

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION-UKRAINE WAR AS A PROXY CONFLICT: SECURITY, DIPLOMACY, AND HYBRID THREATS IN EASTERN AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

Minas LYRISTIS¹

<https://doi.org/10.54989/stusec.2026.20.01.01>

Abstract

The ongoing Russian Federation-Ukraine war has produced consequences far beyond Ukraine's battlefield, reshaping the security, diplomatic and informational environment of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. This article analyses the conflict through a qualified proxy-war framework, treating the war not as a simple Russia–West confrontation that denies Ukrainian agency, but as a conflict in which Ukraine's existential defence is embedded in indirect great-power competition through military assistance, sanctions, alliance signalling and strategic narratives.

The article argues that the proxy-war dynamic produces differentiated regional outcomes through three mechanisms: securitisation, politicisation and narrative transmission. In frontline NATO and EU states, the war reinforces threat perception, defence adaptation and demand for allied reassurance. In states marked by energy dependence, domestic polarization or historical-cultural ties to Russia, the same framing can legitimize hedging, selective alignment or neutrality claims. In exposed partner states and vulnerable media environments, it increases susceptibility to hybrid pressure by turning external strategic narratives into domestic political cleavages.

By comparing frontline allies, intra-alliance dissenters, Western Balkan balancers, Black Sea states and exposed partner states, the article shows how the proxy-war lens connects security dilemmas, diplomatic positioning and information warfare within a single regional framework. The findings suggest that the Black Sea–Balkan–Eastern Mediterranean corridor will remain characterized by uneven deterrence, selective cooperation and persistent hybrid contestation.

Keywords: proxy war; Russia–Ukraine war; hybrid warfare; disinformation; security

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has devastated the country and has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of Eastern and Southeastern Europe by generating new security dilemmas. Its effects are not confined to the battlefield: the war has become embedded in renewed great-power antagonism over the European security order, compelling regional states to reassess defence planning, alliance commitments, and societal resilience. In order to understand the situation, it is essential to engage with the concept of "proxy war". In International Relations literature, a proxy war is broadly understood as a conflict where external actors indirectly participate by supporting one or more of the conflict

¹ Dr. Minas Lyristis holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of the Aegean, Greece. He is a Junior Scholar in Gulf Affairs at Strategy International Think Tank, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8111-5229>; liristisminas@yahoo.gr

parties to achieve their own strategic objectives, typically without committing their own forces to direct combat¹.

Andrew Mumford, in “A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations”, defines proxy wars as “conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a pre-existing war in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction”. This highlights indirect intervention and strategic influence by a benefactor providing weapons, training, and funding, often when direct involvement is too risky or costly. Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as a conflict where third parties support combatants to advance their interests or undermine opponents, largely without direct fighting, enabling major powers to avoid direct confrontation. This was salient during the Cold War due to nuclear risks. Moreover, Tyrone L. Groh offers a focused definition: “directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state”. Groh emphasizes that proxy war is a “middle ground for intervention,” distinct from mere assistance, involving a hierarchical principal-agent relationship where the intervener manages uncertainty, though it's rarely low-cost or risk-free. At the same time, the Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars attests to the concept's growing significance. However, applying the “proxy war” label is complex. Stephen Webber argues the term can be “unhelpful” for the Ukraine war, as it “deprives the parties involved of their agency, and it oversimplifies the often-complex relationships among all sides”. This critique highlights Ukraine's existential struggle as the primary driver of its defence, not solely as a pawn. Thus, labelling the conflict a “proxy war” is a geopolitical act with performative consequences. This framing, used by officials like Russian President Vladimir Putin and analysts, shapes threat perception, resource allocation, and justifications. Thus the “proxy war” term becomes a meta-narrative conditioning response. For Eastern and Southeastern European nations, it can amplify historical anxieties, influencing domestic politics and foreign policy.² The debate on the “proxy war” framework for Ukraine highlights a tension between systemic, great power dynamics (structure) and the motivations of smaller states like Ukraine (agency). While proxy war theories often emphasize principals over agents, potentially downplaying local autonomy, Ukraine's fight for national survival is a primary driver. Yet, substantial Western support and Russia's framing of the conflict as a confrontation with NATO lend weight to the proxy war interpretation.

This article employs a qualified proxy-war framework to examine how the Russia, Ukraine war reshapes the security environment of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, understood here as NATO and the EU's eastern flank, the Western Balkans, and the Black Sea littoral, with spillovers toward the Black Sea–Eastern Mediterranean corridor. The paper does not use the proxy-war concept as a totalizing label that denies Ukrainian agency. Rather, it treats the proxy-war dynamic as a partial but analytically useful configuration: a war in which Ukraine's existential defence is simultaneously embedded in indirect Russia–West

¹ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy War*, “A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations”, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; Baugh, L. S., *Proxy War*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, May 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/proxy-war>; Groh, Tyrone L., *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2019, p. 29, <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9781503608184.001.0001>

² Stephen Webber, *No, Ukraine Is Not Fighting a 'Proxy War'*, in *The Dispatch*, April 24, 2025, <https://thedispatch.com/article/proxy-war-ukraine-russia-definition/>; Hosaka, Sanshiro, *Ukraine's Agency in Japanese Discourse*, “Journal of Regional Security”, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2023, pp. 47–58, <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs18-41778>; Muradov, Ibrahim, *Disrupting the Narrative*, in “Europe-Asia Studies”, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2025, pp. 341–364, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2465569>

competition through military assistance, sanctions, intelligence cooperation, alliance signalling and strategic narratives.

The added value of this framework lies in its ability to connect dimensions that are often analysed separately. A purely alliance-politics approach explains deterrence and NATO adaptation, while regional-security approaches illuminate geographical proximity and patterns of interdependence. The proxy-war lens, however, captures how external support, great-power rivalry and narrative contestation interact inside regional political arenas. It explains not only why states perceive the war differently, but also how the framing of the war as a Russia–West confrontation becomes a causal factor in regional politics. Where threat perception and alliance dependence dominate, the frame strengthens balancing; where energy dependence, domestic polarization or unresolved status issues are salient, it enables hedging and neutrality claims; and where media ecosystems are vulnerable, it becomes a vector of hybrid influence. The article therefore argues that the proxy-war dynamic produces differentiated regional outcomes through three mechanisms: securitisation, politicisation and narrative transmission.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to assess how the proxy-war dynamic effects regional security in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Specifically, it (i) maps variation in threat perception and defence responses, (ii) explains differences in diplomatic alignment, hedging and balancing strategies, and (iii) analyses the information environment as a domain of hybrid contestation that can amplify or constrain policy choices.

Methodology

The article adopts a qualitative research design combining comparative case analysis and limited process tracing. It triangulates primary sources (official statements, national security and defence documents, NATO and EU strategic texts) with secondary academic literature on proxy wars, alliance politics and hybrid warfare, complemented by open-source reporting on disinformation campaigns and cyber incidents. Cases are selected purposively to capture variation in alliance status and exposure to Russian power: frontline allies (Poland and the Baltic states), intra-alliance dissenters (Hungary), Western Balkan balancers (Serbia), Black Sea states (Romania and Bulgaria) and an exposed partner state (Moldova), with brief attention to spillovers in the Eastern Mediterranean (Greece and Türkiye).

