



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **(Un)willing to Sacrifice: History, Post-Heroism and Willingness to Defend Across Europe**

Šliogerytė, Barbora

### **Citation**

Šliogerytė, B. (2026). *(Un)willing to Sacrifice: History, Post-Heroism and Willingness to Defend Across Europe*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4301539>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# (Un)willing to Sacrifice: History, Post-Heroism and Willingness to Defend Across Europe

Barbora Ūla Šliogerytė  
s1686704

MSc Thesis Public Administration: International and European Governance,  
Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs,  
Leiden University  
Dr. Lars Dorren

9th January 2026



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	
INTRODUCTION	
1.1 SELF-SACRIFICE AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE	
1.2. POLITICAL CULTURE AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE IN WESTERN EUROPE	
1.3. PERCEPTION OF THREAT AS A CATALYSER FOR INDIVIDUAL WILLINGNESS TO DEFEND	
1.4. GRAND THEORIES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND INDIVIDUAL WILLINGNESS TO CONTRIBUTE TO COLLECTIVE DEFENCE	
1.5. THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARD COLLECTIVE DEFENCE	
1.6. RESEARCH GAP	
<b>CHAPTER II</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	
2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN	
2.2. CASE SELECTION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY	
2.3. DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED, OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS	
2.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUESTION DESIGN	
2.5. LIMITATIONS	
2.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY	
<b>CHAPTER III</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>ANALYSIS</b>	
INTRODUCTION	
3.1. COMPARING READINESS TO SELF-SACRIFICE IN THE BALTICS, GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS	
3.2. DEFINING BOUNDARIES OF THE COMMUNITY	
3.3. SELF-SACRIFICE AS A MORAL IMPERATIVE	
CONCLUSION	
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	<b>31</b>

# INTRODUCTION

In the first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while Western governments were grappling with how to respond to the return of large-scale war to the European continent, Ukrainian society demonstrated remarkable resilience, repelling many times stronger military forces, while also sustaining the functioning of state institutions. Although subsequent Ukrainian resistance would not be possible without financial and military assistance from the West, many observers noted that the initial days of the war were decisive for Kyiv. Ukraine's case underscored the importance of morale in warfare and how active bottom-up societal participation can be decisive for effective defence and administrative effectiveness.

Due to the war in Ukraine, national security, conscription, and public readiness to defend became central to the political debate across Europe. Nevertheless, despite the security imperative, the debate exposed significant differences in the approach regarding these issues across different member states. In Northern, Baltic, and Eastern European countries, public support for collective defence was underpinned by moral certainty and urgency, which is also reflected in their conscription policy. Meanwhile, in some other Western European countries, the debate remains characterised by indecisiveness and aversion to militarisation and violence, as well as resistance to measures such as mandatory military service. As EU Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen, in the State of the Union speech, noted, because the EU began as a peace project, it is still so uncomfortable for many Europeans to admit that today "Europe is in for a fight". The general atmosphere is also reflected in opinion polls, which show that, for example, only 16 percent of Germans say that they would defend their country in case of war (Bundeswehr, 2025). Such contrast in public discourse presents a puzzle: why do societies that are institutionally, politically, economically, and culturally similar, as well as integrated in the same security framework, display such contrasting attitudes regarding their willingness to contribute to collective defence?

The existing body of scholarship addresses this question only in part. Rationalist approaches address cost-benefit calculations in individual decision-making. Post-materialist theory, for example, does acknowledge the role of history in shaping political culture, namely how extended periods of peace and economic prosperity resulted in the cultural transformation in Western Europe that prioritises individual autonomy, pluralism, and pacifism. Even though these perspectives provide valuable insights, they fail to comprehensively address cross-national variation in Europe among societies that are otherwise institutionally, economically and culturally comparable.

The thesis argues that history is a major force that shapes identities and values systems that translate into differing moral reasoning, which underpins individual willingness to defend, especially under unfavourable conditions where the likelihood of success is low and the risk of death is high. For this reason, the concept of self-sacrifice is introduced and becomes analytically salient. The concept of self-sacrifice is particularly compelling, as it not only undermines the rationalist perception of human nature as inherently self-interested but also primary human instinct of self-preservation. Moreover, in the context of new security challenges, it highlights limits of the post-materialist value system of Western Europe.

This study is socially relevant for several reasons. First, the approach adopted in the research can help find a common language for bridging the gap between meanings across

European societies that have been shaped by different collective experiences - an aspect which is particularly salient in the context of the European fragmentation, which hinders it from collectively addressing new security challenges. Secondly, NATO's Article 5 does not guarantee the automatic enforcement of collective defense; the final decision remains with national governments, whose decisions rely on public support and their willingness to sustain war-inflicted costs. Finally, as the Ukrainian experience demonstrates, public support and societal morale are critical not only for collective defence but also for the functioning of state institutions under wartime conditions, when unpopular decisions have to be made.

The study contributes to public administration scholarship by emphasizing the enduring role of history for the construction of values, identity, and moral reasoning that shape public support for security and defence policies. This way, the study provides a more complex, nuanced understanding of human behavior than theories that reduce humans to rational agents alone. Specifically, an intriguing and underinvestigated concept of self-sacrifice shows how administrative effectiveness - especially in the high-stakes policy areas and crisis governance - depends on citizens' morale and willingness to sustain personal costs for the collective good.

Therefore, methodologically, considering the study's focus on identity, collective memory, threat perception, and moral reasoning - notions, which are produced in the process of intersubjective meaning making - a qualitative approach is best equipped to gain analytical depth. The discourse analysis is based on the data gathered from multiple semi-structured, open-ended 45-minute interviews with approximately 30 individuals from the Baltic states, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 discusses existing scholarship and introduces the theoretical framework employed by the study. Chapter 2 discusses the methodology of the research, together with the research design and the interview guide, and it also considers potential limitations. In Chapter 3, the analysis is presented, which is structured into three parts. First, the findings from the interview are presented, namely individual attitudes toward collective defence in the event of a hypothetical Russian invasion. In the second part, to assess the role of history, the research examines the perceived boundaries of the community for which individuals are willing to sacrifice. Finally, after establishing the boundaries of the community, the research examines how the collective experience of Soviet occupation in the Baltic states, together with the perceived heightened levels of threat, has shaped a value system that influences individual willingness to sacrifice. The findings are summarized in the conclusion, along with potential avenues for future research.

# CHAPTER 1

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### INTRODUCTION

The thesis examines how history shapes individual willingness to self-sacrifice for collective defence in the Baltic states, Germany and the Netherlands. The following chapter develops a theoretical framework that integrates existing approaches to individual willingness to contribute to collective defence and explicitly links them to the concept of self-sacrifice. By drawing on political philosophy, political culture theory, security studies and theories of European Integration, the framework provides conceptual basis for the empirical analysis in the subsequent chapter.

### 1.1 SELF-SACRIFICE AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Jan Patočka conceptualises self-sacrifice as a manifestation of *universal* morality because it signifies human ability to transcend self-interest and see themselves in relation to others. Although Patočka's formulation is normatively-laden, it provides a useful analytical baseline. In this study self-sacrifice, therefore, is defined as the voluntary transcendence of individual self-interest, whereby an individual - free from coercion or intimidation and guided by personal reasoning and the ability to judge - chooses to sustain personal costs - physical harm or death, for instance - in an effort to pursue an individual moral or collective good.

