TOWARDS THE 'FRONTLINE STATES' CONCEPT: UNDERSTANDING THE RESPONSES TO RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Agata Mazurkiewicz
Wojciech Michnik

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About the Authors

Agata Mazurkiewicz holds a PhD in Political Science (Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland) and is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Political Science and International Relations at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her research and publications concern civil-military cooperation and interactions, peace support missions and NATO affairs.

Wojciech Michnik holds a PhD in Political Science (Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland) and is an Assistant Professor of International Relations and Security Studies at the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Jagiellonian University. He is also a Transatlantic Project Coordinator at the Central and South-East Europe Programme at London School of Economics IDEAS and Contributing Editor for New Eastern Europe. His research focuses on NATO and transatlantic security, international conflicts, and the geopolitics of the Middle East.

Authors: Agata Mazurkiewicz and Wojciech Michnik

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, The University of Edinburgh
Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org

Twitter: @Peace_Rep_
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LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/peace_rep_/

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PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, educationalists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrated to support democratic outcomes.

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Executive Summary

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has had significant consequences, including for NATO's Eastern Flank's regional security architecture. Following decades of peace in the region, NATO members neighbouring Russia and Ukraine, such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the Baltic states, have found themselves on the border of an active war zone. The focus in this paper rests on the "frontline states" concept and its explanatory power. The states selected here (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania) for a brief analysis do not constitute a coherent group within "frontline states" category, but rather are selected on a basis of their diversity: Estonia and Latvia (former Soviet republics) are small countries with a high proportion of ethnic Russians and native Russian-speakers; Poland is a regional power in terms of military strength and (relatively) international standing; Romania, bordering both Ukraine and Russia-wary Moldova, has the largest population and territory on the western coast of the Black Sea; while Hungary with its anti-EU and often pro-Russian stance seems to be an outlier among this group of "frontline states". The reactions of these states to Russian aggression have been influenced by the existing regional architecture, as well as their respective "troubled" histories of relations with Russia. Hence, the aim of this policy brief is to discuss to what extent the concept of "frontline states" can be applied to understand the reactions and responses of these countries to Russia's invasion on Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Introduction

This section of the paper examines the concept of "frontline states" both as a certain description of state security perception and more importantly as a potentially potent tool to study the current security environment in selected Central and Eastern European states. Furthermore, it will offer a brief discussion on how the "frontline states" concept can fit into the broader analytical framework of regional security.

In the most-common understanding, a frontline state is a country that borders on an area troubled by a war or other crises. A more specific definition would describe a frontline state as a country that either borders or is in close proximity to an area of a military conflict and thus faces a direct threat to its own security.[1] Such a state is confronted with adversaries in a region of conflict or geopolitical tensions, making it particularly vulnerable to any spillover effects or direct military threats. From the historical perspective the "frontline states" concept is not new as it usually refers to a coalition of African states formed from the 1970s to the early 1990s devoted to ending apartheid and white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia.[2] Yet, it gained a renewed interest in 2010s, especially in the face of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014 (i.e. the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine).[3] After 2014, the debate about so-called NATO's Eastern Flank intensified. In this perspective, the term "frontline states" has been used to address security concerns and defence responsibilities of Central and Eastern European member states of NATO, namely: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland[4], Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.[5] Following Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine in 2022, the threat of war made these geographically exposed states more unified (except for Hungary) in their regional response to Russia's actions.

Thus, since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the concept of the "frontline states" reappeared in debates about the security situation in Central and Eastern Europe and has been gaining momentum after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. While Russia's full-scale invasion directly targets Ukraine and its society, it also undermines the regional security architecture in Central and Eastern Europe. For NATO's member-states bordering the Russian Federation or Ukraine, Russia's aggression means that from 24 February 2022 onwards all Central and Eastern European states have become de facto frontline states.

Even though there was a certain unitary quality to NATO's Eastern Flank frontline states prior to 24 February 2022, Russia's invasion on Ukraine further catalysed ongoing regional security challenges in Europe. And along them the concept of "frontline states" in Central and Eastern Europe not only became much more clear-cut but also the responses of these states became much more coherent. Hence, the "frontline states" concept with its explanatory strength seems to be quite potent and more precise than alternative terms applied to describe geopolitical coherence of this part of Europe, such

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[1] See: Agata Mazurkiewicz, Wojciech Michnik eds., **"**Perception and Rhetoric in "Frontline States". An early assessment of the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine", 2023 (in print).

[2] Robert S. Jaster, *A Regional Security Role for Africa's Front-line States: Experience and Prospects,* London, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper no. 180. 1983, p. 8.

[3] Historically, the term "frontline states" (FLS) referred to a loose coalition of African countries committed to ending apartheid and white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia. The FLS included Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). J. Armon, D. Hendrickson, A. Vines eds., The Mozambican Peace Process in Perspective. Accord, 3, 1998, https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/The_Mozambican_Peace_Process_in_Perspective_Accord_Issue_3.pdf

[4] Finland joined NATO on 4 April 2023.

[5] See: Frontline Allies: War and Change in Central Europe, U.S.-Central Europe Strategic Assessment Group Report, November 2015, Center for European Policy Analysis, https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2102

as Central Eastern Europe, the Eastern Flank[6] or Northeastern Flank.[7] In terms of political coherence, this concept brings together states in the region with similar or identical security concerns. In certain aspects, it cements other regional initiatives, i.e., the Tree Seas Initiative (TSI) or the Bucharest Nine (B9), under a bigger umbrella of defence and security.

Finally, one of the main lessons that so far can be drawn from Russia's invasion on Ukraine is that the war the Kremlin has waged extends far beyond Ukraine's territory and its independence. Since Russia – in the words of Marc Ozawa – has become more desperate as it "has less to lose and is willing to escalate confrontation with Ukraine and the "collective west" along the spectrum of war", it means that in "the future NATO will be dealing with an adversary that is more reactive, unpredictable and ultimately dangerous".[8] Consequently, this clearly indicates that a "frontline state" is much more than just another academic concept but rather a certain geostrategic reality that many nations, from Finland to Bulgaria, would need to address both currently and in the foreseeable future.[9]

In the following sections we proceed to provide brief overviews of the responses of five frontline states to the Russian aggression on Ukraine. The analysis of the cases of Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Romania shows vast similarities in these states' reactions to, and perceptions of, the aggression, thus providing a justification for the utility of the "frontline state" concept. Notably, these five states do not constitute a coherent group within "frontline states" category but rather are selected on a basis of their apparent diversity in terms of size and political power: Estonia and Latvia (former Soviet republics) are small countries with a high proportion of ethnic Russians and native Russian-speakers; Poland is a regional power in terms of military strength and (relatively) international standing; Romania, bordering both Ukraine and Russia-wary Moldova, has the largest population and territory on the western coast of the Black Sea; while Hungary with its anti-EU and often pro-Russian stance seems to be an outlier among "frontline states". The case of Hungary, which is often presented as "the odd one out" in the region[10], adds depth to the study. Each of the following sections focuses on such aspects as the geopolitical reality of the selected frontline states, their reactions on the national and international levels (starting in 2014), as well as the discourses and narratives used in the political sphere in relation to Russia's invasion. In order to present a fuller picture, each section includes the dissenting voices.