The design does not seek universal causal generalization; rather, it compares how alliance status, geographical exposure, energy dependence and domestic political constraints shape differentiated regional responses to the war.¹ To make the comparison more structured, the article uses four cross-case indicators. Threat perception is assessed through official statements, strategic documents, defence-spending decisions and requests for allied presence. Diplomatic alignment is evaluated through positions on sanctions, military assistance, EU/NATO coordination and public justifications of national policy. Hybrid vulnerability is examined through reported disinformation, cyber or political-influence operations and the domestic channels through which such narratives gain resonance. Energy dependence and domestic polarization are treated as conditioning variables that mediate the effect of the

¹ Assaf Moghadam; Rauta Vladimir; Wyss Michel, (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174066>; Watts, Stephen; Frederick, Bryan A.; Chandler, Nathan; Toukan, Mark; Curriden, Christian; Mueller, Erik E.; Geist, Edward et al., *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends*, RAND Corporation, 2023, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA300/RRA307-2/RAND_RRA307-2.pdf.

proxy-war frame. Process tracing is used in a limited sense: the analysis follows how the interpretation of the war as an indirect Russia–West confrontation is translated into national policy choices through intermediate mechanisms such as threat perception, elite framing and public-opinion constraint, rather than claiming deterministic causality¹.

Defining the Proxy-War Element

Characterizing the Ukraine conflict as a proxy war requires delineating principal external actors' objectives, Russia, and the collective West (primarily US/NATO), and evidence of their indirect involvement. Russia's objectives include reasserting influence and reshaping European security. A key goal is preventing NATO expansion eastward. Putin cited NATO's eastward march and military infrastructure encroachment as a threat. This relates to Russia's desire for a buffer zone, preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western military outpost. Russia also stated goals of “demilitarisation and denazification” of Ukraine and protecting Russian-speaking populations, claims widely seen as pre-textual in the West. More broadly, Moscow seeks to challenge the US-dominated post-Cold War security architecture and re-establish Russia as a great power.² Western/US/NATO objectives centre on defending Ukrainian sovereignty and international law. Supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is foremost. Deterring further Russian aggression and strengthening alliance cohesion within NATO/EU are related goals. Upholding the “rules-based international order” is another aim. An implicit objective of sustained Western support is weakening Russia's war-making capacity³.

The evidence of these proxy elements is abundant and manifests across multiple domains:

First, massive and sustained military aid has flowed to Ukraine from the United States, various NATO allies, and EU member states. This support has encompassed a wide array of weaponry, from small arms and anti-tank missiles in the initial phases to more sophisticated systems like artillery, armoured vehicles, air defence systems, and commitments for advanced fighter jets, alongside extensive training programs and intelligence sharing. While the accounting and true economic value of this aid are subject to debate, its impact on Ukraine's ability to resist Russian forces is undeniable. The US, for example, has provided billions in military assistance since February 2022, utilizing Presidential Drawdown Authority to send equipment from DoD stockpiles. European nations, collectively, have also contributed substantial aid⁴.

¹Alexander L. George; Bennett Andrew, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 67–72, pp. 206–207, pp. 210–212

² Al Jazeera, *No Other Option: Excerpts of Putin's Speech Declaring War*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts> (21.03.2026); Mankoff, Jeffrey, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, April 22, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>; Mendiguren, Lorea, *What Does Putin Want?*, Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program, August 8, 2022, <https://hnmcp.law.harvard.edu/hnmcp/blog/what-does-putin-want-assessing-interests-in-the-invasion-of-ukraine/> (21.03.2026)

³ U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine*, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, March 12, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>; Kristin Archick, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: European Union: Responses and U.S.-EU Relations*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Product IN11897, November 1, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11897/IN11897.24.pdf (21.03.2026)

⁴ Edgington, Tom; Eardley, Nick, *How Much Has the US Given to Ukraine?*, BBC News, December 8, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crew8y7pwd5o>; Fedyk, Anastassia; Hodson, James, *New Analysis from Economists for Ukraine: The Cost of US Aid to Ukraine Is Less than Half the Official Figures*, CEPR, March 6,

Second, the West has imposed unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia. These measures have targeted Russia's central bank, major financial institutions, key individuals among the elite, the energy sector (including attempts to cap oil prices), and access to Western technology, all with the aim of degrading Russia's war economy and its ability to finance the conflict. While these sanctions have not caused a complete collapse of the Russian economy, partly due to Russia's ability to redirect trade to non-sanctioning countries like China and India, they have imposed significant costs, restricted access to critical components, and demonstrably weakened Russia's war-making potential¹.

Third, information warfare has been a critical dimension of the conflict, with both Russia and the West (and Ukraine itself) engaging in extensive operations. Russia has deployed narratives portraying the war as a necessary defence against NATO aggression and Western encirclement, aiming to justify its actions domestically and internationally, and to undermine Western support for Ukraine. The West, in turn, has sought to counter these narratives, expose Russian disinformation, and bolster Ukraine's strategic communications efforts.

The Western proxy element has evolved. Initial Western objectives of defending Ukraine and deterring escalation appear to have expanded. Sustained support has taken on an attritional character against Russia's capabilities. The discourse about degrading Russia's future threat capacity has become more prominent. This evolution can create a feedback loop: Russia perceiving Western aims as more offensive may double down on its narrative of fighting NATO, entrenching the conflict's proxy nature and complicating de-escalation.

Three mechanisms link the proxy-war dynamic to regional divergence. First, securitisation: when the war is interpreted as an indirect Russia-NATO confrontation, frontline states read the conflict as a test of deterrence credibility, resulting in higher defence investment, military modernization and stronger demand for NATO reassurance.² Second, politicisation: in states with stronger energy dependence, more polarized domestic politics or historical-cultural ties to Russia, the same frame can be used by governing elites or opposition actors to justify caution, restraint or claims of neutrality³. Third, narrative transmission: Russian and local proxy narratives convert the geopolitical frame into domestic political pressure by portraying military aid to Ukraine or sanctions against Russia as participation in someone else's war. These mechanisms explain why the proxy-war lens does more than describe external involvement; it helps account for why similar external pressures generate different regional responses.

