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Making amends: emotions and the western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

RITA FLOYD AND MARK WEBBER

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the West's response was fast and uncompromising. Russia was condemned in no uncertain terms for a 'war of aggression' that had undermined international stability, violated international law, and inflicted 'immense human suffering'.¹ The Russian economy was subjected to escalating sanctions and, after a stuttering start, Ukraine soon became the beneficiary of a massive, coordinated arms supply and training effort. The types and timings of military assistance occasioned debate, as did the endgame of the war, but in the months after the invasion the principle that Ukraine was deserving of support was uncontested. Russia's invasion, some have suggested, woke the West up from a strategic stupor.² But what explains the western response—its timing, stridency and durability? In this article we argue that emotions played a pivotal role in the West's response. In more detail, we show that western decision-makers *felt* guilty and/or ashamed for past actions and mistakes which they believed played a role in bringing about Ukraine's predicament. In short, the West's unprecedented action was a way to make amends for past failures.

Our argument is a contribution to a growing body of work on the role of emotions in foreign policy and international politics.³ Our article does not develop a distinct theoretical position, nor does it advance views on the intricacies of debates within emotion studies. Its aim, rather, is to bring insights from emotion studies in world politics to an important empirical case. Its conceptual contribution lies in singling out the emotions of *guilt* and *shame* as drivers of foreign policy choice, thus supplementing similar accounts on, *inter alia*, hope and fear.⁴

¹ NATO, *Madrid summit declaration*, 29 June 2022, paras 3–4, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 9 March 2024.)

² James Ellison et al., 'The war in Ukraine', *Cold War History* 23: 1, 2023, pp. 121–206 at p. 150, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2023.2162329>.

³ See, for example, Simon Koschut et al., 'Discourse and emotions in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 19: 3, pp. 481–508, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix033>; Christine Sylvester, ed., 'The forum: emotion and the feminist IR researcher', *International Studies Review* 13: 4, 2011, pp. 687–708, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2011.01046.x>; Emma Hutchison, 'Emotions, bodies, and the un/making of International Relations', *Millennium* 47: 2, 2019, pp. 284–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818811243>; Yohan Ariffin, Jean-Marc Coicaud and Vesselin Popovski, eds, *Emotions in international politics: beyond mainstream International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen and Lene Hansen, 'Images, emotions, and international politics: the death of Alan Kurdi', *Review of International Studies* 46: 1, 2020, pp. 75–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000317>.

⁴ Corina Lacatus and Emmanuelle Blanc, 'Diplomacy of hope: transatlantic relations in the transition from

All International Relations (IR) scholars concerned with emotions grapple with the same questions: 1) What are emotions? 2) How can we know them? 3) Are collective emotions possible? And 4) whose emotions count? It should be obvious that there is no single, true answer to these questions. Indeed, distinct answers to these and other questions have cultivated a subfield of emotion studies in IR. Scholars generally agree that emotions are not strong feelings *per se*, but rather are *expressions* of strong feelings. Feelings are primordial, often bodily/physical responses that one has to a circumstance, while emotions are psychologic responses that follow on from these physical responses.⁵ Emotions can thus be learnt behaviours.

This distinction is useful because it enables scholars to answer the trickiest question of all: how can we know emotions, especially as the private feelings and thoughts of others are epistemologically inaccessible to us? The problem of other minds means that we can access and work with other's emotions only in so far as they are expressed in discourse and representation.⁶ Naturally, the reliance on representation to establish emotional states could betray the fact that emotions are disingenuous, a point we return to below.

Scholars have shown that emotions can be shared by a collective. This can happen via emotional convergence, emotional contagion or even by emotional governance.⁷ The latter takes a structural approach to emotions. Here, prevailing norms and structures determine which emotions individuals should have (as outlined in the so-called logic of appropriateness). By contrast, convergence and contagion are agential approaches.⁸ Simon Koschut notes that it is not always easy, or indeed wise, to settle on a single theory of emotions in empirical analysis. Theories are ideal types, whereas the real world is messier. In the case of responses to Ukraine, all three mechanisms of collective emotion have likely played a role. Notably, the European Union, as a self-professed normative power,⁹ has a tradition of emotional governance, all the while still leaving room for individual actors to lead on emotions.

To be sure, however, not every individual succumbing to a collective emotion is likely to have the same private feelings. As Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker put it, 'emotional power works discursively, diffused through norms, moral values and other assumptions that stipulate—often inaudibly—how individuals and communities ought to feel and what kind of ensuing behavior is appropriate and legitimate in certain situations'.¹⁰ Karen E. Smith observes, on the role of

Trump to Biden', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19: 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orado26>; Neta C. Crawford, 'Institutionalizing passion in world politics: fear and empathy', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 535–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000256>.

⁵ Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 491–514, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000232>.

⁶ Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics'.

⁷ Simon Koschut, 'Emotions and International Relations', *Oxford research encyclopaedia of international studies*, publ. online 20 April 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.693>.

⁸ Koschut, 'Emotions and International Relations'.

⁹ José Manuel Barroso, 'Europe's rising global role', *Guardian*, 3 Jan. 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/03/europe-global-role>.

¹⁰ Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', p. 508.

emotions in EU foreign policy: 'State officials and diplomats must display the mandated emotions as part of their professional roles'.¹¹

The final issue concerns the question of whose emotions count. While the study of emotions in world politics is not limited to elite policy-makers and/or actors, such a focus is appropriate in the foreign policy context.¹² Only certain individuals can meaningfully speak on behalf of states, parties and/or larger units—here, the EU and NATO. In this article we analyse a range of statements by past and present policy-makers in Europe and the United States for admissions of guilt and shame.

The remainder of the article elaborates its argument as follows. First, we outline our method, including the choice of case-study. Second, we describe the policy response to the Russian invasion in the 18 months after the onslaught commenced in February 2022, showing just how innovative and steadfast it has been. This establishes the empirical circumstance we wish to explain. The section that follows showcases a range of leaders' voices from Europe and the United States, including confessional comments of leaders who have passed from the political scene. Here we demonstrate that western policy-makers have admitted to a wide range of past policy failings that suggest emotions of guilt and shame. We conclude our analysis by advancing a number of policy recommendations.

Theory and method

Over the last decade or so, emotions have come to play an indispensable role in understanding foreign policy and security policy-making. With a focus on the related emotions of guilt and shame, this article seeks to contribute to that literature. Guilt and shame are related, but separate, emotions. Both are negative, entailing forms of self-criticism. In a wide-ranging study, Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi suggest that shame is concerned 'with a perceived discrepancy between one's actual and one's ideal self'. In other words, it is an expression of a perceived failure to live up to certain standards. Guilt, meanwhile, is 'concerned with one's responsibility for a harmful attitude or behavior'. Both emotions can drive change, and notably, 'one may also feel ashamed (rather than guilty) of a responsible fault'.¹³ Importantly, here it is the element of perceived culpability that drives the need to make amends. Shame, in turn, can be self-serving; it motivates agents to do better for themselves, if not for others. However, in the process of becoming a better self, actors are also likely to make good on past mistakes, thus closing the gap between the consequences of shame and guilt. Moreover, foreign policy actors often bundle similar emotions together to 'reinforce the demand for—or legitimacy of—particular foreign policies'.¹⁴

¹¹ Karen E. Smith, 'Emotions and EU foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 287–304 at p. 290, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa218>.

¹² See also Lacatus and Blanc, 'Diplomacy of hope'.

¹³ Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi, 'Reconsidering the differences between shame and guilt', *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 14: 3, 2018, pp. 710–33 at p. 711, <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v14i3.1564>.

¹⁴ Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen, 'Images, emotions, and international politics'.