Framed in this way, self-sacrifice is integral to collective defence. Collective defence relies on the individual willingness to accept asymmetrical costs such as physical injury or death for the security, whose benefits are shared collectively. Willingness to accept individual risks, thus, constitute the necessary condition for collective defence.

In the context of contemporary Europe, however, the notion of self-sacrifice becomes particularly intriguing because it conflicts with the value foundation of post-materialist society associated with individual autonomy, rationalism and pacifism - as described by Inglehart et al. (2015). Self-sacrifice not only contradicts an assumption of humans as self-interested beings but also overrides the fundamental instinct of self-preservation. The latter incongruence raises important questions about why, and under what conditions, individuals are willing to incur extreme personal costs - such as losing their life - to ensure collective security.

### 1.2. POLITICAL CULTURE AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE IN WESTERN EUROPE

Recognising the force of modernisation, Simas Čelutka (2024) argues that after World War II, especially following the dissolution of the USSR, Europe entered a “post-heroic” era. According to Čelutka, neoliberalism and economic interdependence contributed to a political environment in which “history and politics were sidelined in favour of economics, trade, international law, and abstract morality.” At the individual level, this shift reconfigured patterns of self-identification and civic responsibility, diminishing the normative salience of “heroic values” associated with courage, duty, and sacrifice. The end of the Cold War cultivated the belief that liberal democracy prevailed, whereas economic interdependence made large inter-state conflict unimaginable. The prolonged period of peace led to devaluation of heroic values associated with courage, individual duty and notions such as self-sacrifice. However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is forcing Europeans to re-evaluate these assumptions and beliefs about security and defence.

Čelutka’s observations are supported by empirical findings presented by Inglehart, Puranen and Welzel (2015). The authors argue that prolonged periods of peace in Europe should not be solely understood through an economic or political lens, but rather as a result of cultural transformation. Under post-material conditions, characterised by an increase in living standard and existential security, societies shifted away from survival-focused orientation toward individualistic, pro-choice and pacifist values, leading “to a moral evolution that devalues violence and war” (Inglehart et al., 2015).

Similarly, Thomas Berger (1998) conceptualises political culture as a synthesis of sociological, anthropological, and historical dimensions. The former focuses at the individual level and sees political culture emerging from everyday practices as a bottom-up phenomena, while history- orientated approaches focus on exogenous shocks - such as wars, revolutions, and crisis - and the ways in which they get anchored in the collective memories. Berger (1998) adopts the latter framework to explain how Germany’s experience of the WWII produced antimilitarist culture that continues to shape political culture as manifested by the public’s resistance to Bundestag’s recent attempts to re-introduction conscription.

### 1.3. PERCEPTION OF THREAT AS A CATALYSER FOR INDIVIDUAL WILLINGNESS TO DEFEND

Mandatory military service was suspended in most European countries during the 1990s, with Germany as an exception to the trend who initiated their suspension in 2011. The declining relevance of conscription was often justified on the basis of instrumental and rationalist reasoning (Longhurt, 2003; Jäckle, S., 2023). With the end of the Cold War, the perceived threat of the large scale territorial conflict decreased, while new forms of warfare, following 9/11 - reframed war in new transnational terms (Jäckle, S., 2023).. These dynamics rendered national conscription obsolete.

After the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, questions related to national security and collective defence regained prominence. European states imposed sanctions, increased military assistance to Ukraine, and pledged to boost their defense spending up to 5% GDP. The perception of increased levels of threat and support to collective defence is also reflected in the polls across the EU (Mader, 2024; Mader, 2024; Graf et al., 2024). For instance,

public support in Germany for invoking NATO's article 5 to defend Eastern member states rose from 34 percent in 2020 to 65 percent in 2024 (Mader, 2024).

According to *the external threat hypothesis*, the presence of foreign adversaries tends to enhance preference convergence, cooperation, and alliance cohesion (Benard and Doan 2011; Myrick 2021; Stein 1976). Russia's aggression has also caused vertical Europeanisation of the EU foreign and security policy and "rally around the supranational flag" effect (Sojka et al., 2025; Muhammad & Undzėnas, 2025). However, *external threat theory* fails to explain variations among equally developed societies within the EU.

#### 1.4. GRAND THEORIES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND INDIVIDUAL WILLINGNESS TO CONTRIBUTE TO COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Other scholars focus on structural aspects shaping individual decision-making. Functionalist theories of European integration emphasise spill-over effects, whereby integration in one policy area generates a demand in others. In the context of collective defence, economic integration creates incentives for supranational security framework to protect the internal market. In this case Russia's territorial ambitions generate demand for supranational solutions. At the individual level, this logic suggests that willingness to defend is determined by cost-benefit analysis: collective defense is the most effective response to shared security challenges (Mader et al. 2023)

Post-functionalists scholars, however, argue that integration is not driven by efficiency alone but is shaped by territorial identities. Hooghe and Marks (2019) describes the process of politicisation, under which national actors instrumentalised political issues to mobilise resistance against further European integration. Even though Schimmelfennig (2024) objects, claiming that a crisis such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine is constitutive to the EU's polity formation, reinforcing shared-identity and functional demand for centralised authority.

The recent work of Mader et al. (2024) lends support to functionalist claim, demonstrating that even Eurosceptic citizens may support supranational solutions under the conditions of increased security threat. However, this logic does not sufficiently explain why, for example, the Baltic states and Poland, which bear substantial economic costs due to war - maintain some of the highest levels of public willingness to participate in national defence. Some research suggests that willingness to contribute to collective defense is contingent on perceived chances of winning the conflict (Dr. Yao-Yuan Yeh, 2021). Specifically, among the small countries that calculation depends on multilateralism, that is, the extent to which smaller countries such as the Baltic states have confidence in their allies. However, at the same time, this does not address why, for example, in countries like Germany, where confidence in NATO's collective defence guarantees is arguably high, there is such a high resistance to conscription.

#### 1.5. THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN SHAPING ATTITUDES TOWARD COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Joenniemi (2002) argues that conscription, in its essence entails acceptance of potentially fatal risk and, therefore, is always value- and ideas-laden because a completely self-interested individual that is primarily concerned with their own survival should be deterred by the idea of sacrificing their own life. Therefore, contrary to rationalists explanations, politico-cultural perspective is better equipped to explain individual decision-making in relation to questions such as military service. Many argue that the rise of neoliberalism and multilateralism in the 1990s signified the 'demise of the nation-state', thereby reshaping individuals' relationship with the state. However, rather than marking an ideational dissolution, the shift in the traditional discourse underpinning state-military relationship was reconfigured into another discursive practices aimed at reconstituting social contract at a global level (Joenniemi (2017). In short, the end of the twentieth-century marked a transition from "dying for your country" to "dying for humanity" (Kaldor, 2003 in Joenniemi, 2017)

This discursive transformation, however, contrasts with developments in Central Europe and Eastern Europe, where nationalism has had a major role in post-communist state building (Gerrits, 1992). Particularly, nationalism in this region was not not only an instrument of resistance against foreign domination but also became a means for re-building and sustaining political and economic institutions in the fragile democracies that emerged in the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union. David Miller (1998), for example, argues that national identities emerge due to exogenous pressures and can produce ethical obligation toward others, challenging universalist stance, who see nationalism as inherently exclusionary. Hence, in this sense, individual self-interest is extended to a community of shared practices and beliefs, thereby providing the individual with meaning and situating them within a broader political and moral order (Wendt, 1990). Consequently, in the context of collective defence, individuals may perceive the survival of their own community as inseparable from their own, creating both the incentive and the justification for self-sacrifice.

