

EU-NIQUE PERSPECTIVES? ANALYSING CONTRASTING POSITIONS ON THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT WITHIN THE EU

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Abstract

This research examines the various positions adopted by the European Union (EU) Member States in response to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, since its reignition on February 24th, 2022. The study is based on a content discourse analysis of speeches and official statements released by individual EU Member States, namely Poland, owing to its historical relations with the Eastern Bloc and its noteworthiness in accommodating refugees; followed by Germany and its pivotal role in providing military equipment to Ukraine; and lastly, Hungary, due to the contentious public statements issued by its Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán. The analysis is complemented by an examination of the broader foreign policy orientations of these countries that shape their responses. The primary aim is to assess whether the Union maintains a cohesive consensus on the conflict or if diverging positions weaken its support for Ukraine. Ultimately, through a juxtaposition of opinions issued by Poland, Germany, and Hungary against the overall EU stance, we conclude that the European Union's support for Ukraine is not as robust and cohesive as expected.

Keywords

European Union, Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Member States, European Commission, consensus.

Resumo

Esta investigação analisa as várias posições adotadas pelos Estados-Membros da União Europeia (UE) em resposta ao conflito russo-ucraniano em curso, desde o seu recomeço em 24 de fevereiro de 2022. O estudo baseia-se numa análise do conteúdo de discursos e declarações oficiais divulgados por cada um dos Estados-Membros da UE, nomeadamente a Polónia, devido às suas relações históricas com o Bloco de Leste e à sua notoriedade no acolhimento de refugiados; seguida pela Alemanha e o seu papel fundamental no fornecimento de equipamento militar à Ucrânia; e, por último, a Hungria, devido às declarações públicas controversas do seu primeiro-ministro, Viktor Orbán. A análise é complementada por um exame das orientações mais amplas da política externa desses países que moldam as suas respostas. O objetivo principal é avaliar se a União mantém um consenso coeso sobre o conflito ou se posições divergentes enfraquecem o seu apoio à Ucrânia. Em última análise, através de uma justaposição das opiniões emitidas pela Polónia, Alemanha e Hungria contra a posição geral da UE, concluímos que o apoio da União Europeia à Ucrânia não é tão robusto e coeso como se esperava.

Palavras-chave

União Europeia, conflito russo-ucraniano, Estados-Membros, Comissão Europeia, consenso.

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU) swift response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in history, with the Union playing a pivotal role in the conflict and its stance evolving over time. The origins of the feud trace back to the NATO Summit in 2008, in which Ukraine's potential membership in the alliance sparked tensions with Russia (NATO, 2008), with Putin warning that "Moscow would view any attempt to expand NATO to its borders as a 'direct threat'" (Dawar, 2008). Notwithstanding, it was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 that led to the ongoing hostilities and instability in Eastern Ukraine, with this tension peaking on February 24th, 2022 (Raik et al., 2024). In the early 2000s, despite the EU showing interest in promoting a "ring of friends" with Ukraine (Raik et al., 2024), the EU leaders recognised that Russia's major gas supply to numerous Member States was an insurmountable issue (Maurer et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, Russia's invasion on February 24th, 2022 appears to have significantly shifted the limits of action that Member States were willing to undertake, in response to major disruptions in Europe's security architecture (Maurer et al., 2023), marking a departure from its previous reluctance to a more defined stance. The leaders of the European Commission and the European Council condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and affirmed that the "EU stands firmly by Ukraine and its people", which was later followed by a similar joint statement by the Member States (Bacarani, 2023: p. 10) and a joint recognition of threat (Håkansson, 2023). Not only did the EU pursue its goals through civilian means while simultaneously

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providing military assistance to Ukraine, but it was also swift in adapting to a new situation, noted by Raik et al. (2024) as the EU's "geopolitical awakening". Consequently, the European Union "massively expanded sanctions against Russia" and adopted "unprecedented restrictive measures" (European Council, 2024a), underscoring its dedication to upholding European values in the face of external threats.

More recently, in 2024, the EU leaders reasserted their commitment: "More than ever, we remain united and true to our promise to support Ukraine for as long as it takes" (European Council, 2024b). Nonetheless, as the Russo-Ukrainian conflict remains unresolved, it continues to pose a persistent challenge in European geopolitics, testing the cohesion and effectiveness of the European Union in responding to the unfolding events.

Despite numerous studies concerning the war in Ukraine, a gap in the literature prevails regarding the contrasting EU positions on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, to the best of our knowledge. Hence, this study makes an original contribution to bridge this gap and find a response to yet-to-be-answered questions: are EU countries truly united in their support for Ukraine? Have political leaders adopted similar stances *vis-a-vis* the war? Thus, this article is based on a content discourse analysis of individual EU Member States, namely Poland, owing to its historical relations with the Eastern Bloc and the pertinence it has in accommodating refugees; followed by Germany and its pivotal role in providing military equipment for Ukraine; and lastly, Hungary, due to the contentious public statements issued by its Prime Minister.