In world politics, guilt is well established as a motive for action.¹⁵ West Germany's postwar foreign policy is the paradigmatic case. Proceeding from a collective guilt (*Kollektivschuld*) for the Holocaust and the catastrophe of the Second World War, a strategic culture of multilateralism and an avoidance of nationalism and militarism developed among West German elites. This shaped policy in the decades that followed the rupture of 1945.¹⁶ Equally, egregious policy errors can generate self-reflection and a consequent desire either to right a wrong for which one is to blame or to ensure the errors of the past are not repeated. For example, during NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the position of the Clinton administration was shaped by its failings a few years previously on Rwanda, while the British and French were galvanized into action by a recognition of errors made in Bosnia.¹⁷ To be sure, we do not wish to suggest that guilt is the only driver of the western response to the war in Ukraine. Our claims are more modest than that. We believe that shame, guilt and the related need to make amends propelled the course of action taken by the global West. Over time, that course became self-sustaining, to the point that any deviance from the 'norm' of near unconditional support for Ukraine was considered heretical.¹⁸

Guilt and shame sit alongside other emotions that motivate the behaviour of actors in world politics. Positive emotions such as hope or gratitude offer benefits to actors, because these have progressive and cooperative connotations and are a mark of leadership.¹⁹ As a result, there is an incentive to exaggerate or even concoct them. By contrast, there is little benefit to be had from negative emotions such as guilt and shame: indeed, displays of these emotions weaken the actor, at least temporarily. Consequently, actors are unlikely to express guilt and shame unless these emotions are genuine.

Our focus on a single case-study, that of Ukraine, is methodologically sound. We proceed from the view that western policy on Ukraine is sufficiently important in its own right to warrant study. It is in this sense 'bounded' and 'context-dependent' and does not require other cases of comparison to elevate it to a position of scholarly attention.²⁰ This does not imply a naive ignorance on our part of other possible illustrations of shame and guilt. But it should be noted that our arguments rest on an assumption that western policy after February 2022 was exceptional

¹⁵ See, for example, Catherine Lu, 'Shame, guilt and reconciliation after war', *European Journal of Social Theory* 11: 3, 2008, pp. 367–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431008092568>; Karl Gustafsson, 'Memory politics and ontological security in Sino-Japanese relations', *Asian Studies Review* 38: 1, 2014, pp. 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2013.852156>; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in international relations: transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 143–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000337>.

¹⁶ Adrian Hyde-Price, *Germany and European order: enlarging NATO and the EU* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 39–47.

¹⁷ Brent J. Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations: self-identity and the IR state* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 114–47.

¹⁸ Hence, the condemnation of calls to negotiate with Moscow: see Kim Willsher, "'Shameful' Nicolas Sarkozy under fire for defending Putin", *Observer*, 19 Aug. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/19/shameful-nicolas-sarkozy-under-fire-for-defending-putin>.

¹⁹ Ronald H. Humphrey, Gerald F. Burch and Laurel L. Adams, 'The benefits of merging leadership research and emotions research', *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 7, 2016, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01022>.

²⁰ On these points, see Bent Flyvbjerg, 'Case study', in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds, *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), pp. 301–16 at pp. 301–4.

in some way—direct comparison, in other words, is hard to find. We accept that there are plenty of other cases of ‘selective indignation’. Serbia, Iraq, Libya and Syria, under their various dictatorships, have all been identified as norm-breakers, and have (in varying ways) been prioritized in the foreign policies of the United States and its allies.²¹ Further, in some of these cases, indignation was seemingly a spur to action (the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo and the invocation of the Responsibility to Protect in Libya in 2011). Each of these has been the subject of its own ‘bounded’ and ‘context-dependent’ examination.²² We are seeking to do something similar in the Ukrainian case, pointing out its distinct features.

Moreover, existing explanations offer an unsatisfactory or incomplete answer. Some explanations focus on Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky, who, it has been argued, embodies the modern version of the ‘hero leader’. Zelensky’s charisma and tireless overseas travel are a textbook case in the application of ‘smart power’, ‘expanding Ukraine’s presence in the international realm’ and building a military coalition in his country’s defence.²³ Zelensky is a skilled politician, but certainly in 2022 and 2023 he was speaking to an audience eager to help. Here, support for Ukraine might simply have been about defending a country facing an existential threat, in the process upholding the principles of international order. But that support also had a distinct moral tone.²⁴ In that light, liberal scholars have explained the West’s response in terms of a good-versus-evil binary, whereby Russia has been seen as threatening not simply one country, but western liberal order as a whole.²⁵ In other words, the war threatened to upend the rules, norms and values and thus the very fabric of how states ought to conduct themselves in international relations. According to this view, the vehemence of the response was self-evidently understandable: to protect the liberal order, the West could not afford to aim for anything less than victory. We can find evidence of the liberal claim that Vladimir Putin posed a threat to the rules-based order in the speeches of high-ranking politicians.²⁶ Some of them also argued—perhaps echoing Zelensky²⁷—that Ukraine was stopping the war from moving to Europe. The facts, however, suggest otherwise. ‘Putin’s wars’, at least of the kinetic variety, have been waged where NATO and EU membership has been absent (in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria).²⁸

²¹ Edward T. Oakes, ‘The politics of selective indignation’, *First Things*, 27 Aug. 2009, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2009/08/the-politics-of-selective-indignation>.

²² Mark Webber, ‘The Kosovo war: a recapitulation.’ *International Affairs* 85: 3, 2009, pp. 447–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00807.x>; Alan J. Kuperman, ‘A model humanitarian intervention? Reassessing NATO’s Libya campaign’, *International Security* 38: 1, 2013, pp. 105–36, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00126.

²³ Małgorzata Zachara-Szymańska, ‘The return of the hero leader? Volodymyr Zelensky’s international image and the global response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’, *Leadership* 19: 3, 2023, pp. 196–209 at p. 206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150231159824>.

²⁴ Lucan Ahmed Way, ‘The rebirth of the liberal world order’, *Journal of Democracy* 33: 2, 2022, pp. 5–17 at p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0014>.

²⁵ Richard Arnold, ‘The stakes could not be higher: the allied response in Ukraine’, *Journal of Global Strategic Studies* 2: 2, 2022, pp. 109–18, <https://doi.org/10.36859/jgss.v2i2.1305>.

²⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, ‘A union that stands strong together’, state of the union address, 14 Sept. 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493.

²⁷ Volodymyr Zelensky, ‘A war against Europe: address to the people of Europe’, Kyiv, 25 Feb. 2022, in Volodymyr Zelensky, *A message from Ukraine: speeches 2019–2022* (London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2022), ch. 8.

²⁸ Mark Galeotti, *Putin’s wars: from Chechnya to Ukraine* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2022).

A more logical explanation why a pro-Ukraine narrative has repeatedly been invoked rests on domestic politics in the West. Western powers are accountable to their electorates, and voters have borne considerable costs in this war, notably in the form of much higher energy costs. Such policies have needed defending. A direct physical threat to western states has offered the strongest rationale. But this argument, too, is not entirely persuasive. Liberal accounts of foreign policy that connect domestic politics to decision-making struggle to explain the twists and turns of how western democracies have dealt with Ukraine and Russia over the years.²⁹ Further, the costs of supporting Ukraine arose *after* decisions were taken from February 2022 to support it—there was no obvious domestic political imperative in staking so much on Ukraine at the point of the Russian invasion.

Explanations invoking ontological security come to a similar conclusion to the liberal position, albeit from a slightly different starting-point. Vincent Della Sala argues that ‘the Ukraine war is raising issues about basic knowledge that has informed EU institutions, member states and EU citizens about why we have the Union in the first place’.³⁰ But the ontological security scholar’s fears of a European loss of self-identity—on this occasion—do not hold up. If anything, the ‘poly-crisis’-riddled EU has benefited from this conflict, not least—as Heidi Maurer and colleagues have shown in the pages of this journal—by placing greater importance on the need for collective action.³¹ In more detail, Maurer et al. have suggested that EU member states’ foreign policy has coalesced around a new norm of a ‘collective European responsibility to act’.³² Their argument considers EU joint action from a decades-long perspective. Collective responsibility, by this view, is the political end-product of the EU’s institutional evolution. But that, too, gets us only so far. We also need to understand why the ‘global West’ more generally (including the United States and the United Kingdom) acted so strenuously after the Russian invasion.

