UKRAINE THROUGH A BALTIC LENS:
REGIONAL NETWORKS OF MEANINGS

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Abstract: Informed by the third-level agenda setting model, also known as the Network Agenda Setting Model, this article contributes to our understanding of the dynamic between meanings by the leading national media and young opinion-influencers (media professionals and civil society members with public profiles) in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In focus are their meanings of Ukraine and its relations with the three Baltic countries and the EU. Our main findings—bifurcated meanings building "storylines" about Ukraine in the Baltic region—raise the possibility that as the EU Baltic states become further embedded in the EU and as the next generation of leaders emerges, the resulting narratives will become more fractured and contested.

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The EU's Global Strategy[1]—its leading political communication docu-
ment on the priorities of its foreign policy—signals a special place for
its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods in the EU's security architec-
ture. In this context, Ukraine remains an urgent unresolved case. Russia's
ongoing aggression against Ukraine means there is an unstable and large
country of 47 million people on the EU's eastern border. It also means
complicated and fractured relations with Russia, once the EU's major stra-
tegic geopolitical and trading partner, and an internally divided EU. The
relevant literature[2] reflects on how some EU member states firmly oppose
Russian aggression and repeatedly call for resolute EU action against
Russia. Other EU states, meanwhile, seek hidden or open alliances with
Russia despite the conflict, which has resulted in 14,000 Ukrainian casual-
ties as of 2020.[3] While earlier attempts by some EU member states to lobby
for closer relations with Russia post-Crimea were more clandestine,[4] recent
years have witnessed a number of more open moves—including by major
EU actors. Nord Stream 2 (a German-led project to provide Europe with
gas while bypassing Ukraine) was ratified. The most recent period has also
seen the warming of—and an increase in—interactions between French
leader Emmanuel Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin as part
of Macron's vision of a "trust-building dialogue" with Russia's leader.[5] In
March 2021, German Chancellor Merkel and Macron held a video confer-
ence with Putin to discuss, among other issues, the situation in Eastern
Ukraine—in the absence of Ukraine and behind its back, over the oppo-
sition of Ukrainian diplomats.[6] Yet a number of EU states—specifically

[1] European Union. 2016. "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global
Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy," At http://eeas.europa.eu/
archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf, accessed September 23, 2019.

[2] See Mai'a K. Davis Cross and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski. 2017. "What Type of Power
Has the EU Exercised in the Ukraine–Russia Crisis? A Framework of Analysis." *Journal of
Common Market Studies* 55:1: 3–19. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12442.

[3] Robyn Dixon and Natalie Gryvnyak. "Ukraine's Zelensky Wants to End a War in the
East. His Problem: No One Agrees How to Do It." *Washington Post*. March 20, 2020,
At https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelensky-wants-to-end-a-war-
in-the-east-his-problem-no-one-agrees-how-to-do-it/2020/03/19/ae653cbc-6399-11ea-8a8e-
5c5336b32760_story.html, accessed December 16, 2020.

[4] Mitchell A. Orenstein and R. Daniel Kelemen. 2016. "Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy."
Journal of Common Market Studies 55: 1: 87–102.

[5] Anne-Sylvaine Chassany. "Macron's Rapprochement with Putin Is Not Worth It." *Finan-
cial Times*. October 1, 2020, At https://www.ft.com/content/168243c2-bac4-404c-843a-
ca1f61196049, accessed December 16, 2020.

[6] Communiqué. 2021. "Call between the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Ma-
cron, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel, and the President
of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin." Élysée Palace, March 30, At
  https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/news/article/communique-call-be-
tween-the-president-of-the-french-republic-emmanuel-macron; Peter Dickinson. 2021. "Pu-
tin Plots Ukraine Peace Talks without Ukraine," At
  https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-plots-ukraine-peace-talks-without-

Sweden, Poland, and the three Baltic states—continue to call for European unity in the face of Russian aggression, support Ukraine in its fight against Russia, and advocate for Ukraine's future in the EU. The findings of this paper further complicate the picture: in one key piece of the picture, the Baltics, we find that meanings assigned by young future agenda-setters to Ukraine and its European aspirations/relations reflect growing detachment between their own states and Ukraine. These perceptions resonate with bifurcated meanings building "storylines" about Ukraine in the Baltic region, raising the possibility that as these states become further embedded in the EU and as the next generation of leaders emerges, the resulting narratives will become more fractured and contested.

We draw upon a new theoretical model of third-level agenda setting,[7] also known as the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) Model,[8] to understand the dynamic between meanings expressed by the leading national media ("what is public") and young multipliers and influencers, who are media professionals and civil society members with public profiles ("what is in the heads"). The NAS Model was developed to understand evolving public sphere contexts with no strong agenda-setting effect within Western liberal media environments. The three Baltic states offer an excellent testing ground to explore "the *association* and *relationship* among different agenda items and measures how the overall object or attribute structure presented in the news influences the public's cognitive picture."[9] In our research, we examine the parallels and resonances between media "storylines" (meanings that are already setting the public agenda) and the perceptions of multipliers and influencers (meanings that have the potential to shape the public agenda). Given the Baltic media's reliance on international and regional wire services for news content on Ukraine (discussed below), media framing occurs not exclusively within the nation state, but rather through a network of *regionally* shared patterns and meanings. This builds on Entman and Usher's[10] notion that media frames do not move exclusively or linearly in national systems. It also adds to the NAS model, as those testing this model have heretofore not considered a regional dynamic in the third level of agenda-setting. Finally, we contribute to the emerging

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[7] Maxwell McCombs. 2014. *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

[8] H. Denis Wu and Lei Guo. 2020. "Beyond Salience Transmission: Linking Agenda Networks Between Media and Voters." *Communication Research* 47: 7: 1010–1033.

[9] Lei Guo. 2013. "Toward the Third Level of Agenda Setting Theory: A Network Agenda Setting Model." In Thomas J. Johnson, ed., *Agenda Setting in a 2.0 World: New Agendas in Communication*. New York: Routledge, 112-133 (cited in Wu and Guo, "Beyond Salience Transmission," 1011).

