

Does rhetoric matter? Narratives of the Visegrad Group and Baltic States' leaders on Ukraine's accession to the EU

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Abstract

The main purpose of the article is to analyse the issue of Ukraine's accession to the European Union in the political discourse of the Visegrad Group and Baltic states' leaders and its impact on the transformation of the EU foreign policy agenda. Based on the analysis of selected speeches delivered by heads of states and governments of the above-mentioned countries, the authors focus on explaining their vision on the need to reform the EU's foreign policy in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to the issue of future EU enlargement in the context of Ukraine's potential accession. Furthermore, the research concentrates on the reflection of the proposed vision in the official position of the EU institutions. By doing so, an attempt is made so as to answer the research question on the transformational potential of Central European and Baltic states' leaders in the decision-making process on the EU foreign policy reform.

Keywords: Ukraine, European Union, Visegrad Group, Baltic states, political discourse

Introduction

With the rapid development of international relations over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in the study of world politics as a social and political construction and, consequently, in the intensive use of discourse analysis as an analytical tool for interpreting and understanding the domestic and foreign policy of the countries under analysis. In this article we are pursuing a two-fold purpose: 1) to identify the position of the political leadership of the Baltic states and of the Visegrad group regarding Ukraine's path to the European Union (EU); and 2) to explain the impact of their leadership on reconsidering the EU-Russia relations in the context of Russia's aggressive policy and full-fledged war against Ukraine. In order to achieve the stated purpose, the paper examines the enlargement policy as part of the EU foreign policy and the role of the political discourse in shaping a common EU

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position regarding Ukraine's accession. The authors make an attempt to answer the research question on the transformational potential of those European leaders whose countries joined the EU as a result of the 2004 enlargement in the decision-making process on the reform of the EU foreign policy and support for Ukraine in confrontation with Russia's aggression.

The methodological approach combines qualitative rhetorical analysis and content analysis and is based on process tracing and strategic choice approach as leading research methods. The methodology of process tracing is employed in order to conduct a qualitative analysis of key political developments in the field of EU enlargement policy-making and to evaluate the impact of political narratives delivered by V4 and Baltic states' leaders. On the other hand, using the strategic choice approach as an analytical framework of the research makes it possible to explain the interactions between those statesmen states and their transformational potential to build alliances and reach compromise while promoting a common vision on the EU forum regarding the potential enlargement. Our article's position regarding these issues is as follows: first, it is based on the assumption that discourse provides the context in which public policy articulations are set, and in that sense, it can contribute to reflections regarding policy development. Second, the way in which discourse reflects political positions both by providing meanings on which one can build and by setting the limits of a meaningful and legitimate policy. Third, these issues play a key role in the analysis of the EU external and foreign policy (Diez, 2013).

Our empirical analysis builds on a comprehensive, original dataset of 850 hand-coded statements from 104 political speeches delivered by leaders of Baltic states and the Visegrad Group in a two and a half years timeframe (September 2021 - December 2023) on reconsidering the EU-Russia relations as a reaction to Russia's preparation, launch and conduct of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. We employ qualitative frame analysis to differentiate and unpack categories of political discourse implemented by the leaders under analysis. For the content analysis, we have selected speeches of the Baltic states leaders, Gitanas Nausėda (Lithuania): 49 speeches (Sept. 2021-Nov. 2023), Alar Karis (Estonia): 8 speeches (Feb. 2022-Oct. 2023), Egils Levits (Latvia): 8 speeches (Jan. 2023-June 2023) and Edgars Rinkēvičs (Latvia): 6 speeches (Sept. 2023-Nov. 2023); Mateusz Morawiecki (Poland): 11 speeches (Feb.2022 - April 2023); Viktor Orbán (Hungary): 8 speeches (Feb.2022 - Dec.2023); Petr Fiala (Czech Republic): 7 speeches (Feb.2022 - May 2023); Eduard Heger (Slovakia): 7 speeches (Feb.2022 - April 2023). As shown above, the major focus is on the speeches delivered after February 2022 to define the rhetorical strategy of the selected politicians regarding the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine. Meantime, a number of speeches of president Gitanas Nausėda delivered from September 2021 to February 2022 were selected in order to present the example of continuity and change of narrative toward the eastern policy of EU. In fact, it was September 2021 when similar appeals appeared during the debates in the European

Parliament resulting in resolutions supporting Ukraine and calling for sanctions against Russia (Zheltovskyy, 2024).

Finally, we do not only explicate the key concepts in our conceptual framework but we also concentrate our empirical research on foreign policy paradigms by conducting content analysis of political speeches, event and document analysis, a case study of Ukraine on the road to the EU and a comparative analysis of Baltic states and Visegrad group leaders' opinions. We do so because it is important not only to identify available empirical data, but also to detect principles "at work". Similar analytical challenges characterize the analytical work on other key concepts of the EU, such as European identity and values, attitude towards Ukraine and Russia and the entire complexity of the EU foreign policy paradigms.

