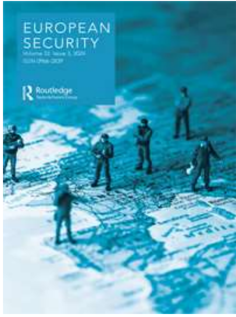

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The subaltern strikes back, or how Ukraine is claiming agency from Russia and the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of liminality in combination with ontological security through an overarching postcolonial lens, this article shows how Ukraine as a liminar on the East–West spatial-ideological axis has successfully claimed agency from the European Union (EU) and Russia in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion. We argue that the latter has acted as a critical juncture for Ukraine, to the point that agency has emerged from a state of ontological anxiety. Provoking the need to fight for the survival of the Self, Russia's invasion has strongly accelerated the transformation of Ukraine's liminal identity, uniting the country around a new asserted Self. Russia's aggression has pushed Ukraine to definitively reject the narrative of a common identity promoted by Russia and claim its rightful belonging to Europe, thereby unleashing unprecedented agency vis-à-vis its significant Others, i.e. Russia and the EU. From the EU's side, Ukraine has finally been embraced within the European family by receiving candidate status. From Russia's side, Ukraine's successful application for EU candidate status has consolidated Ukraine's departure from Russia's perceived sphere of influence. Along with Ukraine's nationwide resistance against the invasion, this destabilises Russia's projected identity discourse around the Slavic brotherhood and the "Russian world".

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Introduction

Since its independence in the early 1990s, Ukraine has passed a long way in the eyes of the West, from a "nasty new Ukraine" (Brumberg 1992), an "unwanted step-child of Soviet perestroika" (as described in reputable Western media of the 1990s) and a "nowhere nation" (Matlock 2000) to a "linchpin of European stability" and a "hope for a better European future" (Applebaum 2022). An obscure nation, on the outskirts of Europe whose "Europeanness" has long been questioned if not denied (Ash 2023), has suddenly been recognised by the European Union (EU) as a "member of our European family"

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(European Council 2022) and granted candidate status to the EU in June 2022. Similarly, also from Russia's side, the perception of Ukraine has changed dramatically. After centuries of being portrayed as the little brother who needs to be "protected" by being assimilated into the Russian context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seen the country turn entirely against its former master, forcing Russia to modify its discourse concerning Ukraine because of the latter's extraordinary resistance on the battlefield and beyond. Russia now portrays Ukrainians as "Russians" with a distorted consciousness who should be, therefore, "re-educated" back into their "true" (Russian) identity or, otherwise, exterminated as incurable "Nazis" (Medvedev 2022, Sergeytsev 2022).

By successfully claiming agency from the EU and Russia, Ukraine is breaking out of its place as a mute subaltern that is peripheral to not one, but two centres of power (Korablyova 2022). This sudden recognition of Ukrainian political agency by both the EU and, ambiguously, by Russia presents an analytical anomaly for a large part of the IR literature. Indeed, most of the IR scholarship has looked at the countries from the so-called shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU as mere objects in the alleged "rivalry" between the two regional powers (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, Torbakov 2013, Cadier 2014, Snyder 2015, Casier 2016, Chalyi 2018), granting these countries very limited agency to act as subjects on their future. Also those IR studies that have focused on either Ukraine's relations with Russia or on those with the EU have tended to downplay Ukraine's subjectivity, centring instead on the influence of either regional power (Langbein and Wolczuk 2012, Mearsheimer 2014, Sakwa 2022).

Theoretically, mainstream IR is struggling to explain Ukraine's agency vis-à-vis these two cores. As several scholars have already highlighted, this is, in large part, due to the misconceptions that dominate mainstream IR debates about Ukraine and Russia. These misconceptions have been strongly influenced by Western and Russian epistemic imperialism, which has tended to downplay Ukraine's agency (Mälksoo 2022, Kotliuk 2023, Oksamytna 2023, Hendl 2024). We argue that critical security studies can help to explain how agency has emerged from the fundamental shift in Ukraine's ontological security narrative and hence in how Ukraine articulates its Self in relation to its two significant Others, i.e. the EU and Russia, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Krickel-Choi 2021, Kurnyshova 2023). However, given the specificity of the Ukrainian context as a double subaltern that is invaded by its former imperial and colonial master, while trying to be accepted as equal within the EU's hegemonic structures, we claim that Ukraine's agency also needs to be understood through a postcolonial lens. Postcolonialism is particularly suited, as it enables us to capture how Ukraine as a double subaltern can subvert dominant representations and overturn the hierarchies of power between the cores and the periphery (Bhabha 1996, Korablyova 2022). We combine these theoretical perspectives using the concept of liminality in dialogue with the concepts of ontological (in)security and ontological anxiety through an overarching postcolonial lens. This allows us to centre the agency of Ukraine and show how Ukraine as a liminar on the East–West spatial-ideological axis has securitised its subjectivity and successfully claimed agency from the EU and Russia in the wake of Russia's invasion. In this regard, the latter event has acted as a critical juncture for Ukraine, to the point that agency has emerged from a state of deep ontological anxiety. Agency is understood here as having "such operational

characteristics as ability to act, visibility, recognition and acceptance by other members of the international society" (Kurnyshova 2023, p. 81).

Provoking the need to fight for the survival of the Self, Russia's invasion has consolidated Ukraine's departure from hybrid liminality that had started in 2014 and has induced the country's successful efforts to also exit marginal liminality, thereby unleashing an unprecedented agency vis-à-vis its significant Others, i.e. Russia and the EU. We argue that the looming threat of losing its sovereignty as a result of the invasion by its (neo-)imperial master, Russia, generated existential anxiety in Ukraine, which prompted it to reassert its statehood and thus to adapt its identity by choosing for a pro-European liberal democratic path and rejecting the Pan-East Slavic identity narrative.