[10] Robert M. Entman and Nikki Usher. 2018. "Framing in a Fractured Democracy: Impacts of Digital Technology on Ideology, Power and Cascading Network Activation." *Journal of Communication* 68: 2: 298-308.

tradition that engages with the NAS model in studies of post-Soviet and/ or European media systems.[11]

We further propose novel inter-disciplinary synergies that aim to explain an emerging network of meanings that are currently setting the public agenda and will do so in the future. Addressing the need to study the "mental mapping" of complex political realities specified in the intro-ductory article, we assess cognitive, evaluative, and affective elements of the meanings behind the images of *Self* (three Baltic states) and *Other* (Ukraine) and their interactions (psychology studies theory by Hopmann),[12] and translate these into the characteristics of frames with high impact (communication studies theory by Entman):[13] visibility and magnitude, local cultural resonance, and emotive charge. We argue that the compar-ative matrix between cognitive, emotive, and evaluative *Self*-images vis-à-vis respective images of the *Other* and the subsequent framing of this comparison results in "storylines" of power, opportunity, and affinity that the *Other* presents to the *Self* (International Relations [IR] theory by Herrmann)[14] in the media and among the multipliers and influencers. We trace how these "storylines" about Ukraine build on the constellations of meanings of perceived capability, opportunity, and affinity.

We engage with a scholarly debate on the Baltic states as a "reliable" European "periphery" but never the "core"[15] and a rich literature that argues that the three states share an identity of "liminal Europeanness"[16] (i.e. "Europe but not Europe" that is "ever becoming European," an identity also found in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries). In this light, we explore how the "storylines" emerging from the networks of meanings created by agenda-setting media and multipliers and influencers in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania may use the case of Ukraine to add to the Baltic states' arsenal of "strategies to move out of the liminal

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[11] See, for example, Anastasia Kazun and Anton Kazun. 2019. "How State-Controlled Media Can Set the Agenda on the Internet: Coverage of Three Tragedies on Different Types of Russian Media." *Demokratizatsiya* 27: 3: 371-98.

[12] P. Terrence Hopmann. 1996. *The Negotiation Process and the Resolution of International Conflicts*. Colombia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

[13] Robert M. Entman. 2003. "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11." *Political Communication* 20: 4: 415–432.

[14] Richard K. Herrmann. 2013. "Perceptions and Image Theory in International Relations." In Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology.* New York: Oxford University Press, 334-363.

[15] Dovile Jakniunaite. 2020. "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States." In Alexander Filip-pov, Nicolas Hayoz and Jens Herlth, eds., *Centres and Peripheries in the Post-Soviet Space: Relevance and Meanings of a Classical Distinction*. Bern: Peter Lang.

[16] Viatcheslav Morozov. 2011. "Book Review. Reviewed Work: *Russia's European Agenda and the Baltic States. (Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series)* by Janina Šleivyté." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42: 2 (June): 305–307. See also Alexander Filippov, Nicolas Hayoz, and Jens Herlth, eds. 2020, *Centres and Peripheries in the Post-Soviet Space: Relevance and Meanings of a Classical Distinction*. Bern: Peter Lang.

condition."[17] We hypothesize four narratives that can be used strategically to move the identity debate in each Baltic state away from liminal and peripheral self-visions. In all hypothesized narratives, Ukraine—the Baltic states' Other—is a vantage point for narratives of the *Self*.[18]

> H1: Ukraine is used as a vantage point to re-affirm the unwavering trajectory of the Baltic states toward the European political and economic "core" and away from the "unreliable periphery" where Ukraine currently is (whether due to bad historical/political choices or its slow progress).

> H2: Ukraine is used as a reference point to underline that the Baltic states are approaching the EU's "core" by being Euro-enthusiastic members of the EU and NATO integration projects that are able to extend a helping hand to a "periphery" (in this case Ukraine) that is even more trapped between West and East than the three Baltic states.

> H3: Ukraine is used as a reference point to present the three Baltic states as already being part of the European "core"—at least in the area of security, where these states can contribute to Europe's security architecture and the EU's common foreign policy in a major and unique way as experts on Russia and threats emanating therefrom.

> H4: Ukraine is used as a reference point to present the three Baltic states as a "new core" for "peripheries" in

[17] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States." See also Vineta Kleinberga and Elizabete Vizgunova. 2021. "Strategic Alignment: Latvian Media Narratives on Russia in the Context of Post-Maidan Ukraine." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, forthcoming; Vineta Kleinberga. 2020. "On Its Path to Become 'North European': Political Climate Change Narrative in Latvia." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 12: 3: 24-34; Pauline S. Heinrichs. 2021. "Agency and the Strategic Negotiation of Futures: Evidence from Latvia." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, forthcoming; Gintaras **Šumskas**. 2021. "Portraying Russia on Lithuanian Internet Media: The Supply and Demand Side." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, forthcoming; Maili Vilson. 2020. "Framing the EU and the Green Deal: A Balancing Act of the Estonian Government." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 12: 3: 35-46.
[18] See also Heinrichs and Sabatovych in this issue.

the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, on the grounds
that they are "models/examples" of successful post-
Soviet transformation.

Consideration of these four strategic "storylines" contributes to the concep-
tualization of an *identity narrative*—a level within the strategic narrative
theory that informs this Special Issue.[19] We define strategic narrative as a
"tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations,
and change the discursive environments in which they operate."[20] Through
strategic narratives, a political actor seeks to be an actor "other nations
listen to, rely on and emulate out of respect and admiration."[21] Strategic
narratives are not "things given" but "processes ensuing": making Ukraine
a reference point for the Baltic agenda-setters allows them to shift from
current *identity narratives* dominated by self-visions of liminality and
periphery toward *identity narratives* that steadily approach the European
"core" (or are even already in the "core"). After all, the strategic narrative
definition of this level is: "identities of actors in international affairs that
are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation."[22] The NAS
Model helps us argue that the resonance between the two types of mean-
ings—those already setting the public agenda and those multipliers and
influencers with prospects of shaping it—has strong potential to either
change existing strategic narratives, specifically on the *identity level* of the
model, or to support and reinforce them. As such, we ask:

> 1. What "storylines" appear in the Baltic news media about
> Ukraine in terms of Ukraine's perceived capability, opportu-
> nity, and affinity?
> 2. Are these "storylines" country-specific? Or is there the
> potential for shared, regional "storylines"?
> 3. Do the meanings conveyed by media "storylines" resonate
> with the opinions of young multipliers and influencers?
> 4. What do resonances and clashes between agenda-setting
> discourses and young agenda-setters mean for the formulation
> and projection of a strategic narrative on the *identity level* in
> these countries and the region and for these countries' relations

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[19] Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives,
Communication Power, and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.
[20] Ibid., 2.
[21] Anne-Marie Slaughter. 2011. "Preface." In Wayne Porter and Mark Mykleby, eds., *A
National Strategic Narrative*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for
Scholars, 2-4, At http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/A%20National%20Strate-
gic%20Narrative.pdf, 4.
[22] Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives, Communication Power, and
the New World Order*, 7.

with Ukraine?

