in upgrading Ukraine's border infrastructure to facilitate transportation and trade with the member states, focusing particularly on rail and road connections. This encompasses projects to modernize intermodal terminals, upgrade railway tracks, and improve border crossing points, many of them part of the EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes initiative [12].

What are the benefits and drawbacks of such projects for local communities in the Ukrainian border regions? From the interviews with mayors and the focus groups one can conclude that the view from below is overwhelmingly positive: The new infrastructure projects are expected to inject money into the local economy (from taxes and leasing land adjacent to the railway and the roads). And they provide jobs, which is particularly important for the nearby small towns and villages. Possible negative effects (such as increased traffic volume, pollution and long tailbacks of cargo vehicles, especially trucks, waiting to cross the border) [13] are taken into account, but they are seen to be outweighed by the potential benefits. Moreover, the recent introduction of electronic waiting lines for trucks has helped to solve the problem of queues at the border.

Crossing points are a good example. Statistical data collected before 2022 in the Lviv oblast testify to the significance of the border with Poland in the life of local residents: 53% of those crossing the border were residents of the 50-km border zone and another 20% were residents of the oblast beyond the 50-km border zone [14]. The situation was similar at other sections of the border with the EU. As frequent border crossers, local residents certainly profit from the proximity of a crossing point; and the availability of

more than one point gives people more flexibility for planning their routes. But this is not the only reason why the construction of new border crossing points is enthusiastically welcomed. For small towns and villages, the opening of a new crossing point holds the promise of boosting cross-border trade, creating jobs, or even attracting tourists. Creating new opportunities for local residents, a crossing point benefits the local community. During my fieldwork in the Lviv oblast in 2021, a local journalist in Sambir, who had for years lobbied for the opening of a new crossing point in nearby Nyzhankovychy, argued:

> *If you take, for example, Khyriv, there is the international crossing point Smilnytsia nearby. Khyriv used to be grey and dirty. Since Smilnytsia was opened, this is already 15 years ago, the town has revived. Why? People started to go to Poland to buy cheap sausages, to earn money there, to invest it here, local business started to flourish. Today, wherever there is an international crossing point, people are getting richer. Whether we like it or not, this is a fact.* (Sambir, male).

These arguments are echoed in an interview conducted in 2023 with the vice-mayor of Shatsk (Volyn oblast), a small town in the Ukrainian-Polish-Belarusian borderlands. For years, Shatsk has been hoping for a new crossing point at the Polish border in the nearby village of Adamchuky. Since 2010, the tradition of the "good neighbourhood days" has been celebrated in Adamchuky, when Ukrainian and Polish border guards build a floating bridge across the river Buh, thus opening the border for local residents on both sides. A permanent crossing point could be the next step. In spring 2023, when President Zelenskyi visited the region to inspect fortifications at the border with Belarus, the project of a crossing point in Adamchuky was presented and received a positive response. Shatsk used to be an attractive destination for both domestic and cross-border tourism: The town is located in the midst of a national park and the local lakes are a popular amenity. Locals hope that the proposed new crossing point will boost international tourism after the end of the war.

Similar hopes are pinned to the programme to upgrade the railway tracks according to European standards. For historical reasons, Ukraine uses the 1 520 mm railway gauge, while – with the exception of Moldova – its western neighbours use the narrower 1 435 mm European gauge. When crossing the border, trains must therefore adjust the width of the axle between their wheels – a complicated and time-consuming procedure. The extension of the standard European railroad into Ukraine is a long overdue project, and the government's ambition is to connect the western Ukrainian regional centres – Lviv, Uzhhorod and Chernivtsi – with the European railroad system [15]. So far, small sections of the Ukrainian railroad (e.g. from the border to Rava Ruska, Lviv oblast) have been adjusted by reconstructing formerly existing but abandoned lines. The construction of a European railway track from Chop to Uzhhorod has recently started, promising to make the latter a passenger transport hub directly connected to some popular European destinations. It's not only local residents that benefit from the extension of the European railroad system to Ukraine as potential passengers; the project also boosts local business serving transit passengers (hotels, the food service industry, etc.) and could in future facilitate international tourism. The mayor of Rava Ruska called the reconstruction of the European railway track from his town to the Polish border one of the few positive developments since February 2022 and considers it his major personal achievement. While such plans were discussed long before 2022, it was only shortly after the invasion

that work started, and the railroad bed was already completed by summer 2022. The first train from Warsaw arrived in Rava Ruska on 15 October 2023.

The city administration and business circles in Kovel (Volyn oblast) have similar plans. Here, it is hoped that the abandoned narrow railroad track connecting Kovel with Chełm in Poland can be reactivated. During the Cold War, it had a mainly military-strategic function and was used by Soviet troops stationed in Poland and East Germany. After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, a local narrow-gauge train was popular among shuttle traders, but eventually the route was shut down. The restoration of this line would make Kovel a transport hub at the northern section of the Polish-Ukrainian border. Some companies relocated to Kovel from the east have also shown interest in the project.

6. Relocated Business

Already during the first weeks of the invasion, many firms from the occupied and frontline territories had to take the difficult decision to relocate their facilities to other regions of Ukraine. The western Ukrainian border regions emerged as a particularly attractive option given their relative security and their proximity to the EU border and its logistics infrastructure – an important advantage for companies reorienting their activities to the European market. The Lviv oblast and Transcarpathia top the list of the receiving regions. At the end of 2023, they accommodated 199 and 120 relocated companies, respectively (of a total of 840). The Chernivtsi oblast, the smallest in Ukraine, accepted 78 relocated enterprises [16].

In 2024, we interviewed 25 representatives of such relocated companies in the western border regions. Their stories testify to a remarkable resilience (for some, it was the second major relocation after 2014, when they were forced to leave occupied Crimea or Donbas). Many companies managed not only to relocate their production facilities but also brought their employees and helped their families to resettle. They quickly adapted to the new environment, found new clients and expanded their activities. Others have moved physically but are still in the process of changing their official registration; they left their offices and some of their facilities in the frontline regions, hoping that they would return. Finally, some companies (e.g. those which relocated from the Kyiv oblast in the first months of invasion) have meanwhile returned.

The Ukrainian government can be credited with some timely decisions. Already in March 2022, the Ministry of Economy launched a programme supporting the relocation of enterprises from frontline regions, and many of our interviewees emphasised the importance of the help it offered, including free transportation of equipment, raw materials and finished products by Ukrposhta, the national postal service, and Ukrainian Railways. Small companies with up to 12 employees were entitled to one-time financial assistance. The oblast administrations of the receiving regions helped firms to find new locations for their facilities, assisted with the resettlement of the relocated employees and the search for new workers, and supported displaced businesses in restoring logistics and finding new markets. The Lviv oblast – living up to its traditional image as a motor of European integration attractive for international and domestic investors – has been particularly proactive in creating incentives for incoming companies. With the support of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and other international donors, special support programmes, trainings and small grants have been offered for relocated entrepreneurs [17]. Most interviewees admitted that the war and the relocation, although

a huge challenge for their business, pushed them to develop in new directions, modernize and become more competitive.

The local communities in the border regions were pro-active about attracting relocated businesses that would bring money to their localities and create new jobs. Even small towns developed information materials and websites advertising themselves as ideal destinations for potential newcomers and offering free plots. However, most of the mayors we interviewed were rather frustrated with the results of these efforts. Firms ended up losing interest when a suitable premises failed to materialize and were also turned off by underdeveloped infrastructure (e.g. gas supply and sewage system). Some territories close to the border turned out to be unsuitable locations for business because of the securitisation of border areas. In Volyn, the proximity to Belarus emerged as a serious security concern.

Like Ukrainian business in general, relocated entrepreneurs complain about the tax and administrative pressure exerted by the state, as well as a lack of stability and planning security. The lack of stability is of course due to the ongoing war with Russia, but not only that. Those companies which had already managed to establish business ties with partners in EU countries were hit by the blockade of the Polish border. Moreover, the lack of a qualified labour force due to mobilisation, exacerbated in the border regions by mass cross-border migration, has been a serious challenge for displaced companies, especially those that could not bring their own employees or wanted to expand. Here, the entrepreneurs from the east and south of the country were confronted with a paradox: While residents of western Ukraine often complain about a lack of jobs which pushes them to earn money abroad, the vacancies there are often remain unfilled. As one local social worker noted in an interview back in 2021:

> *Here, near the border, people earn money in other ways. […] Some time ago we did a survey, and we found out that the lack of jobs is not a problem. The problem is low wages. You know: "I will not work for this money; I cannot live on it. I want to get rich fast." This is what the proximity to the border does.* (Sambir, female)

As some interviewees explain, the challenge of the labour force deficit prompted them to modernize and automatize the production process. Entrepreneurs relocated from the east often point to the different mentality and work culture of the "westerners": They prioritize family over their job and observe numerous religious holidays. Similarly, the pace of doing business, making decisions and solving bureaucratic issues in the west is perceived by easterners as quite slow – even if some confess that they have come to appreciate this more relaxed way of life. The "European" western Ukraine is often juxtaposed with the "American" eastern Ukraine, rushing to make money at any cost. These differences in economic culture and mentality can complicate the displaced firms' integration into local networks. One interviewed female entrepreneur from a quite secular context in eastern Ukraine was surprised by the frequent question about her church membership. But most of the entrepreneurs are pragmatic:

> *I think people here in the west have the right to consider us easterners. We are indeed different. They are not supposed to like us; we all have the right to be what we are. We give people jobs, but they are not obliged to love us for this. We are easterners for them. They have started to respect us, but not more. Maybe it is even not necessary.* (Melitopol – Lviv, female).

7. The Unevenly Spread Benefits of a Favourable Geography

As we have seen, despite all the shocks and challenges of the full-scale war with Russia, western Ukrainian border regions enjoy some advantages over other parts of the country: relative security due to the distance from the frontline, proximity to the EU border and good transport connections with Europe, and the mass arrival of relocated businesses, a qualified labour force and specialists from the east. Yet the benefits stemming from this geographic location are perceived as ambivalent and distributed unevenly among local communities. For example, the social consequences of the demographic shifts addressed at the beginning of this article differ in urban centres, small towns and the countryside. Mayors of small towns (e.g. Mostyska in the Lviv oblast and Volodymyr in Volyn) are worried that some local schools will be closed and teachers' jobs cut due to the mass cross-border migration of families with children, while residents of big cities – Lviv, Chernivtsi and Uzhhorod – complain about overcrowded schools and kindergartens as a result of the influx of newcomers. In general, the arrival of IDPs from the east and south is welcomed in the big urban centres, which can easily absorb them (this does not exclude cases of moral panic unleashed by the mass influx of Russian speakers who allegedly pose a threat to Ukrainian identity). In smaller locations, tensions between locals and newcomers can be stronger, as cultural differences overlap with social ones when western Ukrainians from rural areas meet eastern Ukrainian city dwellers. The residents of big cities tend to benefit more from the new businesses, services, and job offers; relocated business invigorates the local economy, contributes to local revenues and makes the urban space more attractive. This economic boom is more visible in comparatively provincial Uzhhorod and Chernivtsi than in Lviv, the de facto second Ukrainian capital. But it also has a flip side: problems with growing traffic and lack of parking space, overstretched social infrastructure, uncontrolled building expansion, and rocketing real estate prices. In Transcarpathia, the industrial projects of relocated businesses have angered local environmental activists and others keen to protect the local culture and way of life. Regional differences in culture, mentality and language are often instrumentalised to frame these economic and social tensions.

Shatsk, the aforementioned small town in the north-western corner of the Volyn oblast (17 km from the Polish border and 11 km from Belarus) is a good example of how the war exacerbates negative trends, which the benefits of a near-border location do not counterbalance. When the border with Belarus was closed as a result of the Russian invasion, the small cross-border movement which had been an additional source of income for many local families was interrupted. But paradoxically, Poland became less accessible too. The nearest crossing point, Yahotyn, frequently used by locals before the war, was closed for private cars and reserved for trucks due to the dramatic increase in traffic. As a result, locals now have to make a detour of 100 km to cross the Polish border. Tourism used to be another source of income for Shatsk residents – the area is famous for its lakes and has the status of a national park. But both foreign and Ukrainian tourism had already declined before the invasion due to the Covid pandemic, and the war finished it off. Relocated businesses, contrary to initial expectations, did not come here, partly due to the lack of infrastructure, but also due to the restrictions that apply in this border location and security threats from Belarus. Some arable land was lost because of the construction of military fortifications along the border with Belarus. For this reason, the few agricultural companies which had shown an interest before the invasion looked elsewhere. The securitisation of the border with Belarus also entails restrictions on movements of local residents in the near-border zone. Those who earn some extra money

for the family budget by collecting mushrooms and berries in the woods now need special permissions issued by border guards. Local agriculture is also adversely affected by the shortage of labour typical of the border regions. Moreover, locals are convinced that rural residents are hit harder by the mobilisation – one of the perceived injustices of the ongoing war. The IDPs – mainly city dwellers from Kyiv and eastern Ukrainian cities – have not compensated for the labour shortage. They arrived in the first weeks of the invasion and were accommodated in local tourist facilities, but most of them have either returned home or moved to big towns. Only a few found suitable jobs and integrated into the local community.

8. Conclusions

Over the last three decades, the western border regions of Ukraine have made a transition from a Soviet periphery locked in by the Cold War border to the country's "gateway to Europe". After 2014, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's hybrid war in Donbas, on the one hand, and the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, on the other, had a significant impact on local dynamics in Ukraine's western border regions. The EU-Ukraine visa-free agreement facilitated cross-border movement, small trade and short-term labour migration; educational tourism to EU countries became more popular; and plans to upgrade the border and transport infrastructure raised hopes for a boost to the local economy. The full-scale Russian invasion elevated the strategic importance of the western border regions and accelerated some of these developments. At the same time, the mass conscription into the Ukrainian Army and the demographic consequences of out-migration have undermined economic development, while martial law restrictions hamper cross-border movement. With the full-scale war raging in the east of Ukraine, the western border regions have become an attractive destination for displaced persons, businesses and institutions. Apart from security benefits, the proximity to the EU border is a draw for private companies re-orienting their activities to the European market and for resettlers from the east who envision their children's future in the EU.

This article approaches the above-mentioned developments in the western border regions "from below" by analysing the sometimes diverging perspectives of local elites, ordinary citizens and representatives of relocated business. Three years into the full-scale war, local communities, empowered by the post-Euromaidan decentralisation reform, demonstrate a remarkable resilience. Due to their proximity to the EU border, they can benefit from multiple horizontal ties with partners in neighbouring countries and from their experience of cross-border cooperation and participation in international projects. Cross-border social networks and transnational family relationships have helped the local population to adapt to the new challenges. The arrival of businesses and qualified specialists from the east boosts the local economy. But the border, a traditional economic resource for the local population which now offers additional security benefits, can also pose potential risks to local communities. The semi-legal and illegal border crossing to circumvent martial law restrictions encourages corruption, the mass out-migration adversely affects the labour market, and the integration of IDPs often causes tensions. Far-right populism in neighbouring EU countries, which instrumentalises the anxieties of their populations regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war and Ukraine's plans to join the EU, can reanimate hostilities rooted in the past. Depending on the future dynamics of the EU-Ukraine relationship, the traditional pro-European orientation of the local population in the western border regions might one day turn into Euroscepticism.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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The Transnistrian Separatism in the Republic of Moldova: Russian (Geo)Political and Military Implications

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Abstract. This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of Transnistrian separatism in the Republic of Moldova through the lens of longue durée history, uncovering the deep-rooted geopolitical and military dimensions of Russia's enduring presence in the region. It argues that the emergence and persistence of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (PMR) are not merely the result of post-Soviet fragmentation but are rooted in a historical continuum of Russian and Soviet territorial expansionism. From the annexation of Bessarabia in 1812 and 1940 to the outbreak of armed conflict in 1992, the Transnistrian question reflects long-standing patterns of imperial ambition, geopolitical buffer-zone logic, and strategic military positioning that continue into the present. Drawing on extensive research across Eastern Europe and prompted by the ongoing war in Ukraine, this chapter highlights the role of Russian hybrid warfare and coercive diplomacy in sustaining separatist enclaves as instruments of regional destabilisation. It concludes by outlining three potential future scenarios for Moldova: the continuation of the status quo, a Ukrainian victory, or a Russian military success. Each scenario carries significant implications for Moldova's sovereignty, security, and integration into European and transatlantic structures. The unresolved status of Transnistria remains a key indicator of both Russia's regional strategy and Moldova's resilience.

Keywords. Russia, Romania, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Bessarabia, Transnistria

1. Introduction

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are not historical anomalies, but episodes in a persistent pattern of Russian geopolitical assertion in Eastern Europe. This region has long functioned as a contested borderland, shaped by imperial ambitions and competing spheres of influence. Russia's westward expansion began in earnest in the late 18th century, reaching the Dniester River in 1792 and the Prut River in 1812. Although Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856) temporarily halted this advance and limited its access to the Balkans and the Danube Delta, it

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regained momentum in 1877–1878 through renewed war against the Ottoman Empire, securing strategic positions along the Black Sea and reinforcing its self-proclaimed role as protector of Slavic peoples in the Balkans.

The collapse of the Russian Empire following World War I led to significant territorial losses, Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and Bessarabia broke away, while Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus briefly moved toward independence. Yet Soviet Russia rapidly began reversing many of these outcomes. Between 1918 and 1939, the Soviet Union methodically worked to reclaim lost territories through military and diplomatic means, culminating in the forced incorporation of the Baltic states, eastern Poland, and Romanian Bessarabia at the start of World War II. These acts laid the groundwork for the Soviet postwar sphere of influence, an imperial structure reborn under ideological terms but animated by enduring geopolitical logic.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 disrupted this logic, at least temporarily. The Russian Federation entered a period of internal fragmentation, economic hardship, and contested identity. Its relations with the newly independent post-Soviet states, the so-called near abroad, were uncertain and volatile. Yet even during this time of relative geopolitical retreat, Russia began laying the groundwork for strategic resurgence. The deployment of hybrid warfare renewed military assertiveness, and increasingly aggressive postures toward neighbours reflect a long-term strategy of imperial revival. These actions are driven by a logic of geopolitical revanche, aimed at undermining the post-Cold War liberal international order.

Framing its interventions as both a defence of sovereignty and a restoration of historical entitlements, Putin's Russia has steadily rebuilt its power projection capabilities. The invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale war launched in 2022, reflect a calculated attempt to reassert control over former Soviet territories. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine illustrate how Russia combines historical grievance with modern hybrid tactics to reimpose influence over contested borderlands [2]. The war in Ukraine, and the immense suffering it has inflicted, should thus be understood not as a break with the past, but as a continuation of long-standing strategies of territorial assertion through annexation, destabilisation, and coercion. These strategies resonate deeply with earlier regional traumas, including the Romanian experiences of 1940 and 1990–1992, when Moscow exploited internal and international crises to expand or maintain its hold over bordering regions.

The establishment of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) on August 2, 1940, followed the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia from Romania under the auspices of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Five decades later, as the Soviet Union began to unravel, a new separatist entity, the self-declared "Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic" (PMR), emerged on September 2, 1990, during yet another moment of geopolitical dislocation. As the legal successor to the MSSR, the Republic of Moldova inherited a complex and contested legacy. This legacy was shaped by the earlier merger of the MSSR with the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), which had been established in 1924 within Soviet Ukraine. In Romanian historical memory, these entities are remembered as Basarabia and Transnistria; in Russian, they are known as Bessarabia and Pridnestrovie [*Приднестровье*].

This chapter critically examines the roots and persistence of Transnistrian separatism in Moldova through the lens of *long history* – tracing how enduring geopolitical structures and imperial strategies continue to shape present-day vulnerabilities. It draws on nearly two decades of research conducted by the author in academic and policy institutions across Moldova, Romania, the United States, France,

Italy, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Russia. This study was prompted by the escalation of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which renewed regional and European concern over Moldova's precarious geopolitical position, particularly the threat of Russian military action across the Dniester River. As fears have grown that Moldova could be drawn into the conflict, so too has interest in the region's political, economic, and energy dynamics, as well as the deeper historical roots of the Transnistrian conflict and the 1992 war with Russia.

2. The Historical Premises of Transnistrian Separatism

Russian policies have long been intensely focused on the Empire's borders and its "near neighbourhood" [2,3], a space with multiple historical meanings for Russia, not only correlated with strategic reasoning but also closely linked to civilisation. Two aspects of Russian history have determined this perception, which makes the imposition of borders on the "Russian world" impermanent and unnatural for Russians. The first aspect relates to the historical legacies of the political formation of the Russian territory: the period of Kievan Rus cemented the idea of the unity of the Slavic nucleus, made up of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians; Mongol Russia resulted in a mix with the Tatar-Mongols, which developed the instinct and ability to possess vast spaces, specific to the successors of Genghis Khan; Muscovite Russia generated the unity of the Grand Russians, achieved both through the voluntary union of the Russian principalities and their forced inclusion within the "Russian nucleus"; the era of Imperial Russia gave the Russians a European dimension but also ambitions to be an important player in the politics of the old continent; the Soviet period raised the Russians to the heights of influence, offering the possibility of a global perspective on politics, with extensive possessions from Berlin to the Pacific Ocean and the possibility of exerting influence on every part of the world.

The second aspect of this obsessive perception is rooted in the historical formation of Russia's borders, shaped by four key processes and tendencies. The first is internal colonisation, as described by historians S. Soloviev and V. Kliuchevsky, who viewed Russian history as "history of permanent colonisation," first within its own territories and later beyond them [4]. The second is the "gathering of Russian lands," a process begun by Muscovite Russia under Ivan Kalita, which led to the unification of the Russian state and laid the groundwork for future expansion. The third tendency is the consistent drive for territorial expansion to secure the state, continuing until Russia reached what were perceived as "natural" geographic or maritime (often riverine) boundaries. Finally, the fourth strategy was imperial in nature, driven by a messianic ideology and the notion of Russia's "special path" – whether in the Tsarist triad of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and the People, or in the Soviet formula of Communism, the Party, and Soviet power. N. Berdyaev captured this enduring trait of the Russian character when he noted that "the messianic idea penetrates the entire history of Russia, including the communist one [5]."

In this amalgam of periods, processes, and tendencies, the old and newly acquired territories merged into a distinct vital space – an organic unity often referred to as the "Russian nucleus" or *oikoumene* – organic, though not harmonious [6]. Building on this complex legacy, Putin's Russia has sought to reconcile these contradictory inheritances, forging a confused yet compelling ideological symbiosis of tsarism, imperialism, Marxism, and Orthodoxy. This blend continues to shape both the Russian imagination and its conduct abroad.

The Russian Empire was a continental imperial construct that, unlike classical maritime empires – such as the Spanish, Portuguese, British, or French – formed an integrated, uninterrupted landmass. This continuity initially obscured the distinction between metropolis and colony. However, in practice, parts of the empire bore clear metropolitan characteristics, while others functioned more like traditional colonies. Some regions occupied an ambiguous, intermediate status – both colony and core – such as Siberia or Ukraine. Hosking [7] aptly captured this hybrid nature, describing the Russian Empire as suspended between an Asian imperial model and a European great power. Such hybrid states often adopt techniques and institutions from more advanced neighbours, adapting them to their own, often more rudimentary and coercive social structures in pursuit of domination.

The Russian Empire was fundamentally a military state, with economic and fiscal policies focused on sustaining its armed forces and administration. This hindered the effective mobilisation of the empire's economic potential, population, and resources. For its leaders, the empire's survival and territorial integrity took precedence over national, religious, economic, or cultural concerns. This was reinforced by a strong imperial identity rooted in pride over the empire's vast size and a history of military victories.

3. Tradition and Continuity in Russian Expansionism

It is no coincidence that, during the invasion of Ukraine, President Putin publicly asserted that Russia is not occupying foreign lands but merely "returning and strengthening" its historical territories. To justify this claim, he invoked Peter the Great, who fought a 21-year war against Sweden to allegedly reclaim old Russian lands. Peter I also established a tradition of strategic propaganda, echoed by later Russian rulers, claiming before wars, such as with the Ottoman Empire, that Russia sought not expansion, but the protection and uplift of Christian peoples. These narratives promised self-governance, the restoration of ancient rights, and no territorial gain for Russia – rhetoric that masked imperial ambitions under the guise of civilisational responsibility.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, expansion toward the Black Sea and the Balkans became the central focus of tsarist foreign policy, as evidenced by the ten Russo-Turkish wars between 1676 and 1878. The Peace Congress of Nemirov (August–November 1737) was the first to formally articulate Russia's long-term strategy in the Black Sea region, which included: (1) annexation of the Black Sea and Azov coasts from the Don to the Danube, including Crimea and the Kuban; (2) establishing a Russian protectorate over Moldova and Wallachia; and (3) securing freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, including passage through the Bosporus and Dardanelles.