More precisely, these three countries were also chosen due to their varying degrees of hostility towards Russia, with Poland displaying the greatest animosity and Hungary the least. Notably, Poland perceives Russia as an existential threat (Poletti, 2023; Stolle, 2023). In contrast, Hungary's Eurosceptic government maintains a strategic economic partnership with Russia, arguably making it the EU Member State with the closest relationship with Russia (Kovács, 2022; Durakcay, 2023). Lastly, Germany was picked for its dominant role in the EU, as the Union's most populous state, i.e. it has the largest representation in the European Parliament, coupled with its strong adherence to EU positions and directives (Whitworth, 2021). This selection offers a variety of perspectives, thereby providing a valuable basis for comparing EU cohesion in the context of the war.

This article is structured as follows: Section II provides an overview of existing literature regarding the response of the EU and the chosen countries in previous crises (Brexit and COVID-19²), Russia's annexation of Crimea, and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Section III outlines the foreign policy orientations of Poland, Germany, and Hungary, particularly in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, providing the essential context for later analysis. Section IV explains the methodology used and Section V covers the discourse analysis of international newspapers, speeches and official statements pertaining to Poland, Germany, and Hungary, concerning the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war. Section VI analyses the results by integrating insights from both the foreign policy orientations and the discourse analysis. Lastly, Section VII concludes.

² Both were selected due to their more recent nature when compared to other EU crises (e.g. the 2008 subprime financial crisis), as well as their distinct characteristics, one being political and economic and the other social and sanitary.



A brief review of the literature on EU response to crises

Scepticism exists regarding Europe's ability to replicate its COVID-19 success story in the face of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Poletti, 2023). Even though the Member States diverging responses to the sanitary crisis revealed a lack of unity, the national lockdown measures and approaches eventually converged, with most countries opting to adopt a combination of similar policies (Pacces & Weimer, 2020).

In the context of the British exit from the Union, the EU-27 governments maintained a tough negotiation stance, in agreement with the Commission in rejecting any British attempts at "cherry-picking", even at the potential risk of a no-deal Brexit. The block's firm stance was due to, among other reasons, the apprehension that allowing the United Kingdom (UK) to reap the benefits of EU integration, without sharing the associated costs, may instigate the withdrawal of other EU Member States (Walter, 2020). Germany played a significant role in Brexit, as it became one of the architects of the consensus in the EU and took the lead in securing a common EU position (Taggart et al., 2023). Although Poland had a strong economic interest in adopting a flexible Brexit agreement, and occasionally criticised the Commission's stance (Taggart et al., 2023), the country adopted a consensual European attitude in the negotiations. Conversely, Hungary showed sympathy towards the UK, framed as being persecuted by the Brussels elite for daring to go against it, thus, establishing a clear parallel between itself and the UK, regarding the treatment received from the EU (Meislová & Szent-Iványi, 2021).

Overall, during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the EU held back by not playing an active role in the resolution process, "which was left to France and Germany, acting as mediators in the *ad hoc* 'Normandy framework' that also included Ukraine and Russia" (Raik et al., 2024: p. 7). Therefore, it is argued that "the conflict in Ukraine (...) is the most vivid manifestation of the failure to create a stable and durable European security order" (Sakwa, 2015: p. 555). European countries adopted different measures, ranging from economic sanctions to political support, and, despite the lack of consensus regarding military aid, the EU still explored ways to improve its provision of military equipment (Pezard et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the perception of the Russian threat differed between countries, since those bordering Russia perceived a bigger threat, with Poland showing the greatest concern. Still, Germany supported continuous dialogue with Russia (Daehnhardt & Handl, 2018). Although Member States shared different understandings of what Russia's actions would mean to them, they expressed support for Ukraine, maintaining a consensus regarding sanctions since the beginning of the Crimean crisis (Pezard et al., 2017).

However, Hungary became increasingly reluctant to the sanction policy. Despite expressing solidarity at first, Hungary questioned the rationale behind the restrictions imposed, while maintaining its economic relations with Moscow. Contrarily, Poland condemned the annexation of Crimea and advocated for even stricter sanctions against Russia (Zajackowski, 2017), with Poles supporting economic aid and sanctions, even if it heightened the risk of conflict (Forbrig, 2015). Additionally, despite once being the largest consumer of Russian gas in Europe (Liadze et al., 2022), Germany stopped perceiving the Russian Federation as a strategic partner, beginning to increase deterrence and defence options against it. In fact, the country was a leader in implementing EU and United States (US) sanctions, while actively sustaining a measured military response (Daehnhardt & Handl, 2018).



Regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the development of the sanction policy was handled by the Commission to a greater degree than usual, to prevent information leaks and increase the EU's cohesion (Håkansson, 2023). President von der Leyen sought to eliminate the EU's energy dependency on Russia (Bacarani, 2023), although the negotiations on the sixth sanctions package were particularly difficult, as Hungary blocked it for quite some time. Studies conclude that the European Union has grown from the earlier crises that affected integration (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020; Radaelli, 2022), with the experience gained from the COVID-19 pandemic having been used to push forward the Commission's policy agenda (Håkansson, 2023). Empirical analysis further suggests that the President of the Commission contributed to developing a united response to the crisis (Bacarani, 2023).

