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European double standards at the time of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israel-Palestine Crisis (2021-2024)

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MA Thesis - International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era

**“European double standards at the time of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the
Israel-Palestine Crisis (2021-2024)”**

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INTRODUCTION

Might makes not right, unjust wars are doomed to be lost. This is the opening statement of Borrell's speech marking the first few days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, is there a way to make wars "just"? And most importantly, are unjust wars really doomed to be lost if international society decides it is more convenient to look the other way? These are the underlying doubts which have prompted this thesis' investigation.

This thesis examines the European Union's role in international conflict mediation, focusing on two prominent conflicts of our time: the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israel-Palestine crisis. The aim is to uncover the strategies and underlying motivations guiding the EU's diplomatic interventions.

It must be clarified that when referring to "the EU", this thesis includes the entirety of the elaborate institutional apparatus and the high-profile representatives that constitute it. That is, the European Parliament, Council and Commission as well as the External Action Service (EEAS). In the same way, for the sake of clarity and conciseness, the situation in Israel-Palestine is often referred to as a conflict, in line with the mainstream narratives of Western media. In reality, it would be more correct to define it as a humanitarian crisis or genocide, since the strategy employed by Israel has exceeded the parameters of counterinsurgency and has revolved around the indiscriminate targeting of civilians.

The EU's identity is constructed around the values of peace, democracy and human rights, with their promotion within its borders and on the international stage framed as one of the EU's core missions. However, these values' application reveals a complex dynamic between identity politics, normative ambitions and pragmatic interests. This becomes even more evident when the EU is called to mediate conflicts that directly impact its geopolitical sphere and challenge its ethical principles.

The research begins with a literature review presenting the main paradigms of the EU's role on the international stage: the "realpolitik" perspective and the "normative power" framework. While the former emphasises the centrality of strategic and security concerns in European foreign policy, the latter focuses on aspirations concerning the establishment of international norms and standards. By confronting these perspectives, the research explores the mechanisms that guide the EU in different conflict scenarios. In the following chapters, the role of theoretical frameworks such as Constructivism and Critical Theory in the analysis will be detailed, as well as the methodology employed.

The first chapter analyses the role of propaganda in Russia's and Israel's belligerent efforts, identifying the main similarities and differences in the chosen strategies. The subsequent chapter then explores the reaction of EU institutions to the identified narratives, showing the contrasts and inconsistencies in their foreign policy. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to clarify the understanding of the EU's positioning in the global arena, revealing the internal dissonances between its interests and commitments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

More than at any point in history, international diplomacy is an ever-evolving, intricate and delicate landscape. Geopolitical actors are increasingly interconnected through a network of supranational organisations and international conventions. Media channels can instantaneously transmit the evolution of events and shape narratives, reaching every corner of the world. This renders diplomacy progressively more complex. Negotiations must be nuanced while keeping consideration of the diverse spectrum of economic, political and cultural factors that motivate the shifts in the international arena. While heightened interdependence might provide an impression of stability, it also implies that resolutions' consequences reverberate immediately across borders. At present, international diplomacy requires competencies that go beyond the understanding of traditional power dynamics and include expertise in the intricacies of soft power, public perception and network interconnections.

This chapter will take a closer look at the role of the European Union (EU) on the global stage, investigating its role as a mediator in international conflicts.

Actors who often assume a responsive stance on global issues have the power to shape discourses and procedures that then influence how these matters play out. EU's statements thus transcend the realm of simple rhetoric and assume an important transformative role. Political discussions and legislation influence events far beyond the domestic realm. Indeed, in an international community where the EU's mediating role is steadily more recognised, the words of its representatives have the chance to effectively shape the destinies of nations and peoples.

The EU has put values such as peace, democracy and human rights at the core of its identity. In 2012, the EU even became the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for its work in stabilising the European region and turning it "from a continent of war to a continent of peace" (Norwegian Nobel Committee 2012 cited in Bergmann 2020). From the 2000s onwards, the EU acted as a mediator in various conflicts, such as those in the Western Balkans, Georgia and the southern Mediterranean (Bergmann 2020; Adler and Crawford 2004). Scholars who studied these cases have stated that the EU has a "stabilising effect" on nations experiencing turmoil (Ibid). Many have expressed that the role of the EU as a mediator is under-researched, but even more so is the reason why the EU consistently decides to take on this role. That is, what are the European Union's interests in influencing international conflict resolutions? This topic is an exceptionally wide area to investigate, hence why the analysis will focus on post-2000s conflict cases. Moreover, it will maintain a special consideration of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the conflict in Israel-Palestine.

This literature review has identified two schools of thought. The first recognises the EU's motivations to be guided by strategic interest. The second, divided into two subsections, highlights the European Union's normative aspirations.

Realpolitik EU

This perspective emphasises the centrality of pragmatic concerns in the EU's will to participate in the settlement of conflict issues, particularly when countries near its borders are involved.

Securitisation concerns and the natural resources market's intricacies are central in this regard. This theory is particularly relevant when considering the 2010-2023 time frame.

The co-dependency between the EU and the Russian Federation has been one of the main concerns for European stability. The EU has consistently relied on Russian oil and gas exports, making little effort to diversify its suppliers (Ericson 2009). While this might seem common in a globalised market society, the Russian pursuit of political leverage in (domestic) European politics highlighted the dangers of a relationship degenerating beyond a simple trade partnership (Ibid). Russia has frequently made use of the "shutdown lever" threat (i.e. suspending oil and gas supply) in times of turbulent negotiations and attempted to influence the public's opinion during elections (Ericson 2009; European Parliament 2022; Bratterberg and Maurer 2018). This has prompted the EU institutions to pursue parallel economic deals with countries in the Southern Caucasus, Africa and the Middle East as well as Turkey and Ukraine (Eyl-Mazzega 2019).

Zwiech (2008) has argued that cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union "is of major importance in the system of International Relations" as a result of three main conditions: Ukraine's geopolitical relevance for the consolidation of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Ukraine's strategic location as a transit route for energy exports and the EU's position as one of Ukraine's biggest investors and trading partners. Naturally, the reasons put forward by Zwiech were arguably exacerbated by the annexation of Crimea in 2013 (and the subsequent escalation of the conflict in 2022). The significant retrocession in Ukraine's economic partnership with Russia left the EU as the most promising partner for exports (Barvinok and Prykhozhai 2017). Furthermore, the integration of Ukraine into the EU would entail benefits that go beyond the diversification of energy suppliers, such as the removal of trade barriers and the consolidation of the EU's rise as a geopolitical power (Prytula 2013).

Following the escalation of Russia's attacks on Ukraine in 2022, it became essential for the EU to secure deals with other partners to meet its energy needs while supporting Ukraine. The concretisation of military confrontations in the European "periphery" signified the materialisation

of the risks posed by energy interdependency (Ingpraja 2020). Ukraine's conflict represents a significant danger to European stability for two reasons: its placement as an energy corridor and Ukraine's symbolic value as a "cushion" for political influences (Ibid). The latter is particularly relevant for countries like Poland and the Baltics who see Ukraine's invasion as an implied threat to their sovereignty.

As a result of these turmoils, countries in the Middle East became the most promising solution to solve Europe's energy crisis. Qatar supplied gas to Europe via tanks, but the exports were limited due to the logistic costs (Ibid). While the construction of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline has the chance to address these monetary shortcomings, it may be a short-sighted strategy. Importing energy resources through Turkey could alleviate the pressure of Russian influence, but it poses the risk of transferring that power to Turkey. Providing such a significant strategic position to Turkey gives it the power to control the EU energy supply while remaining an external actor, like Russia (Ibid). Moreover, building a pipeline requires a considerable amount of time and negotiations, which face significant setbacks due to the instability in the region (Ibid).

As of today, the EU has pursued collaboration mostly with Egypt and Israel, signing an agreement in June 2022 for energy cooperation (Veretilnyk 2023). Israel found large gas sites off its coast in the 2010s and from then on pursued an ambivalent strategy by promoting both regional integration and the construction of the EastMed pipeline to export resources to Europe (Meritet 2011; Wolfrum 2019). The discovery of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean constituted a huge potential for gaining both energy independence from Russia (for the EU) and enhanced trade and political partnership (for Israel) (Munin 2021). Many have expressed concerns over the impact that Israel's aggressive foreign policy could pose on the EU's reputation, nevertheless, pursuing closer relations with Israel could heighten the EU's importance in the region, thus strengthening its political leverage (Veretilnyk 2023; Munin 2021).