The paper starts by detailing our theoretical framework and the resulting operationalizations. We elaborate the four hypothesized narratives before moving to methodology and analysis of frames and media "storylines" about Ukraine—broken out into political, economic, and social issue-areas—that appear in news media texts and the opinions of young multipliers and influencers in the Baltic region. We conclude with a discussion in which we revisit our analytical framework and discuss our main findings. We examine what a contradictory image of Ukraine in both sets of agenda-setting meanings means for strategic *identity narratives* as well as for Ukraine-Baltic and Ukraine-EU relations in an increasingly fragmented EU foreign policy. We also discuss similarities between the networks of meanings found in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, a finding that allows us to conclude with an argument for a possible *regional* network of meanings surpassing national networks. Finally, we outline future research directions, including inviting other scholars to assess narratives of Ukraine in other EU member states and regions to see to what extent they are different or cohesive.

Theoretical Framework

We contribute to a deeper understanding of strategic narratives—and specifically to their *dynamic* character as process and scope of conditions for change. This study also engages with the latest development in the communication field: third-level agenda setting theory,[23] known as the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) Model.[24] According to Guo, while "[t]raditional agenda-setting research focuses on the transfer of salience of *individual* objects or attributes that describe a given object, the NAS model turns the attention to the *interrelationships* between different elements constructed in the media and those in the public's minds."[25] It focuses on the "*association* and *relationship* among different agenda items" and assesses "how the overall object or attribute structure presented in the news influences the public's cognitive picture."[26] Linking to the cognitive science position that "humans' mental representation resemble a network-like structure,"[27] the NAS Model asserts that "the ways in which the news media associate different agendas will affect how the public associates these agendas as well." Additionally, "the salience of issues or attributes

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[23] McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*.

[24] Wu and Guo, "Beyond Salience Transmission."

[25] Guo, "Toward the Third Level of Agenda Setting Theory."

[26] Wu and Guo, "Beyond Salience Transmission," 1011.

[27] John R. Anderson. 1983. "A Spreading Activation Theory of Memory." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 22: 3: 261-295.

can also be transferred from the public to the media in interactive media environments."[28]

Adding to the NAS Model, we apply it to understand meaning interactions in a specific region of Europe: the three EU Baltic states. Specifically, we trace how the news media in these democratic, open Western media environments[29] "bundle sets of objects or attributes"[30] into "storylines" about Ukraine and its relations with Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the EU (meanings that currently set the public agenda). We also track whether these "storylines" are salient in the minds of particular members of the public. We focus on those who can set agendas themselves (media professionals and civil society representatives), often in interactive media environments (i.e., with the potential to shape the public agenda). This theoretical position adds to the conceptual toolbox of the NAS Model, providing a novel link to strategic narrative theory. It helps to identify "bundles" of meanings that form coherent "storylines" with the potential to reinforce or contest existing strategic narratives by "proving underlying connections and making them salient to the audience."[31] The potential for a change of strategic narrative increases when the salience of issues and attributes linked in a particular way in media "storylines" resonates with the salience of issues and attributes linked in the same way among members of the public who are agenda-setters. Our focus is a specific level of strategic narrative conceptualization: the identity level.

In both cases of our analysis—meanings that are already public and setting agendas through the media, as well as meanings behind perceptions among multipliers and influencers—we consider the combination of cognitive, normative, and emotive image elements (political psychology concepts).[32] Importantly, this combination has also been adopted by the image theory of IR.[33] In this article, we define image as a "reference to some aspects of the world, which contains within its own structure and in terms of its own structure a reference to the act of cognition that generated it. It must say, not that the world is like this, but that it was recognized

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[28] Sharon Meraz. 2011. "Using Time Series Analysis to Measure Intermedia Agenda-Setting Influence in Traditional Media and Political Blog Networks." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 88: 1: 176-194.

[29] See Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Roger Blum. 2005. "Bausteine zu einer Theorie der Mediensysteme." *Medienwissenschaft Schweiz* 16: 2: 5-11.

[30] Luo Guo, Hong Tien Vu, and Maxwell McCombs. 2012. "An Expanded Perspective on Agenda-Setting Effects: Exploring the Third Level of Agenda Setting." *Revista de Comunicación* 11: 51-68.

[31] Wu and Guo, "Beyond Salience Transmission," 1012.

[32] Hopmann, *The Negotiation Process and the Resolution of International Conflicts.*

[33] Kenneth E. Boulding. 1956. *The Image*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; Kenneth E. Boulding. 1959. "National Images and International Systems." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3: 2: 120–31.

to have been like this by the image-maker.”[34] We engage with the images elements specifically through this lens of their importance to the flow of international political communication. Images may be *evaluative* (beliefs about good and bad); *affective* (emotion-based feelings of like and dislike toward others); or *cognitive* (beliefs about the world and those occupying it).[35] We further engage with Kotsopulous,[36] who proposes to link *cognitive* images to “images of adversary,” “self-images,” and “images of situation” (quoting Jönsson’s IR negotiation theory.[37] In our case study, Ukraine is not an “adversary” to the Baltics. As such, our theorization puts forward a slightly different conceptual paradigm for the *cognitive* element of images: a) self-images of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; b) images of the *Other* (Ukraine) in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; and c) images of the situation involving the Other (Ukraine) exclusively or *Self-Other* interactions, including the historical memory of this interaction.[38]

Engaging with the scholarship studying political communication focused on foreign policy, and specifically with the theorization of framing foreign policy-related information flows, we follow Entman, who defines frames as “selection of some aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.”[39] Of specific interest to us is a set of characteristics that assist in making a framing of a foreign policy actor or event more impactful. Following Entman, we explore framing of Ukraine in terms of *magnitude and visibility*, *local cultural resonance*, and *emotive charge*[40] to track meanings that are already “public.” We argue that by analyzing *visibility and magnitude,* we may get an insight into which *cognitive* elements of Ukraine’s images were selected for communication. In our analysis, we will assess the visibility of particular representations of Ukraine (*Other* for the Baltic states), Baltic states in relation to Ukraine *(Self)*, and the situation around Ukraine (either around Ukraine exclusively, or around Ukraine’s relations with the Baltic states, the EU or the world).