The structure of the article is as follows: the following part presents the overview of the scientific research in the field of political discourse and its impact on the foreign policy construction. The main part presents the summary of the conducted content-analysis research regarding the political vision on the transformation of the EU foreign policy in the light of geopolitical challenges caused by Russia's war against Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to the explanation of selected European leaders' position and their consensus-building capacity in establishing a pro-Ukrainian alliance on the EU forum. Additionally, the article summarizes the key developments in the EU-Ukraine relations in terms of the accession process and support initiatives in times of war.

1. Political discourse as a tool of foreign-policy making - theoretical perspective

The focus of this part is on discourse and on the EU foreign policy in the context of the EU-Ukraine relationships. Since the beginning of the 21st century discourse analysis research has been characterized by greater engagement with quantitative methodologies of textual analysis, on the one hand, and internal consolidation, on the other. In terms of consolidation, a significant number of works on discourse analysis in international relations have been published (Dunn & Neumann, 2016).

Critical discourse analysis is useful for our work in terms of identity representations in the EU-Ukraine relations and European foreign policy—and particularly, on the analysis of the relationship between the previous position of European states and the one after the beginning of the full-fledged war run by Russia against Ukraine. Our focus on the issue of Ukraine and the attitude of the Baltic states and the Visegrad Group regarding Ukraine's movement towards the European Union comes at a time when there is a growing interest in the role of identity in the EU-Ukraine relationship, when relations between Kyiv and Brussels have intensified after Ukraine's candidacy for membership and opening of accession negotiations.

Drawing on the interpretive turn in policy analysis, it can be suggested that discourse analysis has been particularly effective for investigating a range of policy dilemmas (Larsen, 2018). Through the discourse approach, it is possible to produce empirical evidence that would progress the understanding of dilemmas in the domestic and foreign policy of the European Union in light of Ukraine's intentions to join it.

Researchers have explored the relations between their home countries and other international players by using discourse analysis of relevant documents and materials, such as the study by Aydın-Düzgıt and Rumelili (2019). Discourse analysis views language as a material component of social relations, with speech bearing important social meanings as they are played out in declaratory of diplomacy (Amer, 2017).

Language is an indispensable component of any social context of human interaction. Therefore, the power of language, which was emphasized by post-structuralism, is critical within the discourse of foreign policy and international relations. Post-structuralists see language as the central social medium through which meaning is generated. This implies that foreign policies have to be connected through discourse so as to justify why these policies are necessary, plausible, and possible. Foreign policy discourses, must, more specifically, provide representations of the 'problem' that policies are aimed at solving (Shapiro, 1988). It is essential to emphasize that the speeches serve as a primary mode of communication in the political sphere, so they significantly affect foreign policy (Khudoliy, 2022) and become a significant persuasion tool in the political agenda (Khudoliy & Zheltovskyy, 2023).

In foreign policy, the language of politicians is also the tool that strives to demonstrate a particular image in contrast with other states (Hansen, 2016). Consequently, it is possible to deduct that foreign policy is based on specific representations of the nations and people that such policies aid or discourage. Language is the primary medium for such representations, but it is not limited to a channel that merely communicates the factual reality. It is closer to a specific practice (Hansen, 2016). Consequently, the discourse analysis should be concerned with identities, values, and norms that are being formed through language. As a result, foreign policy can be perceived as a discursive practice.

The self/other discourses, especially after the beginning of the 2022 Russia's war on Ukraine, are complex grids of signification that evolve and change over time through new (explicit and implicit) identifications, as in official statements (Wilhelmsen & Hjermann, 2022). Political units, such as states, can invoke a range of self/other identifications. Establishing which categories and patterns of self/other identifications emerge in the official language is an empirical undertaking (see below); we therefore focus on the linguistic constructions that identify the EU-Ukraine relationships as well as on the perception of the Other as a threat, including the level of difference and danger that these constructions imply.

Discourse is important because it conveys norms and identities that shape foreign policy directly through the logic of appropriateness or through shaping those interests that, in turn, shape foreign policy. This makes discourse and the norms contained within it an independent variable explaining (foreign) policy outcomes (Schmidt, 2010).

As far as the EU is concerned, Th. Diez (2014) states that it is primarily a 'collective actor', which expresses a pluralistic identity. Meanwhile, he raises the question of how and through what kind of socio-political processes collective actors produce statements. In order to act and speak at the international level, a complex system has been established through the 'fragmented nature of agency at the European level' (White, 1999, p. 48) that enables different national and institutional actors to act and speak on behalf of the EU. Meanwhile, at the executive level, the management of foreign policy issues is entrusted to sets of actors who intervene in the creation of foreign policy measures (Diez, 2014). In this regard, the effectiveness of given measures, i.e., sanctions are dependent on the Member states' approach to respecting the EU rules since their governments control the flow of particular information to the Commission and they themselves oversee which of their national authorities is responsible for carrying out related tasks at the national level (Zheltovskyy, 2023). And from this point of view, leaders of the Baltic states and of the Visegrad Four are exactly the actors who form and represent the foreign policy of their states on the European forum.