To make our case, we adopt a qualitative discourse analysis of publicly available speeches, interviews and statements uttered by a range of policy-makers in strategically important positions.³³ We included the discourses of leading past and present policy-makers, across a range of western states. We systematically trawled through the credible (fact-checked) news media and government websites for articles and interviews relating to the conflict in Ukraine and the West’s role in it, looking for patterns in representations of collective emotional states. We looked for sources where leading practitioners and policy-makers gave a verdict on past actions and omissions. Interviews in newspapers and on fact-checked websites were

²⁹ Way, ‘The rebirth of the liberal world order’.

³⁰ Vincent Della Sala, ‘Ontological security, crisis and political myth: the Ukraine war and the European Union’, *Journal of European Integration* 45: 3, 2023, pp. 361–75 at p. 369, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183396>.

³¹ Heidi Maurer, Richard Whitman and Nicholas Wright, ‘The EU and the invasion of Ukraine: a collective responsibility to act?’, *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 219–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac262>.

³² Maurer, Whitman and Wright, ‘The EU and the invasion of Ukraine’.

³³ On the relevance of this method when considering emotions, see Simon Koschut, ‘Speaking from the heart: emotion discourse analysis in International Relations’, in Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds, *Researching emotions in International Relations: methodological perspectives on the emotional turn* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 277–301.

particularly useful, as were speeches on foreign policy. Our sources are limited to the time-frame from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the end of 2023. Our selection is limited to English and German sources. We include speeches and interviews with, among others, Ursula von der Leyen (Germany and the EU), Joe Biden, Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan (US), Emmanuel Macron (France), Boris Johnson (UK), Annalena Baerbock and Lars Klingbeil (Germany) and Kaja Kallas (Estonia). Our sample is selective in so far as the four largest NATO allies (the US, Germany, the UK and France) and various eastern European countries all are 'staunch or solid supporter' countries in relation to Ukraine,³⁴ unlike, for instance, Italy and Turkey. Given that our sources represent a significant voice, however, it remains representative of 'the West'.

We did not start from the view that guilt and shame were the dominant emotions provoked by the Russian invasion, but *the admitting of mistakes* and *apologies* soon emerged as signature emotional expressions, supplanting, for instance, moral outrage. Apologies are indicators of the underlying emotions of shame and guilt. As Anne-Marie Mcalinden explains, apologies tend to entail 'acceptance of responsibility for wrongdoing [and they] offer the possibility of resolving the moral emotions of shame and guilt and of relieving both victims/survivors and perpetrators of the emotional burdens of harm or offending'.³⁵ The admitting of mistakes alone does not necessarily indicate guilt on the part of the utterer, but it certainly entails shame. Importantly, unlike with guilt, shame is *not* other-regarding. According to Miceli and Castelfranchi:

What matters to the ashamed person is *not* his or her responsibility for the fault, but how this fault impacts on his or her ideal self. Shame implies a perceived *lack of power* to meet the standards of one's ideal self ... (emphases in original)³⁶

Concretely, this means that any politician who admits to past mistakes does not necessarily do so because they care about those harmed; instead, they might simply care about their role in world history. To improve their standing, however, the need to make amends remains.

Guilt and shame, like other emotions, are not static.³⁷ Different contextual settings of actors (in power, out of power, position held, country/organization represented) are likely to influence *what*, precisely, actors feel guilty for/ashamed of. Likewise, successes and setbacks in the war effort are likely to affect emotions of guilt and shame. For clarity and ease of navigation, we divide the evidence into three subsections that consider acknowledgements by western leaders of failed efforts to 1) balance Russian and Ukrainian security sensibilities; 2) take effective action following the 2014 Crimea crisis; and 3) heed warnings of Russian belli-

³⁴ Catarina Thomson, Matthias Mader, Felix Münchow, Jason Reifler and Harald Schoen, 'European public opinion: united in supporting Ukraine, divided on the future of NATO', policy paper, *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2485–2500, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad241>.

³⁵ Anne-Marie Mcalinden, 'From shame to guilt: negotiating moral and legal responsibility within apologies for historical institutional abuse', *Journal of Law and Society* 49: 3, 2022, pp. 470–94 at p. 477, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jols.12379>.

³⁶ Miceli and Castelfranchi, 'Reconsidering the differences between shame and guilt', p. 711.

³⁷ Lacatus and Blanc, 'Diplomacy of hope', p. 6.

cosity. But first, we turn to the record of the western response. Our consideration takes us to the last months of 2023. We are aware that the coalition supporting Ukraine (led by the administration of Joe Biden in the United States), faced pushback from late 2023 (not least among Republicans in the US Congress). But support for Ukraine has also proven enduring. While doubts were raised about American support for Ukraine, support provided by Germany accelerated in late 2023.³⁸ Our purpose is not to project the long-term viability of the western effort. It is rather to explain why that support was uncharacteristically firm in the year and a half following the Russian invasion.

Support for Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted a massive show of support for Zelensky and his government. That support did not appear out of nowhere. Economic, political and, to some extent, military ties with Ukraine had been in development for many years. These ties were scaled up significantly once the invasion occurred. As Russia mobilized during January 2022, the United States warned that countermeasures would follow—'like none [Putin] has ever seen'³⁹—in the event of an attack. That same month, the UK began an airlift of 'thousands of anti-tank missiles to Ukraine'.⁴⁰ Yet, at the time, these measures seemed nugatory in the face of the threat confronting Ukraine. This was the moment of Germany's much-pilloried offer to send helmets to Ukraine. Only 'a full-on invasion of Ukraine', James Forsyth suggested, 'would guarantee a concerted western response'.⁴¹

That line was crossed on 24 February with the multipronged Russian assault on Ukrainian territory. Sanctions followed immediately. The United States, the EU and the UK began imposing new financial restrictions on Russian banks and government entities. Within just two weeks a 'sanctions coalition' had formed comprised of EU, NATO and G7 members, along with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland and Taiwan. This group cut a number of Russian banks out of the SWIFT banking communications system, limited Russian access to trade in goods and financial services, sanctioned a swathe of Russian politicians including Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, and suspended access to Russian media outlets.⁴² The EU imposed its first and second sanctions packages in February (to add to sanctions already in place from

³⁸ Simon Tisdall, 'Germany is Ukraine's new best friend: what a difference a war makes', *Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/02/germany-ukraine-new-best-friend-what-a-difference-war-makes>.

³⁹ Joseph Biden, cited in 'Russia and the West meet for a crucial week of diplomacy', *The Economist*, 15 Jan. 2022, <https://www.economist.com/europe/russia-and-the-west-meet-for-a-crucial-week-of-diplomacy/21807130>, p. 30.

⁴⁰ 'As war looms larger, what are Russia's military options in Ukraine?', *The Economist*, 22 Jan. 2022, <https://www.economist.com/europe/what-are-russias-military-options-in-ukraine/21807240>, p. 29.

⁴¹ James Forsyth, 'Theatre of war: Putin's deadly dramatics over Ukraine', *The Spectator*, 19 Feb. 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/theatre-of-war-putins-deadly-dramatics-over-ukraine>, p. 12.

⁴² S&P Global Market Intelligence, 'Sanctions against Russia—a timeline', <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/sanctions-against-russia-8211-a-timeline-69602559>.

March 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea). The fifth package banned all Russian coal imports; the sixth package curtailed imports of crude oil and petroleum. By the time the eleventh package was announced in June 2023, the EU had sanctioned two-way trade with Russia to the tune of €135 billion—equivalent in value to 49 per cent of EU exports to Russia and 58 per cent of EU imports from Russia in 2021.⁴³ The United States undertook similar action, 'mak[ing] it hard, if not impossible, for Russian financial institutions to process transactions in U.S. dollars'.⁴⁴ Russia's 'most favoured nation' status as a US trading partner was revoked, and a series of trade restrictions were placed on exports of technology, luxury goods and financial services. In July 2023, it was estimated that €300 billion worth of Russian assets had been blocked by the combined effects of sanctions imposed by the EU and G7 nations.⁴⁵

Sanctions have degraded the Russian war effort, but they have failed to sink the Russian economy⁴⁶ or force a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine. But whatever its limitations, the scale of the effort cannot be doubted. For sure, Russia has not been subject to the same degree of economic isolation imposed upon Iran or North Korea. Trade in unsanctioned products (such as uranium, diamonds and fertilizers) has also continued to flow to Europe. And the western coalition has refrained from imposing secondary sanctions on states such as India, China and Turkey (the notable laggard among the NATO nations) for continuing to trade with Russia. Yet, as one assessment has pointed out, 'western sanctions have been more comprehensive than any restrictive measures imposed on Russia since the break-up of the Soviet Union more than three decades ago'.⁴⁷ In Europe, dependency on Russian fossil fuels and raw materials meant sanctions were always likely to hurt. They were adopted regardless.⁴⁸ Russian coal subsequently disappeared from Europe's energy mix. Twelve months after the invasion, crude oil imports into the EU were just one-tenth of their March 2022 level. Piped natural gas was left unsanctioned, but Russia imposed its own limits on supplies. This merely accelerated an uncoupling from Russia and a scramble to source alternative suppliers. 'Europe's dependence on Russian energy is drawing to a close', the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February 2023.⁴⁹ The major exception to all of this was shipped Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG), although even here supplies were cut by one-quarter in the twelve months to March 2023, with the United

⁴³ European Council, 'EU sanctions against Russia explained', 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/#sanctions>.