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[6] For more on NATO's Eastern Flank as a unit of regional defense analysis see: Justyna Gotkowska, "NATO's Eastern Flank – a new paradigm", Center for Eastern Studies, 17.07.2016, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-07-13/natos-eastern-flank-a-new-paradigm.

[7] Christopher S., Chivvis, Raphael S. Cohen et al, "NATO's Northeastern Flank — Emerging Opportunities for Engagement: An   Overview",   RAND   Corporation,   Santa   Monica,   CA,   2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1467z1.html.

[8] Marc Ozawa [in:] Mark Ozawa ed., "War changes everything: Russia after Ukraine", NDC Research Paper 28, February 2023, NATO Defense College, p. 5.

[9] Even though a concept of the "frontline states" is by no means perfect (and scholarly without its vices), we argue that currently there is no better tool (unit of regional analysis) that would better explain the role(s) of the European frontline states in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. For a more detailed role of regions in international affairs see: Louise Fawcett, Andrew Hurrell eds., "Regionalism in World Politics", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995; Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

[10] See e.g.: Benjamin Fox, "The Brief – Orbán becomes the odd man out", Euractiv, 06.04.2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-brief-orban-becomes-the-odd-man-out/.

Estonia

For centuries the territory of today's Estonia has been a point of interest in the interplay between major regional powers, including Russia, which controlled the territory from the early 1700s to the fall of the Russian Empire, and then again with its enforced incorporation into the Soviet Union from 1944. The current relationship between Estonia and Russia is thus built on fraught historical memories which still shape the contemporary security policy of Estonia. The state's accession to the European Union and NATO in 2004 can be interpreted as a clear signal of its Western orientation and an attempt to distance Estonia from Russia's influence.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 alarmed Estonia, in particular due to a relatively large percentage of population identifying as ethnic Russians, and a similar percentage of native Russian-speaking minorities as in Ukraine.[11] The state responses included sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine as well as participation in sanctions against Russia within the EU framework. The 2014 events in Ukraine have also propelled Estonia to pursue a comprehensive approach to national security and defence, emphasising the importance of complementarity of actions taken at the national and allied level, the linkages between military and non-military sectors, and the involvement of the society as a whole in the defence of the state.[12]

In February 2022, following Vladimir Putin's decision to recognize the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk regions as states, as well as Russia's military invasion on Ukraine, most of the Estonian political sphere strongly condemned Russia. Statements of top politicians, including Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and President Alar Karis, emphasized the breach of the international law by Russia and declared support to Ukraine.[13] In several instances, the Estonian political discourse has directly invoked the historical images of Russian domination over Estonia, as well as addressed the fears of Estonians that their country might (again) become the next victim of Russia.[14] Estonia's reactions to the aggression clearly reflected the country's international orientation towards the West. Following the invasion, Estonia (together with some of the other frontline states) immediately requested consultations with the NATO Allies in accordance with the Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. It also welcomed the strengthening of NATO's presence on its territory and provided Ukraine with military aid reaching app. 1% of Estonia's GDP, ranking Estonia's contribution number one among all states assisting Ukraine since February 2022.[15] In terms of the economic response, Estonia, alongside other frontline states, strongly advocated for increasing the EU sanctions against Russia, with Estonian politicians vocally criticizing any hesitation of the Western counterparts in this regard.[16]

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[11] Thomas Schneider, Thanakorn Cheung, "The Crisis in Ukraine: An Estonian Perspective", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Berlin, 2015, p. 1; Pekka Vanttinen, "Russian minority in Estonia turns its back on Putin", Euractiv, 23.03.2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russian-minority-in-estonia-turns-its-back-on-putin/.

[12] See: Eugeniusz Cieślak, "Putting Comprehensive Defence to Work: What Can Poland Learn from the Baltic States?", Politeja vol. 19 no 4(79), 2022, pp. 79-81.

[13] See: https://estonianworld.com/security/february-march-april-updates-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-reactions-in-estonia/3/.

[14] This included the speech made by President Karis as well as the secretary general of the Estonian foreign ministry remarks on 24 February 2022. See: Helen Wright, "Karis: Yet Again, President Putin Has Chosen the Path of War," err.ee, 24.02.2022, https://news.err.ee/1608510848/karis-yet-again-president-putin-has-chosen-the-path-of-war; Rachel Martin, "Estonia's Ambassador to the U.S. Weighs in on Russian Invasion of Ukraine," npr.org, 24.02.2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/02/24/1082810092/estonias-ambassador-to-the-u-s-weighs-in-on-russian-invasion.

[15] Aili Vahtla, "Estonian Military Support to Ukraine to Increase to More than 1 Percent GDP," err.ee, 19.01.2023, https://news.err.ee/1608855524/estonian-military-support-to-ukraine-to-increase-to-more-than-1-percent-gdp.

[16] See e.g.: Ott Tammik, "Estonia's Top Diplomat Makes Pitch for Russia's Total Isolation," Bloomberg.com, 13.12.2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-13/estonia-s-top-diplomat-makes-pitch-for-russia-s-total-isolation.

At the same time, the voices of support towards Russia were also heard, mainly among the Russian-speaking Estonians. Mikhail Stalnukhin, an ethnic Russian member of the Estonian parliament expressed his backing to Putin's decision to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.[17] The Estonian parliament's statement in support of Ukraine, condemning the Russian aggression, and its recognition of the occupied regions was supported by only 72 out of 101 members, with some pro-Russian MPs not showing up for the vote.[18] Finally, Varro Vooglaid, a parliamentary candidate in the upcoming elections, criticized strengthening of NATO presence in Estonia, calling instead for the improvement of relations with Russia.[19]

The perception of Russia in Estonia has developed in relation to several centuries of tense relations and attempts to distance Estonia and Estonians from Russia. This weariness and distrust are probably best illustrated with a Tweet published by Toomas Ilves, the former President of Estonia, on 27 February 2022. It showed a cartoon character Bart Simpson writing on a blackboard multiple times: "I will not assume I know Russia better than the Baltics do".[20]

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[17] See: "Updates 2022: Russia's invasion of Ukraine – reactions in Estonia," EstonianWorld.com, https://estonianworld.com/security/february-march-april-updates-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-reactions-in-estonia/3/.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Aleksander Kryukov, Huko Aaspollu, "Helme: Vooglaid Does Not Represent EKRE' s Views When Talking about Security Policy," err.ee, 30.01.2023, https://www.err.ee/1608868115/helme-vooglaid-ei-esinda-julgeolekupoliitikast-raakides-ekre-seisukohti.
[20] Twitter, toomas ilves aka "I'm not only on this site", 27.02.2022, https://twitter.com/ilvestoomas/status/1498012343980150787.