Shared norms and collective actions are constantly collectively established (Kratochwil, 1988, p. 276). This means that, in the act of interpretation, other (competitive) principles converge and constitute the discursive environment, thereby contributing to the framing of common discourse (Diez, 2014). So, the statements of Baltic presidents and Visegrad Four leaders frame and form the common European discourse on Ukraine and the relationships between the European Union and Ukraine.

Below we present the discourse analysis of the Central European states' leaders during 2021-2023. Here, in our analysis of the delivered speeches, we provide an overview of the historical and geopolitical context, then identify the discourse topics, and finally discuss in detail the perception and assessment of the EU and Ukraine relationships in light of Ukraine's decision to join the EU.

2. Baltic States' narratives vs. EU policy on Ukraine

This section of the article arranges the key topics presented in the speeches of Baltic leaders – namely three themes that embrace numerous notions: support of Ukraine; attitude towards Russia in terms of its aggression; and Ukraine's intention to join EU.

The Baltic leaders' discourses are historical and they should therefore be analysed in their context. So, the first step in analysing the Baltic leaders' speech

texts should be situating them in the historical context. The selected speeches correspond to the moment when the European Council granted the candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022. On the 28th of February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership. On the 17th of June 2022, the European Commission issued its opinion on the application for EU membership. On the 23rd of June 2022, the European Council granted the candidate status to Ukraine. It invited the European Commission to report to the Council on the fulfilment of the conditions specified in the Commission's opinion on the membership application as part of the Commission's regular enlargement package. At the special European Council meeting in February 2023, the EU leaders acknowledged the considerable efforts that Ukraine has demonstrated to meet the objectives underpinning its candidate status for EU membership. They also encouraged Ukraine to fulfil the conditions specified in the Commission's opinion so as to advance towards future EU membership. It was supposed to pave the way for the EU accession of Ukraine (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.; European Council, 2023).

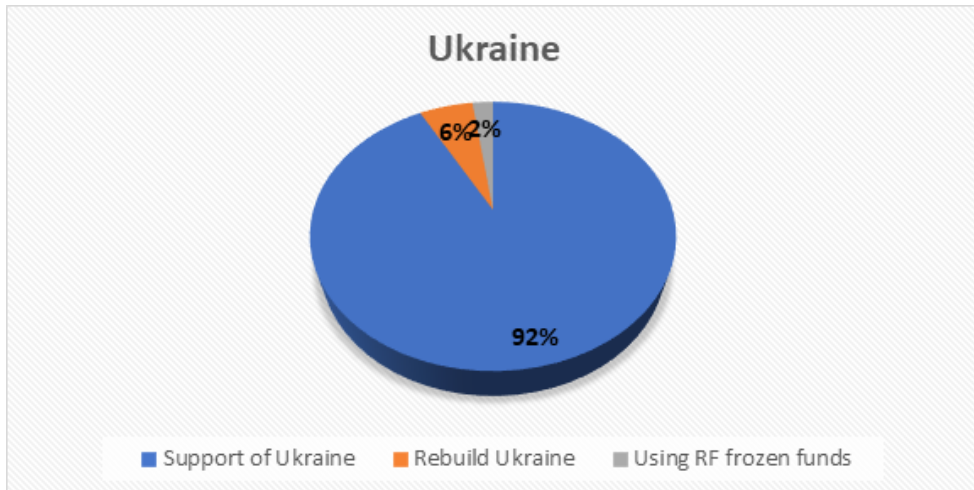
Altogether, out of 71 speeches delivered by the Baltic states' leaders, we managed to select 770 lexical units that illustrate three basic blocks of notions, precisely:

- the Baltic states' support of Ukraine (2021-2023);
- Russia's perception by the Baltic countries' leaders (2021-2023);
- the Baltic countries stand for Ukraine's euro-integration (2021-2023).

It comes as no surprise that the Baltic states leaders' position regarding Ukraine's support was completely positive. The content analysis helped to identify 228 lexical units (29.6%) demonstrating their pro-Ukrainian position (see Figure 1).

The speeches of the Baltic states' leaders indicate that they unanimously stand for Ukraine. Out of 228 units associated with Ukraine, we encountered 210 notions illustrating support of Ukraine. 13 of them were about rebuilding Ukraine during and after the war and 5 were connected with using the Russian federation frozen funds for rebuilding Ukraine. Accordingly, 92% of notions concern overall support of the Ukrainian state and people.

The role of the content analysis of politicians' speeches is to distinguish the contrasting issues at hand. So, it is possible to draw conclusions about a particular country's image and vision. For example, Russia's perception by Baltic leaders is completely negative, which implies that Kremlin's war against Ukraine completely spoiled Russia's image. Meanwhile, the perception of Ukraine is positive. The perception of Baltic states' leaders was turned into actions, accompanied by resisting Russia's policy and providing support for Ukraine. So, the role of discourse within foreign policies represents the practical reality of international relations (Hansen, 2016, p.100).

