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Introduction: The Russia–Ukraine War as a Formative Event in Global Security Policy?

Elena Dück · Bernhard Stahl 

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Abstract The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was perceived as a shock by Western European publics and observers alike. Thus, when German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced an epochal change, a *Zeitenwende* in German foreign policy, the term became a keyword in the political as well as the academic discussion about the changes that the Russia–Ukraine war brought about. The introduction to this special issue starts by empirically sketching the reactions of international actors to the attack. In addition, the naming of the conflict deserves some attention considering the normative issues of the conflict. A brief state-of-the-art analysis demonstrates how the contributions are located in the academic debate. Theoretically speaking, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine revives a long-standing (ontological) debate about continuity and the possibility of change in international politics and foreign policy. The presentation of the single contributions pays respect to these theoretical perspectives and addresses change through the prism of different countries (Germany, Brazil, Poland, the United States, Brazil), transnational actors, religious actors, private military companies, and international law. Overall, the findings challenge the idea of the Russia–Ukraine war as a formative event in global security policy and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the war’s implications and consequences.

Keywords Russia–Ukraine war · Reactions to the war · Change in global security policy · Implications for world order · Foreign policy change

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Einleitung: der Russland-Ukraine-Krieg als prägendes Ereignis in der globalen Sicherheitspolitik?

Zusammenfassung Der russische Einmarsch in die Ukraine am 24. Februar 2022 wurde von der westeuropäischen Öffentlichkeit und Beobachtern gleichermaßen als Schock empfunden. Als Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz einen epochalen Wandel, eine Zeitenwende in der deutschen Außenpolitik ankündigte, wurde der Begriff daher zu einem Schlüsselwort in der politischen, aber auch wissenschaftlichen Diskussion über die Veränderungen, die der Russland-Ukraine-Krieg mit sich gebracht hat. In der Einleitung des Sonderheftes werden zunächst die Reaktionen der internationalen Akteure auf den Angriff empirisch skizziert. Darüber hinaus verdient die Namensgebung des Konflikts angesichts der normativen Fragen des Konflikts eine gewisse Aufmerksamkeit. Eine kurze State-of-the-art-Analyse zeigt, wie die Beiträge in der wissenschaftlichen Debatte verortet sind. Theoretisch gesehen belebt der Einmarsch in die Ukraine eine langjährige (ontologische) Debatte über Kontinuität und die Möglichkeit des Wandels in der internationalen Politik und Außenpolitik. Die Darstellung der einzelnen Beiträge trägt dieser theoretischen Perspektive Rechnung und thematisiert den Wandel in Bezug auf verschiedene Länder (Deutschland, Polen, USA, Brasilien), transnationale Akteure, hier religiöse Akteure und PMCs, und das Völkerrecht. Insgesamt stellen die Ergebnisse der Beiträge die Vorstellung vom russisch-ukrainischen Krieg als einem prägenden Ereignis für die globale Sicherheitspolitik in Frage und tragen zu einem differenzierteren Verständnis der Implikationen und Folgen des Krieges bei.

Schlüsselwörter Russisch-ukrainischer Krieg · Reaktionen auf den Krieg · Wandel der globalen Sicherheitsarchitektur · Auswirkungen auf die Weltordnung · Außenpolitischer Wandel

1 Outline of the Special Issue

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was perceived as a shock by Western European publics and many observers.¹ Despite the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine since 2014, the Russian attack shattered cherished beliefs about the nature of the European postwar order. In particular, the framing of the war as a “*Zeitenwende*” in the German discourse pointed to a fundamental shift, a formative event that would lead to a global change in security policy. The conflict has been interpreted as a “catalyst for reshaping global world order” (Forsberg and Patomäki 2023), with far-reaching consequences that aggravate controversies about “order(s) and hegemony, international law and its (im)partiality, South–North

¹ This surprise by some of the observers also sheds light on a Western-centric perspective in the German debate and a lack of engagement with voices from the region. For a discussion on the part that “Western” knowledge production plays in the repeated surprise about political events in the Global South and East, see Hofius (2024).

relations, and the prospects for and conditions of global cooperation” (Baciu et al. 2024).