Strategic Foreign Policy Frameworks: Poland, Germany and Hungary

To establish a foundation for the following discourse analysis, this section examines the foreign policy strategies of Poland, Hungary, and Germany, particularly focusing on their approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This contextual background can help elucidate how each country's strategic priorities shape and are reflected in their political discourse.

Poland's Foreign Policy

Poland's foreign policy, in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is influenced by its historical memory, geographical position and strategic culture (Komarnytskyy, 2024; Sus, 2025). Deep-rooted in centuries of conflict with powerful neighbours, particularly Germany and Russia, Poland's perception of the latter as a neo-imperialist power with expansionist ambitions underpins its main strategic objective: to defeat Russia, secure Ukraine's victory and, consequently, eliminate the military threat on its eastern border (Doeser, 2018; President of the Republic of Poland, 2023c). Despite improved relations with Germany since the Cold War, the country's 2020 National Security Strategy clearly identifies Moscow as the greatest threat to national security, emphasising that: "The most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, also pursued by means of military force." (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, 2020, p. 6; Komarnytskyy, 2024; Sus, 2025).

In addition to this approach is Poland's "Atlanticist" orientation, which perceives the United States as the indispensable security provider in Europe through NATO (Mikulova, Simecka, 2013; Komarnytskyy, 2024; Lisiakiewicz, 2018). Poland's determination to maintain a robust American military presence on its soil and strengthen Polish-American partnerships reflects the centrality of the US in its foreign and security policy (Poland's Foreign Policy Strategy: 2017-2021, n.d.; Komarnytskyy, 2024; Sus, 2025). This is largely due to the country's heavy reliance on NATO's ability to deter Russia in case of an attack, making Washington its main strategic ally. Indeed, proof of this was the joint visit by Tusk and Duda, long-time political adversaries, to the US capital in March 2024 (Komarnytskyy, 2024; Sus, 2025).

Furthermore, since the war in Ukraine began, Poland has firmly established itself as a pivotal player, offering substantial military, humanitarian and political assistance to Kyiv, while also strengthening military cooperation between Ukraine and the US (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, n.d; Tyler, 2022; Komarnytskyy, 2024). However, it seems this proactive



stance aligns with the country's ambition to lead on the Eastern Flank and amplify its influence within the EU and NATO (Komarnytskyy, 2024; Lisiakiewicz, 2018). In fact, Komarnytskyy (2024) argues that Warsaw considers a Ukrainian victory to be vital not only for limiting Russian influence, but also for stabilising Eastern Europe and achieving a balanced power dynamic on the European continent.

As a result, Poland is establishing itself as a key intermediary between the West and the East, promoting EU norms and advocating for the European integration of Eastern Partnership countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (Brusylovska, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, n.d.; Lisiakiewicz, 2018). Before 2022, Warsaw's influence on EU Eastern policy was limited, but the war has enhanced its role, allowing Poland to play a more decisive part in discussions about European security (Brusylovska, 2022; Komarnytskyy, 2024).

Notwithstanding Poland's consistent support for Ukraine since the government transition in December 2023, domestic political dynamics paint a more nuanced picture (Sus, 2025). Though Prime Minister Donald Tusk stressed there is broad consensus on supporting Ukraine due to Poland's own security concerns, tensions within institutions persist (Tilles, 2024). Sus (2025) highlights that, with President Andrzej Duda and the government representing opposing political camps, these divisions create friction that constrain the decision-making process in foreign policy. This polarisation hinders Poland's role amid geopolitical instability, showing that despite general consensus, evolving domestic factors still influence its external behaviour (Sus, 2025).

Germany's Foreign Policy

Germany's foreign policy has historically been guided by a set of structural principles, such as rejection of war as a legitimate means of settling disputes, respect for human rights, support for democratic governance, as well as commitment to multilateralism, European integration and the transatlantic link with the United States (Blumenau, 2022; Wittlinger, 2010).

Until 2014, Berlin favoured an approach of engagement with Moscow, treating Russia as a strategic partner in the post-Cold War order (Chivvis & Rid, 2009). However, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military support for separatists in eastern Ukraine directly challenged Germany's commitment to rejecting the use of force and upholding international law, while also striking at the foundations of European integration and transatlanticism – central for its positioning in the international arena (Siddi, 2016).

In light of these developments and faced with Moscow's opposition to European integration in the post-Soviet space – perceived as a threat to its strategic interests –, Germany found itself under pressure to recalibrate its foreign policy (Siddi, 2016). At the same time, the United States' firm condemnation of Russia's actions tested Berlin's balance between transatlantic commitments and its traditional cooperative approach towards Moscow. As a result, and despite growing political tensions, Germany took on a key role in preserving EU consensus on sanctions, while trying to keep channels of dialogue open with the Kremlin (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2021).



Such environment reinforced the centrality of multilateralism and cooperation in post-1949 German foreign policy, reflected in its strong commitment to European integration and close alignment with EU principles and objectives on peace, security, and prosperity (Daehnhardt, 2018; Siddi, 2016; Germany Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2021). Similarly, its long-standing commitment to NATO complements this orientation, with Germany acting mainly as a mediator among Member States and within the EU-NATO relationship, promoting consensus and coordinated action (Ewers-Peters, 2020).