As pointed out by Poberezhna *et al*. (2024, p. 3), Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a critical juncture for Ukraine "highlights the importance of ontological security during wars in asymmetric, authoritarian and neo-colonial contexts". Given Ukraine's complex history of imperial and (neo-)colonial subjugation, in order to better grasp the securitisation of Ukraine's subjectivity and emergence of agency in light of Russia's invasion, the literature on ontological security, therefore, needs to be linked to the study of decolonial resistance and the "subaltern securitisation" process (Fasakin 2022).

Together with Bhabha's (1994) claim that the in-betweenness of the subaltern can open up new forms of selfhood when faced with the disruption of assumed hierarchies and impositions, this allows us to understand how Russia's invasion of Ukraine induced the latter to move beyond its liminal position in relation to Russia and mobilised the whole country into fierce resistance against Russia on the battlefield and beyond, predicated on a profound identity adaptation.

The article is structured as follows. After outlining the conceptual and theoretical framework, we will examine where Ukraine situates itself, in-between the two cores with each their own perception of and behaviour towards the country, but similarly framing Ukraine within a hierarchical relationship as some kind of a "lesser" or "little" Self. Using the concept of liminality we will show how Ukraine, following its independence, maintained hybrid liminality vis-a-vis both the EU and Russia up until 2014, when it assumed marginal liminality more clearly oriented towards the EU. Next, we will examine how Ukraine - as a constructed subaltern of both Russia and the EU - has been successfully claiming agency from these cores since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By combining liminality with the concept of ontological anxiety and Fanonian decolonial theory, we will demonstrate that the threat of losing its sovereignty generated existential anxiety in Ukraine, which prompted it to reassert its statehood by adapting its liminal identity in relation to the EU and Russia and contesting its peripherality, thereby choosing for a pro-European liberal democratic path and rejecting the Russia-promoted Pan-East Slavic identity narrative.

Methodologically, the article relies on a combination of primary and secondary data in order to identify shifts in the articulation of Ukraine's Self/Other discourse and link these re-articulations to changes in terms of foreign policy directions and agency, while observing (re)actions by Ukraine's two significant Others, i.e. the EU and Russia. We include the discourses of both state and societal actors in Ukraine in order to assess the degree of stability or contestation of the official discourse. Primary data are used mainly to cover the period following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and consist of

official statements from the Ukrainian, EU and Russian leadership. For the (long) period preceding the war, we rely mainly on secondary data.

Liminality in dialogue with ontological (in)security and decolonial resistance

To understand how Ukraine has claimed unprecedented agency vis-à-vis the EU and Russia in the context of the full-scale invasion, we qualify Ukraine as a liminal actor on the East–West spatial-ideological axis, which has securitised its subjectivity in response to the critical juncture caused by the Russian aggression resulting in a feeling of deep ontological anxiety.

Liminality can be defined as a state of in-betweenness, of being "neither here nor there" (Turner 1969, p. 359), and also of transition, as a Self always in becoming. Liminality is, therefore, associated with indeterminacy, which can be a source of anxiety, and also of change and agency. Going beyond representations of powerlessness and passivity, scholars of liminality demonstrate that the ambivalence of being at the interstices of existing categories engenders potential for constitutive power from the liminar, by challenging the hegemony of the existing structures and bringing forward possible alternatives (Mälksoo 2012). As Bhabha (1994) contended when bringing the anthropological concept of liminality into the field of postcolonialism, liminality can open up new forms of existence when assumed hierarchies and impositions become disrupted. Being in-between can emerge as a "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood, which initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1994, p. 2). Nevertheless, liminality is all but a fixed category and can be articulated differently by the actors who experience it, unleashing different forms of agency. The literature on the subject distinguishes different forms of liminality, among which two appear relevant to understanding the Ukrainian case, namely hybrid and marginal liminality (Rumelili 2012, Loh and Heiskanen 2020). Hybrid liminality is characterised by its emergence from "the interstices of crosscutting discourses of identity, which create mismatching categorisations" (Stoicescu 2008, p. 512). On the other hand, marginal liminality is described as "the product of universalising discourses, where liminality designates the constant state of becoming of an actor in search for a place within an established structural arrangement" (Stoicescu 2008, p. 512). Though not rigid and possibly overlapping categories, the key difference is that marginal liminars attempt to transform and move beyond their liminality to join an established structure, while hybrid liminars "embrace and exploit their liminal position" by staying in-between (Loh and Heiskanen 2020).

In dialogue with liminality, the concept of ontological (in)security allows us to get a better understanding of the articulation of Ukraine's agency. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is understood as a critical juncture that affects the interactions between the Self and the Other and impacts the Self's agency. Coming from the field of psychoanalysis, the concept of ontological security pertains to maintaining a secure and stable sense of the Self through an autobiographical narrative and routinised practices. To be ontologically secure involves understanding one's place in the world, knowing how to interact with Others, gaining recognition from them and having a defined role identity. Significant Others are crucial in sustaining a feeling of ontological security as they participate in routinised interactions and are expected to grant recognition of the Self's projected identity

(Ejdus 2018, 2020, Narozhna 2022, Szkola 2018). The ontological security narrative may face disruptions during critical junctures or situations described by scholars as "unpredictable events that affect a large number of individuals, catching state agents off guard and disrupting their self-identities" (Ejdus 2018, p. 5). These critical situations induce feelings of anxiety that can challenge the collective actors' ability to "go on" (Ejdus 2018, p. 1). Nevertheless, a state of ontological insecurity does not necessarily deprive one of all agency. On the contrary, scholars have argued that the anxiety resulting from being ontologically insecure can open a creative, counter-hegemonic field for agency (Mitzen 2006, cited in Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, Rumelili 2020). According to Krickel-Choi (2021), anxiety can be a source of creative agency that strives to overcome the challenge through adaptations of the ontological security narrative. Therefore, ontological anxiety can result in adaptability and identity change. But it can also become more paralyzing when it reaches its peak (*ibid.*).

