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Revival of the Fittest?

Western Geopolitics and the Discourse about a New World Order after the Russian War against Ukraine

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Ben Ira Lobedan

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Abstract

Since the inception of Russia's war against Ukraine, politicians and foreign policy experts in the West and elsewhere have been keen to emphasize that the war is something much bigger than just a regional conflict between two sovereign entities. According to this discourse, the result of the war will determine the outlook of the international order for decades to come, with a Russian victory leading eventually to the breakdown of the liberal rules-based order. Using this discourse as a starting point, this thesis will investigate the discursive relation between Western ontological security and the war in Ukraine within the framework of order. For that, a broad theoretical introduction will be delivered, explaining the concept of discourse analysis in general and geopolitical discourse analysis in foreign policy-making in particular. Following this introduction, some epistemological reflections on the idea of the West and the concept of the order are required before engaging with the source corpus. This corpus consists of a variety of sources produced by statecraft intellectuals who are actively involved in creating and communicating foreign policy decisions. Analyzing speeches, official documents as well as think tank publications will provide an understanding of how the relation between the order and the war in Ukraine is perceived in the West and how the assumption of crisis equips politicians with a powerful discursive device that enables them to justify extraordinary and contested foreign policy measures. Eventually, the thesis will elucidate how the Russian war in Ukraine resulted in a reconstitution of a fundamental sense of ontological security and a rediscovery of agency within the West. For the European Union, this new sense of ontological security translated into an ontological shift, with the EU regarding itself for the first time as an important geopolitical actor. All these shifts, changes and reassurances will be explained on a theoretical level and evinced through a source-based analysis.

Abstrakt

Seit Beginn des russischen Krieges gegen die Ukraine betonen Politiker und Außenpolitikexperten im Westen und anderen Orten immer wieder, dass es sich bei diesem Krieg um etwas viel Größeres als nur einen regionalen Konflikt zwischen zwei souveränen Staaten handelt. Laut diesem Diskurs wird das Ergebnis des Krieges die internationale Ordnung für die kommenden Jahrzehnte bestimmen und ein russischer Sieg schließlich zum Zusammenbruch der auf liberalen Regeln basierenden Ordnung führen. Ausgehend von diesem Diskurs soll in dieser Arbeit das diskursive Verhältnis zwischen westlicher ontologischer Sicherheit und dem Krieg in der Ukraine im Rahmen des Konzepts der Ordnung untersucht werden. Dazu wird zunächst eine breite theoretische Einführung gegeben, in der das Konzept der Diskursanalyse im Allgemeinen und das der geopolitischen Diskursanalyse im Besonderen erläutert wird. Im Anschluss an diese Einführung sind einige erkenntnistheoretische Reflexionen zur Idee des Westens und zum Konzept der internationalen Ordnung erforderlich, bevor die eigentliche Quellenanalyse stattfinden kann. Das Quellenkorpus besteht aus einer Vielzahl von Quellen von Akteuren, die aktiv an der Gestaltung und Kommunikation außenpolitischer Entscheidungen beteiligt sind. Durch die Analyse von Reden, offiziellen Dokumenten und Veröffentlichungen von Denkfabriken wird Aufschluss darüber geben, wie der Zusammenhang zwischen der Ordnung und dem Krieg in der Ukraine im Westen wahrgenommen wird und wie die Annahme einer Krise den Politikern ein mächtiges diskursives Instrument an die Hand gibt, mit dem sie außergewöhnliche und umstrittene außenpolitische Maßnahmen rechtfertigen können. Schließlich wird die Arbeit aufzeigen, wie der russische Krieg in der Ukraine zur Wiederherstellung eines grundlegenden Gefühls ontologischer Sicherheit und zur Wiederentdeckung der Handlungsfähigkeit des Westens führte. Für die Europäische Union resultierte dieses neue Gefühl von ontologischer Sicherheit in einem Identitätswandel, durch den sich die EU zum ersten Mal als wichtiger geopolitischer Akteur wahrnimmt. All diese Verschiebungen, Veränderungen und ontologischen Vergewisserungen werden auf theoretischer Ebene erklärt und durch eine quellenbasierte Analyse belegt.

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Russia's neighboring country, Ukraine, starting a full-fledged ground war between two sovereign states on European soil. The war is often framed as the first interstate war in Europe since World War II. Although this framing neglects the several wars that derived from the dismantling of Yugoslavia, the Russian war in Ukraine surpasses these wars in terms of magnitude and scale as well as what is believed to be at stake, which is nothing less than the international order that guided and regulated state-interactions since the end of the Cold War.

This common belief that the war represents something much bigger than a regional conflict between two sovereign entities features prominently among Western politicians. According to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "This battle is not only for the territory – for this or another part of Europe. This battle is not only for life, freedom, and security of Ukrainians [...] This struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live and then their children and grandchildren."¹ The assumption that the war, respective the result of the war, will shape the international order for generations to come is emphasized by almost every politician in the West. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed this assumption in the term "Zeitenwende" (watershed moment) and clarified that this "means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before."² Confronting the new reality the Russian war in Ukraine ought to have created, former speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, clarified that "The Ukrainian people are making the fight for all of us. We must help them."³

However, this framing of the war is not unique among Western politicians. For the Russian side, as explained by Russian Secretary of State Sergey Lavrov, "The current developments in the world are not so much about Ukraine as about attempts to shape a new

¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "We Stand, Fight, and Will Win, Because We Are Together—Ukraine, America, and the Entire Free World," *Office of the President of Ukraine*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-stoyimo-boremos-i-vigrayemo-bo-mi-razom-ukrayina-amerika-80017>.

² Olaf Scholz, "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag," *Federal Government of Germany*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

³ Nancy Pelosi, "Pelosi Floor Speech on S. 3522, the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022," *Office of Nancy Pelosi*, April 28, 2022, <https://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/pelosi-floor-speech-on-s-3522-the-ukraine-democracy-defense-lend-lease-act-of>.

international order.”⁴ Similarly, Russia's President Vladimir Putin stated, “We are at a crossroads. We are in for probably the most dangerous, unpredictable and at the same time most important decade since the end of World War II.”⁵

As indicated by these quotes, the Russian war in Ukraine is commonly understood as a conflict about the future outlook of the international order. Given the importance of the war, the Western world sees itself as responsible for supporting Ukraine, both in terms of military and financial assistance. According to international relations scholar Lene Hansen, “When foreign policy discourse articulates an explicit responsibility [...] a powerful discursive move is undertaken in that the issue is moved out of the realm of the strategic and ‘selfishly national’ and relocated within the ‘higher grounds’ of the morally good.”⁶ The goal of this thesis is to analyse and deconstruct this discursive move and tie it to explicit policy measures the West adopted as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The response of the West against the Russian war is unprecedented. For the first time since the Marshall Plan, a European country has been by far the biggest recipient of US foreign aid.⁷ Similarly, the European Union delivered for the first time in the history of the Union lethal weapons to a country actively involved in a war, for which they repurposed the European Peace Facility.⁸ In a coherent and unified act, the West also imposed severe sanctions on Russia. These sanctions represent the most extensive sanctions imposed on a singular country. However, these measures come with a cost for the Western population and are therefore heavily contested by parts of the domestic population. Given this contestation, the Western response needed to be justified in front of their domestic population, and I argue that discursive work is essential for that.

⁴ Sergey Lavrov, “Foreign Minister Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions at a meeting with students and faculty of the MGIMO University,” *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2022, <https://mid.ru/1805995/?lang=en>.

⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting,” *Kremlin.ru*, October 27, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

⁶ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse analysis and the Bosnian war* (London: Routledge, 2006), 50.

⁷ Rita Floyd & Mark Webber, “Making amends: emotions and the western response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” *International Affairs* 100, no.3 (2024): 1158 <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae074>.

⁸ Ibid.

Using a geopolitical discourse analysis approach combined with the concept of ontological security, this thesis will analyze the discourse in which the Western response is embedded. I argue that this response is justified through ontological references to Western identity within the general framework of the international order. Analyzing the discourse about a new world order that is assumed to emerge if Putin wins the war will help understand how Western politicians legitimize their foreign policy measures within the context of the Russian war in Ukraine and also indicate how the West imagines the future order to be. Eventually, this thesis will show that the West's response with regard to the future of the international order oscillates between efforts to secure Western primacy in the international environment, e.g. an envisaged revival of the fittest, and calls to reform the current order to make it more appealing to non-Western countries.

Research Problem, Aims, and Questions

Despite the prominence of the new world order discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine among politicians in the West and other parts of the world, scholarship on this discourse is scarce. Research focuses mainly on Russia and China and how these actors imagine the future international order.⁹ Addressing this research gap, this thesis will analyse the new world order discourse as it is conducted in the West, thereby answering several research questions relevant to the current geopolitical developments.

First, this thesis attempts to analyze the construction of temporal and spatial identities in relation to the new world order discourse and thus answer how geopolitical identities in relation to order are articulated and reinforced through the foreign policy measures the West has adopted since February 2022. It will also explain the geopolitical purpose the new world order discourse serves for the West. For that, explicit foreign policy measures, such as sanctions, military and financial assistance to Ukraine, investments in deterrence and a prospected EU enlargement, are linked to discursive articulations of identity in relation to the order, indicating the ontological dimension of foreign policy as a central mechanism of justification. Furthermore, the thesis wants to find out which tropes and discursive images are recycled as part of the new world order discourse.

⁹ See for example Elizabeth Economy, "China's Alternative Order," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no.3 (2024), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy> or Elias Götz, "Russia and the question of world order," *European Politics and Society* 20, no.2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545181>.

In addition, several minor research questions will be answered. What are the central structures of persuasion? What regimes of truths and hegemonic discourses are mobilized? What is the assumed target audience, and which effect is the discourse intended to produce? How is the event familiarized in order to reinstall a sense of ontological security? Eventually, this thesis will also explain how key Western actors imagine the future world order to be.

Limitations

Despite the broad scope of the research questions and aims, this thesis comes with some fundamental limitations. First, the discourse that will be analyzed will be totally focused on the West, excluding other relevant non-Western actors. However, it is crucial to note that a very similar discourse about the world order in relation to ontological considerations exists in non-Western countries such as China and Russia. This structural and functional similarity of this discourse has long been acknowledged by scholars who have conducted extensive research on the concept of Occidentalism, through which non-Western actors constitute their identity by contrasting it with what they assume is the essence of Western identity. Thus, identity formation *ex negativo* seems to be a somewhat natural process which is not genuine to the West.

Secondly, this thesis operates on the assumption that the war initially constitutes a source of ontological insecurity for the West. The same argument can be made for Putin's regime since, for him and the political system he has built around his persona, a democratic and Western-leaning Ukraine is likewise a fundamental source of ontological insecurity. Some politicians acknowledge that and even suggest that this ontological insecurity Ukraine poses to Russia at the moment is one of the main reasons the invasion started in the first place.¹⁰ My research, therefore, is only one half of a coin because it does not engage in a comparative analysis. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at this one side of the coin, especially since the Western discourse about a new world order is largely neglected in research.

Thirdly, and most importantly, some reflections on discourse analysis during the time of an ongoing conflict are necessary. War is a real thing. People die every day, and no

¹⁰ See for example Olaf Scholz, "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz," February 27, 2022.

philosophical or analytical reflections can justify the killing of people. Additionally, the war – as it is conducted at the moment – restricts diplomatic engagement and forecloses policy alternatives towards Russia for many years to come. But so does discourse. Moreover, there is a co-constitutive relation between geopolitical discourse and policy choices. Understanding the embeddedness of policy choices in geopolitical discourse can thus open up alternative roads and hint at how discourse restricts the choices policymakers can make.

Outline of the Thesis

In order to answer the research question and show the relation between policy choices and discourse, a rather extensive theoretical basement is required. The first chapter will, therefore, introduce the concept of discourse in a threefold way. First, a general definition of discourse and discourse analysis will be delivered. As part of this delivery, the philosophical assumptions upon which the analysis is built will be spelt out. After that, the specifications of discourse analysis in international relations with a special emphasis on foreign policy discourse analysis will be assessed. Lastly, the theoretical part will also introduce the concept of ontological security and its relation to the essence of foreign policy discourse analysis will be evinced.

Following the theoretical foundations of this thesis, some epistemological reflections on the concepts of the West, as well as on the concept of order, will be conducted. The goal of these reflections is to introduce the West and the concept of order as basic discourse, in which the discourse surrounding the Western reaction to the Russian war in Ukraine is embedded. After that, the concrete method with which the sources will be approached is explained.

The source corpus consists of divergent types of foreign policy documents that are interlinked through their thematical focal point on the war against Ukraine. All used sources are the product of an actor group that is labelled as the statecraft intellectuals in the literature, e.g., actors, who are actually involved in the making and communication of foreign policy choices. Eventually, the analysis will indicate how these actors employ a particular discourse to create a certain picture of reality that, on the one hand, enables the implementation of certain policy measures and, on the other hand, restricts alternative choices.

In total, three different types of sources are consulted. First, a central portion of the sources corpus comes from speeches delivered by relevant foreign policy actors. Secondly, official government papers that outline the concrete measures the West adopted in response to the war against Ukraine will be analyzed. Lastly, papers published by renowned think tanks will also be included in the analysis. The inclusion of think tank publications reflects the recent changes and developments in policy making – in the literature often labelled as the transition from government to governance – through which advisors and think tanks have become a more integral part of the policy community. In the last part of the analytical chapter, differences and similarities in accordance with the respective type of document will be assessed and explained.

The analytical chapter in which the actual discourse analysis will be done consists of three parts. The first two parts of the analytical chapter will be structured in accordance with the two central discursive clusters of the new world discourse. These clusters, Western values and identity on the one side and the assumed threat to the current international order on the other, are based on the basic discourses introduced in part two of the thesis. Eventually, the last part will synthesize the findings, explain similarities and differences, and discuss the relation of the clusters to the basic discourses and the chosen policy measures. Through this analysis, I will show how the war was reinterpreted as a source of ontological security for the West and resulted in ontological shifts for some Western actors.

1.) Methodological framework

The first part of this thesis will introduce a rather elaborated methodological framework. Such an elaborated introduction is required, however, because of the magnitude and prominence discourse analysis has acquired as a method in recent years. Despite this interdisciplinary popularity of discourse analysis, the object that is framed as a discourse remains often vague, clouded behind abstract statements wrapped in fancy words and underpinned by naming relevant discourse scholars. To prevent any confusion about what a discourse actually is, how language is related to reality and how then discourse plays a central role in foreign policymaking, the methodological chapter will introduce the concept of discourse in general and its application within the field of foreign policy in particular.

1.1) Discourse as an Object of Study

After the inauguration of discourse analysis by Michel Foucault's seminal works on discourse, knowledge, and power, discourse analysis has advanced to a ubiquitous method that cross-cuts various disciplines. Today, discourse analysis is a prominent approach not only in linguistics but also in social and political science. It is used to approach various subjects relevant to the respective disciplines. Despite this prominence, scholars struggle to find a standard definition of what a discourse is and how a discourse analysis should be conducted.¹¹ As a result of this methodological inconsistency, coupled with the vast popularity of discourse analysis, many scholars label their work as discourse analysis and do content analysis instead since they avoid spelling out the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions of their interpretative approach.¹² To mitigate the risk of turning discourse analysis into content analysis, the first part of this chapter will elaborate on the philosophical assumptions that form the basis of the discursive approach used throughout this study.

For Foucault, a discursive formation is defined as "a system of dispersion whenever between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define regularity¹³". As indicated in this quote, Foucault's works focus mainly on the rules and regulations that enable the discourse to emerge and subsequently govern its development. His studies investigated who has the authority to speak on a particular subject, what is considered valid and true knowledge, and what and who is excluded from the discourse, thereby showing the historical contingency of truth.¹⁴ Following the assumption of the historical contingency of truth, Foucault developed his genealogical approach to discourse, indicating how truth changes in different historical contexts and also the rules that could make a statement in a specific historical context rendered as true or false.¹⁵

¹¹ This uncertainty in defining the concept of discourse results from the diverse applications of discourse analysis in various disciplines. See Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton, "Introduction to the First Edition," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1.

¹² Hendrik Waagenar, *Meaning in Action: Interpretation and Dialogue in Policy Analysis* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 12.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1997), 38.

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Ordnung des Diskurses* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Wissenschaft, 2021).

¹⁵ See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 31-39.

Central for comprehending the implications of Foucault's findings on power, knowledge, and discourse is the basic poststructuralist understanding of reality. For Foucault, language is not merely a tool to describe the material world – instead, it is constitutive of this material reality in the first place. Discourse, thus, has a productive dimension since it is through its operationalization that reality is created and meaning asserted to it. In order to fulfil these constitutive functions, a discourse often makes use of tropes and discursive images that get recycled in various contexts, thus making new situations appear similar to what society is already familiar with.¹⁶ In accordance with this familiarisation function, "discourses operate as background capacities for people to differentiate and identify things, given them taking-for-granted qualities and attributes, and relating them to other objects."¹⁷ Therefore, one central structural feature of discourse is its ability to equip people with a conceptual language through which they can make sense of the world and the events within. It is through the language used in a discourse that people can create order for the world surrounding them.¹⁸

Once such a discourse – using specific tropes, images, and language coupled with the assertion of taking-for-granted qualities to specific objects – dominates in a given society, it constitutes a hegemonic discourse. According to Kurecic, "A discourse can be considered hegemonic from the moment in which it succeeds to unite the society around certain meanings and its articulations. Every hegemonic discourse is therefore political, in a sense that it acknowledges only one meaning, excluding the others [sic!]."¹⁹ This discursive hegemony, however, is rather unstable and needs to be constantly articulated, re-articulated, and adapted into new contexts.²⁰ The hegemonic dimension of discourse also hints at the productive side of discourse and power. As a result of the constant reproduction of objects, a discourse constitutes what Foucault labelled as a regime of truth that renders specific statements in a given socio-historical context as true or false and entitles

¹⁶ Foucault, *Die Ordnung des Diskurses*, 18.

¹⁷ Jennifer Millikin, "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods," *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no.2 (1999): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005002003>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Petar Kurecic, "Identity and Discourse in Critical Geopolitics: A Framework for Analysis," Paper presented at *DIT 2015: Society and Technology*, Opatijia, Croatia, 28 -30.06 2015, 11, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291229074_Identity_and_Discourse_in_Critical_Geopolitics_A_Framework_for_Analysis.

²⁰ Millikin, "The Study of Discourse", 230.

and disentitle actors that can claim valid statements or not.²¹ Discourse analysis is highly interested in deciphering hegemonic discourses and analyzing their production, reproduction and dispersion throughout society.²² A hegemonic discourse or a regime of truth can be thus considered as one central control mechanism operating through the inclusion and exclusion of actors and statements.

As the preceding paragraph already implied, another primary feature of discourse is the role of actors in producing and distributing it. Not every actor possesses the same discursive authority, and some are more entitled to make valid statements on a given subject than others are.²³ Discursive authority is yet another exclusion mechanism through which a discourse is regulated. The analysis of discourse can thus be considered an actor-centred approach since it investigates the statements of certain actors possessing discursive authority and studies the rationale behind the particular understanding of reality.