Regional Context: Eastern and Southeastern Europe

This section contextualizes the proxy-war framing within Eastern and Southeastern Europe by examining (i) the region's historical memories of Soviet domination and Cold War frontiers, (ii) the differentiated strategic positions of regional states as frontline NATO

2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/new-analysis-economists-ukraine-cost-us-aid-ukraine-less-half-official-figures> (21.03.2026)

¹Gabriel, Felbermayr; Kariem, Heider; Kirilakha, Aleksandra; Kwon, Ohyun; Syropoulos, Constantinos; Yalcin, Erdal; Yotov, Yoto, *On the Effectiveness of the Sanctions on Russia: New Data and New Evidence*, CEPR, March 12, 2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/effectiveness-sanctions-russia-new-data-and-new-evidence>; Kumleben, Nick; Luck, Philip; Palazzi, Andrea Leonard, *Back & Forth 3: Do Sanctions Work?*, CSIS, March 19, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/back-forth-3-do-sanctions-work> (21.03.2026)

² NATO, *Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank*, October 23, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm (21.03.2026)

³ Markus Balázs Göransson, *The Hungarian Government's Rhetoric on Russia's Large-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, "European Security", 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2468943> (21.03.2026)

members, intra-alliance dissenters, Western Balkan balancers or exposed partners, and (iii) how these legacies shape contemporary threat perception and policy responses to the Russia–Ukraine war.

Historical resonance. The current geopolitical anxieties and strategic calculations of Eastern and Southeastern European states are strongly shaped by Cold War legacies and memories of Soviet domination. The region’s experience as a contested frontier between Soviet and Western spheres of influence continues to filter contemporary interpretations of Russia’s war against Ukraine. For Poland and the Baltic states, Russian aggression evokes fears of revanchism and renewed imperial pressure, while in Moldova it reinforces concerns about sovereignty and vulnerability. NATO enlargement is therefore interpreted differently across the region: Moscow frames it as encirclement, whereas many Eastern European states regard it as a sovereign security choice made in response to historical experience¹. These memories help explain why some regional governments strongly support Ukraine and advocate robust deterrence, while others remain more cautious or ambivalent.

Differing regional perspectives. There is no monolithic regional perspective on the Ukraine conflict. National interests, historical relationships, energy dependence, domestic politics, and public opinion create diverse responses. Poland and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) show strong NATO/US alignment, viewing Russia’s actions as an existential threat. Their policies include robust aid to Ukraine, advocating for strong sanctions, increased defence spending, and welcoming NATO presence. This hawkish stance is shaped by historical experiences of Soviet occupation.² Hungary, under Viktor Orbán, pursues a cautious, transactional approach prioritizing national interests like energy security. It maintains ties with Moscow, voices scepticism on sanctions, and is reluctant to provide military aid to Ukraine, framing its policy as “pro-peace”. This often puts Hungary at odds with EU/NATO partners.³ Serbia balances deep ties with Russia (historical, cultural, energy, Kosovo support) and its EU aspiration. It has condemned Russia’s invasion in UN forums but not joined sanctions, a policy of “strategic ambiguity”.⁴ Other Balkan countries (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria) generally align with EU/NATO positions, but with nuances due to internal complexities, historical legacies, energy vulnerabilities, and susceptibility to Russian influence. Romania has increased defence spending and is a key aid conduit. Bulgaria has provided aid despite internal divisions. Western Balkan EU aspirants face particular

¹ EBSCO Information Services, *Warsaw Pact*, Research Starters, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/warsaw-pact> (12.02.2026); Kramer, Mark, *The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia*, “The Washington Quarterly”, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2009, pp. 39–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902773248>

² Kateryna Kvasha, *Security, Europe! Poland’s Rise as NATO’s Defense Spending Leader*, Wilson Centre, March 6, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/security-europe-polands-rise-natos-defense-spending-leader>; Kasekamp, Andres, *NATO’s Greatest Test: Baltic Security in Trump’s Shadow*, “Georgetown Journal of International Affairs”, May 21, 2025, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/trump-and-nato/> (12.02.2026)

³ Göransson, Markus Balázs, *The Hungarian Government’s Rhetoric on Russia’s Large-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, “European Security”, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2468943>; Robert Lansing Institute, *Viktor Orbán’s Russian Alignment*, May 20, 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/05/20/viktor-orbans-russian-alignment-a-threat-from-within-the-european-union/> (12.02.2026)

⁴ Florian Bieber, *Serbia’s Staged Balancing Act*, in “Georgetown Journal of International Affairs”, August 7, 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/08/07/serbias-staged-balancing-act/>; Curdy, Angélique, *Serbia and Its Partners: A Balancing Act*, Blue Europe, March 19, 2025, <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/short-analysis/serbia-and-its-partners-a-balancing-act/> (12.02.2026)

pressures.¹ These perspectives are amplified by the weaponization of historical narratives. Russia exploits historical grievances and cultural affinities to sow division. Narratives of Slavic brotherhood resonate in Serbia, while memories of Soviet oppression fuel threat perceptions in Poland and the Baltics. Hungary might evoke Cold War dangers to small nations to justify its caution. This manipulation is a key hybrid warfare tactic. Varying energy dependence on Russia also constrains foreign policy autonomy, impacting full alignment with Western objectives. Hungary's emphasis on energy security is a prime example. Serbia's gas reliance also plays a role. While the EU has reduced overall Russian energy dependence, the transition is uneven and challenging for some, providing Russia leverage. This underpins divergent diplomatic strategies.

Heightened security dilemmas. The Ukraine conflict as a Russia-West proxy war has intensified security dilemmas in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. This means increased threat perceptions, impacting defence postures, alliance commitments, and heightening vulnerability to hybrid warfare. The classic security dilemma is supercharged in this context. Eastern and Southeastern Europe face an intensified security dilemma as the Russia-Ukraine war reshapes perceptions of threat and credibility. In this dynamic, defensive measures undertaken by one actor are interpreted as offensive preparations by another, generating action-reaction cycles that can accelerate militarisation and narrow diplomatic space. Since 2022, Russia's use of military force, coercive signalling, and hybrid tools has increased perceived vulnerability across the region, prompting higher defence outlays, force posture adjustments, and stronger reliance on NATO's deterrence and defence commitments. Persistent cyber operations and disinformation further exacerbate uncertainty, complicating intent attribution and increasing the risk of miscalculation.

Increased threat perception. Framing the conflict as a Russia-NATO proxy contest magnifies fears of escalation and spillover. Regional actors perceive a potential flashpoint for wider confrontation. This framing exacerbates the adversarial dynamic, driving insecurity. Academic analyses highlight how defensive measures can be seen as offensive, fuelling escalating tensions, amplified by the proxy dimension. Regional assessments consistently note mutual perceptions of threat between Russia and NATO. Across the alliance, Russia is now treated as the principal military challenge on the eastern flank, reflecting the sharpened threat perception produced by the war and its wider coercive spillovers.² Many Eastern/Southeastern European capitals fear that Russian success in Ukraine could embolden further pressure on neighbours, including Moldova or NATO members. The risk of "catastrophic spillover" is a constant concern. For example, Poland experienced spillover risk in November 2022 when a missile killed two citizens, illustrating tangible dangers. Polish strategic documents identify Russia as the primary threat, necessitating military modernization and robust NATO posture. The Baltic States, drawing on historical experiences, consistently condemn Russian aggression and call for support for Ukraine and

¹ Ljiljana Kolarski, *The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans*, "The Policy of National Security/Politika Nacionalne Bezbednosti", Vol. 23, No. 2, 2022, pp. 87–107, <https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.2322022.5>; Mukhina, Olena, *Romania Boosts Defense Spending*, Euromaidan Press, March 29, 2025, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/03/29/romania-boosts-defense-spending-maintains-ukraines-aid-after-security-council-meeting/>; Trifonova, Gloria; Malinov, Svetoslav, *Operation 'Disinformation' in Bulgaria*, Centre for the Study of Democracy, November 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/operation-disinformation/> (12.02.2026)

² NATO, *Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank*, October 23, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm; Jones, Seth G.; Daniels, Seamus P., *Deterring Russia: U.S. Military Posture in Europe*, CSIS, January 27, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/deterring-russia-us-military-posture-europe> (12.02.2026)

Russian accountability. Romania passed a law in early 2025 authorizing its military to neutralize unauthorized drones after Russian drone debris was found on its soil.