Let us briefly recall global reactions to the Russia–Ukraine war. Reactions could be categorized in four ways. First, a country could condemn the invasion, participate in the sanctions against Russia, and deliver arms to Ukraine. It should be noted that, legally speaking, the flagrant violation of the United Nations (UN) charter even allows for sending troops to Ukraine, as in the 1991 Iraq case, but—and this is already noteworthy—not one of the 150 states rhetorically sympathizing with Ukraine (see the General Assembly resolution of March 2022) is doing so. Second, a country might rhetorically side with Ukraine but refrain from sending arms or participating in sanctions. Third, countries could stay neutral and avoid taking sides. And fourth, countries could support Russia by sending troops and arms, defending its cause, and assisting in circumventing sanctions.

Overall, the countries attributed to the West turned out to be as united as hardly before since the end of the Cold War. The Russia–Ukraine war is even called the greatest federator of European and Western integration (Grosse 2023). Shining examples were the formerly neutral Sweden and the nonaligned Finland that acceded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The alliance, already warned by Russian provocation of NATO airspace in recent years and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, reacted to the full-scale invasion by launching sanctions and activating NATO’s defense plans (NATO 2022). The Group of Seven (G7), too, strongly condemned the invasion and made further promises to provide all kinds of support to Ukraine (G7 statement September 2024, Auswärtiges Amt 2025). The European Union (EU) almost univocally sided with Ukraine, and even countries with pro-Russian elites, such as France, Germany, Italy, and Greece, joined the chorus of those backing Ukraine. In Italy, for instance, even after the elections of the autocratic-minded Lega and the postfascist Brothers of Italy, the Meloni government pursues a staunch anti-Russian course, against internal pushback (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024). In the EU, only Hungary and, more recently, Slovakia opposed the EU’s sanctions regime, while even the remaining neutral states in Europe (Austria, Switzerland, Malta, Ireland) participated (BBC 2022; Consilium 2025; Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2025; Reuters 2024). In addition, the countries of the Global East and South, which are commonly perceived as Western allies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand), shared the Western view and participated in the sanctions regime against Russia (S&P Global Market Intelligence 2025). Beyond the understood West, the picture becomes more nuanced. Many countries of the Global South rhetorically condemned the war in UN resolutions but do not put the blame entirely on Russia (e.g. Pakistan, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, and Rwanda, as well as the Holy See). Consequently, no country in the Middle East (including Israel and Turkey), Africa, or Latin America participated in the sanctions regime against Russia. Notably, such a positioning allowed the NATO member Turkey to effectively act as a mediator for Ukraine and Russia regarding their wheat exports via the Black Sea. The concern regarding the wheat exports triggered a political initiative by the African Union to urge both countries to establish a ceasefire, while at the same time calling on “the Russian Federation and any other regional or international actor to imperatively respect international law, the territorial

integrity and national sovereignty of Ukraine” (AU 2022), yet the African Union tried to stick to a nonaligned stance overall (Staeck 2023). Similarly, although a majority of member states had voted against Russia in the UN, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Gijss and Barigazzi 2023), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Yog Shah and Pachaly 2025) maintained a rather neutral position despite U.S. and EU pressure.