When considering the various power dimensions of discourse, its ability to exclude certain depictions of reality and actors from making statements, as well as the productive side of discursive power that enables the constitution of a particular picture of reality through the creation of meaning, a specific understanding of this reality itself need to be spelt out. According to Holzschneider, discourse analysis employs two divergent ontological understandings of reality that dictate their approach to the given discourse. In the first approach, which she labels the micro-institutional approach, a thin constructivist understanding of reality is used that emphasizes the roles of actors in creating meaning through discourse. In this approach, actors are asserted to have more agency in determining the evolution of discourse and, thus, in creating a certain perception of reality. Therefore, this particular approach also focuses on the aspect of intentionality, investigating the interest of actors in communicating their notion of reality.²⁴

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Power and Truth," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131.

²² Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 8.

²³ see Geróid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, "Geopolitics and discourse: Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy," *Political Geography* 11, no. 2 (1992): 195, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(92\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90048-X).

²⁴ Anna Holzschneider, "Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations," *International Studies Perspective* 15 (2014): 145ff, <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12005>.

The second approach, labelled as the macro-structural approach, entails a different understanding of reality since this approach studies not how actors constitute meaning but how meaning constitutes actors. In this approach, the actors' agency is limited since the epistemological assumptions understand actors and their behaviours as determined through the language used to describe the world and its phenomena. Following this understanding, actors and material objects are seen as a product discourse, never being able to stand outside of discursive formations. Put differently, "there is no social reality outside of discourse" and "the world is `always talked into existence'".²⁵

Putting a strong emphasis on the role of structure, the macro-structural approach is more suited to investigate discourses as larger meaning systems, whereas the micro-institutional approach can be used to investigate the strategic use of language in a specific situation and is thus more suited for a geopolitical discourse analysis focusing on a singular event.

Despite the different ontological underpinnings of the two approaches, both consider the power aspect of discourse in its ability to create meaning, which determines social and political action. According to Derrida, another central French philosopher pivotal for the evolution of discourse analysis, a discourse often creates meaning through juxtapositions.²⁶ Creating the binarities not only enables the actors to create meaning for certain material objects, places or events but also to create an understanding of oneself. This identity creation *ex negativo* was first applied to a historical and political context by Edward Said, who analyzed the discursive creation of the Orient within the Western intellectual tradition of Orientalism. For Said, Western scholars, artists, and travellers did not intend to create an accurate picture of the Orient but rather a self-affirmative picture of European culture and society,²⁷ which was possible through juxtaposing the Orient and the Occident, rendering the former as backward, irrational and incapable of the political traditions and institutions that marked Europe.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁶ See Millikin, "The Study of Discourse," 229.

²⁷ See Dmitry Chernobrov, "Ontological Security and Public (Mis)Recognition of International Crises: Uncertainty, Political Imagining and the Self," *Political Psychology* 37, no 5 (2016): 587, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12334>

²⁸ See Edward Said, *Orientalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2019), 91 and 235.

Through his concept of Orientalism, Said was the first one to apply the insights of discourse analysis to a geographical context, deciphering how the discourse about the Orient in Europa created a spatialized hierarchy central to the constitution of an overarching European identity. In the subsequent years and decades, a spatialized understanding of discourse operations found its way into political geography, paving the way for the emergence of discourse analysis as a recognized approach in geopolitical studies.

1.2) Discourse Analysis in International Relations

Despite being an example of the application of discourse analysis to a spatialized context and bearing much resemblance with the use of this method in political geography later, Said's work did not inaugurate the study of discourse in international relations.²⁹ It was only in the early 90s that a new generation of political scientists and geographers used discourse analysis to approach geopolitical subjects.

Discourse analysis in geopolitics, respectively, international relations, is closely interwoven with Geróid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, who first introduced this method in their scientific field.³⁰ The classical understanding of geopolitics, being an inquiry into state practices and how they are affected by the spatial features of their respective territory, was marked by a non-discursive and seemingly neutral understanding of space. In this understanding, states had to compete with other states over scarce resources, access to sea routes, and other objective spatial features that their territory did not provide. However, Ó Tuathail and Agnew dismissed this old definition of geopolitics, instead suggesting that geopolitics "should be critically reconceptualized as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples, and dramas."³¹ Showing that the discursive spatialization binarity during the cold war, the "drama" between the between the capitalist, democratic West and communist, non-democratic and expansionist East, had practical results since it "brought huge military-industrial complexes into

²⁹ Orientalism as a concept was and is used by scholars to investigate and deconstruct discourses within a colonial context, less a political one, although the broad field of colonial discourse analysis has many (geo-) political implications too.

³⁰ Their contribution is highlighted by many scholars in the field of geopolitical discourse analysis. Look for some See for example, Kurecic, "Identity and Discourse," 4.

³¹ Ó Tuathail and Agnew, "Geopolitics and discourse," 193.

existence [...] and rigidly disciplined the possibilities for alternative political practices [...]”³², Ó Tuathail and Agnew already implied the role of discourse in constituting social and political reality.

Affected by this new conceptualization of geopolitics and motivated by the dissatisfaction with realist notions of power and geography that “conceptualized politics as a territorial practice in which states and nations naturally vie for power over territory and resources quite similar to evolutionary struggle,”³³ scholars began to rethink the role of language, power, and knowledge in geopolitics. Using Foucault's reconceptualization of power, geopolitical power was no longer only conceived as coercive and subjugating but as something productive and enabling. Subsequently, many works were interested in how geographical knowledge was produced as a part of a discourse and subsequently employed politically.³⁴ On the surface, the new interpretation of geopolitics and state power conflicts with the realist school of political geography that considers power to be objectively measurable through variables like economic and military capacities or certain geographical features that give some states an advantage over others. However, scholars in critical geography are keen to emphasize that their approach does not imply that the security questions of states are not constituted by material facts. Instead, these material facts only become meaningful through their embeddedness in a larger discourse.³⁵ Thus, as argued by Kuss, critical geopolitics “is distinct from other themes not by its empirical focus but by its theoretical and methodological underpinnings.”³⁶

Although being influenced and applied by different schools of thought, such as post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism as well as social constructivism, different applications of discourse analysis as part of critical geography have a shared understanding of these theoretical underpinnings. First, a discourse is interpreted as a system of signification that equips individuals with linguistic devices through which they can conceive the meaning of objects and events, and again, binarities play a central role within this

³² Ibid.,” 191. In their essay, this interpretation of world politics was labelled as outdated. However, observing the geopolitical discourse surrounding the Russian war in Ukraine, it seems to get new relevancies in geopolitics today, as will be shown in later parts of this thesis.

³³ Merje Kruss, “Critical Geopolitics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 30.11.2017, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.137>

³⁴ Ibid., 3f.

³⁵ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 33.

³⁶ Kruss, “Critical Geopolitics,” 4.

system.³⁷ Secondly, discourse is understood as being productive and reproductive “of things defined by the discourse.”³⁸ In a spatialized application, this discourse productivity highly affects foreign policy choices since “to designate a place is not simply to define a location or setting. It is to open up a field of possible taxonomies and trigger a series of [...] appropriate foreign policy responses.”³⁹ Here, we can see the function of discourse as background capacity since the people, e.g. the audience towards which the foreign policy choice has to be justified, can understand the appropriateness of the respective state action through the unquestioned, common-sense assumptions that are implied when designating a place.

For example, when former US president George W. Bush designated Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as “Axis of Evil,” he created a moral laden binarity between legitimate civilized states and “evil” states. The adjective evil used to describe these states implies that those states are corrupt, aggressive and an overall threat to global security. This threat to global security is further implied through the word “Axis” used to describe the alliance between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Japanese empire during World War Two. As elucidated by Agnew, “President Bush was thus attempting to give a clear geopolitical structure to the threat faced by the United States (and the current world order) and recall a powerful threat from the past to support his case.”⁴⁰ Recycling this trope and the historical discourse around it, the US public was more ready to accept the post-9/11 US foreign policy in the Middle East, eventually resulting in the invasion of Iraq and the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003.⁴¹

A third underlying assumption of the various discursive approaches in international relations concerns the nature of hegemonic discourses. When Bush introduced the Axis of Evil into the foreign policy discourse of the post-9/11 world, he also referred to a century-old hegemonic discourse that renders the West as the moral champion of the civilized

³⁷ Millikin, “The Study of Discourse,” 229.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ó Tuathail and Agnew, “Geopolitics and discourse,” 194.

⁴⁰ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning world politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

⁴¹ Liu Yongtoam, “Discourse, Meanings and IR Studies: Taking the Rhetoric of “Axis of Evil” As a Case,” *CONfines de relaciones internacionales y ciencia política* 6, no. 11 (2011): 101ff, https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-35692010000100005 The discourse of Axis of Evil touched upon so many more discourses and their various underlying assumptions, as will be shown in a later chapter.

world, being therefore obliged to take a leadership role within the international community.⁴² However, no hegemony or discourse is eternally stable and thus, a hegemonic discourse needs constant articulation, re-articulation, and adaption into new contexts, which happened when Bush introduced the Axis of Evil. Thus, the nature of any discourse is unstable and open to intervention and threatened by counter-discourses that challenge the hegemony of particular discourses.⁴³ A further linkage of critical geopolitics and its realist counterpart can be observed when considering the unstable nature of hegemonic discourse.

Given that not all actors have the same authority in making valid statements within a given discourse, states that possess huge material power often also have “the power to represent world politics in a certain way.”⁴⁴ Although other state and non-state actors can challenge the discourse, the prerogative of the sovereignty of interpretations lies more often in the hands of the more powerful states.⁴⁵ The powerful states have the power to order the world, assign places and struggles and define the central drama. In order to achieve hegemony, these states employ a discourse that resonates with wider cultural concepts by recycling metaphors, myths, tropes, and images that are widely known.⁴⁶ The term Axis of Evil's persuasive power lies precisely in the recycling of widely known and resonating tropes.

Despite these shared theoretical underpinnings, e.g. the discourse as a system of signification through which meaning is asserted, the productivity of discourse in producing objects and foreign policy choices, and the need for constant articulation and re-articulation in order to maintain stability, discourse analysis in International Relations is often criticized for its lack of solid and versatile applicable methods. However, as Hansen clarified, “it is more productive to see methodology as a way of communicating choices and

⁴² For the origins of this discourse see, Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

The chapter about the West as a geopolitical category will be elaborate more on this specific discourse.

⁴³ Millikin, “The Study of Discourse,” 230.

⁴⁴ Ó Tuathail and Agnew, “Geopolitics and discourse,” 195.

⁴⁵ See for example, Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning world politics*, 9: “The dominant representation and practices (or *hegemony*) constituting the modern geopolitical imagination have been overwhelmingly those of the political élites of the Great Powers, those states and empires most capable of imposing themselves and their views on the rest of the world.”

⁴⁶ Ó Tuathail and Agnew, “Geopolitics and discourse,” 195f.

strategies [...].”⁴⁷ Thus, methodological choices always have to converge with the research question.

At the beginning of discourse analysis in International Relations, many scholars were concerned with the issue of representation of marginalized groups within geopolitical discourses and decisions.⁴⁸ In accordance with this research goal, most of these works employed methods from the subfield of critical discourse analysis, which analyses language structures that constitute and perpetuate social inequalities and suppress the perspectives of marginalized groups.⁴⁹ Other research focus points, however, require different methodologies. The second large field of discourse analysis in international relations is the analysis of concrete foreign policy discourses, which will be dealt with in the next part of this chapter.

1.3) Foreign Policy Analysis in Critical Geopolitics

In addition to the issue of representation of marginalized groups in geopolitics, geopolitical discourse analysis has also influenced the fields of international relations theory, international diplomacy, and foreign policy analysis.⁵⁰ Since this study will be conducted as a foreign policy analysis, this chapter will only introduce this aspect of geopolitical discourse analysis. Although done differently by different scholars in accordance with their research aim and focus, “This research program is based on the assumption that policies are dependent on the representation of threats, country, security problem, or crisis they seek to address.”⁵¹ Discursive work is essential for the representation of such threats, especially when the chosen foreign policy response is considered controversial within the society of the state that wants to enact it.⁵² In order to persuade the public of the aptness of the chosen course of action, policymakers often produce a discourse that creates meaning for the event via claims that resonate with society on an ontological level.⁵³

Naturally, a discourse analysis that investigates foreign policy works mainly with foreign policy documents, such as speeches, official documents, or papers produced by

⁴⁷ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, XIV.

⁴⁸ Millkin, “The Study of Discourse,” 228.

⁴⁹ See Kurecic, “Identity and Discourse,” 7f.

⁵⁰ See Millikin, “The Study of Discourse,” 236.

⁵¹ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 5f.

⁵² See Jan Blommaert, *Discourse: a critical introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

⁵³ See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6.

consulting think tanks and other political institutions. These specific types of policy texts have various functions. First, foreign policy texts intend to establish authority about the subject by claiming to have sufficient knowledge, either through “objective” fact-finding, personal encounters and experiences, historical analogies or subjective interpretations. This knowledge is subsequently used to justify the deployment of political power.⁵⁴ Another feature of policy texts, which is related to the claim of authority, is the goal of persuasion. By employing a specific geopolitical discourse and communicating their understanding of world politics, policymakers intend to persuade the public of the obligation to act upon the concerned event.⁵⁵ As indicated by Hansen, “The goal for foreign policymakers – as well as for actors trying to influence foreign policy – is to present a foreign policy that appears legitimate and enforceable to its relevant audience.”⁵⁶

The persuasive dimension of policy documents consists of three interrelated aspects. First, through resonance with larger societal discourse, policymakers try to make their policy appear as derived from common sense.⁵⁷ Here, the power of an already established regime of truth comes into play since the relevant audience, e.g. the public, is already familiar with the implications of the employed geopolitical discourse that communicates the understanding of an event, a place or people living there. Secondly, foreign policymakers need a compelling story that resonates with the audience and contributes to the linkage between policy and common sense.⁵⁸ Thirdly, foreign policymakers try to produce a discourse that convergence with society on an ontological level. Thus, identity creation and projection become central for establishing and communicating foreign policy choices: “Foreign policies are legitimized as necessary, as in the national interest, or in defence of human rights, through references to identities [...]”⁵⁹ Combining these elements, policy texts can limit the options of policy choices, make their choice appear as inevitable and necessary, and thus persuade the public and allies of the aptness of their policy response to an event.

⁵⁴ See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 266.

⁵⁵ See Kurecic, “Identity and Discourse,” 3.

⁵⁶ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 28.

⁵⁷ See Millikin, “The Study of Discourse,” 236.

⁵⁸ See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, XVI.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

In post-structuralism, identity is not considered as something fixed but as the result of constant negotiation, articulation and re-articulation.⁶⁰ The identity of individuals and states are thus socially constructed, and discourse is crucial for this identity creation. In international relations, the relational dimension of state identity is emphasized since the state creates a sense of who they are within the international realm by creating relations and routines with other states.⁶¹ This relational-based identity then serves as a basement for policy choices. At the same time, however, identity is articulated and reproduced through this same policy. Thus, identity does not stand in a causal relation to policy; rather, both aspects are of a co-constitutive nature.⁶² The goal of discourse analysis in this context is then to analyze the system of signification as well as the ontological dimension used to justify the given policy and to deconstruct the common-sense claims embedded as well as the unquestioned assumptions within the discourse as to open up space for debating alternative policy choices excluded by the hegemonic discourse. In other words, such a discourse analysis seeks to investigate how a regime of truth is constituted to enable a certain course of action while invalidating possible alternatives.⁶³

Given the focus on policy documents, the discourse analytical approach to foreign policy is actor-centered. Depending on the scope of the study, various actors become relevant. The most critical actors for this analysis are the actors actually involved in creating, communicating, and implementing foreign policy. In the literature, these actors are framed as intellectuals of statecraft, which subsumes political leaders, executive members, state bureaucrats, foreign policy experts, and advisors.⁶⁴ Given the changes in doing politics in recent decades, e.g. the turn from government to governance, this community of non-governmental actors grew considerably, as did their influence upon policy decisions, which is why they are also included in the intellectuals of statecraft.⁶⁵ The analyst has the

⁶⁰ See Jolanta A. Drzewiecka, "Identity, Poststructuralist Approaches," in *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*, ed. Kim Young Yun (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017), 1.

⁶¹ See Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no.3 (2006): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>.

⁶² Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 1.

⁶³ Milikin, "The Study of Discourse," 236.

⁶⁴ See Ó Tuathail and Agnew, "Geopolitics and discourse," 194.

⁶⁵ This choice of actors naturally results in a Top-Down bias of this approach, an accusation that is frequently brought against geopolitical discourse analysis. See Millikin, "The Study of Discourse," 244. One way to deal with this accusation is to broaden the scope of actors by also including media reports and cultural documents such as novels, travel reports, movies, music and videogames. This enlargement has the

task of deciphering how these actors purposefully create meaning by “telling the right kind of stories to the right audience in the right moment.”⁶⁶

To sum up the theoretical part up to this point, discourse analysis is based on a variety of philosophical claims. Most importantly, discourse analysis does not treat language as a sole device through which we can conceive reality; rather, language is moved to the centre of analysis, given its constitutive relation to the reality it ought to describe. Furthermore, discourses in general, and language in particular, are not considered neutral but rather as something that always carries aspects of power. Language and Discourse are also regarded as central to the emergence of identity, which a discourse often does by creating binarities within a hierarchical linguistical framework. Applied to geopolitics, this indicates that no representation of places, events, and peoples is value-free. Consequently, using the new conceptualization of geopolitics from Ó Tuathail and Agnew, making geopolitics entails employing particular discourses that imply certain derivatives – labelled as common-sense or unquestioned assumptions – upon which policy responses are chosen and justified.

What all the geopolitical discourse analyses share is their thin constructivist understanding of reality. Individual actors possess agency in constituting reality through discourse, which is done purposefully to enable a particular course of action. Ontological claims made within the concerned discourse are crucial for this endeavour. The centrality of identity for this approach harmonizes perfectly with the concept of ontological security, and therefore, it will be shortly introduced in the next part.

1.4) The Concept of Ontological Security

Richard Laing first developed the concept of ontological security in the 1960s to highlight the psychological mechanisms through which individuals can match their desire to maintain a stable sense of who they are and where they belong.⁶⁷ In its psychological application to individuals,” Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to

advantage that it can make comparisons between the official framing of an event by those in power and the framing of the event in popular culture. See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 62.

⁶⁶ Martin Müller, “Doing Discourse Analysis in Critical Geopolitics,” *L’Espace Politique* 12 (2010): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.1743>.

⁶⁷ Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis)recognition,” 583.

realize a sense of agency.”⁶⁸ Although initially entrenched within the field of psychology, the concept of ontological security was later applied in international relations research, opening the way to approaching state relations, international order, and conflicts through an ontological lens.