Impact on defence alliances. Intensified threat perception has catalysed profound changes in regional defence postures and NATO's strategic orientation. A surge in defence spending is primary. Poland aims to spend 4.2% of GDP in 2024, up to 4.7% in 2025, for ambitious military modernization with US and South Korean hardware¹. Germany's Zeitenwende includes a €100 billion defence fund and commitment to exceed NATO's 2% GDP target. European military expenditure surged 17% to \$693 billion in 2024, the steepest rise since the Cold War's end; Russia's reached \$149 billion. A record 22 of 32 NATO states met or exceeded the 2% GDP guideline in 2024, with discussions to raise it further. The proxy war has reinvigorated NATO, fostering collective purpose and bolstering its eastern flank. NATO doubled its multinational battlegroups from four to eight, extending its reinforced presence from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and increased high-readiness troops. Eastern European states strongly advocate for a robust US military presence. However, the proxy framing also introduces uncertainty about long-term US commitment, pressuring European NATO members to increase their capabilities. Maintaining cohesion can be challenged by differing national approaches, like Hungary's. A "double security dilemma" emerges for Eastern European states: their defensive measures vis-à-vis Russia are seen as threatening by Moscow, while they may feel compelled to adopt more hawkish postures to ensure continued Western allied commitment, further intensifying the primary dilemma with Russia.

Vulnerability to hybrid warfare. The conflict's proxy-war dimension increases regional vulnerability to hybrid tactics because Russia–West competition often unfolds below the threshold of direct military confrontation. Russia's hybrid toolbox includes cyber operations, electronic warfare, economic coercion, political interference, sabotage and support for destabilizing actors. Cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, GPS jamming, attacks on communications networks and threats to undersea infrastructure illustrate how the war's effects extend beyond Ukraine's territory.² Disinformation is equally central: narratives portraying Ukraine as a "Nazi state," the war as provoked by NATO, and European countries as instruments of Washington seek to undermine support for Kyiv and erode trust in Western institutions. Defensive measures by NATO and Eastern European states can paradoxically be incorporated into these narratives as supposed proof of Western escalation. Hybrid warfare therefore transforms the proxy-war frame into a continuous challenge to societal cohesion, infrastructure resilience and political trust³.

¹ Kateryna Kvasha, *Security, Europe! Poland's Rise as NATO's Defense Spending Leader*, Wilson Centre, March 6, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/security-europe-polands-rise-natos-defense-spending-leader>; SIPRI, *Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditure as European and Middle East Spending Surges*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges> (12.02.2026)

² Lennart Maschmeyer, *Cyber Conflict and Subversion in the Russia-Ukraine War*, Lawfare, June 11, 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/cyber-conflict-in-the-russia-ukraine-war>; Bendiek, Annegret; Bund, Jakob; Mika Kerttunen, *The Attribution Dividend: Protecting Critical Infrastructure from Cyber Attacks*, SWP Comment 2024/C 46, October 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2024C46>; SCEEUS, *Russia's Hybrid War Against Moldova*, 2024, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/2024-publications/russias-hybrid-war-against-moldova.pdf> (12.02.2026)

³ Kateryna Odarchenko, Davlikanova, Elena, *Russia's Evolving Information War Poses a Growing Threat to the West*, Atlantic Council, November 26, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-evolving-information-war-poses-a-growing-threat-to-the-west/>; Šefčíková, Kristína, *Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine*, Prague Security Studies Institute, March 2023, https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10391_hostile-narrative-a-case-study-of-slovakia.pdf (12.02.2026)

Navigating great power politics. The Ukraine conflict's proxy dynamic thrusts Eastern and Southeastern European countries into complex great power politics, facing diplomatic pressures and consequential choices on allegiances. Russia's invasion is seen by many as an attack on European values and security, generating strategic anxiety and compelling reassessment of strategies. States respond to power shifts and threats via balancing (countering threats through alliances or internal build-ups) or hedging (avoiding definitive alignment, pursuing mixed strategies to maintain flexibility). Eastern and Southeastern European countries employ these strategies amidst Western pressure to align against Russia and Russian influence efforts.

Case Variation and National Strategies

The case variation becomes clear when frontline allies, intra-alliance dissenters, Western Balkan balancers, Black Sea states and exposed partner states are compared. Poland exemplifies strong alignment and robust balancing against Russia. Viewing Moscow as an immediate and severe threat, rooted in centuries of difficult history and the more recent Soviet era, Warsaw has positioned itself as a frontline state in NATO's defence and a leading European supporter of Ukraine¹. Poland exemplifies a strategy of strong alignment and robust balancing against Russia. Viewing Moscow as an immediate and severe threat, rooted in centuries of difficult history and the more recent Soviet era, Warsaw has positioned itself as a frontline state in NATO's defence and a leading European supporter of Ukraine. Polish policy is characterized by significant military aid to Kyiv, a strong push for tougher international sanctions against Russia, a massive national military modernization program, and enthusiastic hosting of substantial NATO and US forces. For Poland, Ukraine's security is indivisible from its own and that of the broader Central and Eastern European region.

Hungary, under Prime Minister Orbán, has adopted a distinct strategy that can best be described as hedging with strong transactional elements. While formally a member of both the EU and NATO, Budapest has prioritized what it defines as its "national interests," which prominently include maintaining affordable energy supplies from Russia and avoiding direct entanglement in the conflict. Consequently, Hungary has often been a dissenting voice within the EU regarding the scope and severity of sanctions against Russia, has been reluctant to provide military aid to Ukraine, and has emphasized the need for peace negotiations, even if such negotiations might involve concessions from Kyiv. This approach is often framed domestically as a pragmatic pursuit of sovereignty and a refusal to be drawn into a great power conflict that is not Hungary's own.