⁴⁴ Congressional Research Service, 'Russia's war on Ukraine: financial and trade sanctions', *In Focus*, 22 Feb. 2023, p. 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12062>.

⁴⁵ European Council, 'EU sanctions against Russia explained'.

⁴⁶ In 2022, Russian GDP declined by 2.1%. In the twelve months to mid-January 2024, it grew by 2.8%: 'Economic and financial indicators', *The Economist*, 20 Jan. 2024, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey J. Schott, *Economic sanctions against Russia: how effective? How durable?* (Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2023), <https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/2023-04/pb23-3.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Rick Noack and Kate Brady, 'European sanctions on Russia will hurt Europe too, early signs show', *Washington Post*, 2 March 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/02/europe-russia-sanctions-backlash>.

⁴⁹ Georgi Kantchev and Joe Wallace, 'Europe cuts addiction to Russian energy, yet fuel scramble continues', *Wall Street Journal*, 3 Feb. 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/europe-en-addiction-to-russian-energy-yet-fuel-scramble-continues-11675421544>.

States usurping Russia as the EU's main supplier. The EU committed to eliminate imports of Russian LNG entirely by 2027.⁵⁰

The western coalition has also undertaken a major assistance effort in support of Ukraine. From the invasion up to the beginning of December 2023, the United States had committed approximately US\$46.3 billion in military aid to Ukraine, alongside \$26.4 billion in financial support and \$2.7 billion in humanitarian assistance.⁵¹ The 'extraordinary scale' of this assistance is plain to see when compared with other American initiatives. The Brookings Institution reported in June 2023 that since 2020, the US\$76.8 billion of total US aid provided to Ukraine towered above the \$4 billion to Afghanistan (the next largest recipient) and \$3.3 billion to Israel. In 2022, for the first time since the era of the Marshall Plan, a European country was the largest beneficiary of American aid.⁵² Aid allocated to Ukraine in 2022 was more than twice the size of the budget dedicated to NASA.⁵³ The United States was also the second external source of Ukrainian state budget financing in 2022 and 2023 combined (to the tune of US\$ 22.9 billion), behind the EU (\$27.5 billion), and ahead of the International Monetary Fund (\$7.2 billion) and Canada (\$3.6 billion).⁵⁴

Following the Russian invasion, the EU repurposed the European Peace Facility (EPF). Money ostensibly directed towards EU conflict management efforts was used to fund (for the first time in the EU's history) the supply of arms to a third country. In November 2022, the EU launched a Ukrainian training mission, extended in February 2023, with the aim of training 30,000 personnel. By mid-2023, €5.6 billion of EPF funding had been allocated to Ukraine.⁵⁵ As for NATO, before the 2022 invasion, fewer than half the allies had provided military assistance to Ukraine; by August 2023 all but two of NATO's then 31 members had given such help.⁵⁶ Prior to 2021, only the United States had been prepared to supply 'lethal' assistance to Ukraine (and even then only in small quantities). After the invasion, the distinction between lethal and non-lethal lost its political meaning.⁵⁷ Tellingly, by May 2023 Germany—a country with a longstanding

⁵⁰ Ben McWilliams, Giovanni Sgaravatti, Simone Tagliapietra and Georg Zachmann, *The EU can manage without Russian liquefied natural gas* (Brussels: Bruegel, 2023), https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/eu-can-manage-without-russian-liquefied-natural-gas#footnote5_3btmqu.

⁵¹ Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, 'How much aid has the US sent Ukraine? Here are six charts', Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts> (accessed 8 Dec. 2023).

⁵² Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, 'How much aid has the US sent Ukraine? Here are six charts' (accessed 10 July 2023).

⁵³ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, 'Ukraine's state budget financing since the beginning of the full-scale war', https://mof.gov.ua/en/news/ukraines_state_budget_financing_since_the_beginning_of_the_full-scale_war-3435 (accessed 16 Aug. 2023).

⁵⁵ Claire Mills, *Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion*, UK Parliament, House of Commons Library Research Briefing, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9477/CBP-9477.pdf>, p. 6 (accessed 14 Aug. 2023).

⁵⁶ The outliers were Hungary and Iceland. The latter can be discounted as it has no armed forces. Turkey, sometimes perceived as leaning towards Russia politically on the war, had nonetheless provided Ukraine with armed drones on a commercial basis. See: Forum on the Arms Trade, 'Pledged and/or delivered weapons to Ukraine', undated, <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/ukraine-countries.html>.

⁵⁷ Alexander Lanoszka and Jordan Becker, 'The art of partial commitment: the politics of military assistance to Ukraine', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39: 3, 2023, pp. 172–94 at p. 178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2162758>.

aversion to supplying arms to countries at war—was the second largest bilateral donor of military aid to Ukraine after the United States (the United Kingdom was a close third).⁵⁸ Military assistance has also been institutionalized. The International Donor Coordination Centre and the Ukraine Defense Contact Group were set up in early 2022 to coordinate arms transfers. Further, the United States began relaying intelligence to Ukraine on the Russian campaign, allowing Ukraine to hone its military strategy and to counter anticipated Russian strikes. Ukraine's own missile strikes relied on American-supplied targeting data.⁵⁹

The provision of military aid has not been unlimited. The Ukrainian side has had to shout long and loud before certain weapons (main battle tanks, multiple rocket launchers, fourth-generation fighter jets and long-range army tactical missile systems) have been approved for transfer. Further, worries over escalation have been a constant brake on the western coalition.⁶⁰ This explains a refusal to police no-fly zones over the country; to establish maritime corridors in the Black Sea; or to send coalition trainers and advisers, let alone combat troops, to Ukraine. Ukraine is not Korea or Vietnam, or even Iraq or Afghanistan. In this war, the locals have been 'doing all the fighting and dying'.⁶¹ Furthermore, support for Ukraine has not been accompanied by clarity on the country's security future. Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations, as evident from the conclusions of the July 2023 Vilnius summit, have been parked.⁶²

For all these qualifications, military assistance has had a decisive effect.⁶³ British, American and NATO training programmes launched after 2014 provided Ukrainian armed forces with the competence to successfully resist the initial Russian attack. Weapons provided in the months before the invasion and then in greater quantities shortly afterwards (especially drones and anti-tank missiles) ensured Kyiv did not fall to Russian forces. Significant supplies of artillery (including US high-mobility artillery rocket systems—HIMARs) allowed Ukraine to recapture territories in counter-offensives launched in the second half of 2022. Air-defence systems (supplied *inter alia* by Germany, France, Spain and the United States) helped counter frequent Russian missile bombardments of Kyiv and other Ukrainian towns away from the front lines. Long-range precision missiles supplied by the UK and France from mid-2023 enabled Ukraine to strike key targets in Russian-occupied territories, including Crimea. Overall, western military assistance has ensured regime survival, helped Ukraine reverse Russian territorial gains (albeit

⁵⁸ Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 'Ukraine support tracker', <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker> (accessed 6 July 2023).