In her groundbreaking essay, Jennifer Mitzen suggested that states – just like individual persons – have a desire to establish and maintain a strong sense of ontological security. Justifying her transmission of a psychological concept to the realm of politics, Mitzen empathized that “ ‘ the state as a person ` has heuristic value insofar as it indexes real aspects of the ways in which states operate in world politics. As such, assuming ontological and physical security seeking alike can be theoretically fruitful.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, ontological security is an essential dimension of societal stability since individual members project the stable identity of the state on themselves, giving them orientation in a complex political environment, which comes particularly important in times of crises and uncertainty.⁷⁰

Similar to individuals, states can obtain ontological security through the routinization of behaviour and interactions with others. Through this routinization of relations, states can create a sense of belonging and an idea of their role in the world.⁷¹ In the next step, states form political communities based on the assumption of shared security interests, shared values as well as a shared ethical responsibility towards moral issues in world politics.⁷² According to theoretical insights from a realist perspective, these communities of states can be divided into security seekers, those states that want to uphold the status quo, and revisionists, those states that intend to challenge the status quo. For Mitzen, this division is translated into divergent role identities of states, “which means that in trying to secure their types, states will secure the relationships that make those roles meaningful.”⁷³ As such, role types can only manifest themselves if they are recognized as such by others. If those roles are established enough, they can become internalized and advance to a

⁶⁸ Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 352.

⁷⁰ See Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis)recognition,” 583.

⁷¹ See Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 346ff.

⁷² See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 46.

⁷³ Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 354. The best example for this is the division between NATO and BRICS states, the former being a political community of security seekers that want to maintain the current international order with all its mechanisms and rules for interaction, and the BRICS states, that intend to reform the current international order to obtain a stronger position within it.

central pillar for foreign policy, such as the leadership role of the US that served as a guiding framework for their post-cold-war foreign policy. Once a political community and their respective societies internalize these projected roles, communities can become rivals, competitors and even enemies.⁷⁴

Mitzen, however, argued that even advisory relations between states can produce a strong sense of ontological security since they provide states with the most crucial ingredient of ontological security: certainty. Through such ontological assumptions of the types of relations, states can mitigate uncertainty by creating a cognitive structure that makes their environment seem more predictable.⁷⁵ A conflictual relation, therefore, can advance to a routinized behaviour between states that serves a guidance for action. In such a situation, Mitzen speaks of the realization of an ontological security dilemma in which states become attached to a conflict: “On a deep level, they prefer conflict to cooperation because only through conflict do they know who they are.”⁷⁶

Given the centrality of certainty for ontological security, crises and key events that disrupt this assumed certainty in the political environment are the basements for the emergence of ontological insecurity. For example, the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the resulting end of the Cold War created a strong sense of uncertainty in the international environment since the stable, ontological security framework and its established political communities with their respective role types ceased to exist.⁷⁷ If such a key event or conflict disrupts the cognitive order of state relations, states try to reestablish certainty by interpreting the event or conflict through a framework that makes it seem familiar. Historical experiences and parallels often advance to the most crucial discursive device for creating familiarity and, thus, ontological security. However, as indicated by Chernobrov, this (mis)recognition of events through a familiarizing framework can result in a narcissistic self-construction of state identity.⁷⁸ Moreover, such a familiarization usually has a

⁷⁴ Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 358ff.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 346.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 362.

⁷⁷ See Khaled Al-Kassimi, “Nato’s Anglo-American identity and the Ukrainian crisis from an ontological security perspective – can a realist international system give diplomacy a chance?,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2022): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2200665>.

⁷⁸ Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis)regognition,” 587f. He illustrates this result through the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia in 1896. After being defeated by the Ethiopians, Europeans “discovered” that Ethiopians were not really Africans but Caucasians that got darker skin through their

positive and a negative side for both parties: “It creates an illusion of predictability but prevents seeing other dimensions of the problem and leads to a known and well-rehearsed routine of policy escalation and popular suspicion.”⁷⁹

As indicated in this elaborated theoretical part of this thesis, state identities, routinizations, senses of belonging to a political community and a familiarized environment are central to understanding and analyzing the acting of states in the international environment, and for all these aspects, discursive work is crucial. Before we move on and apply these theoretical insights to the Western reaction towards the Russian war in Ukraine, the next part of this thesis will investigate the constitution of the identity of the West as a political community, the idea of the liberal world order as well as the current war in Ukraine under the lense of ontological security, which enables us to have a better understanding of the West’s reaction to the war in Ukraine and its assumed implications for a new emerging world order.

2.) Emergence of the West as a Geopolitical Concept and Idea

Despite the omnipresence of the term West in political speeches, media analysis, scholarly debates and popular culture, people struggle to find a standard definition of what they mean when they invoke the term West. As indicated by Herborth and Hellman, “As if we always already knew what we are talking about when invoking it, ‘the West’ seems to operate as a taken-for-granted presumption, making superfluous any further investigation.”⁸⁰ From this quote, we can already see an interesting similarity between the West and what we defined as a hegemonic discourse, which also operates and functions through the enshrinement of taken-for-granted assumptions and unquestioned qualities that we attribute to the object of the discourse. Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining what the West actually is, looking at some scholarly definitions will help get an idea of what people understand when they use the term West.

geographical location. By using the Caucasian framework to familiarize this new situation (Europeans being defeated by Africans), Europe could maintain superiority as their central ontological dimension.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 584.

⁸⁰ Benjamin Herborth and Gunther Hellman, “Introduction: Uses of the West,” in *Uses of the West: Security and the Politics of Order*, ed. Benjamin Herborth and Gunter Hellman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

On the most basic level, the term West is used as a geographical marker, demarcating a specific area – that of the West – with other areas that are not within its realm.⁸¹ However, the West, as we know and use it in today's discourses, refers to much more than only a spatial location. For sociologist Stuart Hall, the West is a historical construct rather than a geographical one, and he defines it as “a society that is developed, industrialized, secular and modern.”⁸² Here, the concept is disentangled from any spatial features and defined through its internal qualities rather than specific localities. In a similar fashion, Lehti and Pennanen defined the West simply as a “political community of like-minded states.”⁸³ In those definitions, the West is much more an idea than a geographical location. But how is it that this idea of the West emerged and advanced to a ubiquitous concept whose implications and associations are apparent to most people? To understand this development, a small genealogical investigation is required, in which the century-old discourse of the West is shortly reconstructed.

Before that, however, some small restrictions need to be spelt out about the nature of such an investigation. First, there is no shared meaning of the West that is true for all contexts, be they historical, political, or cultural. The West means different things to different people and has different implications in different historical contexts. Thus, to talk about the West or to reconstruct the historical discourse that enabled such talking, one naturally must simplify a complex and contextual concept. Hall reminds us rightly in that regard that “We have to use short-hand generalizations, like ‘West’ and ‘Western,’ but we need to remember that they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning.”⁸⁴ Engaging in such an analysis requires simplifying complexity and thus always carries the risk of essentializing. Interestingly, though, simplification and essentializing are precisely what such discourses generally do.⁸⁵ Therefore, it is central to understand

⁸¹ See Virginie Mamadouh, 2006, “Divided we stand: Plural geopolitical visions of the West,” Paper presented at *Towards a Post-Western West? The changing heritage of ‘Europe’ and the ‘West,’* Tampere, Finland, 2-3 February 2006, 1. <https://www.sange.fi/~magnus/norface/files/s1-mamadouh.doc>.

⁸² Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 186.

⁸³ Marko Lethi and Henna-Riika Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire and Peace: Declining Hegemony of the West?”, in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?*, ed. Marko Lethi/Henna-Riika Pennanen and Jukka Jouhki (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 21.

⁸⁴ Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 185.

⁸⁵ See *Ibid.*, 190.

that the discourse scholar uses these simplifications as analytical devices, not as general and sacrosanct statements about what the West is.

Secondly, investigating the emergence of the West as an idea and identity means going beyond the spatial scale of the nation-state and searching for markers that constitute a political community outside the borders of national territories. Hansen delivered useful categories that will help us identify aspects defining the West as a political community. According to her, the ontological basis for any political community is constituted through time, space, and responsibility.⁸⁶ When investigating the discourse that resulted in the emergence of the West, we will apply these categories to different historical contexts, showing how they changed and related to each other over time.

Different scholars identify divergent starting points for the constitution of a discourse that created a sense of a civilization identity among Western societies, differentiating themselves from non-Western societies.⁸⁷ McNeill goes so far as to position the inception of a delineated civilization that we call Western in 460 BC. During that time, ancient Greece experienced the second Persian invasion, resulting in a victory against the invaders from the East. According to Herodotus, Greece could defeat the Persian empire due to its political-military structures, using free men who acquired citizenship as soldiers in contrast to Persia, whose army consisted primarily of slaves. At this moment, McNeill sees a first division between the East and the West with clear attributes associated with them. While despotism and slavery prevailed in the East, the West was able to distinguish itself from this form of society through the centrality of citizenship and a freer social order.⁸⁸ This centrality of citizenship for the social order of Western society was later enshrined in the ideals of the Roman Republic.⁸⁹ During the late antiquity and the following middle ages, citizenship as a distinction marker towards other societies was substituted by

⁸⁶ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 46.

⁸⁷ It is important to note that following analysis uses the term West and Western society or people as an analytical term, not as a source-based one. Societies in that time did not consider themselves as Western but rather as European.

⁸⁸ See William H. McNeill, "What we mean by West," *Orbis* 41, no. 4 (1991): 513, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387\(97\)90002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387(97)90002-8). Naturally, this analysis is highly simplistic, and the ancient Greek society was far from what we could consider as a free society today.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 514f.

Christianity, which served the same unifying purpose and helped to distinguish Western, e.g. Western European societies from their counterparts in the East.⁹⁰

Although opinions differ among scholars about the inception of the constitution of a distinct West, there is a broad consensus about the centrality of the Age of Exploration and all the inventions and societal developments that occurred in that period. The “discovery” of a new continent in the West and the encounter with an alien civilization that inhabited this continent was a critical moment for the identity formation of the West. As demonstrated in the theoretical part of this thesis, identities are often formed *ex negativo*, defining something through the qualities that the other does not possess. Encountering the Other in the form of Indigenous people in America, Europeans could create a sense of themselves in delineation to these others.⁹¹ Moreover, a certain sense of superiority advanced to a central feature of Western identity during that time. As indicated by McNeill, “the great Age of Exploration, the invention of printing, and all the discoveries of the scientific revolution gradually persuaded Western Europeans, for the first time in history, that they might actually [...] know more than anyone in the world.”⁹²

In the following decades, this sense of superiority was consolidated and also projected towards societies in the East, especially the Ottoman Empire. The role of the East in creating the identity of the West, enshrined in their feeling of superiority towards other cultures, is already thoroughly displayed in Said’s concept of Orientalism and thus does not require any further explanation here.⁹³ What is important to note is the crucial role of the Other – be they Indigenous, Muslim or Asian – in constituting the identity of the West.

A further central period for the emergence of a Western identity was the Enlightenment and the concepts developed in that context, which are intimately related to the Age of Exploration and the various encounters with the Others. After having explored many different societies and cultures, European thinkers came to the conclusion that their civilizational form is the pinnacle of humanity.⁹⁴ As a result of this line of thinking, the concept of different stages of civilizational progress emerged, within which European – especially

⁹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 516f.

⁹¹ See Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 188ff.

⁹² McNeill, “What we mean by West,” 517.

⁹³ For more information, see Said, *Orientalism*.

⁹⁴ Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 187.

French and English – civilization was considered to be in a leading position.⁹⁵ With regard to their colonial endeavours and encounters with others, Europe assigned itself the responsibility to uplift the colonial subjects upon the stages of civilization. This so-called civilizing mission advanced to the central ideological justification of colonial subjugation.⁹⁶ The idea of having the shared responsibility of civilizing the Other further contributed to the emergence of a Western identity based on a profound belief in the superiority of their civilization and associated social order.⁹⁷

Overall, the development of the Western discourse and identity brought some interesting dynamics to the three dimensions that constitute a political community. The space of this community was still somewhat clear, with Western civilization being primarily located in Western Europe, especially in France and the United Kingdom. However, to the dimension of space, time was added, and the West and its civilization became equated with progress and modernity.⁹⁸ Through this addition of the temporal dimension, the West became despatialized, at least on the metalevel, since the idea of the civilizing mission was that under the right guidance and instructions, any culture and civilization could become Western and it was the West's ethical responsibility to implement that. Moreover, the discourse about the stages of civilization allowed for the creation of a spatial hierarchy, serving as an ordering mechanism through which places could be categorized in accordance with their assumed stage of civilizational progress. For the first time, all three dimensions of a political community became visible, and the idea of the West began to appear.

Interestingly, though, within the colonial power's discourses, the term West or Western civilization was not employed to designate their type of civilizational model. However, in some places, especially in Russia and China, a debate emerged about the necessity of implementing "Western reforms" or "Western policies" in order to modernize the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁶ See Lehti and Pennanen, "Beyond Liberal Empire," 36.

⁹⁷ This statement naturally also requires restriction. French and English civilizational culture was still regarded as something distinctive, and both had very distinctive ways in implementing their civilizing mission, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2020), 1176ff. However, what is important is that both civilizations considered themselves as being superior to non-Western civilization and thus also responsible for civilizing the other along the lines they saw as fit.

⁹⁸ Hall, "The West and the Rest," 219.

respective country. Thus, the terms West and Western reforms were employed by non-Western actors prior to the usage of the terms within the West.⁹⁹

Another turning point in the development of the discourse was the First World War and the decision of American President Woodrow Wilson to interfere and fight with France and Britain against the central powers. At this point, America was, for the first time, partly integrated into the Anglo-French civilization. As evinced by McNeill, “Under Woodrow Wilson, Americans chose to engage and at that moment what we think of as Western civilization, Western Civ., was born.”¹⁰⁰ Through this engagement, the subject of Western civilization was inaugurated as part of American curricula, allowing for the emergence of a sense of belonging beyond the nation-state container. For some Americans, this was an emancipation since they could replace religious and other identities with a felt belonging to a community of shared values based on progress and reason: “It converged membership in the great cultivated, reasonable, sophisticated world of “us,” the heirs of a Western tradition dating from Socrates and surviving all the tribulations of the medieval and early modern times.”¹⁰¹ This feeling of communal belonging shares many similarities with the concept of imagined communities developed by Benedict Anderson to explain the establishment of a national community, highlighting the relevancy of intangible, imagined factors to constitute a feeling of belonging between people living within a community where not everyone knows each other.¹⁰² As argued by Herborth and Hellman:

The West can be viewed as an imagined community in the sense that it is a broad transnational association, which extends over a broad geographical and temporal canvass. It encompasses peoples who may have no immediate contact with one another, but who perceive themselves to be part of the West. There is, therefore, a shared identity and some element of common interests, ideas and values. It is taken to represent certain traditions, handed down in the course of the long history of the West.¹⁰³

After a period of isolation dominated US foreign policy in the interwar period, the Second World War and the following inception of the Cold War finally gave birth to the Western world as we would define it today. Again, the Western world got a stronger spatial

⁹⁹ Chistian Weber, “Transatlantic Policies towards China and Russia: Self-Conception and Contradictions of a Universalizing West,” in *Uses of the West: Security and the Politics of Order* ed. Gunther Hellmann and Benjamin Herborth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 192.

¹⁰⁰ McNeill, “What we mean by the West,” 519.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁰² See Jacinta O’Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West in International Relations: From Spengler to Said* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 13.

¹⁰³ Herborth and Hellman, “Introduction: Uses of the West,” 13.

demarcation due to the Iron Curtain and the division of the post-war international system into the capitalist West and communist East. The West was associated with new qualities such as democracy, the rule of law, a secular society as well as a capitalistic organized economy.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, with the intention to contain the spread of communism, the community of Western states found a new shared ethical responsibility.

The Cold War was thus a period of a clear ontological security system. States knew their place in the world, how to relate to other states and what their overall purpose in terms of security was.¹⁰⁵ This period also witnessed the emergence of an institutionalization of the Western idea in the form of NATO, the UN, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, all institutions that are rooted in the Western value system.¹⁰⁶ Liberalism advanced to the main qualities of the West, replacing the old discursive picture of a predominantly white and imperial West.¹⁰⁷ The discourse about a shared Western value system rooted in the liberal tradition served a specific discursive function since “referring to ‘The West’ as the common ground for political action allowed for the integration of very different positions by actors in Western Europe and North America throughout the Cold War.”¹⁰⁸

Given the securitization of the Soviet Union as the central threat to the Western world during the Cold War, the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the following end of the Cold War naturally resulted in a period of ontological uncertainty. In general, two main visions can be distinguished. On the one hand, scholars like Samuel P. Huntington suggested a re-emergence of stronger cultural identities and the inception of a period that would be marked by a struggle between the different civilizations.¹⁰⁹ In reverse, other scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama, were optimistic about the prospect of the post-Cold War order. According to his end-of-history thesis, the victory of the liberal over the communist model meant that the world did not just experience the end of the Cold War, “but the end of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁵ Mamadouh, “Divided we stand,” 1.

¹⁰⁶ See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Logic of the West,” *World Policy Journal* 10, no.4 (1993): 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209331>.

¹⁰⁷ See O’Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Weber, “Transatlantic Policies,” 182.

¹⁰⁹ See O’Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West*, 18f.

history as such: that is, the end of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."¹¹⁰

In the first decade of the post-Cold War period, the spirit of liberal optimism, as displayed in Fukuyama's thesis, prevailed, and the Western world witnessed the democratization and Westernization of many countries that were part of the Soviet bloc.¹¹¹ Although some actors questioned the survival of NATO after the common threat of the communist East diminished, NATO could survive as a community of values committed to the spread and consolidation of liberalism.¹¹² At the same time, however, the concept of a Western civilization diminished as well and became discursively universalized to disentangle the associated values from a specific spatial and political bloc.¹¹³ Again, this discursive move allowed for the integration of divergent foreign policy positions. It was first evinced in Serbia during the Kosovo War at the end of the 1990s, in which NATO's intervention was not justified with an assumed threat to the Western community but in the name of liberalism, e.g. the protection of human rights and democracy.¹¹⁴

Similarly, in development policies, the Western Road to modernity was universalized, and the idea prevailed that everyone could become Western. This idea became further institutionalized through various Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP),¹¹⁵ the Copenhagen criteria for membership in the European Union and the adjustments required in order to become part of NATO, all of which encapsulated the idea of the superiority and universal adaptability of the Western model and provided concrete steps explaining how to achieve such a transformation along the lines of the Western model.¹¹⁶ As evinced by Lehti and Pennanen, "By adopting certain forms of governance and economics, all societies can become Western. Essentially, the distinction between the West and the Other is

¹¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, No. 16 (1989): 4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

¹¹¹ See O'Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West*, 133f.

¹¹² Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 25f.

¹¹³ See Weber, "Transatlantic policies," 190.

¹¹⁴ The humanitarian motive used to justify the deployment of NATO troops in Serbia is evinced by then British foreign minister Robert Cook. See "Why Kosovo matters; it's a test for our generation," *The Guardian*, March 26, 1999. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/mar/26/balkans15>

¹¹⁵ The SAP's are issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a prerequisite for obtaining a loan. In order to get such a loan, the concerned country must introduce broad reforms, especially with regard to economic liberalization.

¹¹⁶ Weber, "Transatlantic policies," 193ff.

temporal, not qualitative.”¹¹⁷ This new Western community was thus based on institutional and economic entanglement, as well as the shared belief in the liberal order.