## 1.6. RESEARCH GAP

Most surveys typically ask whether the individuals are willing to "fight for their country." However, such a formulation is not representative of the current political reality. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, willingness to defend stems not only from narrow nationalist sentiment in the modernist sense of the word but also from the belief in the community of values associated with liberal democratic freedoms in opposition to autocratic modes of governing in Moscow. Moreover, post-materialist theories, despite integrating history in their research, excessively rely on linear and teleological assumptions regarding socioeconomic development and declining individual willingness to defend. This does not only fail to reflect current political reality that is illustrated by waging war in Europe, but also does not explain the variation in attitudes toward collective defence among equally developed societies. Specifically, it does not comprehensively address the enduring role history and collective memory in shaping individual attitudes.

The following study therefore aims to go beyond structural and instrumental explanations by examining how historical experience interacts with identity construction

and personal moral reasoning. Specifically, it examines how collective memory - namely, that of the Soviet occupation - shapes attitudes toward collective defence, particularly under unfavourable conditions, and how it influences individual willingness to self-sacrifice.

# CHAPTER 2

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The study is based on qualitative research and aims to explore how historical experience shapes the value systems that underpin individual readiness to contribute to collective defence and how, under unfavourable conditions, these values systems translate into willingness to self-sacrifice.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach and can be situated in the intersection of public administration and constructivist epistemological framework, drawing particular inspiration from political philosophy and anthropology.

Given that study focus on identity, collective memory, threat perception and moral reasoning - concepts that are not fixed but embedded in inter-subjective meaning creation - qualitative approach is better equipped to comprehensively address these notions than quantitative methods alone.

Therefore, the study does not seek to test pre-defined hypothesis but aims to explore personal worldviews in relation to collective experience, and to generate better understanding of the meanings and narratives that inform their decision-making.

Considering topic's conceptual and normative complexity, the study will follow an inductive logic, aiming throughout the interviews to identify patterns and explore how individuals make sense of the world and themselves. Specifically, the study aims to explore how individuals think and speak in relation to the concepts of belonging, and how that reflects in their value systems that guides their moral reasoning in relation to collective defence and the notion of self-sacrifice.

### **2.2. CASE SELECTION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY**

The research employs a comparative design and focuses on the following countries - Germany, the Netherlands and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). All these countries exhibit important structural similarities as they all are liberal democracies that share same supranational political institutions of the EU, has relatively similar level of economic development and are part of the same security framework of NATO. At the same time, however, they significantly differ in historical experience and geographic proximity to Russia.

Germany and the Netherlands are exemplary of the Western post-materialist societies whose culture has been shaped by the prolonged period of peace and prosperity. By contrast the Baltic societies, following the end of World War II endured fifty-years of the Soviet occupation, regaining their independence only in 1990. Therefore, by holding economic and institutional factors constant, the study can isolate variables related to historical experience and

threat perception, and explore how they shape identity, values, and, consequently willingness to self-sacrifice.

The sample of the study includes around 30 participants, distributed relatively evenly across the countries. Particular attention has been given to selecting a sample that would be representative of the following generations - Boomers, who in the Baltic states spent most of their lives under the Soviet regime; Generation X, who experienced the most significant social transformation during their youth following the dissolution of the USSR; and millennials and generation Z, who were born after the end of the Cold War. Given the limited scope of the research, a control criterion was applied in the process of case-selection, specifically a similar educational background (university degree) and socio-economic status.

### 2.3. DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED, OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS

The data was collected during semi-structured, open-ended interviews done either in-person or online based on the participants availability and preferences. Interviews lasted approximately 45min, which provided flexibility and opportunity to improvise and examine individual perspective in-depth.

The method of engaging in long open-ended conversation, allowed to get better understanding of the authentic individual reasoning in relation to the notions of identity, lived experience and moral judgement, which are often complex and nuanced. Additionally, such a mode of interview was well-suited to detect subtle nuances and individual sensitivities that are reflected in non-verbal communication such as reactions, emotions and body language. The language of communication used was English, and Lithuanian with participants from Lithuania.

### 2.4. INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUESTION DESIGN

To understand the role of history in shaping the attitudes toward self-sacrifice, the interviews firstly, aimed to determine to sacrifice for whom or what. Accordingly, the first part of the interview focused on establishing the perceived boundaries of participant's communities. Since self-sacrifice in this research is closely linked to the current geopolitical context and the war in Ukraine - and because monopoly over the use of force is held by the nation-states - participants were asked to what extent they identify with the country to which they legally belong.

In this context, their relationship to concepts such as 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' were explored. Other related questions addressed political affiliation, ideas, and beliefs that may extend the boundaries of community beyond the national borders, with particular focus on how these aspect relate to their regional history.

In order to bring discussion to collective defence, participants were asked about their views regarding military service. Considering, however, that often conscription is associated not only with putting one's own life at stake, but also involves using violence - since for example, sacrificing yourself in order to defend the ideals of pacifism is also a way to self-sacrifice -

participants' stance on violence and pacifism was investigated. Also, these questions helped to test post-materialist theory presented in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, following one of the first interviews it was noticed that some participants used categories of "good" and "evil" to describe global affairs. In the subsequent interviews, therefore, respondents were asked whether they use these moral categories when thinking about their value systems.

Finally, the hypothetical invasion scenarios were introduced to assess willingness to remain in the country and contribute to collective defence. To evaluate the importance of ideational dimension associated with the concept of self-sacrifice, participants were asked whether their decision would be impacted by the chances of success and the likelihood of death.

## 2.5. LIMITATIONS

The research design has a few following limitations. First, questions concerning individual willingness in the event of invasion to remain in the country and contribute to collective defence, as well as readiness to sacrifice their life, if needed is inevitably hypothetical and may not accurately reflect the behaviour under the actual conditions of war. For that reason, respondent may overstate their commitment due to normative expectations, especially people from the Baltic states. Whereas others, because of the hypothetical nature of the scenario, may underestimate their readiness. Secondly, the qualitative research and a small sample size of the research limits the extent to which findings can be generalised beyond the cases analysed in the study. Third, in order to control structural differences, in order to enable cross-national comparability, individuals with similar educational background were chosen, which might lead to sampling bias and not reflect the diversity of the social reality in each country.

## 2.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity was integral part of the study. The researcher, given her own personal background, namely her Lithuanian nationality, was attentive to how it can affect interpretation of the results. Especially, when the topic of the study is very recent due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, and emotionally charged because of its association with the themes of death and loss.

Ethical guidelines for qualitative research were followed throughout the process of the research. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants consent under the conditions of anonymity. For that reason, names of the people were changed while their nationality, age and occupation were preserved. Participants were allowed to stop, pause the interview or choose not to answer certain questions they do not feel comfortable with. The data has been stored securely with the researcher.