The more shrugging positioning vis-à-vis the war becomes even more pronounced when it comes to the great and regional powers as organised in the so-called BRICS (Brazil, India, China, South Africa) in 2022. Their lamenting of the outbreak of the war goes along with an overall neutral position. While Brazil voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression, India, China, and South Africa abstained from the vote, and none of them participate in sanctions against Russia or arms deliveries to Ukraine. A more detailed review of their positions reveals that China upholds Russia’s justification of the war as being provoked by the West (Nadkarni et al. 2024), while Brazil and India put emphasis on diplomatic solutions without placing blame on Russia (Belém Lopez and Vazquez 2024; Verma 2024). Brazil and India do not perceive it to be in their economic or strategic interest to align with the West. All three countries, China, India and Brazil, extended their trade relations with Russia and have hit record highs in their trade values with the country since the Russian invasion (Business Insider 2024; The Economic Times 2024; Reuters 2025). Although they received harsh criticism from Western media and politicians for this, it should be noted that their foreign policy behaviour can be interpreted as a mere continuation of the nonaligned policy in the Cold War and their scepticism about the third Iraq war (2003). The BRICS members also succeeded in watering down the G20 statement on Ukraine, to the dismay of the Western members (The Guardian 2024). Finally, the small group of Russia supporters should not go unmentioned. Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea, and Syria voted against the resolutions in the UN General Assembly (United Nations 2022). Belarus allowed Russian troops to start the attack on Kyiv from its territory (but did not meet Russian requests to deliver troops; Coakley 2022), Syria (under Assad) tried to recruit volunteers for the front in Ukraine (The Guardian 2022), and it was North Korea that sent some thousands of soldiers to stabilise the front in the Kursk region (Ng 2024).

This overview suggests that while the Russian invasion was a shock to Europe, the same might not hold true on a global scale. Although drastic foreign policy change was announced in Germany and can be observed in other EU countries—most noticeably in Sweden, which abandoned its 200-year-old successful neutrality policy—even within the EU, the sanctions on Russia are not completely uncontested. Moreover, the “usual suspects” of the pro-Western camp followed the Biden administration in its critical position on Russia. In the Global South, though, continuity prevails in their policies towards Russia, with only minor incremental and some adaptive changes in foreign policies. Given the uncertain stance of the new Trump administration on Russia and on support for Ukraine, change might be observable in comparison to the Biden administration. However, any change in U.S. foreign policy under Trump is unlikely to be in support of a rules-based international order. Recalling the different behavioural camps discussed previously, change vis-à-vis Russia is mostly immanent in the first category (support for Ukraine) and in

the fourth (support for Russia). The large majority of states (categories two and three) only rhetorically denounce Russia's attack or stay neutral, with continuity carrying the day. The international organisations and institutions—indebted to their intergovernmental nature—are likely to follow the direction of the strongest member states. This admittedly sketchy overview calls into question the idea that the Russia–Ukraine war was a formative event in global politics triggering massive foreign policy change.

Thus, bearing in mind that the relation between change and continuity in international relations (IR) is notoriously hard to conceptualise and that the lasting effects of conflicts on the global order are hard to predict, we invited contributions to engage with the question of how the Russia–Ukraine war changed international actors' perspectives on their role in the world order and what structural changes were prompted. Overall, the findings of the contributions challenge the idea of the Russia–Ukraine war as a formative event in global security policy and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the war's implications and consequences. The notion of change is addressed through the prism of different countries (Germany, Brazil, Poland, United States), transnational actors, religious actors, private military companies (PMCs), and international law.

Before we discuss the contributions of the single articles in this special issue, we first clarify the terminology of this special issue. We then provide an overview of the state of the art, locating the articles in this special issue within the broader discussion on the changes in global politics and the consequences of the war.

2 Naming the Conflict

Studying and writing about wars entails normative considerations. The way in which we cluster explanations, the sources that we as scholars amplify, and the words that we use to describe a conflict contribute to the perception of political events. In the case of the Russia–Ukraine war, even naming the war has become a politicised issue. President Putin did not use the term *war* to describe his invasion of Ukraine for the first 10 months of the ongoing conflict, instead referring to a “special military operation” (Gigova and Mogul 2022). However, even before the Russian invasion, there had been debates about how to describe the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as characterisations of civil war or a war of secession might trivialise Russian aggression and its imperial ambitions (Gomza 2022; Strakhov 2023). While it is common that multiple designations for the same conflict exist—for instance, in the case of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, some of the descriptors include Iraq War, Second or Third Gulf War, and Iraq Occupation War—reflection on the terms that authors use has gained traction. Some scholars would prefer neutral terms that emerge from the significance of the war (“First World War”), the date the war was started (“Yom Kippur War”), its duration (“Thirty Years’ War”), geographic denominations (“Crimean War”), or the conflicting parties involved (“Austro–Prussian War”; cf. Singer 2006). In contrast, we would like to stress that although referring to dates and conflicting parties might be more neutral than referring to the significance of a war, the act of naming wars is a process of ordering international politics and can therefore never