Moreover, many leaders assumed that the spread of capitalism and the resulting economic interdependence would automatically lead to democratic reforms in countries that had not yet adopted it as a political system. Eventually, this would result in a safer international order since democracies have fewer incentives to go to war with each other.¹¹⁸ The economic rise of China, coupled with the absence of democratic reforms, was the first post-Cold War moment in which this spirit of liberal optimism cooled down since it conflicted with the ontological self-conception of the West.

In the post-Cold War period, the West remained a highly relevant (geo)political concept. However, given the de-spatialization and metaphysical foundations of the West, the issue of representation persisted. For example, NATO is still considered the central military alliance of the West, but it cannot speak on behalf of the West.¹¹⁹ Similarly, the EU, as the central political institution of Western states in Europe, can also not speak on behalf of the entire West and sometimes not even on that of its member states.¹²⁰ In its early geopolitical visions and agendas, for example, the European Security Strategy published in 2003, the West is not mentioned as a geopolitical entity, and the concept is not one time invoked in the paper.¹²¹ Apart from this issue of who is actually in a position to speak on behalf of the West, the West is still a relevant concept and functions as an ordering mechanism, allowing the categorization of nations and their relations to each other as well as for including or excluding certain actors. Significantly, in the first decades after the Cold War, many former states of the Eastern bloc Westernized and became a member of the European Union and NATO, which had a profound impact on their foreign policy.¹²² As argued by Mamadouh, “The representation of certain places as Western or not, can be a key moment in the constitution of geopolitical visions [...]”¹²³ That this representation also

¹¹⁷ Lehti and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 35.

¹¹⁸ See Harald Müller, “Between Polarization and Appeasement: Democracy and Its ‘Other,’” in *Uses of the West: Security and the Politics of Order*, ed. Gunther Hellmann and Benjamin Herborth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 62. This assumption is encapsulated in the so-called democratic peace theory, which will be introduced in the next Chapter.

¹¹⁹ See Mamadouh, “Divided we stand,” 17.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ See *Ibid.*, 31.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

becomes a crucial factor in the Russian war in Ukraine will be shown in the analytical chapter.

Despite the expansion of the West, there is still a sense of superiority in the nations that originally constituted the West and there is still a sense of “Easternness” perceived in NATO’s and EU’s new members. The most obvious example of this continuation of otherness is the division between “Ossis” and “Wessi” in Germany, where East Germans are often seen as inferior to their counterparts.¹²⁴ This sense of continuity superiority is also evinced in the various human rights discourses. Human rights discourses today mostly accept the universality of human rights, which are no longer perceived as a genuine concept of the Western community. However, Western states often have the prerogative of interpretation when it comes to a situation in which human rights are violated.¹²⁵ This power asymmetry in interpreting human rights violations is most evident in the discourse about the current war in Gaza. Whereas many non-Western nations regard the conduct of Israel in Gaza and Lebanon as clear human rights violations, Western members are more silent about this issue and continue to stress Israel’s right of self-defence and support its war through weapon deliveries. As argued by Weber, “This claim often rests on the implicit assumption that their home states already implemented universally valid norms for the achievement of which the so-called developing countries still require their guidance.”¹²⁶ Thus, a certain sense of superiority still features the Western self-image despite the proposed universalization of the values that constitute the basement for the modern definition of the West as a political community.

Today, what we understand as the West is still potentially de-spatialized. Although the members of the West are often clear, they are not always located in the West in terms of geography and Japan, as part of the Western community, still serves as the best example of that. Considering the factor of time, the West still thinks of itself as being the prime example of modernity.¹²⁷ Other states that are not part of the Western community are regarded as less modern, both in terms of politics and economic development. The West is

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹²⁵ See Weber, “Transatlantic policies,” 195.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹²⁷ In recent years, however, the West and especially the EU got also equated with the term post-modernity. Fully introducing the concept would go beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it will be shortly explained in the following part of this thesis.

also associated with apparent qualities that make the West distinctive from other communities. As such, the West ought to represent those countries that are liberal democracies, capitalist economies and secular societies.¹²⁸ The discursive universalization of liberal values often overshadows the implicit assumptions of superiority. This superiority and the urge to spread their civilizational model, framed in terms of a political and social norm model, is still visible in the relations between Western and non-Western states. As argued by Osterhammel, these relations are marked by the Western “self-proclaimed right and duty to propagate and actively introduce one’s own norms and institutions to other peoples and societies, based upon a firm conviction of the inherent superiority and higher legitimacy of one’s own collective way of life.”¹²⁹ The sense of superiority also adds to the ontological certainty of the West since a staple self often acquires the wish to be imitated yet unreachable at the same time.¹³⁰ Thus, the West today remains “more than ever a political project with a transformationalist agenda towards authoritarian regimes”,¹³¹ and this political project is intimately related to the concept of order, which will be introduced in the next part of this chapter.

2.1) The Concept of Order in International Relations

Just like the concept of the West, the concept of order is likewise a ubiquitous term in political discourses that is not easy to define. Some scholars even go so far as to question the existence of something like an order in the international realm.¹³² The most basic definitions of order all emphasize the importance of regularity. As indicated by Lascurettes, “At the most general level, international order entails some level of regularity, predictability, and stability in the ways actors interact with one another.”¹³³ Most definitions of order can agree on this essential function of order. For Tang, an order “is the degree of predictability (or regularity) of what is going on within a social system, presumably because

¹²⁸ Herboth and Hellman, “Introduction: Uses of the West,” 2.

¹²⁹ Jürgen Osterhammel, “Europe, the ‘West’ and the Civilizing Mission,” *Annual Lecture (German Historical Institute in London)* (London: German Historical Institute, 2006), 8.

¹³⁰ Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis)recognition,” 588.

¹³¹ Weber, “Transatlantic policies,” 196.

¹³² See Kyle M. Lascurettes, “International Order in Theory and Practice,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 31. August 2021, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.673>.

¹³³ Ibid., 1.

agent's behaviour, social interactions, and social outcomes within the social system have come under some kind of regulation.”¹³⁴

Considering the definition of order as providing predictability and an interactional pattern, the interlinkage between order and ontological security becomes visible. If ontological security is produced through predictability and predictability is produced through order, ontological security is the result of the stability of the given order. This also explains the deepness of ontological security during the Cold War, especially in the first half up until the war in Vietnam, since the bipolar order that emerged after the Second World War was relatively stable, with most states knowing their position and their relations to other states within that order. The interactional pattern backed by an extensive institutional framework governed state behaviour in the international realm and provided actors with a profound sense of ontological security.

Scholars who investigate orders in international relations also agree that there are many different types of orders. Those different types of orders are the result of different dimensions that can be used to define an order. The most crucial dimension is the differentiation between a thin and a thick order. For Lascurettes, a thick order is marked by “dense networks of institutions, codified legal rules, and/or a variety of shared norms that govern member's interactions, perhaps even specifying who qualifies as an order member in the first place.”¹³⁵ This definition already hints at the inclusionary and exclusionary functions of order. Not every actor can thus be considered a legitimate part of the order. Using such a definition also allows for considering the West as one type of a thick order since it is based on shared norms that are enshrined in various institutional settings as well as codified rules which eventually govern the interactions of its members. In reverse, a thin version of an order does not require such institutional web or written rules to govern interactions. Such a type of order is more the result of conventions of interactions, often as unintended or unaware consequences. A prime example of such an order would be the realists's emphasis on the balance of power as a central element that regulates state interactions without being enshrined as written law.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Shiping Tang, “Order: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 1, no. 1 (2016): 34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-016-0001-7>.

¹³⁵ Lascurettes, “International Order,” 4.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

A further dimension upon which different types of order can be identified is the spatial scope of its regulatory influence. An order can only be legitimate and enforceable on a regional level. The Soviet Order in Eastern Europe and other states would be an example of a regional restricted order. However, some orders can reach somewhat of a global status. Another dimension that differentiates orders is the principal ordering mechanism that is employed within the order. These ordering mechanisms can be the result of codified rules or the different positions of actors. If rules are the primary aspects that enable ordering, the order is framed as a constitutional one. In such an order, the power of the actors is restricted by rules and institutions. On the other side, an order that functions mainly through the power of the various actors and the hierarchies pertaining to this order, such an order is called a hegemonic one.¹³⁷ Naturally, a hegemonic order requires the existence of a hegemon to create and uphold itself. According to Lethi and Pennanen, a hegemonic state possesses military and economic superiority bounded by “social and cultural dominance of ideas and constitutive normative principles.”¹³⁸ Naturally, the existence of one type of order does not preclude the existence of other types. Most often, orders exist simultaneously, or an order combines different dimensions into a singular order.¹³⁹ Thus, the demarcation between different types of orders is rather an analytical device to categorize and analyze different orders in different contexts.

Naturally, orders changed in different historical settings. However, the process of ordering was often governed by a specific geopolitical regime which likewise changed over time. For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries, European powers established a limited global order based on civilizational geopolitical discourses, justifying colonial expansion and subjugation.¹⁴⁰ During this period, France and Britain advanced to the leaders of this order, giving them the position to rule over large parts of the globe. Thus, this colonial order can be classified as a thin hegemonic order in which the power of the actors mattered most, and there were no actual rules and institutions regulating interaction. Beginning in the 19th century and spanning up until the end of the Second World War, geopolitics became naturalized based on theories of social Darwinism and the paradigm of survival of

¹³⁷ See Charles A. Kupchan, “Unpacking hegemony: the social foundations of hierarchical order,” in *Power, Order and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24f.

¹³⁸ Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 18.

¹³⁹ See Lascurettes, “International Order,” 7.

¹⁴⁰ Agnew, *Geo-politics*, 12.

the fittest, causing state interaction to be derived from considerations of power.¹⁴¹ Again, this order was more regionally restricted, thin in nature, and more concerned with the position of the actors than any kind of rules and regulations. During the Cold War, the bipolar order's fundament was the ideological division between communism and capitalism, respective liberal democracies. However, in that period, the order transformed profoundly with the establishment of the United Nations and other global governance institutions intending to regulate state interaction through rules, laying the foundation for the emergence of what we call the liberal world order.

This liberal order¹⁴² was the result of “a specific set of events, circumstances and global power configurations.”¹⁴³ Despite being historically contingent, the current order and its visions are derived from the historical experience of its holders and the intention to prevent the emergence of war between major powers.¹⁴⁴ In the realm of ideas, this intention dates back to enlightenment discourse with its emphasis on perpetual peace enshrined in Kant's idea of a league of peace, later translated into the creation of the United Nations, as well as the relevance of universal human rights.¹⁴⁵ Today, the liberal order is based on various interrelated aspects.

Up until the 1990s, the liberal order was mostly understood in terms of economics and less in terms of a certain political system.¹⁴⁶ The central idea here is the relevance of free markets and private ownership. However, this economic basement is also tight to political ideology since liberalism assumes that states whose economy is based on free market capitalism will transform their political system along democratic lines, eventually leading to a more peaceful environment in the international realm since democratic states –

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² The term liberal order is used here to characterize the international order that evolved after the end of the Second World War. After its inception, this order was regionally much more restricted and pertained mostly to the countries labeled as Western. Following the end of the cold war, however, the liberal order expanded rapidly, advancing eventually to the most central guiding principle for foreign policy decision made by Western and (partially) non-Western actors.

¹⁴³ Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 17.

¹⁴⁴ See John G. Ikenberry, “Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2018): 23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000072>.

¹⁴⁵ See Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 36.

¹⁴⁶ The end of the Cold War and the dissolving of the bipolar world enabled the US to engage in a much more assertive foreign policy with a strong emphasis on democratic promotion that emerged during the first Bush administration. See Hal Brands, “Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018): 12ff. <https://doi.org/10.15781/T2VH5D166>.

externally, due to their degree of economic interdependence as well as internally, due to the democratic accountability of the respective governments – have fewer incentives to go to war with each other. This central assumption, also known as the liberal peace theory, already hints at the teleology implicated in the idea of liberalism, which considers that the successive development of human society will eventually lead to the emergence of liberalism.¹⁴⁷ The intention to prevent major wars through democratization and increased economic entanglement is backed by other aspects of the liberal order, such as the support for international laws and multilateral institutions and, of course, the crucial principles of democracy and human rights.¹⁴⁸ These order's principles are further institutionalized through various global governance institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are all more or less based on the ideas of liberalism. Finally, this order is also based on respect for the sovereignty of individual states and the crucial deduction not to change borders through the use of military force.¹⁴⁹

Considering the nature of the liberal order and its elaborated institutional framework, as well as the various rules that regulate state interaction on a global level, the liberal order is often classified as a thick, global and constitutional order in which the institutional regulations limit state power.¹⁵⁰ That power of individual states is less relevant than formal regulations is also expressed in the term rules-based order, which is often used interchangeably with the term liberal order. However, on a deeper investigation, this classification entails various contradictions.

The most central contradiction is the question of whether or not the liberal order can also be framed as a hegemonic order. Despite the classification of the liberal order as constitutional, there is also a broad scholarly consensus that the liberal order is marked by Western and especially US-American hegemony. Lethi and Pennanen emphasize, for example, that the US is the primary architect and defender of the liberal order given its economic, military, and moral predomination, and “because of the liberal values and norms

¹⁴⁷ See Beate Jahn, “Critique in a time of liberal world order,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15, No. 2 (2012): 147. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2011.34>.

¹⁴⁸ See Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 32.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ See Lascurettes, “International Order,” 5.

it has inculcated into the order.”¹⁵¹ Thus, many scholars agree that the emergence, consolidation and expansion of the liberal order were only enabled by the unique position the US obtained vis a vis other major powers first after the Second World War and later after the end of the Cold War.¹⁵² This goes so far that after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, scholars and political commentators spoke of the emergence of a unipolar world in which there is only one superpower dominating world politics.¹⁵³ Scholars who see the US as the main hegemon of the current liberal order also derive that the relative decline of the US military and economy vis a vis other powers such as China will lead automatically to the decline of the liberal order itself.¹⁵⁴

Hegemony is likewise a contested concept in international relations. Lethi and Pennanen define a hegemon as a state with economic and military superiority bounded by “social and cultural dominance of ideas and constitutive normative principle,”¹⁵⁵ thereby also indicating the relevance of ideas for the constitution of hegemony. Moreover, there are different types of hegemony. First, hegemony can be purely based on power and coercion so that the hegemon can enforce its rule over others only through its military capabilities. The imperial order of the 18th and 19th centuries can be framed as hegemony through coercion. On the other hand, hegemony can also function through consensus. In such a scenario, the hegemon acquires its position not only through its economic and military resources but also through the supremacy of its ideas.¹⁵⁶ However, once a state acquires such a consensual hegemonic position, giving it the ability to act in a leading position within the given order, this position needs to be maintained, and discursive work plays a central role in that. Therefore, “upholding hegemonic legitimacy requires that key actors continually seek and claim legitimacy for certain ideas, norms, and policies upon which the hegemonic order is founded.”¹⁵⁷ This quote also highlights the central question of the audience of such a discourse. Usually, such a discourse is not only directed towards other

¹⁵¹ Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 17f

¹⁵² See John G. Ikenberry, “Power and liberal order: America’s postwar world order in transition,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5, no.2 (2005): 137 and 144f. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lci112>.

¹⁵³ See *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁵⁴ Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 18.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12f.

¹⁵⁷ Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 27.

state actors but also towards the own population in front of which hegemony must also be legitimized.

This consensuality of liberal domination and hegemony in the realms of politics, economics, and ideas is expressed in the spirit of liberal optimism that captured the Western states after the end of the Cold War. In this period, the world witnessed an unprecedented spread and acceptance of liberal principles, especially in former parts of the Soviet Union. As indicated by Jahn, the victory of the liberal model “has been interpreted as a historical validation of liberal principles and intellectually, politically, and morally.”¹⁵⁸ In a further step, the principles of liberalism got disentangled from their Western origin and framed as universal. This universalization of liberal principles further strengthens the consensuality of liberal hegemony since the values are no longer regarded as values of particular actors but as values that pertain to everybody.¹⁵⁹ However, with this universalization, other problems and contradictions have occurred.

Through the universalization of liberal principles a spatial hierarchy was created in which not all states are considered equally valid.¹⁶⁰ For example, despite the assumed universal acceptance of liberal values and the rule of the liberal order, there is still a power asymmetry when it comes to applying them. Often, it is the US and its Western allies that enforce those rules, and they are also in the position to define when these rules are broken, which indicates the relevance of the position of actors within the liberal order. They can decide which behaviour is considered acceptable in interstate interaction. Thus, the West, despite the universalization of its liberal principles, considers itself as the natural leader of the liberal order.¹⁶¹ Liberalism, like the idea of the West, functions as an ordering mechanism through which a spatial hierarchy with the West in the highest position is created.

This leadership position is also expressed in the principle of liberal interventionism. When states break the rules of liberalism, for example, by fundamentally violating human rights towards their population, the West reserves for itself the right to intervene until the

¹⁵⁸ Jahn, “Critique,” 146.

¹⁵⁹ See Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 18.

¹⁶⁰ See Rohan Mukherjee, “Hierarchy and Endogenous Contestation in the Liberal International Order,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2024): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae028>.

¹⁶¹ See Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 50.

violations end.¹⁶² The central promise of peace achieved through the spread of liberalism thus has to be enforced through intervention sometimes. However, this conceptualization of liberal peace achieved through universalization and enforced through intervention bears a certain resemblance to the assumptions of the civilizing mission since “These ideas are premised on a belief in the universal applicability of “Western values” and “Western Civilization” as well as the universality of the Western path to modernity.”¹⁶³ From this perspective, one could argue that the standard of civilization was replaced by the standard of liberalism, which also works to create spatial hierarchies and gives the West the right to transform non-liberal states according to their visions of apt political models. However, the various liberal interventions since the 1990s¹⁶⁴ resulted in profound backlashes in the acceptance of liberal hegemony. States in the Global South, in particular, perceive and experience this as coercion and question the legitimacy of the liberal order. Often, these rejections are tied to US foreign policy and the discrepancy between their normative pretensions and actual practice. Since then, the crisis of authority has become an omnipresent feature of the liberal order.¹⁶⁵

Crisis, as an omnipresent feature of the liberal order, is often taken for granted. There are even studies that attempt to measure the healthiness of the liberal order,¹⁶⁶ indicating various factors that pose a threat to this order’s stability. Often, “this crisis talk is largely embedded in the question of securing symbolic agency, the role of a global leader, in an era that is seen to be characterized by the rise of non-Western actors and Western self-doubt regarding the liberal order.”¹⁶⁷ As indicated in this statement, discourses about the crisis of the liberal order can serve the function of renewing agency. Thus, a crisis can not only

¹⁶² This right is enshrined in the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which sees state’s sovereignty as conditional to their upholding of human rights within their territory, see Sandra Fabijanić Gagro, “Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Doctrine,” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2014): 64, https://www.iises.net/download/Soubory/soubory-puvodni/pp061-077_ijoss_2014v3n1.pdf.

¹⁶³ Marko Lethi and Henna-Riika Pennanen, “Crisis of the West,” in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?*, ed. Marko Lethi/Henna-Riika Pennanen and Jukka Jouhki (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 68.