Figure 1. The Baltic states' support of Ukraine (2021-2023)

Source: authors' own summary of the analysed political addresses delivered by presidents of Baltic states in years 2021-2023

In this context, the President of the Republic of Lithuania claimed: “We will support Ukraine because it is a sisterly nation, fighting for its freedom and ours. We will support it because we believe in the strong will of the Ukrainian people to build an independent future. We believe that it belongs to the family of European Union countries” (President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022a).

All Baltic leaders are unanimous in rebuilding Ukraine after the war and express their intentions to help Kyiv after the war and support the dialogue with their European partners regarding the use of Russian frozen funds: “The reconstruction of Ukraine cannot be put off until the end of the war. Reconstructing and rebuilding the country is a key factor for Ukraine’s faster integration into the European Union” (President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023a).

Attitude towards Russia in the dichotomy: the EU and Ukraine

In a similar vein, the nomination used by the Baltic leaders in their speeches show a clear binary demarcation between ‘us’ (Ukrainians and Europeans) and ‘them’, namely Russians. Binary oppositions not only divide, they also entail an asymmetrical relationship between two categories of people which, in this context, is Europe/Ukraine/Europeans/Ukrainians and Russians.

The picture emerging from our analysis is that the Baltic presidents perceive Russia as an aggressor and a threat. In their discourse, Russia is an aggressor: “it

wages a brutal war [...], “has shaken the foundations of the international rules-based order” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023b).

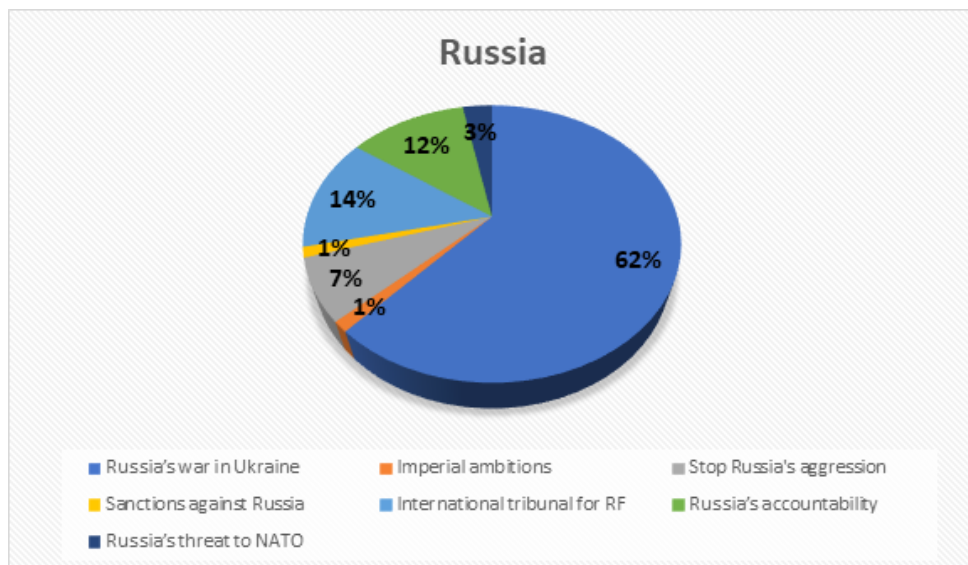
The President of Latvia, Egils Levits’s opinion is clear and precise: “Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine has shaken the foundations of the international rules-based order. It is an attack not only on Ukraine. It is an attack on all of us and the core values of the UN Charter, that we, the democratic community of states, respect and protect” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023b).

Russia’s actions are not less than aggression that is a war against the West: “an attack on the whole Western world, democratic political systems and international law [...]; this war is a concern of all 193 member states of the United Nations” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023a).

The attitude towards Russia is absolutely different and the position is formed by aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. We encountered 165 notions (21.4%) about Russia (see Figure 2).

165 notions, selected in the Baltic leaders’ speeches, are associated with Russia and all of them are negatively marked. The most numerous is the group of units related to Russia’s war against Ukraine (62%, 102 notions). And the Baltic leaders are unanimous on the fact that it is Russia’s responsibility (12%, 20 notions) for the consequences, death of civilians and destruction of the Ukrainian state.

Figure 2. Russia’s perception by the Baltic countries’ leaders (2021-2023)



Source: authors’ own summary of the analysed political addresses delivered by presidents of the Baltic states in years 2021-2023

Russia is responsible for the sufferings of Ukrainians and the destruction of their infrastructure: “Russian leadership and military personnel must be held accountable for each and every international crime” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023e); “Russia must bear full legal and financial responsibility for its aggression [...], We must ensure complete accountability for all crimes committed in Ukraine” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023f); “Russia’s responsibility for the crimes committed against Ukraine” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023d).

Russia is a threat for NATO: “Russia is and will continue to be the most serious and direct threat to the security of the Alliance” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2023g); “the Russian threat to NATO” (President of the Republic of Latvia, 2022).