While traditionally marked by a cautious and pacifist approach to security, with an aversion to using military means to achieve political goals, German foreign policy underwent a decisive change after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Siddi, 2016; DGAP, n.d.; Scholz, 2022). The *Zeitenwende* speech, announced by Olaf Scholz, marked the abandonment of decades of military restraint (Scholz, 2022; Corblin, 2022). After three decades in which German military resources were focused primarily on international crisis management, Scholz declared that the territorial defence of Europe, within the framework of NATO, would become the fundamental priority. Simultaneously, Berlin intensified coordination with its transatlantic allies and became one of the main providers of military support to Ukraine (Scholz, 2022; Graf et al., 2023; NATO, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023).

Hungary's Foreign Policy

As for Hungary, its foreign policy is strongly pragmatic, focused on defending national interests and promoting strategic political and economic objectives (About Hungary, 2020; Hettyey, 2020; Schmidt & Glied, 2024). The country's policy documents underline the need to ensure a comprehensive and stable security policy, prioritising energy, food, resources and market security. In parallel, there is also an emphasis on the importance of promoting Hungary's regional interests and strengthening the stability of Central and South-Eastern Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011; Varga, 2000).

Since the 1990s, Hungarian foreign policy has had a Euro-Atlantic orientation, though the Orbán governments have distinguished themselves by their increasingly Eurosceptic positions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011; Varga, 2000). Despite the country's membership in the EU, it appears to pride itself on the "independence" of its foreign policy, which it defines as both "Hungarian and sovereign" and "balanced and patriotic" (About Hungary, 2020; About Hungary, 2023d). As mentioned by Hettyey (2020), Hungary's recent foreign policy adjustments can be considered a part of the country's growing process of de-Europeanization, i.e. the rejection of the restraints and practices imposed by the EU.

This distinct foreign policy direction is evident in the way the Orbán governments have broken with several European norms and values (e.g. Hungary's close relationship with Russia), using the country's economic wellbeing as a justification for its dissidence from common EU policy, thus making Hungary stand as an outlier in the Union (Hettyey, 2020; Lamour, 2023). Furthermore, the country's long-term goal is the creation of mutually beneficial relations with all great powers, an aim made evident by the government's "global opening" policy launched in 2010 – the Eastern Opening (2010) and Southern Opening (2015) initiatives –, with the aim of strengthening political and, above all, economic ties with "emerging countries", such as China or Russia (Hettyey, 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011; Schmidt & Glied, 2024).



In spite of this mostly pragmatic approach, there is a moral and value-based facet in Hungary's foreign policy, which the Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister has stressed as one of its most important aspects: the rights of Hungarian minorities abroad, particularly in the countries of its neighbourhood, such as Romania, Ukraine or Serbia (About Hungary, 2019; About Hungary, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011). Therefore, even before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the relationship between Hungary and Ukraine was strained because of the latter's treatment of its Hungarian minority. In fact, Minister Szijjártó stated that ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine "continue to face serious challenges" (About Hungary, 2021). Since the 2010s, tensions have escalated due to demands for "full collective rights" and dual citizenship, which is prohibited by the Ukrainian Constitution (Schmidt & Glied, 2024).

Simply put, Orbán – the longest-serving head of government in the EU – seeks to balance Western alliances with a strategic partnership with Russia, ensuring Hungary access to cheap energy. This pragmatism, coupled with the rejection of exclusive alliances, sustains the country's economic and energy security, while also legitimising value-based policies guided by national interests, such as the protection of Hungarian minorities abroad, especially in Ukraine (Lamour, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011).

Methodology

This research is based on a discourse content analysis, using an interpretative approach. This method involved a detailed reading of the selected speeches, identifying points of convergence and divergence in the positions expressed by the countries under analysis, which made it possible to map the predominant narratives and discursive tensions related to the conflict. For this purpose, official statements made by representatives of the selected countries, along with credible international newspapers and media sources were used. Priority was given to national government websites, speeches at renowned international organisations, such as the United Nations and EU institutions, as well as reliable, publicly accessible outlets (e.g. *The Guardian*, *Reuters*, and the *Atlantic Council*).

To facilitate a thorough but focused analysis of discourse, a total of 45 discourses were selected, of which 22 were analysed in detail based on their relevance and reliability. These were deemed pertinent according to three main criteria: institutional representativeness (i.e. utterances by heads of state, foreign ministers or official government sources), thematic pertinence (direct references to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, EU foreign policy, or national security), and temporal proximity to the conflict. As a result, all selected statements were issued between February 2022 and April 2024³, enabling a focused discussion on the positions expressed by Poland, Germany, and Hungary regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since February 24th, 2022. Furthermore, the keywords used in the search process were: "EU", "war", "Ukraine", "Russia", "Germany", "Poland", "Hungary", "unity" and "statement".

³ The latter marked the beginning of the study's development and served as the cut-off point for data collection.