How the feeling of ontological anxiety resulting from the critical juncture of Russia's aggression has empowered rather than constrained Ukraine's agency can be further understood by drawing on Fanonian decolonial theory (FDT) and the "subaltern securitisation" process. As Fasakin (2022, p. 55) has argued, the existing securitisation literature has so far only marginally accounted for this process. Fasakin has shown how the subaltern in a postcolonial context "might reclaim the agency and voice they have been denied, which is effectively responsible for their security predicament" (Fasakin 2022, p. 58). FDT helps to explain "how the subaltern can activate their agency when faced with security predicaments, while suffering from a lack of opportunity to discuss and engage" (ibid.). In particular, FDT highlights the emergence of agency by the subaltern when faced with a threat to their survival. For Fanon, the pursuit of ontological security by the colonised Self boils down to an obsessive fixation with rejecting and disassociating from intersubjectivity with the colonial Other (Bradshaw 2023). When the threat to survival gets to a tipping point, the subaltern securitises the threat by engaging in armed resistance against the aggressor. Importantly, this mobilises the people, overcoming previously held divisions, "pitch[ing] them in a single direction, from which there is no turning back" (Fasakin 2022, p. 76). Although the concept of the subaltern is not at the core of the present analysis, it helps us to further explain how Ukraine, as a liminal actor, caught in hierarchical structures with both the EU and Russian cores (which can be qualified as a form of double subalternity, see, e.g. Korablyova 2022), when encountered with ontological insecurity, has attempted to securitise its subjectivity, resulting in "an intensified search for one stable identity" (Kinnvall 2004, p. 949) and the unleashing of agency.

Ukraine's liminality

The EU's and Russia's little Self

Despite fundamentally different perceptions, goals and policies vis-à-vis the countries of the shared neighbourhood, Russia and the EU shared the supremacist view of the minor, "non-historical" nations in-between as allegedly lacking political agency and requiring, therefore, some guardianship – either soft and negotiable, on the one side, or harsh and coercive, on the other side (see, e.g. Kakabadze 2020, Oskanian 2021, Vieira 2021, Korablyova 2022).

The concept of liminality allows us to shift the focus on the margins by putting them at the centre and to turn them into subjects and investigate their agency through their own identity and subjectivity (Amoris 2024). This section examines where Ukraine as a liminar situates itself, in between these two cores with each their perception of the country, but similarly framing it within a hierarchical relationship as some kind of a "lesser" or "little" Self (Stoicescu 2008). Indeed, imperial affinity has played a role here: the structure of Western (European) and Russian imperial knowledge about subaltern nations, about the "lesser people of the lesser world" (in Said's terms) bore an uncomfortable similarity. Whilst Russia has long portrayed Ukraine as its little brother, which had to be protected by being fully assimilated into the Russian fold, the EU regarded Ukrainians as second-rate Europeans, still catching up with the Western patterns of modernity and democracy (Korablyova 2022, p. 44).

As Oskanian (2021) demonstrated, Russia articulated its Self as superior in relation to Ukraine by promoting a common Slavic authenticity with Russia at its core as the big brother and protector. Russia has engaged in an ambiguous form of Othering in its approach to the "near abroad", blurring the distinction between the inside and the outside. The concept of Russia's "near abroad" itself highlights this ambiguity, suggesting that the former Soviet Republics are not entirely foreign but rather partly-Self.[1] By systematically Othering Ukrainians (Riabchuk 2016) Russia relegated Ukraine "to a lower tier in the hierarchy of nations", a pattern that was prevalent in Russian discourses for centuries (Oksamytna 2023, p. 504). As Oksamytna (2023, p. 504) writes, this "made imperial violence acceptable and created an expectation that there would be no capable resistance".

The EU, in turn, has represented Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine as the EU's "potential we" (Vieira 2021), not yet "good enough" according to the established standards to be considered full Europeans, but progressing toward that goal (Kakabadze 2020). Through such practices, the EU creates places of liminality, transitional spaces where the liminars are expected to adopt the dominant categories set by the core (e.g. democracy, rule of law, governance, etc.) to mitigate the risks of subversion and secure the EU's own Self. They are not fully accepted, however, within the European in-circle (Rumelili 2012) and do not receive proper incentives and instruments for such a transition.

In turning to how Ukraine has framed its identity in relation to its two significant Others, we follow a poststructuralist approach and thus uphold the idea that identity is neither primordial nor fixed, but rather informed and fluid (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In poststructuralism, discourse is seen as a linguistic system through which meaning is created, rather than a transparent medium (Hansen 2016). Discursive structures are both constraining and enabling: they construct the agents but their inherent instability also highlights the emergence of political agency (Hansen 2006).

The remainder of this section seeks to identify changes in Ukraine's discursive structures and discursive strategies and to examine how the Self-Other nexus is being (re)constructed and the agency that emerges from Ukraine's foreign policy discourse. Poststructuralism suggests a co-constitutive link between identity and foreign policy, where policy discourse seeks to establish a stable and consistent connection between these two elements. When this connection is disrupted, there are adjustments or re-articulations of either the identity or foreign policy discourse (Hansen 2006).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has variously articulated its own Self in relation to the two cores. Ukraine's liminality is not only a post-Soviet phenomenon

but has deeper historical roots, as described by many historians as "Ukraine between East and West" (Hrushevsky 1991, pp. 141–144, Rudnytsky 1987, p. 8, Sevcenko 1996, pp. 3–8).

Ukraine's hybrid liminality

Since its independence from the Soviet Union, Ukraine has sought closer relations with the West, but this was not a singular trajectory. Civil society and political elites were long divided and unstable on how to relate with their neighbours. Depending on the time or the political side, the "Other" was changing and the perceptions of Russia were balancing between the brother and the enemy (Kuzio 2001), but Ukrainian elites always tried to maintain limited strategic relations with both sides and hedge the risks for Ukraine's territorial sovereignty (Shyrokykh 2018).