¹⁶⁴ Cunliffe lists 17 interventions in the name of the liberal order since the end of the Cold War, see Philip Cunliffe, *Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 32.

¹⁶⁵ See Lethi and Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 44.

¹⁶⁶ See Michael J. Mazarr et al. *Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order* (RAND Cooperation: 2017). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1900/RR1994/RAND_RR1994.pdf

¹⁶⁷ Lethi and Pennanen, “Crisis of the West,” 62.

be a threat to the order and its holders, but it can also serve as ontological renewal, injecting new certainty into the actors about their role in the world.¹⁶⁸

In general, crisis is an ambiguous concept in international relations and geopolitics. On a metaphysical level, crisis implies the existence of a normal state of things, and the crisis indicates a derivation from this state, requiring states to act in order to reinstall the normal status. As such, crisis discourses are metaphorically flexible and can be integrated into various contexts.¹⁶⁹ From a discourse analysis perspective embedded in a thin constructivist perception of reality, crisis equips intellectuals of state-craft with a powerful discursive instrument that can be used to justify extraordinary political measures in accordance with the crisis discourse's representation of reality. The question of the effectiveness of such a discourse lays not so much in the accuracy of the crisis itself but on "how credibly a crisis is presented and how it resonates with wider economic, political, and social trends."¹⁷⁰

When considering the representation of the ascribed crisis of the current order, one realizes that there are different types of crisis based on different perceptions of what the West is. On the one hand, right-wing popularism and conservative discourses represent the crisis of order as a result of the application of liberal principles. For them, the stability of the order is threatened through larger societal trends within the West, such as the demographic change resulting from mass migration or the growing (discursive) acceptance of values, sexual orientations and religions that are not genuine to a Christian West. They are thus more trapped in the older conceptualization of the West, which is understood as a relatively homogenous civilization marked by Christianity and the associated social norms. In these discourses, liberalism is regarded as a threat to order and the Western world in general.¹⁷¹

Reversly, the liberal-internationalist discourse about crisis identifies the right-wing and conservative discourses as a central threat to the liberal order from within. Before Russia started its war in Ukraine, the crisis of the liberal order in this perspective was mainly

¹⁶⁸ See Lethi and Pennanen, "Crisis of the West," 88.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

attributed to these forces and their questioning of the liberal order.¹⁷² However, authoritarian regimes, especially China, Russia and Iran, were also considered a threat to the order, with this trend culminating in the current war in Ukraine. Their rise economically and politically without implementing democratic reforms is not only conflicting with the ontological self-conception of the West but also limits the transformist influence the West can exercise over other countries since authoritarian models are now considered by many non-Western actors as valid alternatives to the Western models.¹⁷³ In the perspective of this discourse, the West is conceptualized as a civilizational entity marked by liberal values, democracy and tolerance and these values are threatened internally by right-wing populism and externally by the rise of non-liberal states.

Despite this discursive outsourcing of the threat, other scholars highlight the West's own role in destabilizing order. The liberal self-conception largely sees conflicts and crises as the result of the behaviour of competing actors. The role of liberalism in constituting conflicts is often negated. However, "liberalism plays a crucial role in constituting competing actors and worldviews theoretically, as well as practically."¹⁷⁴ This role of liberalism invalidates the general perception that non-liberal actors bear sole responsibility for problems and conflicts in the international realm while the liberal states provide solutions to the problems created by their illiberal counterparts.¹⁷⁵ Due to the universalization of liberalism and the implied assumption that if every state behaved like a liberal state, the world would be a more peaceful place, alternatives and other perspectives on the sources of and solutions to conflicts are escamotated from the discourse.¹⁷⁶ This trend indicates the discursive power universalization in creating regime of truths and restricting discourses to other perspectives. Another crucial function of universalization can be observed in the various liberal interventions in the past two centuries, in which universalization was used as a discursive device to justify the realization of particular interests.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ This trend is significantly visible in the realm of development politics where China advanced in recent years as a major actor, providing countries in Africa with an alternative developmental model, see Corrie Decker & Elisabeth McMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 97.

¹⁷⁴ Jahn, "Critique in a time of liberal world order," 152.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 152f.

¹⁷⁶ Lethi and Pennanen, "Beyond Liberal Empire," 37.

¹⁷⁷ See Ibid.

In sum, the current liberal order is like the West's complex, multi-layered and ambiguous. This complexity is also expressed in the difficulties of classifying the order. On a discursive level, it is often represented by statecraft intellectuals as a thick constitutional order that is regulated by rules and non-state institutions such as the UN or the IMF. However, in reality, the power of states within the order matters. Often, Western states – as the architects of the liberal order – are in the privileged position to judge which behaviour by which state is considered acceptable. They are also in the position to intervene militarily when they see the rule of the order broken. Thus, the liberal or Western paradigm serves as an ordering mechanism, creating spatial hierarchies and power asymmetries in which the West sees itself in a leading position. As such, the creation of dichotomies and hierarchies while claiming normative universalism remains the central paradox of the liberal order. The supremacy of Western states is also a crucial feature of orders in the past two centuries. However, this supremacy was justified differently in different epochs. In the 19th century, it was the discourse about “Western” civilization, whereas, during the Cold War, it was the discourse about the free world that framed the Western world in a superior position within the order. Today, it is the discourse about liberalism, human rights and the promise that the global spread of liberalism will eventually lead to the emergence of a peaceful and stable international environment that fulfils this function. The liberal order, therefore, can also be framed as hegemonic. Moreover, crisis advanced to an omnipresent feature of the liberal order. Despite the differences in the various crisis discourses, “in these narratives, the present is envisioned as a critical juncture in which harsh choices need to be made if the historical agency of the West is to be revived,” and the War against Ukraine is widely considered as the most central juncture threatening the future of the liberal order as well as the West’s position in the order.

2.2) Russia’s war against Ukraine, Ontological Security and the liberal world order

The discourse about a declining liberal order is not a new discourse that was only created as a result of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Already after the financial crisis and the various geopolitical fractures in the 2010s, such as the war in Syria and Libya as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014, sparked many political comments about declining US influence and, thus, naturally also a declining liberal rules-based international order.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ See for example Nick Bryant, “The decline of US power?,” *BBC News*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33440287>.

However, since the inception of Russia's war against Ukraine, the discourse about the emergence of a new world order has advanced to an omnipresent feature of geopolitical discourses in the West. As clarified by US President Biden a month after the war's beginning: "we emerged anew in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force."¹⁷⁹

From an ontological security perspective, the war in Ukraine creates a sense of ontological insecurity on two levels. First, it fundamentally disrupts the ontological self-understanding of the European Union. The European Union, as one of the central actors of the collective West, has a somewhat unique ontology. Unlike in the 19th and 20th centuries, where European civilizational identity was based on a dichotomy between the civilized Self and the uncivilized Other, the identity of Europe after the horrors of the Second World War was not based on spatial differentiation but on a temporal one. The Other, in this case, was thus not an inferior spatial Other but the temporal Self of Europe prior to the Second World War against which the post-war Europe defined itself.¹⁸⁰ Never again should there be so cataclysmic wars being fought out on European soil, and the spread of liberalism, as well as the institutional integration of European states, ought to provide this prevention of the re-emergence of an imperial Europe.

However, the inception of a full-fledged war fundamentally challenged this ontological certainty of having overcome the period of 19th-century great power politics and the accompanying wars – at least on the European continent. Reacting to this ontological insecurity, the EU has redefined its role in Europe and the world and thus created a new identity that fits within the current geopolitical reality. How this exactly happened will be displayed in the analytical chapter.

On a second level, the war creates a sense of ontological insecurity beyond Europe. As indicated above, the liberal and rules-based order was already fractured before the war

¹⁷⁹ Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine," *The White House*, March 26, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.

¹⁸⁰ See Louise Schou Therkildsen, *A European State of Mind: Rhetorical Formations of European Identity within the EU, 1973–2014* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2022), 174, <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1635526/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

even started. However, since the inception of the war, these fractures have become more visible, indicating the difficulties in establishing and maintaining a liberal order based on universalism through the primacy of a hegemon. It is widely assumed in the West – as well as in Russia – that the war’s outcome will fundamentally dictate the outlines of the future international order, with a Russian victory resulting in the emergence of a new, post-liberal international order. Given this uncertainty about the future of the order, the war in Ukraine can be considered a fundamental source of ontological insecurity for the liberal West.

As already explained in the order chapter, the breaking down of an order only functions in correspondence with the approach that defines what constitutes the order. If the order is hegemonic, then the relative decline of a hegemon vis-a-vis revisionist states that could replace the hegemon naturally translates into a general decline of this order.¹⁸¹ Moreover, scholars also distinguish different order breakdowns in accordance with their rapidity. Orders can break down suddenly and in a dramatic way, often after a major war between great powers or an extensive financial crisis. If such events cause the downfall of an order, this breakdown appears revolutionary. But orders can also break down slowly and much more gradually and processual. This often occurs when dissatisfaction with the order grows too big, and states become alienated from current arrangements in the international environment, eventually resulting in the formation of a new order. However, both categories are not mutually exclusive, and the breakdown of order can also occur through a combination of evolutionary and revolutionary change.¹⁸²

The same combination of factors also led to the currently assumed transformation of the liberal order. Many events, such as the various liberal interventions that discredited the West’s moral position, the financial crisis indicating that neoliberal growth has limits, the rise of China as an authoritarian state and many more reasons indeed, contributed to an evolutionary fracturing – not breakdown – of the rules-based order with Russia’s war being discursively framed as a revolutionary attempt to break it down finally. Thus, the war creates a sense of ontological insecurity since a Russian victory is largely interpreted as leading to the final downfall of the liberal order. The crisis of the liberal order – with the war in Ukraine as its most pressing symptom – also risks resulting in an ontological crisis of the

¹⁸¹ See Lascurettes, “International Order,” 15.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 17.

West. However, as the past has shown, the West could always use crisis and crisis narratives to re-invent itself, ultimately enabling it to maintain its hegemony. In that regard, Lethi and Pennanen clarified that “Crisis-talk recovers certainties, generates dichotomies, and perhaps even confirms the imagined superiority of the West.”¹⁸³ That the new world order discourse embedded in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine serves precisely this function of rediscovering ontological certainties will be shown in the next chapter.

3.) Methodology and Structure of the Analysis

As already indicated in the previous chapters, discourse analysis is not a consistent one-size-fits-all methodology. Rather, the methodology is used to communicate certain choices and strategies in accordance with the research questions. The goal of the proceeding discourse analysis is to investigate the relationship between Western identity and the geopolitical responses to Russia’s war against Ukraine within the framework of order. For that, a post-structuralist research method is employed since this allows to “show not only that identities matter for foreign policy, but also how they can be studied systematically through the adoption of a theory of discourse.”¹⁸⁴ A prerequisite for such employment is a thin constructivist understanding of reality in which actors possess a certain degree of agency in creating a specific perception of reality through language structures used in the discourse. The central question in that regard is to analyze “how states generate responses to the problems they face and how politicians rally support for their calls for action.”¹⁸⁵

The methodology used in this thesis to study the concerned discourse is borrowed from Hansen and her discourse analysis about Western intervention in Serbia during the 1990s. Although her method is designed to analyze the justification of actual military intervention, it is still suitable to use within the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine since many Western states responded with unprecedented and highly contested policy measures that, just like interventions, require extensive discursive work to justify them in front of the respective populations. My hypothesis is that the question about the future of the liberal order plays a central role because it allows the conflict to be disentangled from

¹⁸³ Lethi & Pennanen, “Beyond Liberal Empire,” 92.

¹⁸⁴ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 1.

its regional context, allowing for the gathering of support for extraordinary political measures even beyond the national interests of individual states. Again, the goal of this thesis is not to assess if and how the war in Ukraine poses a threat to the liberal order but instead to analyze how this assumed threat serves as a discursive device to legitimize extraordinary political measures and how Western identities are expressed in those measures.

In order to achieve this goal, a discourse analysis with a focus on ontological security and its relation to the liberal order will be conducted. How are these two things connected to the conflict on a discursive level? What system of signification can be identified, and with what language structure does it equip the target audience? Answering these questions requires conducting a broad and systemic analysis of the language used in the discourse. Since the focus is on the Western response to the War in Ukraine, the study is limited to the West¹⁸⁶ as the Self in the discourse and to the war in Ukraine that represents a major turning point in post-Cold War geopolitical discourse.

Given that such an investigation naturally is embedded in a thin constructivist understanding of reality and the strategic uses of discourse to create a certain picture of reality, the analysis will be restricted to state-craft intellectuals, e.g. those actors that are actually responsible for designing, implementing and communicating foreign policy choices. The sample consists of a variety of different text genres produced by state-craft intellectuals, and it spans from official speeches and policy papers to texts produced by advisors and think tanks, both of which have a growing influence on the foreign policy of states.¹⁸⁷

When conducting this analysis, various questions need to be answered. What are the central structures of persuasion? What tropes and images are recycled in the discourse, and with what purpose? What regimes of truths and hegemonic discourses are mobilized? What is the assumed target audience, and which effect is the discourse intended to produce? How is the event familiarized in order to reinstall a sense of ontological

¹⁸⁶ Russian and Ukrainian sources are deliberately excluded from the analysis, especially since both parties are actively involved in the war.

¹⁸⁷ See Henna-Riikka Pennanen & Anna Kronlund, "Imagining the West in the Era of America First," in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?*, ed. Marko Lethi/Henna-Riikka Pennanen and Jukka Jouhki (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 202f.

security? What is the war's assumed impact on the liberal order, and how does the West imagine the future of this order?

However, the most important aspect of the analysis will still be the articulation of geopolitical identities in connection to the concept of order. For that, I will investigate the language structure and central juxtapositions that create a delimitation between the Self, e.g. the West, and the Others, e.g. Russia and its allies, allowing for the emergence of identity *ex negativo*. These juxtapositions are systemized through a process of linking and differentiation, in which particular relations between actors are created. The analysis will look at the linguistic signs that allow the process of linking and differentiation, which links specific ontological characteristics of the Self to the assumed characteristics of the other, allowing for a differentiation to occur. With regard to the constituting role of the Other, Hansen reminds us correctly that the juxtapositions are often not simply binaries. Rather, they are embedded in a complex web of identities in which degrees of otherness and internal splits exist within the concerned others, which allows for degrees of in- and exclusion.¹⁸⁸ Thus, instead of remaining within the simple self-other dichotomy, the analysis will analyze the multilayered web of identities that is invoked as part of the West's geopolitical response to the war in Ukraine.

The following discourse analysis will be ordered by different discursive clusters, e.g., Western identities and values and the assumed threat to the liberal order. These clusters are more analytical devices than separated parts of the discourse. Their interconnectedness, as well as their differences, will be summarized at the end of the analytical chapter. Overall, and despite their differences, these clusters form a relatively coherent geopolitical discourse about the prospects of a new world order after the Russian war in Ukraine. The analysis will show differences in accordance with the respective type of document and explain which cluster is used to justify what policy measures.

4.) Western Values and Identity

When the Kremlin decided to invade Russia's neighboring country Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, starting a full-fledged war in Eastern Europe, Western politicians were from the beginning keen to emphasize that this war is not only a regional conflict between

¹⁸⁸ See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 7 and 42f.

two sovereign nations but an overall attack on democracy in general and Western values in particular. The West – according to the cluster of Western values and identity – is being tested through the war to see if they really stand up to their values once they are attacked. For example, in a speech by former Polish President Duda, he stated that, regarding the war in Ukraine, “it is the Western world that stands a test of its credibility and whether its values really mean anything.”¹⁸⁹ As a consequence of this test, the West must ensure that Ukraine wins the war without making any territorial concession to Russia; otherwise, “this will be a huge blow not only to the Ukrainian people, but the entire Western community.”¹⁹⁰ From this first quote, it becomes evident that Western military and financial support for Ukraine, as well as its sanctions against Russia, are justified through ontological references to the very essence of Western identity based on a specific set of values.

The interlinkage of Western military and financial assistance to Western values and identities advanced to an omnipresent feature of the discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine. In his famous “Zeitenwende” speech, the German chancellor Olaf Scholz likewise linked the German reaction to its internal Western identity. After indicating the epochal break the War has brought to Europe, encapsulated in the term “Zeitenwende” (water-shed moment), and assuring that the German government will provide broad support for Ukraine, he clarifies that Ukraine is not only defending its country but that “They are fighting for freedom and democracy. For values that we share with them. As democrats, as Europeans, we stand by their side – on the right side of history.”¹⁹¹ Right after delivering this statement claiming the togetherness of Ukraine and the West through their commitment to the same values, he listed all the sanctions Germany, together with the EU and the US, have imposed on Russia.

Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered a similar speech in May 2022, where he also stated the broad support the Western response to the war in Ukraine enjoyed in the British public and declared after listing the sanctions that

It is about Ukraine’s right to independence and national self-determination, against Putin’s deranged imperial revanchism. It is about Ukrainian democracy against Putin’s tyranny. It is about freedom versus oppression. It is about

¹⁸⁹ Andrzej Duda, “Speech by the President at Verkhovna Rada,” *Office of the President of Poland*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.president.pl/news/speech-by-the-president-at-verkhovna-rada,54101/>.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Olaf Scholz, “Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz,” February 27, 2022.

right versus wrong. It is about good versus evil. And that is why Ukraine must win.¹⁹²

In a similar way, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, clarified that the EU citizens have to bear the cost that comes with sanctions on Russia “because what is at stake is our values, our beliefs and our common future.”¹⁹³ However, the most clear articulation of the relation between Western identity and the geopolitical response to the war in Ukraine was delivered by President Biden in 2023. In a speech he held during the NATO Summit 2023 in Vilnius, he stated that Putin did not expect the West to respond that fast and coherently because “He still doesn’t understand our commitment to our values, our freedom is something we can never, ever walk away from. It’s who we are. I mean it – it’s who we are. It’s who we are.”¹⁹⁴

As evinced through these speeches, the West justified its military and financial assistance as well as the sanctions by linking them to its identity based on a set of shared values. It is because of this value-based identity that the West has the responsibility to support Ukraine, which is discursively included as part of the Western community. A victorious Russia would result in the West losing its face value and reputation across the globe since this would indicate that the West is not ready to defend its self-ascribed values. Thus, on the one hand, Western values and identity form the basement for supporting Ukraine, while these values and identity are simultaneously reinforced by implementing the foreign policy measures the West adopted in its response to Russia’s invasion. Within this cluster, an apparent dichotomy is created, framing the West, its allies and its value system as superior to the values and identities of the autocracies that threaten democracy. As explained by Johnson, for the West, this war is about good vs evil, and the West must ensure that it does anything to be on the good side.

¹⁹² Boris Johnson, “Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Address to the Ukrainian Parliament, May 3, 2022,” *Government of the United Kingdom*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-boris-johnsons-address-to-the-ukrainian-parliament-3-may-2022>.

¹⁹³ Charles Michel, “Remarks at the Extraordinary Debate at the European Parliament on Russian Aggression Against Ukraine,” *European Council*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/01/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-extraordinary-debate-at-the-european-parliament-on-russian-aggression-against-ukraine/>.