Both Israel and Egypt constitute a smaller threat to the international influence the EU could gain once freed from energetic codependency with Russia. Firstly, the dual agreement with Egypt and Israel prevents either party from exerting total control over the resources' transport. Egypt, in particular, pursues a less confrontational foreign policy than Turkey or Russia, favouring a cooperative approach with both European and MENA countries (Adar and Toygur 2020). On the other hand, Israel's close political, cultural and economic ties with several Western countries render coercive tactics less likely.

Adopting a proactive stance in international diplomacy and seeking closer partnerships with key energy players form a logical strategy to reduce reliance on Russian exports. For years, Russia

enacted a series of hostile measures geared towards destabilising the EU (Ericson 2009; Lambert and Tayah et al 2022). It follows that the EU's participation in the international arena must be influenced by these preconditions. By mediating conflicts that take place near its borders (such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, or the crisis in Israel), the EU attempts to consolidate its security and market interests while climbing up the geopolitical ladder.

However, as captivating as it may sound, this hypothesis presents several shortcomings.

Firstly, this perspective vastly overplays the cohesiveness of European foreign policy. Drawing a direct connection between the EU's energy policy and its aim to become a superpower implies that its apparatus acts like a Federation and not like a supranational organisation, which conserves dynamics of disagreement and opposition. It might be argued that with the current state of events, every EU country regards Russia as a threat. However, internally there are still disputes about how Ukraine's crisis should be tackled. Arguing that the sole motivation behind EU conflict mediation is a coordinated effort to achieve its strategic interests disregards these factors.

Secondly, this stance is blind to other factors that may motivate EU members to mediate extra-EU conflicts, such as cultural and historical proximity. EU members bordering Ukraine or European Mediterranean countries might want to stabilise security conditions not for the sake of acquiring more power, but to avoid a spill-over effect. Equally important is the feeling of solidarity with attacked countries and the EU's self-perception as a para-legal conglomerate committed to the maintenance of peace, diplomacy and democracy.

Despite acknowledging the limitations of this perspective, it is important to not dismiss it altogether. Although energy securitisation and market interests may not always be the primary drivers of EU mediation, they play a role in the degree to which the EU commits to a particular crisis.

Normative power Europe

This perspective holds that the EU's involvement in conflict mediation is rooted in its aspiration to rise as a global normative power. It differs from the previous frameworks in the fact that it centres around liberal principles of collaboration and mutual benefits rather than on adversarial dynamics. Conflict mediation is seen as an instrument through which the EU aims to propagate its normative power by fostering its declared goals. Hence, the EU acts as a dialogue mediator while aligning its foreign policy objectives with internationally recognised ideas of liberal cooperation.

To contextualise the arguments put forward by this school of thought, the term "normative power" must be clarified. According to Munin and Sitbon (2021), "Normative power is a form of soft

power, based mainly upon the use of conceptual justifications. It is exercised by the formation, implementation, and enforcement of legal norms. [...] Deviation from these norms might be subject to sanctions”.

Influence is traditionally exerted through coercion and payment (hard power) or attraction (soft power) (Ibid). However, the EU’s relevance in the international sphere added a dimension of cognitive and sociological importance to traditional international relations (Ibid). The authors argue that the EU’s normative power represents an evolution from its historical practices of imperialism, having transitioned from the physical imposition of norms to establishing strategic global standards of behaviour (Ibid). The “Psagot case” is taken as a case study of how the EU’s policies weigh on other countries’ political aspirations. This ruling avowed that local producers must label goods coming from the territories occupied by Israel when exporting to the European market in order for consumers to make an “informed choice” (Ibid). While this judgement cannot alter Israel’s position towards these territories, it deters its campaign by influencing the (international) public opinion (Ibid).

However, the influence exerted by EU bodies is not always intentional. As a conglomerate of states with a substantial weight in the global economy, the EU aligns its economic policies to reflect its legal norms (Cardwell and Wessel 2020). Therefore, other states might decide to adopt the EU’s norms and standards to access the EU market (Ibid). This dynamic raises questions about the interrelation of jurisdiction and territoriality, namely how territoriality is often defined by the power of an actor to exert its jurisdiction over it. Especially when it comes to third states, entering into a contractual agreement might implicate recognising their declared borders, despite ongoing disputes with other states (Ibid). This holds significant relevance for the EU’s reputation and credibility in the eyes of the international community.

To be established as a “normative actor”, other countries should regard the EU as embodying norms retaining “universal value”, norm-driven rather than interest-driven (Zutter and Toro 2008).

It is also fundamental to recognise the demands of the norm-receivers when it comes to know-how, procedures, security challenges, and so on (Stumbaum 2015). Normative power is based on persuasion and interaction, and so far the EU has used incentives such as membership, market access and EU Neighbourhood Policy (Ibid). However, the EU should differentiate its incentives and present novel opportunities to maintain influence (Ibid). The EU should provide benefits that give (the impression of) a solid and immediate “return on investment”.

At the moment, the EU’s leverage consists mostly of its capacity to promote security through multilateralism’s consolidation and its proficiency in tackling non-traditional threats (i.e. disaster

relief, humanitarian assistance, etc) (Ibid). However, the EU has limited capabilities in traditional force protection, particularly in distant regions, presenting a significant setback in the ability to respond to norm-receivers' needs (Ibid). While military capacity is not central to the exertion of normative power, the EU has made consistent efforts in cooperative security practices, such as region-building and pluralistic integration (i.e. in the Euro-Med region) (Adler and Crawford 2004). The construction of a Mediterranean region of stability and peace is subjected to the creation of a security community in which principles of peace and democracy remain central (Ibid). Hence, lacking traditional military capacity poses a lack of guarantee in the solidity of a security community. Still, as normative power is defined as "culturation" and as shaping the conditions of acceptable behaviour, it can also be argued that its efficiency stands in making military options obsolete (Manner 2001).

Indeed, the EU's novel role in global politics is enabled by the general environment which avoids the re-emergence of overt coercive politics (Tuominen 2013).

It is complex to measure the efficacy of the EU's normative power due to the incongruence, interpretation and disparities in norm adoption by third countries (and sometimes among member states) (Romaniuk 2012). Normative power in itself, and the extent through which one can have ideological control over a foreign entity, are rather vague concepts (Tuominen 2013). Consequently, it is hard to quantify how the achievement of a global normative power status motivates the EU to participate in conflict mediations.

Furthermore, notions of normative power (NP) and military power (MP) are not mutually exclusive. While the idea of a "normative power Europe" (NPE) is relevant to internal discourses of legitimisation and identity building, the achievement of normative power is not exclusive to the EU and can be noticed in US diplomacy too (Diez 2005). As it was hinted before, it seems difficult to construct the first (NP) without being able to covertly deter adversarial dynamics with the latter (MP). Normative power, in theory, would also entail that the policies promoted have a universal value and are -in a sense- neutral. Nevertheless, the NPE discourses imply the othering of third parties, as they construct the idea of an EU that acts as a benevolent force in world politics, id est, a civilising agent (Ibid).

Building a European identity?

The framework outlined above conceals a secondary motivation for the EU's increasing presence on the global stage. The will to project its power (normative, or else) on a third party contends that the EU must have a core identity that can exercise that power.

There is little consensus on what a pan-European identity would entail, nor what its relation to the EU's mediation tendencies is. This is mainly due to the internal competition between EU institutions, as well as member states (Pace 2008). Still, scholars widely identify three core values, often referred to as the "European value triangle": democracy, peace, and justice, with human rights occasionally mentioned (Diez 2010). As such, the EU's power revolves around fostering, protecting and upholding these norms, which constitute the basis of its identity. In essence, this "value triangle" is part of a reciprocal cycle of power consolidation between EU member states and third parties. Specifically, the EU's involvement in international diplomacy stems from internal efforts to shape a cohesive "European identity", which in turn propel the EU to address international crises, showcasing its normative authority on the matters.

This process is well-illustrated by Barroso (2008), who stated "the great mission of peace and reconciliation that guided European integrations...now...depends on our ability to shape globalisation by promoting our values in the world [...] ensuring the success of the EU's project of bringing peace to Europe and the world" (as cited in Diez 2010).