Following this strategy, the Russian Empire not only expanded its territories in southeastern Europe but also gained access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, establishing control over the lower Danube and the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits. Within a century, Russia had effectively achieved its expansionist objectives. The Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi, signed on 8 July 1833, declared the Black Sea a "Russian lake" and formalised a Russian protectorate over the Ottoman Empire.

3.1. Romanian Principalities and the Russian Imperialist politics

From a historical perspective, the emergence of Transnistrian separatism in the Republic of Moldova is closely tied to the expansionist and annexationist policies of the Russian

Empire, later continued by the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. These policies, aimed at extending influence in Eastern Europe, encountered resistance in the 18th and 19th centuries from the Romanian Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, later unified as Romania in 1859. During this period, the region became a focal point of the "Eastern Question," marked by the waning influence of the Ottoman Empire, the military and political ascent of Russia, and competing interests from the Habsburgs. Simultaneously, Western powers – particularly France and, to a lesser extent, Britain – intervened to preserve the regional balance of power

After the Russo-Turkish War of 1710–1713, when Russian troops under Peter I first entered Romanian territory, four more Russo-Turkish wars were fought there during the 18th century. The 1787–1792 war, concluded by the Treaty of Iaşi, set the Tsarist Empire's western border with Moldova at the Dniester River. Following the treaty, Catherine II devised ambitious plans for the region, including defeating the Ottoman Empire, restoring the former Greek Empire, and uniting Moldova and Wallachia into a small state under Russian Prince Potemkin. Her successor, Emperor Paul I, continued these ambitions, reportedly planning to annex Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova into the Russian Empire.

Continuing the expansionist policies of Peter I and Catherine II, Emperor Alexander I launched the fifth Russo-Turkish war on October 18, 1806. Russian troops crossed the Dniester, occupied the Romanian principalities, and in 1812 annexed the eastern part of Moldova, later known as Bessarabia. This act violated both Moldova's historical rights and the obligations of the Ottoman suzerain and Russian protector, who were meant to uphold its international status. As Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu [8] remarked, "Bessarabia was transmitted by he who had no right to do so, to he who had no right to take it." From 1792/1812 until 1917, Bessarabia and Transnistria remained under the rule of the Russian Empire, one of the most autocratic and reactionary regimes in Europe.

3.2. The Russian Colonisation of Transnistria and Bessarabia

When Russian forces arrived in these regions in 1792 and 1812, Moldovan Romanians were the oldest and most numerous population groups in Bessarabia and Transnistria. Their history is inseparable from the broader formation of the Romanian people. They have always been ethnically Romanian, with the term "Moldovans" referring not to a separate ethnicity but to inhabitants of a specific geographic region – much like Wallachians, Oltenians, Transylvanians, Banatians, or Dobrujans. Archaeological and historical evidence confirms the continuous presence of their ancestors, the Getae-Dacians and Romans, in the area. Throughout the first millennium AD, Romanians lived on both sides of the Dniester River, maintaining a longstanding presence in the region.

Romanians on the right bank of the Dniester had their own state, the Principality of Moldova. In contrast, those on the left bank struggled for survival during the great migrations, both in the early Middle Ages and later, facing repeated incursions by nomadic tribes from Asia. As medieval states emerged, they found themselves caught in regional rivalries involving the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Khanate, the Kingdom of Poland, the Ukrainian Hetmanate, and eventually the Russian Empire [9].

From 1812 to 1918, Romanians on both sides of the Dniester lived under a single state, the Russian Empire, sometimes even under a unified administration, such as the Podolia Governorate in the early 19th century. Between 1940–1941 and 1944–1990, they

were again united within a Soviet republic, with Chişinău emerging as a central hub for Transnistrian Romanians. Since 1991, despite political and territorial distortions, Romanians on both banks of the Dniester have been part of the Republic of Moldova, the second Romanian state. To consolidate Russian control and support expansionist aims, Tsarist authorities pursued aggressive colonisation in Novorossia, particularly between the Bug and Dniester rivers. This policy aimed at economic exploitation and led to the forced Slavicisation of the region. By 1897, only 202,369 Romanians (Moldovans) remained on the left bank of the Dniester [10].

During the century of Russian domination in Bessarabia, the Tsarist regime implemented policies to attract wealthy settlers and investors from abroad and from other Russian guberniyas. The region saw an influx of settlers from Transdanubia, including Bulgarians, Gagauz, Serbs, and Albanians, as well as German and Swiss colonists and migrants from within the Russian Empire. Many foreign merchants, particularly Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, also established themselves in Bessarabia. Their arrival contributed to the consolidation of Tsarist military, economic, and political control over the province. According to the 1897 Russian imperial census, Bessarabia had a population of about two million. While Romanians/Moldovans remained the largest group, their proportion had declined to around 921,000 (47%). Ukrainians numbered approximately 380,000, Jews 230,000, Russians 156,000, Bulgarians and Gagauz together 103,000, and Germans 60,000.

The Russian imperial authorities pursued three strategic objectives regarding the Romanian majority. First, they sought to transform the Romanian majority into a minority through colonisation and administrative measures. Second, they aimed to maintain the Romanian population in a state of political, economic, and cultural subordination relative to Slavic groups. Finally, the Tsarist regime worked to erode Romanian national identity through systematic Russification.

3.3. Between the Union of Bessarabia and the Communisation of Transnistria

The Union of Bessarabia with Romania was declared on March 27, 1918, ending a century of Russian dominance. This union gained international recognition at the Paris Peace Conference on October 28, 1920, when Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and Romania signed the treaty known as the Bessarabian Treaty or Convention. Between 1918 and 1940, Bessarabia and Transnistria developed under two distinct political and cultural spheres. During Romania's interwar modernisation, Bessarabians embraced a European, Western identity. Meanwhile, from 1917 onward, the Soviet regime implemented communist policies on the left bank of the Dniester. The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was conceived by the Communist International (Komintern) on February 4, 1924, and officially established on October 12, 1924, as an autonomous region within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The official capital of the Moldovan ASSR was declared to be the "temporarily occupied city of Chişinău," while the administrative capital was Balta until 1929, and thereafter Tiraspol until the republic's dissolution in 1940. According to the 1935 Soviet census, the Moldovan ASSR had a population of 582,138: 184,046 Moldovans (31.6%), 265,193 Ukrainians (45.5%), 56,592 Russians (9.7%), 45,620 Jews (7.8%), and 12,711 Germans (2.2%). Despite its small size and the ambiguous ethnic identity of its Moldovan population, the republic served as a key political and propaganda tool for the Soviet regime. Its primary role was to contrast the Soviet and Romanian political systems,

naturally promoting the former. It also kept the Bessarabian issue alive, maintaining pressure on Romania throughout the interwar period. Ultimately, in the event of major geopolitical shifts, it was envisioned as a potential bridgehead for Soviet expansion into the Balkans – a strategy the Kremlin would pursue during the Second World War.

Between June 26 and 28, 1940, the Soviet Union issued ultimatums to Romania demanding the evacuation of civilian administration and the withdrawal of Romanian troops from Bessarabia, the area between the Prut and Dniester rivers, and northern Bukovina. Romania was given just four days to comply, under threat of war. These ultimatums occurred within a broader geopolitical context shaped by the expansionist Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 23, 1939, in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union divided spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. The Soviet occupation force, almost entirely drawn from the Kyiv and Odessa military districts, numbered nearly 500,000 troops and was commanded by General G. Zhukov, leader of the Red Army's "South" group.

Following the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia, the Moldavian SSR (MSSR) was established by decision of the Supreme Soviet on August 2, 1940, combining parts of Bessarabia with a portion of the former MASSR. After local consultations and border adjustments, the boundary between the MSSR and the Ukrainian SSR was formalised by decree on November 4, 1940. The Soviets did not base the new republic's borders on historical, ethnic, or cultural criteria, but rather on strategic and imperial interests. Moscow's aim was to weaken Bessarabia's historical cohesion and make any future attempt to reunite with Romania more difficult.

3.4. Impossible coexistence: Bessarabia and Transnistria in the MSSR (1944-1989)

The forced merger of Bessarabia and Transnistria, two historically distinct territories, proved detrimental to the development of both the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic and the modern Republic of Moldova. Economically and demographically, the region evolved into two separate entities: Bessarabia remained largely rural, agrarian, and predominantly indigenous, while Transnistria developed Soviet-style urban centres, with a Slavic-influenced population composed mainly of immigrants working in heavy industry [11]. From June 1941 to August 1944, Bessarabia was under Romanian administration, which also exercised military control over Transnistria during this period.

Bessarabia was reoccupied by the Soviet army in 1944, and the Moldavian SSR (MSSR) was reestablished with its original 1940 borders. The leadership from the former MASSR was installed over Bessarabia, becoming central to the governance of the new republic. Throughout the Soviet period, party officials – largely Russians – formed a privileged ruling caste. Native Moldovans were rarely recruited into leadership roles, Russian officials dominated most institutions, and Russian became the de facto language of administration and public life, reinforcing this hierarchy [12].

Through a deliberate long-term economic strategy, most industrial – and the most profitable – enterprises in the republic were concentrated on the left bank of the Dniester, within the territory of the former MASSR [13]. The Soviet Union strengthened its control over Bessarabia by creating an industrial and economic region located on the left bank of the Dniester, centred on the axis of Tiraspol-Bender (Tighina). Due to its strategic location and role as a railroad hub, the Tiraspol-Bender area became the Moldovan SSR's most important urban centre after Chişinău. By 1973, its population reached 300,000, with 46% living in urban areas. The region employed 21% of the republic's industrial workforce and accounted for 15% of industrial investment and 20% of industrial output.

The largest hydroelectric power plant in the southwestern USSR was in Dubăsari, on the left bank of the Dniester, while the Moldovan thermal power plant operated in Dnestrovsk (Cuciurgan). Together, these plants supplied over 60% of the republic's electricity in the early 1970s and later became key factors in separatist energy policies after 1991 [9].

The region on the left bank of the Dniester was clearly privileged by Soviet authorities in terms of economic development. Despite accounting for only 12.2% of the territory and 17% of the population of the Moldovan SSR, it concentrated over one-third of the machine-building industry, half of the canned food industry, and nearly one-third of the republic's industrial assets. This disproportionate development was driven not only by the Soviet Union's strategic and imperial interests but also by the influence of a powerful Transnistrian lobby in Chişinău and Moscow, which secured substantial industrial investment. Until the 1980s, Transnistrians held a dominant position in the leadership structures of the Moldovan SSR, backed by Russian military, educational, and cultural elites who had settled in the region as part of broader Soviet colonisation policies. According to the 1989 Soviet census, the Moldovan SSR had a population of 4.3 million, including 700,000 on the left bank of the Dniester (420,000 urban, 220,000 rural). Romanians/Moldovans made up 64.5% of the population, followed by Russians (13%), Ukrainians (14%), Gagauz (3.5%), Bulgarians (2%), and other ethnic groups (3.2%).

The Soviets invented a "Moldovan nation" within the Moldovan SSR, which they claimed was distinct from and opposed to the Romanian people. From that point forward, Soviet "Moldovenism" became an official state policy in the MASSR, MSSR, and across the USSR. Its aim was to cultivate political, ethnic, historical, cultural, and linguistic differences between the Romanian-speaking population of the Moldovan SSR and the rest of Romania. According to this narrative, Moldovans and Romanians were separate peoples with separate languages and distinct historical trajectories, beginning with their ethnogenesis.

In the late 1980s, the national revival movement in Bessarabia gained momentum with Gorbachev's reforms, seeking to restore the historical, ethnic, and cultural rights of the Romanian majority in the Moldovan SSR. This movement deeply alarmed the Russian and heavily Russified elites of the Transnistrian region. Unsurprisingly, starting in August 1989, protests erupted in Tiraspol and Bender against the language legislation passed by Chişinău, which had officially reinstated Romanian as the state language and restored the Latin script.

3.5. The Independence, The War on the Dniester and the Division of the Republic of Moldova

The 1992 War on the Dniester (also called the Transnistrian War or War of Independence) is part of the long-standing Russian/Soviet-Romanian conflict dating back to 1792. Illustrative of this is a statement by Ghenadie Seleznev, then President of the Russian State Duma, who during a 1992 visit to Chişinău said: "We Russians had to support Transnistria in the conflict. Without our support, Moldova would now be an integral part of Romania [14]." The independence of the Republic of Moldova must be understood within the broader context of global transformations and the collapse of the communist bloc, particularly the USSR, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Eager to legitimize their power both against the Soviet centre and the conservative, Russophile party leadership, representatives of the Moldovan moderate *nomenklatura* formed a common front with a new generation of intellectuals. Their interests aligned:

intellectuals sought to revive Romanian national culture, a goal many had quietly pursued since the 1960s, while local politicians used the national movement to push for greater concessions from Moscow and to marginalize Transnistrian and Russian influence. Unlike former communist states in Central Europe, where alternative elites fully replaced the old nomenklatura, Moldova's independence resulted from a compromise between new intellectual and political elites and the "national" communists. These "national" communists either permitted or actively participated in the national revival, using it to delegitimize the Soviet system and build a new political base that could compete with conservative factions and Transnistrian elements.

Relations with Romania and prospects for unification quickly became contentious issues within the leadership and among social groups in the Moldovan SSR. Although the Popular Front of Moldova initially included representatives from many ethnic groups, the legacy of Soviet domination and the influence of the imperial centre made tensions and conflicts inevitable.

In addition to linguistic conflicts between Romanians and Russian-speaking minorities, who rejected the return to the Romanian language and Latin script, as well as the Romanian tricolour and other state symbols, these tensions caused serious confrontations between Chişinău and Tiraspol. However, the main cause of the war on the Dniester River lies in the struggle between the imperial centre and the Moldovan SSR. Facing the likely prospect of the MSSR leaving the Soviet Union, Moscow sought to create two territorial fractures within the republic: one on the left bank of the Dniester River and the other in Gagauzia [15]. At the same time, Soviet officials linked local separatism to Moldova's commitment to sign the new Soviet treaty initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, aimed at preserving the Soviet Union.

In early June 1990, with the support of A. Lukianov, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the complicity of Defence Minister D. Yazov, Interior Minister B. Pugo, and Transnistrian leaders Yu. Blokhin, I. Smirnov, and Gr. Marakutsa, a plan to create separatist entities in Gagauzia and Transnistria within Moldova was set in motion. On August 19, 1990, following these agreements, the first Congress of People's Deputies from southern Moldova proclaimed the districts of Comrat, Ceadâr-Lunga, and Vulcăneşti as the "Gagauz Republic" within the USSR. In response, the Supreme Soviet of Chişinău declared that none of Moldova's ethnic groups had a historical or legal basis to claim state-territorial autonomy, including the so-called Gagauz ASSR within Moldova [16].

Following Gagauzia, on September 2, 1990, the "Second Extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies from Transnistria" convened in Tiraspol, proclaiming the "Socialist Soviet Moldovan Republic of Dniester." The rise of secessionist movements in the east and south of the republic, supported by the imperial centre, prompted the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR to temporarily suspend its participation in Moscow consultations on the Soviet Union's future. Consequently, the new Union Treaty proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev on November 22, 1990, was rejected by the Great National Assembly on December 16, 1990 [15]. Negotiations over the Moldovan SSR's participation in the new Union Treaty, which aimed to recognize the republics' declarations of sovereignty, lasted through the summer and were scheduled to be signed at the Kremlin on August 20, 1991. However, on August 19, a *coup d'état* by conservative party leaders and security forces attempted to restore the USSR's old structures and block the treaty's signing.

The coup's failure, largely due to the mobilisation of Russian society defending their newfound freedom and democracy, triggered a "parade of independence." Several former Soviet republics declared withdrawal one after another: Estonia on August 20,

Latvia on August 21, and Ukraine on August 24. On August 27, 1991, during an extraordinary parliamentary session and following the Great National Assembly's decision, the Republic of Moldova declared its independence. The declaration was unanimously approved by all 277 deputies present, including about 40 (14%) representing ethnic minorities.

Since the Transnistrian War began, various interpretations of its nature have emerged – civil war, ethnic conflict, political or geopolitical struggle, among others. Moscow's propaganda framed it as a civil and interethnic conflict, portraying "Moldovan nationalists" seeking union with Romania and an ethnocratic Romanian regime against Russian-speaking groups defending their rights. The armed conflict was initiated by separatist forces in Tiraspol, backed politically and militarily by imperialist forces in the Kremlin, including Russian troops stationed in Transnistria.

The Russian/Soviet war of aggression against the Republic of Moldova stems from two broad causes, both ultimately tied to Russian imperial interests. The first relates to the Soviet period and involves three key aspects:

1. The problematic historical coexistence of two distinct entities, Bessarabia and the RASSM/Transnistria, differing in identity and civilisation, with the former aligned to Romanian and European space, and the latter to the Russian and Soviet world.
2. The rise of the national revival movement in the RSSM, which alarmed the Russophone elites who dominated the republic. They saw the growing Romanian majority's political, linguistic, and cultural shift as a threat, leading to the radicalisation of ethnic minorities on the right bank of the Dniester and sparking secessionist movements on the left bank, a refuge for political elites and Russian speakers.
3. The Soviet imperial centre's interest in retaining the Moldovan SSR within the USSR and opposing Moldovan independence.

The second type arises after independence, stemming from the clash between the fragile Moldovan state's efforts to enforce constitutional order and territorial control by force, and the Russian Federation's neo-imperial ambitions to shape its "near abroad" in line with its interests. In this context, Russian propaganda exploited the idea of unification between Moldova and Romania as a scare tactic, mobilising both local and Russian populations, while pressuring Moldova's political class to redefine the new state's identity around "Moldovenism."

4. Russia's Involvement in the War against the Republic of Moldova

The Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova provided a pretext for the secessionist leaders in Tiraspol and Comrat to escalate provocations against Chișinău and consolidate their separatist entities. Efforts by Moldova's constitutional authorities to reassert sovereignty and control over these pro-Russian enclaves faced fierce resistance, initially through civic opposition and later through armed conflict.

On December 26, 1991, by decree of Igor Smirnov, the self-proclaimed president of the so-called Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR), military forces of the Tiraspol regime were formally established, drawing on troops and forces stationed beyond the Dniester River. By the start of hostilities, the separatists had assembled a substantial

armed force comprising the Republican Guard (around 8,000 soldiers); police units, including the "Dniester" battalion (about 5,000); territorial rescue detachments (4,000 people); workers' regiments; and Cossacks from various regions of Russia (3,000–4,000). The 14th Soviet Army, soon transformed into a Russian force, with approximately 6,500 soldiers openly sided with the separatists, providing weapons, transport, and combat equipment.

On March 2, 1992, Moldova became a member of the United Nations. Following a provocative attack by Cossacks and guards in Dubăsari, Moldovan authorities opted for military engagement. The conflict escalated after President Mircea Snegur issued an ultimatum in March 1992, culminating in Russia assuming direct control over the 14th Army via a presidential decree on April 1, 1992. General Alexander Lebed, who replaced Yuri Netkachov as commander in July 1992, repeatedly expressed strong support for the PMR regime. He declared the city of Bender, located on the right bank of the Dniester, an inseparable part of the PMR and the Transnistrian region, calling it the "key to the Balkans" and a "small part of Russia."

The Transnistrian War culminated in the siege of the city of Bender (Tighina), which began on June 19, 1992. Following a planned provocation by the separatists aiming to seize control of the city, the government in Chișinău dispatched a special police detachment to restore authority. In response, military units of the 14th Army, alongside guards and Cossack troops, launched a joint assault using heavy artillery and tanks. This offensive resulted in a massacre of Moldovan forces and civilians alike. The conflict escalated at the bridgeheads of Cocieri, Coşniţa, and Chițcani, with bombing campaigns targeting localities on the right bank of the Dniester – including Holercani, Criuleni, Cruglic, and Măşcăuți – raising the death toll to several hundred and forcing the Chișinău government to capitulate.

On July 21, 1992, in Moscow, Moldovan President Mircea Snegur and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Agreement on the Principles of Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in the Dniester Region, effectively ending the armed conflict in Transnistria. The war resulted in approximately one thousand deaths, two thousand injuries, and over 100,000 refugees. The fact that the agreement was signed by the heads of state of Moldova and Russia underscored the direct involvement of the Russian Federation in the conflict.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) legally and politically confirmed Russia's key role in the creation and support of the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR) in its July 8, 2004 decision in the case of "Ilaşcu and Others vs. Moldova and Russia." The Court found that during the 1991–1992 conflict, forces of the former 14th Army, originally part of the USSR and later Russia, stationed in Transnistria, fought alongside the Transnistrian separatists. Large quantities of weapons from the 14th Army's arsenal were deliberately transferred to the separatists, who also acquired other arms without opposition from Russian military personnel. The Russian authorities provided both military and political support for the establishment of the separatist regime in the Transnistrian region, which remains part of Moldova's internationally recognised territory. Even after the July 21, 1992 Agreement, Russia continued to support the separatist regime militarily, politically, and economically, enabling it to endure, strengthen, and exercise a degree of autonomy from Moldova.

4.1. Landmarks of separatism and the evolution of the Republic of Moldova

As a result of the war, a separatist regime was established in Transnistria, aligning itself with the Russian political and cultural sphere, symbolised by the slogan "Transnistria is Russian land." This persists despite the region's population being roughly one-third Moldovan, one-third Ukrainian, and one-third Russian. Transnistrian authorities, operating beyond Chişinău's control, promote a distinct historical narrative. They trace the origins of their "statehood" to 1924, when the Soviet Union created the Moldovan ASSR within the Ukrainian SSR, and reject any historical ties to the medieval Moldovan state. The Tiraspol regime even cites Moldova's 1991 Declaration of Independence, which condemns the annexations of 1812 and 1940, as justification for their separatism, though this does not stop them from occupying Tighina (Bender), a city in historical Bessarabia on the right bank of the Dniester. The regime continues to push for independence, rejecting integration with Moldova, while promoting the concept of a "Transnistrian people," defined as a tri-ethnic blend of Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians.

Although Russia officially supports the territorial integrity and independence of the Republic of Moldova, it remains the main ally of the administration in Tiraspol, providing political, economic, financial, and military support. Paradoxically, despite maintaining the functionality of this pseudo-state, the Russian Federation resists its full independence. This was demonstrated during the war in Georgia when, after the authorities in Tiraspol requested recognition of the PMR following the example of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow refused. Russia's strategy is to "Transnistrianise" the Republic of Moldova through the promotion of federalisation (as outlined in the Kozak Plan). By doing so, Russia would secure instruments to influence and block political decisions in Chişinău, continue to maintain its military presence in Transnistria, and guarantee Russian as a state language within Moldova.

4.2. Russian Military Occupation of Transnistria

During and after the 1991–1992 Dniester War, the Russian Federation promoted two persistent falsehoods. First, successive Russian governments denied the involvement of the 14th Army in the conflict. Second, they portrayed Russian forces as playing a "stabilising" role, downplaying their military engagement. However, in 2004, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found that units of the former 14th Army, stationed in Transnistria, actively fought alongside separatist forces. The Court also confirmed that large quantities of weapons were transferred to the separatists with the complicity of Russian military personnel.

The involvement of the 14th Army in the Dniester War has been acknowledged repeatedly by high-ranking Russian officials. President Boris Yeltsin himself stated in May 1992 that "obviously, among the officers of the 14th Army, there are supporters of Transnistria, and they begin to join, sometimes with all their equipment, on the side of the Transnistrian people"[17] General Lebed admitted that "…personally, I recruited 12,000 soldiers and officers, armed them with everything necessary, and then reported all the weapons as losses captured from the enemy."

A documentary recognition of Russia's direct military involvement in the Dniester War was the signing in Moscow of the "Convention on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Area of the Republic of Moldova" on July 21, 1992 (also known as the "Yeltsin-Snegur Convention"). Article 1, paragraph 1

of the document explicitly states that "From the moment of the signing of the Convention, the parties to the conflict assume the commitment to undertake all necessary measures to completely cease fire, as well as any armed actions, against each other [17]." Therefore, from a legal and political standpoint, the Yeltsin-Snegur Convention is essentially an agreement on a ceasefire between two parties to the conflict, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova, with no mention of the separatist regime in Tiraspol.