Latvia

Latvia, bordering with both Russia and Belarus, is yet another example of a country which, following Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine, has become a frontline state. Similarly to other Baltic states, Latvia was formally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and made into a Soviet Republic, but is currently a part of the Western-oriented regional arrangements, including NATO and the EU. The historical connection with Russia is however still very much present in Latvia's society with approximately 25% of Latvian population being ethnic Russians[21] and approximately 37% of population speaking Russian as their first language.[22] The presence of such a significant minority has been a source of concern in Latvia particularly since 2014 when the Russian annexation of Crimea was being justified by the Kremlin by the alleged need to protect the rights of Russian speakers. From that moment onwards, Latvia has feared that it might be the next country to fall prey to Putin's Russia.

As such, since 2014, Latvia (and other frontline states) has insisted on a robust response of the West to Russia's aggressive posture. It has pointed to security risks related to the Nord Stream 2 project,[23] proposed sanctions against Russia at the EU level,[24] and expressed its support to and solidarity with Ukraine.[25] Only a month before Russian full-scale aggression, Latvian Minister for Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs called for further strengthening of NATO's presence in its Eastern flank.[26] Similarly, to Estonia, Latvia has also invested in a comprehensive approach to national defence, strengthening the involvement of the society in national security.[27]

Not surprisingly, Latvia's reaction to Russia's aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a strong condemnation of the invader and simultaneous support to Ukraine. The Latvian parliament declared Russia a state sponsor of terrorism[28] and "the greatest threat to peace and international law in the world".[29] It also acknowledged that the Russian Federation was committing genocide against the people of Ukraine.[30] Minister Rinkēvičs remarked that: "For the second time in the last 100 years, an iron front is falling in Europe, Russia is trying to isolate itself from the civilized world and restore an empire of evil and lies. Unlike last time, we are on the right side of the front, but we are also in the front row, this imposes a great responsibility and obligation on any of us."[31] This narrative was later reinforced by President Egils Levits, who on the first

[21] Minorities and indigenous peoples in Latvia – Russians, Minority Rights Group International, March 2018, https://minorityrights.org/minorities/russians-4/.

[22] "Languages of Latvia", OnLatvia.com, https://www.onlatvia.com/topics/culture-of-latvia/languages.

[23] Matthew Thomas, "Why stopping Nord Stream 2 matters for the Baltics", Baltic Security Foundation, 10.10.2019, https://balticsecurity.eu/stopping_nord_stream.

[24] "Baltic states to back further Russia sanctions if Ukraine crisis does not ease", Reuters, 21.06.2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-sanctions-baltics-idUKL6N0P20CM20140621.

[25] Joint statement by Foreign Ministers of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 15.04.2021, https://pl.mfa.lt/default/en/news/joint-statement-by-foreign-ministers-of-estonia-latvia-lithuania-and-ukraine.

[26] "Latvia's Foreign Minister calls for more NATO forces in Eastern Europe", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 24.01.2022, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/latvias-foreign-minister-calls-for-more-nato-forces-in-eastern-europe.a440247/.

[27] See: Eugeniusz Cieślak, "Putting Comprehensive Defence to Work: What Can Poland Learn from the Baltic States?", Politeja vol. 19 no 4(79), 2022, pp. 81-84.

[28] "Latvia Parliament calls Russia a state sponsor of terrorism", AP News, 11.08.2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-latvia-terrorism-government-and-politics-3bafb28ab5e1bec6327311aa810fbf55.

[29] "Latvian parliament: Russia is "greatest threat to peace and international law in the world"", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 23.02.2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/saeima/latvian-parliament-russia-is-greatest-threat-to-peace-and-international-law-in-the-world.a497783/.

[30] Statement of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia on the aggression and war crimes of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, 21.04.2022, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2022-04/latvia%20%20-%20Statement%20on%20Ukraine.pdf.

[31]Edgars Rinkēvičs, Facebook post, 03.03.2022,https://www.facebook.com/edgars.rinkevics/posts/5081808475213758.

anniversary of the attack explicitly called Russia an evil which must be resisted and punished.[32]

At the international level, alongside other frontline states, Latvia has called for isolation of Russia from international and regional organisations and again pushed for stricter EU sanctions, including the exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT payment system[33] and a total ban on issuing tourist visas to Russians.[34] Latvian politicians have pressured their Western counterparts to strengthen their support to Ukraine, also in terms of military transfers.[35] Finally, Latvia, often in cooperation with other frontline states, has also expressed its commitment to welcoming Ukraine to both NATO and the EU.[36]

Apart from political and diplomatic reactions, the Latvian support towards Ukraine and Ukrainians has also had a substantial material dimension, with the government's commitment of bilateral aid exceeding 0.9% of the country's GDP.[37] The welcoming stance towards Ukrainian refugees and the provisions of supplies to Ukraine, including ammunition, medication, and personal equipment,[38] together with the support in the international arena, ranked Latvia fourth position on the Forbes magazine's list of "Friends of Ukraine".[39]

Bearing in mind the complex demography of Latvia, the social reactions have not been entirely uniform. The political representation of the Russian-speaking Latvians, the "Harmony" party, has mostly presented an anti-war sentiment, clearly indicating Russia as an offender of international norms.[40] However, this stance might have been costly, as in the autumn 2022 election the party did not cross the 5% threshold necessary to obtain seats in the parliament (while in the previous election of 2018 its support reached 23%).[41] Instead, eleven seats were won by a newly emerged party "For Stability!" with an anti-EU and pro-Russia agenda.[42] At the same time, a poll conducted in December 2022 showed that only 4% of the Latvian population supported Putin's invasion of Ukraine.[43]