[34] Harold Cohen. n.d. “What Is an Image?,” At http://aaronshome.com/aaron/publications/whatisanimage.pdf, accessed June 30, 2021.

[35] Hopmann, *The Negotiation Process and the Resolution of International Conflicts.*

[36] John Kotsopulous. 2020. “South African Perceptions of the EU and UK after Brexit.” In Natalia Chaban, Arne Niemann, and Johanna Speyer, eds., *Changing Perceptions of the EU at Times of Brexit: Global Perspectives*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 17.

[37] Christer Jönsson. 1990. *Communication in International Bargaining.* London: Pinter, 145-147.

[38] See also Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska, and Michèle Knodt. 2019. “Frames and Narratives: Conceptualizing Cultural Congruence.” Paper presented at International Studies Association (ISA), Toronto, Canada, March 27-30, At https://jeanmonnet.nz/rcx-eu/dissemination-activities/jm-chair-conferences, accessed December 16, 2020.

[39] Robert Entman. 1993. “Framing: Towards the Understanding of the Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication* 43: 4: 51–58.

[40] Entman, “Cascading Activation.”

The category of *local cultural resonance* is linked to the representations of interactions between each of the three Baltic states (*Self*) and Ukraine (*Other*). But perhaps more importantly, we link this category to the *evaluative* image component by considering representations of the resonance (or dissonance) of Ukraine's norms and values with the norms and values possessed by the Baltic states. Finally, the framing category of *emotive charge* is direcly linked to the *emotive* image element. Media representations of Ukraine (the *Other*), the Baltic *Self* (in relation to the Other), and their interactions communicate certain emotions further shaping the image of Ukraine.

Arguably, *cognitive*, *emotive*, and *evaluative* self-images vis-à-vis *cognitive*, *emotive*, and *evaluative* images assigned by the *Self* to the *Other* create a matrix of comparisons. In this matrix, the *Other* could be presented as being stronger (or weaker) than the *Self*, offering opportunities (or threats) to the *Self,* and being superior (or inferior) to the *Self* (following IR's image theory paradigm)[41] (see Table 1). Importantly, to justify relative capability, opportunity, and status, historical insight is often needed, whether on a short-, medium-, or long-term scale. Such a perspective allows storylines of power, interest and affinity of *Other* vis-à-vis *Self* to appear. We argue that these "storylines" are not yet strategic narratives. The "storylines" of power, interest, and affinity can feed into existing strategic narratives, either reinforcing them or contributing to the creation of new ones and (con)testing their viability.

In this research, the agenda-setting "storylines" with reference to Ukraine (the *Other*) are not interpreted as determining how meaning is made in news discourse, by elite actors, or by members of the public. Given that these are open, pluralist societies, such "storylines" can only be interpreted as constituting one possible strategy (albeit a major one) for shifting the *identity narratives* of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from "eternally liminal reliable periphery" to "belonging to the core." Moreover, in these open societies, such "storylines" may well carry elements that either support the main strategic narrative formulations and projections by state-level communicators, particularly in the foreign policy/international relations domain, or undermine them (see Table 1).

There remains the major question of whether a network of meanings can be asserted here given the porousness of modern-day media systems. Building on Entman and Usher's[42] argument that media frames do not move exclusively in national systems, we will test whether there is evidence for a bounded *regional* network of meanings that can "shift" the shared identity narratives from being a "reliable liminal periphery" of Europe to steadily approaching the European "core" and even being

41 See Hermann, "Perceptions and Image Theory in International Relations."
42 Entman and Usher, "Framing in a Fractured Democracy."

already at the "center." We hope to add an innovative conceptualization to the NAS Model that specifically explores geopolitically cohesive regions (in our case, post-Soviet EU member states on the shores of the Baltic Sea).

Table 1. Summary of Theoretical Positions

"In our heads" (meanings that have the potential to shape the public agenda)	**Characteristics of the mental image** Theory by Hopmann, 1996 psychology	**Cognitive** Image of Self (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) Image of Other (Ukraine) Image of Situation (about Ukraine exclusively or about Ukraine's relations with a Baltic state, the EU, or the world)	**Evaluative** ("what is good, what is bad") European norms of peace, democracy, rule of law, good governance, human rights, solidarity, equality, sustainability	**Affective** (emotions) Positive Negative Mixed
"What is public" (meanings that are setting the public agenda)	**Characteristics of the frame** Theory by Entman, 2003 communication studies	**Visibility/ magnitude** Of Self Of Other Of situation	**Local resonance** Of interactions between Self and Other Of norms of the Other vs. norms of Self	**Emotive charge** Positive, negative, neutral, or mixed portrayals of the Other and of the Self in relation to the Other
STORYLINES	**Characteristic of the image in IR discourse** Theory by Herrmann, 2013 IR	Story of power/capability (strong or weak) Story of interest/opportunity (benefit or threat) Story of affinity/status (superior or inferior) - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - All unfolding in time		
Strategic narratives		*Identity level* of strategic narrative and its potential change		

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research and preexisting scholarship.

EU Baltic States and Ukraine: Contexts and Narratives

The Baltic states are a special case within the EU, as they are the only former Soviet republics in the EU. There is a broad—political, academic, and public—discussion concerning each of the three Baltic states' narratives of identity in the context of post-Soviet transformation and accession

to/membership in the EU. Systematic review of this vast scholarly discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, yet the relevant literature, while acknowledging country-specific differences between the three countries, points to one common outlook: the "never-ending becoming" (fully) European, also known as the continuous liminality of the Baltic countries (as well as the Central and Eastern European countries) within the EU. This shared identity outlook of "liminal Europeanness"[43]—a historical legacy of the Western European Enlightenment, which invented and juxtaposed Western (superior) and Eastern (inferior) Europe—occurs against a background of similar experiences in the Soviet past; drastic political, normative, and socio-economic transformations after the collapse of the USSR; and simultaneous accession to the EU in 2004. These striking historical similarities are reinforced by parallels in the small size of these countries, their strategic geopolitical location on the shores of the Baltic Sea, uneasy relations with the Russian Federation as a regional "hegemon" and a factor in Baltic security, and the presence of Russian-speaking minorities who stayed in those countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union—with larger groups in Latvia (33.8%) and Estonia (29.8%), and a smaller group in Lithuania (8%).[44] Our study adds to the debate on the three Baltic states' "strategies to move out of the liminal condition."[45] Specifically, we "audition" Ukraine as a critical reference-point by which each Baltic state might forge its respective post-liminal *identity narrative* in their quests "to find the settled relation with the European core and distance themselves from Russia, the constant threat in their security imaginaries."[46] The most recent literature in the field argues that in the "process of finding the space and place in Europe and regarding Russia," the current ambition of the three Baltic states is to create "representations of the reliable peripheries which are able to actively shape their subject position and formulate their own initiatives and ideas though never ever trying to become what they cannot—the centre."[47] In our study, we argue that the case of Ukraine offers a strategic opportunity for the three Baltic states to move their identity narratives from "belonging to a reliable periphery" to "being closer to the core," or even "being in the core." We hypothesize

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[43] Morozov, "Book Review." See also Filippov, Hayoz and Herlth, *Centres and Peripheries in the Post-Soviet Space*.