After the end of the war, Russia shifted to seeking legal and political pretexts to legitimize the continued stationing of its troops in the Republic of Moldova, despite the Yeltsin-Snegur Convention explicitly providing for negotiations on the procedure and deadlines for their phased withdrawal. On April 18, 1995, by directive of the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, the 14th Army was transformed into the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. Since its formation and to the present day, the OGRF has had three main missions:

1. Preparation and participation of military personnel in "pacification" operations;
2. Securing the arms and ammunition depots at Colbasna (containing approximately 20,000 tons of mainly Soviet-era weapons and ammunition);
3. Carrying out actions commanded by the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces in the event of changes in the geopolitical situation.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the OGRF would become operational only if there were a simultaneous Russian attack on Odessa – from the sea, from the Mykolaiv direction, and from southern Bessarabia. In such a scenario, military formations in the Transnistrian region would have two strategic missions: first, to attack Odessa from the rear to encircle it and link up with Russian forces in Ukraine; and second, to prepare for an attack on the Republic of Moldova and invade Chişinău if Russian forces reach the Dniester.

Since its formation, the OGRF has been criticised by Moldovan officials and Western observers alike, who consider the presence of Russian troops either illegal or unnecessary. In November 2008, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its armed forces in accordance with its commitments made at the 1999 OSCE Summit in Istanbul. In 2020, the newly elected President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, declared that the Russian armed forces should be withdrawn from separatist Transnistria, noting that although the troops guard ammunition depots, "there are no bilateral agreements regarding the Operational Group and the arms depot." She further stated that the mission should be transformed into a civilian observer mission under the auspices of the OSCE.

5. Implications and Complications of the War in Ukraine

On the morning of February 24, 2022, citizens of the Republic of Moldova living near the border with Ukraine awoke to loud explosions, signalling that the Russian invasion was poised to extend into their country. Once Russian forces reached Odessa and the mouths of the Danube, they were expected to link up with troops stationed in Transnistria. Together, they could rapidly conquer the Republic of Moldova, a neutral state with no defence capabilities, restore the border along the Prut River, and seek to recreate the Soviet Union within its 1941 borders.

Plans for a potential invasion of the Republic of Moldova, coming from various sources, paint a bleak picture for this neutral state with limited military capacity, its army numbers about 6,000 soldiers, and Russian troops stationed in Transnistria, ready to act at any moment. As a result, Chișinău's response to the war and its fallout has been cautious and somewhat ambiguous. Moldova faced a major refugee crisis, ranking first among the top five countries receiving Ukrainian refugees, with nearly 1,400 refugees per 10,000 locals, according to a UN report, remarkable given Moldova's status as the poorest country in Europe. At the same time, Moldovan leadership declined to join international sanctions against Russia, citing its neutral status and heavy energy dependence on Moscow. Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu explained, "In 2014, Moldova decided not to align with European or American sanctions on Russia, and we continue to maintain this position today [18]."

By the resolution of March 15, 2022, of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the occupation of part of the sovereign territory of the Republic of Moldova through military aggression in 1992 was officially recognised. In response, the Moldovan Foreign Minister, Nicu Popescu, issued a cautious statement regarding the PACE declaration and Russia's role as an occupier in the Transnistrian region [19]. This ambiguity highlights the fragile nature of Moldovan statehood. It is shaken economically by the effects of the war in Ukraine, massive fuel price hikes, and spectacular increases in basic commodity prices. At the same time, the country faces an increased threat of invasion from beyond the River Dniester and an uncertain situation at the regional and European levels.

On the other hand, contrary to initial estimates that predicted an activation of the Russian Federation and the Russian army in the Transnistrian region in connection with events in Ukraine, the leadership in Tiraspol has adopted a neutral, somewhat anti-war position. They have repeatedly declared that they do not want to be drawn into the conflict in the neighbourhood. This attitude has several explanations. Firstly, in thirty years the regime has developed a certain autonomy beyond Moscow's traditional control. The leaders in Tiraspol have consolidated the separatist regime through a blend of cooperation and corruption involving political elites in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. They often use leverage to obtain economic concessions, usually smuggling, which they have achieved equally in Chișinău, Odessa, and Kyiv.

Around 150,000 Ukrainians, approximately 28% of Transnistria's population, live in the region, many holding Ukrainian citizenship, including some separatist leaders. This demographic reality, combined with the uncertainty surrounding the war's outcome, makes the separatist leadership cautious toward Ukraine. Ukraine's military successes against Russia, alongside Moldova's limited military capacity and Transnistria's inability to withstand a large-scale Ukrainian offensive, have convinced the separatist regime to adopt a wait-and-see approach. Ukraine closed its border with Transnistria on February 28, 2022, and has expressed willingness to support Chișinău militarily to end separatism. Kyiv has also declared readiness to defend Moldova against any Russian aggression.

The Republic of Moldova has been directly affected by the military hostilities in Ukraine, with numerous Russian aerial targets detected crossing its airspace between 2022 and 2025. Despite its official neutrality, Moldova was invited to the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bucharest on November 29–30, 2022. There, NATO pledged stronger "individualised support" for Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, dedicating a special session to these countries. Moldova's growing ties with NATO have angered Moscow. In early February 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

warned that the West aims to turn Moldova into the "next Ukraine." Against this backdrop, on February 13, 2023, President Maia Sandu exposed a Russian plan to overthrow Moldova's legitimate government and replace it with a pro-Russian regime, halting European integration and using Moldova as a tool against Ukraine.

During his visit to Ukraine and Poland on February 20–21, 2023, U.S. President Biden reaffirmed strong support for Moldova's sovereignty in a meeting with President Sandu, following his Warsaw speech marking one year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The year 2024 proved pivotal for Moldova, consolidating its pro-European trajectory through a successful referendum and presidential election. However, deep societal polarisation remains, placing immense pressure on the 2025 parliamentary elections, which will be crucial for determining Moldova's European future.

6. Conclusions and Future Scenarios

Moldova currently faces three potential trajectories; each closely tied to the unfolding outcome of the war in Ukraine—and each deeply rooted in the region's long history of geopolitical contestation. The first scenario envisions a continuation of the status quo, in which Russia consolidates its control over occupied Ukrainian territories. Such an outcome would reaffirm Moscow's capacity to impose influence across the post-Soviet space and extend its buffer zone along NATO's eastern flank. In this version of the future, Moldova risks being once again caught in the gravitational pull of a resurgent neo-imperial Russia, echoing patterns seen in the early and mid-20th century.

The second scenario, Ukrainian victory, would significantly weaken the Putin regime and diminish Russia's ability to project power in the region. In this context, Moldova, aligned with Ukraine, Romania, and its Western partners, could pursue the reintegration of Transnistria, solidify its independence from Moscow's orbit, and accelerate its integration into the European Union and NATO. Such a shift would not only reverse recent Russian gains but would represent a historic break from the cycles of coercion and occupation that have shaped Moldova's modern history.

The third and most dangerous scenario involves a Russian military victory. Under this scenario, Russian forces could attempt to reach Transnistria by activating the troops already stationed there, supported by local mobilisation. These forces would be positioned to coordinate with Russian attacks from the Black Sea, southern Ukraine, and the Mykolaiv region. The Transnistrian contingent would have two strategic objectives: to strike Odesa from the rear, facilitating a broader campaign in Ukraine, and to open a new front against Moldova once Russian forces reach the Dniester River. This would allow Moscow to implement its maximalist vision: severing Ukraine from the Black Sea and Danube Delta, and reestablishing Russia's frontier along the Prut River, directly bordering the EU and NATO.

Such a scenario would place Moldova in a historical dilemma reminiscent of 1918, when the Bolshevik advance led the Moldovan Democratic Republic to seek Romanian intervention and ultimately unify with Romania. Today, as then, the defence of Moldova's sovereignty may depend on a swift and coordinated response from Romanian forces and NATO allies to deter Russian occupation. All three scenarios point to a single strategic imperative: the success of pro-European forces in Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections. This political outcome will be critical not only for continuing Moldova's European integration and safeguarding its democratic institutions, but also

for ensuring that the country does not once again become a pawn in a wider struggle for imperial dominance in Eastern Europe.

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PART IV

Geopolitical Reverberations: Russia, NATO, and the Changing Security Order

Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Managed Pluralism in Russia's Foreign Policy After the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract. This chapter argues that it is not possible to understand processes shaping Russia's foreign policy without proper understanding of the mechanisms of Putin's system, including the use of expert community and opposition voices in public debate. Consequently, the analysis that takes a closer look at which voices are allowed into the public debate, and which are eliminated from it, will help to understand how the Kremlin uses different actors appearing in the public space for its foreign policy. To achieve this goal, the chapter applies the concept of managed pluralism and through its prism examines three distinct issues: limiting the presence of nationalist voices in the public space, the evolution of the nuclear escalation debate, and the links between recent changes in the political system and foreign policy proposals voiced by the systemic opposition. The analysis reveals several mechanisms of managed pluralism and points to the principles of its operation, indicating the usefulness of this concept in NATO's threat assessment and building the Alliance's resilience.

Keywords. Russia's foreign policy, war in Ukraine, managed pluralism, security

1. Introduction

NATO 2022 strategic concept [1] emphasised that Russia's war against Ukraine "has shattered peace and gravely altered our security environment', identifying Moscow as 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area". This chapter presents the concept of managed pluralism as a key to understanding Russian strategic considerations. The concept was introduced by Balzer [2] and first used in the analysis of Russia's foreign policy by Strycharz [3]. Managed pluralism offers a framework that through the analysis of Russian public debate allows to identify different foreign policy mechanisms used by the Putin regime, which may contribute to both assessing the threat from Russia and enhancing NATO's resilience.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Russian public debate has been dominated by voices encouraging even harsher actions towards Ukraine and the West, while voices calling for an end to the war have been virtually absent. Moreover, since the beginning of the war (and even before it), public space has been filled with voices

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talking about the need for not only conventional but also nuclear escalation. All this, as well as Russia's ongoing efforts to undermine NATO, e.g. through disinformation and propaganda, suggests the need for a better understanding of how Russia's foreign policy is shaped. This chapter argues that this is not possible without proper understanding of the mechanisms of Putin's system, including the use of expert community and opposition voices in public debate.

Consequently, to improve understanding of the processes shaping Russia's foreign policy, analysis takes a closer look at which voices are allowed into the public debate and which are eliminated from it or not allowed at all which will help to comprehend how the Kremlin uses different actors appearing in the public space for its foreign policy. Furthermore, this chapter aims to point to potential avenues in which the concept of managed pluralism can be used in the analysis of Russia's foreign policy, such as, regulating the availability of different voices in the public space, interpenetration of proposals between expert community and decision makers, and the relationship between the changing system and the role of individual actors' statements on important international issues. The chapter consists of five sections. The first one introduces managed pluralism and points to the mechanisms of its operation in foreign policy. The following three sections examine the limitation of nationalist voices in public debate, the evolution of the nuclear escalation debate, and the links between recent changes in the political system and foreign policy proposals voiced by the systemic opposition. The final section concludes with reference to the broader implications of managed pluralism for Russia's foreign policy.

2. Managed Pluralism (in Russia's Foreign Policy)

The concept of managed pluralism in the analysis of Russian politics was introduced in 2003 by Balzer [2], who, explained its operation, writing that "it is not an attempt to dictate a single political, religious, or cultural 'norm'" but "an effort to restrict the palette to shades and hues compatible with familiar landscapes". He defined the concept providing, among others, examples of religion and party system, stating that "managed pluralism does not entail mandating a state religion" but rather "restricts religions that are perceived to be too different or threatening" and in a similar manner, it does not need a one-party system, instead limiting political participation to parties that may criticize individual decisions but do not pose a threat to the regime [2]. Indeed, the 1997 law recognised four religions as "traditional": Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, a selection which reflects, among others, historical disputes with the Catholic Church. Interestingly, just five years later a bill was introduced which favoured Orthodoxy, ignored Judaism, but still recognised Islam and Buddhism [2], which shows the variability and arbitrariness of managed pluralism. Likewise, since 2003, apart from the ruling United Russia, there have been only three parties in the Russian Parliament: the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), and A Just Russia—For Truth (which replaced its predecessor, Rodina). It was not until 2021 that they were joined by a new party, New People, which is widely understood as created by the presidential administration to attract new voters [4].

In 2024, Strycharz applied the concept to Russia's foreign policy. He pointed out a number of mechanisms that managed pluralism allows for in foreign policy, such as testing ideas, consolidating the regime, creating the impression of pluralism, generating the illusion of consensus as well as the practice among opposition groups of "outbidding"

each other with radical solutions, which helps to "blur the boundaries between what is thinkable and unthinkable". Strycharz [3] notes that various voices regarding Russia's foreign policy, even critical ones, appear in the public space, provided that they come from licensed actors and do not trespass arbitrarily defined and not always clear boundaries. Consequently, both Balzer's analysis of domestic policy and Strycharz's analysis of foreign policy draw attention to the Kremlin's actions that promote certain actors, for example, by allowing them into the public debate, while at the same time restricting others.

Managed pluralism was also used by Feklyunina [5] who, writing about Russian elites' reinterpretation of the Cuban missile crisis, notes the crucial role of nuclear coercion in status-seeking and emphasises that Russian public debate on the crisis "should also be considered in relation to Russia's domestic propaganda and nuclear signalling targeting the 'West'". Feklyunina explains that tolerance of different opinions by the government indicates that these positions may contribute to the authorities' strategic nuclear messaging targeting audiences in Russia, for example blurring the limit of what is thinkable and possible in Moscow's attitude to nuclear escalation.

The following analysis is divided into three issues with partially overlapping periods of analysis. First, I examine the shifting boundaries of managed pluralism and the changes in the regime's approach to Russian nationalists, which were most visible in the second half of 2023. Second, I analyse the evolution of the debate on nuclear escalation, first focusing on Putin's statements in the autumn of 2022 and then highlighting the interaction between expert publications and the statements and actions of Russian decision-makers between June 2023 and December 2024. Finally, I draw attention to recent changes in the systemic opposition's role within the system and, in this light, examine the presidential candidates' statements on international affairs during the 2024 campaign.

3. Sinusoidal Presence of Nationalist Voices

The first area where mechanisms of managed pluralism can be noticed is the participation of Russian radical nationalists, known as "turbo-patriots", in the public debate. What unites this otherwise diverse group of nationalist politicians, military personnel, commentators, and bloggers is support for the war in Ukraine along with criticism of the way in which it is being conducted [6]. Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, as well as before, these nationalist critics had been tolerated and even encouraged by the Kremlin, but in the summer of 2023, there were visible actions to curtail their activities, which led some observers [7] to conclude that there was a new crackdown on these voices.

One of the most vocal critics of the Russian army and its performance in Ukraine was Igor Girkin (alias Strelkov). He considered the conduct of the war as a lost cause because of inefficiency, corruption, and incompetence of Putin's system [8]. Girkin regularly criticised the leadership, the ministry of defence, and Chief of the General Staff, Gerasimov, on his Telegram channel, which had almost 900.000 followers [9,10]. Girkin's comments had been tolerated since 2014, when he became critical of the Russian authorities for insufficient action in Donbas, but he was suddenly arrested in July 2023, being charged of inciting extremism. Furthermore, three days before Strelkov's arrest, another "turbo-patriot", Kvachkov, had been charged with discrediting the Russian military [9], while at the beginning of October, Guzenko, the author of the popular

Telegram channel "13th", was arrested, being charged of "using violence" against the police. Several weeks earlier, Guzenko had criticised the authorities' decision to jail Girkin stating that traitors had taken over the country and threatened that if he was recognised as a foreign agent, he would "go to the Kremlin" with so many people that the authorities would "go crazy" [11]. Finally, nationalist organisations like the All-Russian Officers Assembly also came under renewed official scrutiny [12].

Importantly, nationalists' criticism of the authorities often focused on international issues. For example, Girkin began his post announcing his intention to run for president by emphasising that he considered himself "more competent in military affairs" than Putin. He noted that he had never trusted the West, unlike Putin, who had been deceived by Western leaders. Additionally, he drew attention to Putin's excessive naivete, which was exploited not only by Western and Ukrainian leaders, but also by the heads of Russian security services and the military. Girkin [13] also emphasised that he had no contacts with oligarchs, and therefore had no obligations to them, implying that these various connections and Putin's naivete were the main reason for the Russian army's failures in Ukraine. Earlier Girkin [9] ridiculed Putin writing that "for 23 years, a complete nobody has been in charge of the country" and explained that Russia "will break down if this cowardly hack stays in office for another six years". It indicates that both through the growing criticism of the regime and direct attacks on Putin, instead of general negative comments about the conduct of the war, Girkin crossed unwritten boundaries of managed pluralism. An additional reason determining the four-year prison sentence could have been his willingness to run in the 2024 presidential elections, to which the regime ultimately did not allow any independent or even partially independent candidate.

That said, this situation also indicates that as long as Girkin and other nationalists were seen as useful for the regime's goals, their public criticism was allowed, but this changed when the threats resulting from the growing criticism from the "turbo-patriots" camp became increasingly visible. This threat became particularly tangible after the Prigozhin mutiny and (lack of) reaction of members of the security services and the army, because as Mitrokhin [9] explains, this kind of criticism may serve as "an ideological basement for Prigozhin-like rebellions" and can undermine the army's leadership.

However, after several significant steps mentioned above which were taken in the months after the mutiny, this process slowed down, which means that many "turbo-patriots" still have the opportunity to speak publicly and criticize the authorities, which indicates the operation of mechanisms of managed pluralism. For example, after negotiations began to end the war in Ukraine, the Russian authorities' tactic of tempting the Trump administration with Russian resources was criticised by military bloggers who were outraged by the possibility of cooperation and sharing resources with a country they perceive as hostile towards Russia [14]. Likewise, the idea of a ceasefire was quickly condemned by supporters of the war. As Pertsev [15] explains, for "turbo-patriots" the war was the goal, while the authorities do not have a clear idea how to deal with this group. Furthermore, propagandist and political scientist Sytin [16] criticised the conduct of the war, publicly expressing doubts as to why Russia started the war if it is unable to take control of all of Ukraine using conventional forces, and most likely was not ready to use nuclear weapons. Thus, Sytin, in addition to criticising the authorities, publicly spoke out on the issue of using nuclear weapons, which is analysed in the next section.

The above analysis shows that nationalist voices that had been allowed for a long time, were partly suppressed in the summer of 2023 when they began to be perceived as dangerous to the regime, but have not been completely eliminated, which suggests management of their diversity by the regime. Indeed, these voices had been seen as

dangerous even months before the summer of 2023. For example, at the beginning of 2023, Matveychev, United Russia MP, spoke about "turbo-patriots" as "the only danger" to Russian state, a statement which Galeotti saw as potentially "encouraged by the regime as a way of signalling that it is beginning to take the turbo-patriot threat seriously" [8]. However, it was only after Prigozhin's mutiny that such voices, e.g. criticising the Russian leadership and Ministry of Defence, began to be seen increasingly as a threat, as similar arguments had been voiced by Prigozhin who, among others, had accused Shoigu and Russian top generals of treason for blocking the supply of ammunition to Wagner soldiers [17].

Consequently, this indicates that the silencing of Girkin and several other voices in the summer of 2023 was supposed to send a message to this group to keep it in line, rather than being a wider crackdown. In other words, it demonstrates that the changing reality after the Prigozhin's mutiny led to changing boundaries of what is (not) allowed publicly, one of the key characteristics of managed pluralism. For example, some military bloggers who had been very critical of the authorities, quickly changed their narrative [12], a shift which to a large extent results from the fact that in general the system does not allow for independent self-organisation [18]. It also explains why certain critical voices were still allowed in the public space, despite some of them being eliminated after the Prigozhin mutiny.

Overall, the analysis points to several mechanisms of managed pluralism. First, the presence of nationalist voices in the public discourse creates the illusion of pluralism, thanks to which especially people disappointed with the prolonged war in Ukraine, its course, and the performance of the Russian army saw that such opinions were represented in the public space and thus reached the authorities. Second, the constant, although of varying intensity, presence of nationalists in the public debate indicates that the Kremlin needs them to mobilise the public during the wartime, as it did in the period preceding it. As explained by Gallyamov and Mitrokhin [9], Girkin's long-standing criticism was tolerated by the authorities because he "matched some of Putin's strategic goals and ideology". In other words, "turbo-patriots" have been seen as a natural ally of the regime, being useful as they have been provoking patriotic mobilisation, among others, strengthening the image of the West as an existential threat. Likewise, the constant presence of "turbo-patriots" proposing various radical solutions helps portray Putin as a moderate and reasonable leader on whose common-sense Russians can count even in the most difficult moments.

Furthermore, Girkin and others publicly expressed the views popular among the siloviki. As Galeotti [12] puts it, Girkin was "a pressure valve releasing pressure for the disgruntled middle-rankers within the security forces and also a weathervane, showing the ways their sentiment was blowing". In addition, even when the "Club of Angry Patriots" announced entering Russian politics, the group described itself as an opposition party without any connections to the Kremlin, but noted that it saw Putin as the only guarantee of stability in Russia, whose removal from power "would mean the fall of Russia" [6], thus replicating the position often presented by the systemic opposition. This suggests the existence of several further mechanisms of managed pluralism. First, the use of nationalists as test balloons, showing how much support their diagnoses and proposals gather. Second, Galeotti's remark about "a pressure valve" once again points to a mechanism of creating the illusion of pluralism, but suggests that it may operate not only at the level of public opinion, but also members of the elite, and even the military or security services, who can thus see that their views are represented in the public debate, which distracts them from unofficial, potentially most dangerous for the regime,

channels of opposition. Third, the emphasis on Putin's role as a guarantor of stability in Russia, strengthens the president's position among various segments of public opinion and the elite. To sum up, these mechanisms point to the use of foreign policy issues for domestic, rather than international goals, an observation that may be useful from the perspective of NATO's threat assessment.

4. Nuclear Escalation Debate

Another area where managed pluralism can be a useful analytical tool is the issue of nuclear escalation. Since the beginning of the escalated war, the period when Russian leaders were most eager to refer to nuclear weapons was the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in autumn 2022. For example, Putin [19] explained that so far Moscow's reaction to Western attempts of "dissolving the Russian state" had been "quite restrained", but if nothing changed, the response would be "more impactful". In another statement, he made the nuclear threat more explicit saying that in case of a threat to Russia's territorial integrity, Moscow was ready to "make use of all weapon systems available", emphasising that it was "not a bluff" [20]. These references to nuclear weapons show the perception of the situation during Kyiv's counteroffensive as increasingly unfavourable and risky to Russia. More importantly, they indicate the leadership's readiness to resort to nuclear threats to influence Western decision-makers at the time when the Ukrainian army coped best and could have encircled 30,000 Russian troops in the Kherson region and recaptured further territories with the help of Western weapons. As Stanovaya [21] argued, the Kremlin had "issued an ultimatum to the world: either Russia wins in Ukraine or it will resort to nuclear escalation".

The American reaction suggests that these nuclear threats proved to be (at least temporarily) an effective way to influence Washington's, and more broadly Western policy towards Ukraine. It was at this point that US intelligence agencies assessed the risk of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons at 50%. Furthermore, Biden [22] publicly said that Putin was not "joking when talking about nuclear weapons", while in a conversation with his national security adviser he acknowledged "a very strong likelihood of nuclear use" if the West succeeded in pushing Russia out of Ukraine, statements which indicate that Russia's nuclear threats at that point worked, limiting the US's room to manoeuvre in terms of support for Ukraine. That said, subsequent months demonstrated that they worked only partially as the West continued to increase its support for Ukraine, sending new types of weapons which it had not been ready to send at the beginning of the escalated war.

However, the reaction to these events was not a series of stronger nuclear threats from Putin, but the emergence of the nuclear issue in the Russian public debate. This time it was not only media propagandists like Solovyov, who frequently threatened the West with nuclear attacks, but the nuclear debate also flared up among international relations experts. It gained momentum with Sergei Karaganov's article with the telling title "A Difficult but Necessary Decision" published in June 2023, in which he argued for the necessity of nuclear escalation. Karaganov, head of the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy and former adviser to Yeltsin and Putin, began writing that the confrontation between Russia and the West would not end even with Moscow's victory in Ukraine. He argued that a better option for Russia might be the annexation of southeastern Ukraine along with the demilitarisation of the remaining part but pointed out that such a scenario was only possible in a situation where Western support for

Ukraine stopped, which led him to key conclusions regarding the need for nuclear escalation [23]. Furthermore, and more importantly, Karaganov spoke about lack of space to improve relations with the West and growing threat of World War III due to Western actions, especially the loss of fear by Western leaders, which must be therefore revived. He elaborated explaining that by breaking the Western will, not only Russia, but all humanity would be saved. Consequently, Karaganov [23] saw making "nuclear deterrence a convincing argument again by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons" a necessary step, which would make the West realize that Russia was ready to deliver a pre-emptive strike which would prevent a global war.