¹⁹⁴ Joe Biden, “Remarks on Supporting Ukraine, Defending Democratic Values, and Taking Action to Address Global Challenges, Vilnius, Lithuania,” *The White House*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/07/12/remarks-by-president-biden-on-supporting-ukraine-defending-democratic-values-and-taking-action-to-address-global-challenges-vilnius-lithuania/>.

Another central trope of this discursive cluster is the new sense of unity and agency the war has given to the West. In a speech in Poland, Biden explains that “The democracies of the world are revitalized with purpose and unity found in months that we’d once taken years to accomplish.”¹⁹⁵ Correspondingly, Borell likewise emphasized that “Vladimir Putin no doubt assumed that he would shatter European unity. He was wrong. He probably thought he would be facing inaction, inertia and dithering. And he was wrong.”¹⁹⁶ In his State of the Union Address 2022, Biden extended this newfound unity beyond Europe to include all “other freedom-loving nations in Europe, Asia and Africa.”¹⁹⁷ In addition to the creation of spatial delimitations based on Cold War rhetoric between the freedom-loving nations and those that do not love freedom, at least implicitly, the newfound sense and unity indicate how the war as a moment of ontological insecurity, both with regard to the order and the Western and particularly the European Union identity, translated into a moment of ontological security by reaffirming not only the identity of the West but also their ontological relation to the international order.

Particularly in the US, this positive self-assurance of their position and superiority was highly vocal, partly also due to the upcoming elections. In his State of the Union Address in 2023, Biden reiterated the discourse of Western or American exceptionalism by ensuring his audience that “The story of America is a story of progress and resilience [...] A story that is unique among nations. We are the only country that has emerged from every crisis stronger than we entered.”¹⁹⁸ The war in Ukraine and the resulting crisis in international relations thus likewise resulted in a renewed sense of ontological security in the US by reclaiming their uniqueness and superiority to other nations, which also gives them the mandate to shape, maintain and control the international order, as will be shown through the next cluster.

However, not all relevant actors delivered such positive reaffirming statements about the West and its relation to the order in their speeches. One of the most critical voices in that regard is the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada, Chrystia Freeland. In a speech she

¹⁹⁵ Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World,” March 26, 2022.

¹⁹⁶ Michel, “Remarks at the Extraordinary Debate,” March 1, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ Joe Biden, “State of the Union Address, 2022,” *The White House*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2022/>.

¹⁹⁸ Joe Biden, “State of the Union Address, 2023,” *The White House*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2023/>.

delivered in front of the Brookings Institution in 2022, she fundamentally criticised the period of liberal optimism that guided Western foreign policy since the end of the Cold War:

Our core belief was that the rights and opportunities enjoyed by the citizens of Western countries could and should be universal; that people around the world wanted and merited – and could achieve – the freedom and prosperity we already enjoyed. Now, it is impossible to utter these words without a shame-faced grimace; without an acknowledgement of how inconsistent and ineffective we have been at putting this moral commitment to universal rights and values into practice.¹⁹⁹

She criticised not only the failure of the Western community to deliver their promise of liberal peace and prosperity for everyone but also the assumption that Western values are universal and the hypocrisy of the West when it comes to implementing these values. After stating the global democratic backsliding since 1989, she continued her criticism of the universal dimension of Western identity and suggests that the West needs “to assume that in the decades to come we will be sharing the planet with rich and powerful countries who do not share our values – who, in fact, often see our values as both hostile and inferior to theirs.” Regarding this new reality of the international environment, she urged the West that “We need to find a way to coexist.”²⁰⁰ However, she does not suggest that the West should resign in front of this challenge. Instead, the West should strengthen its democracy to make it more resilient against autocratic subversion and enlarge its co-operation in critical sectors with like-minded states, a concept which she framed as “friend-shoring.”²⁰¹

Another critical voice in the discourse about Western identity and values in relation to the war in Ukraine and order comes again from Josep Borrell. Speaking at Georgetown University in 2024, he likewise criticised the spirit of liberal optimism, significantly in the EU with regard to their Russian politics and lamented that Europe outsourced its security issues to the US, believing that having the most powerful state as the central ally would be enough to ensure European security.²⁰² This self-criticism of the EU reflects the

¹⁹⁹ Chrystia Freeland, "Remarks by Deputy Prime Minister at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.," *Government of Canada*, October 11, 2022, <https://deputypm.canada.ca/en/news/speeches/2022/10/11/remarks-deputy-prime-minister-brookings-institution-washington-dc>.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² See Josep Borrell, "Speech by High Representative Josep Borrell at Georgetown University: 'Europe Re-discovering Harshness'," *European External Action Service (EEAS)*, March 15, 2024,

ontological change the war inflicted on the Union, through which the EU sees and labels itself for the first time as a geopolitical actor. Although naming her commission already in 2019 a geopolitical commission, Ursula von der Leyen explained in her 2023 Union Address that “We have seen the birth of a geopolitical Union – supporting Ukraine, standing up to Russia’s aggression, responding to an assertive China.”²⁰³ This new identity of the EU as a geopolitical actor rests in the belief that prior to the aggravation of the international order, the EU’s acting was within the framework of post-modern geopolitics, given its fluid understanding of space and identity. With regard to its transformational eastern policy, the EU intended to change the spatial organization of Europe by the dissolution of modern boundaries associated with fixed identities and nation-states by the latter’s incorporation into its supranational structures.²⁰⁴ This post-modern self-image was confirmed by the reaction to the war in Georgia, where the EU official Javier Solana stated, “Because of our post-modern DNA, the EU is not well placed to respond to something that might look like ‘great power politics’.”²⁰⁵

However, with the changing international environment and the updated threat perception concerning Russia, the EU no longer denied its geopolitical dimension and, in fact, embraced them as their new identity, giving them a sense of ontological security about who they are and what they want to achieve. This new geopolitical identity is expressed first by the weapon delivery for Ukraine, which indicates a fundamental turning point in EU foreign policy. For the first time in the history of the Union, the EU delivered weapons to a country involved in a major war, for which they repurposed the European Peace Facility.²⁰⁶ Secondly, the EU articulates its new geopolitical identity through a renewed enlargement impetus following a prolonged period of enlargement fatigue. As indicated by Von der Leyen in the Union Address 2023, enlargement is enhancing peace, democracy and prosperity in Europe while also giving the EU more geopolitical weight. Eventually, enlargement is

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/us-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell-georgetown-university-%E2%80%9Ceu-re-discovering-harshness_en.

²⁰³ Ursula von der Leyen, “Speech by President Ursula von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the State of the Union 2023,” *European Commission*, September 13, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426.

²⁰⁴ See Ian Klink, “Postmodern Geopolitics? The European Union Eyes Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 5 (2012): 935, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41495556>.

²⁰⁵ Javier Solana, “Europe in the World,” *Council of the European Union S212/09*, September 17, 2009, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/discours/110218.pdf.

²⁰⁶ See Floyd and Webber, “Making amends,” 1158.

framed as a necessity since “The people of Europe want a Union that stands up for them in a time of great power competition.”²⁰⁷ Following the co-constitutional relation between identity and foreign policy, the new identity of the geopolitical EU is the basis for their response to Russia in the form of weapon delivery as well as further enlargement in Eastern Europe, while this identity is precisely articulated via implementing them.

As evinced through these various speeches, the Russian war in Ukraine triggered a fundamental shift in the ontology of the West. However, this shift occurs differently for different actors. For the US, the newfound ontological security translated into a reaffirmation of their superiority and thus also for their ascribed leading role in the international environment. Other actors, such as the Prime Deputy Minister of Canada, are more humble by highlighting the Western failures in the past in delivering their promise of liberal peace, thereby creating an interesting self-other duality, one in which the new self is contrasted with the old self. A similar ontological shift can be observed in the EU, where the new geopolitical identity is delineated from the prior post-modern geopolitical identity. The new European Union actively engages in great power politics by delivering weapons to a country in war and stimulating new waves of enlargement to give the EU more geopolitical weight. Overall, the discourse about Western identity and values serves to legitimize extraordinary policy measures.

In contrast to the speeches, articulations of identities and values in relation to the war in Ukraine are scarcer in official documents. The Biden-Harris security strategy only reiterates the discourse of American exceptionalism. After clarifying that the US will lead this complex international environment with its values and success, the document reassured that “Our inherent national strengths—the ingenuity, creativity, resilience, and determination of the American people; our values, diversity, and democratic institutions; our technological leadership and economic dynamism; and our diplomatic corps, development professionals, intelligence community, and our military—remain unparalleled.”²⁰⁸ However, the document also indicates a shift in American ontology when referring to the military departure from Afghanistan which “ended an era of major military operations to

²⁰⁷ Von der Leyen, “State of the Union, 2023.” September 13, 2022.

²⁰⁸ Joe Biden, *Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, 7.

remake other societies [...]”²⁰⁹ Despite the aspirations of remaining the leading force in the international environment, the US acknowledged its limited capacity to reform other societies in their own image and thus abstain from further military interventions conducted within the framework of liberal optimism and the assumption that all nations must be democratic to ensure a stable international order. In the EU’s strategic foresight, no clear articulations of identity can be found, although the paper repeated the new geopolitical identity of the EU and the importance of developing a coherent geopolitical strategy.²¹⁰

Unlike the official documents, the think tank papers are again full of ontological articulations in relation to the war and its implication for the future order. The ontological change the West experienced as a result of the war is most clearly articulated when comparing the Munich Security Reports of the past three years.²¹¹ In the 2022 report, published only days before the war broke out in Ukraine, the overall subject was the feeling that the West is gradually losing control over geopolitical events and developments. This seeming lack of agency, according to the report, was most visible in Europe:

Despite its significant economic power, Europe often seems to have lost faith in its ability to shape global events. 19 years ago, three EU member states initiated negotiations that eventually led to the Iran nuclear deal. Today, European initiatives for addressing shared global threats are rare. As if dominated by a sense of impotence, Europe appears like a political dwarf in the global arena.²¹²

This lack of agency, however, is visible not only in Europe but in virtually all liberal democracies around the world, a feeling that is expressed in the report through the term “Westlessness.” To overcome this feeling of Westlessness, the report suggests that the leaders of the West need “to revive the optimism and momentum palpable in the early days of the Biden administration and demonstrate that both democracy as a system and alliances

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 20.

²¹⁰ See European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: 2023 Strategic Foresight Report: Sustainability and people’s wellbeing at the heart of Europe’s Open Strategic Autonomy*, July 2023, CELEX: 52023DC0376, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0376>, 1.

²¹¹ Although the Munich Security Conferences is a somewhat unconventional think tank since it more a forum for exchanging transnational strategies than a research institute than advises politicians based on scientific insights. However, the 2021 awarded as the “best think tank forum” indicates the self-classification of the conference within the realm of think tanks, see Munich Security Conference, “Best Think Tank Conference,” <https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/best-think-tank-conference/>.

²¹² Tobias Bunde et al., *Munich Security Report 2022: Turning the Tide – Unlearning Helplessness*, February 2022, <https://doi.org/10.47342/QAWU4724>, 6.

based on liberal values can deliver for their states' citizens and the world at large."²¹³ Who would have thought that Putin's war in Ukraine served precisely that function.

In 2023, with the war in Ukraine being fought for one year, this feeling of Westlessness was overcome. According to the report, the war gave a new purpose to the democratic alliances and enabled the West to counter the feeling of Westlessness and helplessness that featured so prominently in the 2022 report.²¹⁴ Reasserting the historical agency of the West, the report also states that this new ontological purpose goes beyond the transatlantic community since

the war on Ukraine has strengthened the idea of values-based cooperation between liberal democracies on a global scale. Some again refer to the "free world" or the "Global West", made up of "rich liberal democracies with strong security ties to the US" and "defined more by ideas than actual geography."²¹⁵

By using the typical Cold War rhetoric of a "free world" or "global west," the Western ontology associated with liberal values serves as an ordering mechanism, dividing the world again into de-spatialized blocs that share these values and those that oppose them.

Apart from the positive self-assurance and the reinstalled sense of ontological security, the report is also critical towards the universality of Western ontology, significantly with regard to human rights: "About 70 years later, the very understanding of human rights as universal can no longer be taken for granted".²¹⁶ Notably, Russia and China are mentioned as limiting the universal validity of human rights in the name of national sovereignty or the envisaged achievement of developmental goals. But the report also states the increasing tendency to question the universality of human rights within Western societies, be it from religious or right-wing groups or even American Presidents such as Trump. Concerning these tendencies, the report explains that "If Western democracies want to reduce suspicions regarding their human rights policies, they cannot allow themselves to apply double standards when implementing basic human rights."²¹⁷ Thus, once again, the Western ontology based on the assumed universality of its values is criticised with regard to the West's acting.

²¹³ Bunde et al., *Munich Security Report 2022*, 11.

²¹⁴ See Tobias Bunde et al., *Munich Security Report 2023: Re:vision*, February 2023, <https://doi.org/10.47342/ZBJA9198>, 25.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

The 2024 report has fewer articulations of Western identity. However, the report, reflecting on the shifting sentiments in Western societies about continued support for Ukraine, warned that

Tighter budgets, combined with domestic scepticism, already risk undermining public support for Ukraine, whose survival as an independent state rests on the collective assistance of the world's democracies – just as the global perception of the strength of the community of liberal democracies depends on Ukraine prevailing over Russian revisionism.²¹⁸

Again, the victory of Ukraine is linked to the preservation of the integrity of the West as such, which would suffer incremental losses if Ukraine does not win the war.

Other think tank reports likewise criticise key features of Western identity, which are considered an obstacle to shaping the order to enable the integration of more non-Western actors. The Spanish-based think tank IEEE considers the war to be a historical turning point, closing centuries of Western domination and outlines this post-Western order as characterized by more insecurity and inter-state tensions. They also point out that Asia is likely to be the place where the conflict about the new order will be fought and state the difficulties of the West in legitimizing their order in front of non-Western countries since “the Western powers were the protagonists of imperialism and colonialism and, thus, of the era of humiliation of more than half the world, which undermines any universalism of a Western-inspired system of standards and values.”²¹⁹ This questioning of the moral superiority of the West is further elaborated on in a paper published by the Brussels-based think tank VUB. After criticizing the “heroic” trope of reading the war as the most fundamental turning point in post-Cold War history since such a reading can complicate actual foreign policymaking, they likewise stated the problematic position of the West to shape the order to come because “The last vestiges of the moral superiority of trans-Atlanticism is evaporating and ‘the rest’ know it.”²²⁰ The historical entanglement of the West with

²¹⁸ Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2024*, ed. Thomas Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut & Leonard Schütte, February 2024, https://securityconference.org/assets/01_Bilder_Inhalte/03_Medien/02_Publikationen/2024/MSR_2024/MSR_Report_2024_190x250mm_EN_final_240507_DIGITAL.pdf, 23.

²¹⁹ José Pardo de Santayana, “From Ukraine to Taiwan: Learning to live in a worse world,” *IEEE*, April 2022 https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA28_2022_JOSPAR_Ucrania_ENG.pdf, 4.

²²⁰ Stefan Lehne, “After Russia’s War Against Ukraine: What Kind of World Order?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/02/after-russias-war-against-ukraine-what-kind-of-world-order?lang=en¢er=europe>.

colonialism,²²¹ its assumed universality of their values and governance system associated with an assumed moral superiority towards the rest as a central feature of Western identity is here understood as a veritable obstacle of the West to shape the future of the order, particularly with regard to the Global South.

However, not all think tanks paint such a dramatic picture of Western identity and its relation to the ability to shape the order. In fact, some think tanks reiterate the assumption of the moral superiority of the Western model and assert a more transformist policy towards non-democratic states. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, for example, explains that “The current conflict in Ukraine would have been unthinkable if the Kremlin had a democratically elected leadership. Two democracies – according to the *democratic peace theory* – do not go to war with each other.”²²² For this think tank, the war is a defined turning point in geopolitical history, which indicates that “if we want peace – we must seek a world in which every country is ruled in a way that provides for citizen control of political decisions and decision-makers, and equality in the exercise of control,”²²³ thus implying that the West should adopt a more transformative policy, for example by spending more on democracy-building initiatives abroad. However, the publication lamented that the West seems to adopt a different approach and is ready to sacrifice or cool down its democratic paradigm for the sake of its geopolitical position. This tendency is best exemplified by the invitation list of Biden’s Summit for Democracy that took place prior to the war in 2021. Criticizing the invitation list for the 2021 Summit, the Carnegie Europe Institute states that

The United States has placed itself in an awkward position by conflating its promotion of democratic governance with its geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia. The invitation list for the Summit for Democracy left out Hungary and Türkiye, but it included India, the Philippines, and Poland, which have problematic records on democracy but are important potential partners in meeting the China-Russia challenge. U.S. efforts to promote democracy would have better chances of success if they remained separate from geopolitical competition.²²⁴

²²¹ This does not mean that the West is the only civilizational entity entangled with colonialism. However, in the perception and memory culture of the Global South, the colonialization and associated humiliation coming from the West is much more vibrant than colonial endeavors of the Russian or Chinese empires.

²²² International IDEA, *The Ukraine War: Struggle to Defend Democracy in Europe*, June 2023, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/ukraine-war-struggle-to-defend-democracy-in-europe.pdf>, 2.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²²⁴ Lehne, “After Russia’s war.”

Although the Summit took place prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the invitation list for the 2023 follow-up summit stayed the same,²²⁵ indicating that the US is ready to sacrifice its imperative of democracy promoting and consolidation to be better positioned in the geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia.

As shown in this part, identity claims on the basis of shared values are largely used in speeches to justify the military and financial assistance of Ukraine as well as the sanctions towards Russia, which is framed as the central responsibility of Western democracies if they want to live up to their values. Western identity serves as the basis for these foreign policy measures, while the identity is re-articulated by implementing them. Moreover, the analysis also evinced that the war not only resulted in a new sense of ontological security in the West, being reassured about who they are and in what way they want to shape the world, but also the ontological changes the war has stimulated in the West, although differently for different actors. In the US, the leadership claim based on the discourse of American exceptionalism is reaffirmed, whereas, in the EU, the war led to a self-ascribed geopolitical shift through which the EU sees itself as a geopolitical actor capable of engaging in great power politics. This new geopolitical identity is expressed in the new enlargement impetus as well as their military assistance for a country in war. Both these ontological changes could also slightly be observed in the official documents, although identity claims were not as vocal as in the speeches. The think tank reports delivered a variety of different perspectives on Western identity and its relation to the war, oscillating between criticising the universal element of Western identity as an obstacle to shaping the order to more positive visions that reasserted the superiority of Western values and governance systems. The next part of this thesis will analyse the cluster of the perceived threat to the global order and further elaborate on the relationship between Western identity and the international order.