# CHAPTER 3

## ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

The following chapter presents the data gathered from the interviews and examines how historical experience and threat perception shape individual willingness to self-sacrifice. Building on the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2 and the methodological approach described in chapter 3, the analysis proceeds in three sections. Firstly, the study presents cross-national differences in regards to individuals' willingness to contribute to collective defence and self-sacrifice. Subsequently, boundaries of the community are examined to see how identities shape individual sense of obligation regarding collective defence. Finally, the study demonstrates how history shapes the value system, and thus individual attitudes toward self-sacrifice.

### 3.1. COMPARING READINESS TO SELF-SACRIFICE IN THE BALTICS, GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS

In the context of the war in Ukraine and the increased possibility of military conflict in other European countries, this research aims to establish whether - and to what extent - people would be willing to contribute to collective defence, even when the likelihood of losing their life is high. In other words, the study examines the extent to which people across Europe are willing to self-sacrifice.

Despite sharing common market, political structures, and a security framework underpinned by liberal democratic principles and values, responses to the question of whether individuals would choose to leave or stay in the event of hypothetical Russian invasion differed drastically across the European members states - specifically, the Baltic states, the Netherlands and Germany. When the question was reframed to consider decreased chances of success and an increased likelihood of death, these contrasts became even more prominent. Respondents from the Baltic states overwhelmingly indicated that they would choose to stay regardless of the chances of victory:

*I think my decision, if I was in Latvia, would be to stay. If I wasn't in Latvia, it would be to go there, if I could. And that's because there's nowhere else for me to be. Because at the end of the day, that's where my family is, that's where my home is, that's where my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents all the way back have lived. And I don't think I'd be able to live with myself if I didn't go back in some capacity.*

Dani, Latvian, 20 years old

*I have to fulfill my responsibility to Estonia. <...> Our family's men would all go. I wouldn't leave. I know what we're capable of. I've been to many exercises. I know how tough people with a purpose are. We've proved we can handle ourselves. <...> I would fight to my last breath.*

Martin, Estonian, 23 years old

No. If the decision were based on “chances of winning,” that would already be running away. At my age, where would I run? I think I would stay. Maybe I could do something useful—take down at least five Russians (laughs).

Tommy, Lithuanian, 52 years old

In contrast, respondents from Germany demonstrated willingness to remain and contribute to national defence only under conditions of high success probability and low personal risk.

If I think it's a lost cause or it's just too dangerous, yes, I definitely would not enter a major risk of losing my life.

Freidrich, German, 21 years old

I think it depends on how it looks on the front and the chances of winning. If the chances are very low, then I would probably leave if possible. Because if it is just a loss of life, it doesn't help. There is also a life somewhere else...

Karl, German, 23 years old

If the base is f\*cked, if we don't have weapons, if the system is eroding, I don't fight for a sinking ship.

Elias, German, 20 years old

There must be a reasonable chance of winning or protecting people. <...> If I had to fight, I'd probably leave. If I could stay in a peaceful area behind the war zone, I might stay. But if the war zone moved closer, I would leave at some point.

Matteo , German, 26 years old

Fighting a war you can't win is foolish. It creates more suffering and prevents nothing. If you know you'll lose, losing without fighting could be better because fewer people die and less is destroyed.

George, German, 21 years old

It depends on the outcome. If it means someone or the nation is protected, then I want to say yes, but probably the answer is no.

Peter, German, 33 years old

The most obvious explanation for cross-national differences is geographic proximity to Russia, which shapes threat perception, as well as divergent historical experiences - most notably Soviet occupation in the Baltic states, and Germany's legacy of collective guilt following the Second World War. The former has fostered societal mobilisation in the face of existential threat, the latter has contributed to general aversion to violence. However, these two factors alone do not sufficiently explain why only small segment of post-modern, secular, liberal democratic societies - namely the Baltic states - demonstrate a significantly higher willingness to relinquish the fundamental human instinct of self-preservation in favour of self-sacrifice. Accordingly, the research examines how history has actively shaped institutions, societies, and individual perceptions in the Baltic states, Germany, and the Netherlands resulting in divergent attitudes toward self-sacrifice.

## 3.2. DEFINING BOUNDARIES OF THE COMMUNITY

### 3.2. A ROLE OF TERRITORIALLY DEFINED IDENTITIES IN WEST EUROPE AND THE BALTIC STATES

To understand the role of history in shaping the attitudes toward self-sacrifice, it is first necessary to establish: sacrifice for "whom" or "what"? Employment of force falls under the provision of the state, but states themselves like the Baltics, Germany and the Netherlands are part of the larger security frameworks of NATO, whereas its foreign and security policy is also coordinated on the EU level. Consequently, an individual's willingness to self-sacrifice during war is influenced by how strongly they identify with each of the aforementioned entities and institutions that would make the decisions affecting their lives under such conditions.

In the Baltics the reference point for self-identification appeared to be very much territorially and historically defined. Even though many in the Baltics emphasized Europeanness as essential to the boundaries of their community, they acknowledged that a certain level of distinctiveness from the "Old Europeans" existed. This sentiment was stronger among the older generation who lived through the occupation of the Soviet Union.

*I don't really have any alternative way of positioning myself [than Lithuanian] — we weren't "children of the world.... My way of thinking is a bit different from the "real" — or rather, the \*old\* — Europeans who grew up without that rupture\*<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> The participant is referring to the collapse of the USSR

Tommy, Lithuanian, 52 years old

Additionally, this sense of distinctiveness was strengthened with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has brought onto the surface the collective trauma of the region.

*... I would like to position myself as "Western European," <...> Technically I am part of Europe because I participate in EU activities in a very direct, practical sense through opportunities that come with membership. But Europe itself rejects me ... because of what is happening with Ukraine <...> my Lithuanian identity is becoming more important...*

Elena, Lithuanian, 52 years old

Since the concept of nationalism encompasses the notion of a person's identification with their nation-state, participants were asked about their personal relationship with the concept. Respondents from the Baltic states defined nationalism in more positive terms than their counterparts from the Netherlands and Germany but also indicated existing tensions with more exclusionary versions of the same phenomena. Interestingly, in the Baltics the term 'nationalism' was not limited to the national borders but also included larger social frameworks and communities of values associated with liberal democratic freedoms, which has been restored after declaration of independence in the 90s, as in opposition to the autocratic mode of governing in Russia.

*A nationalist in this sense is not someone who denies others, but someone who protects and appreciates the value-based foundations of their own community, without doing so at the expense of other nations. So yes, to practice these [liberal democratic] values is to be a patriot — both a patriot and a nationalist — because the word "nationalist" itself is not inherently negative.*

Tommy, Lithuanian, 52 years old

Additionally, Europe as a political project and a space of shared values was seen as essential for the survival of the small Baltic states. A Latvian student summarised it as follows

*For me, being European means being part of a larger project—one of the few regions in the world where democracy, freedom, and self-determination are not just ideas but are actively functioning. These principles are essential to Latvia's existence as an independent country, and Europe is the place where this project is actually working. I care deeply about seeing that succeed.*

Dani, Latvian, 20 years old

In contrast to, to the Baltics, where the term nationalism was often used in the context of liberal democratic European values and freedoms as anathema to the illiberal modes of governing, the Dutch and German participants largely described it in negative terms. Because of the role of nationalism in WWII many saw it as exclusionary, isolationist and overall obstructing

the very same liberal European project. Othering' and an inherent hierarchical approach in regards to other cultures were seen as underlying aspects of the notion.