be considered truly neutral. Or as Axel Heck puts it in this special issue: “Whether Russia’s move on Ukraine’s territory is considered an ‘invasion’ [...] or an act of ‘self-defense’ is already the result of discursive processes—regardless of how obvious we might think the issue is” (Heck 2024). Thus, we agreed on naming this special issue “The Russia–Ukraine War as a Formative Event in Global Security Policy”, using terminology that does not ignore one conflicting party as would, for instance, “Ukraine War”. However, we did not prescribe a particular name for the authors in this special issue to use. Hence, the authors chose different denominators, ranging from “Ukraine war” (McLarren 2024) and “war in Ukraine” (Reinold 2024) to Russo–Ukrainian war (Schorlemer 2024).

3 State of the Art

When examining recent articles dealing with the war, three topics stand out.² First, the reasons and causes for the war are covered, dealing with systemic-level explanations such as Western responsibility for the war, NATO expansion, a declining liberal world order, or a failure of diplomacy. The state-level explanations grasp Russian motives for going to war, the Russian self-image, the Western orientation in Ukraine, internal divisions within Ukraine, and a view of the United States as an aggressor state. For instance, Park (2022) sees a motive for the war in the declining world order, while Kuzio (2022) claims that the West might be responsible, and Kortunov (2022) conceives of it as a conflict between autocracies and democracies. Russian reasons for the war are discussed in different dimensions such as Putin’s fear of humiliation (Molloy 2023), economic reasons (Lawrence 2022), imperialism (Park 2022), religion (Benedikter 2023), and fascism in Russia (Khodarkovsky 2022). Remarkably, there are very few contributions looking for reasons of war within Ukraine (Dunford 2023). The “Western-dominating perspectives and Russia-centric frameworks” lead to research “that commonly ignore[s] or erase[s] Ukrainian perspectives and agency” (Hendl et al. 2024, p. 173) and silences Ukrainian voices (ibid., p. 190). In a similar vein, Burlyuk and Musliu (2023) published a special forum dedicated to the politics of knowledge production of IR on the Russian war in Ukraine, describing the status quo of subjects and subjectivities as “harmful and intellectually unsustainable” (ibid., p. 613 f.).

Second, many articles deal with the characterisation of the war. The war is described as a surprising event, as West/East or systemic confrontation, and the form of the war and the warfare are discussed. For example, the war is depicted as a conflict about territories that matter to the West and East (Jović 2022), as a sign of different understandings about borders by the West and East (Wehner 2023), or as a West vs. East (Allin and Jones 2022; Allison 2022; Kanet 2022) or a Russia vs. the West confrontation (Allison 2022). Flynn (2022) straightforwardly calls it

² The following literature review is based on a manuscript that has systematically examined more than 200 articles on the war that have been published in international relations journals of six publishers (Springer, JSTOR, Sage, Cambridge University Press, Taylor and Francis, Oxford University Press) since the start of the full-scale invasion (Maaßen and Stahl 2024).

a “Cold War 2.0”, and Noonan (2023) describes the war as “conflict between Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union”. Regarding Russian warfare, scholars research Russia’s legitimization of its actions in the war (Rotaru 2022), Russian tactics and military culture (Malyarenko and Kormych 2023), and shifts in its tactics (ibid., Minic 2023) amongst its general warfare. Ukraine, in comparison, mainly appears as a military and self-defending actor (Gady and Kofman 2023; Lindelauf et al. 2023; Sanders 2022), especially when it comes to Ukraine’s will to withstand, and its cohesion against, the Russian aggression (Gould-Davies 2022; Allin 2022; Kulyk 2023).