We can argue that up until the 2010s, Ukraine was in a state of hybrid liminality, "a synthesis of East and West" and "ambivalent category resting in both" (Rudnytsky 1987), embracing its in-between position and at times trying to turn it into strength as a bridge between East and West (Kuzio 2001).

The newly found independence after the fall of the Soviet Union led to the (re)construction of a discourse on Ukraine's national identity centred on its natural belonging to Europe. Being with Europe meant being free, democratic and modern, as opposed to life with Russia (Wolczuk 2000, Musliu and Burlyuk 2019). This suggests that the (re)construction of Ukrainian national identity clearly upheld some degree of marginal liminality in relation to the EU. However, like most other post-Soviet states, Ukraine for a long time pursued an ambiguous policy vis-à-vis the EU in order to maintain corrupt, illiberal, or even non-democratic systems in spite of the European pressure to reform them, while not wanting to spoil beneficial relations with the EU by rejecting openly its normative principles (Kakachia *et al*. 2019). Ukrainian elites, like most of their post-Soviet counterparts, had to find a delicate balance (trade-off) between the need to protect sovereignty (threatened by Russia) and the desire to hold authoritarian power (threatened by European demands for democratisation and rule of law).

It is interesting to note that, before the point of rupture in the relations between Ukraine and Russia in 2014, the former could have seen itself play the role of a bridge between Europe and Russia, "to 'return to Europe' together with Russia" (Kuzio 2001, p. 360). This underlined Ukraine's ambiguous positioning that it had strived to turn into an opportunity under Kuchma's presidency (1994–2005), to act as a bridge, to be a dynamic force of connection and rapprochement.

Ukrainian leaders learned how to manipulate both Russia and the EU for their own benefit. Leonid Kuchma was in particular skilful in this regard, excelling in ambiguous, ad hoc policies and proposals dubbed as "momentocracy" (Kuzio 2012).

It was rather Ukrainian civil society than the EU that detached Ukraine from increasingly authoritarian (and expansive) Russia and put it on the "European" track – despite a very lukewarm attitude in Western capitals that typically "acknowledged Ukraine's European aspirations", but never welcomed them or tried to institutionalise them (Portnov 2018).

Indeed, the two popular revolutions against the ruling elites in Ukraine, the first one in 2004 and the second one in 2013–2014 consolidated the fundamental difference between Ukrainian society and Russian society, articulated around the urge to be free (Kudlenko 2023). As a Ukrainian scholar from Kharkiv aptly observed in the wake of Euromaidan,

> Ukrainian identity, which for so long had been associated with ethnicity, language and historical memory, suddenly has become territorial and political and thus inclusive … For the Russian-speaking urban middle class, along with small and medium-sized business owners and the intellectual elites in the East, Russia's anti-democratic tendencies, its self-isolation and its growing hostility to the West make it easier to identify with a (potentially) European Ukraine. (Zhurzhenko 2014)

It is in this context that Ukraine began to assert its identity in opposition to Russia as its most significant Other. In the 2000s, Ukrainian citizens increasingly began to view the Soviet Union as a reincarnation of the Russian Empire and Putin's reign as a logical stage of the empire's development. This enhanced their will to defend civic freedoms despite authoritarian tendencies in Russia and most post-Soviet states. Both the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (a.k.a. Euromaidan, 2013–2014) took place in response to attempts of Ukrainian authorities to derail Ukraine's democratic development and "European" orientation. These and some other events are rightly identified as "the key milestones of Ukraine's pathway to normative agency that denotes an ability to act and develop specific policies in accordance with values, principles and rules of the Western democratic tradition" (Kurnyshova 2023, p. 99). They were thus clear markers of marginal liminality in relation to the EU and the West.

The protests were not anti-Russian, contrary to the claims of some commentators; they were first and foremost about rejecting the Soviet and imperial legacy and looking at the future. As the Ukrainian intellectual Kebuladze (2019, p. 191) explains the nature of the popular uprisings:

> This was influenced not so much by Ukrainian nationalism but rather by post-colonial resistance to Russian imperialism, and an attempt to break free from the sphere of influence of the Russian Empire and join civilised European countries. Everything Ukrainian was growing to become a marker of our belonging to the civilised world and rejecting Russian imperial xenophobia.

The protests were rather postcolonial than anti-colonial. They envisioned a "reinvention of [a] positive, 'post-transition' sense of belonging" and a "quest for a new collective self not in the invented past or someone else's present, but in the unknown future" (Gerasimov 2014, 2015, Gerasimov and Mogilner 2015).

Ukraine's marginal liminality and failed efforts to escape it

Ukraine's past attempts to acquire a political agency of its own following the 2004 Orange revolution and 2013–2014 Euromaidan by showcasing its catch-up efforts and proclaiming its European civilisational identity evoked some enthusiasm from the EU but ended up in a new disappointment. Indeed, the EU did not fully recognise Ukraine's projected discourse about the Self, thus impeding Ukraine's agency. Increasingly assuming a position of marginal liminality, Ukraine portrayed itself as a European nation that is progressing towards liberal democracy and needs to be accepted in the club, not only from the point of view of values but also from that of security, against the Russian threat. Politically, however, the post-revolutionary governments failed to complete a much-needed breakthrough from oligarchic pluralism to liberal democracy and from the "rule by law" to the rule of law (Kakachia *et al*. 2019), which – along with the EU's unwillingness to acknowledge Russia as a threat, – further compromised Ukraine's efforts to break through its peripherality.

However, the period following the Revolution of Dignity marked a clear shift in Ukraine's liminality, sparked by Russia's increased aggression towards the country. Indeed, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the onset of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine following the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014 gave rise to Ukraine's departure from hybrid liminality, while stepping up efforts to escape marginal liminality. Russia's aggressive response to the Revolution of Dignity destabilised Ukraine's ontological security as it undermined its sovereignty and statehood. In order to safeguard its sovereignty from Russia, Ukraine started to relinquish its in-between position and instead more assertively strived to be accepted within the European club by engaging in reforms and trying to comply with European standards, yet without ever being completely successful and thus remaining of the "edges" (Kakachia *et al*. 2019).