*I would define nationalism as a conviction that your own nationality is superior over others. It's more than love for your country. It puts that in comparison to other nations and above them, and often it has disregard and disrespect for other people.*

Karl, German, 23 years old.

Also, many respondents from the Netherlands and Germany associated nationalism and patriotism with the current rise of populists movements across the world. Patriotism especially, amid different from nationalism, was defined more in terms of legal membership in the community associated with citizenship, yet at the same time exclusionary and adhering to the current rise of right-wing populist movements in the West.

*My personal relationship to both [nationalism and patriotism] is difficult. For me, nationalism and patriotism feel more negative. I think of American Trump supporters—MAGA people—when I think about patriots. And in Germany<...> for me it's more connected with right-wing people.*

Sabina, German, 35 years old

Others also defined it as obsolete, a phenomena that was integral to the forging of the state system in Europe but in today's context as an obstacle for forging a common European identity:

*Nationalism, I think that is a 19th century concept. It was once very important <...> but it's something that is in the past. <...> So as long as we can go to the next level and leave patriotism and nationalism behind us, there is a bright future to preserve our European identity.*

Wouter, Dutch, 65 years old

Such a pronounced contrast between the participants can be traced not only to the different collective experience, namely, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states on one side, and Western colonialism on the other - but also the lack of reflection and articulation of historical narratives about the WWII, as well as deep misconceptions about the different modes of imperialism, that in the West Europe was underlined by nationalist ideologies.

### 3.2.2. EXPLAINING THE ROLE OF HISTORY FOR THE BALTIC NATIONALISM

First, as noted by Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko (2025), Russian imperialism in the Soviet Union differed from Western imperialism in its approach to local cultures. Whereas Western imperialism was largely grounded in *difference* - manifested through overt discrimination and domination on the basis of Western superiority - Soviet imperialism operated through '*sameness*', relying on covert discrimination and systematic assimilation at the expense of local cultural heterogeneity (Yermolenko, 2025). This logic was reflected in state policies that promoted intensive Russification across the Soviet republics.

Similarly, Arendt (2017) argued that in Nazi Germany hierarchical relations were structured primarily along the racial lines, whereas in Western Europe social power dynamics were shaped by class. In the Soviet Union, however, such categories were ostensibly dissolved under the guise of communist ideology, rendering virtually anyone a potential victim (Arendt, 2017). Consequently, the boundary between the victim and the perpetrator became blurred, undermining the very notion of justice, thereby making its execution particularly challenging. In the absence of clear categories, conceptual clarity regarding who constitutes 'the oppressor' and 'the oppressed' was lost, complicating the articulation of historical narratives capable of doing justice to the latter while holding the former accountable.

Both of the aspects are grounded in the negation of particularism, thereby denying the right for self-determination. In the context of discursive historical ambivalence - where, Russia, unlike Germany continues to be perceived in Western discourse as 'an exotic unknown,' - neither sufficiently benign, nor sufficiently culpable to share the stance of shame with former slave owners and Nazis - Baltic nationalism should be understood as an attempt to reclaim back their identity and break the cycle of Russia's historical impunity.

Whereas in Western Europe, nationalism given the historical clarity regarding its role in dividing the continent before for the major confrontation in WWII - has largely been associated with colonialism, exclusion, alienation, and expansionism. Thus, its revival today is often viewed as an obstacle for forging common European identity. Additionally, processes of late-modern globalisation and open borders in Western societies have fostered expanded notions of community and weakened attachment to territorially defined identities.

### 3.2.3. UNIVERSALISM IN GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS

There was a notable trend among Germans respondents, particularly those that position themselves on the political left, was strong identification with universalist set of values. Many participants referred to the notion of the "global citizen", understood as an individual whose individual obligation towards the community transcends national borders and who exhibits a weakened attachment to territorially defined communities. This orientation is illustrated by the response of the German student who, when asked to describe their self-identification, replied:

*I would say I identify as a human. And then I would say I identify as European. Then I would say I identify as German <...> there is some prosocial behavior I would show toward someone I share a group with. But since I started by saying I'm human, I would also show prosocial behavior to every human being, besides all the smaller communities I identify with. <...> Maybe if someone shares all the*

*categories—like living in the same small town —there would be a stronger bond and I would trust them more, even though that's unreasonable.*

Matteo , German, 23 years old

The erosion of attachment to territorially defined communities and the emergence of universalist value orientation are symptomatic of the broader context of the 1990s and late-modern globalisation, shaped by the end of the Cold War, technological innovation, and the expansion of multilateral institutions (Puranen, 2015). These processes prompted a transnational flow of people, information, and capital, while simultaneously increased awareness of cross-border risks.

Universalist view is grounded in the notion of a global human consciousness based on fundamental aspects of human life and social experience shared across different societies. Within this framework, moral reference points stems from an abstract idea of a disembodied-self - an individual empathetic, to humanity as a whole, in spite, or by reason of, the existing diversity. The sense of a shared world citizenship was reiterated by another German respondent from Berlin, who nonetheless acknowledged internal contradictions and practical challenges associated with a universalist stance. When asked about his sense of obligation towards the community he replied:

*I do feel a sense of responsibility for the world that I live in and the people that I share this planet with. <...> There's no one [particular] group that I would say 'that's whom I want to help.' I want to help society become better. Or rather contribute to society instead of just taking out of society. But it's actually really hard because there are a lot of people in Germany, who vote right wing parties and certainly don't share my sense of morality... I can hide behind saying 'yes' I want to help the society - because it is so abstract - but not necessarily every individual in it. So there's a bit of a contradiction for me.*

Mikros, German, 36 years old

The paradox captured in the interview - namely the tension between human experience as an analytical concept and as an empirical reality, as described by Mikros - encapsulates an effort to reconcile individual morality with universalist forms of consciousness within the social world marked by social, cultural, religious and political heterogeneity. This tension reflects a broader trajectory characteristic of Europe's post-Cold War peace era.

As societies shifted from agrarian to advanced market-orientated societies, social interaction increasingly relied on non-violent cooperation. At the same time technological development and an increased cross-border interaction heightened awareness of the existent diversity, facilitating the diffusion of Enlightenment values associated with rationalism and individual autonomy (Pinker, 2011; Puranen & Welzel, 2015). As material security came to be taken for granted, tolerance toward cultures expanded, rendering confrontation and violence undesirable (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005)

Although the rise in populism today may appear to complicate this trajectory, the aforementioned broader dynamics continue to characterise the socio-cultural environment shaping much of Western population. This pacifist orientation was also evident in interviews with many Dutch and German participants:

*...war is something I barely understand: why it's necessary, why it happens. I wish there were more diplomatic ways of negotiating and that the world didn't need violence anymore. But reality is different, and I'm aware of that. I had to adjust my view, because for a while I was very pacifistic.*

Sabina, German, 35 years old

Furthermore, a pacifist orientation was also evident in the language and arguments used to justify conscription. Rather than focusing primarily on security, many respondents, when asked about their view regarding mandatory military service, emphasized its role in fostering social cohesion, embedding the military within society, and preserving the welfare state. In fact, these arguments closely mirror Germany's efforts during the Cold War to reconcile its historical responsibility for the Second World War with the security imperative of the Cold War.

From the establishment of conscription in 1956 until the end of the Cold War, official discourse was carefully framed to legitimise West Germany's strategic role in the defence of the West, while simultaneously affirming its post-war democratic identity. Shaped by Germany's historical experience, an antimilitarist political culture emerged and gradually acquired relative autonomy, further influencing public discourse regarding the use of force as means of achieving political goals (Berger, 1998).