Third, a strand of scientific contributions aims at illuminating the consequences of the war, mostly dealing with threat perceptions. The war—or often Russia—is portrayed as a threat towards other entities. The world order (Grant 2022) and the values and institutions of Western civilisation (Allin 2022), Europe (Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig 2022; Aries et al. 2023), and specifically the Baltic Sea region (Crowther 2023) are threatened by the war: “we are witnessing the undermining of the very foundations of international rules-based order” (Fajon 2023). When treating the behaviour of third countries, neutral states play a special role, and their neutrality is often discussed extensively—India being a case in point (e.g. Jagtiani and Wellek 2022; Verma 2024; Vishwanath and Mukund 2022). Yet there are also a few cases that pinpoint the West (NATO or the United States) as a threat towards Russia: “Kremlin officials perceived Ukraine’s drift toward the West as a major threat to both Russia’s security interests” (Allin 2022). More recently, a special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (Geis et al. 2024) touches upon the consequences of the war for theory-building, calling for a critical reflection of knowledge production in IR.

The articles in this special issue fit into this picture by contributing to this third strand of literature, the consequences of the war for different countries such as Germany (Nabers and Stengel 2025; Heck 2024), the United States (Rieger 2024), and Brazil (Schorlemer 2024); for the polity of security (Dörfler 2024); for transnational religious actors (McLarren 2024); for international law (Reinold 2024); and for the European migration regime (Dück et al. 2024).

4 Theoretical Perspectives of the Contributions

Theoretically, it seems worthwhile in this issue to illustrate the “enabling path” from an event (here, the start of full-scale war in Ukraine) to an outcome (i.e. policy change) in a social constructivist perspective. The pathway begins with an event that becomes “formative” (Breuning 2007, p. 79), having an impact not only on foreign policy decision-making but more generally on foreign policy outcomes. Moving from actors to ideal structures, the question arises how and why a specific IR event triggers foreign policy learning and subsequent policy changes (Reiter 1996). Thus, when German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced an epochal change, a *Zeitenwende*, in German foreign policy, the term became a keyword in the discussion about the changes that the Russia–Ukraine war brought about. On an empirical level, the announcement raised the question of whether this speech induced a deeper, lasting

change of German foreign policy that is grounded in changed elite (cf. Bunde 2022; Dück and Stahl 2023) and public foreign policy attitudes towards the conflict and Russia (Mader and Schoen 2023). Yet beyond such a country- and foreign policy-specific approach, the ongoing war seems to ask more fundamental questions about its impact on IR. For instance, the Russian invasion fuels the ongoing debate about the end of the “liberal international order” (Ikenberry 2018) and shifts in global security politics that started a lot earlier than February 2022 (cf. Hellmann 2017).

Taking this into account, upon closer examination the war raises three theoretical issues that need to be addressed: First and foremost, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine revives a long-standing (ontological) debate about continuity and the possibility of change in international politics and foreign policy (cf. Alden and Aran 2012; Barnett 1999; Hermann 1990; Gustavsson 1999; Holsti 2016; Medick-Krakau 1999; Subotić 2016; Welch 2005). It seems that particularly fundamental foreign policy change still looks underresearched (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021, p. 483). Second, the contributions in this special issue engage with the question of where—on which analytical level—and how change did or did not occur. This is also linked to the normative question of what kind of change is desirable. Third, the contributions address the issue of how changes in foreign policy and in IR are legitimised. The contributions share the notion that discourse and narratives play an important role in making change possible: by changing the possibility space of foreign policies in the short term, while scope, content, and outreach of existing institutions of the international system may be altered in the long term.