⁵⁹ Isabelle Khurshudyan, Dan Lamothe, Shane Harris and Paul Sonne, 'Ukraine's rocket campaign reliant on US precision targeting, officials say', *Washington Post*, 9 Feb. 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/09/ukraine-himars-rocket-artillery-russia>.

⁶⁰ Austin Carson, 'The missing escalation in Ukraine: in defense of the West's go-slow approach', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 Sept. 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/eastern-europe-caucasus/missing-escalation-ukraine>.

⁶¹ Carter Malkasian, 'The Korea model: why an armistice offers the best hope for peace in Ukraine', *Foreign Affairs* 102: 4, 2023, p. 49, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/korean-war-diplomacy-armistice-nato>.

⁶² 'We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met', Vilnius summit communiqué, 11 July 2023, para. 11, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

⁶³ Júlia Szóke and Kolos Kusica, 'Military assistance to Ukraine and its significance in the Russo-Ukrainian war', *Social Sciences* 12: 5, 2023, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/5/294>.

much more slowly in 2023 than 2022) and imposed a severe cost upon the occupiers (an estimated 120,000 Russian dead and 180,000 injured by August 2023).⁶⁴

Omissions and failures in past dealings with Russia

Our contention is that the western response has been driven by a sense of guilt and/or shame. In what follows, we show that important actors within the core of the West wish to make amends for actions which indirectly contributed to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. The history of the West's interactions with Russia after the Cold War is complex and controversial. This is not the place to revisit the whole 'who lost Russia?' debate.⁶⁵ Rather, our analysis is narrowed to those matters on which western leaders have admitted error in their dealings with Russia (and, by extension, with Ukraine). From these admissions we can infer guilt and/or shame and thus a need to make amends, culminating in support for Ukraine. Three areas of policy fit this description: the efforts by the West to balance Russian and Ukrainian security sensibilities; the limited response to the 2014 Crimea crisis; and the failure to heed warnings of Russian bellicosity.

Balancing Russian and Ukrainian security sensibilities

Following the Crimea crisis in 2014, NATO and the West came under scrutiny for not having paid enough attention to Russian security sensibilities. At its bluntest, the charge here is that the West was to blame both for the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin, of course, ordered both actions but he did so, by this account, as a pre-emptive move against Ukraine's absorption into the EU and NATO—a move designed to make the country indigestible to western institutions and in the process preserve a security buffer between Russia and a US-dominated Europe.⁶⁶ Western leaders (and many analysts) reject this charge.⁶⁷ Be that as it may, it is clear that at least some western decision-makers believed that NATO's actions since the end of the Cold War had adversely affected Russia's sense of security. Robert Gates, the 22nd US Secretary of Defense who served under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, wrote in his memoirs that 'the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged after [George H. W.] Bush left office in 1993'. Gates supported NATO's incorporation of the east European and Baltic states, but suggested that 'trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into

⁶⁴ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes, 'Troop deaths and injuries in Ukraine war near 500,000, U.S. officials say', *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/us/politics/ukraine-russia-war-casualties.html>.

⁶⁵ Peter Conradi, *Who lost Russia? From the collapse of the USSR to Putin's war on Ukraine* [2017] (London: Oneworld, 2022).

⁶⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, 'The causes and consequences of the Ukraine war', *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 21, 2022, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2022-issue-no.21/the-causes-and-consequences-of-the-ukraine-war>. NATO is the usual suspect here. On the EU, see Jolyon Howorth, '“Stability on the borders”: the Ukraine crisis and the EU's constrained policy toward the eastern neighbourhood', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55: 1, 2017, pp. 121–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12448>.

⁶⁷ Robert Person and Michael McPaul, 'What Putin fears most', *Journal of Democracy* 33: 2, 2022, pp. 18–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0015>.

NATO was truly overreaching'. NATO, in fact, never initiated Ukrainian entry. But even an expression of support in principle (something the administration of the younger Bush engineered at NATO's April 2008 Bucharest summit) was, according to Gates, a 'monumental provocation', 'recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests'.⁶⁸ William J. Burns, former US ambassador to Russia and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in 2008 (and later head of the CIA in the Biden administration) noted similarly shortly before the Bucharest summit that a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine would mean 'throwing down the strategic gauntlet' and would likely provoke 'Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine'.⁶⁹ Indeed, it was for these very reasons that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy opposed a MAP for Ukraine at Bucharest.⁷⁰ Burns, interviewed in 2019, suggested that enlargement was a policy pursued on 'autopilot' without full consideration of its impact on Russian thinking.⁷¹

Leaving the policy on autopilot, however, had adverse consequences. Significantly, after 2008 enthusiasm for Ukrainian entry evaporated in the United States. The Obama and Trump administrations did not pursue it; neither has the Biden administration. All three struck a consistent line: accepting the principle of enlargement (including to Ukraine) and rejecting Russia's case for wanting to halt the process, but then doing nothing in practical terms to facilitate Ukrainian entry. In January 2022, the Biden White House turned down two draft Russian security treaties (one with NATO and one with the United States) that proposed a prohibition on NATO's 'further eastward expansion' to former Soviet republics.⁷² Yet the administration had shown no enthusiasm for actually bringing Ukraine into the alliance.⁷³ Hesitancy on Ukraine's accession to NATO continued to characterize the positions of France and Germany, as well as the UK. Substitutes for membership—the 2016 NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package, the 2020 Enhanced Opportunities Partnership with the alliance, and bilateral strategic partnerships agreed in 2021 with the United States and the UK—sustained Ukrainian hope, but concurrently nurtured a sense of frustration in Kyiv that the real prize, of a firm collective defence guarantee via NATO, remained out of reach. Yet keeping an 'open door' to membership raised hackles in Moscow and fed a narrative that NATO enlargement to include Ukraine was a driving objective of the United States and its allies. Ultimately, it also provided Putin with an excuse—however ill-founded—for a pre-emptive strike.

⁶⁸ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: memoirs of a secretary at war* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), pp. 157–8.

⁶⁹ William J. Burns, *The back channel: American diplomacy in a disordered world* (London: Hurst, 2019), p. 233.

⁷⁰ See Merkel's remarks, cited in Tina Hildebrandt and Giovanni di Lorenzo, "'Hatten Sie gedacht, ich komme im Pferdeschwanz?'" *Die Zeit*, 7 Dec. 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/2022/51/angela-merkel-russland-fluechtlingskrise-bundeskanzler>.

⁷¹ Matt Peterson, 'A brief history of US–Russian missteps', *The Atlantic*, 11 March 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2019/03/a-brief-history-of-us-russian-missteps/584542>.

⁷² Steven Pifer, 'Russia's draft agreements with NATO and the United States: intended for rejection?', *Brookings*, 21 Dec. 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection>.

⁷³ The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden in press conference', 14 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/14/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-3>.

Crucially, these errors have been recognized in the West. Antony Blinken, Secretary of State in the Biden administration, was forced to address them in Senate hearings on Ukraine shortly after Russia's invasion. Why, he was asked, did the Biden administration cleave to the idea of admitting Ukraine into NATO, but do nothing to promote it? While Blinken refused to concede mistakes,⁷⁴ others have done so. French President Emmanuel Macron, commenting in May 2023 on Russia's attacks on Georgia and Ukraine, noted:

In this context, it is true, we *failed* to provide a European response, or to organize an architecture to protect ourselves, via the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] or the other projects envisaged at the time, against these attacks. As for NATO's response, it was too much or too little: perspectives offered to Ukraine and Georgia, exposing the two countries to Russia's wrath, but which did not protect them, and which came with guarantees that were far *too feeble*. And we *lacked coherence* as Europeans. So we provided *insufficient* guarantees to certain countries at our borders. We did *not engage* with Russia in a security dialogue for ourselves. Ultimately, we delegated this dialogue to NATO, which was probably *not the best* means to succeed. And at the same time, we did *not break free of dependencies* on Russia, particularly for energy, and indeed we even continued to increase them. So we *must be clear-sighted* about ourselves. We were *not coherent* in our approach.⁷⁵

Our added emphases on select words in the above quotation are intended to pick out admissions of error in western policies. As identified by Macron, such admissions (especially on this scale) are indicators of shame, albeit with the proviso that shame is not necessarily an other-regarding emotion. Instead, shame is about deviations from one's ideal self, including shame at not having been smarter or possessed of foresight. Even so, the need to make amends remains, albeit not to make good for the other, but to restore one's own international reputation.