Karaganov's article led to a wide response in Russia. For example, Russian International Affairs Council Director General, Timofeev [24], criticised his argumentation, stating that the pre-emptive nuclear strike would not eliminate the problematic issues in Russia's relations with the West, and in addition, would significantly worsen Russia's international position and might lead to a full-scale nuclear war. He pointed to many potential flaws in Karaganov's logic, such as underestimating the determination of Western elites, noting that it ignored the potentially catastrophic consequences for Russia itself. On the other hand, Trenin [25] wrote that nuclear weapons had been "on the table" from the beginning of the war in Ukraine as a way to keep Washington and its allies "from getting involved in the armed confrontation", but according to him, this strategy had not been successful and had not prevented NATO's increasing involvement in Ukraine. As such, he argued, the nuclear deterrence strategy had to be changed to reflect the experience of the war in Ukraine. He went on to write that a nuclear strike should become an option as only fear could help avoid a global catastrophe [25]. These arguments show that Trenin reached similar conclusions to Karaganov and his article was another voice encouraging changes in the nuclear doctrine.

In another publication, from April 2024, Trenin wrote that the war in Ukraine resulted from "the failure of strategic deterrence" in an area of Russia's vital interests. He explained that the US goal was to "inflict a strategic military defeat on Russia, despite its nuclear status", which meant a proxy war between two nuclear powers. Therefore, the concept of strategic stability worked only partially, being disrupted by the escalating conflict between Russia and the USA [26]. Consequently, the solution to the problem of (lack of) strategic stability was to strengthen nuclear deterrence in "an active" form, as the limits of "purely verbal intervention" were exhausted. Thus, Trenin argued for sending the most important messages through "concrete steps", such as doctrinal changes, "warnings about preparations for nuclear tests and the tests themselves". In this way, Russia would demonstrate its readiness to use all available capabilities and would "bring the enemy to a halt and encourage it to engage in serious dialogue" [26]. In other words, Trenin argued, among others, for changes in Russia's nuclear doctrine, something that Putin approved five months later, in September 2024.

However, before the Kremlin changed the nuclear doctrine, we could observe an interesting exchange of opinions between Karaganov and Putin, in which the president argued against nuclear escalation. During the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2024, Karaganov [27] raised the nuclear issue asking Putin how Russia could hold talks with the West without first defeating it and "holding a nuclear gun" over it and explaining that without "accelerated movement towards nuclear escalation", it would be impossible to end the war quickly. Reacting to these questions, Putin assumed a role of a moderate leader saying that Russia had no other partners, so it could not fight with everybody and explaining that nuclear escalation was not initiated by Moscow.

Furthermore, pushing back Karaganov's arguments, Putin referred to Russia's nuclear doctrine saying that nuclear weapons could be "used only in exceptional cases – when there is a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country". That said, a moment later he stated that the doctrine was "a living instrument" explaining that the Kremlin was **"**closely monitoring developments in the world" and did not **"**rule out the possibility" of changing the doctrine [27]. These statements indicate that the discussion over the nuclear issue at the forum as well as the broader debate about escalation present in the Russian public space for over a year, was useful to prepare ground for announcement of changes in the doctrine, in this way preparing the public for this step [5]. Thus, Putin posed for a responsible leader who respected the doctrine, but at the same time clearly indicated that if circumstances deteriorate, he might be forced to change it.

However, the exchange between Karaganov and Putin did not end there. Karaganov pushed further saying that the nuclear escalation could "save numerous lives by imparting a sense of caution" to Russia's opponents who had exploited Russia's "relatively permissive doctrine". He argued for Russia moving decisively up the escalation ladder in this way "instil[ing] some reason into humanity", a proposition which Putin clearly rejected showing himself as a responsible leader, a true statesman, who only takes risky decisions when it is really necessary. Indeed, after the exchange of nuclear arguments, Karaganov [27] described Putin's behaviour as "responsible", but in several other statements, Putin [28] was less moderate, for example stating that Russia's nuclear forces were on full combat alert. Thus, speaking about the possibility of changes to the nuclear doctrine Putin presented himself as a tough leader who is ready to take difficult decisions when circumstances change, at the same time as being responsible and moderate, especially compared to Karaganov's radical ideas. This dichotomy was perfectly visible when Putin [27] explained that as long as the West knew that Russia was not ready to make such a decision, it would continue to harm Russia "endlessly" and emphasised that Moscow's tactical nuclear weapons were "four times more powerful" than US bombs used during the WWII and that Russia possessed "significantly more of them", but as a *responsible leader* he quickly warned that in case of the use of nuclear weapons, casualties could "escalate indefinitely".

The analysis of the nuclear debate in Russia points to several important dimensions. First, it indicates that Putin's autumn 2022 references to nuclear weapons, supported with a similar message presented by Russian propaganda, with time became considered unsuccessful in influencing Western policy towards Ukraine not only by Russian experts, but especially by the leadership that allowed Karaganov, whose role is understood not only as an expert but also as a person with access to key decision-makers [29], to publicly launch a nuclear debate. Furthermore, and related, it shows a wide response to Karaganov's article, which transformed into a heated debate with various arguments, which leads to the question why the Kremlin allowed public discussion on this issue. Consequently, as with the targeting of some nationalist voices, the analysis of the public debate on nuclear escalation demonstrates the operation of certain mechanisms of managed pluralism.

First, the analysis points to the mechanism of testing opinions and moods regarding nuclear weapons, thus allowing or even encouraging public discussion and publications like Karaganov's one. Furthermore, it points to attempts to blur the line between thinkable and unthinkable for both domestic and foreign audiences as well as to familiarize the Russian public with possible updates in the nuclear doctrine and the topic

of nuclear weapons more generally[2], which prepared the ground for modifications to the doctrine, ultimately announced by Putin in September 2024. Indeed, Trenin [26] speaking about lowering the nuclear threshold argued exactly what Putin later did. Second, the whole debate around this issue and especially Putin's exchange with Karaganov helped to present Putin as a moderate and responsible leader, who, on the one hand, does not succumb to nuclear fever and tones down the ardour of supporters of nuclear escalation. But, on the other hand, who notes that if circumstances change, modifications to the nuclear doctrine can be introduced, thus presenting himself as a leader ready to defend Russia's interests. Thus, this exchange presented Putin as a tough, but reasonable leader as he emphasised that Russia would be ready to defend itself with any possible means, but at the same time, when directly asked about nuclear weapons, he rejected such a possibility, expressing a similar opinion at the Valdai Club meeting [30]. As such, it was others' role to escalate the nuclear threat, while Putin positioned himself in the middle as a moderate voice. Consequently, as with the presence of nationalist voices, this dynamic points to illusions of pluralism, because since Karaganov's publication, different opinions on the nuclear escalation appeared in the public debate, in this way normalising it and contributing to blurring the line between thinkable and unthinkable.

Last but by no means least, statements and actions of the Russian leadership indicate their belief that convincing the West of Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons is the best way to achieve goals in Ukraine by limiting Western support for Kyiv, which points to the mechanism of signalling to the West. It supports Pifer's [31] conclusions and more recently, Feklyunina's findings, who analysing the Cuban Missile Crisis narrative in Russia, also emphasises nuclear signalling targeting the West [5]. This mechanism was also mentioned by Trenin [25], who wrote that Russia should send the West an unambiguous signal that it would "not play at giveaway and by the rules set by the opposite side" adding that the real perspective of using nuclear weapons should "pave the way for a strategic equilibrium in Europe" that would benefit Russia.

5. Systemic Opposition and Elections

The third area in which it is worth applying the concept of managed pluralism are the recent processes concerning the systemic opposition and elections in Russia. Both Balzer [2] and Strycharz [3] demonstrate that boundaries of managed pluralism are unclear and may change, thus changing the rules of the game and this is how recent changes in Russian politics in terms of parliamentary opposition parties can be interpreted. Systemic opposition parties had been traditionally supported by people dissatisfied with the regime. This situation was mutually beneficial: on the one hand, these parties were supported by disappointed voters, and on the other hand, the regime was able to channel protest votes towards harmless systemic opposition, rather than unpredictable independent forces [2, 32].

However, recent actions initiated by members of the presidential administration suggest a change in the rules that were in place for more than 20 years and provided the official semblance of independence that gave at least partial legitimacy to these parties. According to Pertsev [32], people responsible for political technology at the Kremlin now see the party system as an "extension of the 'big political bloc'" developed by the presidential administration. He explains that the first attempts to change the system were

[2] See [5] for a similar interpretation.

taken before the 2021 parliamentary elections, when several new political projects were created to attract voters from different societal groups, thus strengthening the illusion of representation and pluralism to avoid big political protests. However, out of these projects, only the New People party entered the Russian Parliament in the 2021 elections, while Putin's preference to keep familiar structures led to efforts to reformat the existing systemic opposition parties, rather than replacing them with new ones [32]. In this renewed system, each party should work with a particular electoral segment which does not vote for United Russia and as a part of new unwritten rules, systemic opposition parties can, for example, recruit celebrities to attract public attention [32]. These changes indicate that it is not a problem for the presidential administration when these parties take some votes from United Russia, as the more important goal is to gather as much support as possible for the parties that are part of the system, so that voters' dissatisfaction or even anger was channelled, thus preventing them from opposing the regime and supporting an independent position.

The operation of the new rules in practice could be seen at the recent congresses of the LDPR and New People, at which members of the presidential administration were not only present, but also delivered speeches in which Sergei Kiriyenko, the First Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration and head of the Kremlin's political block, sketched new aims for these parties. At the LDPR congress, Kiriyenko [33], among others, emphasised the need to consolidate "all healthy, patriotic political forces", stressing that this is LDPR's role, which had proven its "true statehood, patriotism" and praising the party for helping soldiers and their families, thus contributing "to bringing the common victory closer". Likewise, Kiriyenko's speech as well as Duma Speaker Volodin's and Prime Minister Mishustin's addresses were key events at the New People party congress. Kiriyenko read out Putin's letter to the party members which emphasised its establishment as "a constructive political force", which was able to attract "energetic, creative, caring people with a responsible civic life position". Kiriyenko [4] described them as people who "previously had not been involved in politics" (attracting them was the goal of the presidential administration when creating the party), at the same time emphasising that New People supported President Putin on the key issues.

The last point is very important as it perfectly fits into the mechanism of showing national consensus on fundamental issues, one of the crucial elements of managed pluralism. Indeed, as Pertsev points out, currently New People is an example of an ideal political party from Kiriyenko's perspective as it flawlessly understands the new rules and the political bloc's expectations. On the one hand, the party submits bills, e.g. in support of business or to unblock some social networks, that are aimed at a younger, urban electorate, but at the same time regularly supports the war, but in less radical way than other parties of the systemic opposition, not to alienate the electorate mentioned above [34]. This aspect is particularly interesting as just before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, New People's MPs voted against the recognition of independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the party website accused the government of attempts to divert attention from domestic problems, also warning against the risk of escalation of the situation in Ukraine [35]. Overall, Kiriyenko's speeches from the two congresses demonstrate what different audiences the parties aim for, including in foreign policy issues. Two other systemic parties: the Communists and A Just Russia regularly support the war, even presenting themselves as more patriotic and radical than the government, thus demonstrating national consensus on this key issue.

The 2024 presidential elections in Russia can be seen as a transitional moment between the old and new rules, a moment when, on the one hand, the reluctance of party

leaders, Zyuganov from the CPRF and Nechaev from New People, to take part in the presidential contest revealed the limitations of the old rules [36], and, on the other hand, Nadezhdin, the candidate who channelled public discontent was not initially blocked. However, eventually, Nadezhdin was not allowed to run when it turned out how much support he could gather (see below), thus showing general discontent with the war and potentially weakening support for it among public opinion, which could have affected support for the regime. The managed, and to some extent, theatrical nature of the presidential elections was best demonstrated by statements of the candidates of the individual parties about their chances. When asked whether they planned to win, Davankov from New People laughed and replied that it depends on what "victory" means. Kharitonov, the CPRF candidate, replied that he could not speak in terms of winning or not, while Bogdanov, chairman of the Russian Party of Freedom and Justice, denied it outright, asking if he looked "like an idiot?" [37].

Furthermore, it is important to point to the topic of war during the elections, especially as after the quick elimination of one openly anti-war candidate, Duntsova, the regime ultimately blocked the candidacy of another one, Nadezhdin, but allowed Davankov from New People to run on a cautious anti-war platform. It shows that the Kremlin decided that the best solution was to try to channel anti-war views towards a candidate from one of the systemic opposition parties. Nadezhdin, who openly spoke that his main task would be to stop the war in Ukraine, had been initially ignored as uncharismatic and thus harmless [38], but thousands of supporters queuing in frigid cold to provide signatures for his candidacy and his campaign focused, among others, on the wives of mobilised soldiers, led to the spike in fears that the war could result in electoral backlash. Consequently, when his campaign began to gain momentum and he became perceived as a threat, he was banned from the elections [39]. This indicates that Nadezhdin could have been seen as a threat for at least two reasons. First, he could have gained enough votes to make it difficult to deliver the expected results (in the end Putin got 88.48%, and besides him there were three candidates of the systemic opposition who also had to receive their share of votes) and even more importantly, the authorities were concerned that anti-war views would gain too strong a platform, especially in a situation where more and more Russians supported peace talks with Ukraine [40]. In these circumstances, pro-peace views, even when expressed by a moderate candidate, were not accepted by the authorities, as this could destroy the image of elite consensus on the necessity of continuing the war.

The importance of the image of consensus on the most important international issues, and especially on the war in Ukraine, can be seen in statements of systemic opposition politicians immediately after the elections. Davankov [41], who during the campaign spoke about "peace and negotiations on our own terms", just after the elections expressed support for the "special military operation", saying that only Putin could guarantee victory. Kharitonov said that the country was "headed by a reliable man, a man trusted by the majority" and emphasised that he had "done everything for a powerful consolidation of Russians" around their leader. Slutsky [42], the LDPR leader, explained that many his party supporters contributed to Putin's victory, stressed the significance of reaffirming "the high prestige of our national leader" and supported the war calling it "sacred and noble".

The image of complete unity was also displayed the day after the elections during a concert celebrating the 10th anniversary of the "unification of Crimea with Russia", during which Putin appeared with his election rivals. Kharitonov emphasised that everyone remembered how the president did everything to ensure that "the people

of Crimea…return home". Slutsky spoke about the challenging days in which there was "no other choice but to return [Crimea] to its home" and exclaimed at the end "To the President of the great Russia!", while Davankov [43] said that he would never forget the sense of pride for his country and his president ten years earlier. To sum up, this event can be seen as a practical application of the expectation of national unity in important foreign policy matters, which Putin [44] clearly expressed in one of his pre-war statements explaining that party leaders in the Russian Parliament "always speak from a common and consolidated position when it comes to matters of external security and foreign policy, as well as protecting our country and our citizens' interests", thus perfectly describing this mechanisms of managed pluralism.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the three areas above shows the operation of several mechanisms of managed pluralism and points to the principles of its operation, especially with regards to voices that are allowed and prohibited in the public space. It demonstrates that a change of circumstances may lead to shifts in acceptable boundaries (as in case of nationalist voices) or may even entail changes in the operation of the system. Consequently, the silencing of some nationalist voices rather as a crackdown, should be understood as a signal sent to other "turbo-patriots" that certain criticism would no longer be tolerated. Indeed, already a few months before the Prigozhin mutiny, analysts wrote about the regime's changing tactics, which made criticism increasingly costly and difficult as the scope of what was politically admissible had "shrunk to the microscopic" [45]. Thus, the situation around Russia's "turbo-patriots" shows the influence of domestic circumstances, in this case concerns about the stability of the regime after the mutiny, on the boundaries of managed pluralism. In addition, it is worth looking at Putin's role in allowing access to the public debate. Stanovaya [46] notes that Putin distinguishes between good and destructive opposition, explaining that it allowed many nationalists, like Prigozhin, to remain untouchable for a long time, although they were politically more dangerous than the liberal opposition. Hence, figures like Navalny were seen as traitors used by the West to ruin Russia, while people like Prigozhin as true patriots implementing a pro-Russian agenda [46]. It indicates that what Putin sees as "right" partly sets the agenda of managed pluralism.

In the context of narrowing boundaries, which only intensified in the summer of 2023, it is hard not to interpret the nuclear debate that flared up around the same time as being inspired by the regime, with other, also independent, participants joining in over time. Importantly, the analysis of the nuclear escalation debate shows that in certain areas mechanisms of managed pluralism use not only the systemic opposition and media propagandists, but also the expert community. In addition, changes in the functioning of the system and the presidential elections in 2024 indicate the initiative of individual actors within the regime (Kiryenko and his political bloc) and how certain players, in this case the systemic opposition, must adapt to the changing rules.

However, it is worth remembering that even in managed pluralism not everything depends on the Kremlin. Even before the mutiny analysts spoke about the radicalisation of domestic politics, a process which was not organised by the Kremlin but was rather gaining its own momentum, becoming increasingly problematic for members of the regime dealing with domestic politics, who had to restrain the turbo-patriots [46]. It demonstrates that the Kremlin not only manages the public debate by steering it to the

right track, but the authorities also become recipients of voices circulating among the elites and in the public space, and they have to react to them. Finally, it once again shows that boundaries of managed pluralism can be trespassed, which may become dangerous for the regime.

Overall, the chapter demonstrates that despite the ongoing war in Ukraine and changes in the internal situation, or perhaps because of them, managed pluralism remains a more beneficial tool for the regime than the complete elimination of the opposition, as it provides an illusion of pluralism in both domestic and foreign policy issues, preventing the flight of public support to an independent opposition, e.g. one advocating an end to the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, it creates the possibility of supporting the authorities on the most important issues, thus showing the national consensus, even in light of growing internal challenges. In addition, with the complete elimination of the opposition, Putin would lose the opportunity to position himself as moderate in relation to other political actors and, similarly, the Kremlin would lose the opportunity to use the opposition to launch trial balloons giving insights into the mood of public opinion and elites on key issues, such as potential nuclear escalation or negotiations with the USA and peace talks with Ukraine. Finally, the use of other actors in the public space provides an opportunity to send signals to NATO countries, thus trying to influence their foreign policy.

To conclude, the application of managed pluralism shows different purposes for which foreign policy voices appearing in the Russian public debate are used. It indicates that not all of them are aimed at influencing Western countries, e.g. by increasing the sense of threat, as many of these voices are used for internal purposes, such as showing unity and strengthening the regime's stability. Nevertheless, the analysis and previous studies [3] indicate that the adoption of various radical proposals by the top decision-makers after the Russian public has been familiarised with them is a moment when they should be taken more seriously, at the same time remembering that many of them are expressed precisely to influence the actions of NATO member states. This demonstrates that the concept of managed pluralism is key for the proper assessment of the Russian threat by NATO, as well as for building enhanced resilience of the Alliance. Indeed, through scrutinising the Russian public debate, participants who are (not) allowed to it, and changing boundaries, managed pluralism can become crucial for analysts and policymakers in recognising patterns in Russian information warfare, being an effective tool in countering Russian disinformation and thus, helping to resist Russian influence operations and maintain Alliance cohesion.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Russia's War on Ukraine and the Shifting Order on NATO's Eastern Flank

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Abstract. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered assumptions about post-Cold War stability, marking a watershed for European and global security. This chapter explores the war's strategic consequences for NATO's Eastern Flank amid shifting security dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe. The conflict has exposed the vulnerabilities of the liberal international order and validated longstanding warnings from Eastern Flank states, especially Poland and the Baltic nations, about Russia's revisionist ambitions. As NATO shifts from reassurance to forward defense, the Eastern Flank has become the Alliance's geopolitical and military frontline. The analysis highlights three urgent priorities: military readiness, strategic cohesion, and deterrence through deeper integration with vulnerable partners like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. It argues that NATO's credibility depends on addressing the region's exposure to conventional, hybrid, and nuclear threats. The Eastern Flank is now both a testing ground for Russia's neo-imperial project and a measure of Western resolve. The chapter calls for a comprehensive strategy to reinforce defense, support partners, and strengthen cohesion. Without such action, the conflict could escalate into a prolonged strategic crisis. The future of the rules-based international order hinges on the West's response, not just to current aggression but to enduring structural threats to European security.

Keywords. NATO Eastern Flank, Russia, Ukraine, Russian invasion of Ukraine, European security, Central and Eastern Europe security, Strategic deterrence

1. Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in international relations, abruptly ending the illusion of a stable post-Cold War order. This event not only upended assumptions about peace in Europe but also signalled the unravelling of three decades of global interdependence. The consequences of the war have reverberated far beyond the immediate region, disrupting global energy markets, threatening food security in vulnerable areas such as Africa and the Middle East, and intensifying strategic competition among great powers – all while the world continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the protracted conflict in Donbas were early warnings of Russia's revisionist ambitions. Yet, many Western capitals were slow to react. The 2022 escalation, however, left no room for ambiguity: Russia had returned to an aggressive form of neo-imperialism. For NATO member states, especially those on the Alliance's Eastern Flank, this was not only a geopolitical shock but a validation of long-standing concerns about regional security. For years, countries such as Poland, the Baltic States, and Romania had warned of Moscow's destabilising intentions. These warnings, once considered alarmist, are now seen as prescient.

NATO's Eastern Flank – comprising the Bucharest Nine (Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) – has become the frontline in the defence of the Euro-Atlantic community. Since the initial Russian aggression in 2014, NATO has undertaken significant steps to adapt: enhancing military readiness, rotating forces along the eastern frontier, modernising command structures, and increasing defence spending. However, the 2022 invasion compelled the Alliance to move from reassurance to deterrence and forward defence. This shift signals a fundamental change in NATO's posture and identity, from a political-military alliance of crisis management and expeditionary operations to once again focused on territorial defence.

The implications of the war go far beyond Ukraine's borders. The conflict has effectively ended the notion that Europe is immune to large-scale interstate warfare. It has also exposed vulnerabilities in European energy policy, defence preparedness, and transatlantic cohesion. More broadly, the war challenges the basic assumptions of the post-Cold War international order, which was founded on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. These principles have been eroded not just by Russia's actions, but by the West's initial failure to respond forcefully enough to earlier provocations [1,2].

This chapter aims to explore the strategic consequences of the war in Ukraine for NATO's Eastern Flank. It asks several critical questions: Are the Alliance and its member states responding adequately to the long-term security threats posed by Russia? Can NATO emerge strengthened and revitalised in the face of Moscow's aggressive behaviour? And finally, does the Russian challenge to Ukraine represent an effort to overturn the U.S.-led liberal international order that has shaped global affairs since 1991?

While the chapter offers a compelling account of NATO's strategic adaptation following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it would benefit from a more explicit conceptual engagement with the theory of resilience as applied to deterrence. Resilience, in security contexts, encompasses a state's or alliance's capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to emerging threats, and recover from crises without losing core functionality. Unlike traditional deterrence, which relies heavily on the threat of punitive retaliation, resilience-based deterrence emphasises societal and systemic robustness, signalling to adversaries that aggression will not yield strategic gains. This conceptual shift allows for the integration of non-military dimensions – such as information integrity, infrastructural redundancy, and social cohesion – into broader deterrence postures. Embedding these frameworks into the chapter's analysis would sharpen the distinction between Cold War-style static deterrence and the adaptive, multi-domain resilience required in the current security environment.

Moreover, the transnational and hybrid nature of contemporary threats posed by Russia, ranging from cyber intrusions and disinformation campaigns to covert interference in electoral systems, necessitates a resilience approach that extends beyond national borders. NATO's Eastern Flank cannot be fortified through military

deployments alone; it requires enhanced societal resilience across allied and partner states, including borderland regions most vulnerable to Russian influence. These areas often serve as testing grounds for malign operations and therefore provide valuable insight into the mechanisms of both disruption and resistance. Drawing from borderland studies, the chapter could explore how local governance, civil society networks, and decentralised crisis response capabilities contribute to collective resilience. Incorporating these dimensions would not only broaden the theoretical foundation of the chapter but also align with the volume's overarching interest in adaptive deterrence strategies grounded in regional cooperation and knowledge transfer.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the collapse of the bipolar system left a power vacuum in parts of Eastern Europe. This vacuum has become a contested geopolitical zone, where competing visions of order clash. As Adam Daniel Rotfeld [3] observed, the nature of conflict has evolved from wars between states to civil, religious, and internal conflicts, yet the globalised nature of security means these localised disputes have wide-reaching impacts. The region between the European Union and Russia has emerged as a "grey zone" or what some call "the Kremlin's shadow" – a geopolitical arc stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Caucasus and Central Asia. These are states caught between integration with the West and coercion from the East, often lacking strong institutions or cohesive regional cooperation.

Russia's war against Ukraine is not just a local or regional conflict; it is a defining test of the resilience of the rules-based international system. The outcome of this war – and how NATO and the West respond – will shape the future of security in Europe for generations to come. Whether the liberal order can endure or be replaced by a world shaped by spheres of influence and coercive power remains an open and urgent question.