The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the conflict in the Donbas indeed marked a shift in Ukrainian political discourse, with a re-articulation of its identity that became firmly embedded in its European choice, putting an end to the balancing strategy and the perspective of being a bridge with Russia. "[T]here [was] no longer a debate on Ukraine's geopolitical choice" (Axyonova and Zubko 2017, p. 197). Ukraine's leadership framed the country's identity as one that belongs in Europe in terms of its history, identity and values, therefore aspiring to be accepted within the process of European integration (Shyrokykh 2018). While no longer being a bridge between Europe and Russia, it started promoting its role as a bridge between Europe and "the rest", being a model for other countries "in transition" towards democracy (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019). Accession to the EU was presented as a natural way forward and the EU was Ukraine's ally and counter-pole to Russia (Axyonova and Zubko 2017). On the other hand, the representation of Russia as an antagonistic Other further radicalised. Ukraine's leadership started to frame Russia as an ontological threat that tried to keep Ukraine from its European future. As President Petro Poroshenko stated at a conference in 2015:

> Russia, which had failed to become an attractive soft power, unleashed its military power to restrain Ukraine's quest for modernization and European integration. By the aggression against sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Russia has actually challenged the entire democratic world. Ukraine and its allies are preventing Russia from growing in its aggression and stretching its deadly neo-imperial ambitions further. I think it is clear that an independent democratic Ukraine anchored into the system of European values is a cornerstone to security and stability in Europe and in the whole world. (Poroshenko 2015)

All the while, both Russia and the EU still regarded Ukraine as their subaltern, denying Ukraine any true agency. It was only following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that Ukraine started to move beyond its liminal position as little Self in relation to both Russia and the EU, emboldened in its agency by the existential threat of losing its sovereignty.

Importantly, however, given that Ukraine's popular revolutions were postcolonial rather than anti-colonial in nature (Gerasimov 2015), in the years following Euromaidan, most of Ukrainian society was not ready to reckon with the idea of Russia as the oppressor and instead favoured a more conciliatory approach (Korablyova 2022, p. 44). This was reflected in the landslide victory of Zelenskyy in the 2019 presidential elections. As Korablyova (2022, p. 44) highlights, Zelenskyy's major victory over Poroshenko, who had upheld an explicitly anti-colonial political agenda of "the army, the language, and the faith", can be seen "as a mandate to break the obsessive fixation on Russia as the oppressor".

In this regard, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced a historic anti-imperial momentum in Ukrainian society (Kurnyshova 2023), heralding a definitive break with Russia and sparking the start of the nation's collective anti-colonial resistance against the Russian oppressor. Russia's war against Ukraine forcefully destabilised Ukraine's ontological security narrative, resulting in a feeling of anxiety symptomatic of being ontologically insecure. This led to a fundamental shift in how Ukraine articulates its Self in relation to Russia, which came to be identified as both the aggressor and the colonial Other.

Kulyk (2023) demonstrates that while changes were already noticeable after 2014 in the consolidation of Ukrainian identity, the changes have become even more striking after 2022, further uniting Ukrainians around questions such as language or history. For instance, perceptions of national figures that fought Russian or Soviet imperialism and had been heavily demonised by Moscow have become more widely positive among the Ukrainian population. Overall, the alienation from and antagonisation of Russia further spread and solidified. Whereas before 2022 opinions in Ukraine were still divided on whether the conflict in the Donbas was a Russian invasion, in 2022, no doubts remained that it was an unprovoked Russian aggression (*ibid.*)

Moving beyond the subaltern position of the little Self

Critical juncture

Following a postcolonial logic, Russia and the EU despite their highly different policies towards Ukraine have been found to articulate their Selves as superior in relation to the constructed subaltern, Ukraine, which until recently was denied any true agency (Kotliuk 2023). This section examines how Ukraine has moved beyond its subaltern position of the little Self and has been successfully claiming agency from these cores since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

As we have indicated above, the concept of ontological (in)security allows us to get a better understanding of the articulation of Ukraine's agency. A country's ontological security narrative is susceptible to being destabilised at critical junctures or situations (Ejdus 2018, p. 5). Such critical situations induce a sense of anxiety indicative of ontological insecurity, challenging "the ability of collective actors to 'go on'" (Ejdus 2018, p. 1).

Scholars have argued that the anxiety stemming from ontological insecurity can create a space for creative, counter-hegemonic agency (Mitzen 2006, cited in Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, Rumelili 2020). According to Krickel-Choi (2021), anxiety can be a source of creative agency, as actors tend to adapt their ontological security narrative to overcome the anxiety. The concept of liminality suggests that the liminal Self, being in a perpetual state of becoming and not fully determined, harbours inherent anxiety. Nonetheless, it is actually in this ambivalence that resides the liminar's potential for constitutive power (Mälksoo 2012). This corresponds with Bhabha's (1994) claim that liminality can lead to new forms of existence and formulations of identity for a nation when faced with the disruption of assumed hierarchies and impositions. When anxiety reaches its peak, it can lead to adaptability and identity change in an attempt to restore a new sense of stability (Krickel-Choi 2021, p. 37). We argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a critical juncture for the latter, leading to a destabilisation of its ontological security narrative

concerning the continuity of its Self and its relations with its significant Others, which has profoundly affected its agency as a liminar.

Ukraine was pushed into a deep state of existential anxiety by Russia's full-scale invasion. Russia's attempts to annihilate the Ukrainian nation and state threatened the very existence of the Self. Russia's aggression has, therefore, reinforced Ukraine's efforts to exit its marginal liminality, which started in 2014. The need to fight for the survival of the Self allowed Ukraine to unleash an unprecedented agency vis-à-vis its significant Others, i.e. Russia and the EU. The looming threat of losing its sovereignty prompted a decisive reassertion of its statehood and a profound identity adaptation, by committing to a European liberal democratic path while rejecting the Pan-East Slavic identity narrative.