Indecisive action on Russia after Crimea

Karen DeYoung, associate editor for the *Washington Post*, has written that after February 2022 the West 'rush[ed] ... to send weapons to Ukraine' after 'years of hesitancy'.⁷⁶ Many of those responsible have, admittedly, sought to dodge the blame for that earlier position. Obama and David Cameron, who led the American and British (and, by extension, the NATO) response to the 2014 Crimea crisis, have acknowledged that the policies of the time were less than sweeping in scope (involving the imposition of limited sanctions and a strengthening of NATO's eastern flank). But both have argued that these were at the limit of what was then

⁷⁴ PBS NewsHour, via YouTube, 'Secretary of State Blinken testifies in Senate Foreign Relations Committee', 26 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdQHjvzBf44&t=4714s>, from 1:19:40.

⁷⁵ French Embassy in Spain, 'Closing speech by the President of the Republic at the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum', 31 May 2023, <https://es.ambafrance.org/Closing-speech-by-the-President-of-the-Republic-at-the-GLOBSEC-Bratislava-Forum> (emphases added).

⁷⁶ Karen DeYoung, 'The US has been rushing to arm Ukraine, but for years it stalled on providing weapons', *Washington Post*, 27 Feb. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/27/ukraine-us-arms-supply>.

diplomatically possible.⁷⁷ Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel—who, along with then-French President François Hollande, was the architect of the Minsk Process on post-2014 occupied eastern Ukraine—has argued similarly. She has defended both diplomatic outreach to Russia after 2014 (a failed policy, but still ‘the right thing to attempt’) and economic ties, notably the development of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline (a commercial, not a geopolitical decision).⁷⁸

Others in high office at the time have been more reflective. Hollande, for example, has suggested that sanctions after 2014 ‘were not at the level required for the gravity of the violation of international law’.⁷⁹ Key figures in Merkel’s government—including Frank-Walter Steinmeier (who was serving as federal minister for foreign affairs in 2014 and was elected as Germany’s president in 2017) and the late Wolfgang Schäuble (Merkel’s finance minister from 2009 to 2017) have disowned Nord Stream 2 (a policy for which they were, in part, responsible) and with it the whole idea of *Wandel durch Handel* [change through trade].⁸⁰ Even Merkel admitted in December 2022 that: ‘we should have acted quicker against Russia’s aggression [in Crimea]’ including by making sure that Germany met NATO’s defence spending benchmark of 2 per cent of GDP.⁸¹

Other decision-makers have suggested that the main reason Putin ‘got away with’ his actions in Crimea was because of the EU’s dependence on Russian energy exports (approximately 40 per cent of total imported oil and gas came from Russia prior to the 2022 invasion).⁸² Former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has stated that with the West dependent on Russian oil and gas, ‘when [Putin] finally came to launch his vicious war in Ukraine, he knew the world would find it very hard to punish him. He knew that he had created an addiction’.⁸³ Former high-ranking German civil servant Rolf Nikel, who worked in the chancellery for successive administrations, goes further, suggesting that Germany’s energy policy filled Russia’s war chest.⁸⁴ Nikel’s comments are part of a debate in Germany on whether there should be a national inquiry into the failings of Germany’s *Russlandpolitik* [Russia policy].⁸⁵

⁷⁷ On Obama, see Nicolas Camut, ‘Ukraine slams Obama for making “excuses” over his Russia policy’, *Politico*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-slams-us-barack-obama-for-excuses-over-russia-policy-war>; on Cameron, see Channel 4 News, via YouTube, ‘It’s very dangerous to predict what Putin might do next, says former PM David Cameron’, 16 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7pTEP8w50U>.

⁷⁸ *Die Zeit*, ‘Merkel again defends her policies toward Russia’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/merkel-russia-defends-policies-ukraine/32385675.html>.

⁷⁹ Theo Prouvost, ‘Hollande: “There will only be a way out of the conflict when Russia fails on the ground”’, *Kyiv Independent*, 28 Dec. 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/hollande-there-will-only-be-a-way-out-of-the-conflict-when-russia-fails-on-the-ground>.

⁸⁰ Bojan Pancevski, ‘Did Merkel pave the way for the war in Ukraine?’, *Wall Street Journal*, 26 May 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/did-merkel-pave-the-way-for-the-war-in-ukraine-4abef297>.

⁸¹ Merkel cited in Hildebrandt and di Lorenzo, “‘Hatten Sie gedacht’”, authors’ translation.

⁸² Ewan Thompson, ‘These charts show Europe’s reliance on gas before the war in Ukraine’, *World Economic Forum*, 10 Nov. 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/europe-gas-shortage-russia>.

⁸³ Boris Johnson, ‘We cannot go on like this. The West must end its dependence on Vladimir Putin’, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/03/14/cannot-go-like-west-must-end-dependence-vladimir-putin>.

⁸⁴ Klaus Wiegrefe, “Putin war so nervös, dass seine Wangenmuskeln zitterten”, *Spiegel Politik*, 7 Sept. 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutsche-russland-politik-was-lief-schief-ex-regierungsberater-rolf-nikel-draengt-auf-eine-enquetekommission-a-67f96819-d540-41ca-827c-6a297d3d066b>.

⁸⁵ Constanze Stelzenmüller, ‘A reckoning on Germany’s Russia policy is long overdue’, *Financial Times*, 21 March

But Germany is not the only country questioning its dealings with Russia. On military support, Michael Fallon, who was appointed UK secretary of state for defence just after the 2014 Crimea crisis, has bemoaned the British reluctance to send arms to Ukraine before 2022, suggesting that the absence of a tough response by the NATO nations conveyed to Putin the impression that he ‘could get away with’ aggression against Ukraine ‘all over again’.⁸⁶ Ben Hodges (who led NATO’s Allied Land Command in 2014 and thereafter commanded US forces in Europe) has noted similarly: Russia’s invasion following weak responses to Russian actions in Georgia, Syria and Crimea is, he has suggested, ‘what failed deterrence looks like’.⁸⁷ Such sentiments have been repeated by those in office at the time of the 2022 invasion. In March 2022, Johnson wrote:

When Putin invaded Ukraine the first time round, in 2014, the West made a terrible mistake. The Russian leader had committed an act of violent aggression and taken a huge chunk out of a sovereign country—and we let him get away with it.⁸⁸

Then-UK Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace suggested in July 2023 that the West should have made ‘a much greater effort to lethally equip’ Ukraine after 2014.⁸⁹ On this matter, views in the United States are especially instructive, as some of those responsible for decisions in 2022 and 2023 had a hand in earlier policy towards Ukraine. Biden, speaking one month after the Russian invasion, conceded that sanctions imposed after 2014 (when he was US vice-president) had failed to deter Russia in 2022.⁹⁰ On military assistance, Blinken, interviewed in 2017, noted that President Obama’s decision not to send anti-tank weapons to Ukraine to fight separatists in Donbas after 2014 had divided the administration—‘some ... believed that it did make sense to give the Ukrainians lethal defensive weapons, particularly anti-tank weapons’.⁹¹ Jake Sullivan was one such advocate. Also interviewed in 2017, he suggested that weapons to Ukraine (in greater numbers than those actually sent) would have been the best deterrence against Russian interference.⁹² Blinken (as Secretary of State) and Sullivan (as National Security Advisor) would, under Biden, have the opportunity to make good that omission.

Overall, the statements cited in this section convey a mix of shame, largely expressed along the lines of ‘we should have known’, ‘we should not have become

2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/afd6428c-9391-4f93-be85-bc9da9dab23b>.

⁸⁶ Interviewed on the *Daily Telegraph* podcast ‘Ukraine: the latest’, ‘Ukraine “advancing on Bakhmut” & Joe Biden visits the UK ahead of NATO summit’, 10 July 2023, <https://shows.acast.com/ukraine-the-latest/episodes/658301371b4a0600176a3fee>.