2. Heading Russia's Imperial Legacy, Ukraine's European Aspirations, and the Security Dilemma in Eastern Europe

The war in Ukraine is not merely a geopolitical conflict; it is a confrontation between two fundamentally different visions of political order. At its core lies Russia's enduring aspiration to regain influence over the post-Soviet space, and Ukraine's equally determined effort to break away from Moscow's orbit and integrate into the European political and security architecture. These divergent trajectories have produced one of the most consequential confrontations in post-Cold War Europe [4].

For Russia, the path to regaining global influence begins with reasserting dominance over its immediate neighbourhood. As Sergei Karaganov [5] has long suggested, a prerequisite for Russia's return to great power status is the consolidation of its role as a regional hegemon. Ukraine, by virtue of its size, resources, and symbolic significance, holds a central place in this strategy. Without Ukraine, any vision of a restored Russian sphere of influence remains incomplete. But Russia's aggressive attempts to reclaim this influence, particularly through military means, have instead exposed its limitations and provoked unprecedented resistance both regionally and globally.

Since the 2000s, Moscow has gradually shifted from a rhetoric of cooperation with the West to a more pragmatic, assertive, and militarised foreign policy. The so-called "petropolicy" of leveraging energy as a geopolitical tool, combined with an increasing reliance on hard power, especially in its dealings with the post-Soviet space, has defined this new approach. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its escalation in 2022 marked a definitive rupture. These actions have not only destabilised the region but also

discredited Russian-led integration initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union, particularly in the eyes of countries that once hovered in the grey zone between East and West [4].

The divergence between Ukraine and Russia is not accidental; it is the outcome of contrasting national identities and historical experiences. As Roman Szporluk [6] astutely argued, Ukraine aspires to become part of Europe, to embrace democratic norms, the rule of law, and integration with Western institutions. Russia, conversely, views such aspirations as existential threats. In choosing confrontation over cooperation, Moscow has effectively severed its post-Cold War engagement with Europe, turning instead to authoritarian assertiveness and strategic rivalry [5].

Ukraine's European choice, and Russia's refusal to accept it, represents more than a bilateral dispute. It signals the collapse of the notion that the post-Soviet space can be managed through ambiguous geopolitical balancing. The war has revealed the stark incompatibility between Moscow's imperial mindset and the sovereign choices of its neighbours. Analysts such as Adam Eberhardt [7] rightly argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks the most significant collapse of its influence in the region since the 17th century. The path Ukraine is on is not just about NATO or EU membership; it is about civilisational alignment and the rejection of Russian tutelage.

The conflict must also be viewed in a broader international context. As George Soroka [8] has noted, Russian foreign policy is driven by a worldview in which the sovereignty of small states is conditional and contingent. Russia demands respect for its own "great power" status while denying equal recognition to nations like Ukraine or Georgia. This double standard is emblematic of a system in which brute power, not legal norms or mutual respect, defines international conduct.

The strategic implications are profound. Eastern Europe remains a contested space, often described as a "grey zone" of security, where neither full Western integration nor Russian domination has prevailed. The persistence of frozen conflicts, Russian military deployments, and the erosion of arms control regimes like the INF Treaty have made this region one of the most volatile in the world. The deployment of Russian missiles capable of striking across Europe adds to the urgency of addressing this challenge.

Finally, the war in Ukraine exposes a critical gap in European strategic thinking. The European Union has struggled to formulate a coherent and assertive policy toward its eastern neighbourhood. This vacuum has allowed Russia to act with increasing boldness, exploiting divisions within the EU and capitalising on the lack of long-term strategic vision. Without a united and proactive Eastern policy, Europe will remain reactive, rather than shaping the geopolitical environment to its advantage.

A more nuanced understanding of Russia's neo-imperial posture requires situating its external aggression within the broader domestic and ideational structures that shape Moscow's strategic calculus. The internal drivers of Russian behaviour – particularly regime legitimacy, economic constraints, and demographic decline – play a crucial role in motivating foreign policy adventurism. The Putin regime, facing a legitimacy deficit rooted in stagnant economic performance and the erosion of electoral credibility, has increasingly relied on external confrontation to consolidate internal support. Military campaigns, such as those in Crimea, Donbas, and Syria, function as tools of performative sovereignty, reinforcing the image of Russia as a global power and portraying the Kremlin as the ultimate guarantor of national revival. These acts of assertiveness serve a dual purpose: distracting from domestic socioeconomic stagnation while solidifying elite cohesion around the Kremlin's vertical power structure.

Strategic culture also remains a key explanatory variable in Russia's decision-making. Grounded in a historically rooted suspicion of the West and a deep-seated emphasis on territorial security, Russia's geopolitical imagination continues to privilege buffer zones and spheres of influence as essential to its national survival. The legacy of the Soviet collapse looms large, fostering a narrative of historical injustice and betrayal by the West, which in turn legitimises aggressive measures as defensive acts aimed at preserving Russia's status and autonomy. This perception is further reinforced by the belief that Western liberal norms, especially democratic promotion and NATO expansion, pose existential threats to regime stability. Accordingly, Russian strategic behaviour reflects not just rational cost-benefit analysis, but also an ideological commitment to restoring a multipolar world order in which Russia commands regional hegemony.

Nevertheless, Russia's strategic calculus is not without vulnerabilities. The overcentralisation of decision-making within a narrow circle of elites and intelligence services increases the likelihood of misperception and operational overreach. Misjudgements regarding Ukrainian national identity, Western unity, or the resilience of liberal democracies have already produced costly consequences for Moscow, including severe sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and long-term degradation of economic capacity. Moreover, the Kremlin's reliance on coercive instruments – military, informational, and economic – has narrowed its strategic flexibility, trapping it in a pattern of escalation with diminishing returns. Recognising these contradictions within Russia's strategic behaviour is essential for crafting deterrence strategies that not only address Russian power but exploit its structural weaknesses and internal contradictions.

In conclusion, the Russo-Ukrainian war is not only a fight for territorial integrity and sovereignty. It is a struggle over the future of the post-Soviet region, the nature of global order, and the balance between authoritarian resurgence and democratic resilience. How Europe and the broader West respond to this challenge will shape the strategic landscape of the 21st century.

3. NATO at a Crossroads: Strategic Priorities for the Eastern Flank in the Age of Renewed Geopolitics

The end of the Cold War, marked by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, brought about a profound transformation of the global security architecture. These events forced NATO to redefine its mission, identity, and strategic direction in a world no longer divided by two antagonistic blocs. From the 1990s onward, the Alliance evolved into a political-military organisation increasingly focused on crisis management, counterterrorism, and cooperative security. However, the resurgence of geopolitical rivalries and the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine have once again placed NATO's core collective defence mission at the forefront, especially for its Eastern Flank members [9].

In recent years, the strategic environment surrounding NATO has become markedly more complex. Hybrid warfare, cyber threats, disinformation campaigns, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction have blurred the lines between peace and conflict. Simultaneously, NATO's eastern and southern flanks have faced distinct but equally pressing challenges. While southern European states have grappled with migration flows, instability in North Africa and the Middle East, and the consequences of the Syrian conflict, Eastern European states have been confronted with Russia's

aggressive revisionism – first visible in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and later confirmed by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

For Central and Eastern European countries, especially those bordering Russia or Belarus, the return of high-intensity warfare to the continent has served as a wake-up call. It has revealed the enduring relevance of territorial defence and reaffirmed the necessity of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. In this context, countries such as Poland, the Baltic States, and Romania have emerged as advocates of a stronger, more cohesive NATO presence along the Alliance's eastern frontier.

The notion of a future "NATO 4.0", advanced by retired Admiral James Stavridis [10], encapsulates the need for a multidimensional response to new and traditional threats. According to this vision, NATO must continue to deter Russia's ambitions in the East while expanding its capabilities in areas like the Arctic, cyberspace, and outer space. The future Alliance will need to combine traditional military preparedness with innovation in hybrid warfare and digital defence, ensuring that it remains relevant and effective in a rapidly evolving security landscape.

Crucially, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has re-energised the Alliance politically and operationally. It has accelerated defence spending across the Alliance, with more member states approaching or exceeding the two percent GDP threshold for defence expenditures. This trend not only enhances NATO's military capabilities but also symbolises a renewed commitment to collective defence. As Camille Grand [11] has noted, this shift represents a long-term investment in transatlantic security, benefiting nearly a billion people across Europe and North America.

In light of current developments, it is evident that NATO's Eastern Flank will remain central to the Alliance's strategic focus in the coming years. Russia's revisionist posture, ambitions to redraw borders, and pursuit of influence in the post-Soviet space all point to a prolonged period of strategic competition. For the countries of the Eastern Flank, NATO is not just a political alliance but a vital security guarantor, a bulwark against instability and aggression in a region still shaped by the shadows of history and the pressures of geopolitics.

4. NATO's Strategic Calculus in Eastern Europe: A Geopolitical Crossroads

In today's multipolar international order, security is increasingly shaped by the interaction of regional dynamics. Nowhere is this more evident than in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea basin, where multiple regional security complexes converge. This critical zone represents the intersection of three major geopolitical spheres: the European regional security complex, the post-Soviet space, and the Middle Eastern arc of instability. In addition, the region includes sub-regional hotspots like the Balkans and the Caucasus, each with its own volatile political and military realities.

NATO's evolving interests in this strategic corridor reflect the complex and fluid nature of the region. Several key developments have reshaped the Alliance's eastern focus over the past decades. First, the core of European security concerns has shifted eastward, away from Cold War-era focal points in Central Europe. This reorientation is driven by Russia's assertive foreign policy and the persistence of unresolved, ethnically-charged conflicts in the former Soviet republics [12].

Second, the post-Soviet space continues to be characterised by systemic instability – fragile institutions, economic volatility, and contested sovereignties. These factors are exacerbated by deteriorating relations with the Russian Federation, particularly

following the annexation of Crimea and Moscow's military actions in eastern Ukraine. In parallel, the rise of transnational threats emanating from the Caucasus region, including terrorism and organised crime, has made security in Eastern Europe inseparable from broader global security concerns.

The geographical location of Eastern Europe – situated between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia – enhances its strategic value. It serves not only as a vital corridor for energy transport but also as a gateway for illicit trafficking networks, including arms, narcotics, and human smuggling. This geographic centrality amplifies the region's importance for NATO, whose member states are increasingly aware of the need to secure these corridors and contain destabilising forces.

The role of Turkey as a NATO member also adds another layer of complexity. Following the Crimean annexation, Ankara's strategic positioning at the intersection of the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East has become even more consequential for the Alliance's posture in the region. Simultaneously, NATO's open-door policy, with aspirations for further enlargement, remains both a promise and a provocation, particularly from Moscow's perspective [12, 13].

Indeed, Russia's current leadership under President Vladimir Putin views NATO's presence in its former sphere of influence as an existential challenge. The Kremlin's rhetoric and actions signal a deliberate push to reverse post-Cold War gains made by former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states. In this light, the idea of "reintegrating" what the Kremlin considers "historically Russian lands" underlines a neo-imperial vision, sharply at odds with the West's liberal internationalist principles.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it a new international order – one that recognised the sovereignty of newly independent states, endorsed their right to chart independent foreign policies, and encouraged integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. Western powers welcomed Russia into multilateral forums such as the G8 and the IMF, hoping to foster cooperation. But recent developments, including President Putin's combative addresses at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and the 2015 UN General Assembly, reveal a growing revisionist agenda aimed at reshaping this order.

As Agnieszka Bryc [14] has aptly noted, regaining influence over global affairs has become a central driver of Russian foreign policy – a blend of imperial nostalgia and strategic ambition. The war in Ukraine, both in Crimea and Donbas, represents not merely a regional conflict but a larger geopolitical rupture: a turning point that has ended the cooperative post-Cold War era and ushered in a renewed era of confrontation. In response, NATO's eastern strategy must remain agile, cohesive, and forward-looking. The Alliance's long-term security depends not only on conventional deterrence but also on its ability to navigate a regional landscape marked by hybrid threats, political fragmentation, and the return of hard geopolitics [10].

5. NATO over 75: A Strategic Pivot Towards Central and Eastern Europe

In 2025, NATO marks 76 years of collective defence, democratic values, and transatlantic cooperation. More than a ceremonial anniversary, this moment offers the Alliance a critical opportunity to renew its strategic focus amidst one of the most complex security environments since the end of the Cold War. The Washington Summit in 2024 was not just a reflection on NATO's enduring relevance, it served as a crucial inflection point. Now, more than ever, the Alliance must demonstrate that it is fit for purpose in an era of renewed great-power rivalry, hybrid threats, and systemic disruption.

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has emerged at the heart of this transformation. With Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, growing Chinese influence, and mounting global instability, NATO's political and military centre of gravity continues to shift eastward. The region is no longer a buffer; it is a frontline. Against this backdrop, four strategic imperatives stand out for the NATO 2024 Summit, particularly through the lens of CEE's evolving role:

1. *Strengthening NATO–Ukraine Cooperation*: Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression has underscored its strategic value to the Euro-Atlantic community. While full NATO membership may remain a medium-term objective, the Alliance must make irreversible progress toward closer integration. This includes expanding the NATO–Ukraine Council's competencies, fast-tracking joint training and capability-building initiatives, and strengthening interoperability through permanent frameworks. Supporting Ukraine is not only a moral duty; it is a security necessity.

2. *Deepening Deterrence and defence on the Eastern Flank*: Russia's revisionism has forced NATO to rethink its deterrence architecture. For CEE countries, this means bolstering forward defences, modernising military infrastructure, and prioritising rapid mobility of forces. Increased defence spending must be sustained – not as a symbolic gesture, but as a practical investment in collective resilience. Crucially, the role of the United States as a stabilising force in Europe must be reaffirmed through an enduring presence and robust transatlantic coordination.

3. *Recalibrating NATO's Strategy Toward Russia*: NATO must develop a more assertive and comprehensive approach to dealing with Russia. This includes not only military readiness but also a whole-of-society approach encompassing economic, informational, and diplomatic tools. A renewed containment strategy should be focused on raising the strategic cost of Russian aggression while maintaining unity among allies. Isolation, deterrence, and long-term pressure – without closing the door to future dialogue under different political conditions in Moscow – should define this policy.

4. *Preparing for Global Strategic Rivalry, Especially with China*: While Russia remains the most immediate threat to CEE, long-term strategic competition with China demands equal attention. NATO must adapt to a world where technological dominance and supply chain security are as critical as conventional military power. For CEE states, this means enhancing national resilience, reducing economic dependence on authoritarian regimes, and actively contributing to NATO-led innovation platforms. Countries in the region can serve as incubators for defence technologies and play a role in shaping the Alliance's digital and strategic future.

6. Conclusion: Rethinking Security on NATO's Eastern Flank

This analysis has aimed to provide a broad overview of the security realities shaping NATO's Eastern Flank in the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. The current strategic environment reveals a profound imbalance: while many NATO member states have been slow to reinvest in conventional defence, the Russian Federation has

been actively testing and refining its military capabilities in real combat conditions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not simply a regional or isolated crisis; it is part of a long-term strategic ambition rooted in neo-imperial thinking and aimed at reshaping the European security order.

Treating Russia's aggression as a contained conflict risks misreading its deeper geopolitical implications. The war in Ukraine represents not only a test of Western resolve but also a rehearsal for future coercive strategies that Russia may deploy elsewhere. Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the Baltic region and the wider Black Sea area, remains the most exposed segment of the Euro-Atlantic space. Failure to fully recognize this exposure may result in strategic surprise and long-term erosion of NATO's credibility.

Russia's neo-imperial ambitions and confrontational posture toward the West cannot be fully understood without accounting for the interplay between domestic political imperatives and ideational drivers embedded in its strategic culture. The Kremlin's pursuit of external aggression serves as both a mechanism of internal consolidation and a reflection of a deeply entrenched worldview that frames security in zero-sum terms. Russia's leadership views the post-Soviet space not merely as a geopolitical arena but as a civilisational buffer that must be retained under its influence to preserve regime legitimacy and symbolic power. These imperatives have informed a pattern of behaviour characterised by assertiveness, historical revisionism, and rejection of the liberal international order.

However, the very foundations of this strategy are increasingly susceptible to internal contradictions and systemic risks. As the costs of militarised foreign policy escalate, both economically and diplomatically, Russia finds itself locked into a reactive and brittle approach to security. This creates important opportunities for the transatlantic community. Effective deterrence must go beyond conventional military posturing and incorporate strategies that exploit Russia's institutional weaknesses, reinforce democratic resilience in frontline states, and amplify the strategic consequences of Kremlin miscalculations. Only by understanding the full spectrum of Russian motivations – material, ideational, and structural – can NATO and the EU develop a long-term strategy that not only counters aggression but helps shape a more stable and secure European order.

The Eastern Flank now embodies NATO's frontline – politically, militarily, and symbolically. The evolving geostrategic role of this region is shaped by a mixture of conventional military threats, hybrid tactics, energy security concerns, and ethno-political vulnerabilities. Yet NATO's long-standing lack of a comprehensive policy toward the post-Soviet space has left a strategic vacuum that adversaries are eager to exploit.

As retired General Heinrich Brauss and security scholar Joachim Krause [10] have warned, NATO must avoid strategic distraction. While global challenges such as climate change, migration, and political fragmentation in the EU are pressing, they must not eclipse the hard realities of a revanchist Russia preparing for regional conflict scenarios in Europe, potentially backed by nuclear intimidation. Any credible long-term strategy must consider Russian military posturing as a component of an integrated war-preparation model spanning peace, crisis, and war phases. To meet these challenges, NATO must act on three interconnected fronts:

1. *Military Readiness and Forward defence*: The implementation of defence pledges from the Warsaw and Brussels Summits must be completed without delay. Eastern Flank states like Poland and the Baltic nations are leading by

example, but larger powers, especially Germany, must rapidly enhance their force posture and logistical readiness.

2. *Strategic Cohesion and Policy Clarity*: NATO needs a unified and forward-looking strategy for the post-Soviet space. Ad hoc or reactive policies will not suffice in the face of Russia's calculated long-term aims. Security for the region must include not only military guarantees but also support for political sovereignty, economic resilience, and defence innovation.

3. *Support for Partners and Deterrence by Integration*: Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova must not be left in a grey zone vulnerable to destabilisation. While NATO membership for Ukraine remains a politically charged issue, deepening interoperability, joint exercises, and defence assistance must proceed as a pathway toward integration and deterrence.

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine has redefined the strategic significance of NATO's Eastern Flank. This region is no longer simply a zone of reassurance; it is a zone of active defence and strategic competition. NATO must not only respond to current threats but also anticipate future ones. Adaptation, investment, and cohesion are essential. If the Alliance is to remain the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security, it must confront the changing security order in Eastern Europe with clarity, urgency, and resolve.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Russia's War in Ukraine: Deterrence and Resilience in Asia

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Abstract. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has not only disrupted the international norms and order but has also divided the globe in a manner similar to the Cold War. While Europe has largely united in confrontation against Russia, Asia's policy responses reflect a complex landscape shaped by diverse national interests, strategic calculations, and historical legacies. Major Asian powers – Japan, South Korea, China, and India – have formulated their responses to Russia, revealing varied approaches to deterrence, alignment, and resilience. Japan and South Korea, as close allies of the United States, have joined Western-led sanctions, though differing in scope and intensity. In contrast, China and India have maintained strategic partnership with Russia, while cautiously avoiding direct confrontation with West and the United States. Beyond national-level foreign policy, the paper also investigates how these geo-political shifts affect Asia's borderlands, with particular attention to the Japan–Russia borderlands. Once functioning as spaces of cross-border exchange and confidence-building despite unresolved territorial disputes, these borderlands have increasingly reverted to Cold War-style barriers under the strain of renewed geo-political tension. The study assesses how borderlands have responded and whether they still retain any capacity to facilitate future engagement. By integrating analyses of state-level policies and borderland dynamics, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on regional resilience, Cold War reoccurrence, and the evolving geo-political landscape in Asia following Russia's war in Ukraine.

Keywords. Asia response, geo-politics, cold war, strategic alignment, borderlands

1. Introduction

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the world appears to be as divided as during the Cold War. The discourse regarding Russia's war is widespread, particularly in Europe. Vladimir Putin himself cautiously avoids the term war, preferring to use "special military operation" as if repressing rebellion in one country. Occasionally, he asserts that Ukraine is NOT a sovereign state but an artificial state that had never possessed its own kingdom or statehood, and thus, must cease to exist.

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Since 1992, Ukraine has been a sovereign state *de jure*, and Russia, as the successor state of the Soviet Union, recognised it as an independent state. Putin's argument suggests that a former empire or superpower could theoretically reject the sovereignty of any country at any time.

Putin has his own "logic" to justify Russia's war; it is not a "war" against Ukraine but against the U.S. and West. Ukraine would have been an essential part of the "Russian World" if outsiders had not provoked Ukraine against its "brother." Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a "neo-Nazi" leader who has been supported by a West that seeks a weaker Russia. These antagonistic views echo a new Cold War discourse that Putin throws against the West. The dichotomy of "friend and enemy" again prevails in Europe.

Russia has destroyed the international norms and system that it created and maintained after WWII. The Soviet Union was a responsible superpower that regulated the post-WWII order. Even during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, along with the U.S., was leading the decolonising process in Asia and Africa. Despite facing numerous challenges, its socialist regime influenced many developing countries on their paths to modernisation. Many international norms that granted privileges to the major powers were challenged through Soviet initiatives, sometimes with support from coalitions of "third world" countries, within the U.N. General Assembly and many other international bodies.

Although the Soviet Union was notorious for dividing the continent in the late 1940s and repressing East European countries as its satellite states, it was also recognised as an initiator of détente in the 1970s and the Helsinki Process, which ultimately caused the disintegration of the Eastern bloc. Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika ended the Cold War, and the new Russia wanted to transform and participate in a new democratic order.

Putin's Russia rejects the constructive results of previous Soviet and Russian engagement with the world order. The year 2022 marked the end of the "happy" thirty-year post-Cold War period [1]. However, when we observe the global situation beyond Europe, the landscape appears significantly different. Donald Trump's manoeuvring for "peace negotiations" with Putin seems to decouple the U.S. from Europe; this contrasts with U.S.-European unity displayed against Russia under the Biden administration. However, non-European territories were less divided.

In Asia, only Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan have imposed sanctions against Russia. China provides significant support to Russia. Meanwhile, India has also benefitted from extensive energy and military cooperation with Russia under more favourable terms than in the past. Other Asian countries have adopted a cautious stance, prudently avoiding involvement in a "regional European conflict."

As background, this paper highlights the diverse policies adopted by Asian nations towards Russia following the outbreak of war, focusing on Japan, South Korea, China, and India. The responses have varied depending on these countries' political values, historical backgrounds, as well as their geo-political and economic interest. Even sanctions imposed by Japan and South Korea differed in both scope and effectiveness. Analysing the Asian realities which structure these responses may provide insights into how to foster resilience in regional relations and anticipate future trajectories of foreign policies. When state-to-state relations are viewed in "black and white" terms, it is also important to continue to review the transformation of the borderlands situated between these states. Re-militarisation in one country more significantly affects its borderlands which face the "enemy" threat.

Most of Asia's borderlands in the post-Cold War period enjoyed "bridging" functions, promoting the exchange of people and goods with neighbours. Even Japan-

Russia borderlands, despite being one of the world's longest unresolved territorial disputes, have experienced sustained period of cross-border exchange and economic collaboration with Northern Territories, over the past three decades. However, the war has altered these bridges into barriers reminiscent of the Cold War. Despite these disruptions, it is important to continue examining the transformation of these borderlands and to explore ways to promote reconnection. How are the borderlands addressing these issues? Do they still retain possibilities for recovering a degree of pre-war resilience? The paper also aims to contribute to border studies theory and seeks a new dimension base on within which to make contributions, even "small" ones, to stability and peace in the region.

2. Japan: A Leading Sanction State against Russia

Japan, a member of the G7, has distinguished itself in Asia by enforcing sanctions against Russia, restricting trade, financial transactions, and travel. To isolate Russia and its economic actors in liaison with the U.S. and EU, the following sanctions were implemented: Bans on importing goods, such as diamonds, aluminium, and other strategic materials; Restricting access to the international financial system, and freezing of assets of designated individuals and entities; Bans on entry into Japan for specified individuals and entities associated with the Russian government or regime: Export restrictions on goods that could be applicable for military or dual-use purposes; Advising Japanese citizens against any entry into Russia for travel and business. Consequently, 48 % of Japanese companies halted their activities in Russia [2].