Ontologically, the contributions range from traditional foreign policy/English School approaches (Schorlemer; McLarren) and international law interpretations (Reinold) to liberal model applications (Dörfler) via reconstructive discourse studies (Rieger, Heck) to poststructuralist articles (Nabers and Stengel) and critical studies (Dück, Weisner, and Thevenin). Epistemologically, qualitative methods prevail. Finally, normativity in most cases follows the claims of the fourth debate of IR, attributing it to the theories employed. From a critical perspective, normativity is at the core of the argument (Dück et al.). The traditional foreign policy (Schorlemer), the reconstructive discourse-analytical (Rieger; Heck), and the poststructuralist perspectives (Nabers and Stengel) point to the research question and the normativity implied (the Global South’s striving for equality, the German parties’ leaning towards Russia, Trump’s erraticism), while the model application, the international law, and the English School studies rely on hermeneutic reasoning (Dörfler, Reinold, McLarren).

When approaching crisis as a core concept to address foreign policy change, Frank Stengel’s and Dirk Nabers’s paper “*Crisis and Change in Post-Zeitenwende German Security Policy*” embarks from Charles Herman’s understanding of crisis as a “*a situation that (1) threatens high-priority goals of the decision-making unit, (2) restricts the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed, and (3) surprises the members of the decision-making unit by its occurrence*” (Hermann 1969). By recognising crisis as an “underlying principle of society” (Nabers 2017, p. 419), they offer a theoretically rich conceptualisation of crisis and show, based on a quantitative discourse analysis, how crises such as the war on Ukraine open up space for discursive change (e.g. the *Zeitenwende* in Germany) and make possible

once unthinkable policy options. In a discourse-theoretical take, they turn away from decision-making and conceive of “crisis” as “dislocation of sedimented practices” in legitimacy/legitimation discourses. Three analytical modes help to explain a possible discursive change: “translocation”—when a new signifier foreign to the prevalent national identity enters the discourse; “dislocation”—the disruption of the internal logic of the articulatory process, meaning trauma and speechlessness, which makes articulation difficult, and “ephemeral dislocation”, referring to “discursively articulated destabilisation” of a discourse, for instance when discourse participants claim that a certain situation represents a crisis that requires radical policy change. The authors found all of these modes in the German *Zeitenwende* discourse while claiming that overall change was modest and preliminary, as the discourse-theoretical theory of Laclau and Mouffe suggests.

To deepen our understanding of how seemingly radical changes may mitigate and translate into rather modest and incremental change, Axel Heck examines in his article “*Ready, Steady, No? The Contested Legitimacy of Weapon Deliveries to Ukraine in German Foreign Policy*” how the call for a *Zeitenwende* by the German chancellor ebbed thereafter. Analytically, Heck demonstrates that the civilian power narrative still plays a role in German security discourses since it allows pacifist, militarist, and multilateralist claims to be reconciled. On the question of arms deliveries, the German public (and the political elite) turned out to be divided, even after Russia’s full-scale attack. Thus, large parts of the German population did not subscribe to the announced *Zeitenwende*, and the government reacted accordingly: “*Scholz’s discursive retreat from the offensive into the defensive midfield (...) may have caused disappointment in the alliance and annoyance among advocates of a tougher stance (but proved effective) as a confidence-building measure to calm a divided public*”. In line with the findings by Stengel and Nabers, the article indicates that change in German foreign policy discourse and attitudes looks rather modest.