The underlying message is that Europe's violent past and the subsequent 80-year-long peace period make it the best-suited candidate to deliberate how foreign actors should approach their security crises. It is also implied that the so-called EU values are universal, and work together seamlessly. However, there are significant frictions between the application of justice, democracy and peace (Diez 2010). For example, the pursuit of justice and democracy can clash with the maintenance of peace. This is the case for every nation undergoing a process of decolonisation. Notable cases are those of South Africa during its transition from Apartheid to democracy, Bosnia and Herzegovina following the 1990s war crimes, or the pursuit of reconciliation in Northern Ireland in 1969-1998. There are other instances of countries ruled by "authoritarian democracies", whose system of elections and political campaigning does not guarantee the rightful application of justice, nor the maintenance of peace, freedom and human rights (i.e. Russia).

An appearance of peace can also be maintained at the expense of justice or democracy. This can be shown through actions such as censorship, persecution of political dissent and the manipulation of elections (i.e. China). Outside of the EU bubble, it is evident how peace, democracy and justice are not indivisible traits. To perform the role of a real, just normative power, the EU should thus overcome its Eurocentric naïveté.

This would work only in the case that the EU's actions were guided by the sole purpose of sharing norms, and not protecting interests. However, when considering wrongdoing perpetrated by EU member states, such as the treatment of migrants, the centrality of "EU values" in the mission to

establish the EU as a hegemonic “normative” power appears as a facade. Like the US “exports democracy” and Russia runs “peacekeeping operations”, the EU seeks to “maintain and spread global democracy, peace and human rights”.

As Diez (2010) argued, however, it is troublesome to dismiss the idea of “normative power Europe” solely based on inconsistencies between interests and norms, since distinguishing the two poses numerous problems both from an ontological and empirical standpoint. While keeping in mind these struggles, it should also be noted that the EU’s shortcomings in international diplomacy may be rooted in its own biases.

CONCLUSION

This review of the literature affords a solid analysis of the theories surrounding the EU’s behaviour in international diplomacy. Research showed the overwhelming presence of two paradigms in academic productions: the first one explains the EU’s interventions in global affairs as an effort to protect and promote its interests. Political, economic or security concerns are thus interpreted as the provoking elements of EU involvement in international disputes. The paragraph then delves deeper into the dynamics between international trade and security, taking into perspective the case of Russian exports to Europe.

On the other hand, the second framework centres on the EU’s pursuit of “normative power”. Normative power is conceived as the ability to shape norms and standards of behaviour. In this sense, the EU sees conflict mediations as opportunities to align its foreign policy objectives with internationally recognised ideas of cooperation. A subsection of this framework regards the pursuit of a “Normative Power Europe” as part of an internal effort to create a European identity, centred around humanitarian values such as peace, democracy and justice, made appealing through the attraction posed on foreign countries. These two standpoints do not contradict each other but rather complement one another.

The motivation behind the EU’s participation in international conflict mediation remains a relatively understudied area. Few studies have examined EU diplomatic interventions from a regional perspective, and even fewer have conducted comparative analyses to show the diverse approaches taken in different contexts. Considering this, the thesis will explore this gap in the literature by analysing two contemporary cases of international crises. Namely, the Russo-Ukrainian War and the humanitarian crisis in Israel-Palestine. It will attempt to provide a comprehensive answer to the question: "How and why did the EU's response to conflict outbreaks differ between Russia-Ukraine

and Israel-Palestine?”. The following chapters will further define the boundaries of the thesis research, aiming to address some lacunae in the field.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is widely documented that the conflicts in Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine have been interpreted in several, sometimes contradicting, ways. Indeed, Mearsheimer (2014) stated that Russia and the West have diametrically opposite interpretations of the circumstances that led to Ukraine's invasion. While Western countries see the war as part of Putin's expansionist strategy, Mearsheimer presents a different theory. He argues that Russia's aggression came as a response to NATO's enlargement, with the expansion and promotion of "EU values" in the post-Soviet region interpreted as a disguise for a growing anti-Russian alliance (Ibid). Russia has motivated its actions as "peacekeeping operations" aimed at protecting local Russian-speaking populations from violence and killings perpetrated by the Ukrainian military (Volkov and Kolesnikov 2022). Fedorov (2019) offers an alternative perspective, explaining how Russia began tightening its influence in Ukraine in 2004, with territorial annexations being the most recent steps in achieving a "Novorossiia" (New Russia). Not only that, but many Ukrainians have stated that Russia's human rights violations form part of a genocidal intent likened to the Holodomor genocide perpetrated by Stalin in the 1930s (Hook 2023). For Ukrainians and many people in the West, the invasion of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea constitutes Russia's renewed imperialistic aspirations, which exploits the idea of state-based violence against "ethnic Russians" in Ukraine as a pretext for justifying its military aggression (Ashby 2022).

The same dissonance can be found in accounts of Israel-Palestine's crisis. In the instance of Hamas' attack in southern Israel on the 7th of October 2023, perspectives regarding the responsibility for the subsequent escalation could not be more divergent. The Israeli government and most Western countries have framed military actions as a defensive response to Hamas, aimed at containing further attacks, liberating hostages, etc. Prime Minister Netanyahu referred to Israel's military plans as part of a preparation process for a "second War of Independence" (Dubnov, Rynhold et al 2024). Sentiments over the impossibility of living alongside Palestinians peacefully have been growing, with Israel's former defence minister stating that "Israel has no foreign policy, only a defence policy with international implications" - enshrining Israel's true stance on peace negotiations and relations with a Palestinian state (Ibid). Conversely, Palestinians have seen Israel's large-scale incursions in Gaza as yet another tyrannic abuse from a government whose purpose is to gain sovereignty over the entirety of the peninsula (Abusada et al 2024). It is no coincidence that Gaza had been referred to as the "world's largest open-air prison" long before October 7th, with several UN and Amnesty

International reports indicating the human rights violations and poor living conditions faced by Gazans (Ibid).

Clear parallels can be found between the two cases. There are two groups (Ukrainians and Palestinians) who lived through military attacks, and human rights violations. Both Russia and Israel have been accused of employing starvation as a method of warfare (Hook 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023). Both Russia and Israel have vastly made use of white phosphorus in Ukraine, Gaza and Lebanon, which is banned in civilian areas under international law (Murphy 2023, Human Rights Watch 2023). Conversely, there are two states (Russia and Israel) who launched the first traditional and official invasions (i.e. non-guerrilla, non-cyber, etc), claiming to act in their right of self-defence and responsibility to protect.

However, the responses from the international community - and the EU in particular - could not be more different. EU institutions and officials have condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while actively supporting Israel's territorial incursions in Gaza.

With all things considered, constructivism emerges as the most appropriate theoretical framework for this research due to its emphasis on the role of identity, perception, and social constructs. The exploration of historical narratives, cultural identities and norms reveals the hidden processes in states' actions. Constructivism can thus provide a nuanced understanding of international conflicts' intricacies. It is vital to complement this framework with critical theory to grasp the entirety of factors influencing the selected cases' dynamics. Indeed, critical theory's focus on power structures, imperialism and marginalisation can bring substantial insights to a constructivist analysis by highlighting profound layers of systemic injustice and hegemonic oppression.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study is comparative critical discourse analysis, which will serve to analyse and interpret EU officials' language within different contexts. By juxtaposing official statements and speeches, the thesis will provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of how language constructs and echoes cultural norms, social conditions, identities and political stances. As the research focuses on the conflicts in Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, comparative discourse analysis appears the most suited to investigate causal mechanisms and links in the EU's responses. This methodology effectively allows for the exploration of power dynamics, ideologies, and relations which lie in the language chosen by state actors to address one another. It also merges seamlessly with the critical theories adopted in the discussion sections, as it recognises language as a site of power shaped by sociopolitical contexts, rather than a neutral stage for fact-sharing. The data employed in this research was collected mostly through archival research in EU and Russian websites and Israeli and independent news reports.

The dependent variable selected for this study is the EU's response to conflicts in Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine in 2021-2024, the aim is to understand the changes in EU foreign policy in these contexts. The independent variables recognised as influencing factors are threefold. Firstly, how Russia and Israel utilise narratives of (un)sovereignty to justify their actions in Ukraine and Palestine. Secondly, how myths of "denazifying missions" are used to legitimise military aggressions in Ukraine's and Palestine's civilian areas. Finally, how human rights violations and war crimes are depicted as necessary responses to security threats.