Discourse analysis

Building on the foreign policy framework outlined in Section III, the subsequent discourse analysis examines how Poland, Germany, and Hungary have publicly positioned themselves in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Poland

On February 24th, 2022, the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, issued a statement to the nation, in which he condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, making it clear that Ukraine could "count on full support from Poland". He further stated that Poland had repeatedly warned against the illusion of negotiating with Putin and that it was crucial "for the whole Western community today to be united and to adopt a firm common position on Russia". According to Duda, to "resist evil", "the most important thing is unity, unity and above all unity". He further emphasised the US's pivotal role in global security, guaranteeing that Poland's borders were safe thanks to NATO allies (President of the Republic of Poland, 2022a). In an annual speech to Poland's parliament in 2023, he expressed that "There will be no European security and, most likely, no effective way to block Russian imperialism without absolutely close Euro-Atlantic cooperation, without a strong European-American partnership" (Krzysztozek, 2025).

Later in August 2022, after talks with Volodymyr Zelensky, the Polish president stated that Ukraine was fighting for its independence and there could not be a "business as usual" with Russia, reinforcing that Poland is Ukraine's supporting partner, its ally and a home for families seeking shelter (President of the Republic of Poland, 2022b). President Andrzej Duda affirmed that Poland had received almost six million Ukrainian refugees by September 2022, highlighting the good conditions provided to them, and the empathy from the Polish people who had also suffered Russian occupation during World War II. Once again, Duda fervently criticised Russia and added that Poland was the country "Ukraine can always count on" (President of the Republic of Poland, 2022c).

In February 2023, one year after the war broke out, the Polish president reinforced Poland's solidarity with Ukraine, "Because what unites us – Poles and Ukrainians – is a great love of freedom.". Duda further declared that "NATO's role has increased with more countries joining the Alliance" and that "Europe is finally ending its dependence on Russian oil and gas". Once again, he stressed that the "United States is the guarantee of security on the old continent". The President reiterated that for Ukraine to have a chance of winning, "we need unity, unity and more unity of the whole free world" (President of the Republic of Poland, 2023a).

Moreover, the Polish president declared that "the West should help Ukraine join the EU and NATO as well as helping it win its defensive war against Russia", concluding it was his opinion on "how this war should end" (President of the Republic of Poland, 2023b). In addition, Polish Foreign Minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, equally defended the United States and its support for Ukraine. He emphasised that Russia and their allies wish to destroy "the stability of America and to create victory where it is not deserved", as they are "hungry to show that the US is weak, ineffective, and hopelessly divided". However, Sikorski remained positive, mentioning the possibility to "achieve peace through strength", and connecting it to the Polish case. He stated that "in 1999, Poland was invited to join NATO and the transatlantic family" and that "victorious Ukraine may follow a similar path" (Atlantic Council, 2024).



Germany

Throughout the conflict, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has remained adamant regarding his support for Ukraine, stating that Germany would “continue to support Ukraine with financial, humanitarian aid, but also with weapons” (Zakaria, 2023), and claiming to be Ukraine’s strongest supporter in Europe. Since the outbreak of the war, not only has Germany welcomed an abundance of refugees (BR24, 2024), but has also “made available more than 27.8 billion euros in bilateral support for Ukraine” (German Federal Foreign Office, 2024).

Across Scholz’s speeches, he often stresses the importance of assertiveness and unity in preventing Russia’s victory in Ukraine: “It is necessary that Putin understands that he will not succeed with his invasion and this imperialistic aggression and that he has to withdraw troops” (Zakaria, 2023). Furthermore, Scholz underscored that a Russian victory would mean “the end of Ukraine as a free, independent and democratic state” and “the destruction of a peaceful order in Europe”. The Chancellor also addressed the concerns regarding the costs of the war by saying that if Russia goes unstopped, “the financial and political price that we would then have to pay would be many times higher than all the expense of our support for Ukraine today and in the future”. Moreover, he emphasized his commitment by stating that, in 2024, “Germany will invest 2% of its GDP in defence this year, and also every following year and the 2020s, 2030s and beyond” (BR24, 2024).

In his speeches, Scholz repeatedly underlines the need for the EU to do more for the resolution of the conflict: “Are we actually doing enough to signal to Putin that we are in for the long haul?” (BR24, 2024). Already in 2023, the German leader had highlighted that, despite the diplomatic efforts being made to resolve the conflict, Russia is ultimately opting for war (Permanent Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany to the United Nations, 2023). Furthermore, concerning Germany’s energy dependency on Russia, Scholz has unequivocally stated and sought to reinforce that Germany remains resilient in the absence of access to Russian energy, and will continue to prosper despite the adversity: “There is no economic crisis in Germany. There is no gas shortage” (Zakaria, 2023).

Notwithstanding his verbal support, Scholz has been hesitant in supplying Ukraine with weapons. According to *The Guardian* newspaper, in early 2024, the Chancellor refused to “supply Taurus long-range cruise missiles to Ukraine despite an outcry among Western allies”. He reasoned that to operate and target these missiles, German soldiers would need to go to Ukraine, increasing the tension between Berlin and Moscow: “I am the chancellor, so that’s it”. In this sense, Scholz expresses a desire to avoid a direct conflict between Russia and NATO, claiming that “there will be no ground troops, no soldiers on Ukrainian soil sent there by European countries or NATO states” (Taylor, 2024), even in the case of an escalation.