Japan's resoluteness offers a contrast with its earlier actions. When Russia invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, while superficially claiming adherence to international norms, and annexed Crimea in response to "popular determination," Japan was hesitant to join sanctions. Its eventual participation, under pressure from the Obama administration, was nominal and referred to as a *vacuum cut,* "non-substantial sanction." Japan had two existing reasons to avoid imposing strong sanctions: the Northern Territories issue and China.

The former premier, Shinzo Abe, wanted to solve the territorial dispute, sign a peace treaty, and restore full diplomatic relations with Russia. First, he wanted to develop a comprehensive foreign policy for Japan in cooperation with Russia. Second, he planned to decouple China from Russia, one of China's most important "strategic partners," which posed a challenge to Japan's interests in the near future. Abe's return to the premiership at the end of 2012, was viewed as an opportunity for Japan to negotiate a deal with Russia, but this was disrupted by the Crimean event.

Conversely, Vladimir Putin also considered the territorial issue as a means to decouple Japan from the U.S. and Europe, similar to Nikita Khrushchev's actions in the mid-1950s. Putin showed his "good will" towards Abe and suggested peace treaty negotiations based on the 1956 joint declaration; this states that Shikotan and Habomai, two of the four islands claimed by Japan, would be transferred to Japan after the peace treaty is signed. His "good will" worked as a lure for the Abe administration. Abe invited Putin to his hometown, Yamaguchi, in December 2016, when pressure from Obama was waning. Though little progress was made, Putin and Abe announced better ties through a joint press release in Tokyo. Putin was very active and seemingly honoured to be there, despite the EU announcing additional sanctions on Russia that day. Putin used Abe's reception to show that he was not isolated globally.

However, this affability yielded minimal results. Frustrated by the stalemate, Abe presented a new proposal in November 2018. This proposal sought the transfer of two islands to Japan, relinquishing further claims implied in the 1956 joint declaration. Nevertheless, Putin disagreed with the new proposal, citing disdain for Japan's reliance on the U.S. forces for security. He suggested Japan was not a "sovereign state" because it cannot make independent decisions on national security. Before the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, negotiations had reached a deadlock. The pandemic concealed the lack of progress. Then, the war began in 2022.

Post-Abe administrations recognised the realities of Putin's intentions. The impossibility of decoupling Russia from China is now clear. The war increases Russian dependency on China in every field. Therefore, Japan had no reason to hesitate in participating with international sanctions in 2022. Cooperating with the EU and U.S., Japan fully imposed these measures. If Putin had continued negotiations, Japan would not have imposed such significant sanctions as it did. Putin might not have expected the war to continue till today. It has been a great miscalculation to have discarded Japan earlier. Paradoxically, Abe's failure to resolve the territorial issue led to Putin's mistake of discarding the Japan card in the war.

Even if the territorial issue is decisive for Japan's foreign policy towards Russia, other motivations for imposing sanctions should also be considered. Politically, one of the crucial factors must be the alliance with the U.S.; in particular, Japan is apprehensive of China's intentions towards Taiwan following the Russian precedent. The U.S. alliance encourages Japan's current sanctions without concerns over the peace treaty negotiation. However, the international law aspect is also important. Japan, as a normative state, wants to retain the current international order, which incubated Japan's recovery from defeat in WWII. Japan's pacifist constitution remains intact, encouraging its effort to maintain a law-based international society and deter China's unlawful actions.

In summary, even if Trump successfully negotiates with Russia for a ceasefire, Japan will not easily follow the U.S. path and align with most EU countries out of normative considerations. Putin might demonstrate amicability over the peace treaty issue to divide Japan from Europe again; but the Japanese government will not be easily swayed because they remember past lessons from the Abe administration.

3. South Korea: A Sanction Swing State

South Korea has also been participating in sanctions against Russia since 2022. However, its stance is quite distinct from that of Japan. It resembles Japan after 2014, namely, as an imposer of "nominal sanctions" against Russia [3]. At the beginning, Korea hesitated to pose sanctions against Russia. While the "conservative" referred to the Russian behaviours in Ukraine as infringement of the international norms and Korean participation in the western camp, the "progressive" insisted that Korea keep a balance between Russia and Ukraine and away from the European theatre against the sanctions. As a result, the government decided to join the sanctions a bit later [4].

Some of the sanctions seem similar to those imposed by Japan, such as export controls and the removal of several Russian banks from the SWIFT global payment system. However, the outstanding difference is that most Korean companies, including Hyundai, Kia and others, continued to operate in Russia. 81 percent of Korean companies still operate in Russia according to a Chinese economist survey [5]. Small businesses in

Russia and exports via Central Asian agents also bypass sanctions, suggesting that Korea retains a great deal of interest in Russia [2].

It is notable that Korea declared the policy of no supply for lethal weapons for Ukraine in the case [6]. Korea had many experiences to join the U.S. led armies such as in Vietnam after the WWII in difference from Japan as a "no-war" clauses under its peace constitution. In addition, some Korean academic societies, and particularly Russian schools, still retain valuable ties with their Russian counterparts. They continue to host research events with Russian scholars, occasionally with an ambassadorial presence [7, 8]. This is very different in Japan, where all its national university corporations are prohibited to collaborate with Russian counterparts or send their professors to Russia.

Why is the South Korean stance like that of Japan in 2014? [9] First, it should consider their historical distrust of international norms. When we study Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula in the early 20th century, European powers were indifferent to the survival of such a small country. In 1907, a Korean envoy appealed the illegal action of the Japanese Empire to Hague but they neglected the claims. Thus, in the Korean discourse, traditional international norms such as state sovereignty or non-interference in internal affairs were merely verbal and great powers' tool but not universal in many cases. Most South Koreans do not emphasize the norms as Japan does nowadays[2].

Second, the historical background as a small nation surrounded by great empires is critical. In the imperial period, Northeast Asia was challenged by great European powers in search of colonising the territory. China, Japan, Korea faced the same challenges simultaneously. On one hand, Japan successfully modernised its political system after the Meiji Restoration with rapid industrialisation; China became weaker, having more pressure from the Europeans, but still surviving the Qing Dynasty's legacy. The two major rivals competed over the Korean peninsula during the collapse of the Choson Dynasty. Finally, Japan defeated China in the war which began in 1894, but Russia hindered Japan by supporting Korea. This was the prelude to the Russo-Japanese war from 1904 which led to Japan's unexpected victory. Consequently, Korea became a colony of Japan as mentioned before.

The Koreans created an image of Russia as a "white knight" against the Japanese invader. Therefore, in Japan, Russo-phobia remained after the Cold War, but Russia has a vastly different representation of Korea. For example, the Russian (Soviet) term for "saving you" often sounds beautiful to those sacrificed by great powers. It resembled Putin's discourse on Ukraine: We can save you from "neo-Nazis" and lead you on the "right path." In addition, it may be true that some Russians are "honest" men who believe that the mission is great. Historically, if Koreans were "saved" from the Japanese Empire by the "Russian world," they would recognize the gap between the narrative and the crucial realities. It is not claimed here that Japanese rule was better than the Russians. It is a counterargument; the Koreans did not know how Russia ruled over its colonised people.

A minor reason can also be considered. Some Korean non-Russian experts state that the Russian school in the Korean academic community seems more favourable towards Russia because of their direct experience being limited to more positive periods in Russia. In the 1980s, many books interpreting Japanese research for Russians filled the shelves.

[2] In contrast, some Koreans – particularly those identifying as "progressives" – strongly embrace emerging global norms such as human rights and decolonisation principles. They tend to take an assertive stance against Japan's historical actions, especially its role as a former suzerain power.

South Korea did not have diplomatic relations with Russia until 1990 which means that most Korean researchers experienced the Gorbachev era and the new Russia as youngsters. They only had a good image of Russia with an unstable but democratic and dynamic society. Factually, the Russian ambassador to South Korea, Georgy Zinoviev [10], stated that South Korea was one of the "friendliest country among unfriendly countries."

However, the main reason for South Korean hesitation to sanction against Russia must be the existence of North Korea. When Korean newspapers refer to the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 2022 to 2025, most of the discourse concerns the war as a variable issue in the context of North Korean issues [4]. In brief, Koreans are worried that provoking Russia will place it on the North Korean side. Although the U.S. pressed South Korea to impose more sanctions and provide aggressive weapons for Ukraine, they resisted this request. The South Korean attitude for preserving national interests looks like Japan since 2014: North Korea works for South Korea as Northern Territories for Japan.

Following Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea in 2024 and the military deal – ammunition and soldiers for Russia and high-tech support for North Korea – the situation changed dramatically. Despite high pressure from the U.S., the Korean government had resisted providing "offensive" weapons such as KM-SAM Block 2, a medium-range surface-to-air missile system, K2 Black Panther tank, K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzer, and K239 Chunmoo multiple rocket launcher to Ukraine according to its policy not to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine [11]. South Korea still did not want to provoke and push Russia to be a North Korean ally. However, after Putin's deal with Kim Jongun, the atmosphere changed. The administration of Yoon Suk Yeol suggested to reconsider the sanction level against Russia and the military support policy for Ukraine [12]. The Korean attitude is yet to be shifted although discussions are ongoing. The reshaping of policies was halted by the presidential martial law scandal. If the next president comes from the "progressive" party, its "pro-North Korean" policy would apply the brakes to the updated situation.

4. China: A Necessary but Nuanced Ally

Following the invasion, China's attitude toward Russia has been disputable. China's support for Putin is unclear considering its interests with the U.S. and Europe. Some reports say China pretends not to support the war but provides full assistance for Russia's war development [13]. If China ends its support, Russia could not continue the war. Others say China does not want to be involved in the war, but a defeated or weaker Russia would challenge China's interests because of facing U.S. pressure alone.

Both interpretations may be persuasive to some extent; Xi Jingpin firmly and officially supports Putin, and the future Sino-Russian "strategic tension" scenario is broken [14,15,16]. Decoupling China from Russia and vice-versa would not work; for example, Japan attempted this in the 2000s [17]. However, it does not necessarily mean that any other voice does not exist in the Chinese policy research circle.

When one of the authors, Akihiro Iwashita, met a militant researcher from China in Budapest at the MCC peace conference of June 2023, he [18] privately informed him that Russia has no future. Furthermore, he did not care about a weaker Russia because it might be advantageous for China as an energy provider and in the consumer market but not so relevant for China's interests. Feng Yujun [19], the distinguished Beijing University

professor and strategic researcher on Russia, published a paper about no hope for Russia. It might surprise the world, but it is one of the suggestions that prevailed in his research.

Let us introduce his discussion in more detail. He identifies the three impacts on Russia under the war. First, it is a "decisive historical watershed moment" and "strategic defeat" for Russia. Even if Russia achieves tactical victory, Ukraine's Western integration would be avoidable. Second, global diplomatic isolation is clear because of the overwhelming condemnation at the UN General Assembly and the historical record of international opposition to Russia's action. Third, it caused NATO's dramatic revitalisation, including Finland and Sweden, to alter the European security architecture to Russia's disadvantage. Furthermore, he suggests that, historically, several of Russia's wars were followed by revolutions and civil wars and implies what would happen after this war.

Concerning the Sino-Russian relations, it hit a peak at the beginning of the war. However, now, China wants to maintain a distance to consider conflicts of interests, particularly he is afraid that China would be engaged by the Russia-North Korean axis against the U.S. and West. This will not serve China's national interest [20].

From my observation, Chinese experts on non-Russia tend to focus on cooperation with Russia to balance with the U.S., while many experts on Russia echo Russia's distrust and challenges. For the time being, the leadership seems to ignore the Russian school voices, but the future reshape of Chinese policy regarding Russia is unclear. Why do they remain cautious of Russia under any circumstances within its partnership? Most scholars from the Russian school focus on bi-lateral history and discuss current and future relations. Chinese scholars still remember the past imperial behaviours of Russia in the nineteenth century, rather than Soviet era actions. In the mid-nineteenth century, China faced heavy challenges from major western powers. Most of the incursions came from the maritime zone such as the British and French aggressions. Russia's attack was worse because of its direct continental marching toward the Northern China that Qing dynasty had claimed as its own territory. Mao Zedong [21] later called it a "million kilometer square loss of the territory."

After the communist revolution, Russian power projection decreased but regained its position under Stalin's modernisation period. Japan occupied Manchuria in the 1930s but the Soviet army liberated it during the end of WWII. Following the Chinese communist victory of 1949, the Soviet Union and China promoted the "socialist brotherhood" as friendship for Russia but an inferior, junior status for China. In fact, Stalin disregarded Chinese territorial claims and controlled the border rivers of Amur and Ussuri, where many islands would have belonged to China if the international norms, Thalweg principle, were applied for river demarcation. This background caused the Chinese stealth attack on Damanskii islands in March 1969 and the Sino-Soviet war tensions spread throughout 7000 km of borderlands. Sino-Russian relations reached a low point in history, nearing nuclear war.

Sino-Russian relations achieved rapprochement after Gorbachev's appearance in the late 1980s, and the bi-lateral relations improved through actions such as the Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan, Mongolia and the borderlands with China. The 1991 border agreement finalised 98% of the disputed area, regulating the geo-political peace and stability of the two countries. Even under the turmoil before/after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bi-lateral relations overcame the challenges of the border affairs: delay of demarcation work and massive Chinese immigration in the Far East during the 1990s. Developing the "strategic partnership" from 1996 to the friendship treaty of 2001 and the final solution of the remaining border dispute islands of 2004 completed the principle

of bi-lateral cooperation [22]. Since then, the international collaboration has been more flexible. It suggests that if the international cooperation faces challenges by the U.S. and Europe, which causes difference of interests between the two countries, it will not become "strategic tension."

However, it does not mean that China will trust Russia indefinitely; Chinese still remember the Amur massacre in 1900 and the following unilateral actions to wipe out Chinese residents on the left coast of the river that even the "unequal treaty" guaranteed the right to live for Chinese people. In other words, Russia occupied Chinese territory, violating the same international norms that were imposed on China. China wants to distance itself from "outlaw Russia" but it must be wary about any future focus on the East, as Russia did in the nineteenth century.

If we compare China with Korea and Japan, the Chinese geo-political path is more like Japan than Korea. China and Japan share the view of Russian "liberation" missions, recognising them as aggression. They recall historical rivalries and victimisation by Russia. Therefore, despite the China-Japan rivalry being in mainstream relations, both countries have the potential to cooperate concerning Russia. Many Japanese researchers do not want to work in China because of being detained anywhere and anytime, but our academics still work together on how to deter/engage Russia in Northeast Asia [2, 17].

In conclusion, the perceptual dichotomy of whether Sino-Russian relations are either "alliance" or "adversary" is naïve. The relations have been made of dual structure: geo-politics [23,24] and international relations. The latter would be changeable and influential by external forces; as the invariable, the former determines the fundamental bi-lateral relations in depth. Therefore, no fundamental change in relations is expected soon. However, geo-political conversions may disrupt them again in the long term, but this is not foreseeable yet. The difference between the two dimensions should be noted when analysing relations.

Finally, the Taiwan issue should be referred to in the section. Taiwan has been an essential geo-political interest for China, although an international issue for Russia. For years, Russia did not want to be involved in the Taiwan crises. In the1990s, under the name of the partnership, Russia maintained the position of Taiwan as a part of China although democratic Russia loved to develop economic ties with Taiwan too.

Interestingly, in the 2000s, a joint statement by the two leaders did not mention Taiwan's status. "Economy and peace first" were the goal. Both Russia and China concentrated on practical and functional cooperation, more than the sensitive political issues. This trend continued in the Xi Jinping' era beginning in 2012. No joint statement mentioning Taiwan appeared for almost ten years.

The sudden and first appearance was the joint statement issued on February 6, 2022, when Putin visited Beijing during the Olympics. This statement was famous for the declaration of the "no limit partnership" between the two but few noticed the revival of the Taiwan clause, "an integral part of China" and "objection to any form of its independence" [25]. Focus should be given to the summit on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's confidential message for Russia's plan for the "special military operation" on Ukraine (expected to end shortly). There is little information on the details of the talks, but the sudden disclosure of the Taiwan clause could be linked to the war preparation. It is an estimation, but Xi Jinping might urge Putin to reconfirm his back-up of China's operation in Taiwan. The period of "economy and peace first," gradually eroded since 2013, turning into full-fledged political ambitions. The following joint statements in 2023, 2024 and 2005 featured the Taiwan clause as a priority with a

long reference [26]. This item must be a good test for considering the Sino-Russian relations.

5. India: No Alliance with Multi-polar Preference

India had a unique position facing the U.S.-Russia-China triangle. Soon after independence, India had delicate relations with the U.S. and its anti-imperial/colonial orientations. The main Indian foreign policy has been "independent" from any military bloc as called "non-alignment," keeping away from the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The political realities were not that simple: As a representative of the de-colonising camps, India's policy orientation has been aligned with the Soviet Union, not with the U.S. and Europe. Nevertheless, at the beginning, the U.S. supported India to counter communist China. However, India and China declared the five peace principles in the1950s and reconciled with each other. India could be distant from the United States. The borderlands challenges between India and China ended relations and resulted in war in 1962. Since then, China has been a "threat" to Indian security. Particularly, the U.S. rapprochement with China in the early 1970s forced India towards the Soviet Union under the shadow of the Sino-Pakistan coalition.

Geo-politically, India's concerns about its neighbours are primarily with Pakistan, a succeeding part of India under the UK rule, and then, China. The Soviet Union has been far from India, not an essential partner. In the Cold War process, India-China/Russia-China conflicts cemented the relations reflected by the international landscape based on geo-political dynamics.

The post-Cold War reconciliation between China and Russia decoupled India from Russia. India also looked more to the U.S. and had little interest in Russia in the peace environment. When Yevgeny Primakov, premier of Russia, declared the famous formula of the "strategic triangle" in 1998, both China and India never dealt with Russia as a "romantic." The following Indian economic interdependence on pre-Xi Jinping's China in the 2000s reduced Russia's significance in the triangle. The Sino-India trade value increased seven-fold from 2001 to 2006 to $25 billion. An Indian sinologist, in the early 2010s, stated that China was no longer to be viewed as a "threat," but rather as a partner, debunking the political turmoil of the territorial disputes that provoked the military conflict in 1962 and remain unresolved [27,28].

However, tensions in China-India relations due to the Doklam incident in Bhutan in June 2017, military incidents in the Galwan Valley in the Himalayas in June 2020, and other events have led India to view China as a "threat" again. Nevertheless, their interdependence has continued with approximately $83 billions of trade volume in 2020, as China became India's top trading partner. Russia hit a diminishing presence in India with $8 billion in 2020 and accounted for only 1.2% of India's total trade value.

The depth of Russia-India relations is often explained by long-standing military and economic links [29]. Russian provision of the S400 air defence missile system and the Akula-class nuclear submarines were key examples of military cooperation in recent years. India was dismissive when the U.S. raised concerns about its dependence on Russia because India had no alternative except Russian military techniques. Provision of the latest Sukhoi models and ammunition for India keep Russia in their international relations. In fact, 60–70% of India's weapons used to come from Russia/the Soviet Union, and the large-scale annual land- and sea-based military exercises are predicated on these arms sales.

However, since 2017, India's dependence on Russia for arms has been decreasing. From 2012 to 2016, India's dependence on Russian arms dropped to 70% of its total and from 2017 to 2021 to less than 50%; it was replaced by Western arms supplies. In addition, although small, military cooperation and exercises between Pakistan and Russia encourage India not to depend only on Russia.

Energy may be a key issue in economic cooperation. India enjoyed inexpensive oil purchases from Russia, but its dependence was only 2–3% of total imports into India before the war. India benefited from purchasing oil from Russia because the import percentage was less than 1% of its total crude oil imports before the war but it jumped to a staggering 40% [30].

India is concerned that relations with the U.S. would be damaged, and that they would be disadvantaged if subject to sanctions, though the Trump administration carries a different message. The energy supply from Russia works positively in the short-term, but it would not necessarily continue in the long-term. Russia's support for India's nuclear power plants is also notable but India does not necessarily need to rely solely on Russia. Though Russia-Indian relations have been developed in the military and economic field since the war with no future promise. If Western sanctions against Russia become tougher, it is possible that India would lean toward protecting the current status quo rather than siding with Russia and China. If the Trump administration eases sanctions in the successful case of a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, it would cause downsizing of the current Indian positions toward Russia. Any scenario suggests that the current boom seems tentative. However, when viewed within the broader geo-political structure of neighbouring countries and the Eurasian region, Russia's presence seems critical for India to maintain an independent foreign policy and to ensure its own security.

When India faces tensions with China such as over the South China Sea or inland confrontations, India turns to the U.S. or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). In contrast, when India wants to protect its autonomy and distance itself from the U.S., it sometimes leans on Russia and China. As its neighbour, while the relations with China have challenges, there is no direct rivalry with Russia. For example, in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), India's Russian card partially neutralises China's hardline stance against India, enabling India to face China without relying solely on its relationship with the U.S. The recent ties between China and Russia, the triangular relationship between the two countries and India, and the SCO regime are useful for India's balancing diplomacy in relation to the U.S.

Factually, India utilises its unique position between the U.S./Europe and Russia/China. In the eyes of the QUAD, India often has different voices from the U.S., Japan and Australia for the issues concerning Russia and is not fully dependable. However, in the SCO, India blocked the unanimous resolution of the Samarkand summit of 2022 in Uzbekistan such as anti-sanction agreement and others and wanted to maintain distance from Russia and China, displaying independence and consideration with the U.S. and Europe [31]. Reviewing its Cold War experiences, India was silent during the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s and expressed understanding toward the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan at the UN. It is not surprising that India did not criticize Russia about its invasion of Ukraine.

India hopes to avoid a situation where Russia can no longer maintain its power as a "pole" following the Ukraine war and becomes a "junior partner" to China. To prevent this scenario, India must support Russia without "isolating" it. India must maintain a situation in which Russia works with China and India cooperates, so that it can preserve

its autonomy from the United States. India's unique position seems unaffected by "Trump 2.0," keeping its distance from the United States. India may foresee an opportunity for bridging between the U.S. and Russia as a leader of the "global south."

6. Borderlands: Back to the Fortress from the Gateway

The international field has many spaces for resilience from the new Cold War situation that is currently concentrated in Europe. This section focuses on the borderlands' role within a state, particularly Japan and Russia, for providing the clues for future development in comparison with the EU and Russia.

Starting the analysis on the borderland's situation, we would like to review one of the theories from the border studies community. Oscar Martinez [32], a well-known professor of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, categorises a border transformation in four stages: alienation, coexistence, interdependence, and integration; he modelled this basically as a shift from the former toward the latter. In the beginning, the borderlands functions as a kind of "fortress" on the front of military conflicts when two "powers" collide. As tensions dissipate, the border would become a function of peace and coexistence and then, of interdependence that connect people and goods. This stage shows more cooperation than security at the border. The borderlands serve as a "gateway" between the powers. Martinez illustrates the development of Mexico's maquiladoras (tariff-free import systems for raw materials, machinery, etc. for products for export) under NAFTA in the U.S.-Mexican case, concluding that economic globalisation in peacetime changes the border into a more positive and innovative role.

Though Martinez recognised complexities and varieties of the four-stage formation over the world, it suggests that the North American *borderization* process is seen transformed from conflict over borders to demarcation, and subsequently to economic cooperation through NAFTA, developing border and immigration control. The chronological development of the European Community after WWII is another example, specifically from the EEC to the EU. Concluding the Schengen Agreement, which liberalises people's flow within the region, and introducing a common currency, Euro, certainly cements the regional integration.

However, the recent border-related phenomena suggests that the process is not necessarily a one-way transformation from conflict to integration, rather from the latter to former even in Europe and North America. The UK exit in 2016 from the EU and Donald Trump's turmoil in the U.S., surprising many, are examples. The contemporary global and regional order is not unilinear; regions which are stable in their interdependence can be suddenly cut off at the border and turned into the frontline of conflict. Back to the "fortress" occurs frequently in Asia and Eurasia. The Ukrainian War since 2022 clearly demonstrates the "four stages" as reversible even in Europe. The updated Martinez Model in Figure 1 should be shared and developed by our discussion [33].

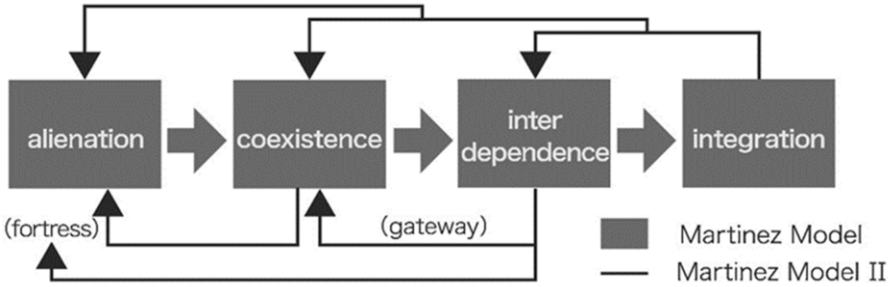

Figure 1. Transformation of Border Region Type

Then, how can we foresee border resilience back to future cooperation? First, we can still rely on the experiences of the borderlands under the post-Cold War. We introduce the Japanese borderlands in Hokkaido vis-à-vis Sakhalin, Russia.