However, admittedly, an exogenous shock generated by the new geopolitical reality has prompted a shift in convictions and beliefs about pacifism and the use of violence in Western Europe. When asked whether their worldview had changed following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a German student from Hamburg responded:

*It disturbed the image I had of Europe as always peaceful. I think it changed my view on military build-up: before I would have said it's overall bad and unnecessary, and that view was weakened by the invasion.*

Karl, German, 23 years old

Nevertheless, it would be premature to claim a paradigmatic shift in the political culture of the Western European mainstream. While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Donald's Trump's inauguration have generated a heightened sense of insecurity, core beliefs regarding the utility of violence remain largely unchanged. The ideal of pacifism as both desirable and attainable has not dissipated.

*I used to think pacifism could solve all problems <...> but trade and unity with Russia didn't work. Yet over time I start to see that military strategies also aren't*

*working. <...> Now I think maybe pacifism isn't as bad as I thought, because the other options are also not so good. The ideal of peace without violence still makes more sense to me.*

*Matteo , German, 26 years old*

Overall, as liberal societies developed into the twenty-first century, they increasingly accommodate diverse worldviews, reshaping their value systems in pursuit of a degree of moral universality. This shift has often translated into more pacifist orientations and weakened sense of obligation toward territorially defined communities. This stands in stark contrast to the Baltic states, where respondents consistently emphasized their lived historical experience as defining their sense of communal duty.

The divergence between German and Dutch perspectives, on the one hand, and those of the Baltic respondents, on the other, reflects classic universalists-particularist debate. Critics of universalism argue that the absence of a fixed moral reference point risks sliding into moral relativism. In response, Cohen et al. (2024) argue that universalism does not entail relativism but instead represent an effort to develop a “critical language” capable of moving beyond binary opposition between identity and anti-identity - such as Baltic nationalism versus Cosmopolitanism of West Europe (Cohen et al., 2024, p.8). The next section, therefore, will demonstrate how this debate manifests in reality, focusing on the notions of “good” and “evil” and their relationship to the concept of self-sacrifice.

### 3.3. SELF-SACRIFICE AS A MORAL IMPERATIVE

#### 3.3.1. DEFINING THE WORLD IN TERMS OF ‘GOOD’ AND ‘EVIL’

The multi-perspective cultural awareness, coupled with a deliberate avoidance of rigid ideational categories, was evident among many Dutch and German participants. When asked whether they perceived the world in through the categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, they provided the following responses:

*I would categorize some things as evil and good, but it doesn't paint the whole picture. It falls short of describing everything.*

*Karl, German, 23 years old*

*I don't think those categories are useful in political decision-making. Framing conflicts as good versus evil legitimizes extreme violence and dehumanization. While values differ between societies, using moral absolutes leads nowhere constructive.*

*Peter, German, 33 years old*

For many German and Dutch participants, the categories of “good” and “evil” were perceived as overly reductionist. Several respondents distinguished between immoral acts or unjust structures, explicitly resisting the reduction of persons to binary moral labels. Instead, there was an effort to acknowledge complexity and to seek structural or contextual explanations for harmful actions. In other words, while participants rejected “truth” as an objective and absolute category, they nonetheless sought to a form of “partial” or situated truth - one that is inherently relational and contingent on geography, history and culture. As a German student commented

*I like the values I grew up with, but I also think: what if I was born in China or Russia — would I be different? I understand why other states act the way they do. I don't see them as villains. They act in ways I would act if I were in their position. But I was born into this system and don't know any other.*

Hans, German, 21 years old

By contrast, respondents from the Baltic states did not necessarily perceive the world solely through binary moral categories, yet they did not refrain from using the language of “good” and “evil” to evaluate actions and outcomes. Many participants, when asked whether they think that defending their own values represents “good,” and someone that threatens them is “bad”, responded affirmatively. For instance, when asked about whether she interprets current global affairs in terms of good and evil, a Lithuanian woman replied:

*If someone were to give Russia Ukrainian land that would be evil's victory. <...> The moment a signature is placed, the world explodes before my eyes. You can trust nothing. It becomes “each for himself.” To me, because I believe in a shared value of co-creation that equals self-destruction. Creating separately is impossible - the world becomes like a torn painting. This is a dystopian world.*

Elena, Lithuanian, 52 years old

This does not imply a fundamentally different ontological understanding of morality among Baltic respondents. Instead, in the presence of an imminent existential threat, moral distinction was intentionally rendered in unequivocal terms. As Elena from Lithuania noted “there’s no grey in war; you have to make a choice.” In such context, confrontation eliminates the space for moral deliberation, reducing moral choice to existential binaries - fight or flee, live or die. By contrast, analytical retreat evident in many Dutch and German responses reflect a position of relative security, in which moral ambiguity can be sustained because the choice is not bound to immediate existential consequences.

Aversion to categorical moral imperatives among Dutch and German participants can be attributed to a broader reluctance to acknowledge that the world order underpinned by Western hegemony, prosperity, and peace is undergoing a fundamental change. As a 33-year-old German journalist summarised:

*The formative experience of my parents, the baby boomers was that <...> the system you grew up is historically vindicated, the winner. The way we live will be the way things go forever. <...> The only fear was boredom. <...> This generation doesn't prove itself prepared for radical change. We see it with elites and political leadership, and at dinner tables. They are slow to realize how rapidly things are changing: Europe is under threat, there's a war in Europe.*

Peter, German, 33 years old

Therefore, the reluctance of Dutch and German respondents to employ binary moral categories reflects a broader discomfort with acknowledging a world in which the language of force becomes not only relevant but dominant, and in which the preservation of peace may require difficult choices that leaves little room for compromise - or for moral 'grey'.

### 3.3.2. PERCEPTION OF THREAT

The reluctance of Dutch and Germans respondents to employ binary moral categories may be interpreted as a refusal to accept a new geopolitical reality - one that could require radical decisions and austere choices between "good" and "evil", "staying" and "leaving," or even "life" and "death." In the Baltic states, by contrast, geographic proximity to Russia and the collective experience of Soviet occupation have produced a significantly higher and more prevalent perception of threat than in the Netherlands or Germany.

The heightened sense of vulnerability was evident in multiple interviews with Baltic participants. When asked what they would do in the event of a potential invasion, several interviews had to be paused as respondents became visibly emotional and overwhelmed. For instance, a young Latvian student explained that such scenarios have already been discussed within their family. When asked why she would not leave in the event of an invasion, she replied,

*I never thought I'd have conversations with my parents about what to do if war breaks out. I've had that conversation three times now. <...> I'd stay. Because my family wouldn't leave. <...> Older people can be stubborn—"I was born here, I'll die here." I couldn't leave them.*

Amelija, Latvian, 23 years old

Following the statement, Amelija's voice broke, and the interview had to be paused so she could collect herself before continuing. A similar reaction was observed in another interview, in which a Lithuanian participant acknowledged having had the same conversation with her partner:

*I remember discussing this with my partner <...> We decided that we would not go, with his skills and knowledge he would be useful as a technician and solderer that mends metals and wires at the front.*

Elena, Lithuanian, 53 years old

As Elena spoke, she became visibly emotional and briefly cried before resuming the interview. Other participants, including Dani from Latvia and Martin from Estonia - both members of an active reserve - indicated that they had already considered and accepted what their responsibilities would be in the event of an invasion.