Hungary

In February 2022, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, issued a statement showing agreement with the EU’s decisions, in which Hungary “jointly condemned Russia’s military action against Ukraine and decided to unite in imposing sanctions”, but they did not “extend to energy”, therefore “energy supplies to Hungary and the other Member States of the EU are guaranteed”. The Prime Minister restated his consent with the EU’s views and NATO’s position by declaring that “we agreed that we need to behave responsibly, and that rash and irresponsible statements will only worsen the situation and endanger the security of



Europeans". He equally clarified that he will always prioritise Hungary's national interests, thus "we shall not allow anyone to draw Hungary into this war" (About Hungary, 2022a).

After the war broke out, Orbán reiterated the country's interest in staying out of it: "We condemn the war, especially that it is here in our neighbourhood; we say no to violence, we stand together with our allies (...) but the most important thing is that Hungary should stay out of this war conflict" to prevent "the price of war being paid by Hungarians" (Kovács, 2022). In fact, the need to rein in inflation, sustain energy security and the exemption of the energy sector from sanctions ("we will definitely avoid sanctioning energy supply" sustained Orbán) are major concerns of the Hungarian government, as well as the country's humanitarian commitment towards Ukraine. As government spokeswoman, Alexandra Szentkirályi said (regarding Ukrainian refugees): "Hungary helps everyone, we are prepared to help everyone, no one is left without help" (Kovács, 2022).

Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, publicly reinforced the notion that Budapest should prevent NATO's engagement in the war, which could lead to an escalation of the conflict. After explaining the overlap of interests between Hungary and NATO, he stated, "Hungary is not blocking any decisions on the EU Member States delivering more weapons to Ukraine, but it will neither supply arms nor allow lethal aid to cross its territory" (About Hungary, 2022b).

One year after the conflict began, the Prime Minister said that "Europe is drifting into the war in these very minutes, it is doing a dangerous balancing act", affirming that European countries are "already indirectly at war with Russia" (Reuters, 2023). Although Orbán understood the stance of Poland, he alleged that the conflict could have unfolded differently if Russia had had the guarantee that Ukraine would not be joining NATO. Furthermore, Orbán criticised EU sanctions and their harm to the Hungarian economy, stating that "the Brussels super-state" and its support for Ukraine had only lifted the conflict from a "local regional war" to "an all-European level" (Reuters, 2023).

Orbán further reaffirmed his concern for ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine, who also lost their lives in the war: "Hungary is in a unique position as Ukraine is not far away. We have ethnic minorities living in Ukraine, and they are part of the war. They are conscripted, they are soldiers in the Ukrainian army, and they die. So, we lose lives, Hungarian lives..." (Bloomberg Television, 2023). Nevertheless, Hungary considers that the solution is not to encourage the war and provide Ukraine with funds and weapons, but to promote a peaceful resolution, which is "to save lives" (Bloomberg Television, 2023). For the Prime Minister, although "our heart is with Ukrainian suffering", it "is obvious that there is no victory for the poor Ukrainians on the battlefield", and this is why Hungary's perspective on the war "does not belong to the mainstream European approach" (Bloomberg Television, 2023).

The Prime Minister also warned of the danger of a possible "third world war (...) knocking on our door" and insisted on the idea of rejecting Ukraine's adherence to NATO, which he considers a provocative action that would only worsen the conflict: "We have to be very, very careful (...) If any Western country would send boots on the ground, that would mean a direct war between the West and Russia" (About Hungary, 2023a). Furthermore, Minister Szijjártó reaffirmed that Hungary pursues "a foreign policy based on national interests and will not accept any pressurising from the outside, therefore we will cooperate with Russia in securing Hungary's energy supply in the upcoming period just like before" (About Hungary, 2023b).



Additionally, during the domestic parliamentary debate on Ukraine joining the EU, Orbán considered that the EU's treatment of Ukraine shows "blatant bias in the European Union" and "inevitably destroys the authority of the European Union's institutions" (About Hungary, 2023c). He concluded that "Ukraine's membership of the European Union in this form is in direct opposition to Hungary's interests" and although "Ukraine can and must be helped (...) no one should want us to destroy Hungary in the process" (About Hungary, 2023c).

Lastly, Viktor Orbán stated that even if the Visegrád Four (V4)⁴ share divergent positions on the war, they all agree that "Russia's attack was a gross violation of international law". When meeting with the V4, and despite the country's economic relation with Russia, Orbán uncharacteristically proclaimed that "Hungary does not want a common border with Russia again", defending that "the most important basic principle of Hungarian national security is that there should be an entity to the east of us that is located between Russia and Hungary" (About Hungary, 2024).