Indeed, Russia's invasion has united Ukrainians and has consolidated their identity around the dichotomy of the European democratic Self against the Russian imperial and authoritarian Other. The nation-wide civic mobilisation provoked by the Russian all-out military invasion provides Ukrainians with a better chance for the systemic transformation and sustainable maintenance of their political agency beyond extraordinary circumstances. Firstly, the price of this newly acquired agency is too high, so neither Ukrainian leaders dare nor Ukrainian society allows them to waste the accumulated symbolic capital. Secondly, the Ukrainian society itself got finally rid of its protracted ambivalence and axiological anomia that largely hindered its internal development and undermined its international profile (Ratinggroup 2023, p. 48).

Claiming agency from the EU

In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian authorities were quick to announce to the EU how the Russian aggression towards Ukraine constitutes a great threat to the whole of Europe, for its security architecture and its values. As President Zelenskyy stated shortly after Russia's invasion started: "[I]t is on our land that it is decided whether someone else in Europe will fall victim to the same aggression. […] We decide the future of the continent" (Zelenskyy 2022a).

From the beginning, the Ukrainian leadership framed the war as one between democracy against barbarism and authoritarianism, with Ukraine included within the family of the former, in the front row as "Europe's army", therefore asking for the right to be considered as equal: "We are fighting on Ukrainian soil for what all of you, dear friends, cannot imagine your lives without. This is basic security. This is freedom and life under the law. This is human dignity" (Zelenskyy 2023). The binary trope has become dominant in the Ukrainian authorities' continued bids to the West for further military support in their fight against a more numerous, more resourceful and better-armed enemy. As the Ukrainian Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, stated in early 2024: "The world is changing. Whether it is moving – towards development and progress or the archaic conservatism and omnipotence of authoritarianism – is now being decided primarily on the Ukrainian fields riddled with trenches and craters" (Danilov 2024).

Emboldened by the nationwide civic mobilisation against Russia's invasion, this discursive strategy towards the EU has been highly effective. Indeed, in the past, the EU showed reluctance to acknowledge Ukraine's projected discourse of a Russian threat targeting a

European nation and, therefore, the whole European order. Since Russia's invasion, the Ukrainian discourse has been internalised by the EU, which recognises Ukraine's position as a beacon of grassroot democracy, resilience and freedom, sharing with Ukraine a common understanding of European security. EU institutional leaders have been univocal in internalising the Ukrainian discourse. European Council President Charles Michel, for instance, stated the following after a meeting with President Zelenskyy in Kyiv in April 2022:

> I feel a very strong support to make sure that we can provide concrete support to Ukraine in your choice to follow the EU path for your future. And I am convinced that what you are demonstrating day to day, this demonstration that you are totally committed to democratic principles, to freedoms, and that you don't only fight for the future of the children of Ukraine, we know that you fight for the European fundamental principles and values. (Michel 2022)

Also, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, has adopted the Ukrainian discourse: "We, inside the EU, have to accept to pay also a price to stop this outrageous and unprovoked war: the future of our security and our democracies depends on it" (Borrell 2022). The same goes for the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (whose intensive support for Ukraine was even made visible in her formal outfits, which represented the colours of Ukraine's national flag): "Ukraine is fighting for its survival, but it is also fighting for our values" (Ursula von der Leyen, as interviewed by Weymouth 2023).

Most emblematic of the EU's internalisation of Ukraine's discourse has been the recognition of Ukraine's central place in Europe: "All of this happens in 2022 – *in the very heart of Europe*. President Putin chose to bring back war to Europe" (Von der Leyen 2022, emphasis added). It can thus be concluded that Ukraine successfully managed to relocate itself from a peripheral position in Europe to a more central one, being accepted as a member of the family and playing a crucial role in ensuring its security in its fight against Russia.

This acceptance and recognition by the EU culminated in Ukraine's successful application for EU candidate status, which it received on 23 June 2022, just four months after submitting its application. As Charles Michel formulated it: "A historic moment. Today marks a crucial step on your path towards the EU […]. Our future is together" (EU Neighbours East 2022).

Claiming agency from Russia

As Kurnyshova (2023) explains, Ukraine's agency vis-à-vis Russia is a multi-faceted phenomenon. First and foremost, Ukraine's agency is manifested by the strong military resistance of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. From the beginning of the invasion, the Ukrainian army, much to everyone's surprise, but especially to the surprise of Russia, was capable of thwarting the Russian army (Kurnyshova 2023). This provided a solid and endurable basis for resistance and forced Russia to reconsider its initial plans of conquering Ukraine in just a few days. Indeed, from the very beginning, Russia had to recognise that its subaltern or little brother was much stronger and more self-confident than it had anticipated.

Ukraine's agency goes far beyond the battleground. Both on and off the battlefield, Ukraine's agency "is to a large extent grounded in the ability and determination of Ukrainian society to withstand the Russian aggression, consolidate human and material

resources for resistance and thus provide a solid ground for patriotic mobilisation" (Kurnyshova 2023, p. 81). Ukraine's agency vis-à-vis Russia also has a strong (geo)political component. As Kurnyshova (2023, p. 81) writes, "politically, it is manifested in the persistent strategy of decoupling the country from the 'post-Soviet' legacy, breaking with the externally imposed constructs of 'Eurasia' and the 'Russian world', and consistently moving towards reasserting Ukraine as a full-fledged European nation". Indeed, whilst displaying a strong military resistance on the battlefield, Ukraine, as a nation, is showing an equally strong political resistance by rejecting the Russian-promoted Pan-East Slavic identity narrative and instead choosing definitively for a European future (Wilson 2024).