This contrasts sharply with responses from Dutch and German participants, many of whom reacted to the same question with a smile or a laugh, perceiving the scenario as highly unlikely and largely abstract, almost like a game. As one German participant explained:

*[Worried for] Germany, to be honest, not very much. I do think [an invasion] is quite an abstract scenario<...> but I think the Baltic state very much so [a possible scenario].*

Friedrich, German, 25 years old

This view was shared by many Dutch and German respondents, who described the prospect of direct invasion of their countries as remote. As one German student summarised, “at the end of the day, it is still very far away.”

### 3.3.3. SELF-SACRIFICE AS MEANS TO PRESERVE HUMANITY

Due to the legacy of Soviet occupation, the Baltic states retain a living memory of totalitarian modes of governance. Communist dictators demanded from societies not only absolute obedience but also complicity. Individuals were simultaneously victims and collaborators, as many were compelled to spy on neighbors, friends, and relatives while themselves remaining under constant surveillance. As discussed in the previous sections, beyond the systematic dissolution of cultural heterogeneity, the regime sustained itself by rendering everyone complicit, and consequently, morally implicated. Thus, as discussed earlier there was not only absence of clearly delineated categories of “perpetrator” and “victim” along social, ethnic or racial lines, but also the erosion of the moral categories of “good” and “evil” as such.

In the Soviet system, moral judgement was no longer centered on what individuals did, but rather on who controlled the narrative and the extent of the state’s capacity to suppress alternative views. The system operated within self-perpetuating moral limbo sustained by fear and enforced docility, which paralysed individual initiative, critical self-reflection, thereby constraining the freedom to choose between right and wrong. In this way, individuals were deprived of the ability to exercise moral agency and free will, and consequently of the capacity to realise their full human potential. It is for this reason that totalitarian rule - particularly Soviet rule - has frequently been described by Baltic respondents as dehumanizing. As one Latvian student articulated:

*In my view, a person who is not free—who cannot truly live—is not experiencing a fully human life. If you are imprisoned without reason, or because of your opinions, you are being dehumanized. <...> In some cases, the absence of these freedoms creates a condition that I would consider worse than being dead. <...> I believe there is such a thing as good and evil. I think my values represent good,*

*more or less, and I believe that opposing those values is, in many ways, opposing what it means to be human.*

Dani, Latvian, 20 years old

That helps explain why, in the Baltic states - where a significant proportion of the population has directly experienced Soviet repression - the emergence of an imminent threat following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by a more radical moral vocabulary structured around categories of "good" and "evil." In this context, such moral clarity functions as a coping mechanism. In other words, radical morality operates as a response against tyranny. In dehumanising conditions, preserving the ability to distinguish between right and wrong becomes a means of safeguarding what it means to be human.

In contrast, the absence of a living memory of totalitarian rule in the Netherlands and Germany, combined with comparatively low perception of threat, sustains hope for compromise and negotiation. Under such conditions, the capacity to adopt alternative perspectives is desirable, while binary moral language is often perceived as obstructive. As Celutka (2024) observes, "in a purely rational universe where equally rational meet each other to deliberate and seek compromises, there is no need any more for conflict, struggle, risk-taking, heroic deeds, radical decisions and extreme, life-and-death situations."

Moreover, because Dutch and German respondents lack recent experience of systemic oppression, abstract concepts such as freedom can be more challenging to grasp. In the interviews Dutch and German participants defined it in more functional terms, equating it with security and stability. For example, several participants defined freedom in terms of human safety:

*Because it allows people to freely live their life and not fearful prosecution. <...>  
It's fundamentally about security.*

Friedrich, German, 25 years old

*I think democracy is necessary to produce the most stable societies. It also helps you get good decisions because you negotiate all the time. <...> So democracy is the best system because negotiations probably produce better decisions.*

Hans, German, 21 years old

In such cases, freedom derives its value from its capacity to produce social stability and personal safety. Defined in such instrumental manner, the notion of self-sacrifice appears contradictory: why I should sacrifice myself for something that is there to ensure my safety in the first place. Consequently, when asked whether their decision to stay or leave in the event of war would depend on the likelihood of success and the risk of death, the vast majority of German and Dutch respondents answered affirmatively. For many, the prospect of fighting under unfavourable conditions was perceived as a senseless loss of life:

*...I wouldn't give my life for an idea. That's also how I grew up—my father said it's not good to die for an idea, because afterward you cannot influence it anymore. If an idea requires you to die for it, maybe it's not a good idea. But there are counterarguments too. I don't know. I would sacrifice to some extent—maybe my left arm, but not my life.*

Matteo, German, 24 years old

In the Baltic states, however, the continued relevance of moral categories such as 'good' and 'evil' creates a normative foundation for self-sacrifice. Under conditions of existential threat directed not only at physical survival but also freedom, identity, and dignity, these categories function as moral landmarks for preserving humanity against dehumanising regimes. When faced with a radical choice between resistance and submission, self-sacrifice becomes a moral imperative rather than irrational act.

In this sense, self-sacrifice represents the ultimate expression of human agency because it negates the fundamental instinct of self-preservation. Mere biological survival does not, in itself, allow for the actualisation of an individual identity. By deliberately overriding evolutionary impulses, individuals extend their sense of self beyond the boundaries of personal survival and embed themselves within a moral relationship with others. Accordingly, Baltic societies - shaped by decades of totalitarian repression - may demonstrate a greater willingness to resist even when the chances of success are low, because the act of resistance itself affirms moral agency and preserves human dignity.

Noteworthy, that these perceptions are not inherently territorial or immutable. Several respondents indicated that direct exposure to war, specifically through close contact with Ukrainians affected by the war, reshaped their view on self-sacrifice. As one Dutch participant reflected:

*Before, I would have said I'd leave and hide somewhere like Canada. But after seeing Ukraine, how the country worked together, it changed me. I would stay and fight in some way. I even considered joining a program where you work part-time for the Ministry of Defence to be able to help.*

Jan, Dutch, 24 years old

Overall, while historical experience and threat perception emerge as the primary determinants of individual willingness to self-sacrifice, the identities shaped by history are neither fixed nor impervious. Instead, they remain porous and subject to transformation through both exogenous shocks and ongoing exchange of ideas, narratives, and lived experiences. This brings the analysis back to the very first and fundamental question of sacrifice posed in the beginning of the study - for whom and for what. As the perceived boundaries of community expand and collective memories extend beyond territorially defined identities, the value system, including attitudes toward self-sacrifice can also shift. Thus, it is important to note that willingness to sacrifice should not be understood as a static and fixed cultural attribute but as

contingent and relational phenomena, continuously reshaped by history, social interaction, and shifting boundaries of belonging.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the research shows that willingness to self-sacrifice varies across different countries and is intimately tied to divergent historical experience, as well as perceived levels of threat, and moral narrative construction. It was demonstrated that respondents from the Netherlands and Germany tend to prioritise universalist values, which stem from the prolonged period of peace and thus resulted in the expanded notion of identities and values system that prioritise compromise over conflict. Whereas people from the Baltic states demonstrated greater willingness to self-sacrifice due to their collective memory of Soviet repressions, which strengthened territorially defined identities and normative frameworks, which makes self-sacrifice a moral imperative.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the interviews revealed substantial divergence in attitudes across the respective countries toward contributing to collective defence in the event of a hypothetical Russian invasion. The contrast in responses become even more pronounced when the scenario was reframed to include low chances of victory and a high likelihood of death. While many Baltic respondents indicated that such a change in conditions would have a little effect on their decision to stay or leave the country, respondents in the Netherlands and Germany identified these factors as decisive in determining their decision. By comparing cases of the Baltic states, Netherlands and Germany, the following research aimed to show how historical experience shapes individual willingness to self-sacrifice in the context of collective defence.