In this concern, it is urgent to stop Russia’s aggression in Ukraine (7%, 12 notions). The reasons for starting the war and Russia’s imperial ambitions are mentioned twice in the speeches (1%, 2 notions). In this regard, more strict sanctions (1%, 2 notions) should be imposed on the Kremlin. The Baltic politicians are convinced that Russia’s policy should be punished and the international tribunal for Russia (14%, 22 notions) should be an effective and fair way to punish Russia for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. They are sure that Russia poses a threat to NATO (3%, 5 notions).

In sum, the pattern of the representations above projects Russia as a hostile and aggressive state by nature. This identification is achieved through the mix of notions. It contributes to constituting Russia as dangerous not only to Ukraine, but to European states as well.

The Baltic states’ position on Ukraine’s accession

The set of notions for the European Union was numerous enough. They make up for 25.7% (198 units) out of all the selected notions. They demonstrate the Baltic leaders’ attitude, not only to Ukraine and its intentions to join the EU, but also to the Euro integration and enlargement policy of the European Union.

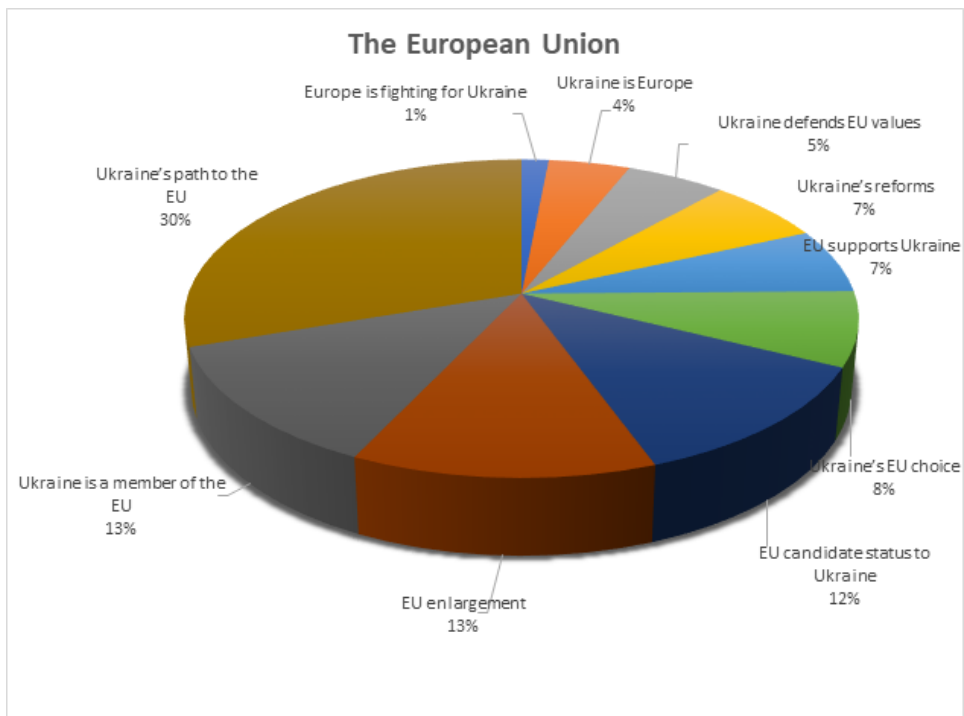
In the context of a possible accession of Ukraine to the European Union, the Baltic leaders equate Ukraine with Europe and Ukraine’s membership with being European. For instance, they talk about correlation between the EU and Ukraine from different respects by taking into consideration the efforts made by Kyiv on the path to the EU, Ukraine as a part of Europe, EU enlargement, EU candidate status to Ukraine, Ukraine’s EU choice, EU support of Ukraine, Ukraine’s reforms, Ukraine defence of EU values, Ukraine is Europe, and Europe is fighting for Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the speeches, Europe is viewed as a homogenous entity in relation to Ukraine and Ukrainians, with no visible scope for diversity.

The process of European integration has profoundly shaped an imagined sense of belonging to a European community.

If we accept the fact that the EU foreign policy is the “sum of official external relations conducted by [an] independent actor[s]” (Hill, 2003, p. 3), we realise that the number of independent national and institutional actors that form the EU voice account for an inherently pluralistic choir. Discourse analysis can be of great use in revealing the way in which social discursive practices convey meaning to foreign policy discourses, through both contestation and communicative action (Carta & Morin, 2014, p. 23).

This group of notions embraces various subgroups concerning the EU and Ukraine. They are as follows: Europe is fighting for Ukraine (1%, 3 notions); Ukraine is Europe (4%, 9 notions); Ukraine defends EU values (5%, 11 notions); Ukraine’s reforms (7%, 13 notions); EU supports Ukraine (7%, 13 notions); Ukraine’s EU choice (8%, 15 notions); EU candidate status to Ukraine (12%, 24 notions); EU enlargement (13%, 25 notions); Ukraine is a member of the EU (13%, 25 notions); Ukraine’s path to the EU (30%, 60 notions) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Correlation of the notions of the EU and Ukraine (2021-2023)



Source: authors' own summary of the analysed political addresses delivered by presidents of Baltic states in years 2021-2023

The Presidents of the Baltic states perceive enlargement positively. According to Gitanas Nausėda, Ukraine belongs to the European Union family and to NATO. The President said that it is important for Ukraine to use the window of opportunity for a positive decision to be taken before the end of the year on launching EU accession negotiations. A prerequisite for this is to implement the reforms specified by the Commission in its opinion on Ukraine's application for EU membership (President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023b).