Discussion

The outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated existing political divisions within the European Union, particularly between Eastern and Western Member States, deepening their geopolitical fissures over how to handle the Russian threat. From the get-go, this reality stands in stark contrast to the official discourse of top EU leaders, who declared: "We stand together more than ever and remain committed to our promise to support Ukraine for as long as necessary." (European Council, 2024b). It is this tension between rhetorical unity and divergent national responses that forms the backdrop against which the positions of Poland, Germany, and Hungary must be examined.

While European governments have generally agreed on key objectives – such as reducing their reliance on Russian gas and mitigating socio-economic disruptions – their approaches to achieving these goals have diverged, exposing significant cracks in cohesion and strategic depth (ECFR Comms, 2022). In fact, although extensive, the sanctions imposed have had uneven and delayed effects. In the first half of 2022, for example, Russia maintained financial stability and posted a record current-account surplus, driven by high commodity prices and reduced imports, suggesting a limited short-term impact on its war effort (Demertzis et al., 2022). Thus, even as unity was maintained in principle, through sanctions on Moscow and financial and humanitarian support for Kyiv, national stances continued to reflect each country's foreign policy traditions and strategic cultures.

Through the discourse analysis, it appears that Poland's stance and support for Ukraine have remained stable since the beginning of the war, in alignment with the EU, with high and consistent support across the country's political spectrum (Stolle, 2023). This stability can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Poland's close relationship with NATO and the United States, combined with its historically rooted "anti-Russian" sentiment, aligns with its foreign policy that identifies Moscow as the principal threat to national and European security, while reinforcing its "Atlanticist" orientation and reliance on the United States as a security

⁴ An alliance between the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. "The Visegrad Group (also known as the "Visegrad Four" or simply "V4") reflects the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration" (Visegrad Group, 2024).



guarantor (Mikulova & Šimečka, 2013; Stolle, 2023; National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, 2020; Komarnytsky, 2024).

Secondly, the war in Ukraine represents an existential concern for the country, given its geographical proximity and historical experience with Russian aggression, which heightens its perception of direct vulnerability (Zajackowski, 2017). Lastly, Poland's support for Ukraine's integration into Western institutions is reinforced by a "siege mentality," reflecting anxieties about sovereignty and the country's position between stronger and expansionist powers. A stable and democratic Ukraine is therefore viewed as essential for regional security and for consolidating Poland's role as a regional leader and "gateway to the West" (Zajackowski, 2017; Brusylovska, 2022).

Notwithstanding, the country's response extends beyond military support. As the country with "the largest per-capita influx of refugees under the liberal conditions of the Temporary Protection Directive⁵ in 2022" (Letki et al., 2024: p. 18), Poland allowed Ukrainians to remain, work, and access social security and healthcare (Jankowski & Gujski, 2022), strengthening its political influence within both EU (Brusylovska, 2022; Lisiakiewicz, 2018) and NATO frameworks (Komarnytsky, 2024). Nevertheless, Poland's "maximalist" strategy – seeking Russia's strategic defeat and full Ukrainian integration into NATO and the EU – can sometimes clash with the more cautious positions of several Western European Members, potentially hindering consensus when Warsaw advocates for broader and faster military aid than others are prepared to provide (Komarnytsky, 2024; Stolle, 2023). Moreover, domestic political tensions, such as those between President Duda and the Tusk government, indicate that even a broadly pro-Ukraine stance can be internally fragmented (Sus, 2025).

In comparison, Germany has adopted a more cautious approach to the conflict, remaining broadly aligned with the EU in supporting sanctions, humanitarian assistance and military aid, which underscores Berlin's recognition of the importance of maintaining a united front within the Union. Nevertheless, Germany's stance has often been accompanied by hesitancy, reflecting efforts to reconcile the country's post-war pacifist tradition with the evolving security landscape (Whitworth, 2021; Stent, 2022).

Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech marked a clear reorientation of the country's foreign policy from decades of military restraint to prioritising NATO's territorial defence and strengthening coordination with the United States (Scholz, 2022; Graf et al., 2023). This shift, from diplomacy-focused engagement to a firmer security posture, signalled Germany's intent to defend European stability and counter Russian aggression, with Scholz's decision to support Ukraine reinforcing this, in a nation long reluctant to embrace military force after WWII (Whitworth, 2021). Simultaneously, his hesitation to deliver advanced weaponry can be closely tied to Berlin's energy dependency and historical relations with Moscow, as escalation risks are perceived to jeopardise broader geopolitical interests and sever remaining diplomatic ties (Stent, 2022).

Despite initiating the *Zeitenwende* and committing substantial funds to defence (Scholz, 2022), Berlin has faced criticism for delays in weapons deliveries (Taylor, 2024; Gasper, 2024). Furthermore, structural limitations in military readiness raise doubts about its ability

⁵ Exceptional measure to provide immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who are unable to return to their country of origin (European Commission, n.d.).



to fulfil its own ambitions (Tallis, 2024). This caution, driven by fears of escalation, has slowed EU-level decision-making and fuelled perceptions of a reactive rather than strategic approach (Fischer, 2023).