Despite providing several valuable observations, this methodology is not exempt from limitations. The selection of Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine as case studies constitutes a significant restraint to the research findings' generalisability. Therefore, the discussions of the collected data will not provide a comprehensive explanation of EU diplomatic interventions. Rather, it will specifically shed light on the reasons behind the EU's actions in the selected case studies and similar instances. That is conflicts between states with analogous political characteristics and ties with the EU as Russia's and Israel's, as well as those of the mentioned occupied countries.

At the same time, this methodology will enable an in-depth understanding of the selected cases, providing several contextual insights into the sociopolitical dimensions of the employed discourses. In conclusion, comparative critical discourse analysis will enable a comprehensive exploration of the EU's statements, while also shedding light on the intricacies of power, ideology and interests among the actors involved in the selected conflicts.

HAVE YOU SEEN THESE STATES?

There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine and the crisis in Gaza have reached a climax of violence, characterised by constant bombings, ground incursions and the ruthless implementation of genocidal tactics against local populations. As with all wars, however, one of the most important battles is the one aimed at (mis/dis)information, propaganda and public perception. Before using military tools, states try to employ ideological weapons to justify their actions in the eyes of the public. In this research's case studies, the narratives promoted by Russia and Israel centred around the illegitimacy of Ukraine's and Palestine's jurisdiction over the attacked territories.

Putin has repeatedly argued that Ukraine's existence has been constructed by the Russian Empire and, later on, the USSR. Israeli public figures have popularised the argument that a Palestinian state had never existed before the 1950s, hence undermining its establishment's legitimacy in the present. According to these narratives, the measures taken against the self-proclaimed "local authorities" or "local populations" are not to be seen as a declaration of war against fellow sovereign nations, but as the reclaiming of territories over which they hold historical rights, occupied by deviant or rebellious communities.

This chapter will discuss this phenomenon, breaking down the propaganda of both states through a comparative analysis of high-profile individuals' speeches.

Dueling Narratives: Russian and Israeli Perspectives

Questioning Ukrainian Sovereignty

"Ukraine is not even a state" stated Putin in 2008, during a NATO summit - "A part of its territory is [in] Eastern Europe, but [another] part, a considerable one, was a gift from us!" (Duben 2020).

Russian authorities have begun implementing this idea long before the start of the conflict in 2021 or Crimea's annexation in 2014. The notion that Ukraine is not a "real country", with its history, heritage and culture, seems to be deeply ingrained in the minds of Russian authorities. Such rhetoric has been propagated in several statements over the last two decades of Russian politics and has managed to gain traction among the public living in pro-Russian countries, as well as among some Western politicians (i.e. Trump has remarked, in 2016, that Ukraine is not a real country) (Ibid).

Surkov, a Russian politician who for several years served as the Kremlin's ideologist has stated in an interview that "There is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainian-ness [...] a specific disorder of the mind. An astonishing enthusiasm for ethnography, driven to the extreme. [...] [Ukraine] is a muddle

instead of a state. [...] But there is no nation. [...] Only a brochure” (Ibid). Surkov put bluntly what many members of the cabinet - and Putin himself - believe. Indeed, six years before this interview, Putin stated “We [Russians and Ukrainians] are one people. Kyiv is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus’ is our common source and we cannot live without each other” (Putin 2014). He then went on to say that there are external forces who, in recent years, have tried to “divide and conquer” the two nations - with Ukraine being the weakest chain link, since Russia is still profoundly convinced of their brotherly unity (Ibid).

“Modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. [...] It was shaped [...] on the lands of historical Russia. [...] Look at the boundaries of the lands reunited with the Russian state in the 17th century and the territory of the Ukrainian SSR when it left the Soviet Union” (Ibid). Russia was robbed of its lands because of the communist ideals that aimed for a borderless world at first, and by foreign interference that convinced Ukrainian authorities that it was in their best interests to antagonise Russia on a second occasion (Ibid). “Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. Inevitably, there came a time when the concept of “Ukraine is not Russia” was no longer an option. There was a need for the “anti-Russia” concept which we will never accept” (Ibid). He then proceeds to draw a historical comparison between the Nazis’ exploitation of Ukrainian land with the partaking of Western (i.e. EU) countries in the alleged coup of Ukraine’s government in February 2014, fomenting “blatant aggressive Russophobia” of radical nationalist groups (Ibid). Ukrainians are being forced to regard Russia as their enemy by their new pro-West, anti-Russian government (Ibid). “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us” (Ibid). In 2022 he corroborated these ideas, stating in a public speech to Russian troops “You are fighting for our motherland [...] so that there is no place in the world for torturers, death squads and Nazis” (NYT 2022).

The propaganda perpetrated by the Russian regime seems to be fourfold: firstly, Ukraine is not a “real country”, as it lacks a distinct historical nationhood. Secondly, Ukrainian identity is manipulated, presenting the modern-day borders as a product of Soviet manipulation. Thirdly, foreign interferences have manipulated Ukraine into becoming a barrier between Europe and Russia. Finally, the Ukrainian government disregards the real will and background of the population, forcing animosity towards Russians.

Needless to say, the arguments put forward by Russia’s president result from a skilful manipulation of historic events.

Kyivan Rus', the "common ancestral homeland", was not a cohesive organism with a centralised authority and governance system. It rather acted as a federation of principalities, sometimes with different alliances, languages, cultures and ethnic makeup (Duben 2020).

Moreover, modern-day Ukraine was under the dominion of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which contributed significantly to the identity of the population (Ibid). The Ukrainian language had already developed in the 14th century and continued to evolve in isolation under Poland-Lithuania for centuries (Ibid). Not only that, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was an entirely separate entity from Moscow's centre (Ibid). From the 16th to 18th century, loyalties in Ukraine's noble class were divided between the Polish and Russian kingdoms (Ibid). This led to a sustained period of civil wars and unrest, as different factions hoped to gain autonomy through the intervention of either side - almost mirroring the dynamics of contemporary Ukraine (Ibid). Ukraine was later absorbed by the Russian Empire, and gained a brief period of independence after its fall, before being re-incorporated in the Soviet Union (Ibid). Even then, however, borders were not drawn as carelessly as Putin claims: the territories that were assigned to modern-day Ukraine were not a simple "gift", but rather the result of ethnic surveys which revealed the overwhelming majority of ethnic Ukrainians (Ibid). The Kremlin's Propaganda is thus entirely subverted: Ukraine has a considerable history and identity independent from Russia. Historically, Ukraine has sought both autonomy and cooperation with Western and Russian actors, defying the myth that the present-day government is going against the natural conformation and desires of Ukrainian society.

Challenging Palestinian Heritage

Contrary to Russia's case, Israel's denial of Palestinian identity is foundational to its statehood. This rejection contends there is no shared ancient homeland that leads to a "single, twofold" nation. The erasure of Palestinian culture and heritage is not hidden below a layer of condescending benevolence, as Putin does in his speeches regarding Ukraine. In the words of Israeli authorities, there is one overwhelmingly clear concept: Palestinians must get out of the way, for there must be an Israeli nation. "If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country.-Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs." said Ben Gurion, Israel's founding father, during the first years of Israel's establishment (Morris 2008). Since then state propaganda has improved, and it is almost impossible to collect quotes that remotely acknowledge Palestinians's existence in the peninsula. "There was no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? [...] It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering

itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist” asserted Meir, Israel’s Prime Minister in the 1970s, during an interview (Giles 1969). These quotes highlight the continuity of Israel’s rhetoric, revealing how modern propaganda echoes Meir’s stance. “There is no such thing as a Palestinian nation. There is no Palestinian history. There is no Palestinian language” stated Israeli minister Smotrich in March 2023, echoing almost word-for-word the statement of his colleague, uttered almost sixty years before (TheGuardian 2023). The contemporary sentiments of Israeli society are resumed in what almost became the country’s slogan: “A land without a people for a people without a land”, extremely viral since the events of October 7th. While scholars still discuss the phrase’s origins, its message is blatantly clear. Palestinians do not exist, hence their society is not entitled to be recognised in Israel-Palestine. Secondly, Palestinian identity is a fabrication geared towards the destabilisation of Israel, thus it must be controlled (and eliminated). This gives a way to portray any form of resistance from Palestinians to be depicted as the result of irrational hatred and anti-Semitism, rather than the result of a desire for self-determination and freedom. Indeed, this discourse is what enabled Israel to gather the West’s support in its retaliation against the 7th of October attacks, despite its clear actuation of genocidal tactics against Palestinians - as attested by UN experts, among others (UN News 2024). Israel rejected such reports stating its war is against Hamas and not Palestinian civilians (Ibid). It is a fact, however, that since October more than thirty thousand people have been killed, an even greater number have been displaced, and the denial of Palestinian existence has always been a core of Israeli politics (Ibid). Collateral damage cannot be applied to instances where attacks are precisely targeted.