[44] CIA World Factbook, At https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/, accessed June 30, 2021.

[45] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States." See also Kleinberga and Vizgunova, "Strategic Alignment: Latvian Media Narratives on Russia in the Context of Post-Maidan Ukraine"; Kleinberga, "On Its Path to Become "North European": Political Climate Change Narrative in Latvia"; Heinrichs, "Agency and the Strategic Negotiation of Futures: Evidence from Latvia"; **Šumskas**, "Portraying Russia on Lithuanian Internet Media: The Supply and Demand Side"; Vilson, "Framing the EU and the Green Deal: A Balancing Act of the Estonian Government."

[46] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States".

[47] Ibid.

four shared identity narratives circulating in the public opinion-making discourses in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in this regard.

Hypothesis 1: As part of the EU, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are developed economies with favorable rankings on human development, civil liberties, press freedom, and other markers of successful Western democratic societies. Estonia, in particular, is notable for its technologically advanced economy with free education and universal healthcare for its citizens. As argued by a voluminous literature since the 1990s, the three Baltic states are taking on board the narrative of belonging to "Nordic" Europe (stereotypically associated with the image of strong liberal democracies) while attempting to move away from being labelled as "Central" and/or "Eastern" Europe. In contrast, Ukraine is not a full member of the EU and has struggled to disentangle itself from Russia, as evidenced by the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Ukraine has also faced endemic government corruption and is one of the poorest countries in Europe.[48] It could be argued that Ukraine and its near neighbors have taken divergent paths, with the Baltic states "returning to Europe" (even if only to its periphery) in normative, political, and economic terms while Ukraine finds itself "not yet fully in Europe" due to bad decisions, flawed governance, or unfortunate circumstances at key historical intersections. Alternatively, one could argue that Ukraine is simply at a different point on the same path, as some of the critical juncture narratives in this Special Issue contend.[49] We hypothesize that, in this context, the three Baltic states' public discourses in the domain of strategic messaging (including news media) may reference Ukraine as a vantage point to reaffirm these states' own firm trajectory toward the European normative, political, and economic "core" and away from the "unreliable periphery" in which Ukraine currently finds itself.

Hypothesis 2: The three Baltic states have forged a distinct image within the EU as active and Euro-enthusiastic nations. Arguably, this position is part of their strategy to settle relations with the European core[50] and signal a move closer to the "core" of the EU, as well as to overcome their contested "Europeanness" as post-Soviet and post-socialist states caught between East and West.[51] This is in contrast to some other member states (including "old" member states from the "core" of Europe) that are now seen to either be or be becoming more Eurosceptic. In this narrative, the Baltic states see EU (and NATO) enlargement as a way to shift from

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[48] Anders Åslund. 2019. "What is Wrong with the Ukrainian Economy?" Atlantic Council, At https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-is-wrong-with-the-ukrainian-economy, accessed December 16, 2020.

[49] See Heinrichs and Sabatovych in this issue.

[50] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States."

[51] See, e.g., Maria Mälksoo. 2009. "Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space." In Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration*. London: Routledge, 65-84.

"existential politics to normal politics."[52] And while this shift is "far from being accomplished,"[53] Ukraine remains overlooked either as a candidate for EU enlargement or NATO membership. We hypothesize that agenda-setting media discourse, as well as the discourse of multipliers and influencers in the three Baltic states, may formulate a narrative about distinctly Euro-enthusiastic "Baltic voices" heard in Europe in support of Ukraine's future membership of the EU and NATO—both country-specific and resonating across the region. Such a narrative would communicate a particular strategic self-vision of each of the three states, namely that these states are approaching the European "core" by virtue of their membership of exclusive "Western clubs" and their ability to extend a helping hand to a "periphery" that is even more stuck between West and East than the three Baltic states.

Hypothesis 3: The Baltic states' vision of Russia as "the constant threat in their security imaginaries"[54] opens up yet another strategic opportunity for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to use the case of Ukraine to signal a move away from liminality and periphery. In this case, the Baltic states can contribute to Europe's security architecture and common foreign policy in a major and unique way and frame themselves as experts in Eastern European security and Russia matters, with high-level expertise and a nuanced understanding of the threat coming from their Eastern neighbor. We hypothesize that agenda-setting media discourse, as well as the discourse of multipliers and influencers in the three Baltic states, will use Ukraine as a reference to frame state identity in this light.

Hypothesis 4: With their first-hand experience of "being framed as simultaneously in Europe and not quite European,"[55] the Baltic states have arguably succeeded in creating for themselves the image of a "reliable periphery" for Europe.[56] Meanwhile, volatile Ukraine—another Eastern European state "betwixt and between"[57] East and West and a turbulent "periphery" in Europe's self-imagination—has not achieved such status. Our final hypothesis is that agenda-setting media discourse, as well as the discourse of multipliers and influencers in the three Baltic states, will use the case of Ukraine to present the Baltic states as "models/examples" for how other European peripheries can become a "reliable" part of Europe. As such, while the three Baltic states may be "never ever the centre" of Europe,[58] they may already have turned themselves into a new "center" for

[52] Mälksoo, "From Existential Politics Towards Normal Politics? The Baltic States in the Enlarged Europe," 275.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States."

[55] Mälksoo, "From Existential Politics Towards Normal Politics? The Baltic States in the Enlarged Europe", 275

[56] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States".

[57] Turner (1969), cited in Mälksoo, "From Existential Politics Towards Normal Politics? The Baltic States in the Enlarged Europe," 275

[58] Jakniunaite, "Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States."