Serbia continues its long-standing foreign policy of balancing between Russia and the West. This strategy is dictated by a complex web of factors: deep historical, cultural, and Orthodox Christian ties to Russia; significant dependence on Russian energy; Russia's crucial diplomatic support for Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence; and, simultaneously, Serbia's official strategic goal of EU accession, which necessitates alignment with EU policies and values, alongside substantial economic links to the West. Thus, while Serbia has condemned Russia's violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity in international forums like the UN, it has steadfastly refused to join Western sanctions against Moscow. This policy of ambivalence, according to some analyses, allows President Aleksandar Vučić to

¹ Aris Marghelis, *The Port of Alexandroupolis: A Strategic and Geopolitical Assessment*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, August 1, 2024, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/port-alexandroupolis-strategic-and-geopolitical-assessment-2024> (12.02.2026); Minas Lyrstis, *Forging a Strategic Axis: The Deepening Partnership between Greece and Saudi Arabia*, in "HAPSC Policy Brief Series", Vol. 6, No. 1, 2025, pp. 198–203, <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.43206>

maximize Serbia's international manoeuvring space and consolidate his domestic political power by appealing to diverse segments of the electorate.

Beyond the cases highlighted above, the Black Sea littoral and its immediate neighbourhood illustrate how geographical exposure and alliance status condition responses to the proxy-war dynamic. Romania has tended toward robust alignment and deterrence, treating the war as a direct security challenge to the Black Sea region and to Euro-Atlantic order. Bulgaria, by contrast, combines formal NATO/EU alignment with high levels of domestic political contestation, creating greater policy volatility and a more permissive environment for external influence operations. Moldova occupies an even more constrained position as an exposed partner state: it faces hybrid pressure and security externalities from the war while lacking the deterrent umbrella of NATO membership.

The choice between these strategies of balancing, hedging, or aligning is not solely determined by external geopolitical pressures or abstract calculations of national interest. It is significantly mediated by factors such as domestic political legitimacy and elite cohesion. Regimes with strong nationalist credentials, or those facing potent internal opposition, may strategically employ a particular foreign policy alignment to bolster their domestic standing. For instance, Hungary's "national interest" framing of its hedging strategy under Orbán is deeply interwoven with his broader "illiberal democracy" project and a nationalist rhetoric that positions Hungary as a defender of sovereignty against perceived EU overreach and "globalist" agendas, thereby resonating with certain Russian narratives and consolidating his support base. Similarly, President Vučić's carefully calibrated balancing act in Serbia enables him to navigate strong pro-Russian sentiment within parts of the populace while keeping the doors to EU accession and Western engagement at least nominally open, thus maximizing his political survivability and room for manoeuvre at home. This indicates that the "national interest" that guides these foreign policy choices is often heavily shaped by the ruling elite's primary interest in regime stability and maintaining popular support. Therefore, the pressures emanating from the Russia-West proxy war are filtered through, and frequently instrumentalized by, these domestic political dynamics, leading to alignment outcomes that are more complex and contingent than purely geopolitical models might predict.

Furthermore, the Ukraine proxy war is accelerating a fundamental re-evaluation of the concept of "strategic autonomy" within Europe, but this concept is interpreted and pursued differently across the Eastern and Southeastern European sub-regions. For some nations, particularly those like Poland and the Baltic states who feel most directly threatened by Russia, strategic autonomy is understood primarily as achieving greater European burden-sharing and capability development within the NATO framework, with the aim of strengthening the European pillar of the Alliance and ensuring continued, robust US commitment to European security (referring to EU strategic autonomy). Poland's massive military modernization and its calls for higher NATO defence spending exemplify this approach. For others, however, such as elements within Hungary or potentially Serbia, "strategic autonomy" might imply a greater desire for independent manoeuvring space between the competing great power blocs, seeking to maximize national freedom of action by avoiding rigid alignment with either side. This divergence in understanding and pursuing strategic autonomy, catalysed and amplified by the pressures of the Ukraine proxy war, could become a significant source of intra-European tension and policy incoherence in the future, potentially fragmenting European responses to ongoing and future geopolitical challenges. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that the proxy-war framing interacts with local strategic culture, alliance status and domestic politics. The next section examines the

implications for regional cooperation and the ability of existing formats, such as the Visegrád Group and Balkan initiatives, to sustain cohesion under conditions of heightened polarization.

Impact on Regional Cooperation

The proxy war dynamic emanating from the Ukraine conflict significantly impacts patterns of cooperation and division within Eastern and Southeastern Europe. It acts as both a centrifugal force, deepening rifts between states with divergent approaches to Russia and the West, and, paradoxically, a centripetal one, fostering closer collaboration among like-minded nations or on specific, shared security concerns.

The Visegrád Group (V4), comprising Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, serves as a prominent example of this fragmentation. Historically a platform for coordinating regional policies and amplifying Central European voices within the EU, the V4 has been severely strained by the war in Ukraine. While the group showed some initial unity, such as a joint financial support package for Ukraine facilitated through the International Visegrád Fund, profound divisions quickly emerged, primarily driven by Hungary's distinct stance on sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine. Poland and the Czech Republic, and to a large extent Slovakia (though with its own internal political complexities), have adopted strong positions condemning Russian aggression and providing substantial support to Kyiv. This has led to acute political tensions with Budapest, resulting in the cancellation of some high-level V4 meetings and a general weakening of the group's cohesion on foreign policy matters related to the war. The V4's response to the Ukraine crisis has been notably less unified than its collective stance during the 2015 migration crisis, indicating that the geopolitical pressures of the proxy war have overridden previous patterns of regional solidarity on certain issues. Even cooperation on energy policy within the V4, previously an area of common interest, has been complicated by differing national responses to the war and its energy implications¹.

In the Balkans, the Ukraine war and its associated proxy dynamics carry particularly complex implications, given the region's own history of conflict, unresolved disputes, and its position as an arena of competing external influences. Russia has long sought to maintain and expand its influence in the Western Balkans, often by exploiting ethnic and political fault lines, supporting nationalist narratives, and cultivating ties with anti-Western or pro-Russian political actors, particularly in Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war in Ukraine has intensified these efforts, as Moscow seeks to demonstrate its continued relevance and to distract Western attention. This can exacerbate regional tensions and potentially hinder the EU and NATO integration processes for several Balkan states. Countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have generally aligned more closely with EU and NATO positions on Ukraine, condemning Russian aggression and adhering to sanctions. In contrast, Serbia's balancing act and the pro-Russian stance of some political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina create clear divisions within the region, potentially leading to increased friction between pro-Western and more Russia-leaning states or entities.

However, the impact on regional cooperation is not uniformly negative. While the overarching proxy war dynamic can create deep divisions on high-profile political issues related to Russia, it can also paradoxically stimulate closer cooperation on specific, shared

¹ Petr Kaniok, Hloušek, Vít, *Visegrad Four as an Institution in Times of EU Crises*, "European Politics and Society", 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2488815>; Maksak, Hennadiy, *V4 in Challenging Times of War: How to Preserve Assistance to Ukraine*, GLOBSEC, February 9, 2023, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/v4-challenging-times-war-how-preserve-assistance-ukraine>. (12.02.2026)

security or logistical concerns among sub-sets of states. For example, frontline states like Poland, Romania, and Slovakia have had to coordinate closely on managing refugee flows from Ukraine and facilitating the transit of humanitarian and military aid. Even within the fractured V4, there has been some agreement on practical, less politically charged areas of cooperation, such as assistance to refugees (at least initially), medical aid for wounded Ukrainian personnel, or making efforts in de-occupied territories.