In their public speeches, Baltic leaders frequently stressed that Ukraine is defending European values: "Our shared values define where Europe begins and where it ends. By acting in such an aggressive way, Russia draws a clear-cut distinction between Europe and non-Europe. At the same time, Ukraine demonstrates what it means to be European and to defend European values", the President of Lithuania said (President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022c).

The leaders of the Baltic states unanimously support Ukraine's euro-integration intentions and the steps taken by the country on the path to the European family. 91 notions (11.8%) demonstrate the Baltic leaders' position. Baltic leaders declare "full support for Ukraine, bilateral economic cooperation and the reconstruction of Ukraine" (President of Estonia, 2023a).

In their speeches, the leaders of the Baltic states expressed complete support of Ukraine on the road to the European Union (91 notions). 14% of the notions were about Estonia's support of the Euro-integration of Ukraine (13 notions). 32% of all the notions were about Latvia's support of the Euro-integration of Ukraine (29 notions). And 54% of notions are for Lithuania's support of the Euro-integration of Ukraine (49 notions): "Latvia and Estonia are the world's biggest supporters of Ukraine in terms of GDP - this shows how seriously we take Russia's war against an independent and democratic country - Ukraine - and how seriously we take this security situation" (President of Latvia, 2023c).

Each of the Baltic leaders expressed support of Ukraine on its way to the EU: "We must continue to do everything we can to help the country in joining the EU and winning the war [...] We must continue to work as one to assist Ukraine for as long as our help is needed" (President of Estonia, 2023b).

3. (In)-coherent narratives of the Visegrad Group leaders on Ukraine's accession to the EU

Unlike unanimous support for Ukraine's accession to the EU among Baltic states' leaders presented above, a case study of narratives delivered by V4 leaders and promoted on the international arena has vividly illustrated a clash between transformational and transactional vision on the future of the EU foreign policy.

From the very beginning of the Group's establishment, the Visegrad cooperation has never been an absolute manifestation of the cohesion of the V4 countries due to the fact that member states often represented separate policies, based

on their own state interests. This inconsistency of opinions between member states can be considered a typical phenomenon for the V4, which argues for not treating this group as a homogeneous one, but as an intergovernmental entity of four member states with - at times - divergent interests towards the further integration of their own position within the position of the EU (Bauerová, 2018).

As a matter of fact, the analysis of the political discourse of four prime ministers in 2022 and 2023 illustrated both similar and opposite viewpoints. It was the prime minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, who conducted a range of international trips and delivered a number of addresses in the Western European states, i.e., the speech at the University of Heidelberg on the 20th of March 2023. The main idea of his message was two-fold: 1) to persuade western European states to increase their support for Ukraine and the support for the idea of the EU enlargement; and 2) to promote the concept of the Europe of Nations introduced by Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s (Zheltovskyy, 2024).

As for Petr Fiala, the prime minister of the Czech Republic and Eduard Heger, the prime minister of Slovakia, their political discourse was characterised by similar features, with the main line of Mateusz Morawiecki narration on the future shape of the EU foreign policy. At the same time, while three leaders agreed on the need to strengthen the sanction policy against Russia and to build a strong position of the EU as a global power, one could have noticed different accents regarding the model of cooperation between member states and EU institutions. On their turn, Petr Fiala and Eduard Heger argued for closer cooperation with the EU institutions and European solidarity in order to build an efficient strategy to counter the consequences of the Russian aggression, which did not coincide with the appeal of Mateusz Morawiecki to reduce the leverage of supranational institutions, such as the European Commission, on given strategies. In terms of Hungary, as a member of the Visegrad Group, Viktor Orban continued to maintain close relations with Russia and repeatedly criticised the EU sanction policy and plans to resign from status quo with Russia.

That is why this part of our article is focused on the V4 leaders' narratives on Ukraine's accession to the EU - in order to define the similarities and differences in the political positions of the four analysed actors. By doing so, the authors aim to evaluate the transformational potential of the V4 group among EU member states. The analysed narratives on Ukraine are divided into the categories used in the previous section on Baltic states' leaders, i.e.:

- support of Ukraine;
- Russia's perception by V4 leaders;
- V4 stand for Ukraine's euro-integration.

As far as the V4 position on the support for Ukraine is concerned, it is impossible to state that the Group developed a unified approach and communicated in one voice. Similar observations are relevant in other categories of our rhetorical analysis, as well. The main reason lies in the position of Viktor Orban who has remained a proponent of economic cooperation with Russia despite its violation of

international law and war of aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, it seems rational to compare the narratives of three leaders (Morawiecki, Fiala and Heger) with the narratives delivered by the prime minister of Hungary. The table below presents major messages in three categories that were taken into consideration.