"peripheries" comprised of post-Soviet states like Ukraine. Such a projection would resonate well in the world of growing global multipolarity.

Method

The data for our analysis came from a transnational Jean Monnet Research Project, "Youth Opinion and Opportunities for EU Public Diplomacy: Youth Narratives and Perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine Relations in Ukraine and the Three Baltic States" (E-YOUTH).[59] The project observed daily coverage of Ukraine in the three Baltic states and compared their media framing of Ukraine to the framing of the three Baltic states and the EU in Ukrainian news media. The project also interviewed young national decision-, policy- and opinion-makers from the political, media, and civil society spheres in the three Baltic states and Ukraine. Following the UN definition of "youth," all respondents were under 33 years old.[60] The project compared their opinions of each other and examined these opinions vis-à-vis frames of Ukraine, the three Baltic states, and the EU communicated by the national media. Data collection was guided by the project's key objective of studying youth opinion and constrained by the project's budget and time available.

Media Analysis

The media systems of the three Baltic states have experienced turbulent transformations throughout their history. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the three states embarked on profound media reforms. As of 2020, the Index of Press Freedom ranked Estonia #14 in the world, Latvia #22 and Lithuania #28 out of 174 countries. As part of the Western democratic liberal media environment, media in each of the three Baltic states employ "bottom-line" policies and engage in pragmatic cost-cutting strategies. These typically include using a range of cost-effective news sources, especially when it comes to the reporting of international news. When it

[59] E-YOUTH, Jean Monnet Project, Erasmus+, European Commission, At https://jeanmonnet.nz/eyouth/2018-2020, extended to 2021 due to Covid-19. We express our gratitude to the E-YOUTH researchers who collected the media and interview datasets: Vineta Kleinberga, Elizabete Vizgunova, Dr Gintaras Šumskas, Vlad Vernygora, Dr Viktor Velivchenko, and E-YOUTH Data Manager Dr Iana Sabatovych. We are also grateful to Sam Brett for preliminary media content analysis.

[60] According to the United Nations (UN), "There is no universally agreed international definition of the youth age group." Citing "statistical purposes," the UN—"without prejudice to any other definitions made by Member States"—defines "youth" as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (see https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth). However, the UN recognizes that the "operational definition and nuances of the term 'youth' vary from country to country, depending on relative socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors." With no consensus in place, the E-YOUTH project, after considering a number of age classifications in the relevant literature, differentiated between adolescents (between the ages of 13 and 19) and young adults (between the ages of 19 and 32).

comes to the reporting of events in Ukraine, the E-YOUTH project discovered that the three Baltic states draw on a specific range of news sources. Significantly, the media environments of the three Baltic states use news agencies that are owned by companies in one of the Baltic states (Estonia), yet sell news into the other Baltic states in *their own* languages. Moreover, these news agencies have news bureaus in other Baltic states and employ local journalists. In addition to Delfi, Estonian outlets have a significant presence across all three countries through the Postimees Media Group. This group owns 15min in Lithuania, TVnet and LETA in Latvia, and Postimees in Estonia. It also owns the BNS news agency, which distributes stories across the Baltic states.

The project prioritized a particular source of media images of Ukraine in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and of the three Baltic states in Ukraine: the most popular e-news platforms (see Table 2). Given the project's aim of studying perceptions among youth, e-sources of news were chosen due their reputation as a medium more popular than traditional media among young people seeking to learn about current events. As such, the E-YOUTH project did not engage with traditional media. Social media were also outside the scope of the E-YOUTH project. In this article, we engage with the sample collected after observing coverage of Ukraine on the most popular e-news platforms in the three Baltic states: LSM.lv, Delfi. lv and Tvnet.lv in Latvia; 15min.lt, Delfi.lt and lrytas.lt in Lithuania, and Delfi.ee, Postmees.ee and err.ee in Estonia. For an article to be included in our sample, it had to reference "Ukraine" (our key search term)—but one brief reference was sufficient for inclusion.

A relatively short period of media observation—January 15 to February 15, 2019—was dictated by the project's timeline and limited budget. Still, this short period of observation featured several key political events for Ukraine and was dominated by news about the upcoming presidential elections in Ukraine and the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict with the seizure of two Ukrainian navy vessels by the Russian military in the Sea of Azov. Both events attracted intense media attention in the three Baltic states, due not least to their leaders' immediate vociferous condemnation of Russia's capture of the Ukrainian ships and sailors. The latter also fed into the narratives of constant Russian threat to the security imaginaries of the three Baltic states and these states' status as experts on security matters in the region.

Media sources were observed daily by a team of pre-trained local researchers: one researcher in Lithuania and Estonia, respectively, and two researchers in Latvia. Training involved a three-day practice in a face-to-face format, followed by a series of webinars, a pilot of one week's media observation, a pilot debrief session, and a second three-day face-to-face training discussing the main results and fine-tuning the media dataset.

The project also had a data manager who oversaw media data analysis on a daily basis and undertook random double-coder reliability checks. In total, 471 articles—all referencing Ukraine—were studied (see Table 2).

Table 2. Media Sample

Lithuania		Estonia		Latvia	
Delfi	28	*Delfi*	55	*Delfi*	85
15min	32	*Postimees*	74	*LSM*	40
Lrytas	19	*ERR*	84	*TVnet*	54
Total	79	Total	213	Total	179

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Table 3. Degree of Centrality in Reporting on Ukraine

Lithuania (79)			Latvia (179)			Estonia (213)		
Ukr. Major Focus	Ukr. Secondary Focus	Ukr. Minor Focus	Ukr. Major Focus	Ukr. Secondary Focus	Ukr. Minor Focus	Ukr. Major Focus	Ukr. Secondary Focus	Ukr. Minor Focus
57	19	3	58	48	73	68	65	80

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Assessing the intensity of the discussion about Ukraine on the entire agenda, our analysis discovers country-specific patterns to how national e-news media platforms assign the degree of centrality to Ukraine (see Table 3).

While the Lithuanian sample is the smallest of the three considered here, it shows a strong trend toward greater intensity in reporting on Ukraine (just 3.8% of the sample reported only briefly on Ukraine). In contrast, popular e-news engines in Latvia and Estonia have more voluminous samples in the same period of observation, yet they feature less intensive representation of Ukraine, with 41% and 37.5% of the samples, respectively, referencing Ukraine only in passing.