When the existence of Palestinians is acknowledged, they are portrayed as invaders. In school books, the overarching narrative contends that Israel went through (an ancient) golden age, followed by exile and the Holocaust, which preceded a new era of return and “national redemption”. Redemption is achieved through the resettlement of Jewish citizens in areas that Arab people had occupied. Peled-Elhanan (2012) explained “This narrative includes both the denial of 2000 years of Jewish life in “exile” and the denial of any meaningful life in Palestine during the same period”.

Ergo, Zionist narratives promoted in Israeli institutions erase two thousand years of contributions made by Jewish people around the globe, implying that an individual’s identity could not be Jewish-Italian, Jewish-Polish, etc. This holds that no Jewish cultures could exist outside the unified, enduring, legacy of the ancient Jewish kingdom pre-exile. This explains why Yiddish experienced a long period of linguicide in Israel (Zuckermann 2023).

This unified outlook on Jewishness introduces a second narrative which “relates a continuous struggle of the Jews against non-Jewish conquerors [...] In this grand narrative [...] the hero is the “New Jew” who returned to reclaim his homeland and retrieve it from the Arab invaders” (Peled-Elhanan 2012). The idea that Palestinian identity is to be found somewhere between nonexistence and rapacity is reinforced by the notion that an independent Palestinian state was never established. Therefore, at present, an occupied Palestinian state cannot exist. “This led [Arab states] to promote the creation of a Palestinian identity in order to forge a narrative of Arab victimhood and Israeli aggression [...] Palestine may exist in the minds of those who seek to do Israel harm. But in the real world, it is nothing more than a mirage. And a malevolent one at that” (Freund 2023). These feelings are alive and well within Israel’s government, with the current Finance minister stating “there are 2 million Nazis” in the West Bank and the minister of Defence “there will be no electricity, no food, no fuel...we are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly” (Times of Israel 2023).

Israel’s propaganda tactics can be sorted into four main categories: (1) Denial of Palestinian identity, labelling it as a fabrication aimed at destabilising Israel; (2) Justification of Israeli control, framing Palestinians as “invaders”; (3) Rejection of Palestinian statehood by denying the existence of a pre-Israel Palestinian society, hence undermining contemporary reclamations; (4) Delegitimisation of Palestinian resistance, portraying it as anti-Semitic rather than a struggle for self-determination. The underlying belief is that the sole act of identifying as a Palestinian is rooted in an anti-Semitic desire to undermine the Jewish nation.

Today, these ideas are almost uniquely applicable to Israel. The notion that a Palestinian national identity cannot exist due to its historical inclusion in empires contradicts the globally accepted norms of decolonisation. Out of the 195 countries recognised by the UN, 80 gained independence only after 1945, and many contemporary sovereign countries were established during the colonial period (UN 2024). By this logic, if Palestinian heritage is unfounded because Palestine was never a fully autonomous country, then nations such as Argentina, South Africa, the US and most countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas should be held to the same standard.

Institutions have recognised that the formation of national culture is relatively independent of governmental administration, although the latter can influence culture by legislating shared spaces, forced assimilation, and other means.

Moreover, Empires with centralised authority are relatively modern concepts. While Palestine was part of several empires, it is equally true that these empires contained self-regulated communities (Breuille 2017). While *de jure* Palestine might not have been fully independent, *de facto*

communities most likely enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. Like everywhere else, Palestine experienced migratory fluxes and civilisations' evolutions over centuries.

It is unclear why Palestinians should be treated differently than any other individual in post-colonial societies, except for political discourses aimed at their dehumanisation and othering. Additionally, many Palestinians show a high degree of genetic continuity with ancient Levantine populations, shared by Jewish populations too (Nebel et al 2000). This suggests that Muslim Arabs, Palestine's majority, are descendants of local Christian and Jewish inhabitants who converted to Islam (Ibid). The dehumanisation of Palestinians is even more evident when considering the feelings of "irrational hatred" attributed to them when Palestinians have little to no possibility of living peacefully and autonomously in Israel's controlled territories. Namely, the areas recognised as the state of Israel, plus the occupied territories for which Israel controls the movement of goods, people, and services (Amnesty International 2024). Due to the institutional discrimination of Palestinians, amounting to segregation, military law, inhumane acts and restricted access to food and freedom of movement, Israel has often been accused of being an Apartheid state (Human Rights Watch). According to international law, the act of implementing a system of legalised racial segregation in which one group is deprived of political and civil rights or "apartheid" in short, is a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute (Ibid). Several reports indicate is guilty of these charges, long before October 7 (Ibid).

The recognition of a Palestinian country has been a sophisticated tango between Israel, Western countries and international organisations, with concerns coming from Palestinians taken as afterthoughts. The unequal treatment reserved to Palestinians is attested by the subordinated position Israel, the international community, and third countries grant them. Within the territories controlled by Israel, Palestinians are deprived of equal rights due to the country's ethnocentric governance (Yiftachel 1999). Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, effectively living under Israeli rule, are not recognised as citizens and cannot vote in Israel's elections (Ibid). In the UN, Palestine's ability to participate in discussions and vote on resolutions directly affecting its citizens is severely curtailed by its non-member observer status (Berg 2024). Exiled Palestinians are most likely to be registered as "stateless" in host countries, a precarious status that often precludes access to education, employment, or regular resident status, thus leading to impoverishment (Shiblak 2006). The entirety of the system of governance, from domestic policies to international alliances, is designed to marginalise Palestinian voices.

The international community follows precise discursive rituals, which include the condemnation of Putin's subjugation of Ukraine and the celebration of Apartheid's end in South Africa. Yet, it

systematically overlooks Israel's crimes. Israel's policies create racial hierarchies and justify dehumanising, lethal tactics against Palestinians. This inconsistency reveals a distressing willingness to ignore human rights violations when politically convenient.

Similarities in Propaganda Tactics

Propaganda has been employed by Russia and Israel alike to shape public opinion and legitimise their foreign policy stances. While their goals may be similar and narratives may coincide in certain points, the tactics as well as certain cultural elements may vary significantly.

One of the starkest similarities found across Russian and Israeli narratives is the strong denial of the other's national identity, respectively Ukrainians and Palestinians. As Russia denies the legitimacy of Ukraine's sovereignty, deeming it a fabrication from Western countries to destabilise the Russosphere, Israel discredits Palestine's existence. Israel too frames Palestine as the forgery of external actors who aim to breach Israel's security. This stance highlights a second convergence in Russia's and Israel's propaganda, which is the manipulation of historical events.

Both countries wilfully misrepresent ancient norms of nationhood, autonomy and imperial affiliation. Russia leverages on Kyivan Rus' to legitimise its control over Ukraine. Likewise, Israel argues that Palestine's sustained imperial subjugation prevented the formation of a cohesive national identity

Russia and Israel coincide in framing their delegitimisation of Ukraine and Palestine as a response to (foreign) security threats.

Russia frames its incursions in Ukraine as the result of external manipulations which led Ukraine to harbour anti-Russian sentiments, rendering the protection of ethnic Russians in Ukraine essential.

On the other hand, Israel's actions towards Palestinians are explained by their role as anti-Semitic invaders in Israeli narratives, making any security provision in their regard justifiable.

It is because of these security concerns that Russia and Israel reject the idea of fully independent statehood for their counterparts. Russia portrayed Ukraine's policies as an attempt to create a barrier between Europe and Russia, implying it will never allow Ukraine to favour a different political alliance to that with the Russian Federation. Israel rejects the foundation of a fully sovereign Palestinian state, with independent jurisdiction, military, and economy, as it would pose a serious threat to its sustenance.

Finally, both countries delegitimise any form of resistance coming from Ukraine or Palestine attributing it to Russophobia in one case, and anti-Semitism in the other. Both accuse Ukraine's and

Palestine's populations and resistance groups to be nazi sympathisers (NYT 2022, Times of Israel 2023).