Similarly, in the Balkans, while geopolitical alignments on the Ukraine war differ significantly, shared challenges such as energy security, countering disinformation, or managing other transnational threats could, in principle, spur pragmatic cooperation even among states with divergent foreign policies towards Russia. The EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, for instance, explicitly aims to foster deeper regional economic cooperation as a means of promoting stability and accelerating EU integration. This suggests that the proxy war does not entirely eradicate regional cooperation but rather reconfigures it. Broad, values-based political solidarity may falter in the face of conflicting geopolitical pressures, but more pragmatic, interest-driven cooperation on specific, tangible issues might persist or even strengthen among smaller, more agile groupings of states.

Weaponizing the Narrative

A critical dimension of proxy war is the systematic weaponization of narratives, using information and disinformation to shape perceptions and achieve strategic objectives by exploiting the “proxy war” theme. Russia employs sophisticated disinformation targeting domestic and international audiences, impacting Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The “proxy war” theme serves as a cornerstone for many disinformation campaigns, especially those emanating from or aligned with Russian state interests. A dominant and consistently promoted Russian narrative portrays the war in Ukraine not as an unprovoked act of aggression by Moscow, but as a defensive and necessary reaction to decades of US and NATO provocation, expansionism, and encirclement. Within this framing, Ukraine is depicted as a mere pawn, a “client state,” or a “battering ram” being used by the West (primarily the United States) to wage a proxy war aimed at weakening, dismembering, or even destroying Russia.¹ This narrative serves multiple purposes: it attempts to legitimize Russia's actions by shifting blame to external actors, to rally domestic support by invoking a sense of existential threat, and to undermine international condemnation of the invasion. These campaigns actively seek to undermine Western unity, particularly transatlantic cohesion. European nations are often portrayed as sacrificing their own economic and security interests to serve American geopolitical ambitions, effectively acting as “vassal states” or puppets of Washington. Narratives suggesting that Europe is being economically “bled dry” or foolishly “sacrificing its economy” to sustain a US-led proxy war against Russia are common, designed to foster resentment and division within European societies and between Europe and the United States. Within Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the informational effects of the “proxy war” narrative are mediated by historical memory, political polarization and media ecosystems. In several Western Balkan and Black Sea settings, pro-Russian networks and domestic political entrepreneurs can amplify proxy-war frames to justify non-alignment, contest EU/NATO policies or delegitimize sanctions. In

¹ EUvsDisinfo, *The Myth That Won't Die: Blaming NATO for Russia's War*, 2025, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-myth-that-wont-die-blaming-nato-for-russias-war/>; Shultz, Daniel; Jasparro, Christopher, *How Does Russia Exploit History and Cultural Heritage for Information Warfare?*, Antiquities Coalition, April 1, 2022, <https://acthinktank.scholasticahq.com/article/118601-how-does-russia-exploit-history-and-cultural-heritage-for-information-warfare-recommendations-for-nato>. (12.02.2026)

frontline states, similar narratives tend to be rejected more quickly, yet they can still contribute to securitized domestic politics and fatigue over time. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the effectiveness of strategic communication and societal resilience policies.

Historical revisionism is another key tactic. Russia frequently weaponizes interpretations of history, particularly concerning World War II, the Soviet era, and the Cold War, to create tension, justify its current narratives, and appeal to specific historical sensitivities in different countries. This includes narratives that deny or distort Ukrainian statehood and identity, portray the Ukrainian government as “Nazi” or “fascist,” and accuse Ukraine of committing “genocide” against Russian speakers, claims used to dehumanize Ukrainians and legitimize Russian military actions. The dissemination of these narratives relies heavily on a multi-platform strategy, with a strong emphasis on social media. Platforms like Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube are extensively used to amplify disinformation, spread manipulated images or videos (including deepfakes), and promote conspiracy theories. The strategy often involves what has been termed the “firehouse of falsehood” model, a high volume of messages across multiple channels, often contradictory, designed to overwhelm and confuse audiences rather than necessarily convince them of a single truth. Russian state-sponsored media outlets like RT and Sputnik, along with a vast network of proxy websites, ostensibly independent “milbloggers”, and paid influencers, play a crucial role in this ecosystem. These campaigns are often tailored to specific linguistic and cultural contexts, targeting vulnerable communities in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, such as Serbian- and Bulgarian-language audiences, with messages designed to resonate with local grievances or historical perspectives. The use of “local narrative proxies”, domestic individuals or groups who willingly or unwittingly amplify Kremlin-friendly narratives, is a key tactic for lending credibility and local relevance to these campaigns.

The potency of the “proxy war” narrative, in particular, lies in its ability to tap into pre-existing sentiments within various Eastern and Southeastern European societies. It often resonates with anti-establishment, anti-globalist, or isolationist currents, offering a seemingly straightforward, if conspiratorial, explanation for a highly complex and tragic conflict. For audiences already sceptical of mainstream media, their own governments, or the foreign policies of major Western powers, such narratives can be particularly attractive. In nations with strong nationalist political parties or movements, as seen in parts of Slovakia or Bulgaria, the “proxy war” framing can be readily co-opted to fit domestic political agendas that emphasize national sovereignty against perceived external interference, whether from the West or Russia. The narrative's simplicity, great powers clashing while smaller nations suffer the consequences, can hold more appeal for populations with lower levels of media literacy or those who place high trust in alternative or state-influenced media outlets than do more nuanced geopolitical analyses. Thus, the effectiveness of this narrative is not solely a testament to Russian propagandistic skill; it is also a function of its capacity to activate and amplify latent societal grievances, historical anxieties, and pre-existing worldviews, transforming it into a powerful instrument for political mobilization and societal polarization.

The intended and, in some cases, actual effects of these sustained disinformation campaigns on public opinion in Eastern and Southeastern Europe are significant and multifaceted. A primary objective is to undermine popular support for military and financial aid to Ukraine. Narratives are crafted to convince citizens in supporting countries that such aid is futile, merely prolongs the suffering, and is unaffordable amidst domestic economic challenges, or primarily benefits corrupt Ukrainian elites or external arms manufacturers. For example, in Slovakia, specific narratives have pushed for a halt to military aid to Ukraine.

Public opinion polls across Europe show varying levels of support for aid, with some southeastern European countries exhibiting more skepticism¹. Another key aim is to fuel anti-NATO, anti-EU, and anti-Western sentiment more broadly. By consistently portraying NATO as an aggressive alliance responsible for provoking the conflict, and framing the war as a US-led proxy endeavour, these campaigns seek to erode public trust in these institutions and their security guarantees. This is particularly targeted at populations in countries like Serbia or parts of the Balkans where historical grievances against NATO (e.g., the 1999 intervention in Kosovo) or existing cultural affinities with Russia provide fertile ground for such messaging.