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[32] "President Levits: "Evil must be resisted. Evil must be punished."", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 24.02.2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/president/president-levits-evil-must-be-resisted-evil-must-be-punished.a498010/.
[33] "Baltic Foreign Ministers in Kyiv: kick Russia from SWIFT payment system", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 24.02.2022, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/baltic-foreign-ministers-in-kyiv-kick-russia-from-swift-payment-system.a445054/.
[34] "Baltic states and Poland: We must 'drastically decrease' flow of Russians into the EU", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 01.09.2022, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/baltic-states-and-poland-we-must-drastically-decrease-flow-of-russians-into-the-eu.a471768/.
[35] "Latvia calls on Germany to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine 'now'", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 21.01.2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/latvia-calls-on-germany-to-send-leopard-tanks-to-ukraine-now.a492667/.
[36] Joint Statement of the President of Latvia Egils Levits, President of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda, President of Poland Andrzej Duda, President of Romania Klaus Iohannis on the regional security and European integration, Kaunas (Lithuania) 25.11.2022, https://www.president.lv/en/article/presidents-latvia-lithuania-poland-and-romania-vow-intensify-common-regional-security-cooperation-and-pledge-support-european-integration?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F; Statement of the European Union Affairs Committees of the Baltic States in support of Ukraine, 05.03.2022, https://www.riigikogu.ee/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Statement-on-Ukriane-by-EE-LT-LV.pdf.
[37] Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker", https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set.
[38] Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, "Latvia supports Ukraine", 23.02.2023, https://www.mk.gov.lv/en/latvia-supports-ukraine?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Feng.lsm.lv%2F.
[39] Volodymyr Landa, Konstantin Gnenny, "Rating of friends of Ukraine. 20 countries that have helped Ukraine the most since the Russian invasion", Forbes, 31.05.2022, https://forbes.ua/inside/reyting-druziv-ukraini-20-krain-yaki-naybilshe-dopomogli-ukraini-z-momentu-rosiyskogo-vtorgnennya-reyting-forbes-31052022-6292.
[40] Una Bergmane, „Latvia's First Response to Russia's War in Ukraine", Foreign Policy Research Institute, 11.03.2022, https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/latvias-first-response-to-russias-war-in-ukraine/.
[41] Evija Djatkovica, „In the Shadow of War. How Russia's catastrophic invasion of Ukraine impacts Latvia", 13.01.2023, https://opencanada.org/in-the-shadow-of-war/.
[42] Ibid.
[43] "Only 4 percent of Latvian population is now pro-Putin", Public broadcasting of Latvia, 05.02.2023, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/only-4-percent-of-latvian-population-is-now-pro-putin.a494950/.

While Latvia's small size in terms of territory, population and economy does not place it among significant players in international politics, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has definitely elevated its position and importance in NATO and the EU. As a frontline state, which has long warned against the Russian threat and presents a uniformed message together with its neighbours, Latvia's voice is becoming more resonant in the West.[44]

[44]Robyn Dixon, „Baltic nations long warned about Russia. Now, maybe the West is listening.", The Washington Post,12.10.2022, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/12/baltics-poland-russia-warnings-nato/.

Poland

No other frontline state in Central and Eastern Europe simultaneously borders Ukraine, Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) and Lukashenko's pro-Russian Belarus. This fact, along with regional ambitions exemplified with such formats as the Visegrad Group, the Three Seas Initiative or the Bucharest Nine, makes the position of Poland as a frontline state unique. Additionally, Poland was one of those states that reacted most strongly to the initial Russia's invasion of Ukraine that included the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas in 2014. For Poland and other countries in the region (i.e. the Baltic States), it was clear that Russia's 2014 aggression was not only a direct violation of Ukrainian independence but also a message to the West that the current status quo of a peaceful and democratic Europe – under the security umbrella of the United States and NATO – did not resonate with Putin's vision of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir).[45] Presently, Poland seeks to increase the presence of US and NATO forces on its territory.[46] In March 2023, Warsaw made another step in this direction when Americans upgraded its military presence on Polish territory, forming the first US Army garrison in one of NATO's frontline states.[47]

Geopolitical realities, including over 500 km of border with Ukraine and central location in the region, made Poland a hub for diplomatic cooperation, humanitarian assistance and coordination of weaponry shipments to Ukraine. For Warsaw, a member of both NATO and the EU, it quickly became apparent that it needed to perform two key tasks at the same time. Poland would assist Ukrainians in their struggle against the Russian invasion while also attempting to do everything in its power to prepare contingency planning in case Russia chooses to escalate the war directly into NATO territory. Even though the war should have not come as a total surprise, becoming a frontline state has challenged Poland in various dimensions.[48]

Poland's diplomatic and political decisions and reactions to Russia's can be viewed from the point of view of multilateral and unilateral frameworks.[49] Regarding the former, NATO and the European Union served as the most important forums for presenting Poland's stance towards Russia and Ukraine. Following the aggression, Poland and other states in the region (including such frontline states as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia) immediately invoked Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, requesting consultations with all political allies.

As part of NATO, Poland was also a signatory of Alliance's declarations and statements strongly condemning Russia's actions, expressing solidarity with and pledging support to Ukraine. Poland is also an outspoken supporter of Ukraine's membership in the EU[50] and Polish politicians have been actively advocating among their counterparts for increased pressures on Russia and transfers of military equipment to Ukraine.[51] In terms of more unilateral responses to the aggression, Polish political sphere has been largely

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[45] Wojciech Michnik, Łukasz Kamieński, Maciej Smółka, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: A Dramatic Game-Changer", LSE IDEAS CSEEP at the Jagiellonian University, https://cseep.uj.edu.pl/blog/-/journal_content/56_INSTANCE_syU1o8MlR1gt/147284642/150046097

[46] Neil Buckley, James Fontanella-Khan, Jan Cienski, "Poland calls for NATO troop deployment", Financial Times, 01.04.2014, https://www.ft.com/content/3867c08a-b999-11e3-b74f-00144feabdc0.

[47] "1st US Army garrison on NATO's east flank formed in Poland", Associated Press, 21.03.2023, https://apnews.com/article/poland-us-security-military-nato-garrison-base-57a3db8e7e9073ed8fe7eb5b67e5f115.

[48] See: Wojciech Michnik, "Poland as a new frontline state", New Eastern Europe, no 3(LI) 2022, April-May 2022, p. 130.

[49] The below section explaining Poland's reactions is predominantly based on authors' policy brief: Agata Mazurkiewicz, Wojciech Michnik eds., Perception and Rhetoric in "Frontline States". An early assessment of the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine, 2023.

[50] Joint Declaration on the European perspective of Ukraine, The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 07.05.2022, https://www.president.pl/news/joint-declaration-on-the-european-perspective-of-ukraine-,37193.

[51] Anna Widzyk, „Polska i Litwa naciskają na Berlin: Nie czas na egoizm", Deutsche Welle, 26.02.2022, https://www.dw.com/pl/polska-i-litwa-naciskaj%C4%85-na-berlin-nie-czas-na-egoizm/a-60928922.

in agreement as to the strong condemnation of Russia and a pledge of support to Ukraine.[52] Russia's aggression has been called "an attack on the international order", a "barbarity" and "a madman's decision".[53] Next to declarations and resolutions, this has also taken the form of legislation and programmes aimed at assisting Ukraine and Ukrainians (including a fast-track border crossing procedure for Ukrainian refugees[54] or the transfer of humanitarian aid and military equipment).