Differences in Propaganda Tactics

There are still several differences between Russia and Israel, starting from the historical context surrounding their propaganda. Russia's techniques portray Ukrainians as victims of a corrupt government which does not represent them and continuously manipulates them to antagonise Russia. To convey this message, Russia weaponises the commonalities in the countries' heritage (i.e., Ancient Rus' to Soviet nationalism). Contrarily, Israel's core campaign is the villainisation of Palestinians, which plays on racist archetypes of "barbaric, invading, anti-Semitic Arabs". This conception is deeply intertwined with the establishment and identity of Israel, achieved through settler colonialism and hence the slow but strenuous replacement of Palestine's heritage with concepts and policies traceable to Israel.

Moreover, the geopolitical aims driving the propaganda do not entirely coincide. Russia's goal is to preserve its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe against "Western expansion". Instead, Israel's ambitions concern the securitisation and maintenance of control over the occupied territories, with the potential of further expansion.

Aspect	Russia's Propaganda Tactics	Israel's Propaganda Tactics	Similarities	Differences
Identity's denial	Negates Ukrainian nationhood, claims it as a part of historical Russia.	Denies existence of Palestinian identity, claims it is a modern fabrication.	Both deny the legitimacy of the opponent's national identity and undermine its autonomy from Russia-Israel's existence.	Ukraine's peculiarity is still somewhat acknowledged, but is placed as a subgroup of Russian culture. Palestine's socio-cultural legitimacy is completely nullified.
Historical narrative	Emphasises periods in which Russia and Ukraine were part of same empire/ organisation, stresses Russia's role in the making of Ukrainian culture.	Emphasises Jewish ancestral connection to the land, frames Palestinians as invaders. Stresses historical illegitimacy of Palestinian state due to empires' presence.	Both employ historical narratives to legitimise territorial claims. Most notably, both undermine the sovereignty of smaller nations in relation to their past subjugation in empires.	Israel focuses on ancient historical ties to sustain its jurisdiction over the territories. Russia focuses on medieval times (i.e. Ancient Rus'), the Russian Empire, and the USSR in particular.
Foreign involvement	Attributes Ukraine's distancing from Russia to Western interference, threat of anti-Russian indoctrination.	Claims Palestinian nationalism is fabricated and fuelled by foreign forces that aim at destabilising Israel.	Both blame foreign powers for the establishment of opposition networks in their opponents' societies.	The external enemies identified differ. In Russia's case it is Western countries, while for Israel it is the "Arab World".
Resistance's imagery	Portrays Ukrainian (military) resistance as Russophobia and nazi-fascism.	Labels Palestinian (cultural and armed) resistance as terrorism and anti-Semitism, with mentions of nazism.	Both attempt to delegitimise their opponents' resistance by associating it with negative ideologies. Both mention nazism.	Ideologies differ, or are employed differently. Russia emphasises extreme nationalism, state violence and armed suppression of dissent for "nazism", while Israel focuses primarily on anti-Semitic sentiments.
Language and Messaging	Terms such as "fascists", "nazis", "Russophobia" and "extremists" are used to describe opponents.	Terms such as "terrorists", "invaders" and "anti-Semites" to describe opponents.	Both use strong, emotionally charged language to discredit opponents.	The connotations of the terms differs. I.e. "extremist" (internal threat) versus "terrorist" (external threat).

(Marchiondelli, V.)

Conclusion

This chapter explains how Russia and Israel employ strategic narratives to justify their military goals. By misrepresenting historical processes, these countries' regimes aim to delegitimise their opponents' pursuit of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The analysis has revealed stark similarities in the discourses employed, such as the denial of national identity, the framing of escalations as resulting from (foreign) security threats, and the portrayal of opponents' leadership/prominent entities. Still, significant cultural and political differences have emerged.

For instance, Russia has often victimised Ukrainian civilians, forced by a (allegedly) violent authoritarian government to harbour resentment against Russians. Contrarily, Israel's campaigns aim at Palestinians' villainisation and dehumanisation. Finally, the chapter provides a side-by-side comparison, resuming the cultural, political, historical and ideological elements at play in the conflicts.

Expanding on the concepts presented in the first chapter, this section will delve into the European Union's interventions in the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine. The analysis reveals how EU institutions keep significant double standards in resolutions aimed at conflict mitigation, occasionally co-opting the so-called European values of justice, peace and human rights protection. This chapter is divided into three subcategories. Firstly, it provides a picture of the EU's actions for Ukraine. Subsequently, it analyses the response of EU institutions to the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. The discussion's last elaboration centres on the discrepancies between the assumed approaches, highlighting the inconsistencies in the EU's foreign policy.

The European Union's Response

Examining Policies and Initiatives Towards Ukraine

From the first days of the conflict in Ukraine, the EU has strongly condemned Russia's attacks. The EU had already promulgated several statements and policies in support of Ukraine after Crimea's annexation by Russia in 2014, it is thus unsurprising that the EU decided to increment its assistance when the conflict escalated in 2021. The measures undertaken towards Russia have been extremely stringent, unequivocally highlighting the severity of the acts committed, leaving no room for ambiguity regarding the EU's stance on the topic.

The EU has refused to acknowledge Russia's claims that Ukraine's present-day borders have been constructed by the Soviet ruling class. Such assertions aim to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's rule, particularly over areas where civilians appear to retain cultural and linguistic proximity with Russia (i.e. Donbas, etc). This rejection is evidenced by several statements made by different institutions, in which the EU's backing of Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity is reiterated together with the condemnation of Russia's behaviour (EU Council 2024). In a joint statement by the President of the European Council, Commission and Parliament, the conflict is summarised as follows: "Today marks a tragic anniversary: that of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in manifest violation of international law and the UN Charter. Two years of violence, brutality, terror and destruction. [...] The heroic Ukrainian people are demonstrating fortitude and determination in defending their homeland and fighting for their freedom and our shared European values" (Ibid).

These declarations have been accompanied by concrete measures to curtail Russia's power and obtain its isolation in the international sphere. The EU has established political, military, financial, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian aid packages for Ukraine, and has heavily sanctioned Russia (e.g. freezing assets and redirecting the funds to Ukraine) (Ibid). "For the people of Ukraine, for peace and security in Europe and for the rules-based international order to prevail", continues the statement detailing the assistance provided by the EU institutions (Ibid).

The EU formulated plans to constrain Russia's ability to wage ideological warfare, besides its material capacity to inflict direct military attacks on Ukraine. Indeed, platforms that shared Russian disinformation on Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic apparatus, as well as high-profile individuals linked to such outlets, have been faced with a range of restrictive measures, including asset freezes, travel bans and the prohibition of funds from EU citizens and companies (EU Council 2024). By taking action against Russian propaganda on the supposedly authoritarian nature of Ukraine's government, EU bodies also dismantle the notion that Ukraine's government has been manipulated by Western interference to become an "anti-Russia".

Further elaborating its defence of Ukrainian democracy, the EU has also put efforts into debunking Russia's assertions on Ukraine's abuses against its Russian-speaking population and its alleged problem with extremist factions. "Russian state-controlled media have tirelessly sought to vilify Ukraine, falsely accusing it of genocide in eastern Ukraine, drawing groundless parallels with Nazism [...] there is no evidence that Russian-speaking or ethnic Russian residents [...] face persecution [...] This has been confirmed in reports published by the Council of Europe, The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the OSCE" (EEAS 2024). In this same report, the EU openly links Russia's disinformation strategy -including accusations of genocide - to imperialistic objectives. The abuse of the term genocide and the labelling of Ukraine as a "Nazi state" forms part of a scheme aimed at inciting "hatred and fear of Ukrainians [...] among Russian audiences" (ergo, dehumanisation through the presentation of Ukrainians as murderous monsters) and fabricating a "solid" pretext for the invasion (Ibid). "Calling the Kyiv government "neo-Nazi" and "Russophobic" is nonsense: all manifestations of nazism are banned in Ukraine. [...] extreme rightwing candidates are a fringe phenomenon [...] [and] the Ukrainian government did not cut the Donbas off and it has not prohibited the use of Russian language and culture", remarked Borrell - the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (EEAS 2022).