Table 1. V4 leaders' narratives on Ukraine

	Support for Ukraine	Russia's perception	On Ukraine's Accession to the EU
Mateusz Morawiecki	calls for continuous support for Ukraine as a responsibility of the EU.	"standing against Russian fascism" as a duty of Europeans; criticism of Western EU states for developing bilateral relations with Russia; no return to "business as usual" with Russia; calls for development of the EU energy independence.	calls for EU enlargement including Ukraine and Western Balkans.
Petr Fiala	appeal to develop long-term plans for support for Ukraine and its post-war recovery.	appeal to change the model of EU cooperation with Russia; calls for the increase of sanctions against subjects responsible for war crimes in Ukraine.	calls for Ukraine's accession to the EU.
Eduard Heger	increase of support for Ukraine; support continuation "till Ukraine's victory".	appeal to increase cooperation within the EU in order to resign from energy dependence from Russia.	calls for Ukraine's accession to the EU.
Viktor Orban	lack of support for Ukraine as a moral decision; criticism of the EU member states for supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression.	calls for maintaining economic ties with Russia; calls for resigning from sanctions against Russia.	no support declaration for Ukraine's accession to the EU.

Source: authors' own summary of the analysed political addresses delivered by V4 prime ministers in years 2021-2023

As shown in the table, the major controversy between the joint position of Morawiecki, Heger and Fiala, on the one hand, and Orban's, on the other, lies in the presented vision on the need to transform the EU-Russia relationship as a reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The reference to morality became a common feature of the political discourse of Morawiecki, Heger and Fiala. All three politicians put emphasis on the role of Ukraine's fight for the defence of European values. Moreover, the morality constituent has been used by Polish prime minister in his international addresses to promote Poland's *raison d'état* in the context of further

enlargement among other member states. For this purpose, one could have regularly heard the call for assistance to Ukraine as an obligation of EU member states. As for appeals to the governments of Western European countries (especially the government of Germany), they were centred on the calls for the increase of support for Ukraine and on the calls to abandon the transactional model in bilateral relations with Russia. On his turn, Viktor Orban presented his lack of support for Ukraine as a moral action and criticised the EU for being a “pro-war institutional system”.

4. The impact of political narratives delivered by Visegrad Group and Baltic states' leaders on the EU foreign policy agenda

The narratives of the analysed leaders made their impact on the transformation of the EU foreign policy. Along with other factors, the political speeches of the above-mentioned statesmen affected the decisions of the European Union to support Ukraine. In the research, we distinguish the EU actions as a whole and the actions of the Baltic and Visegrad 4 states, in particular. The analysis in the sections above illustrate the joint political effort (with the exception of Hungary) aimed at strengthening the EU support for Ukraine.

In terms of the financial initiatives of the EU toward Ukraine, the following show the unprecedented scale of the support and achieved consensus on supporting the functioning of the Ukrainian state in times of war. With the Black Sea route closed by the Russian aggression, 20 million tons of grain were trapped in Ukraine before the summer of 2022. Therefore, the European Commission launched the Solidarity Lanes Action Plan in May 2022 to establish alternative logistics routes via rail, road and inland waterways. It became possible for haulers to transit through and operate between each other's territories, without the need for permits. The EU invested €250 million in 9 Solidarity Lanes projects to improve cross-border connections between Ukraine, Moldova, and the EU. In September 2023, the EU made €7 billion available for key infrastructure projects, opening the call to Ukrainian entities (European Commission, 2022b).

In 2023, the EU budget enabled €19.5 billion in assistance to Ukraine, including an unprecedented support package of €18 billion in concessional loans. Thanks to this, Ukraine was and is able to keep paying wages, pensions, restore critical infrastructure destroyed by the war, maintain essential public services, such as hospitals, schools, and housing for relocated people, and overall ensure macroeconomic stability. At the request of the European Commission, the Energy Community Fund has made available around €500 million to cover the immediate needs in Ukraine's energy sector. The EU and its Member States have mobilized €32 billion in military support for Ukraine, including €6.1 billion under the European Peace Facility (European Commission, 2024).

Between March and August 2022, the Commission disbursed €1 billion and 950 million in emergency macro-financial assistance to Ukraine. Between

September 2022 and March 2023, the European Commission disbursed €11.5 billion in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine. From April to June 2022, the EU has provided over €700 million of humanitarian assistance in response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. This funding is part of the €1 billion support package pledged by the European Commission at the event "Stand Up for Ukraine" (European Commission, 2024).