The economic tools employed as a direct response to Russia's aggression by Poland can also be categorised in two groups: a) the instruments applied by Poland as part of the EU sanctions policy; b) individual changes to Poland's own legislation in order to provide economic and social support to Ukrainian refugees. The first group of actions comprises multiple rounds of sanctions against Russia and Belarus, restrictive measures against individuals and companies, as well as bans on media outlets and economic cooperation with the areas controlled by Russia (e.g. Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk). Here, Poland, together with several other frontline states, has put pressure on other EU members to increase the sanctions[55] in order to further constrain Russia's ability to continue its war of aggression.

Poland has also supported Ukraine through direct transfers of military equipment, i.e., armoured fighting vehicles, tanks, guns, and rocket launchers worth nearly 2.5 billion euros (as of March 2023).[56] In March 2023, Poland, was the first NATO member state to declared it would transfer fighter jets to Ukraine.[57] In terms of GDP, Poland has been one of the top suppliers of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (0,4% of GDP, next to other frontline states like Estonia – 1%, Latvia – 0,9%, and Lithuania – 0,5%,).[58]

While the vast majority of Poles, politicians and citizens have been unified in supporting Ukraine, there are also those who back Russia and oppose the assistance provided to Ukraine. One representative of the latter stance is Grzegorz Braun, the member of the Polish parliament, who blames Ukraine and NATO for Russia's actions and criticises aid provided to Ukrainian refugees.[59] There have also been some incidents of (racially inspired) attacks on refugees in the border town of Przemyśl[60] but their scale was rather insignificant.

As a result of its straightforward response to Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine and unique geopolitical position as a central frontline state, Poland seems to have elevated its international status, at least in the short-term. Not only is Poland's attitude toward Russia being taken more seriously, but so is Poland's role in European security. Within weeks of the invasion, Poland became a pillar of Western efforts to defend Ukraine and

[52] Uchwała Sejmu ws. agresji Federacji Rosyjskiej na Ukrainę. "Atak na cały porządek międzynarodowy", Sejm Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 24.02.2022, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=46D05344F0494503C12587F30050EC4B.

[53] „Rosja zaatakowała Ukrainę. Reakcje z Polski", Bankier.pl, 24.02.2022, https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Rosja-zaatakowala-Ukraine-Reakcje-z-Polski-8284464.html.

[54] Robert Hrobaczewski, „Uchodźcy z Ukrainy nie muszą się rejestrować w punktach recepcyjnych", Prawo.pl, 28.02.2022, https://www.prawo.pl/samorzad/uproszczenia-graniczne-dla-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy,513674.html.

[55] Barbara Moens, „Eastern Europeans push for new penalties as EU sanctions fail to end Putin's war", Politico, 01.04.2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/eastern-europeans-conjure-up-plans-to-raise-new-penalties-pressure-on-vladimir-putin-russia/.

[56] Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker", https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set.

[57] "Poland to transfer MiG-29 jets to Ukraine within days", Deutsche Welle, 16.03.2023, https://www.dw.com/en/poland-to-transfer-mig-29-jets-to-ukraine-within-days/a-65009216.

[58] Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker", https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set.

[59] Anna Mierzyńska, „Poseł polskiego Sejmu promuje w Warszawie prorosyjskie oświadczenie obwiniające Ukrainę i NATO", Oko Press, 26.06.2022, https://oko.press/posel-polskiego-sejmu-promuje-prorosyjskie-oswiadczenie.

[60] Piotr Żytnicki, „Rasistowski atak w Przemyślu. Kibole polują na czarnoskórych uciekinierów z Ukrainy", Wyborcza.pl, 01.03.2022,https://rzeszow.wyborcza.pl/rzeszow/7,34962,28173002,rasistowski-atak-w-przemyslu-kibole-poluja-na-czarnoskorych.html.

deter Russia - a task as important as dangerous.[61] In a significant twist of events, Poland that before 24 February 2022 was criticized for its government's dubious record with the rule of law and state of democracy, within weeks after Russian aggression became a forerunner of the alliance of democracies against the assault by the authoritarian regime. The significance of Poland as a frontline state and important player in transatlantic security dynamics seemed to have been sealed by President Biden's visits to this country, twice in one year.

61 "Why Poland has become NATO's linchpin in the war in Ukraine", The Economist, 12.03.2022, https://www.economist.com/europe/poland-will-play-an-outsized-role-in-western-efforts-to-assist-ukraine/21808064.

Romania

As Romania has the longest border with Ukraine of any NATO member, Russia's full-scale invasion made it a frontline state by default. This geopolitical reality had also been evident even before 24 February 2022, as Romanian attitude towards Russia had become even more alerted after Kremlin's decision to attack Ukraine and annex Crimea in 2014. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that Romania, with the largest population and territory in south-eastern Europe, is a "worried nation". As Robert D. Kaplan aptly observed, Romania "has been trapped historically by its proximity to Russia, whose army has now invaded next door. Romania and Romanian-speaking Moldova have a longer border with Ukraine than does Poland".[62] Moreover, Romania's heightened threat perception of the Russian Federation's intentions and behaviour stems also from Kremlin's provocation of conflict and division within Moldova, which shares substantial cultural and ethnic affinities with Romania, specifically through the unrecognized, Russian-dominated breakaway region of Transnistria.[63]

The 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia was met in Romania with concerns. Even though country's political scene was quite polarized at the time, the main political forces expressed their disagreement with Kremlin's outright violation of international law and Ukrainian sovereignty. Bucharest did not recognize the annexation of Crimea, viewed as an integral part of Ukraine, and warned against revisionist policies of Russia aimed at resurrecting the Soviet Union.[64] Notably, the annexation intensified Romanian calls for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. From Bucharest's perspective, Moldova, situated between Romania and Ukraine and threatened by pro-Russian separatism in Transdniestria, became even more of a security issue due to Russia's rewriting of borders and uprooting of the status quo in Europe.[65]

Romanian immediate reactions to Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine echoed rather a typical, frontline-state response. On 24 February 2022, Romania was among seven other countries that requested to hold consultations under Article 4 of the Washington Treaty.[66] Within its Enhanced Forward Presence, NATO established eight multinational battlegroups, one of them being hosted by Romania. 4,000 US soldiers (US Army's 101st Airborne Division) were deployed to Romania just weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine.[67] This presence of additional allied troops strengthened deterrence and defence posture of Romania. In addition, Romanians played an active role in providing assistance to refugees from Ukraine, welcomed them into their homes, offered transportation and food. Hundreds of participants have gathered for protests against Russian aggression, with demonstrations taking place not only in the capital city of

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[62] Robert D. Kaplan, "Romania Fears Putin, But Putin Should Fear Romania, Too", Blomberg online, 16.07.2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-07-16/russia-ukraine-war-romania-fears-it-may-be-next-on-putins-s-hit-list.