Gateway-sation of the Japanese borderlands with Russia began when Mikhail Gorbachev visited Japan in 1990. The territorial issue that hindered the bilateral relations in the Cold War period is well known and even Gorbachev did not offer any solution. However, he proposed a new deal on the borderlands: in 1992, the "non-passport and non-visa" regime for people exchange between Japan and the Northern Territories was introduced, and six years later a "secure fishery" in Russia's "territorial waters" surrounding the Northern Territories started. The Cold War maritime border was pierced, and community connections between Japan and the Northern Territories developed. The "fortress" borderlands turned into a partial "gateway." The Japanese former islanders, expelled from their home by the Soviet force, enjoyed these annual human exchanges for thirty years and visited their homes until they were halted by Covid-19 in 2020, and then annihilated by Russia as a reciprocity against the Japanese sanction. Thirty years of exchange transformed perceptions of those on the other side of the border.

This transformation faces far more difficult circumstances today but still retains its power. Hideo Fukuzawa, a former islander, stated that the Russian invasion of Ukraine reminded him of the Soviets occupying islands at the end of WWII. He remembered those days as he watched a crying girl during the attacks in Ukraine on TV news. However, he added that Russian citizens are kind and trustworthy, with the leader who has responsibility for all [34]. His memory of the human exchange under the "gateway" period certainly deferred the deterioration of people-to-people relations. Most of the former islanders follow Hideo Fukuzawa' s comments on Russia and the war [35].

Besides that, energy and fishing industries, even small, still work to connect the two countries. Japan maintains its interests in Sakhalin II, a big Russian gas and oil project that provides LNG gas to Japan. In exchange, the Japanese energy company cooperates, and locals also benefit from the interests they retain in Russia's waters. Some fishery negotiations, including at the national level where they are tied to sanctions, are challenging but some negotiations continue in a businesslike manner, and the effects of the war are limited. In 2022 and 2023, salmon/trout fishing in Japan's 200 nautical mile zone under Russian agreement and kelp fishing from Nemuro to Kaigara Island, a few kilometres away from Russian-controlled waters, continued.

The local poll on the war of 2023 that Akihiro Iwashita conducted with Hokkaido Shimbun reveals some perspective of the borderlands working for the future. Two cities were selected for the poll considering its characteristics of the borderlands with Russia.

Wakkanai is at the northern edge of Hokkaido, 50 km from Sakhalin, and had a regular ferry operation as a gateway port to Sakhalin in the post-Cold War period. Citizens have been accustomed to Russia as a neighbour. Nemuro was the hub for the national movement that sought the return of Japan's territory and the place of gathering right wings against the Soviet Union under the Cold War. However, as mentioned before, from the Gorbachev era until Putin's war, the city turned into a friendship hub and special gateway for local interaction from/to the Northern Territories on the "non-passport and non-visa" regime under the post-Cold War period.

The results of the poll are as follows [36]: The concerns about Russia have been higher among people in both cities than other areas in Japan compared with different major surveys after the invasion. Most of them say that the impression of Russia is worse after the invasion, but Nemuro is slightly weaker in perception change on Russia than Wakkanai. 90 percent of them accept the adverse impact on the regions by the invasion but 13% of Nemuro people still have hope for a future peace treaty for territorial solution. More than 80% of both cities recognize Russia's full responsibility for the war but 20% of Nemuro people does not support Japan's sanction against Russia (for Wakkanai, only 6% does not). In addition, more than half of Nemuro people prefer "mediation" or "neutrality" to "sanction" for Japan's probable policy toward Russia. It illustrates the realities of the borderlands' voice in Japan toward Russia following the invasion. Particularly, Nemuro city, which has struggled with the territorial dispute but enjoyed gateway experiences during the post-Cold War, has a message for the future by resilience for peace and stability.

7. Conclusion: Toward Revival of "Border Cooperation"

Russia has full responsibility for the war and infringement of international norms. It should be deeply criticised in the view of fairness and justice and all countries belonging to the UN must join as one team to maintain international order by law. In parallel, we should consider the realities of geo-politics and people's lives. Even if the conditions are not satisfied for the invaded parties, ending the battle and saving lives must be a priority. In that sense, even if it is selfish and romantic, Donald Trump's will for a ceasefire should be noted. The issue is how the motion can be realised to consider the interests of Ukraine, and not the invader."

The borderlands' interests should be considered in the deal. For example, the borderlands of Finland have been frozen by the limited transfer of people and goods, except the practical contact by border control. Japan's case is similar, but the post-Cold War elements are still active physically and mentally, as shown before. Russia in the Far East, including Sakhalin, is the same: they question why relations with Japan should be stopped by the European war which is farther away [37]. It may sound a bit egoistic for Europe, but it should understand the life of people in different spaces.

When we look back to international relations, Russian neighbours in Asia have more space for resilience. Ulaanbaatar now works as a gateway to the Russian Far East (China works for Russian transit to Japan but not vice versa because of "personal security problems" for Japanese within China as mentioned before). Central Asia also serves as a contact point for Russia and the West. Japanese academics have been prohibited from entering Russia after the war and struggle with maintaining relations with their counterparts, who do not necessarily support the war. The countries mentioned above provide a place to gather, discussing the future regional development for our people.

For the state-to-state level, they can provide a formula for the Asian version of OSCE under the Cold War. "Ulaanbaatar Dialogue" is famous for accumulating the CBM meeting in Eurasia including North Korea in the post-Cold War period and is still active. It could be a place to discuss all the necessary items with any country including Russia. Almaty or Bishkek also has a potential for resilience and future development. They can discuss "border cooperation" with Russia and China even though the terms have almost lost relevance in Europe and Japan. The border studies community faces serious challenges with the *fortify-sation* trend worldwide. Recreating resilience for *gateway-sation* is a task for us. It is time to search "border studies 2.0," which means resilience for *gateway-sation* after the war and not *fortify-sation*. Finally, the second Cold War remains local and partially frozen, giving us an opportunity for resilience.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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From Static Deterrence to Adaptive Resilience: The Value of Borderland Innovation

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Abstract. This concluding chapter synthesises insights from a comprehensive volume examining NATO's strategic transformation following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The analysis reveals a paradigmatic shift from static deterrence towards adaptive resilience, recognising that contemporary security challenges – characterised by hybrid threats, strategic ambiguity, and grey-zone warfare – cannot be adequately addressed through conventional military deterrence alone. Drawing upon comparative case studies from NATO's borderlands, the volume demonstrates how these regions have evolved from vulnerable peripheries into strategic laboratories for security innovation. Borderland territories possess unique adaptive capacities developed through sustained exposure to geopolitical volatility, offering invaluable experiential knowledge essential for broader Alliance security. The chapters collectively establish that effective resilience operates as a dynamic, networked process manifest through societal adaptation, institutional learning, and community empowerment. Rather than merely complementing traditional deterrence, resilience has emerged as its fundamental precondition. The borderland experience illustrates that deterrence in the twenty-first century requires integrated responses combining institutional capacity with community agency, sustained investment across multiple societal levels, and the cultivation of democratic values as active instruments of strategic defence.

Keywords. Borderlands adaptive resilience, hybrid threats, strategic transformation, societal deterrence

1. The Power of the Periphery

The transformation of the European security environment since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has constituted a decisive inflection point in NATO's strategic orientation. The return of high-intensity warfare to the European continent has not only shattered long-held assumptions regarding the permanence of peace but has also exposed the limitations of deterrence strategies predicated solely upon conventional military doctrine. More significantly, it has demonstrated the centrality of hybrid threats deployed to undermine social cohesion and exploit vulnerabilities across multiple

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domains. In response, NATO has undertaken a paradigmatic shift from a posture of static deterrence rooted in territorial defence
towards a more dynamic approach centred on adaptive resilience, grounded in societal endurance, flexibility, and cohesion. This volume examines this strategic transformation, in particular, through the analytical lens of NATO's eastern and northern borderlands, regions situated at the intersection of great power rivalry and increasingly recognised as strategic laboratories for security innovation.

The chapters have presented a comprehensive analysis of this evolutionary trajectory. They have demonstrated how resilience has undergone a fundamental transformation, moving from the periphery of NATO's strategic vocabulary to occupy a central position within its deterrence posture. This shift represents a complete reconceptualisation of strategic priorities: no longer merely an auxiliary function supporting conventional military strength, resilience has emerged as its essential complement and, in numerous instances, its very foundation. This reorientation extends far beyond tactical adjustments or procedural modifications. It constitutes a profound reconceptualisation of how NATO must prepare for, respond to, and operate within an increasingly complex security environment; one defined by persistent and dynamic hybrid threats, strategic ambiguity, and adversaries who deliberately blur the lines between peace and conflict. Traditional military deterrence, while remaining crucial, is insufficient when confronting challenges that operate below the threshold of conventional warfare yet pose existential risks to member states' political, economic, and social fabric. This transformation reflects NATO's acknowledgment that contemporary security challenges require a more holistic approach to defence; one that integrates military readiness with societal preparedness, technological adaptation, and institutional flexibility. The elevation of resilience from a supplementary consideration to a core strategic imperative signals the Alliance's recognition that future conflicts will be won not only through superior firepower but through the ability to maintain critical functions, adapt to disruption, and sustain societal cohesion under pressure.

As the volume has demonstrated, NATO's borderlands, particularly those neighbouring Russia, should not be seen merely as vulnerable peripheries requiring protection. Instead, they must be understood as strategic assets [1] whose proximity to threat vectors has generated unique experiential knowledge and adaptive capabilities essential for broader Alliance security. Their histories of geopolitical volatility have cultivated distinctive forms of adaptive continuity, a deeply embedded societal capacity to manage uncertainty, absorb shocks, sustain core functions under duress, and transform disruption into renewal. Their constant exposure to strategic uncertainty has fostered an inherent adaptability that many other states and regions, long accustomed to stability and prosperity, have yet to develop. Thus, borderlands should be recognised as repositories of invaluable expertise in societal resilience. The potential for reverse learning is significant: societies comfortable with extended peace may find themselves less equipped to handle sudden disruptions than those maintaining heightened readiness. These frontline states offer essential lessons about building anticipatory resilience, demonstrating how democratic societies can remain both vigilant and free, prepared yet not paralysed.

The evidence presented across the chapters supports the central argument that borderland regions function as force multipliers within NATO's deterrence framework. Their experience is shaped not only by recent Russian aggression but also by the long-standing uncertainties and complexities associated with life at the border. Over time, this has fostered distinctive competencies in threat assessment, early warning, and cross-

domain threat management. Borderland populations have learned to navigate the challenges of coexisting with neighbouring powers in both cooperative and confrontational contexts. Unlike regions situated further from the border, where perceptions and assessments of threat are often shaped by isolated or exceptional events, borderland communities experience the constant presence of the other as a structural condition. Everyday life at the border is shaped by continuous proximity, and it is this sustained exposure that gives rise to a distinct mode of resilience: one that is habitual, immediate, and deeply embedded in local practices of adaptation, cooperation, and vigilance. This sustained proximity cultivates a high level of situational awareness, adaptive capacity, and relational knowledge that is difficult to replicate elsewhere. It also enhances the effectiveness of intelligence collection, threat detection, and deterrent signalling, contributing significantly to the overall resilience and strategic posture of the Alliance.

The borderland communities examined in this volume have demonstrated that resilience extends far beyond mere recovery from disruption. Rather than simply returning to a previous state of stability, these communities embody resilience as a transformative capacity. Specifically, the ability to reorganise, innovate, and evolve in response to dynamic and often unpredictable threat environments. This form of resilience draws on accumulated local knowledge, institutional adaptability, and cross-sectoral collaboration, enabling borderlands to function not just as sites of vulnerability, but as engines of strategic adaptation. This reconceptualisation shifts resilience from a reactive posture to an active and forward-looking component of NATO's deterrence strategy, strengthening its capacity to anticipate, absorb, and shape complex security developments along the Alliance's periphery.

The transformation outlined in this volume calls for a recalibrated NATO strategy that integrates borderland insights into doctrine and practice. These regions offer scalable innovations in threat management, resilience, and civil-military coordination. The interdisciplinary perspectives and comparative analysis across diverse borderland contexts presented in the preceding chapters reveal that the expertise of these regions extends beyond tactical responses to encompass strategic understanding of Russian internal developments, priorities, and motives. Their strategic understanding of Russian developments also strengthens early warning and Alliance-wide preparedness. The volume's examination through conceptual foundations, social analysis, empirical evidence, and strategic implications points toward concrete opportunities for enhanced cooperation and capability development. Moving forward, NATO must develop mechanisms to systematically capture, codify, and disseminate the practical knowledge generated by borderland regions whilst creating institutional frameworks that support their continued innovation and adaptation. This transformation is more than a reaction to present threats; it offers a blueprint for how the Alliance can evolve to confront future challenges. By recognising borderlands as strategic assets rather than vulnerable peripheries, NATO can leverage their unique capabilities to reinforce collective defence, while preserving the democratic values and societal cohesion at its core. The path from static deterrence to adaptive resilience, illuminated through the borderland experience, offers a roadmap for NATO's continued evolution in an increasingly complex security environment.

Building on the analyses presented in the preceding chapters, this concluding reflection draws together key insights from comparative case studies, theoretical innovation, and field-based evidence to illuminate four central themes. It explores the strategic evolution from static deterrence to adaptive resilience, reframes borderlands as

dynamic hubs of security innovation, critiques the limitations of symbolic security while underscoring the importance of substantive resilience, and highlights the critical role played by technology, civil society, and human agency in shaping modern deterrence. Together, these themes offer a forward-looking framework for enhancing NATO's capacity to navigate complex threat environments and fortify its security architecture from the periphery inward.

1.1 From Static Deterrence to Adaptive Resilience

NATO's traditional deterrence posture was founded on the logic of collective defence and overwhelming conventional strength. The credibility of the Article 5 commitment rested on the assumption that adversaries could be dissuaded by the threat of military retaliation, supplemented by forward-deployed forces and integrated command structures. However, the nature of conflict has evolved. Adversaries, most notably Russia, have demonstrated a capacity to exploit institutional seams, societal vulnerabilities, and the ambiguities of the "grey zone," [2] where conventional distinctions between war and peace, internal and external, or civil and military no longer apply. Against this backdrop, resilience has emerged not as an ancillary concern but as a strategic core of NATO's deterrence doctrine. Resilience is no longer conceived merely as the capacity to recover from disruption, but as the ability to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and transform in the face of complex and continuous threat vectors. It entails preparing societies, not just armed forces, to respond flexibly to hybrid threats that unfold across physical, digital, psychological, and cognitive terrains.

The borderland regions of NATO, particularly those bordering Russia, exemplify this shift in action. From Finland's robust civil defence infrastructure and whole-of-society preparedness model to the Baltic states' integration of digital literacy, local volunteerism, and societal mobilisation, these areas are actively demonstrating resilience as deterrence. Rather than being weak points, they are functioning as sentinels of security innovation. Yet, this strategic shift also reveals vulnerabilities. As several chapters in this volume demonstrate, resilience remains unevenly institutionalised and inconsistently applied across NATO member states, revealing gaps not only in formal structures but also in practical implementation. The absence of standardised benchmarks, insufficient multilateral coordination, and the lack of shared operational definitions hamper coherence. Without sustained investment in the mechanisms of civil preparedness, resilience risks becoming a rhetorical commitment rather than a substantive strategic capability.

1.2 Borderlands as Strategic Laboratories: Knowledge from the Margins

A second central insight from this volume concerns the repositioning of borderlands within NATO's strategic imagination. Long relegated to the periphery of policy attention, borderlands are now recast as vital zones of experimentation, adaptation, and knowledge production – serving as vital laboratories for developing adaptive security responses. Their geographical proximity to adversarial powers, combined with their historical exposure to geopolitical volatility, has fostered a unique repertoire of adaptive practices. These practices depend and rely on civic capacities, cultural narratives, and community-level awareness that sustain strength from the ground up [3]. While a

hardened border infrastructure can serve as a source of security for some and may enhance borderland resilience, such securitisation can also generate stress and disrupt daily life – underscoring the diverse and often contradictory experiences of living with and adapting to the shifting dynamics of a border(land) [1]. Already seemingly minor and gradual border shifts – often overlooked by international observers – can profoundly shape daily life, producing states of inbetweenness, uncertainty, and heightened vulnerability [3]. These dynamics underscore how border practices, even when subtle, become embedded in social action and individual experience, rendering borderland populations both visible and invisible in geopolitical processes.

The chapters underscore how borderland communities, often the first to detect hybrid intrusions, are repositories of tacit security expertise. In the Baltic Countries and Finland, public education campaigns counter disinformation and encourage digital hygiene. In Poland and Romania, volunteer networks and local governance structures support refugee integration, critical infrastructure monitoring, and cross-border solidarity. These are not just acts of local agency; they constitute the foundational architecture of NATO's societal security ecosystem. Importantly, resilience in borderlands is multiscalar. It operates across local, regional, and national levels, and it emerges from the interlinkages between community trust, institutional responsiveness, and strategic communication. Unlike deterrence models that operate primarily through centralised command, resilience requires decentralised, context-sensitive mechanisms tailored to diverse cultural, political, and social environments. However, this thematic strand also surfaces structural inequities. Not all borderland regions benefit from the same capacities or state support. Variations in political will, administrative coordination, demographic pressures, and infrastructure quality generate an uneven resilience landscape. Without mechanisms to share best practices and bridge institutional asymmetries, the risk of strategic fragmentation persists.

1.3 The Limits of Symbolic Security

The third thematic axis of this chapter critiques the widespread reliance on physical border fortifications and technological surveillance as default responses to insecurity. While walls and fences may convey strength and offer visual reassurance to domestic publics, they often mask a deeper strategic deficit and risk diverting attention from the non-material foundations of resilience [4]. Hybrid threats do not respect physical boundaries. Cyberattacks, financial coercion, media manipulation, and cognitive warfare traverse borders with ease. Focusing narrowly on territorial defence may thus provide an illusion of control while leaving societies exposed to subtler, more insidious threats. As several contributors to this volume emphasise, the strength of a state's outer borders is inextricably linked to the cohesion, vitality, and adaptability of its internal communities.

The Estonian case study [5] exemplifies this paradox, where extensive technological surveillance systems coexist with the recognition that border security ultimately depends on the vitality of border communities themselves. Despite achieving near-complete technical coverage along critical sections, Estonian authorities acknowledge that depopulation poses fundamental security risks that technology alone cannot address. This reality underscores the need for integrated approaches that balance technological capabilities with sustained investment in border communities, treating residents not as passive beneficiaries of protection, but as active participants in the security ecosystem.

Symbolic security frequently reflects a return to binary spatial imaginaries, such as inside versus outside or safe versus dangerous. These imaginaries may offer psychological reassurance, but they are increasingly inadequate for understanding the complexity of contemporary security challenges. In this context, borders provide a sense of comfort by suggesting that the collective "we" remains physically separated from, and protected against, perceived threats [6]. This is not only a political narrative but also a deeply social one. Understandably, Russia's actions, particularly its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have renewed attention among researchers, policymakers, the media, and the public on the role of borders as guarantors of national security. These developments, combined with a general deterioration of international relations, have intensified concern about how to preserve security in an increasingly unstable world. At the same time, Russia's use of hybrid threat tactics demonstrates that many of the most pressing threats cannot simply be fenced away and contained. These threats cut across domains, exploit legal and institutional grey zones, and often unfold over long time horizons. They shift across both time and space, making them increasingly difficult to track. In a world shaped by ambiguity and volatility, efforts to impose control through rigid border fortifications are often inefficient and may even prove counterproductive by reinforcing a false sense of security.

The current global context is marked by deep uncertainty, fragmentation, and the erosion of long-standing norms. This environment cannot be reshaped through short-sighted, technical, or reactive solutions alone. Security today must be understood as more than physical protection or the defence of territory. Without broader societal well-being, trust in institutions, and a sense of shared purpose, security cannot be sustained. A more nuanced understanding comes from recognising the dynamic, fragmented, and ephemeral timespaces of borders, which more accurately reflect how cross-border movements are currently regulated [7]. What is needed, then, is a more comprehensive and layered approach to security that treats borders not only as lines of defence but also as spaces of interaction, adaptation, and renewal. In this view, borders become sites where resilience can be cultivated and where diverse actors collaborate to manage complexity and change.

This critique does not deny the utility of hard border technologies, such as sensors, drones, or biometric systems. Rather, it argues that these tools must be embedded within a broader strategic approach that includes investment in social infrastructure, local capacity, and community resilience. Extensive technological surveillance systems, no matter how complete the coverage they may provide, cannot substitute for the vitality of border communities themselves. The depopulation of rural and peripheral border regions diminishes early warning capacities, weakens institutional presence, and erodes the social capital needed to manage disruption – fundamental security risks that technology alone cannot address. No matter how sophisticated, physical infrastructure cannot replace the role of informed, engaged, and connected communities. This reality underscores the need for integrated approaches that balance technological capabilities with sustained investment in border communities, treating residents not as passive beneficiaries of protection, but as active participants in the security ecosystem. Without this human dimension, border technologies risk becoming empty symbols of control, projecting strength while failing to address the deeper vulnerabilities they are meant to protect against.

1.4 Civil Society, Technology, and the Human Dimension of Security

Finally, this volume foregrounds the indispensable role of civil society and human agency in building resilient security architectures. While NATO has made significant investments in technological capabilities – from satellite surveillance to cybersecurity – these tools are insufficient without strong social foundations. As multiple chapters in this collection illustrate, civil society actors, including local NGOs, educators, community leaders, and media practitioners, serve as critical nodes in the detection, response, and recovery cycle of hybrid threats. Resilience, in this sense, is not merely a technical or institutional capacity; it is a deeply social and cultural practice. It also entails upholding democratic norms and values and enabling participatory governance – the cornerstones of many liberal democracies. These practices are especially vital in border regions, where state presence may be limited and societal legitimacy and continuity often need to be generated from within.

NATO's security architecture – perhaps unsurprisingly – continues to privilege military and state-centric approaches, often leaving civil society engagement under-resourced, informal, or treated as secondary. This civil–military gap is particularly evident in borderland regions, where effective resilience relies on coordination across multiple jurisdictions, levels of government, and policy domains. The case studies in this volume illustrate both challenges, where national-level political tensions hinder local efforts, and opportunities, where community-based solidarity and initiative persist despite broader political constraints. These findings suggest that NATO's resilience agenda must be supported by more sophisticated mechanisms to strengthen local and regional cooperation, particularly in the context of complex national political dynamics. The relationship between local and national approaches remains a persistent tension that cannot be addressed through ad hoc arrangements alone but instead requires sustained and structured engagement.

2. Resilience as Adaptive Deterrence

The volume identifies important temporal dimensions of resilience. It is not a static goal or a one-time achievement, but an ongoing and adaptive process. Building and maintaining resilience requires iterative learning, long-term investment, and the flexibility to respond to evolving threat environments. This includes attention to less tangible dimensions such as narrative resilience, memory politics, and the safeguarding of epistemic sovereignty in the face of disinformation, propaganda, and historical revisionism. This volume has also demonstrated that resilience is not simply a complement to deterrence but a vital component of a comprehensive security panorama. Through diverse empirical case studies and analytical insights, the chapters collectively advance the understanding of resilience as a multi-scalar, socially embedded, and forward-looking practice essential for navigating today's hybrid threat environment.

The analysis of memory politics and cognitive resilience on the Norwegian-Russian borderland revealed the vulnerabilities and strengths of historical narratives as sites of geopolitical contestation. As Fors [8] showed, local agency can resist external manipulation, but coordinated national strategies remain necessary to safeguard narrative sovereignty. Contributions from the Polish-Ukrainian and Ukrainian western borderlands emphasised the dialectical and temporal nature of resilience. Dębicki [9] and Zhurzhenko [10] highlighted how border regions respond to crisis with both rebordering

and permeability, demonstrating that resilience is not a singular trajectory but a layered and adaptive process.