Assessing the sources of news, Delfi almost never sourced stories from agencies. Postimees used some foreign agencies, such as AFP, in a small number of stories; it also occasionally used the Russian news agency Interfax, though never as a sole source. ERR used BNS for some of its stories, often in conjunction with foreign agencies or its own reporters.

Interviews with Opinion-Formers

Interviews with young decision-, policy- and opinion-makers from the political, media, and civil society sectors were also part of the E-YOUTH research project. As mentioned above, all interviewees had to be under 33

years old. The project budget allowed for 10 interviews per country. This article engages with perceptions among multipliers and influencers from two opinion-forming cohorts: media professionals (editors and journalists) and civil society actors (those who are active on various platforms influencing the opinions of others). In this study, we consider 17 interviews with multipliers and influencers (out of 30 total interviews in the Baltic segment of the E-YOUTH project). The choice of respondents followed their distinct profiles as multipliers and influencers in each country, as assessed by the local research teams in each country. Importantly, the final sample remains random, as some multipliers and influencers approached for interviews declined the invitation.

The interviews were conducted in the three Baltic countries by pre-trained local researchers. All interviews were face-to-face and semi-structured; all followed Human Ethics guidelines. To comply with ethics requirements, all quotations below are de-identified. The questionnaire used in Estonia, Latvia, and Latvia was identical to ensure that comparisons would be valid. Questionnaires asked respondents about their sources of news about Ukraine, as well as their perceptions of their country's relationships with Ukraine (historical and current), Ukraine's relations with the EU and its aspirations to join the Union, and the role and future of the EU and the Baltic states in regional, European, and global leadership. The responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative interpretative analysis.

Operationalizations

In our media analysis, informed by framing theory, we operationalized *visibilit*y in terms of the volume of articles (number of articles that covered Ukraine exclusively and Ukraine in the context of the three Baltic states) and degree of centrality of representation (of Ukraine and of each Baltic state). The content analysis of the media texts also coded for situation, namely the actors involved, the type of action in an issue area, location of the action, presence of the conflict, and if the conflict was reported with reference to a resolution proposed and/or a solution found.

Analysis of media and interview texts investigated how the three *cognitive* image elements—the *Self,* the *Other*, and the situation—were framed. *Local resonance* was operationalized by coding for whether or not Ukraine was reported to interact with a Baltic state. In addition, our analysis observed whether or not Ukraine was represented as upholding the norms of peace, democracy, rule of law, good governance, human rights, freedom/liberty, solidarity, equality, and sustainability. This correlated with the *evaluative* element within the image.

Emotive charge was operationalized by tracking representations

of Ukraine in the Baltic states according to a range of emotive indica-
tors: positive, positive-to-neutral, neutral, neutral-to-negative, negative,
and mixed. Language expression was the main indicator used to assess
sentiment and emotive coloring (literal and metaphoric descriptors were
examined by the pre-trained coders). Thus did we address the *affective*
element of the image.

Interpretative analysis of the frames of *Self* and *Other* (Ukraine) in
cognitive, emotive, and *evaluative* terms produced various "storylines" of
the capability (or weakness) of Ukraine, the opportunity (or threat) it pres-
ents to a given Baltic state, and its affinity for (or inferiority to) these states.

Media "Storylines"

These broad "storylines" (see Table 4) closely reflect aspects of the stra-
tegic narratives discussed above, although with significant differences of
emphasis and some distinctive patterns in each country. We make three
main points about how news media in each country framed Ukraine. First,
politics dominated, although in a complex mix of representations in which
Ukraine was alternately a victim of Russian aggression, a threat to the
security of the country, and an opportunity. Second, there was a wide range
of economic stories, but in each "storyline" the country's media tended
to be more concerned with the domestic impact than with Ukraine itself;
Ukraine was strongly refracted through a local lens. Third, the resulting
framing of Ukraine is very uncertain in all three respects in which we
analyzed the texts: cognitive, emotive, and normative. Ukraine is at once
capable and weak, an opportunity and a threat, "like us" and "not like us."

Before expanding on these points, it should be noted that there is
a continuum in the coverage. Estonian news media contain many more
stories (213) than Lithuanian media (79). Estonian media were also more
likely to use a positive tone in portraying Ukraine—the tone was positive
more than half the time, with the remaining stories mostly neutral or mixed.
Its outlets were also very likely to use local "hooks" for their stories and
more likely to represent Estonia as a major actor. By contrast, Lithuanian
news media represented Ukraine as a major actor far more than as a
secondary or minor one. Its outlets were also the most varied of the three in
terms of how they covered Ukraine, with both positive and neutral stories,
though seldom negative ones. Local hooks were much rarer, with Ukraine
represented more in its own terms. Only one outlet, 15min, mentioned
Lithuania positively more than 50% of the time, with Delfi.lt and Lrytas
being more neutral. Latvian outlets shared the Estonian tendency to frame
Ukraine more as a secondary or minor actor: Latvia was an actor in more
than half of stories from Delfi.lv and LSM and just under half of those from
TVnet. Across stories, however, the Latvian portrayal of Ukraine was the

least positive: the tone was positive more than half of the time in Delfi.
lv stories, but just under half of the time in LSM or TVnet stories. The
public service outlets in Estonia and Latvia (ERR and LSM, respectively)
both differed slightly in their coverage from private outlets in that they
were more likely to use a local hook in their stories and to cast their own
countries as major actors.

Table 4. Summary of Media Storylines Framing Ukraine in Terms of Capability, Opportunity, and Affinity

		Capability	Opportunity	Affinity
Politics	Storyline 1 *Ukraine's external affairs*	Weak	Threat to Baltic	Like us
	Storyline 2 *Ukraine's internal affairs #1*	Growing capability	Opportunity	Like us
	Storyline 3 *Ukraine's internal affairs #2*	Weak	Threat to Baltic	Lower
Economy	Storyline 4 *Ukraine's economy #1*	Weak	Threat/no opportunity	Not like us
	Storyline 5 *Ukraine's economy #2*	Growing capability	Potential opportunity	Like us
Social affairs	Storyline 6 *Ukraine's social affairs #1*	Weak	Opportunity	Not like us/ lower
	Storyline 7 *Ukraine's social affairs #2*	Capable	Opportunity	Like us/ better

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

The *political* issue-area dominated the framing of coverage in all three
countries, but as Table 4 shows, it produced three different "storylines"
in which capability, opportunity, and affinity were represented in different
ways. In stories in which Ukraine was a major actor, the political news
focused both on international relations (typically the Russia-Ukraine
conflict) and domestic news (typically Ukrainian domestic political devel-
opments). The former category of news reported on Europe's "forgotten
war" in the East of Ukraine. Other stories in this category included Russia's
capture of Ukrainian ships in the Azov Sea and various forms of Russian
aggression and propaganda surrounding Ukraine's prospects of joining
NATO. Ukraine was "like us" in these stories of Russian threat, but at the
same time a country with weak capability and framed in terms of the threat
to the Baltics, which might be next in line. This "storyline" appeared to us
to offer support for H3: the media of the three Baltic states used Ukraine
as a reference point to frame their respective countries as security field
"experts" who know Russia and can warn the rest of Europe about the
threat emanating from Russia.