[63] Rumena Filipova, "Romania: Determined Action on the Ukrainian-Russian Frontline", The Geopost, 22.04.2022, https://thegeopost.com/en/factchecking-eng/romania-determined-action-on-the-ukrainian-russian-frontline/.

[64] Reactions to Russian Annexation of Crimea, Radio Romania International, 19.03.2014, https://www.rri.ro/en gb/reactions to russian annexation of crimea-14708.

[65] For a detailed analysis of Moldova's perspective on the EU accession amidst Russia's war in Ukraine see: Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers, "Walking the tightrope towards the EU, Moldova's vulnerabilities amid war in Ukraine", Clingendael Report, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' September 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/walking-the-tightrope-towards-the-eu.pdf

[66] The consultation process and Article 4, NATO, 08.12.2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics 49187.htm.

[67] See: NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance, NATO, 21.12.2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics 136388.htm; Lara Jakes, "In Romania, U.S. Troops Train Close to Russia's War, in Signal to Moscow", New York Times, 03.01.2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/world/europe/us-troops-romania-russia-ukraine-war.html.

Bucharest, but also in smaller towns.[68] Furthermore, according to the poll conducted three months after the invasion, 71.2% Romanians believed Russia to be the main perpetrator of the war in Ukraine, while 10.4% blamed the US, 4.5% - Ukraine, and 3.9% and 1.7% blamed NATO and the EU respectively.[69] Romania also unequivocally rejected Russia's territorial claims towards Ukrainian territory, including staged "referendums" that Moscow attempted in September 2022. According to the Romania's Foreign Ministry statement, "Romania does not recognize the results of these so-called 'referendums', which are illegal and illegitimate".[70] This response fell in line with similar reactions of Romania and other frontline states to Russia's attempts to redraw national borders in the 21st-century Europe. These efforts were dubbed a serious violation of international law and therefore not bearing any kind of legal effect. Consequently, Romanian officials reacted in a similar fashion to the 24 February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As President Iohannis underlined, Russia is "the aggressor, not the victim, as the Kremlin is trying to prove". He added that Romania strongly "condemns the completely unjustified, illegal and unprovoked aggression of the Russian army against Ukraine".[71]

However, not all Romania's reactions to Russia's full-scale invasion were outright positive. The scale of economic and military assistance to Ukraine is significantly smaller than that of other frontline states, such as Estonia, Poland or Slovakia. It stems partly from the fact that Romania's economy is in a relatively poorer condition vis-à-vis these states, and from a concern – not that unique among other partners of Ukraine, of course – that by sending excessive levels of military assistance, Bucharest would weaken its defensive capabilities. Another explanation might be security concerns, i.e., endangering Romania's position vis-à-vis Russia. As a matter of fact, Bucharest officially maintains that it has provided significant military assistance to Ukraine but cannot disclose the details for security reasons. It appears that the government wants to avoid giving the impression to Moscow that Romania is directly involved in the current war. Moreover, another point of concern for Bucharest may be the presence of approximately 1,600 Russian troops in the separatist region of Transnistria, which poses a security threat to Moldova and consequently to Romania.[72] One significant instance of such a "cautious approach" was a controversial remark made by Romania's Minister of National Defence Vasile Dîncu. In October 2022, he stated that "Ukraine's only chance for peace would be engaging itself in negotiations with Russia".[73] One week after this statement the minister resigned for going against Romania's official stance, yet the fact that the process of resignation took seven days may point to some internal rifts about Ukraine's prospects of winning the war.

With its strategic geopolitical location and its historical animosity with the Russian Federation, Romania self-identifies as a frontline state "facing a regionally assertive Russia". And even though it does not share a border with Russia, Romania sits along NATO's Southeastern Flank with an access to the Back Sea (alongside Bulgaria, Georgia,

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[68] "Ukrainian refugees and disinformation: situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania", Investigations, The European Digital Media Observatory, 05.04.2022, https://edmo.eu/2022/04/05/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/.

[69] "Survey: Seven in ten Romanians hold Russia accountable for the war in Ukraine", Romania Insider, 03.06.2022, https://www.romania-insider.com/romanians-war-ukraine-russia-blame.

[70] Quoted in: Bogdan Neagu, "Romania calls Russian referendums in Ukraine 'illegal and illegitimate'", Euroactive, 29.09.2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/romania-calls-russian-referendums-in-ukraine-illegal-and-illegitimate/.

[71] Andrei Chirileasa, "President: Romania won't be drawn in the military conflict in Ukraine!", Romania Insider, 24.02.2022, https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-president-ukraine-russia-war.

[72] Kamil Calus, "Extremely cautious. Romania's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine", Analysis of the Center for Eastern Studies, 22.10.2022, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-10-14/extremely-cautious-romanias-approach-to-russian-invasion-ukraine.

[73] Ibid.

Russia Turkey, and Ukraine).[74] Because of Russia's full-scale invasion and subsequent war in Ukraine, the status of the Black Sea region has become an important concern for European security, which has raised the importance of NATO's member states in the Black Sea Basin, including Romania. Consequently, Romania has clearly increased its role within the Alliance's Eastern Flank defensive posture as it has become one of the pillars in NATO's deterrence of Russia in the Black Sea region. This has been illustrated not only by the Romanian declaration to boost its military spending (from 2% of GDP to 2.5% in 2023)[75] and its ongoing assistance to Ukraine but also by a growing US and NATO military presence on Romania's territory.[76]

[74] Samir Puri, "Romania: Black Sea Security and NATO's South-Eastern Frontline", Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2021, https://www.spf.org/projects/upload/Romania%2C%20Black%20Sea%20Security%20and%20NATO%E2%80%99s%20South-Eastern%20Frontline%20%28Puri%29.pdf.

[75] See: Bogdan Neagu, "Romania wants to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP", Euroactive online, 02.032022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/romania-wants-to-increase-defence-spending-to-2-5-of-gdp/ .

[76] This includes an establishment of NATO's Battlegroup in Romania. See: NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance, 21.12.2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

Hungary

Hungary, geographically and geopolitically, is a frontline state. Not only does it neighbour Ukraine through the 135 km-long border but its unique location makes Hungary an important gateway for trade and transportation between Ukraine and the EU. From a European security perspective, Hungary's position is significant due to its strategic geographic location which for years have acted as an important link and a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe. After the fall of communism in 1989, Hungary has experienced significant political, social, and economic transformation, which have included transitioning to a market economy and a system of multiparty democracy. Comparably to most of its Central and Eastern European partners, Budapest chose quite a straightforward political and economic path towards Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union. When Hungary joined NATO in 1999, it faced similar challenges as their peer NATO's newcomers – Poland and the Czech Republic: namely, a need for a rapid transformation of the military forces and increases in defence spending.[77] As Hungary underwent economic and military transformation in 2000s, its domestic policies slowly started to differ from the ones of its regional partners from the Visegrad Group.