These competing narratives inevitably contribute to increasing political polarization within Eastern and Southeastern European societies. The war in Ukraine and the question of how to respond to it have deepened existing ideological divides and, in some cases, created new ones, making national consensus on foreign and security policy more elusive. This polarization is evident in countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where public opinion is sharply divided, and opposition parties often leverage pro-Russian or anti-Western narratives to criticize government policies and mobilize support. For instance, a significant portion of Slovaks (28% in one poll) believed the West provoked Russia into war, and 49% disapproved of EU support for Ukraine.

Such shifts in public opinion, fuelled by disinformation, can exert considerable pressure on government policy. While geopolitical imperatives and alliance commitments are often paramount, policymakers in democratic states cannot entirely ignore public sentiment, especially if it becomes widespread or intensely held. Sustained public opposition to aiding Ukraine or supporting sanctions against Russia can constrain a government's options or lead to more cautious, ambivalent, or delayed policy responses. In Bulgaria, for example, the active promotion of pro-Russian narratives by influential figures, including some with military backgrounds, can impact policy debates and public enthusiasm for robust NATO/EU actions against Russia. Similarly, Kremlin-aligned narratives about the Ukraine war demonstrably affect policy discussions and political discourse within the Visegrad countries, exploiting existing societal concerns about economic stability, energy security, or national sovereignty.

The effectiveness of the “US-led proxy war” narrative in parts of Southeastern Europe can contribute to more neutral foreign-policy positions or reluctance to align fully with Western strategies. When publics are persuaded that sanctions, military aid or NATO deployments serve external interests rather than national security, governments face stronger incentives to delay, dilute or rhetorically distance themselves from collective policies. This creates a feedback loop: visible policy divergences, such as Hungary’s cautious approach or debates over military aid in Slovakia, are then used by Russian propaganda as evidence that Western unity is weakening. Countering this dynamic requires more than fact-checking. Because proxy-war narratives exploit historical grievances, economic anxieties and identity-based cleavages, resilience depends on locally credible strategic communication, media literacy, energy diversification and policies that address the domestic vulnerabilities through which disinformation gains traction.

¹ Peter Učeň, *The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia*, ECPS, March 4, 2023, <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-russia-ukraine-war-and-the-radicalization-of-political-discourse-in-slovakia/> (12.02.2026); Metodieva, Asya, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans*, German Marshall Fund, 2019, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Narrative%20Proxies%20in%20Balkans.pdf> (12.02.2026)

The security, diplomatic and informational dimensions analysed above are therefore mutually reinforcing rather than separate. Security adaptation changes diplomatic incentives: as NATO's eastern flank is reinforced, frontline members become more confident in advocating sustained support for Ukraine, while more ambivalent states face sharper pressure to justify deviation from alliance consensus. Diplomatic divergence, in turn, creates openings in the information domain, because Moscow-aligned narratives can amplify disagreements over sanctions, military aid or energy costs as evidence that Western unity is fragile or externally imposed. Information operations then feed back into security policy by shaping public tolerance for defence spending, allied deployments and assistance to Kyiv. The proxy-war frame thus operates as a connecting mechanism between military deterrence, diplomatic bargaining and societal resilience.

Results and Original Contribution

This study finds that the proxy-war dynamic of the Russia–Ukraine conflict has a differentiated rather than uniform regional impact. Its effect depends on how indirect great-power confrontation is filtered through alliance status, geography, energy dependence and domestic politics. In frontline NATO/EU states, the proxy-war frame reinforces threat perception and strengthens balancing through defence spending, military modernization and demands for NATO reassurance. In states where energy dependence, domestic polarization or historical-cultural ties to Russia are stronger, the same frame can legitimize hedging, selective alignment or claims of neutrality. In exposed partner states and politically contested media environments, it increases susceptibility to hybrid pressure by turning external strategic narratives into domestic political cleavages.

The article's contribution is therefore not to claim that the Russia–Ukraine war can be reduced to a proxy war. Such a claim would understate Ukraine's agency and overstate the coherence of Western or Russian control. Rather, the contribution is to show that the proxy-war lens is analytically useful when treated as both a material structure and a narrative resource. It explains how military assistance, alliance adaptation, sanctions politics and information warfare interact to produce divergent regional strategies across the Black Sea–Balkan–Eastern Mediterranean corridor.

Conclusions

Analysed through a qualified proxy-war framework, the Russia–Ukraine conflict operates as both geopolitical reality and contested narrative. The argument advanced in this article is not that Ukraine lacks agency or that the war can be reduced to a confrontation between Russia and the West. Rather, the article has argued that the indirect Russia–West dimension conditions how regional states interpret risk, allocate resources, justify diplomatic choices and respond to hybrid pressure. The proxy-war lens is analytically useful because it explains how military assistance, sanctions, alliance signalling and competing strategic narratives interact inside domestic and regional political arenas.

The comparative cases support this claim. Poland and the Baltic states illustrate how geographical exposure and historical memory translate the proxy-war frame into strong balancing, military modernization and demand for forward deterrence. Romania and Bulgaria demonstrate how Black Sea exposure produces broadly similar alliance incentives but different degrees of domestic contestation. Hungary and Serbia show that formal alliance membership or European orientation does not automatically generate alignment when energy dependence, regime strategy and public narratives create incentives for hedging. Moldova shows the vulnerability of exposed non-NATO partners, where military risk, energy pressure

and information operations intersect more directly. These cases confirm that the war's regional impact is not linear; it is mediated by alliance status, domestic politics and exposure to Russian leverage.

The three dimensions examined in the article, security, diplomacy and information, should therefore be understood as a single interactional process. Security adaptation generates diplomatic pressure by forcing states to define their position on deterrence, sanctions and aid to Ukraine. Diplomatic divergence then becomes material for information campaigns, which portray disagreement within NATO or the EU as evidence of Western fatigue, hypocrisy or external manipulation. Information warfare, in turn, affects security policy by shaping public support for defence spending, allied deployments and assistance to Kyiv. The proxy-war frame thus does not merely describe the conflict; it becomes part of the mechanism through which the conflict reorganises regional politics.

The policy implications are consequently differentiated. For frontline NATO members, the priority is credible deterrence combined with resilience against cyber, drone and infrastructure threats. For Black Sea states, the focus should be maritime security, air and missile defence, military mobility and protection of energy and logistics corridors. For Western Balkan balancers, policy should combine EU conditionality, energy diversification and locally credible counter-disinformation strategies rather than generic calls for alignment. For exposed partners such as Moldova, support should concentrate on institutional resilience, election security, cyber defence, energy security and crisis communication. For intra-alliance dissenters, the relevant policy challenge is not only persuasion but reducing structural dependencies that make hedging politically attractive.

These conclusions should be stated with caution. The war has accelerated contestation across the Black Sea–Balkan–Eastern Mediterranean corridor, but the long-term regional order remains contingent on the military trajectory of the conflict, the durability of US and European support for Ukraine, Russia's capacity for prolonged coercion and domestic political change within regional states. A plausible scenario is not a clean return to pre-2022 stability but a prolonged period of uneven deterrence, selective cooperation and persistent hybrid pressure. Future research could test the argument more systematically by combining public-opinion data, content analysis of disinformation narratives and closer within-case process tracing of policy decisions before and after key escalation moments.