⁸⁷ ‘Ukraine: the latest’, ‘Exclusive interview with Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commanding general US Army Europe’, 29 May 2023, <https://shows.acast.com/ukraine-the-latest/episodes/658301371b4a0600176a400d>.

⁸⁸ Johnson, ‘We cannot go on like this’.

⁸⁹ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, via YouTube, ‘Ben Wallace on Britain’s defence and the future of NATO’, 18 July 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58Iu_my_EUo, from 0:14:55.

⁹⁰ The White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden in press conference, 24 March 2022’, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/24/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-7>.

⁹¹ Blinken was Deputy Secretary of State between 2015 and 2017. PBS Frontline, ‘The Putin files: Antony Blinken: Obama adviser, 2009–15’, 24 July 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/antony-blinken>.

⁹² Sullivan was National Security Advisor to then Vice-President Biden at the time of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. PBS Frontline, ‘The Putin files: Jake Sullivan: Chief policy adviser, Clinton campaign’, 22 June 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/jake-sullivan>.

dependent on Russia', and 'we should not have been so naive'. However, there are—we think—indicators of guilt, especially the failure to act decisively on Ukraine in 2014. And in Germany, facilitated by the change of government after years of Merkel's leadership, there is the open question of her—and hence Germany's—'Mitschuld am Krieg' (partial culpability for the war).⁹³

The failure to heed warnings

Admissions of hesitancy have been accompanied by a recognition that previously critical views of Russia had not been accorded sufficient attention. As Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki noted in March 2022:

For years the West has lived in the hope that Putin and Russia [would] change, normalize. We warned [that they would not] and unfortunately today we have no satisfaction when we see the late sobering up of the West ... Europe today is discovering that a business marriage of convenience with Russia was an enormous mistake.⁹⁴

The error here goes to the heart of Europe's post-Cold War politics. The enlargement of the EU and NATO swung the numerical balance of members to Europe's east. But this was not initially accompanied by any shift of political influence—symbolized by then French President Jacques Chirac's memorable comment amid the debates over Iraq in 2003 that the then EU candidate countries had 'missed a good opportunity to keep quiet'.⁹⁵ Such disdain lingered after the 'big bang' EU and NATO enlargements of 2004. Concerns over Russia—voiced especially in the Baltic States and Poland⁹⁶—were not acted upon: indeed, they were filtered out of the policy assessments of the major European powers and the United States.⁹⁷ The United States had, in fact, made a modest increase in its military presence in the Baltic region as early as 2010, but this move was insufficient to allay local concerns.⁹⁸ It was also not guided by any assumption of Russian ill-intent. The American policy and intelligence communities had focused their attentions elsewhere (a lingering legacy of the post-9/11 focus on counter-terrorism) and so were caught by surprise when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.⁹⁹ Only thereafter did the Pentagon develop plans for the defence of the

⁹³ See Michael Baumüller, Stefan Braun, Daniel Brössler and Nico Fried, 'Putins Schuld und Merkels Beitrag', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/krieg-in-der-ukraine-putins-schuld-und-merkels-beitrag-e656023>.

⁹⁴ Daniel Tilles, 'West now realises "enormous mistake" of not listening to our Russia warnings, says Polish PM', *Notes from Poland*, 14 March 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/14/west-now-realises-enormous-mistake-of-not-listening-to-our-russia-warnings-says-polish-pm>.

⁹⁵ Cited in Ian Black, 'Furious Chirac hits out at "infantile" easterners', *Guardian*, 18 Feb. 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/18/france.iraq>.

⁹⁶ Valdas Adamkus et al., 'An open letter to the Obama administration from central and eastern Europe', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 July 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html.

⁹⁷ Anne Applebaum, 'Obama and Europe: missed signals, renewed commitments', *Foreign Affairs* 94: 5, 2015, pp. 37–44, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/obama-and-europe>.

⁹⁸ '200 Baltic public figures ask for permanent NATO bases in open letter to Obama', *Estonian World*, 2 Sept. 2014, <https://estonianworld.com/opinion/200-baltic-public-figures-ask-permanent-nato-bases-open-letter-obama>.

⁹⁹ Burgess Everett and Josh Gerstein, 'Why didn't the US know sooner?', *Politico*, 3 April 2014, <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/united-states-barack-obama-ukraine-crimea-russia-vladimir-putin-104264>.

Baltics.¹⁰⁰ In practical terms, America's commitment to reinforcing the NATO alliance's eastern flank continued under President Donald Trump. But Trump's NATO scepticism left many governments in the region feeling uncomfortable. A sense that Germany was not taking its NATO commitments seriously reinforced this feeling of exposure.¹⁰¹

In the two years preceding the Russian invasion, serving and former high-ranking politicians in the Baltics and eastern Europe warned the United States and NATO not 'to go soft on Russia'.¹⁰² The 2020 Polish national security strategy singled out the 'the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation' as 'the most serious threat' facing the country.¹⁰³ Latvia's 2020 state defence concept¹⁰⁴ and the 2021 Lithuanian national security strategy¹⁰⁵ contained similar language. Throughout 2021, concerns were voiced expressly among these governments over Russian designs on Ukraine.¹⁰⁶ Ukraine's own 2020 national security strategy and 2021 military strategy articulated the same concern.¹⁰⁷

Scepticism in relation to Russia was seemingly vindicated by the events of February 2022—and led to soul-searching among those who had been slow to recognize the gravity of the problem. As President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted in September 2022:

One lesson from this war is we should have listened to those who know Putin. To Anna Politkovskaya and all the Russian journalists who exposed the crimes and paid the ultimate price. To our friends in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and to the opposition in Belarus. We should have listened to the voices inside our Union—in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop. And they acted accordingly.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, Macron suggested in May 2023 that eastern European voices had been ignored for too long. In an apparent repudiation of his predecessor Chirac, Macron suggested 'we sometimes missed opportunities to listen'.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile in Germany, the Social Democratic Party's co-leader Lars Klingbeil admitted:

¹⁰⁰ Julia Ioffe, 'Exclusive: the Pentagon is preparing new war plans for a Baltic battle against Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 18 Sept. 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/18/exclusive-the-pentagon-is-preparing-new-war-plans-for-a-baltic-battle-against-russia>.

¹⁰¹ Jens Ringsmose and Mark Webber, 'Hedging their bets? The case for a European pillar in NATO', *Defence Studies* 20: 4, 2020, pp. 295–317 at p. 303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2020.1823835>.

¹⁰² Sławomir Debski, James Sherr and Jakub Janda, 'Take it from eastern Europe: now is not the time to go soft on Russia', *Politico*, 31 Aug. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/31/open-letter-not-time-to-go-soft-on-russia-405266>.

¹⁰³ Republic of Poland, *National security strategy of the Republic of Poland*, 2020, https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ Lukas Milevski, 'Latvia's new state defense concept', *Baltic Bulletin*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/06/latvias-new-state-defense-concept>.

¹⁰⁵ 'Lithuania updates national security strategy: Russia, Belarus, China among key threats', Lithuanian Radio and Television, 11 April 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1534208/lithuania-updates-national-security-strategy-russia-belarus-china-among-key-threats>.

¹⁰⁶ NATO News via YouTube, 'NATO Secretary General with the Prime Minister of Estonia, Kaja Kallas', 25 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygW3LleaRb4>, from 5:50.

¹⁰⁷ President of Ukraine, 'Head of state approves strategic defense bulletin of Ukraine', 17 Sept. 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverddiv-strategichnij-oboronnij-byulet-en-uk-70713>.

¹⁰⁸ Von der Leyen, 'A union that stands strong together'.

¹⁰⁹ French Embassy in Spain, 'Closing speech by the President of the Republic at the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum'.