Long before Russia's full-scale invasion, Budapest's political and diplomatic behaviour within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks made Hungary a unique and rather unorthodox case in comparison to other frontline states. This trend and subsequent geopolitical shift became visible in 2010 when Victor Orbán-led Fidesz party came to power. Within a few years, Hungary's foreign policy took a populist turn The conservative, right-wing ruling party drove Hungary to distancing itself politically and ideologically from the West. As Hungary was turning into self-proclaimed "illiberal democracy"[78], its relations with Western countries, especially within the EU, deteriorated. Instead, Hungary has focused more on closer cooperation with the Visegrad Group countries and, surprisingly, with Russia.[79]

Furthermore, it is worth noting that even prior to Russia's war in Ukraine the relationship between Hungary and Ukraine had been strained for a considerable period of time. Russia's full-scale invasion only seemed to deteriorate the relations even further. One of the reasons for Hungarian-Ukrainian tensions – at least from the Budapest perspective – was the situation of Hungarian minority residing in Ukraine, including its declining population and increased emigration, exacerbated by the war.[80]

Since the early 2010s, Moscow has emerged as a key foreign policy ally for Hungary, driven primarily by the country's energy interests and anti-Western rhetoric of the

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[77] Despite initial criticisms for falling short of NATO standards and insufficient spending (from nearly 1% of its GDP in 2014 to 1.61% in 2021), Hungary has since made substantial progress in defense reform and modernization. See: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021), NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 11.06.2021, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf.

[78] Definition of the so-called "Illiberal democracy" is far from precise. As Hungary is no longer a liberal democracy, yet (still?) cannot be considered an autocracy like Russia and Turkey. "They are hybrid regimes where the drift toward authoritarianism and a concentration of powers skews the political competition: "Illiberal democracies" in the words of Orbán himself, in which the checks and balances are considered to unduly constrain the sovereignty of the people". Quoted in: Jacques Rupnik. "Illiberal democracy in East-Central Europe", Esprit, no. 6, 2017, p. 75, https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-esprit-2017-6-page-69.htm.

[79] Even after 24 February 2022, Hungarian government has actively pursued communication with autocrats, particularly with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. See: Gabriela Greilinger, "How Hungary's Russia connection undermines EU support for Ukraine", New Eastern Europe, January-March 2023 no. 1 (LV), p. 75-81.

[80] Based on the Ukrainian census of 2001, there were approximately 151,500 individuals of Hungarian ethnicity residing in Transcarpathia, which accounted for 12% of the region's population at the time. However, a survey conducted in 2017 revealed that the number had decreased to 131,000. After Russia's full-scale invasion, it is estimated that the remaining population of Hungarians in the region has dwindled even further to a range of 75,000-85,000. "Ethnic Hungarians have been having a tricky time in Ukraine", The Economist, 16.03.2023, https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/03/16/ethnic-hungarians-have-been-having-a-tricky-time-in-ukraine.

government. Hungary's reliance on Russian energy[81] and its growing ties with Russia have had an impact on its actions and position within both the EU and NATO. This has led to concerns that Hungary may be acting as a "Trojan horse" of Russia within NATO, with an intention to impede Ukraine's potential integration with the organization and erode the unity within the Alliance. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Hungarian position stood out among the EU and NATO member states. Instead of undertaking careful re-evaluation of Kremlin's role in dismantling the European collective security architecture, Budapest looked the other way, warning against an "anti-Russian" approach. In 2015, Prime Minister Orbán stated that he "doesn't want to live in a Europe that conducts a new Cold War against Russia and which makes the Europeans enemies of the Russians".[82]

This tendency has not significantly changed, especially after Russia escalated its war in Ukraine in 2022, which led to a firmer response from the Alliance. Consequently, certain tensions have been noticeable between Hungary and NATO, mostly linked to the disagreement over NATO's level of engagement in supporting Kyiv and Hungary's desire to be recognized as a country that maintains its aloofness from the Russian war in Ukraine. This distance was voiced by Prime Minister Orbán himself when he (in)famously accused the European Union of prolonging the war, and argued that that war in Ukraine is not Hungary's war: "The war in Ukraine is not a conflict between the armies of good and evil, but between two Slavic countries that are fighting against one another. This is their war, not ours".[83] These comments not only isolated Hungary within the transatlantic community but also made it officially the only state in the EU "worried that supporting Ukraine would prolong the conflict."[84]

Hungarian subsequent reactions only solidified its image of an untypical frontline state, the one that would abstain from eagerly assisting Ukraine and supporting joint Western responses to the war. While the vast majority of the EU and NATO member states pledged to maintain their military support for Ukraine so that it could defend itself, Hungary not only called on Kyiv to give up the fight but also refused to provide military aid to Ukraine. Budapest even blocked the transit of weapons for Ukraine through the Hungarian territory. And even though Budapest finally agreed on joint EU sanctions against Russia, it did not cease to actively communicate with Russian counterparts, sending Hungarian officials to Moscow to negotiate a deal for extra gas supplies.[85]

Russia's war in Ukraine has put Hungary and Orbán's government in an awkward position. When President Putin ordered Russian forces to invade Ukraine in 2022 many thought it would surely spell the Hungarian leader's demise, given his strong ties with Moscow. Yet, it did not happen. Orbán managed to find the way to manoeuvre between preserving Hungary's role in NATO, on the one hand, and continuing an open-ended conflict over the rule of law with the EU while maintaining relations with Moscow, on the other. One of the latest cases in point is Budapest's refusal to join together with the rest of the European Union member-states in a (mostly) symbolic condemnation of

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[81] The majority of Hungary's oil and gas supplies, 65% and 85% respectively, are sourced from Russia. According to opinion polls, 60% of Hungarians believe that Orbán's strategy is the most effective in ensuring their safety. Paul Hockenos, "The Secrets to Viktor Orban's Success," Foreign Policy, 01.04.2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/01/viktor-orbans-hungary-populism-election-nationalism/.

[82] Hadas Aron, Emily Holland, "Is Hungary Ukraine's Biggest Problem in the European Union?", War on the Rocks, 29.04.2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/is-hungary-ukraines-biggest-problem-in-the-european-union/.

[83] Justine Spike, "Hungary's Orban accuses EU of prolonging war in Ukraine", Associated Press, 18.02.2023, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-government-european-union-viktor-orban-a404e437593bddf9b0e8b23482f2872e.

[84] Krzysztof Dębiec, "Slovakia, Hungary: minister Káčer's controversial comments", Analysis, Center for Eastern Studies,22.02.2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-02-22/slovakia-hungary-minister-kacers-controversial-comments.

[85] Lily Bayer, "Hungary breeds unquiet on Ukraine's western front", Politico, 01.09.2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-unquiet-ukraine-russia-western-front/.