Other chapters expanded the scope of resilience beyond institutions and infrastructure. Lačný and Džuka's [11] focus on border community satisfaction underscored that well-being is a cornerstone of national security. Berg, Allik, and Urmann [5] stressed the importance of human presence over technological surveillance, while Zanjer and Baklacıoğlu [12] brought critical attention to gendered strategies of survival and solidarity, challenging top-down, state-centric models. Hagelin's [13] critique of Northern European border discourse further exposed the limits of technocratic security narratives and called for more inclusive frameworks that engage marginalised voices and community experiences. In parallel, contributions on Russia's evolving strategic culture, including those by Bassin [14], Stępniewski [15], Stokłosa [16], Țîcu [17], and Strycharz [18], illustrated how cognitive warfare and managed pluralism are central to hybrid aggression and require anticipatory and coordinated countermeasures. Iwashita and Sartayev [19] highlight Asia's varied resilience in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While Europe is largely united, Asian powers like Japan and South Korea align with Western sanctions, whereas China and India maintain ties with Russia. This complexity is seen in Asia's borderlands – especially the Japan–Russia borderlands – which once fostered exchange but now face renewed geopolitical barriers, revealing challenges and opportunities for regional resilience.

Taken together, these contributions argue for resilience as a form of adaptive deterrence – grounded in local agency, social cohesion, and inclusive governance. As Mälksoo [2] aptly notes, this requires embracing resilience thinking as a way of anticipating threats, fostering flexible responses, and building security from the ground up. Resilience, as outlined in Article 3 of the NATO Treaty, is not merely a reactive capability. It is a proactive commitment to maintaining and developing the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and grow from disruption. In an age where warfare is as much psychological and informational as it is territorial, this volume affirms that deterrence must begin with the resilience of societies themselves. The evolution of resilience thinking reflects broader changes in the security environment demanding new analytical frameworks and policy approaches. The emergence of resilience as adaptive deterrence ultimately represents recognition that contemporary security challenges cannot be addressed through episodic responses or static defences. Instead, they require sustained cultivation of social, economic, and institutional foundations that enable communities and nations not merely to survive disruption but to adapt, learn, and emerge with enhanced capabilities for meeting future challenges.

The insights from these borderland studies have several important implications for NATO's strategic development:

1. The Alliance must develop more nuanced approaches to supporting borderland resilience that acknowledge the diversity of local contexts and responses. One-size-fits-all solutions are unlikely to be effective given the varied geographical, historical, and political circumstances documented across these cases.

2. NATO's resilience framework requires stronger mechanisms for incorporating grassroots expertise and local knowledge. The experiences of border communities and civil society organisations represent invaluable resources for understanding how resilience operates in practice and should be systematically integrated into Alliance planning.

3. The Alliance must address institutional fragmentation currently characterising civil preparedness efforts. While respecting national sovereignty over domestic affairs, NATO could develop stronger coordination mechanisms and shared standards for borderland resilience, possibly through enhanced cooperation frameworks that support local and regional initiatives.
4. The cognitive dimensions of resilience – including narrative sovereignty, memory politics, and resistance to disinformation – require greater attention within NATO's strategic framework. The capacity to maintain autonomous historical narratives and resist external cognitive manipulation represents a crucial element of contemporary security that deserves systematic development.
5. Effective deterrence must go beyond conventional military posturing and incorporate strategies that exploit adversaries' institutional weaknesses, reinforce democratic resilience in frontline states, and amplify the strategic consequences of hostile miscalculations.

3. Toward a Resilient NATO in the Age of Hybrid Threats

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally transformed NATO's strategic calculus, elevating resilience from a peripheral consideration to the central imperative of Alliance security. This transformation represents more than tactical adjustment; it constitutes a paradigmatic shift in how the Alliance conceptualises deterrence itself. Traditional models predicated on conventional military deterrence and binary threat assessments have proved inadequate to address the complex, multidimensional nature of contemporary security challenges. In their place has emerged a more expansive deterrence framework that prioritises societal adaptive capacity alongside military capability.

This volume demonstrates that NATO's borderlands, particularly those regions sharing direct frontiers with Russia, must be reconceptualised from vulnerable peripheries to strategic assets [1]. These territories possess unique advantages that position them as laboratories for strategic adaptation: their historical exposure to uncertainty has generated deep reservoirs of adaptive capacity, whilst their proximity to threat vectors provides invaluable experiential knowledge and institutional reflexes essential to broader Alliance efforts. The borderland experience reveals that effective resilience cannot be imposed through centralised mechanisms but must be cultivated through sustained investment in social trust, economic viability, institutional integrity, and civic engagement [20].

The evidence presented across these case studies establishes that resilience operates as a dynamic, networked process rather than a static attribute. It manifests through societal adaptation, institutional learning, and community empowerment, with specific expressions varying according to historical legacies, political culture, and demographic structures. Crucially, resilience functions through multiple interconnected pathways that differ fundamentally from conventional military or diplomatic deterrence mechanisms. This process-oriented understanding of resilience has profound implications for NATO strategy. It requires recognition of distributed capabilities across multiple societal levels, acknowledgement of temporal dynamics that extend beyond immediate crisis response, and appreciation of the essential role human communities play in maintaining long-term security. Such recognition demands that the Alliance develop more sophisticated,

context-sensitive approaches that support diverse pathways to resilience whilst maintaining strategic coherence.

Realising resilience's full strategic potential requires NATO to confront significant conceptual, institutional, and operational challenges. The Alliance must reconcile uneven development of civil preparedness across member states whilst bridging tensions between national sovereignty and collective coordination requirements. This necessitates developing common standards for civil preparedness, coordinating institutional responses across multiple governance levels, and supporting local innovation within broader strategic frameworks. The transformation also demands substantial investment beyond traditional defence capabilities. Effective resilience requires sustained attention to human capital development, social cohesion strengthening, and democratic value reinforcement, elements that constitute the foundation of long-term stability but often receive inadequate strategic attention.

The analysis presented in this volume points towards an evolution in NATO's deterrence posture. In an era characterised by strategic ambiguity and hybrid competition, the Alliance's future credibility may depend less on the size of its military arsenal than on its capacity to foster resilient societies capable of withstanding, adapting to, and recovering from twenty-first century conflict's disruptive forces. This shift represents both opportunity and obligation. NATO possesses the institutional framework and collective resources necessary to cultivate societal resilience at scale. However, success requires sustained commitment to multi-level coordination, context-sensitive implementation, and community empowerment, approaches that challenge traditional centralised security models.

The borderland experience offers three critical insights for NATO's strategic development. First, deterrence in the contemporary security environment operates through complementary conventional and resilience-based mechanisms, with neither sufficient alone. Second, effective resilience emerges from integrated responses that combine institutional capacity with community agency, requiring coordinated investment across multiple societal levels. Third, the Alliance's long-term security depends on its ability to maintain essential societal functions, uphold democratic values, and regenerate capacity after disruption. These insights suggest that NATO's strategic evolution must embrace complexity rather than seek simplification, empower local actors rather than rely solely on centralised responses, and centre resilience as both principle and practice in Alliance operations.

The evidence examined throughout this volume establishes that resilience must not be treated as an accessory to deterrence but as its fundamental precondition. The adaptive capacity to maintain essential societal functions, uphold democratic values, and regenerate after disruption will ultimately determine whether NATO can meet the evolving demands of an increasingly contested international order. The strategic task ahead requires transforming resilience from fragmented aspiration into coherent strategic reality. As this volume makes clear, in a world defined by hybrid threats and strategic uncertainty, the true line of defence begins not at the border, but in the capacity of communities to endure, adapt, and resist. The strategic task ahead is to cultivate those capacities: patiently, systematically, and collectively. Societies that cultivate these capacities become not merely defended territories but active instruments of deterrence themselves. The borderlands have emerged as both inspiration and instruction for this crucial experiment in strategic adaptation.

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Resilience as Deterrence: Towards a Comprehensive Security Panorama
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Afterword: Borderlands, Economic Determinism, and Inclusive Resilience

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Abstract. This afterword reflects on the key themes, tensions, and insights that emerge across the chapters in this volume, which collectively examine NATO's renewed relevance in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and broader shifts in the global order. It emphasises that the resilience of NATO countries cannot be understood solely in military terms but must also include democratic legitimacy, social inclusion, and the lived experiences of communities situated along its external borders. These often-overlooked border regions appear throughout the volume as crucial spaces where geopolitical tensions intersect with economic marginalisation and conflicted identities. Contributors show how resilience is not only built by national governments but also shaped by local actors, including women-led organisations, civil society groups, and cross-border networks. The afterword highlights a central dilemma: how to safeguard democratic values and maintain societal cohesion while facing both external authoritarian threats and rising internal populism. It concludes that effective resilience depends as much on strengthening economic and social foundations as on military and security factors. Investment in inclusive, community-based approaches to resilience is essential for securing stable and democratic societies in the years ahead.

Keywords. Resilience, borderlands, hybrid threats, authoritarianism, socio-economic marginalisation

At the end of 1949, Stalin had much to celebrate at his official seventieth birthday party. Earlier in the year, the Soviet Union had tested its first atomic bomb, and he hosted at his birthday celebrations Mao Zedong, whose People's Republic of China (PRC) had been proclaimed just weeks earlier. For Stalin, the formation in the April of NATO – which was denounced in the Soviet press and official pronouncements at the time – was perhaps one of the bitterest moments of the year [1]. Seventy-six years later, the Soviet Union has long since expired, while Mao's Communist China is unrecognisable – a geopolitical and economic powerhouse, made wealthy by its embrace of capitalism. As for NATO, it has found a renewed purpose in what should have been its dotage after the end of the Cold War, recently expanding its membership for the ninth and tenth time, adding Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024. At the most recent NATO summit in June 2025, virtually all members reached a decision to invest 5% of GDP in defence by 2035, a figure that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago [2].

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Much of NATO's resurgence is a response to Russia's barbaric and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A war that Russian President Vladimir Putin [3] was convinced would be quickly over is now in its fourth year, with no end in sight. Russia's economy is effectively on a war footing, while NATO is framed in Russia as one of the key reasons behind its invasion of Ukraine [4]. For Putin, it is a convenient bogeyman, indicative of a West that he claims desires to dismember Russia [5]. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, has already warned that with NATO's closer relationship to Moldova, the West has set its sights on turning it into the "next Ukraine" [6].

The intense focus on NATO in Russia also serves to distract domestic audiences from some of the key challenges to regime security posed by the kinds of anti-corruption measures, free media, democratic politics, and rule of law associated with the European Union [7]. Against the background of such challenges, Stępniewski [8] argues that Putin's foreign policy adventurism and his carefully cultivated image as the "ultimate guarantor of national revival" is assuming increasingly critical significance for consolidating internal support in the face of stagnant economic performance and the erosion of his electoral credibility. This function of regime insecurity – with the West and NATO framed as the malevolent Other – has trapped Russia in "a pattern of escalation with diminishing returns."

Any free and fair elections, and the breaking up of Russia's oligarchic system, could be personally disastrous for Putin. After two and a half decades of wielding progressively more authoritarian power, the nationalist or liberal successors who might follow Putin would be unlikely to let him retire quietly to his palatial dacha as happened to Yeltsin (Putin acquiesced to this despite the corruption and personal enrichment of Yeltsin's family during the tenure of the first President of the Russian Federation) [9].

In this context, NATO has assumed critical significance for regime survival by serving to legitimate a decisive turn away from Europe and the West. However, if Putin's invasion is responsible for the revitalisation of NATO, then the organisation's greatest challenge may come in the ambivalent and ambiguous attitude towards alliances and multilateralism of the 45th and 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump. While the invasion of Ukraine galvanised the resolve of the majority of the European members of NATO, involving new levels of spending on defence, Trump's attitude towards the conflict has included the dressing down of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky in February 2025, an often-quoted desire to readmit Russia to the G8, and an inconsistent tone on his commitment to NATO's Article 5. While inconsistency is a defining element of his presidency, Trump can appear at times more aligned with the world view of Putin, whereby Great Powers have the right to reject the sovereignty of other countries, be that Ukraine, Georgia, Denmark, Canada or Iran. In different ways, both demand respect for their own Great Power status while denying equal recognition to others [8].

In its initial reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent surge in defence spending commitments by its members, NATO demonstrated determined resilience to "respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions, and ensure the continuity of the Alliance's activities" [10]. But will it be able to demonstrate the same resilience to the strategic shock and disruption posed by several more years of Trump's Presidency? As this collection reveals, this is a question that is further complicated by an urgency and necessity to expand definitions of both resilience and security to encompass inclusivity, diversity, and democracy – values that are not immediately associated with the rhetoric, policies, and actions of the Trump Administration. Virtually every contribution in this volume emphasises that these values

are essential ingredients for the resilience of NATO's members and a bulwark against the authoritarianism and disinformation campaigns associated with Putin's Russia.

Reflecting the background of many of the scholars in this collection, borderlands feature prominently. As these chapters recount, many of the regions in NATO countries that border Russia face acute circumstances of precarity and marginalisation, which left unaddressed, can undermine community cohesion and societal resilience – especially when economic opportunities have been severed by the closure of the border with Russia. This volume gives voices to people and places far from national capitals, which can be discordant with the pronouncements of political leaders and the policies formulated in distant centres. It presents diverse perspectives, which may not always be comfortable reading for such politicians and bureaucrats. However, each one offers alternative viewpoints that are vital for understanding what security and resilience mean, and how to realise them.

One key concern to emerge is the link between security and regional economic development. In southeastern Estonia, the border region is reliant on agriculture and forestry, with poorer standards of infrastructure, education, medical care, and public transport relative to the rest of the country. As in similar border regions, this leads to outmigration – especially of the young and those with families – leaving behind a weakened sense of community. Even though Berg, Allik and Urmann [11] find high levels of trust between residents and the border guards in this region, "scepticism toward the central government persists." Sustaining the resilience of communities whose economic opportunities have been severed by the closure of the border since Covid-19 and then the war in Ukraine means that there is an ever-greater urgency to ensure that life in border zones is "actively supported by regional policy."

A similar scenario emerges along the Polish border with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Stokłosa's [12] contribution foregrounds factors of economic determinism in the shaping of identity. Parallels with southeastern Estonia emerge when she describes a double marginalisation in these borderlands of being not only on the periphery of Poland but also now sealed off from the economic opportunities of trade, tourism, and cultural exchange with Russia. It is a scenario that breeds resentment but not always at Putin. In many cases, dissatisfaction has instead been directed towards Ukraine and policy elites in Warsaw. Stokłosa's [12] borderland is characterised by "shared economic struggles [which] have fostered a 'we-identity' between Polish and Russian borderlanders, while Ukrainians are increasingly viewed as belonging to a separate social category."

Border closures from early 2020 abruptly ended the burgeoning cross-border economic and cultural links in the region, exacerbating "socio-economic marginalisation." On the Polish side, tourism and visits from Russia collapsed, restaurants have closed, and all exchange offices shut down. In her conversations with local people, Stokłosa [12] found that "the dominant perception was that Ukrainians receive excessive support from the Polish state, while Russians are viewed not as citizens of an aggressive regime but as 'poor people from the other side of the border' – people who are very much like themselves." In these borderlands, the shared experience of peripherality – and the ending of the opportunities of a more open border to overcome this – have engendered resentment not at each other but at distant capitals and fears over migrants competing for resources.

Elsewhere on NATO's border with Russia, in Norway, there has been precisely the opposite framing of Russia amongst the local community since the invasion. Fors [13] outlines in his contribution how in Kirkenes, performances of the memory of the Second World War, which once built bridges between communities on either side of the border,

have now become a source of contention. Prior to the invasion, commemorative events involved high-level political meetings, including the two countries' prime ministers, Jens Stoltenberg (NATO secretary general between 2014 and 2024) and Dmitry Medvedev in 2013. These commemorations were centred around public speeches emphasizing historical brotherhood and expressions of Norway's gratitude to the Soviet Union and Russia for liberating Kirkenes. However, since February 2022, the Soviet Liberation Monument in the town has become a site of protest and discord. Local actors in Kirkenes began to emphasise the contributions of Ukrainians and other Soviet nationalities in its liberation, disputing "Russia's exclusive claim to the historical narrative […while…] bringing together diverse groups – Norwegians, Russians, and Ukrainians – in a shared resistance against external manipulation." These local residents came to challenge Russian state propaganda in a far more assertive way than Norway's central government was prepared to do [13].

However, pro-Russian accounts of the war in Ukraine can often land on more fertile terrain. Zhurzhenko's [14] chapter notes that far-right populism in those EU countries neighbouring Ukraine "instrumentalizes the anxieties of their populations regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war and Ukraine's plans to join the EU, [which] can animate hostilities rooted in the past." The Podkarpackie Voivodship is a region neighbouring Ukraine and one of the least economically developed regions in Poland, which leans in favour of the populist-right and far-right, especially in smaller towns and the countryside. In this region, Marcin Debicki [15] charts an initial embrace of Ukrainian refugees in the immediate aftermath of the invasion only for this to dissipate as historical antagonisms started to be exploited for the sake of political gains. This became particularly apparent in the run-up to the 2025 presidential election in Poland and against an economic background of discontent from farmers over the influx of agricultural products from Ukraine and competition from Ukrainian migrants in certain sectors of the labour market.

In the Hungarian-Ukrainian borderlands, Balogh and Svensson [16] acknowledge similar issues but they also paint a picture of a variegated borderland community that at times defies nationalist frames. Their chapter even strikes an optimistic note against Victor Orban's increasingly entrenched "illiberal democracy" [17]. In the economically disadvantaged region on the Hungarian side of the border with Ukraine, they suggest that: "The coexistence of old and new residents has been reported as peaceful, with new life pumped into this long-peripheral region" [16]. In contrast, on the Slovakia-Ukraine Borderland, Lačný and Džuka's research [18] seems to suggest that the residents of the two neighbouring self-governing regions in Slovakia have relatively little direct experience of cross-border travel, business, shopping, commuting and cooperation with Ukraine.

A nuanced picture also emerges on the other side of Eurasia, along Japan's border with Russia. Here, some of the former Japanese residents, who once lived on the disputed islands of the Southern Kurils / Northern Territories, could, until recently, enjoy a visa-free exchange programme, established in the early 1990s. These former residents, and their descendants, took part in annual exchanges to the islands and Russians living on the islands could visit Japan. During these exchanges, they would visit each other's homes until this programme was halted by Covid-19 and then cancelled by Russia in response to Japan's sanctions. As Iwashita and Sartayev [19] note: "Thirty years of exchange transformed perceptions of those on the other side of the border". Today, the memories of this relatively recent humanitarian exchange have mediated the deterioration of people-to-people relations amongst many of the former islanders. In Nemuro, the closest town to the disputed islands, one in five respondents to a survey

stated that they didn't support Japan's sanctions against Russia, with half preferring "meditation" or "neutrality" to "sanctions". Iwashita and Sartayev suggest that similar attitudes apply on the Russian side, including on Sakhalin, where residents also question why relations with Japan should be halted by a distant European war.

Taken together, these chapters all place an emphasis on the economic factors in determining resilience, as well as the diversity of borderland experiences and the potential they offer for building people-to-people relations and moving beyond crude nationalist, or even civilisationist framings. As Zhurzhenko [14] notes, it is the economic and social elements in these borderlands, alongside issues of hard security, that will determine "the resilience of local communities facing multiple challenges and security threats".

A second key feature of this collection is broadening understandings of the implications and significance of the war in Ukraine in political centres. Iwashita and Sartayev's [19] chapter includes a striking account of a Chinese academic drawing three devastating conclusions for Russia on its 2022 invasion:

> *First, it is a "decisive historical watershed moment" and "strategic defeat" for Russia... Second, global diplomatic isolation [for Russia] is clear…Third, it caused NATO's dramatic revitalization, including Finland and Sweden, to alter the European security architecture to Russia's disadvantage*

Support from the leadership in Beijing has been essential for Russia maintaining the ongoing war but perspectives such as this shred Putin's Great Power posturing, already weakened by a reliance on mercenaries, amnesties for enlisted prisoners, Iranian drones, and North Korean troops. The acceleration of Russia's pivot towards China has occurred against the background of what Stępniewski [8] suggests is the most significant collapse of Russia's influence in Europe since before the time of Peter the Great. Although such interpretations are not the official line of the Chinese government, a wider expert community in China are sceptical not only of Russia's military prospects but also of tethering China too closely to an economically weakened and isolated Russia that may end up accentuating the worsening of China's relations with the West [20].

However, the negative trends of this war for Russia, which are spoken of openly in Chinese expert communities, remain largely unacknowledged – at least publicly – in Russia. Instead, as Bassin's chapter [21] reveals, the notion of Greater Eurasia – promoted by the likes of Sergey Karaganov, a foreign policy strategist and sometime Kremlin advisor – doubles down on the significance of China for Russia. The notion of Greater Eurasia promotes a "complex trans-national and cross-civilizational system" but one that involves dependency on China, which presents an extraordinary "avowal of sustained national weakness and dependency [that] is entirely unprecedented in Russian nationalist discourses". It formalises a remarkable recognition of Russia's interdependence with processes of globalisation, albeit ones centred on China. If, as Bassin argues [21], the entire narrative of Greater Eurasia revolves around a foreign policy privileging "the enhancement of all dimensions of bi-lateral engagement with the PRC", then it is one that has been enthusiastically embraced by Putin.

Despite a dissonance around the impacts of the war amongst expert communities in China and Russia, there is widespread consensus in both countries that blame for Russia's invasion lays at NATO's door [22]. Where public criticism of Putin's conduct has been permitted in Russia is in certain nationalist circles, but with limits that are strictly enforced when it is deemed that lines have been crossed. Stycharz's [23] chapter

charts the case of the military veteran, nationalist, and milblogger, Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov), who went too far in his personal criticism and vitriol against Putin, even suggesting that he might run in the 2024 presidential elections. While the nationalist enthusiasm of these bloggers was tolerated by the ruling elite when fanning national-patriotic fervour and denouncing NATO and the West as an existential threat for Russia, the limits to such voices of opposition were unambiguously restated when Girkin received a four-year prison sentence in 2024 on charges of extremism [23].

As Stycharz [23] points out, their constant propositions of various "radical solutions" also help to portray Putin as "a moderate and reasonable leader". At the same time, these pronouncements serve as "test balloons", acting as a useful societal conduit to distract from "unofficial" and potentially more dangerous opposition. Similar strategies are at work in the co-optation of once moderate political commentators – including Karaganov – as both a means to show unity across the political spectrum on critical topics, in particular the war in Ukraine, and as a "mechanism of testing opinions and moods regarding nuclear weapons". This tactic again works to present Putin as a moderate and responsible leader, even as he alters Russia's nuclear doctrine to lower the threshold for their use. In the end, the pretence of plurality and managed opposition appears more useful to the Kremlin than no opposing voices. For without this mechanism, Putin might look like the extremist, and it would deny the regime the ability to gauge both public and elite opinion on key issues, which may one day include negotiations and concessions with the likes of the United States on Ukraine [23].

A third prominent vector across this volume is the extent to which inclusivity is vital for resilience. As Zanjer and Baklacioğlu [24] argue in their chapter, comprehensive resilience and human security cannot be achieved without the active participation of women. Their fieldwork in Ukraine and Syria found that "women-led civil society organizations have filled the gap left by the failed public services". It also reveals the vital role of the resilience strategies developed by refugee women, in terms of "sustaining security through informal networks, narrative resistance and memory work, advocacy and bottom-up peacebuilding" [24]. However, this more inclusive and comprehensive reading of resilience runs counter to many of the policies, pronouncements, and actions of the leading actor in NATO: Donald Trump.

As a response to Trump's world view, this collection offers a definitive rebuttal to any singular approach to resilience, demonstrating that relying only on exclusion, militarisation, and securitisation will be doomed to failure. As Hagelin [25] points out, the danger is that with such practices – and the new norms of surveillance and centralization of control introduced to borderlands – there can follow consequences for democratic oversight and civil liberties. When such freedoms are curtailed, and more authoritarian control becomes entrenched in borderlands and beyond, is it the resilience of the West that prevails, or the agenda of Putin's Russia? Such a question highlights a key tension facing many of NATO's members: how to preserve democratic values, openness, and freedom, while securing societies from external and internal disinformation and propaganda that works to erode such values with far-reaching implications for community cohesion and inclusion. As Zhurzhenko [14] cautions, populist and far right forces in neighbouring countries are "receptive to Russian geopolitical narratives" and the "cross-border impact of such populist discourses and politics should not be underestimated."

This volume has emphasised that resilience to such discourses and politics is bound to socio-economic development and to the impacts of the closure, hardening, and securitisation of borders [26]. At the same time, it has revealed how border communities

can also be well-placed to rebuild trust, overcome binaries, and facilitate dialogue both in times of peace and war [12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 27]. Along NATO's borderlands, responses to the ruptures in trade and lost opportunities brought about by border closures demands ever more economic, social, and political investment from state budgets which are stretched, not least by the growing demands of defence spending. The key to resilience is not competition between these elements but coordinating their integration into innovative and comprehensive strategies that offer a sustainable and dynamic future for these border regions and their communities.

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