Unsurprisingly, Central European and Baltic states undertook a number of significant steps to support Ukraine, which served as a proof of political statements delivered by their leaders. Baltic states are avid supporters of Ukraine. Estonia and Lithuania have contributed 1.8% of their GDP in aid to Ukraine, with Latvia not far behind, with 1.5% of its GDP (Hannén & Moyer, 2024). Regarding refugees, the Baltic states have taken on a lot more than most countries in Europe. Estonia has hosted approximately 40,000 Ukrainian refugees (about 3% of its population), Latvia hosts between 50,000-53,000 Ukrainians (about 2.7% of its total population), and Lithuania has issued more than 50,000 visas for temporary protection and claims that more than 80,000 have arrived (2.8% of its population). Each of the Baltic states has invested heavily in educational and language programmes for Ukrainian refugees (Hannén & Moyer, 2024). All three countries are ardent supporters of welcoming Ukraine to NATO and the EU. Latvia is leading the discussion on the creation of a drone coalition to support Ukraine.

Warsaw, Prague, and Bratislava have all been among the leaders, along with the Baltic states, in the amount of bilateral aid to Kyiv, including the costs of supporting refugees. Hungary was noticeably absent from the list of nations sacrificing for the benefit of Ukraine. When considering the V4 military aid to Ukraine, the chasm between Hungary and the rest is even much deeper than on the humanitarian side. Due to statistics from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, between January 24, 2022, and October 31, 2023, Poland (3 billion Euros), the Czech Republic (1.1 billion Euros), and Slovakia (700 million Euros) provided critical military support to Kyiv. Conversely, Hungary did not make the list of top thirty-one donors (Beck, 2024).

The proactive position of Central European and Baltic states on the European arena that coincided with the transformative stance of leaders represented three major EU institutions, such as the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament, which led to the adoption of the ambitious enlargement agenda. As a result, on the 11th of June 2022, President von der Leyen met President Zelenskyy in Kyiv and held discussions in preparation of the Commission's opinion on Ukraine's application for the EU membership. On its turn, the Ukrainian parliament has proved to be an effective institutional actor facilitating the process of democratization reforms in Ukraine in order to meet the recommendations from the European Commission (Zheltovsyy, 2024). Furthermore, on the 23rd of June 2022, the EU granted the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. On the 6th of June 2023, The Commission further integrated Ukraine into the EU Single Market through the

Connecting Europe Facility for infrastructure funding. On the 8th of November 2023, the Commission recommended that the European Council opened the EU accession negotiations with Ukraine as part of its 2023 Enlargement Package. On the 14th of December 2023, the EU leaders decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine (European Commission, 2024).

Conclusions

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine became a trigger for the transformation of the EU foreign policy agenda and brought the enlargement issue, which had been politicised for a long time, back to the table of political discussion among member states. At the same time, the Baltic countries and the majority of Central European states became the most engaged supporters of such a transformation. Their leaders employed political discourse as a tool of persuasion in the process of foreign policy making on the European forum.

Due to the fact that discourse analysis is reasonable to apply in the studies of international relations as the latter relies heavily on communication, the conducted analysis allows finding more meaning, at both material and discursive levels, which can lead to sensible conclusions regarding reality. Our empirical analysis shows that the Baltic states' leaders' official discourse during 2021-2023, following the war against Ukraine, construes a new reality in which Ukraine is perceived as part of the EU. After the beginning of the full-fledged war against Ukraine, Russia has turned into a threat and deserves International Tribunal for its crimes. It has been illustrated that the topic of the European Union is closely connected with Ukraine, which is represented as a part of Europe. Meantime, the narration stressed on the need for the EU to continue support of Ukraine, and the need for Ukraine to implement reforms on the road to the EU.

Our analysis has also shown how all topics, i.e., support for Ukraine, change of Russia's perception and Ukraine's accession to the EU are entangled in the context of the rhetorical campaigns conducted by the leaders of the Baltic states and V4 (with the exclusion of Hungary). All given narratives became an inseparable part of Baltic leaders' campaign targeting not only support for Ukraine, but also the need for increasing the progress of Ukraine's integration in the European community. In terms of the Visegrad Group, it did not build a joint narration due to the vividly pro-Russian stance of Viktor Orban. Simultaneously, there has been a strong joint message of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia addressed to Western European countries in order to convince undecided political decision-makers to transform the formula of cooperation with Russia and develop a new vision of foreign policy. This vision primarily assumes support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. An equally important element of the political discourse of the three prime ministers was the issue of Ukraine's accession to the EU, as well as the issue of the EU

enlargement and support for democratization processes in candidate and potential candidate states.

Overall, the analysis of the political discourse delivered by selected Central European leaders and leaders of Baltic states in years 2021-2023 emphasized the avid support of Ukraine and its intentions to become a member of the EU. The conducted study of their narratives has shown how such a worldview is constructed through official statements on a day-to-day basis, becoming naturalized. That, in turn, became one of the tools that led to an unprecedented shift of the EU foreign policy-making toward the dominance of transformational vision on the European integration.

Along with the political narration in support of Ukraine, both groups of states, the Baltic countries and the Visegrad 4 countries (except Hungary, which lacked the political will to provide support), have demonstrated support through actions. They embraced financial support, provided legal status for Ukrainian refugees, as well as military and humanitarian aid for Kyiv.

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