Bibliography

Books

1. George, Alexander L.; Bennett, Andrew, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005
2. Groh, Tyrone L., *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2019
3. Moghadam, Assaf; Vladimir Rauta; Michel Wyss, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2023
4. Mumford, Andrew, *Proxy War*, In *A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018
5. Watts, Stephen; Frederick, Bryan A.; Chandler, Nathan; Toukan, Mark; Curriden, Christian; Mueller, Erik E.; Geist, Edward et al., *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2023

Studies and Articles

1. Bieber, Florian, *Serbia's Staged Balancing Act*, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, August 10, 2023
2. Göransson, Markus Balázs, *The Hungarian Government's Rhetoric on Russia's Large-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, European Security, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2468943>
3. Hosaka, Sanshiro, *Ukraine's Agency in Japanese Discourse*, Journal of Regional Security, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs18-41778>
4. Kaniok, Petr; Vít, Hloušek, *Visegrad Four as an Institution in Times of EU Crises*, European Politics and Society, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2488815>
5. Kasekamp, Andres, *NATO's Greatest Test: Baltic Security in Trump's Shadow*, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, May 21, 2025
6. Kolarski, Ljiljana, *The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans*, Politika Nacionalne Bezbednosti, No. 2, 2022
7. Kramer, Mark, *The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia*, The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2009
8. Lyrstis, Minas, *Forging a Strategic Axis: The Deepening Partnership between Greece and Saudi Arabia*, HAPSC Policy Brief Series, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.43206>
9. Muradov, Ibrahim, *Disrupting the Narrative*, Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2465569>
10. Webber, Stephen, *No, Ukraine Is Not Fighting a 'Proxy War'*, RAND Corporation, April 30, 2025

Documents, Policy Papers and Reports

1. Al Jazeera, *No Other Option: Excerpts of Putin's Speech Declaring War*, Al Jazeera, February 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>
2. Bendiek, Annegret; Bund, Jakob; Kerttunen, Mika, *The Attribution Dividend*, SWP, October 9, 2024, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C46_CyberAttacks.pdf
3. Congress.gov, *Russia's War against Ukraine: European Union Responses and U.S.-EU Relations*, CRS Product IN11897, November 1, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11897/IN11897.24.pdf
4. Curdy, Angélique, *Serbia and Its Partners: A Balancing Act*, Blue Europe, March 19, 2025, <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/short-analysis/serbia-and-its-partners-a-balancing-act/>
5. Odarchenko, Kateryna; Davlikanova, Elena, *Russia's Evolving Information War Poses a Growing Threat to the West*, Atlantic Council, November 26, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-evolving-information-war-poses-a-growing-threat-to-the-west/>
6. Edgington, Tom; Eardley, Nick, *How Much Has the US Given to Ukraine?*, BBC News, December 8, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crew8y7pwd5o>
7. EBSCO Information Services, *Warsaw Pact*, Research Starters, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/warsaw-pact>
8. EUvsDisinfo, *The Myth That Won't Die: Blaming NATO for Russia's War*, 2025, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-myth-that-wont-die-blaming-nato-for-russias-war/>

9. Fedyk, Anastassia; Hodson, James, *The Cost of US Aid to Ukraine Is Less than Half the Official Figures*, CEPR, March 6, 2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/new-analysis-economists-ukraine-cost-us-aid-ukraine-less-half-official-figures>
10. Felbermayr, Gabriel; Kariem, Heider; Kirilakha, Aleksandra; Kwon, Ohyun; Syropoulos, Constantinos; Yalcin, Erdal; Yotov, Yoto, *On the Effectiveness of the Sanctions on Russia*, CEPR, March 12, 2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/effectiveness-sanctions-russia-new-data-and-new-evidence>
11. Jones, Seth G.; Daniels, Seamus P., *Deterring Russia: U.S. Military Posture in Europe*, CSIS, January 27, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/deterring-russia-us-military-posture-europe>
12. Kvasha, Kateryna, *Security, Europe! Poland's Rise as NATO's Defence Spending Leader*, Wilson Center, March 6, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/security-europe-polands-rise-natos-defense-spending-leader>
13. Kumleben, Nick; Luck, Philip; Palazzi, Andrea Leonard, *Back & Forth 3: Do Sanctions Work?*, CSIS, March 19, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/back-forth-3-do-sanctions-work>
14. Maksak, Hennadiy, *V4 in Challenging Times of War*, GLOBSEC, February 9, 2023, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/v4-challenging-times-war-how-preserve-assistance-ukraine>
15. Mankoff, Jeffrey, *Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, April 22, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>
16. Marghelis, Aris, *The Port of Alexandroupolis: A Strategic and Geopolitical Assessment*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, August 1, 2024, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/port-alexandroupolis-strategic-and-geopolitical-assessment-2024>
17. Maschmeyer, Lennart, *Cyber Conflict and Subversion in the Russia-Ukraine War*, Lawfare, June 11, 2024, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/cyber-conflict-in-the-russia-ukraine-war>
18. Mendiguren, Lorea, *What Does Putin Want?*, Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program, August 8, 2022, <https://hnmcp.law.harvard.edu/hnmcp/blog/what-does-putin-want-assessing-interests-in-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>
19. Metodieva, Asya, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans*, German Marshall Fund, 2019, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Narrative%20Proxies%20in%20Balkans.pdf>
20. Mukhina, Olena, *Romania Boosts Defence Spending*, Euromaidan Press, March 29, 2025, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/03/29/romania-boosts-defense-spending-maintains-ukraines-aid-after-security-council-meeting/>
21. NATO, *Strengthening NATO's eastern flank*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank>
22. Robert Lansing Institute, *Viktor Orbán's Russian Alignment*, May 20, 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/05/20/viktor-orbans-russian-alignment-a-threat-from-within-the-european-union/>

23. Šefčíková, Kristína, *Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine*, Prague Security Studies Institute, March 2023, https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10391_hostile-narrative-a-case-study-of-slovakia.pdf
24. Shultz, Daniel; Jasparro, Christopher, *How Does Russia Exploit History and Cultural Heritage for Information Warfare?*, Antiquities Coalition, April 1, 2022, <https://acthinktank.scholasticahq.com/article/118601-how-does-russia-exploit-history-and-cultural-heritage-for-information-warfare-recommendations-for-nato>
25. SIPRI, *Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditure*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>
26. SCEEUS, *Russia's Hybrid War Against Moldova*, 2024, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeuus/2024-publications/russias-hybrid-war-against-moldova.pdf>
27. Trifonova, Gloria; Malinov, Svetoslav, *Operation 'Disinformation' in Bulgaria*, Centre for the Study of Democracy, November 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/operation-disinformation/>
28. U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine*, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, March 12, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine>
29. Učeň, Peter, *The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia*, ECPS, March 4, 2023, <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-russia-ukraine-war-and-the-radicalization-of-political-discourse-in-slovakia/>