As for Hungary, the country has followed a markedly distinct trajectory in response to the Russia-Ukraine war, highlighting a pragmatic approach prioritising national interests, energy security, and neutrality above EU solidarity. Budapest's statements have, to some extent, been incoherent with the EU's position, which the country initially affirmed being in total agreement with. Contrary to his earliest stance, Viktor Orbán blames the EU and NATO's decisions and actions for the escalation of the war, proclaiming his belief in the ineffectiveness of the European community (About Hungary, 2020; Hettyey, 2020).

Consistent with this broader goal of safeguarding national interests, Hungary's foreign policy balances Western alliances with strong ties to Russia, exemplified by the "Eastern Opening" strategy adopted in 2010, which strengthened relations with Moscow and supported energy security and economic objectives (Schmidt & Glied, 2024; Durakcay, 2023). Orbán also emphasises the importance of the Visegrád Group and portrays Ukraine as a buffer state between Hungary and Russia, reinforcing his security-driven rationale (About Hungary, 2024). Meanwhile, he invokes the protection of Hungarian minorities abroad, particularly in Ukraine, to justify some of his decisions on value-based grounds (About Hungary, 2021; About Hungary, 2022c). This dual approach is reflected in Hungary's international endorsement of Ukraine's EU candidate status while opposing its full membership domestically – an attempt to reconcile EU integration with national security concerns (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Éltető & Szemlér, 2023; Thorpe, 2023).

Nonetheless, Hungary seems to ultimately prioritise its energy security and admits to being dependent on imports from Russia. Considering these countries' connection (Durakcay, 2023), Orenstein and Kelemen (2017) even suggest that Hungary is Russia's "Trojan horse" in the EU, being therefore used to destabilise the European Union to Moscow's advantage (Éltető & Szemlér, 2023). In practice, this obstructive stance – from delaying sanctions packages to opposing military aid (About Hungary, 2023b; Reuters, 2023) – coupled with close energy and political ties with Russia, as well as a preference for negotiated settlements over military solutions, has positioned Budapest as a consistent outlier (Hettyey, 2020; Lamour, 2023). This has not only complicated the process of reaching a consensus but has also undermined the credibility of the EU's unified front.

From a strategic and political standpoint, the common narrative is becoming increasingly fragile. Internal opposition between the desire for justice and the desire for a ceasefire at any cost reflects the fragmented nature of the European public opinion. This tendency undermines the cohesion of future policies and makes the EU vulnerable to political shifts within Member States (ECFR Comms, 2022; Stolle, 2023).

The EU's reactive, *ad hoc* approach, coupled with its reliance on US military capabilities, raises doubts about its ability to sustain a coherent and effective Ukraine policy should external conditions change or transatlantic alignment weaken (Sakwa, 2015; Raik et al. 2024): "the weakness of European defence capabilities and hence dependence of European security on Washington has been once again exposed by the war" (Raik et al. 2024, p.51). This dependence, compounded by the failure to translate ambitious rearmament pledges into concrete outcomes, underscores the persistent gap between rhetoric and implementation.



Conclusion

This study sought to analyse the diverging positions within the EU as a collective body and its Member States (Poland, Germany, and Hungary), regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The empirical analysis concluded that Poland and Germany seem to show support for EU principles, albeit for different reasons. Poland is one of Ukraine's closest allies, as well as a country deeply marked by Soviet repression, therefore it seems to display an "anti-Russian" sentiment that sustains the nation's massive support. Additionally, the country is also strongly committed to the role of NATO and the US in resolving the conflict. Furthermore, although Germany appears to show aversion to direct conflict and remains more cautious with military support, the country has a notorious positive stance towards Ukraine. In contrast, Hungary prioritises national and economic interests over EU consensus, occasionally acting in ways that challenge collective cohesion.

Overall, these cases emphasise the interplay between national foreign policy traditions and EU-level coordination. Warsaw adopts a securitised, "Atlanticist" approach (Mikulova, Simecka, 2013), whereas Berlin adapts its pacifist, multilateralist framework to a new security landscape (Blumenau, 2022; Wittlinger, 2010). Meanwhile, Hungary demonstrates the consistency of its pragmatic, non-EU centric foreign policy while simultaneously revealing contradictions in relation to EU consensus (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Éltető & Szemlér, 2023). Such divergences indicate potential vulnerabilities in the EU's foreign policy framework and suggest that maintaining a unified position in future crises could be an ever-present challenge.

Notwithstanding, this study holds a few limitations. The original research was conducted under the constraints of a strict word limit, which limited the depth of country-specific research and also explains the restricted number of selected discourses. Subsequent revisions tackled these constraints as much as possible, yet they still moulded the overall scope of the study. Therefore, further research should focus on the evolution of the current EU predicament and the distinct stance that countries such as Hungary have within the institution. A deep-dive inquiry into the future positions of the most incoherent or ambiguous leaders within the EU could also shed light on its ever-more apparent lack of total cohesion.

Lastly, academics could explore whether the Union can sustain more "Trojan Horses" in its already fragile foreign policy or if there is a way to strengthen the Member States' positions in a single European direction. Researchers could equally delve into the implications of enlargement – a recurring theme within the EU – on conflict resolution and decision-making, since conclusions requiring unanimity could be made more difficult when deliberated by more members (Hertz & Leuffen, 2011).

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