We did not sufficiently take into account the interests and perspectives of our eastern and central European partners. This led to a massive lack of trust. Especially in the last few years, as the Russians became more and more aggressive, we ought to have listened more to our partners.¹¹⁰

Annalena Baerbock, Germany's federal minister for foreign affairs, suggested similarly in July 2023 that:

For too long, we did not listen to the warnings of our eastern neighbours who urged us to take the threats emanating from Russia seriously. We learned that 'hoping for the best' is not enough when dealing with an increasingly autocratic leader. Besides all our efforts to construct a European security architecture with Russia, our economic and political interaction also did not sway the Russian regime toward democracy.¹¹¹

Apologies, like promises and warnings, are not simply statements but performative speech acts, whereby something is done in saying something.¹¹² Though none of the above cited statements entails the actual word 'apology', this does not matter, because the force of the meaning of a sentence does not solely depend on the word being uttered. As Mitchell Green explains regarding promises:

When that sentence is uttered in such a way as to constitute a promise, what determines that force is the meaning of the sentence *together* with such factors as the speaker's being serious and other contextual conditions being met.¹¹³

In the above statements, force is determined by a mix of regret ('we should have listened'), repeated reference to friends and partners and—in one case—name-checking those who lost their lives. Together these factors amount to apologies, most certainly to the admission of guilt. French and German admissions were especially significant, as governments in both countries had downplayed the Russian threat prior to February 2022. Both Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had also been associated with failed efforts to negotiate with Putin.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that shame, guilt and the need to make amends have underpinned the firm western response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. We have shown that making amends matters to states and groups of states. This is not necessarily because the state (or rather the individuals that run it) are virtuous, and

¹¹⁰ Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), 'Zeitenwende: Sicherheit und Frieden in Europa', speech by Lars Klingbeil at SPD event, 18 Oct. 2022, authors' translation, https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Reden/20221018_Rede_LK.pdf.

¹¹¹ Annalena Baerbock, 'Russia's war on Ukraine has forced us to think differently about our role in the world', *Guardian*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2023/jul/06/russia-war-ukraine-germany-foreign-policy>.

¹¹² J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words: the William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955, 1962* [1962], 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

¹¹³ Mitchell Green, 'Speech acts', in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Fall 2021 edn, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/speech-acts>. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁴ Shane Harris et al., 'Road to war: US struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion', *Washington Post*, 16 Aug. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war>.

therefore intent on doing the right thing, but because mistakes often have costly consequences, including for leaders. Notably, it can make them appear weak and impotent, potentially reducing their chances of being re-elected. In short, making good on mistakes is a rational thing to do.

IR scholars studying emotion have shown that emotions do not necessarily weaken states. Instead, they can and have been used as powerful tools to manipulate and govern populations.¹¹⁵ The present research suggests, however, that whether emotions have that power depends also on the emotion in question. Politically, there are dangers attached to the admission of guilt and shame, especially with a view to re-election. In small doses, admission of mistakes will be appreciated—after all, it makes decision-makers appear humble and human, but it must be accompanied by a ‘not again’ message, or else by a wake-up call. Even then, admitting to past failures will not sway electorates. Hence, while it is rational to feel morally culpable for mistakes, it is not always rational to admit to them. This explains why leaders rarely admit to having made mistakes.¹¹⁶ It also explains—in our case—why the need to make amends for past failures is not more explicitly stated as a motive for the West’s action. And why, indeed, the West sells its extraordinary response as an act of solidarity with Ukraine and a defence of the rules-based international order.¹¹⁷

This article points to the relevance of emotions in studying world politics, complementing existing studies with an exposition of the roles that guilt and shame can play. But of course, we offer only one case-study. To complete the picture, future research ought to examine other empirical cases of guilt and shame. Beyond the scholarly world, our argument has direct implications for practitioners and the policy-making world. Guilt and shame are negative emotions; their admission weakens an actor. It follows that situations that lead to mistakes are best avoided. In Germany, the same is already topical. Several scholars have called for an investigative committee (*Untersuchungsausschuss*) in the Bundestag into Germany’s *Russlandpolitik*, with the aim of avoiding making similar mistakes in the future.¹¹⁸ Our position lends credence to that initiative.

Although the desire to make amends is laudable, it is important that practitioners do not overcompensate for past mistakes. Overcompensation will merely renew a cycle of admission of mistakes and the need to make amends. This risk is real. Two ways of overcompensation are already apparent. The first is the reluctance to even consider pressing for an end to the conflict, for example, by forcing Zelensky and Putin to the negotiating table. Both parties could walk away with wins (territorial gains for Russia; security guarantees for Ukraine)

¹¹⁵ See Simon Koschut, ‘Can the bereaved speak? Emotional governance and the contested meanings of grief after the Berlin terror attack’, *Journal of International Political Theory* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 148–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088218824349>.

¹¹⁶ Times of Malta, ‘Obama admission of mistake rare for presidents’, Reuters, 8 Feb. 2009, <https://timesofmalta.com/article/obama-admission-of-mistake-rare-for-presidents.244114>.

¹¹⁷ von der Leyen, ‘A union that stands strong together’.

¹¹⁸ Bettina Klein, ‘Wie verfehlt war die deutsche Russlandpolitik?’, *Deutschlandfunk*, 13 Sept. 2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/zur-diskussion-verfehlt-russlandpolitik-die-aufarbeitung-der-vergangenheit-dlf-6d356101-100.html>.

and losses (territorial losses for Ukraine; Ukraine's entrenched western orientation for Russia).¹¹⁹ Yet, the main backers of Ukraine—the United States, the UK, Germany and France—are so emotionally invested in Ukraine's cause that they are unable to publicly contemplate negotiations. This position has been adopted despite the failure of huge amounts of military support to deliver a Ukrainian victory. Second is the issue of fast-tracking of Ukraine into the EU. Von der Leyen, who is intent on the idea, considers EU membership the answer to practically all Ukraine's problems.¹²⁰ Less obvious is whether Ukraine's admission is a practicable proposition. The European Commission granted Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022 (a decision endorsed shortly afterwards by the European Parliament). In December 2023, EU member states agreed to open accession talks with Ukraine (and Moldova). This was hailed by von der Leyen and Zelensky as a historic moment.¹²¹ Yet sober reflection suggests the road to membership will be long. The EU's most recent accession state, Croatia, was engaged in accession talks for eight years prior to its entry in 2013. Ukraine is the only state that has entered into such talks while at war; its accession journey is thus likely to be longer¹²²—not to mention controversial. The opportunity cost of EU subsidies to Ukraine's huge agricultural sector will mean a loss of support to budget recipients such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta. It will also require increased support from rich nations such as Germany and France. For these reasons, Ukraine's accession will be closely scrutinized.¹²³ Hungary, under Viktor Orbán, has already sought to stymie progress on negotiations. Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico has voiced wildly contradictory positions on Ukraine, sometimes supporting Ukraine's EU aspirations and sometimes opposing them.¹²⁴ Such machinations among EU leaders are likely to characterize the years of prospective negotiations ahead. It may well turn out that Ukraine's EU accession experience becomes comparable to Turkey's, of being stuck indefinitely in membership talks and all the while fomenting intra-EU division.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Stefan Wolff and Tetyana Malyarenko, 'Ukraine war: are both sides preparing for stalemate?', *The Conversation*, 22 Nov. 2023, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-are-both-sides-preparing-for-stalemate-217848>.

¹²⁰ European Commission, 'Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU ambassadors conference 2023', 6 Nov. 2023, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_558r.

¹²¹ Peter Dickinson, 'Historic breakthrough for Ukraine as EU agrees to begin membership talks', Atlantic Council, 14 Dec. 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/historic-breakthrough-for-ukraine-as-eu-agrees-to-begin-membership-talks>.

¹²² James Batchik, 'Ukraine's EU accession process faces bureaucratic and political hurdles', Atlantic Council, 19 Dec. 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-eu-accession-process-faces-bureaucratic-and-political-hurdles>.

¹²³ Henry Foy, 'EU estimates Ukraine entitled to €186bn after accession', *Financial Times*, 3 Oct. 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/a8834254-b8f9-4385-b043-04c2a7cd54c8>.

¹²⁴ Natália Silenská, 'Slovakia's Fico softens tone in U-turn on Ukraine', *Euractiv*, 24 Jan. 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/slovakias-fico-softens-harsh-tone-backs-ukraine>.

¹²⁵ Dermot Hodson, 'Will Ukraine really join the EU? The answer lies with the countries facing the bill', *Guardian*, 11 Nov. 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/11/ukraine-join-eu-membership-talks-subsidies>.