First, in order to assess the role of history in producing such contrasting results, the research examined the boundaries of the community for which individuals are willing to self-sacrifice. The study explored whether participants primarily identify with the nation-state or with broader social and ideational frameworks. This section demonstrated that different collective experience produced considerably different patterns of self-identification. In the Baltic states, territorially defined identity - often expressed through nationalism - emerged as a response to forced assimilation under Soviet occupation. In the context of discursive ambivalence surrounding Soviet crimes, where SS Nazi officer was tried in Nuremberg, but the guard of the Gulag in Russia today is paid a pension, nationalism in the Baltic states functions not only as a means of preserving identity aligned with liberal democratic values, but also as an instrument for asserting historical justice. Meanwhile, due to nationalism's association with fascist ideologies and WWII, respondents in the Netherlands and Germany often described it as exclusionary, outdated, and detrimental to European integration. Also, late-modern globalisation in Western Europe has reduced salience of territorially defined identities.

Having established the boundaries of community, the research examined how collective experience of the Soviet occupation in the Baltic states generated value system in ways that render self-sacrifice a moral imperative. It was shown that same as the boundary between the victim and the perpetrator have to be preserved in order to exercise justice, the categories of 'good' and 'evil' have to remain in the language of the societies that previously lived under totalitarian regime and face an existential threat. Whereas, in Western Europe, a prolonged period of peace has fostered universalist values characterised by expanded notions of community, tolerance for diversity, and preference for compromise over conflict, rendering morally radical vocabulary undesirable. The findings suggest that these value systems are activated by differing perceived levels of threat. Finally, the study showed that in the Baltic context, moral categories grounded in collective memory of the Soviet occupation become means to preserve moral agency and human dignity under the conditions of existential threat, thereby increasing willingness to self-sacrifice. By contrast in the Netherlands and Germany relative absence of such radical moral categories weakens the imperative to risk their individual life.

By integrating concepts insights from political philosophy, political culture theory, security studies, and theories of European integration, this developed a theoretical framework suited to

examine motivations underlying individual willingness to contribute to collective defence and sustain asymmetrically high personal costs. Constructivist framework proved to be well suited to address how history shapes values, identity, and moral judgement in relation to defence policies. While post-materialist theory was useful in contextualising an experience of West Europe, it failed to comprehensively address the variation in the Baltic states. In this respect, the study enrich the existing theory by demonstrating the lasting influence of historical experience, and by introducing the concept of self-sacrifice - found in political philosophy but relatively neglected in the field of public administration.

Considering the limitations of the study, specifically its limited scope and small sample size, future research would benefit from extending the sample to include a broader range of socio-economic groups in order to better address national diversity in experiences, threat perceptions, and attitudes toward collective defence. Additionally, considering that despite national differences, during the interviews notable similarities in opinions and perceptions could be detected among the respondents on the political left, further research could more systematically investigate how political beliefs shape individual willingness to defend.

## REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (2017). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Penguin Books.
- Berger, T. U. (1998). *Cultures of antimilitarism: National security in Germany and Japan*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bundeswehr: Nur 16 Prozent würden auf jeden Fall für Deutschland kämpfen. DIE ZEIT. (2025, August 3). <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-08/umfrage-bundeswehr-kriegsfall-kampf-bereitschaft>
- Čelutka, S. (2025, June 4). The Ukrainians' sacrifice tells Europe it still needs heroes. *Voxeurop*. <https://voxeurop.eu/en/ukraine-sacrifice-simas-celutka/>
- Graf, T., Steinbrecher, M., & Biehl, H. (2024). From reluctance to reassurance: Explaining the shift in Germans' NATO alliance solidarity following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(2), 298–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2286771>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2008). A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2019). Grand theories of European integration in the twenty-first century. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(8), 1113–1133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1569711>
- Jäckle, S. (2023). Conscription reloaded? The debate about compulsory service in Germany in 2022 and the peoples' attitudes towards it. *Statistics, Politics and Policy*, 14(1), 65–89. <https://doi.org/10.1515/spp-2022-0020>
- Longhurst, K. (2003). Why aren't the Germans debating the draft? Path dependency and the persistence of conscription. *German Politics*, 12(2), 147–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644000412331307614>
- Mader, M. (2024). Increased support for collective defence in times of threat: European public opinion before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Policy Studies*, 45(3–4), 402–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2024.2302441>
- Mader, M., Gavras, K., Hofmann, S., Reifler, J., Schoen, H., & Thomson, C. (2023). International threats and support for European security and defence integration: Evidence from 25 countries. *European Journal of Political Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12605>
- Mader, M., Olmastroni, F., & Isernia, P. (2020). The polls—Trends: Public opinion towards European defence policy and NATO: Still wanting it both ways? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84(2), 551–582. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaa031>
- Mader, M., & Schoen, H. (2023). No Zeitenwende (yet): Early assessment of German public opinion towards foreign and defence policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 64(3), 525–547. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00463-5>
- Miller, D. (1988). The ethical significance of nationality. *Ethics*, 98(4), 647–662. <https://doi.org/10.1086/292997>
- Muhammad, M., & Undzėnas, D. (2025). Entangled fates: The rally effect around Europe due to

- Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), Article 915. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05138-7>
- Puranen, B. (2015). Allegiance eroding: People's dwindling willingness to fight in wars. In R. J. Dalton & C. Welzel (Eds.), *The civic culture transformed: From allegiant to assertive citizens* (pp. 261–281). Cambridge University Press.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2024). Crisis and polity formation in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(10), 3396–3420.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2313107>
- Sojka, A., Terraza, J., Caravaca Crespo, F., & Cuevas Rumín, Á. (2025). Russian invasion as a European issue: Vertical Europeanisation of national political debates and the war in Ukraine. *European Union Politics*, 26(2), 310–343.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165241312879>
- Yermolenko, V. (2025, February 13). *Rethinking imperialism* [Podcast episode]. Spotify.  
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/7EDqaafPqm5DnEtsw8sswu>

# APPENDIX

## List of the Interview Participants

### **Baltic States**

#### **Lithuania**

- Tommy, 52 years old
- Elena, 52 years old
- Sita, 73 years old
- Veronika, 26 years old
- Adams, Polish 53 years old

#### **Latvia**

- Dani, 20 years old
- Amelija, 23 years old

#### **Estonia**

- Martin, Estonian, 23 years old

### **Germany**

- Friedrich, 21 years old
- Karl, 23 years old
- Elias, 20 years old
- Matteo, 26 years old
- George, 21 years old
- Peter, 33 years old
- Mikros, 35 years old
- Ana, 26 years old

### **Netherlands**

- Wouter, 65 years old
- Omer, 29 years old
- Jan, 24 years old
- Sara, 21 years old