Russia's atrocities in Ukraine. When on 20 March 2023 ministers of justice from 26 EU countries released their own statement supporting the International Criminal Court's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin and his commissioner for children's rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, for alleged war crimes relating to the abduction of children from Ukraine, Hungary was the only country among the EU member states that refused to sign it.[86]

Perhaps in this context, it would not be too extreme to assess that "Hungary's Ukraine policy has always been to a certain extent subordinated to Hungary's Russia policy," as Andras Racz of the German Council on Foreign Relations observed. In his view, as far as Western cooperation regarding support of Ukraine is concerned, Hungary "is performing only the necessary minimum". Even if "it's not breaking the consensus, it's not breaking the unity, it's weakening the unity".[87] Therefore, even though Hungary checks the majority of the boxes as a proverbial frontline state (being in a close proximity of a war-torn state, with its own security situation directly being affected by the war), its policy seriously calls into a question whether Hungary acts like one.

[86] Alberto Nardelli, Jorge Valero Samy Adghirni, "Hungary Blocked Joint EU Statement on Putin's Arrest Warrant", Bloomberg online, 20.03.2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-20/hungary-blocked-joint-eu-statement-on-putin-s-icc-arrest-warrant.
[87] Lily Bayer, "Hungary breeds unquiet on Ukraine's western front", Politico, 01.09.2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-unquiet-ukraine-russia-western-front/.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Nearly a decade after the annexation of Crimea and a year after Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine, the analysis of the responses of Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Romania reveals a certain pattern in the way these frontline states make sense of Russia's actions and view the changes at the international arena. These similarities allow to assess the utility of the "frontline state" concept and its explanatory power in a broader transatlantic security framework. At the same time, the case of Hungary shows that there is no full unity in the region and the logic driving Budapest's responses to the conflict clearly separates it from its regional counterparts. Because of that and for the sake of clarity, in the following paragraphs, the term "frontline states" will exclude Hungary.

The geopolitical reality of the frontline states constitutes one of the main convergence points. Neighbouring Russia and/or Ukraine, these countries have found themselves next door to an open war – a shocking turn of events after decades of peace in the region. This has brought a set of challenges, including a massive influx of refugees, and the necessity to deal with political, economic, and social consequences of the war. The attacks on Ukraine, dating back to 2014, have emphasised a common perception among the frontline states that Russia constitutes a direct threat to their security and independence. The troubled history between these countries and Russia has left the societies of these states with deeply rooted fears of being invaded, occupied, and controlled by Moscow. While prior to 2014 these fears may have been to some degree dormant, they can be viewed as one of the factors driving the fierce condemnation of Russia's aggressive stance and relentless support to Ukraine and its fight for territorial integrity and independence. The fear of becoming the next potential victim of Russian revisionist politics and policies has instilled a sense of urgency in frontline states' decision-makers and populations, which has translated into the assistance provided to Ukraine both in terms of direct transfers of aid and equipment, as well as the efforts to increase diplomatic support to Ukraine in the international arena.

As such, the membership in NATO and the EU has been turned into a platform for joint messaging and actions. While, for a long time, many of the frontline states' roles in these organisations had been relatively small (due to their size and economic factors), Russia's February 2022 attack on Ukraine has put them in the spotlight. In this sense, the war, contrary to prior more dispersed risks and threats to security, has had a highly localised effect, temporarily re-calibrating international relations and giving the opportunity to the so-far peripheral and currently frontline states to claim the centre stage. To exemplify this, Poland has become a major stop for global politics, bridging Ukraine with the rest of the world, as reflected in high-level visits paid recently by the American President, Joe Biden, or the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida. Before the war, visits of this calibre in the region had been much less frequent.

This increased interest and presence of global leaders in the region comes with something that we could call an "I told you so" effect. Many of the frontline states feel as they have long warned against Russia's aggressive posture and have been treated as Russophobic by their Western allies. Therefore, in their opinion, the ongoing invasion on Ukraine gives them grounds for demanding attention and relevance at the international arena, allows them to contest the previous (and sometimes current) great powers' politics, and even admonish their Western partners as to the proper and necessary course of action.[88] Thus, the frontline states gain prominence in international relations, demanding to occupy more central role and aspiring to be the agenda setters

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[88] Mateusz Morawiecki, „Mateusz Morawiecki at Heidelberg University - "Europe at a historic turning point"", The Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, 20.03.2023, https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/mateusz-morawiecki-at-heidelberg-university---europe-at-a-historic-turning-point.

for this crisis, claiming that their deep-rooted knowledge and experience of dealing with Russia and building on a perspective that is unique to this part of the world. This, of course, translates into an expectation of an increased access to a wide range of resources: financial (e.g. for supporting the refugees), diplomatic (in terms of the appreciation demanded by the frontline states), and, last but not least, military. On that note, while the frontline states strive to reform their own defence policies and capabilities, they are also actively seeking to increase the presence of NATO troops in the region and creating permanent bases on their territories. The reason behind it is that the membership in NATO is seen by the frontline states as one of the main sources of their security and a vital deterrence measure, putting a distance between them and Russia.

As the concept of "frontline states" in the context of the war in Ukraine is still being developed, the above analysis leaves us with several questions and, therefore, avenues for future inquiry. One of them concerns the diversity of the frontline states and the nuances of their security cultures and approaches to different aspects of the war in Ukraine, resulting from, for example, the varying internal contexts, sizes, populations, and capabilities of these countries. This should not overshadow the importance and the role of states bordering Russia and Ukraine, which are not members of NATO and/or the EU. The analysis of their responses to and consequences of the war could help us increase our understanding of how the concept of "frontline states" operates outside the Western frameworks and how such states on the peripheries of the mainstream political and academic discussion, such as Georgia and Moldova, shape their policies.

Another avenue of inquiry concerns the reasons why Hungary's perspective and policies differ from those prevailing in the region. In order to better understand the logic driving its responses to the conflict and resulting policy choices, it is necessary to investigate the internal political and societal discourse in Hungary, as well as the stance taken by Hungary's representatives at the international arena. An increased awareness of the rationale of Hungary's position can also be gained through an analysis of its and other frontline states' national identities vis-à-vis Russia. Another significant development in the concept of the "frontline states" refers to the positions of the Nordic countries, in particular Finland and Sweden, in the context of their future accession to NATO. An analysis of their responses to the war can further the conceptualisation of the "frontline states" and increase its explanatory power. Finally, it is worthwhile to trace the role of the frontline states in the shaping of NATO's security culture by looking at the evolution of their defence strategies and the reflections of their positions in NATO doctrine and policies. While the analysis of selected countries presented in this paper shows that the concept of "frontline states" is a useful policy-oriented tool, the emergent questions additionally render it a promising framework for academic research.