The discourse-theoretical wisdom that current discourses always draw from lessons of the past also becomes evident in Eva Rieger’s article, “*A Manchurian Candidate? The GOP’s Discourse on the Russian War in Ukraine*”. Past discursive hegemonies continue to resonate in current debates and provide the political elite with a repertoire of arguments, as Heck has shown for Germany. In the United States, the war challenged a former bipartisan consensus on foreign policy, which looked extremely damaged after Trump’s years in office. While Russia had constituted a bipartisan “other” during the entire Cold War and the transitional period thereafter (continuity), large parts of the Republican party (GOP) tended to follow the appeasement policy proposed by Trump (change). Analytically, Rieger aims at demonstrating to what extent the former discursive hegemony of internationalism, exceptionalism, and realism is further challenged by isolationism/nationalism. Overall, the author found in her discourse analysis of speeches in Congress “a (re)strengthened bipartisan consensus [...] on Russia due to an increased unity after the invasion”. Yet she concedes increasing contestation “by rank-and-file GOP members” alluding to future cleavages in the security policy of the GOP.

Our take of changing security discourses also entails critical perspectives. By drawing on critical migration studies, Elena Dück’s, Zina Weisner’s, and Elodie

Thevenin's contribution, "*Female, Deserving, and European? The Changing European Migration Discourse in the Face of the Russia–Ukraine War*", challenges the idea that a fundamental change in the logics of the EU migration system occurred through the adoption of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which exempts Ukrainians from the regular asylum application process. At first glance, the Temporary Protection Directive seems to contradict the predominantly restrictive immigration discourse and practices regarding migration and asylum. Using a reconstructive discourse-analytical approach, they analyse how this response was made possible. They show how gender and notions of proximity and distance, as well as the notion of the Russian threat, affects the EU migration discourse. According to them, the Directive needs to be understood as a strategic component of the EU's response to the war, not as a fundamental change in the migration system. This is because its underlying logics are upheld, "*leading to debates about the use of implicit or explicit criteria used in refugee protection that result in a two-tier asylum system*".

The receptive actor decides whether an event becomes formative. The reaction of states beyond the West, considering the high percentage of abstention in the UN's General Assembly and the political messages of the recent BRICS summit, reminds us of this insight. As Lena Schorlemer underlines in her contribution "*The Russo–Ukrainian War and the Brazilian Perspective on the International Order*", Brazil's interpretation of Russia's war on Ukraine deviates to a large extent from that of the EU, Germany, and the United States. Based on 34 semistructured interviews with national foreign policy experts and diplomats, she concludes that "*Brazil did not see the war as a catalyst for change in the global order, but rather as a disruptive event that reflected the inability of the existing order to deal with global security challenges*". Brazil's tradition of nonalignment serves as analytical background, stressing diplomacy and international negotiation while dismissing Western hypocrisy regarding international law. The findings from the interviews suggest that despite the common perception of a rule-breaking attack, the war tends to remain a regional one. The international order would largely stay intact (e.g. G20, BRICS) but also demonstrate severe blockades (such as the UN Security Council). All of this, however, means that a more vocal Brazilian voice is needed.

However, it is not only state actors that might feel challenged by the Russian invasion. Turning away from "traditional" actors of foreign policy and international politics, Katharina McLarren's contribution, "*Wars Come and Go, International Society Changes, and Religions Endure: Narratives of Religious Actors on the Ukraine War*", embarks from the rich strand of transnationalism. By shedding light on the role of religious actors, she asks what religious narratives on war reveal about a changing liberal international order or, in English School terms, about a solidarist international society. The narrative analysis covers three actors' cases, namely Pope Francis, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Dalai Lama in two cases of war, Ukraine and Syria. To be expected, all religious leaders emphasised the destruction and suffering caused by wars. Yet "*none of these religious transnational actors actively appeal to secondary institutions (e.g., the United Nations and its various organs or suborganizations) or actors (e.g., warring parties, Security Council members, regional partners) to adhere to laws of war or international humanitarian law, to take steps to uphold it, or to re-*

install it”. Moreover, the “Ukraine war can be said to pose a turning point in the Pope’s narrative (only)[:] this does not apply to the other two actors”.