The EU's complete refusal of Russian motives reveals its trust in foreign international organisations (i.e. the UN, Council of Europe, etc) to act as an indicator of state violence and human rights

abuses. In this context, the EU maintains its role as a supporter of democracy and international law by backing Ukraine's sovereignty and evidencing Russia's crimes and imperialistic ambitions. Finally, perhaps one of the "Russian myths" the EU has doubled down on more harshly is the presented justifications for the attacks on Ukrainian land, particularly over civilian areas. Russia has argued that its aggression was provoked by the encirclement of its borders from "enemies" (i.e. NATO) and that the targeting of civilian areas was granted by the repurposing of that infrastructure as military bases from the Ukrainian military. The EU reiterates its commitment to the European security order, of which Ukraine is a supporter, to highlight the incompatibility of its values with Russia's assertions that EU members are planning to invade Russian territories (EEAS 2024). "Remember that Russia is the world's largest country by geography with a population of more than 140 million and has one of the largest armed forces in the world with the highest number of nuclear weapons. It is absurd to portray Russia as a country under acute threat. [...] Of the 14 countries Russia borders, only five are NATO members." (Ibid). According to Borrell, the unfoundedness of the perceived security threats linked to NATO's and the EU's Eastward expansion is amplified by the ahistorical notions popularised by the Russian government, which argue these organisations are in breach of non-existent agreements between Gorbachev and NATO (Ibid). "The claim alleging that NATO promised not to enlarge fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the alliance. NATO, as a defensive alliance, is not "expanding" in the imperialistic sense."

Equally, the EU counters the insinuation that Ukraine's military uses civilians as human shields, recognising it as yet another instance of Russia's wide array of lies. The claim that Ukraine is violating international law in its pursuit of territorial liberation is central to Russia's systematic disinformation campaign. This discourse's goal is to absolve Russia of any accountability regarding breaching internationally recognised norms of peace and sovereignty. Meticulous investigations by the European Parliament, backed by statements from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, revealed that several war crimes of which Ukraine had been accused were committed by Russian troops. "The liberation of Ukrainian territories has led to the discovery of 'overwhelming evidence of structural and widespread human rights violations and war crimes committed by Russian forces and their proxies, such as summary executions and burials in mass graves, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, the use of civilians as human shields, the forced displacement of civilians (including children) to Russia [...] and the targeted destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, homes and schools" (EPRS 2023).

Overall, a univocal European response can be identified to the propaganda promoted by the Russian regime: it is all disinformation, and all the accusations aimed at Ukraine are false. The struggle for liberation from a colonial power is legitimate, under international law, and there is no substantial proof of wrongdoing from Ukrainian troops. An enormous amount of resources has been employed in the debunking of Russian “myths”, as EU institutions call them, and trust in international organisations’ ability to recognise human rights violations has been confirmed. The strong willingness to persecute such crimes has emerged repeatedly in EU declarations and the enactment of EU principles (equality, justice, peace) was thoroughly respected. It could only be expected that such levels of scrupulosity would be maintained in other instances of conflict connected to ethnic tensions, territorial occupation and genocidal tactics.

EU Stances on Palestine’s Case

Providing a comprehensive overview of the stances taken by EU bodies and representatives is infinitely more complex for the conflict in Israel-Palestine. As happened with public opinion, the events reported since October 7, 2023, have fractured the stances taken by different institutions, representatives and even member countries. It must be said, however, that at least on the diplomatic level the EU counters several of the identified claims of Israeli propaganda.

For instance, the EU has officially been a staunch supporter of the Two-State Solutions (EU Council 2023). Whether this provision would ensure equal rights, freedom and security for every individual living on the peninsula is uncertain but beyond the scope of this investigation. However, this position goes against Israel’s claims on the illegitimacy of Palestine’s sovereignty and recognises (to a certain extent) the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people (EEAS 2024). Indeed, several statements by the EU Commission and the External Action Service, among others, have remarked that the EU does not recognise nor condone the annexation of territories by Israel after the 1967 statute (Ibid). “The EU reiterates that settlements are illegal [...] and constitute an obstacle to peace. [...] The EU [...] will not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders” (Ibid).

It must be noted, however, that within EU institutions actors have taken different positions. In the Council, for instance, countries like Ireland and Spain have been more critical of Israel’s actions in settlements and occupied territories, while Germany and Hungary have kept an unwavering pro-Israel stance, emphasising the country’s responsibility in protecting the safety of Jewish people (Martorell Junyent 2024). Similar fractions have been registered in the Commission, with members visibly favouring Israeli leadership, and the Parliament where political groups have engaged in

heated debates on the responsibilities of the current crisis in Gaza (Politico 2023; Middle East Eye 2024).

Despite officially recognising the Palestinians' right to self-determination, the EU concurs with Israel in considering Hamas a terrorist organisation. This can be noticed both through official statements declaring Hamas a terrorist group and the numerous juxtaposition of Hamas with the "need for a credible and legitimate Palestinian authority" (EU Council 2023). At the same time, "The EU has described Israel's settlement policy as entrenching a 'one-state reality of unequal rights, perpetual occupation and conflict'" (ECFR 2024). While recognising Israel's wrongdoing concerning the expansion of settlements and territorial annexations, the EU does not endorse Palestinians' right to self-defence, in staunch contrast with the provisions taken in Ukraine's case (EEAS 2023). "What happened on October 7 [...] cannot be justified on the grounds that it was carried out to exercise the right of defence against colonisation [...] People ask: "Don't the Palestinians also have the right to defend themselves?" But what happened on 7 October was not an act of defence. It was a premeditated act of terror, attacking defenceless civilians", said Borrell (Ibid). This stance might seem plausible if one considers the 7th of October attack as the originating event of the conflict. It is a fact, however, that Israel has expanded and oppressed Palestinian civilians far before October 7, 2023. The loss of civilian lives is always a tragic and useless occurrence. But if Hamas is to blame for Israel's targeting of civilian hospitals, then it should also be questioned whether Israel weaponises civilians' presence in illegal settlements to maintain its dominance over Palestinians. If Borrell had employed the word "colons" or "settlers" instead of "civilians", as it is often done when discussing Israel's societal structure, the conveyed message would have changed significantly. Similar to how defining a group's action as either resistance or terrorism alters public empathy.

This is not to say that Hamas or other armed groups should be regarded as legitimate Palestinian authorities. It is worth thinking, however, if the attacks on the 7th of October were committed with the sole purpose of terrorising innocent civilians or were an attempt to resist the violent occupation to which Palestinian civilians have been subjected for the last seventy years. As philosophy professor and member of Jewish Voice for Peace Judith Butler said, "We can have different views of Hamas as a political party [...] about armed resistance, but I think it is more honest and historically correct to say that the uprising of October 7th was an act of armed resistance. It is not a terrorist attack, and it's not an antisemitic attack. It was an attack against the Israelis and [...] I did not like the attack [...] It was for me anguishing [...] however, it would be very foolish if I then decided that the only violence [...] was the violence done to Israeli people. The violence done to Palestinians has

been happening for decades. This was an uprising that comes from the state of subjugation and against a violent state apparatus. [...] You can be for or against armed resistance [...] but at least let's call it armed resistance and then we can have a debate about whether we think it's right [...] or [they needed] a different strategy" (Middle East Eye 2024).

Nonetheless, the EU has launched a package of sanctions against individuals who support Hamas and have expressed their solidarity with Israel (EU Council 2024). Later on, when the retaliation of Israel's government against (all) Palestinians escalated to an overwhelming point, the EU urged Israel to conduct its operations in respect of international law (EU Council 2023). No provisions were taken for the repeated breaches of international law committed by Israel in the past eight months. In the last days of April, the Council sanctioned four Israeli entities for human rights abuses against Palestinians (EU Council 2024). These groups are depicted as acting independently and outside of Israel's systematic oppression of Palestinians, as such they do not constitute a real provision on the war crimes Israel is committing at present. "The European Council also condemned the Israeli government's decisions to further expand illegal settlements across the occupied West Bank and *urged Israel to reverse these decisions*", however, no pressure is being put on Israel's government to refrain from its conduct not only in the West Bank but also the Gaza Strip, aside from diplomatic begging (Ibid).