As highlighted above, Russia has articulated its Self as superior in relation to Ukraine by promoting a common Slavic authenticity with Russia at its core as the big brother and protector. This fraternal link uniting Ukraine to Russia was particularly visible in the Russian discursive escalation, used as an element of justification for the so-called special operation. As President Putin declared on the eve of the invasion:

> Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. (Putin 2022)

In the Russian discourse prior to the invasion, it was only natural for Ukraine and Russia to be together, they were portrayed as one people, with Russia playing the role of a protector, as any big brother would do. Ukraine was considered to have no nationhood on its own, again underlining this "little Self" projection coming from Russia.

Ukraine has managed to destabilise this Russian narrative. Russia was forced to change its narrative, because, in contrast to what the Kremlin had anticipated, Ukrainians did not embrace their self-proclaimed liberators, but turned resolutely to arms. Faced with a robust and resilient Ukrainian resistance, Russia had to alter its narrative, which became centred on destroying Ukraine as a "Nazi" state. Influential propagandists and some officials even talked about forcible "re-education" of bewildered Ukrainians back into Russians. The incurable species should be exterminated, not as a group defined ethnically (Ukrainians), but as a group defined ideologically ("Nazis") (see, e.g. Medvedev 2022, Sergeytsev 2022). President Putin on every occasion expresses his love for Ukraine and Ukrainians, except for those who deny that they are Russians and play therefore into the enemies' (i.e. the West's) hands. As he stated early 2024:

> Ukraine itself is not our enemy, [but] those who want to destroy Russian statehood and to achieve, as they say, a strategic defeat of Russia on the battlefield […] who think the existence of Russia (at least in its current state and size) is unacceptable … [T]hey have been nurturing the K[yi]v regime for quite a long time, precisely to create this conflict. Unfortunately for us, they have achieved this: they started [*sic*] this conflict and are trying to achieve their objective, namely the task of fighting Russia, with the help of Ukrainians. (Putin 2024)

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be seen as the ultimate colonial war, in the sense that it broke Russia's hegemonic discourse towards Ukraine and induced an entire population to stand up against Russia (Bradshaw 2023). The war has compelled Ukrainians to claim agency by showing emancipation from and resistance to Russia's imperial impositions. In contrast to his cautious pre-war discourse, President Zelenskyy now explicitly labels Russia as colonial and imperialist:

> The Russian leadership believes that Ukraine should be a colony of Russia. […] The occupiers are also deporting our people to Russia and settling them in various remote regions. The number of such deported Ukrainians is hundreds of thousands. And this is also one of the ways to conquer the people. In fact, it is shocking how frankly Russia is trying to bring back to world life the order of the old days, when colonisers and empires imposed their policies or their domination on other nations. (Zelenskyy 2022b)

As indicated above, due to Ukraine's complex history of imperial and (neo-)colonial subjugation, the securitisation of Ukraine's subjectivity and emergence of agency in the wake of Russia's invasion can be better understood by linking ontological security to the study of decolonial resistance. Combining ontological security with Fanonian decolonial theory (FDT) helps us to comprehend how Ukraine as the subaltern claimed agency from Russia when the latter threatened the survival of Ukrainian statehood. As Fasakin (2022, p. 76) explains, when a threat posed by the (former) colonial power gets to a tipping point and, for instance, takes the form of genocidal violence, the subaltern will securitise the threat by engaging in an armed resistance against the aggressor. Key to the strength of the subaltern's agency is that it unites the (previously divided) people around a common national goal and pulls them in a single direction, away from the colonial Other (*ibid*.). The subaltern then becomes obsessively fixated with rejecting and disassociating from intersubjectivity with the colonial Other (Bradshaw 2023). As President Zelenskyy stated in 2024 on the occasion of the Day of Ukrainian Statehood:

> Here, as in thousands of similar places, Ukraine has shown itself to be the nation we are all proud of. The nation we fight for. Which is pure in heart and strongest when we all care for each other and when we see each other as our own. And when we all are not afraid to defend Ukraine. […] We are fighting against a terrible enemy. One that cannot be called human. And one that is infinitely far from true Christianity. Its essence is ruins. The death it brings. And which we must overcome. Ukraine cannot agree to anything less than to live. Anything less than to preserve itself. Anything less than to remain human. Ukraine will not succumb to the evil that sheds blood for its own sick self-assertion. That despises truth, both human and divine, and devalues everyone except itself. Russia builds its statehood precisely on this. But we are different. The history of Ukrainians on this land goes back more than a thousand years. And no matter what strangers came here, no matter who did everything to prevent Ukraine from being itself, they did not break our people and the spirit of this land. They did not break what makes us Ukraine. (Zelenskyy 2024)

Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression put the Kremlin in an awkward position: how to maintain the imperial myth about the "brotherly nations" and Ukraine as a natural part of the Russia-led "Slavic brotherhood" and, at the same time, wage a brutal war against the absolute majority of Ukrainians who deny that myth and defy the assigned status? It seems that the Russian elite is not ready yet to exclude the "schismatic" Ukrainians, like the nineteenth-century Poles, from the brotherhood project, and still promotes the myth about Ukrainians as "nice Slavic people" taken hostage by bad rulers ("fascist junta") and the sinister West. As Putin declared in 2023: "We are not at war with the people of Ukraine. I have made that clear many times. The people of Ukraine have become hostages of the K[yi]v regime and its Western handlers" (Putin 2023a). The Ukrainian authorities and the West are thus portrayed as the enemies, in contrast to Ukrainian society:

> [T]he Ukrainian authorities […] began by building their statehood on the negation of everything that united us, trying to distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of

> people, of entire generations living in Ukraine. It is not surprising that Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. (Putin 2022, see also Putin 2023b)