But institutions and norms as well as IR actors could also be the subject of change. Again, the constitutive premise that applies those straightforward assumptions of a one-way causal pathway should be treated with caution. As Theresa Reinold’s article “*The War in Ukraine and the Concept of Change: An International Legal Perspective*” seeks to demonstrate, the war’s impact on core norms of international law might be counterintuitive: “Russian aggression has only served to reaffirm, rather than weaken, fundamental global rules relating to the use of force in interstate relations”. She argues that law is not merely a reflection of subjective state preferences but is an intersubjective construct of the international community. Starting from Henkin’s observation that “almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law and almost all of their obligations almost all of the time” (1979, p. 47), she treats norm breaks as irritations that lead to the international community’s endeavour to reduce dissonance. The community’s reactions to Russia’s military intervention—its condemnation in the General Assembly, the ongoing arms deliveries to support Ukraine, the International Criminal Court verdict against Putin—all signal that the breach is not likely to change the international legal system, and swan songs on the demise of the liberal order look premature in this regard.

The theoretical claim of different possible pathways meets the analytical wisdom of the century-old literature on war that underlines its unpredictability regarding process and actorness (Lindley-French and Boyer 2012). In this vein, Thomas Dörfler focuses on “*The Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and PMC–State Relations in Russian Foreign Policy: Explaining the Enlistment of Private Military Companies During the Ukraine War*”. The role of the Wagner group and its infamous leader Prigozhin, from heroism in the battle of Bakhmut to mutiny, highlights cooperation and conflict between PMCs and the Russian foreign policy and security apparatus. The author embarks from Kruck’s (2014) model of autocracy-sensitive explanations comprising an ideationalist, functionalist, and political-instrumentalist feature of PMCs. While ideationalism explains the emergence and form of Russian PMCs, functionalism covers specific warfighting functions, and political instrumentalism aims at comprehension to economise on domestic political costs of the invasion. Overall, Dörfler states that the findings “suggest a considerable overstretch of security privatization, not only contesting the liberal international order and constituting a colonial force but ultimately threatening Russia’s autocratic governance system”.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the contributions of this special issue challenge the notion of the Russia–Ukraine war as a formative event on global security policy. Rather, on a theoretical level, they point to crisis and thus instability as a fundamental feature of global order (Stengel and Nabers). On an empirical level, they show only moderate change. This applies to German foreign policy (Stengel and Nabers; Heck) as well as a tendency towards a strengthened bipartisan consensus in the case of the United States (Rieger). Alas, this is likely to be challenged by the second Trump presidency.

As Dörfler demonstrates, the war has triggered stunning changes in the Russian security apparatus at first glance, considering the Wagner mutiny. Yet after Prigozhin's assassination, sustainable changes inside the autocratic regime have appeared modest. Furthermore, the Brazilian perspective (Schorlemer) highlights that the war and its consequences are not perceived as earth-shattering in other parts of the world. The prevalence of these interpretations in the German and European discourse might also point to the fact that European scholars have not fully grasped that the Russia–Ukraine war is not the catalyst for change in the global system but the result of changes that have already taken place. In a similar vein, whereas the invasion was a turning point in the Pope's narrative, the same does not hold true for Ayatollah Khamenei and the Dalai Lama (McLarren), again indicating that the war is not seen as quite as significant by non-European actors. Although these shifts in the global order are linked to the contestation of norms, the implications of the Russian breach are not as clear-cut as they are often portrayed (Reinold). Empirically, our studies find much more continuity than change—and the modest changes are even mitigated with geographic distance from the conflict. This is a remarkable finding considering the public outcry in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. The *Zeitenwende* rhetoric, though, has not translated to substantial changes in narratives, discourses, norms, or the polity of security (here: in Russia). Up to now, the Russia–Ukraine war is not yet a formative event. Rather, change has been gaining momentum over time, as can be attributed to Russian foreign policy since 2003 and to shifts in the global system. The Russia–Ukraine war looks like a sudden shock at first glance but—as the findings in this volume suggest—instead represents a symptom of continuous change. Thus, the war becomes a prism through which the existing normative conflicts in the global system become visible, pressuring Europe to come to terms with the fact that it is not the navel of the world.

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