The absence of concrete provisions (such as sanctions) against Israel's war crimes could be partially explained by the fact that the EU comprehensively accepted the justifications provided by the Israeli government. Namely, the Israeli leadership has systematically explained the targeting of civilian areas as the result of Hamas employing such infrastructure (i.e. hospitals, schools, ...) as hide-outs (EU Council 2023). The EU has not launched any independent investigation of these claims and seems to have effectively ignored the statements of independent bodies such as the UN High Commission for Human Rights and others, who have rejected Israel's explanations as the ground for excusing the indiscriminate killing of Palestinian civilians (ECFR 2023; UNHR 2023). Instead, the EU has relied on the reconstruction by Israeli intelligence that showed tunnels and other means supposedly operated by Hamas to exploit civilian infrastructure (EU Council 2023). Several EU member states (i.e. Germany, Italy, etc) kept supplying the Israeli army with key weapons to sustain the offensive in Gaza (Askew 2023). One can only wonder what Russian intelligence reports attest to the operation of the Ukrainian army in residence zones. As a result, the EU has released statements condemning Hamas for using hospitals, schools and other areas as military bases and impeding the evacuation of civilians, implicitly removing any accountability from Israel for the attacks launched on these sites (Ibid). The parallels with Ukraine's case are striking. The EU

decided that the fuzziness surrounding these claims did not need further investigation, such as in its effort to combat Russia's disinformation war. It appears that, contrary to the *jus in bello* applied to conflicts, Israel's "right to self-defence" comes first and at the expense of any consideration and respect for human life in Palestine.

Similarities and Differences in the response

Comparing the EU's declaration described in the paragraphs above, some similarities can be noted, as well as differences. Firstly, it is evident that the EU supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Palestine, based on international agreements. This position has stayed consistent during the years, despite some of these agreements (i.e. 1967 Israel-Palestine border) being controversial. Secondly, EU institutions have condemned occupation and territorial annexation of territories in both Ukraine and Palestine. The EU has condemned Crimea's annexation and the aggression of Ukraine's eastern territories. Likewise, it has deemed Israel's settlement expansion illegal under international law. Finally, in both instances, the EU has employed sanctions and humanitarian aid as tools to mitigate the conflicts, although disproportionately. Ukraine has received sustained and considerable aid in nearly all aspects necessary to counter Russia's invasion. Contemporarily, the EU has sanctioned Russia heavily, curtailing its ability to sustain warfare against Ukraine. In Palestine's case, the EU has contributed to civilians by providing humanitarian aid and advocating for the establishment of humanitarian pauses and corridors. It has sanctioned individuals linked to Hamas and Israeli settler groups, but not Israel's government.

Differences, as a result of the double standards held by the EU for Ukrainians and Palestinians, are more easily identifiable. Starting with the perception of resistance and extremism in the occupied societies, the EU has assumed diametrically opposite stances. The EU has dismissed Russian reports on Ukraine's issue with extremist groups, rightly so as they were produced by the same regime that launched the (first) aggression on Ukraine. Ukraine's actions are considered a legitimate self-defence against invasion and imperialism. On the other hand, the armed resistance against Israel is labelled an act of terrorism, and an improper example of resistance against colonialism. Similarly, the response to human rights abuses could have not been more different. In Russia's case, attacks on civilian areas have been unequivocally condemned, sanctions have been declared and the EU gave its full support to meticulous investigations into its war crimes. However, for Palestinian victims, the EU has urged Israel to respect international law but has taken no real action to curtail its war-waging power or sever its ties to the Israeli government. The EU also promoted narratives of

shared fault between Israel and Hamas for the victims of Israeli bombings of hospitals and other civilian sites.

Finally, while the EU actively put a considerable effort into fact-checking and debunking Russian disinformation on Ukraine’s government and military, it has not conducted independent investigations into Israel's claims on the appropriation of civilian infrastructure by Hamas. By condemning Hamas in official statements for committing such violations, it has effectively relied on Israeli intelligence instead.

EU	Ukraine	Israel-Palestine
Support for Sovereignty	Strong and unequivocal support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.	Support for two-state solution, does not recognise annexation of territories by Israel post-1967.
Condemnation of Occupation	Condemns the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the subsequent attacks on Ukraine’s Eastern territories (i.e. Donbass, etc).	Condemns Israeli settlements in the West Bank, supports “self-defence” in Gaza Strip.
Humanitarian Aid and Sanctions	Extensive aid to Ukraine in all areas (incl. military), harsh sanctions on Russia.	Efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to Palestinians, sanctions on Hamas for war crimes (7/10). No sanctions on Israel for the crimes committed.
Perception of Resistance	Seen as legitimate defence against Russian imperialism, claims of extremism dismissed as disinformation.	Hamas (and other armed groups) considered terrorist organisations.
Response to Civilian Casualties	Strong and unequivocal condemnation of Russia’s attacks on civilian areas.	To a certain extent endorse Israeli justifications, urges Israel to follow international law after registered attacks on civilian areas.
Handling of Disinformation	Active efforts in debunking Russian disinformation.	Relies on Israeli reports, lacks independent investigations.

(Marchiondelli, V.)⁴

Conclusion

It might be argued that the EU's response to the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine could not be more different. In Ukraine's case, the EU has undertaken a unified and stringent approach to curtail Russia's warmongering capacity, condemning the aggression unequivocally, imposing sanctions, and providing comprehensive support to Ukraine's military, society and government. This consistent strategy attests to the EU's commitment to democratic values and international law's protection. Sadly, it also demonstrated that such commitment is granted on a case-by-case basis. In fact, the response to the crisis in Palestine has been remarkably more fragmented and cautious. The EU officially supported a two-state solution based on the borders drawn in 1967, condemned Israel's following expansions, and has recently sanctioned "independent" Israeli settler groups. Likewise, it urged Israel's leadership to be respectful of international law in its belligerent efforts against armed Palestinian collectives. However, it has refrained from imposing sanctions or significant measures to curtail Israel's offensive capacity, despite repeated and documented human rights violations, like it did for Hamas. The inconsistency is further proven by the absence of independent investigations into Israel's justifications for its attacks on civilian areas. These discrepancies underscore a blatant double standard in the EU's foreign policy. While institutions actively defend the sovereignty and application of international law in Ukraine, they fall short of applying the same right to the conflict in Israel-Palestine. If the EU aspires to maintain its credibility in the international arena, it must reconsider its approach and strive for a more balanced strategy for justice and human rights protection.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is first and foremost critical of the European Union's inconsistencies in the application of foreign policy, international law and recognised global standards of behaviour. It does not, in any way, seek to relieve Russia of accountability for the war crimes committed in Ukraine. Likewise, it does not attempt to absolve or establish Hamas as the legitimate Palestinian authority, nor suggest what the right course of action for Palestine-Israel should be. In an ideal world, these conclusions would be achieved through an extensive process of transitional justice and national reconciliation in which Palestinians and Israelis partake in the court's working as equals, as was done in South Africa after the collapse of the Apartheid regime.

However, this research identifies both Russia and Israel as agents of imperialism and colonisation, indiscriminately attacking and oppressing populations in their proximity. One with dual tactics of annexation and assimilation (Russia), and the other with settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing (Israel). In the middle, is the EU - a supranational body whose foreign policy supposedly aims to promote international peace and stability, democracy, justice and human rights. Unfortunately, investigations have shown that these values are applied selectively, with clear double standards depending on the actors involved in the conflicts. Namely, it is rampant -today more than ever- that the EU's actions are dictated by its geopolitical interests and those of its allies. The promotion of the so-called "EU values" is an afterthought or a powerful tool to embrace in conflict mediations where it is profitable. As the research shows, these values have been taken into consideration when investigating Russia's aggression on Ukraine, leading to unequivocal and stringent countermeasures. In Israel's case, European institutions have been much more cautious in the application of the same standards for war crimes and human rights violations, almost turning a blind eye to the wrongdoings committed against the Palestinian population. Sporadic statements urging Israel to respect international law have been made, but they appear to be a merely performative reiteration of the EU's role as a "normative power". As it was done for Russia and Hamas, the EU could have imposed concrete sanctions to curtail Israel's offensive capacity after the repeated and documented abuses. Nonetheless, institutions preferred to feebly reprimand such violations while reiterating their support and vicinity to Israel. The hypocrisy demonstrated by EU institutions significantly harms their credibility, particularly in the eyes of non-Western states who now had the chance to take a look past the mask of "ideal-driven normative power". It goes without saying that these double standards should find no place in frameworks dedicated to human rights protection and justice promotion.

Coincidentally, during the final days of writing this thesis, the International Criminal Court (ICC) received a request to investigate the European Commission's president Ursula Von Der Leyen (LibertyBeacon 2024). The Geneva International Peace Research Institute submitted a report attesting to her complicity in the facilitation of Israel's genocide in Palestine (Ibid).

This seems to corroborate this thesis' findings, which show how the EU system partakes in conflict mediations particularly when its interests are at stake, occasionally co-opting noble concepts such as human rights, peace, and democracy. A strategy that clashes significantly with the claim that "spheres of influence have no place in the 21st century" (EEAS 2022).

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