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 has unsettled long-standing beliefs and representations of Ukraine. Whereas the latter, together with several other former Soviet states, had been warning for years of the Russian imperial threat to the European security order, it largely fell on deaf ears in European political and academic circles. The start of the full-scale war, therefore, was a shock for many, as was the unexpectedly strong resistance of Ukraine. However, it was also a wake-up call, compelling us to start questioning and reconsidering these persistent perceptions coming from Western (European) and Russian imperial knowledge. Geographically positioned in the peripheries of Europe and as part of Russia's backyard (or even part of Russia), Ukraine has long been portrayed as an object in the hands of great powers, being denied agency to define itself and its future. Russian imperial knowledge, which depicts Ukraine as a little brother that cannot survive without Mother Russia, has been firmly institutionalised internationally as presumably "scientific truth" and has heavily influenced generations of Western scholars, journalists, politicians and the general public (Thompson 2000, Mälksoo 2022, Oksamytna 2023, Hendl 2024). There was certainly a degree of imperial affinity: the structure of Western and Russian imperial knowledge about subaltern nations were uncomfortably similar. The EU's practices towards its Eastern neighbours to some extent reflected this enduring tendency, as it had always refused to give the Eastern Partnership countries clear prospects of membership, asking them to align with its norms and standards but refusing to accept them as equals in the club. The EU's policies, for a long time, rather seemed aimed at creating a ring of friends, or a group of countries that would serve as a bridge or buffer zone to the East. Therefore, although the EU's hegemonic approach cannot be equated to the Russian one, it facilitated the penetration of Russian historical myths into Western societies, their uncritical acceptance and thoughtless internalisation (Keenan 1994).

In this article, we have conceived of Ukraine as a liminal actor in relation to both the EU and Russia, constructed as a little or lesser Self by both hegemonic cores, which was given no subjectivity of its own. The beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2014 already constituted a turning point in the transformation of Ukraine's liminal identity, which has been further consolidated since 2022, uniting the country around a newly asserted Self. Russia's aggression has pushed Ukraine to definitively reject the narrative of a common identity promoted by Russia and strongly claim its rightful belonging to Europe, thereby unleashing unprecedented agency. The deep ontological threat to the survival of the Self prompted the further solidification of the Ukrainian discourse about the Self, both from a domestic point of view, with nation-wide support from the population for the discourse promoted by the state, but also externally, receiving the long-awaited recognition from the EU. We argued that Ukraine has successfully managed to relocate itself from a peripheral position in Europe to a more central one, being accepted as a member of the family and playing a crucial role in ensuring its security in its fight against Russia. On the other hand, it has also successfully managed to challenge the

dominant representations coming from Russia's imperial knowledge of Ukraine's (and other "post-Soviet" nations') belonging to Russia's natural sphere of influence and its status as a "little Russia". Agency can emerge from a state of ontological anxiety, as demonstrated by Ukraine, which has successfully moved beyond its liminal status in relation to Russia and the EU.

Having obtained EU candidate status does not mean that Ukraine has fully exited its liminality in relation to the EU. Even if it eventually becomes an EU member state, Ukraine is very likely to remain liminal within the EU due to the Western European epistemic imperialism that informs prevailing perceptions and conceptions of Europeanness within the EU, as well as Ukraine's historical experience of being portrayed as simultaneously in Europe and yet not quite in Europe (see, e.g. Mälksoo 2010).

Ukraine's sudden advance to the centre of international politics, though impressive per se, should not obliterate the question about the price of this swift, yet belated advance: why "it took so much effort (and so much unnecessary bloodshed) for the West to see Ukraine at all"? Why the nation had "to resist a Russian invasion in order to be recognised" (Snyder 2022)? Although Russia's war on Ukraine has created a new impulse to critically reflect on Western European and Russian imperial constructions of knowledge, further efforts are necessary to go beyond the traditional reproduction of the East/West boundary and to overcome the pitfall of seeing Ukraine (and other countries located on the East–West spatial-ideological slope) as liminal in comparison to the EU. Portraying Ukraine as liminal may imply missing signs of a new nation emerging from below, with "its own face", emancipated to a certain degree from its two large neighbours, despite its in-between geographical position (Osipian 2014). These signs were already visible at the time of Maidan and appear reinforced today in the face of the full-scale invasion. Ukraine's newly acquired "subjectness" and the sustainability of its political agency largely depend on two painstaking victories, namely on the battlefield and in eventual domestic reforms. However, it also depends on the ability (and willingness) of Western societies to revise the main tenets of imperial knowledge (not only Russian, but also their own) and abandon the comfortable supremacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world that this type of "knowledge" provides, while accepting to integrate knowledge from elsewhere (Belafatti 2014, Kwiecińska and Skigin 2022, Smoleński and Dutkiewicz 2022).

As a final point, it should be noted that successfully claiming agency from its two cores, Russia and the EU, has had profound implications for Ukraine's relations with the Global South. The latter has not univocally internalised Ukraine's claims that Russia has unleashed a colonial war against its former colony (Kurnyshova 2024). Instead, a significant number of countries from the Global South are critical of Ukraine's desire to be part of the European club and therefore see Ukraine as complicit in the West's imperialist quest for maintaining world hegemony. This is further exacerbated by Ukraine's ambition to join NATO, which many countries in the Global South tend to see as an instrument of colonial power. This shows that Ukraine's explicit positionality as an actor belonging to Europe and different from Russia makes it difficult for the country to gain support in large parts of the Global South by capitalising on commonalities in historical experience and trauma. This suggests that Ukraine's successful attempt to move away from the periphery towards the core has come at the expense of mobilising support for its cause among other countries with similar experiences of oppression who are still located in the periphery.

Note

1. It should be noted that Russia itself is also a liminal actor. This has been poignantly captured by Morozov's (2015) introduction of the term "subaltern empire". Russia's peculiar hybridity is that it is seen both as backward from a Western perspective and in its relation to the West, and imperial towards its neighbourhood, including Ukraine. The focus on this hybridity highlights Russia's liminal position between East and West, which it tries to capitalise on in its (normative) competition with the EU for hegemony in the post-Soviet space and escape its subaltern status in relation to Europe.

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