4.1) Threat to the Liberal Order

Similarly to the discursive embeddedness of the war into the cluster of Western identity and values, politicians in the West were likewise quick in framing the war as a general war about the future of the international order. Through various discursive moves, the war got

²²⁵ See “Summit for Democracy 2023: Interventions,” *State.gov*, <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy-2023/#Interventions>.

de-spatialized and integrated into a larger discursive framework within which the assumed battle between democracy and autocracy advanced to the central trope. Only one week after Putin launched the invasion, the president of the EU Council, Charles Michel, stated in a speech that “It is not only Ukraine that is under attack. International law, rules-based international order, democracy and human dignity are also under attack. This is geopolitical terrorism, pure and simple.”²²⁶

This framing of the war within the larger framework of an overall attack on the liberal order quickly became a central discursive cluster within the discursive response of the West. In his State of the Union Address immediately after the inception of the war, US President Biden employed a similar discourse, in which Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is understood as an attack on “the free world.” After condemning the Russian attack on its neighbour, Biden emphasized that the war inflicted the “freedom-loving nations” with a new sense of unity and clarified that “the free world is holding him accountable” Here, Biden uses the classical Cold War distinction between the free and the unfree-world, creating a spatialized inside-outside dichotomy, thereby reaffirming Western identity as the beacon of freedom. In the later part of his speech, he also refers to the democracy vs autocracy divide and ensures that “In the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security”²²⁷ By de-spatializing the war as a conflict between democracy and autocracy, Biden reiterates the promise of liberal peace theory and states that the world is favouring an international order based on democratic principles. Similarly, Ursula von der Leyen clarified in her State of the Union Address in 2022 that this is “a war on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy vs democracy.”²²⁸

A year after the war’s inception, the State of the Union Address in America reflected the shifting sentiment towards continuous support for Ukraine and the closer proximity to the US elections. Biden speaks for a long time about how his administration has improved the economy and only mentions Ukraine in the very last part of his speech. After having listed the sanctions the US, together with its allies, have imposed on Russia and stating

²²⁶ Michel, “Remarks at the Extraordinary Debate,” March 1, 2022.

²²⁷ Biden, “State of the Union Address, 2022,” March 1, 2022.

²²⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, “State of the Union Address, 2022,” *European Commission*, September 14, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493.

the importance of increasing deterrence to keep peace and stability, he summarized the American response to the war in Ukraine by reaffirming their leadership claim over the order: “Together, we did what America always does at our best: We led.”²²⁹ This reclaiming of US leadership in international affairs is also confirmed by Western allies such as the former Polish president Andrzej Duda, who stated in 2022 in reference to the war in Ukraine that “In a situation of real danger, it is confirmed that strong American leadership is needed in the world.”²³⁰ The consequences of declining US leadership and the resulting downfall of the liberal order are only partly outlined in the various speeches. Overall, the current order is contrasted with “a world of hopelessness and darkness,”²³¹ which would emerge if Russia could win the war. Moreover, other autocracies would be encouraged to start further wars with the goal of enlarging their territory.²³² The envisaged illiberal order is framed as one in which darkness prevails, people lack fundamental freedoms, and other autocrats have no hesitation in fulfilling their imperial fantasies. The Other against which the Self, e.g. the West and the current order, is distinguishing itself is, in this case, based on temporal imaginations rather than on spatial juxtaposition.

Another common feature of the discursive response to the war in Ukraine is the issue of responsibility. For Western politicians, it was clear from the beginning that the war was “unjustified and unprovoked”²³³ and that Putin was solely motivated by his “imperial inclinations.”²³⁴ When asked about Putin’s rationale behind the war, Biden clarified that “He wants to, in fact, reestablish the former Soviet Union. This is what this is about. And I think that his ambitions are completely contrary to the place where the rest of the world has arrived.”²³⁵ Thus, in the discourse concerning the responsibility of the war, one can state a total domination of the liberal geopolitical understanding of the war, completely dismissing realist approaches that emphasize Russian security concerns and the West’s

²²⁹ Biden, “State of the Union Address, 2023,” February 7, 2023.

²³⁰ Duda, “Speech by the President,” May 22, 2022.

²³¹ Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine,” March 26, 2022.

²³² See Biden, “State of the Union Address, 2023” February 7, 2023

²³³ Michel, “Remarks at the Extraordinary Debate,” March 1, 2022.

²³⁴ Duda, “Speech by the President,” May 22, 2022.

²³⁵ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on Russia’s Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine,” *The White House*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>.

partly responsible for the war by bypassing these concerns.²³⁶ Moreover, Biden creates an interesting temporal dichotomy by contrasting Putin's world with the current state of affairs and assigning that Putin remains in the past and has not coped with the political developments of the world after the end of the Cold War.

Putin's imperial agenda, coupled with the need for American leadership, is also reflected in various official foreign policy documents. The official security strategy of the Biden-Harris administration is the most direct document in that regard. Right at the beginning, the paper clarifies that "Around the world, the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."²³⁷ However, unlike in the speeches, more actors and their assumed threat to the order become relevant, indicating the emergence of a discursive delimitation of a web of identities based on various degrees of otherness. In the strategy paper, China is framed as the more significant threat to the order since "The People's Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit [...]."²³⁸ Overall, the paper highlights that "Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad,"²³⁹ recycling the democracy vs autocracy dichotomy that featured prominently in the speeches. As a result of this competition over the order and the dominant governance model, cooperation in transnational issues such as climate change, pandemics, or migration becomes more difficult.²⁴⁰

Facing this competition about the order and the increased difficulty of cooperation in a fragmented order, the strategy paper also outlines the policy measures the US has to implement to maintain its privileged position in international affairs. First, and most importantly, the US has to invest in new coalitions to strengthen its vision of a "free, open, prosperous, and secure international order."²⁴¹ However, unlike the democracy vs

²³⁶ This statement should not indicate that the realist explanation of the war is more accurate than the liberal one. It shows only that in the West, this realist explanation is completely negated.

²³⁷ Biden, *Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy*, 2.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

autocracy trope implies, these new coalitions will not be based on a specific model of governance but rather on their commitment to the rules-based order:

These coalitions will include all nations that share these objectives. At the heart of this coalition, to ensure it is as transformative as possible, are democratic nations who share our interests and values. To make our coalitions as inclusive as possible, we will also work with any country that supports a rules-based order while we continue to press all partners to respect and advance democracy and human rights.²⁴²

By outlining these new coalitions, the Biden administration creates a new spatial hierarchy in relation to order and based on the respective governance system. While democracies are, in this vision, more entitled to transform and shape the order, non-democratic countries that nevertheless want to maintain a rules-based order are entitled to cooperate in transnational policy areas. The degrees of otherness regarding the democracy vs autocracy divide is thus based on their commitment to the rules-based order, with autocracies that do not challenge the status quo displayed as more valid partners than revisionist states that want to challenge it, indicating a more pragmatic approach to autocratic states than the autocracy vs democracy discourse in the speeches suggests.

Nevertheless, according to the paper, building these coalitions will not be enough. Since, in the past, America often led by example and by showing the world that democracy has the best answers to political problems, they also need to invest in democracy building at home, significantly within the context of rising dissatisfaction with the liberal order in the West in general, and in the US in particular.²⁴³ Moreover, America needs to invest more in critical technology to become more independent of critical supply chains that could be disrupted by competition over the order. Lastly, the US also needs to spend more on deterrence since this is their primary leverage when governing international issues and conflicts.²⁴⁴ The strategy is also keen to emphasize that continued American leadership and engagement in international affairs is not a self-less act but rather tied to the prosperity of the American people: “Our strategy is rooted in our national interests: to protect the security of the American people; to expand economic prosperity and opportunity, and to realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.”²⁴⁵

²⁴² Ibid., 16.

²⁴³ See Ibid., 14f.

²⁴⁴ See Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 7. The analytical and thus artificial distinction of the discursive cluster becomes evident in this quote since the policy measures are not only justified through a threat perception towards the international

The asserted degrees of otherness when it comes to threats to the global order are also reflected in the past three Annual Threat Assessments of US intelligence services. In 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the paper stated that “While Russia is challenging the United States and some norms in the international order in its war of territorial aggression, China has the capability to directly attempt to alter the rules-based order in every realm and across multiple regions [...]”.²⁴⁶ Likewise, regional actors such as Iran and North Korea are listed in the document as states with revisionist intentions.²⁴⁷ That China is the more pressing threat to the order is also emphasized in the 2023 and 2024 Annual Threat Assessment.²⁴⁸ The current 2024 version also acknowledges the importance of discourse for shaping the current order:

The world that emerges from this tumultuous period will be shaped by whoever offers the most persuasive arguments for how the world should be governed, how societies should be organized, and which systems are most effective at advancing economic growth and providing benefits for more people [...].²⁴⁹

This relevance of discourse is also reflected in the Strategic Foresight 2023 of the European Union: “Tensions in the global order are accompanied by a “battle of narratives [...]”.²⁵⁰

In comparison, the discursive cluster of the threat to the rules-based order is framed differently in speeches than in official documents. By using highly emotional language coupled with strong rhetorical pictures embedded in a battle between “light” and “darkness,” Western politicians are discursively de-spatializing the war and recontextualizing it within the framework of the upcoming battle between democracies and autocracies. This central dichotomy is displayed more nuanced in the official paper, in which a more pragmatic approach towards the assumed threat of autocracies is suggested. According to these documents, future cooperation should be based on the respective actor's

order, but also by framing then as realizing the quintessence of “the American way of life,” and thus by ontological references.

²⁴⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 2022, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf>, 4.

²⁴⁷ See Ibid.

²⁴⁸ See Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 2023, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>, 4. and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 2024, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>, 5.

²⁴⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 2024, 5.

²⁵⁰ European Commission, *Strategic Foresight Report*, 3.

commitment to the order rather than on their internal governance system. The pragmatism in dealing with the threats is also expressed in the chosen term “competition” rather than “battle” or “conflict” to describe the nature of the upcoming changes in the order. This discursive de-escalation, however, features most prominently in the think tank papers.

Despite their fundamental differences in how to deal with the war and the future world order, almost any think tank paper agrees that the Russian war in Ukraine is a general war against the current order. The most vocal think tank in that regard is the Munich Security Conference. In 2023, the issue of the transformation of the international order was the main subject of the conference, indicating the importance of this issue for Western politicians, especially after the war in Ukraine. Right at the beginning, the conference paper explains that “the Russian war against Ukraine is just the most brazen attack on the rules-based order. Revisionist actors are trying to undermine international law in many different ways.”²⁵¹ Putin is described as wanting to replace the rules-based order “with 19th-century principles of unconstrained power politics that allow big countries to carve out regional spheres of influence, irrespective of the wishes of local populations.”²⁵² Again, Putin and the envisaged order that would emerge if he were victorious are framed as a temporal other, one in which the world would return to the imperial wars of the 19th century.

In addition to the more vocal description of the imagined illiberal order, the report also creates a very nuanced picture of the current state of the order. After stating the broad support that the West could gather in its response to the Russian war in Ukraine, the report states that

the fact that a considerable number of actors have not condemned Russia’s aggression shows that it is not enough for us to simply defend the status quo. If we do not address the resentment that countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia feel toward the international order, which has not always served their interests, we will struggle to win the fence-sitters as allies in the defense of key rules and principles. As this report argues, we need a vision of the international order that more people can subscribe to, as well as a larger coalition of responsible stakeholders, if we want to preserve the core principles of this order.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Bunde et al., *Munich Security Report 2023*, 6.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

The Munich conference paper thus stresses the need to reform the current order since it has failed to deliver the promise of liberal peace and prosperity, especially to many nations in the Global South. This dissatisfaction is not only visible in the UN voting pattern, in which a resolution that condemned Russia's war was rejected or abstained by a total of 39 countries, combining almost half of the world population²⁵⁴ but also in the sanction regime, with the West being the only political entity that has adopted sanctions against Russia.²⁵⁵ The issue of sanctions indicates that the Western discourse about the war and its assumed threat towards the liberal order is not persuasive in many non-western countries, highlighting the dissatisfaction of many states with the current order's structure and power diffusion.

The criticism of the current order is further elaborated on in the Security Conference Paper 2024. After complaining that the current order transforms in the opposite direction than suggested in the 2023 paper, the report highlights again the reason for the overall dissatisfaction with the current order: "Rather than providing equal benefits, for many countries, the global economic order was exploitive."²⁵⁶ This exploitive nature of the economic side of the liberal order is also used to explain the non-compliance of non-Western states with the Western sanction regime towards Russia:

From the perspective of the share of humanity living in poverty or suffering from protracted conflicts, calls to defend the abstract rules-based order and shoulder the costs that come with it seem tone-deaf. According to this view, Western emphasis on the "rules-based order" is hypocritical and aimed at preserving the status quo of Western domination, including over the Global South.²⁵⁷

Confronting this reality of the current order, most think tank reports follow the Munich Security Conference Paper in its suggestion for a need to reform the order, thereby also highlighting the reasons why many states in the Global South do not comply with the Western framing of the war: "The Russian narrative that the United States and NATO bear major responsibility for the conflict found open ears in many developing countries. Anti-

²⁵⁴ Despite the broad support for the resolution that condemned Russia's war against Ukraine (141) and the support for the resolution that condemned the illegal annexation of parts of Ukraine (143), "those that abstained or voted against the condemnation [...] are home to almost 50 percent of the global population," Ibid., 19.

²⁵⁵ See Peter Piatetsky, "Which Countries Are Taking Action on Ukraine," *Castellum.ai*, <https://www.castellum.ai/insights/which-countries-are-taking-action-on-ukraine>. Even some countries that are considered key actors of the West, such as Israel, do not have participated in the Western sanctioning of Russia.

²⁵⁶ Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2024*, 17.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

Western sentiments, partly fueled by the legacy of colonialism and resentment against Western double standards, played a role.”²⁵⁸ From this perspective, another interesting self-other temporal distinction can be derived. The reformist discourse, as a response to the threats to the world order, uses the unreformed order and its ambiguous reception as it exists today to contrast with an envisaged reformed order, one in which power and benefits are more equally distributed. However, despite the overall emphasis on the necessity of reforming the current order, not a single report becomes more concrete by outlining the explicit steps that need to be taken in order to achieve such a reformed order.

Some reports even go further than only criticizing the state of the current order by suggesting that it is highly unlikely that a new order will emerge, despite the rise of China and the framing of the war as being fought against the rules-based order. For example, highlighting the economic interdependence of all nations in a globalized economy as well as the Chinese and Russian perspectives on the UN system, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace stresses that “despite their mistrust and hostility towards the West, China and Russia do not question the multilateral system that evolved under U.S. leadership since World War II. They position themselves not as revolutionary founders of an alternative system but rather as committed members of an established order[...].” This reading of the position of Russia and China towards the order stands in stark contrast to the discourses in the speeches and official papers, in which both these states are displayed as the central opponents of the rules-based order. However, a few sentences later, the paper emphasizes that the actions of China and Russia do not comply with this self-perception of both states. Nevertheless, for this think tank, the prospects of a future order are very different than those analyzed hitherto:

Although the current order is clearly weakening, it seems unlikely that there will be a fundamental restructuring of the international system. It would likely take another global disaster for there to be a fresh start, similar to when the United Nations was created after World War II. At the same time, a complete relapse into a Hobbesian world of unrestrained and selfish competition is also quite unlikely.²⁵⁹

This view of the continuation of the current order is supported by the Egmont-Institute, a Brussels-based think tank, which also suggested that the main structure of the current order is likely to stay intact and outlines a very different approach the West should adopt

²⁵⁸ Lehne, “After Russia’s War.”

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

towards China. Since China has not yet fully supported Russia, e.g., through weapon deliveries, the report advises not to overemphasize the democracy vs autocracy divide because China probably has the most influence over Russia and thus can contribute to a peaceful solution.²⁶⁰ Concerning the envisaged transformation of the order, the report ensures that China is also interested in maintaining the basic rules because it “needs the stability that these rules create.” The report also suggests making the order inclusive for all powers, including China and a post-war Russia, since “Only a world order that includes all great powers of the day can be truly stable.”²⁶¹ By outlining the future of the order in such a way, this report departs massively from the speeches and the official documents in which China is framed as the main threat to the order. Instead, they suggest that China wants to maintain the order, and the West does, in fact, need China to ensure the order’s stability.

As indicated in this part, the discursive cluster of the assumed threat to the liberal order is framed very differently in different types of documents. However, most statements employ the prominent democracy vs autocracy trope, displaying autocracies and their behaviour as the most imminent threat to the rules-based order. Through this de-spatialization of the war by integrating it into the framework of democracy vs autocracy, Western politicians intend to gather support for their response from non-Western countries by implying the kind of order that would emerge if Putin wins the war, one in which their security concerns are endangered as well. The Other in this discourse is the temporal-imagined Other of this envisaged illiberal order. To prevent such an order, the US needs to reaffirm its natural leadership.

Similarly, the official documents also emphasize the need for American leadership and outline the policy measures that need to be adopted, such as coalition building, democracy enhancement at home and investments in technology and deterrence. Unlike the speeches, the discourse within the official documents is much more pragmatic and deescalating, as is also indicated by the use of the term competition rather than conflict or battle. The more pragmatic approach is further stressed in the think tank papers, which

²⁶⁰ Sven Biscop, Bart Dessein & Jasper Roctus, “Putin Is Creating the Multipolar World Order He (Thought He) Wanted,” *Egmont Institute*, March 2022, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/03/spb156-sven.pdf?type=pdf>, 3.

²⁶¹ See *Ibid.*

also elucidate that the current order needs to be reformed without delivering concrete examples of how this might be achieved. This criticism towards the liberal order is rooted in another temporal self-other duality, only this time, the Other is understood as the un-reformed Self.

4.2) Discussion

The discourse analysis conducted until this point was entrenched in a thin constructivist understanding of reality to prove the thesis of Lethi and Pennanen by showing how crisis talk can serve as a powerful discursive tool being able to translate into a strong sense of ontological security and a rediscovery of agency. Although the analysis indicated that this functions differently for the two clusters, they nevertheless form a relatively coherent discourse about the war in Ukraine and its implications for Western identity and the international order.

In chapter two, Western identity and the concept of order were introduced as the two basic discourses upon which the clusters of the analytical chapter are based, allowing for the integration of the discourses about the emergence of a new world order in the respective clusters. These two basic discourses equipped the target audience with conceptual language and tropes as well as an extensive system of signification through which meaning could be asserted to the war in accordance with these discourses, allowing for the eventual justification of extraordinary policy measures. The Russian war in Ukraine fundamentally affected these basic discourses, although to a different degree and differently for different actors.

As shown in the analysis, the war in Ukraine definitely resulted in a new sense of ontological security in the West. Partly, the war stimulated an ontological shift. In the US, the discourse about Western identity and values in relation to the war resulted in a reaffirmation of US exceptionalism coupled with reclaiming leadership pretensions over the international order. The interconnectedness of US identity with the international order already indicates the relation between the two discursive clusters since the leadership claim also forms a central aspect of American ontology. In order to reclaim and consolidate this leadership, the US should invest in critical technology, engage in coalition building and enhance its deterrence capabilities. Thus, the war in Ukraine did not result in an

ontological shift in the US; rather, it served to reaffirm their identity based on claims of superiority and exceptionalism.

For the European Union, the war resulted in an ontological shift with the emergence of a new geopolitical identity. The new European Union's acting is contrasted with their old approaches, significantly their eastern policy towards Russia and their ability to respond to great power politics. Unlike in 2009, the EU sees itself as ready to engage in geopolitical power plays. The Other through which the EU derives this identity are still the autocracies, with a particular emphasis on Russia, but also the pre-war EU, being more naive in their transformational capabilities towards autocratic regimes. Coping with this new reality, the EU now, for the first time, delivers weapons to a country in war and envisages a continued enlargement towards Eastern Europe, with the intention to gain more geopolitical weight. The new geopolitical identity serves as the foundation for these measures and is simultaneously expressed and reaffirmed by their implementation.

Within the cluster of Western values and identity, a highly emotional tone coupled with ontological references could be detected as a central feature of the speeches. Naturally, this is due to the target audience being the domestic population in front of which the measures such as military and financial assistance as well as the sanctions need to be justified. This justification works through the use of emotional language through which the war is framed as an existential battle between "good" and "evil." Thus, emotional language represents a key feature of the structure of persuasion concerning the Western response to the Russian war in Ukraine. In contrast to the speeches, official documents lacked emotional language since these papers are of a different genre and do not have an explicit audience, and therefore, they can renounce clear ontological articulations. In reverse, the think tank papers again entailed large passages with ontological references. Again, the target audience can help explain this tendency. Since politicians and their advisors mostly read think tank papers, the goal of these reports is to persuade decision-makers to take the course of action suggested by the think tank. Thus, similar to the speeches, think tank reports use ontological references and emotional language as a central ingredient of their structure of persuasion.

The relation between the two analytical clusters becomes even more evident in the various instances in which Western identity is critiqued in speeches or think tank papers.

Here, key features of Western identity, such as the assumed universality, the double standards in applying and judging these universal norms, the historical rootedness in colonialism, and the often implied moral superiority, are considered obstacles to maintaining respective reforming the order. In this part of the discursive cluster, it is argued that the West first needs to reform itself before it can successfully reform the international order.

When applying the three dimensions of the essence of what constitutes political communities, it can be argued that the West still considers itself as non-geographic, as expressed in the use of Cold War rhetoric, such as the delimitation between the free and the unfree world, and membership in this community is realized through values commitments rather than geographical location. Regarding the factor of time, the West frames itself as a modern political actor, which is significantly contrasted with Putin's war, which is widely understood as being conducted within the framework of 19th-century power politics.²⁶² Lastly, the Western political community sees itself as having the ethical responsibility to support and protect Ukraine against Russian aggression on the basis of shared values, identity, and governance models.

Within the cluster of the assumed threat to the liberal order, the dichotomy between democracy and autocracy, which also featured prominently in the ontological cluster, could be identified as a central ingredient. By using this trope, Western politicians can de-spatialize the war and thus disentangle it from its regional context by integrating it into the more significant battle between two opposing governance systems. This cluster served two purposes. First, the goal of this de-spatialization is to gather support for the Western response and sanctions from non-Western countries, particularly the so-called global South. Secondly, as could be derived from the suggested measures the West should adopt in response to the assumed shift in the international order, this trope ought to justify extensive investments in critical technology, new coalition building, and, most importantly, deterrence. Within this cluster, the relevance of discourses and narratives to shape the future was acknowledged, indicating an awareness of the thin constructivist

²⁶² Despite the fact that the 19th century international order was also marked by interstate efforts to prevent or solve conflicts through negotiations, I use the term 19th century power politics since this reference is made in the sources to explain and characterize Putin's war against Ukraine.

understanding of reality, allowing politicians to create a particular picture of reality via discourses.

Again, the speeches of this cluster were characterized by the employment of highly emotional language, framing the war in terms of “light” and “dark” and as the final battle between democracy and autocracy. The order that Western politicians assume to emerge if Putin wins can be derived through a process of linking and differentiation, contrasting the current liberal order with the prospect of the illiberal order. Since the current order provides stability, rules for regulating state interactions and mechanisms to protect citizens against wars and human rights abuses, the illiberal order would be marked by unconstrained power of states being able to conduct any geopolitical adventure they aspire to, and there is no power that could put them in check. Thus, the order is imagined to be unstable and loaded with interstate tension, eventually leading to more interstate wars. Moreover, autocrats can abuse human rights in their domestic territory without being stopped or at least sanctioned by an external power. The Other, in this case, is temporal rather than spatial, and the temporal aspect of the Other operates on two levels. It is temporal because the imagined other against which the Self, e.g. the present, is delineated lies in the future, and it is also temporal because the assumed order in emergence resembles the order of the 19th century, being marked by great power politics conducted with a social-Darwinist mindset of survival of the fittest.

The official documents and the think tank papers contained less emotional language and instead adopted a pragmatic and de-escalating discourse about the relation between the war and the prospect of a new world order. With regard to the threat perception, degrees of otherness in association with the assumed threat to the liberal order could be observed. Unlike the speeches, these documents all emphasized that China is the greatest threat to the liberal order, having the financial and military capabilities to undermine its fundamentals. Iran and North Korea are also framed as threats to the order, although on a regional rather than a global level.

A degree of otherness could also be detected in the suggestion of new coalition building, where democracies that share the values of the West are displayed as the heart piece of the new coalitions and critical supply chains. Nevertheless, given the pragmatism the West is likely to adopt in confronting the current geopolitical shifts, non-democratic

countries that have an interest in maintaining the current order are also part of these coalitions. Therefore, the discourse about new coalition building creates a spatial hierarchy, with democracies at the top, non-democracies with a commitment to the liberal order in the middle, and non-democracies revisionist states at the very bottom.

When applying the spatial, temporal, and ethical responsibility analysis to this cluster, it can be argued that the spatial dimension of this cluster runs along the lines of status-quo and revisionist states and is thus more qualitative than actual spatial. The temporal dimension is similar to those of the ontological cluster since the current order is displayed as the modern order, whereas the envisaged order would be entrenched in 19th-century imperial geopolitics. The ethical responsibility of this community or coalition is not only to ensure the order's survival but also to reform it and make it more appealing to non-Western states. Thus, tendencies to transform the hegemonic order into a more constitutive one are likewise at the centre of this discursive cluster.

A further observation visible in both clusters is the total domination of the liberal explanation of the war, which can be labelled as the central regime of truth in the discourse. Through this regime of truth, a realist reading of the conflict and suggested solutions are invalidated, eventually limiting policy choices politicians can make to provide a solution for the war and the general conflict in which it is embedded. Interestingly, though, former NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg is the only one who implied a realist reading²⁶³ of the reasons for the war when he stated in a speech that in 2021, Russia “actually sent a draft treaty that they wanted NATO to sign, to promise no more NATO enlargement. That was what he sent us. And what was a pre-condition for not invade Ukraine. Of course we didn’t sign that.”²⁶⁴ Apart from this statement, no relevant politician in the West considers NATO enlargement as valid *casus belli*, instead emphasizing that the war is entirely unprovoked.

²⁶³ This does not mean that a liberal explanation of the cause of the war does not consider NATO expansion as a pre-text. However, within the analyzed sources, NATO expansion in relation to the conflict was not mentioned, and the war was framed as being motivated by imperial ambitions to reinstall the Soviet Union or as a general war against liberalism and democratic principles rather than a war that is being fought due to Russia's security considerations and their rejection of further NATO expansion. See Harald Edinger, “Offensive Ideas: Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Putin’s War on Ukraine,” *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November 2022): 1874ff, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia217>.

²⁶⁴ Jens Stoltenberg, “Opening Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Joint Meeting of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) Followed by an Exchange of Views with Members of the European Parliament,” *North*

In addition to this observation, another common tendency in both clusters is to familiarize the war and the prospect of a new world order through historical references. Through the use of Cold War rhetoric, sometimes even with explicit references to the Soviet Union and Putin's assumed intention to recreate it, the framing of Russia's foreign policy as being impacted by an imperial-tsarist mindset, or the references to the 19th-century geopolitics in which Russia is trapped and in which they want to trap the whole world, the event is familiarized, eventually decreasing the risk of ontological insecurity.

A further interesting observation can be made with regard to agency and responsibilities, where a complex web of interrelated agencies and responsibilities is created in the discourse. Military interventions justified through humanitarian motives, as argued by Hansen, are marked by a sense of non-agency of the local population.²⁶⁵ However, the response to the war in Ukraine is not a military intervention but unprecedented military and financial assistance. Thus, rather than lacking agency, Ukraine's agency to defend itself against Russia depends on the Western agency to provide sufficient assistance. In the next step, the historical agency of the West to shape the international order depends on Ukraine's agency to win the war, thus indicating the interrelation of Ukrainian and Western agencies with regard to the order. This agency is also coupled with responsibility since the discourse frames the West as having the responsibility to provide such assistance. In contrast, Putin is displayed as the only person responsible for the war, evincing the liberal reading of the conflict as the central regime of truth of the discourse.

Eventually, as it was argued in the theoretical chapter, the functionality of a crisis discourse is not judged by the accuracy of the crisis display but by its efficiency in convincing the target audience of the aptness of the responses to the crisis. Using a survey conducted in May 2024 by the think tank European Council on Foreign Relations, it becomes visible that the efficiency of the ontological cluster varies in the different member-states. In Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Czechia, Switzerland, Germany, and France, a majority of the population thinks that "Europe should push Ukraine towards negotiating a peace deal with Russia." Reversely, a majority in Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Great

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), September 7, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_218172.htm.

²⁶⁵ See Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 127.

Britain, Sweden and Estonia think that “Europe should support Ukraine to fight to regain the territories occupied by Russia.”²⁶⁶

A similar split can be observed in the efficiency of the threat to order cluster, where only a majority in Poland, Estonia, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands are in favour of increased defence spending as a consequence of the war. In contrast, a majority in Great Britain, Czechia, France, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy are not in favour of increased military spending since that would cut off funds from other important policy areas. In the US, the election of Donald Trump speaks for itself. It seems that the new world order discourse in which the geopolitical response of the West is embedded is likewise not convincing for the American public. Thus, the efficiency of the order cluster and its derived policy measures in the form of enhancing deterrence is questionable, and it seems that it does not resonate well with other societal trends and developments. A similar inefficiency of the order cluster and the democracy vs autocracy trope can be observed in the Global South. Despite the broad condemnation of Russia in the UN, at this point, only Western countries have imposed sanctions on Russia or provided military and financial assistance. This is, of course, also due to the West having the most financial and military capabilities to provide such assistance, but it also indicates that many non-Western countries do not agree with the democracy vs autocracy trope, as well as the broad dissatisfaction with the current order. Now, the West must deliver on its promises to reform the order, restructure power diffusion, and make the order more appealing to non-Western countries. If it does fail to materialize this promise, the war is likely to result only in a revival of the fittest rather than a reformed order marked by more equality between the individual states.

5.) Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to analyse the Western discourse about the prospected emergence of a new world order after the Russian war in Ukraine and to show how extraordinary foreign policy measures can be justified through ontological references within the framework of order. Central to such an analysis was a thin constructivist understanding

²⁶⁶ See Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, “The Meaning of Sovereignty: Ukrainian and European Views of Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, July 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/The-meaning-of-sovereignty-Ukrainian-and-European-views-of-Russias-war-on-Ukraine-v2.pdf>, 20.

of reality. This understanding allows to acknowledge the agency of actors involved in foreign policy-making, who can create a certain picture of reality via discourse and base their policy suggestions on this displayment. Analyzing the new world order discourse as it is produced and diffused by state-craft intellectuals enabled an understanding of the war far beyond its regional context.

A prerequisite for this analysis is an emphasis on the relevance of discourse and language for the creation of reality and the deriving of apt policy measures. From this perspective, language is not regarded as the sole device through which actors can describe the world around them but as an actual device through which this world comes into existence in the first place. It is through language and discourse that meaning is asserted to places, peoples, and events. Thus, the war in Ukraine only obtains meaning beyond its regional context by integrating it into the basic discourses of the West and order, whereby the war can be understood as an attack on Western values and identity in general and against the liberal rules-based order in particular. The relevancy of language and discourse is also acknowledged by foreign policymakers who stress the necessity of a positive discourse as a precondition to shape the international order, which ultimately validates the use of post-structuralist research methods in the field of international relations.

The need for such a discourse surrounding the Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is derived from the unprecedentedness of this response in terms of sanctions imposed on Russia, financial and military assistance, as well as in terms of future investments – significantly in deterrence - that is framed as a requirement if the West wants to maintain the order and its privileged position within. These measures, however, come with a high cost for the Western population, and thus, they require extensive discursive work to persuade the respective populations of their necessity.

Structuring this persuasive discourse along the line of societal trends, story-telling, and ontological references, it can be argued that the discourse in which the response is embedded resonates with the societal trend of a general crisis of liberalism and the liberal order, as indicated by the increased popularity of right-wing political parties that reject the liberal paradigm of the West. In the next step, this general crisis is framed as a story of the final battle between autocracy and democracy, light and darkness, freedom and tyranny. This story then touches upon the essence of Western ontology equated with

democracy, freedom, human rights, and an assumed moral superiority, which eventually allows not only for an identity formation *ex negativo* by contrasting and deriving these attributes from the negation of them by the Other, e.g. the non-Western autocracies, but also for the justification of the adopted measures in response to the war. However, it is crucial to emphasize that a similar discourse exists in Russia and other non-Western actors, which precisely serves the same function and is used by Putin to justify his attack on Ukraine. In the end, “Neither side lives up to the proclaimed standards and norms of either ontology.”²⁶⁷

To structure the analysis of the source corpus, the overall discourse was analytically divided into two discursive clusters based on the basic discourses of the West and order. Both these basic discourses provided an extensive system of signification and equipped the domestic and international audience with a conceptual language through which meaning could be asserted to the geopolitical events in Ukraine.

The results of the analysis indicate the complexity of this discourse, being marked by a variety of opinions and perspectives on the war and its assumed impact on the international order, which indicates the difficulties of the West in formulating a coherent political response due to its non-spatialized nature and the fact that no actor can speak on behalf of the whole the West. Nevertheless, overall, the results elucidate the reaffirmation of ontological security and agency of the West experiencing a new sense of unity and purpose as a consequence of the Russian invasion. The war helped the West to overcome the feeling of “Westlessness” and gave it a new ontological purpose in supporting Ukraine and maintaining, respectively, reforming the liberal international order. In general, the analysis clarifies how crisis talk can be translated into ontological security by reassuring the concerned actors of who they are and what their role in the international environment is.

This new agency of the West is expressed through the geopolitical measures it adopted after the inception of the war in Ukraine. Interestingly, though, the different discursive clusters served different geopolitical purposes. The strong references to Western identity and values were more employed to justify the military and financial assistance of Ukraine as well as the imposition of sanctions towards Russia in front of the respective domestic

²⁶⁷ Andrey Kricskovic and Richard Sakwa, “War in Ukraine: The Clash of Norms and Ontologies,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022): 98. <https://jmss.org/article/view/76589>.

population. In contrast, the order cluster was more targeted towards non-Western actors to convince them of the appropriateness of the Western response to Russia's invasion so that they eventually participate in the sanction regime. However, this cluster was also aimed at the internal audience in order to legitimize future investments, especially for the development of the military capacities of the Western members, which are necessary to maintain the rules-based order and the privileged position of the West.

As part of this discursive justification, a variety of self-other constructions could be detected, which were often embedded in a multilayered web of identities marked by degrees of otherness rather than a stringent self-other duality. Despite these degrees, however, autocracies remained the central Other against which the West derived its own ontology. The degrees were particularly visible in the threat perception these autocracies are assumed to pose to the liberal democracy and the rules-based order, with China being the most significant threat, whereas Russia, Iran and North Korea are more perceived as regional troublemakers that lack the economic and military capacities of China and thus are not perceived as such a big threat to the order. Furthermore, these degrees also play a role in the envisaged coalition building as a response to the perceived threat to the order. In these coalitions, liberal democracies still form the centrepiece, whereas non-democracies that still want to maintain the status quo likewise form a part of this coalition, significantly with regard to transnational policy issues such as migration or climate change. Through these coalitions based on degrees of otherness, a new spatial hierarchy based on governance systems, as well as a commitment to the rules-based order, is created.

The Other against which the Self, e.g. the West, is delineated is not only spatial but appears to be rather based on temporal considerations. In this case, the other is not a particular spatially situated actor but the imagined illiberal order that is assumed to emerge if Putin is able to win the war. This imagined order entails two temporal dimensions since, on the one hand, the present, e.g. the liberal rules-based order, is contrasted with the future, e.g. the illiberal order, and, on the other hand, this order is imagined to resemble the geopolitical order of the 19th century being characterized by imperial power politics unregulated in the absence of norms, rules, and global governance institutions that enforce those rules. Partly acknowledging the necessity of reforming the present order to prevent the emergence of the illiberal future order, a further self-other duality based on

temporal aspects is created since the present unreformed order is contrasted with the reformed order, although the sources did not explain how such a reformed order would look concretely.

In addition to the variety of self-other dualities which inflicted a new sense of ontological security on the West, some ontological shifts could also be observed. This is particularly visible in the European Union, which now, after the war, sees itself as an important geopolitical actor that is able to respond to great power politics. This new identity is contrasted with the old non-geopolitical Union and expressed through the assistance towards Ukraine, but also through the new enlargement impetus the war stimulated within the EU, eventually giving it more geopolitical weight. Reversely, the war did not result in such an ontological shift under the Biden administration. In the US, the war resulted in a reaffirmation of US leadership claims based on ideas associated with US exceptionalism and superiority. Eventually, the war led to a discursive reproduction and re-articulation of American hegemony within the context of the war in Ukraine.

Another finding of this study concerns the constitution of hegemonic discourses and regimes of truths surrounding the new world order discourse in the West. The central regime of truth is the liberal reading of the *casus belli* of the war in Ukraine and the conflict in general, which eventually restricts policy choices and hinders critical self-reflection about the role of the West in this conflict. This regime of truth carries the risk of turning the war into an ontological security dilemma, which is probably already the case. Moreover, the discursive response to the war, significantly with regard to responsibilities, is embedded in the hegemonic discourse that defines the West and its role in the world. According to this discourse, the West is responsible for maintaining the current order so deeply interwoven with its identity and, therefore, must do anything to prevent a Russian victory in Ukraine. However, in this discourse, self-critical aspects could be detected, and some politicians and advisors suggest that the West first needs to reform itself before it can reform the order. The future will tell if the West is ready to make concessions and disentangle its self-ascribed ownership of the order from its ontology and make the order more equal and appealing to non-Western countries. If the West does fail to deliver on this suggestion, the war in Ukraine and the discourse about the prospects of a new world order will probably result only in the revival of the fittest.

Future research about this subject could take a variety of avenues. First, it would be essential to complete this research by engaging in a comparative analysis to analyze how the discourse about a new world order in relation to the Russian war in Ukraine is conducted by relevant non-Western actors such as Russia and China. Moreover, it would be very interesting to see how countries in the Global South perceive this relationship, although scholars probably run into the same problem as this thesis since there is not a singular actor that can claim to speak on behalf of the whole Global South. A further research direction could contrast the discourse about the new world order and the war in Ukraine, as displayed in this thesis, with the discourse that will be created and diffused by the upcoming Trump administration. Considering that Trump himself forms a part of the overall crisis of liberalism and the rules-based order, it would be very interesting to see how his administration relates the war to the maintenance of the current order and Western ontology in general.

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