Ukraine was reported on in terms of reform to its governance structures, the anniversary of the Maidan, and its aspirations to become a NATO member, but also in terms of a lack of progress in fighting corruption. Numerous reports dealt with the arms trading scandal that involved then-president Poroshenko and his colleagues; major problems with the Ukrainian Anti-Corruption Office and a statement by then-U.S. Ambassador Yovavich calling for the situation to be addressed urgently; and the discovery of secret Western bank accounts belonging to former president Yanukovich. In some of these stories, Ukraine was framed as growing in capability, providing each Baltic state with opportunity in the form of an ally that is another democratic country in the region, potentially within NATO, the main guarantor of security for the Baltic states. In these media "storylines," Ukraine is becoming more "like us" for the three Baltic states and framed in terms of affinity. Ukraine's liminal status and move "toward Europe" then validates the acquired "Europeanness" of each Baltic state, who are framed in these reports as "Euro-Enthusiastic Baltic States" (providing support for H2).

Yet in other news reports in this category, the "storyline" is clearly of a weak Ukraine that is corrupt and in need of reform and better governance. It stands as a reminder of old Soviet, non-European ways and is therefore less opportunity, more threat, and "not like us" because it is not on the same normative level. This "storyline" presents Ukraine as a particular reference for each Baltic state: they are already "in Europe," as they have different (better) norms than Ukraine (providing support for H1), and Ukraine can learn from each state in this regard (providing support for H4). Political reporting during the period was not reducible to a coherent view of Ukraine but produced different "storylines" in which capability, opportunity, and affinity varied and in which strategic narratives were accessed in quite different ways.

Reporting on *economic and social* issues was also varied but was both less prominent and more often framed in terms of each Baltic country than in terms of Ukraine. There were, for example, multiple reports on a Latvian bank that got into trouble due to money-laundering schemes, many of which involved Ukrainian money, as well as on a major Estonian company, Baltika, that withdrew its business from Ukraine due to low returns. Particularly in Latvia, Ukraine was extensively mentioned in the context of financial crimes, tax violations, and illegal activities around banks. Ukraine frequently emerges in economic terms as a country with low capability that is a threat to Baltic business and has low affinity to Baltic liberal market values. This framing of Ukraine in secondary terms in stories on Baltic business lends support to H1—that is, Ukraine is used to craft an image of the Baltic states steadily "returning to Europe," where the norms are different from norms in Ukraine. In this "storyline," Ukraine

is lagging behind in modernizing its society, in contrast to the Baltic states.

However, Ukraine's economy did not only attract negative media attention. The three countries also paid attention to successful Ukrainian businesses, including innovative start-ups in the Baltic countries and new air routes connecting the Baltic states with Ukraine. In these Baltic-centric economic news stories, Ukraine is represented in terms of capability and the opportunity that it provides when it is aligned with the liberal market values embraced by each of the three Baltic states. This "storyline" lends support to H4, in which the Baltic states are positioned as a model or example for Ukraine.

That contrasting picture in local angles on Ukraine was reflected also in the small number of stories engaged in *social* or *cultural* reporting. In stories on Ukrainian labor migrants, Ukraine showed weak capability and was presented as "not like us," the Baltic states. However, some stories emphasized reports about skilled migrants, particularly in Lithuanian reports on individual migrants, and presented Ukraine as an opportunity for both the Baltics and Europe. This "storyline" offers support for H4, which frames the three Baltic states as a new "core" attractive to the "peripheries" constituted by the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. In stories on sport and culture (particularly in Latvia), Ukraine was framed as successful in a great number of creative areas, with most events taking place in the relevant Baltic state: classical music, jazz, music festivals, theatre, performing arts, photo exhibitions, book festivals, poetry readings, sports. Ukraine's capability, the opportunity its people represented to the Baltics, and their cultural affinity produced a quite distinct "storyline" that provided support for H1: Ukraine is a reference point for the three Baltic states in the sense that "we all belong to Europe."

In sum, media in the three Baltic states followed the same pattern in representing Ukraine: it was presented very much in relation to Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania through a distinct set of affinity/non-affinity dyads in which Ukraine was both weak and growing in capability, a threat and an opportunity. There was an almost equal split of weak vs. growing capability, opportunity vs. threat and affinity (like us vs. not like us) across both political and socio-economic topics. The resulting "storylines" that lend support to the four hypotheses can be understood not just as varied, but also as constituting an uncertain picture in cognitive, emotive, and normative terms. In each "storyline," the meanings oscillated between positive/promising and bleak/negative. Thirty years after the collapse of the USSR, the Baltic media still have not made up their minds and project deeply split, contradictory frames of Ukraine.

Perceptions among Young Multipliers and Influencers

We observed major similarities in the outlooks of the young multipliers and influencers in the three Baltic countries, all of which resonated with media "storylines." Cognitive meanings reflected a vision of each Baltic state as "European," EU-focused, Euro-enthusiastic, and with European values when elites reflected on Ukraine in the three samples. These *Self*-reflections carried strong positive evaluations. In another cognitive mapping, respondents shared a perception of Ukraine as having experienced similar historical trauma to Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. For interviewees, this shared painful experience helps the Baltic states understand Ukraine better than other EU countries (providing additional support to H3: Ukraine as a tool for stressing the "expertise" of the three Baltic states in this geopolitical region). Because of this, the three groups of respondents agreed that their respective countries should continue to help Ukraine (providing support for H2: reliable and capable Baltic states are now able to extend a helping hand to a volatile Ukraine). A cross-sample recognition of similar historical challenges did not prevent respondents from stressing a major difference in the present, namely normative divergence (a normative element of the imagery). In the eyes of young multipliers and influencers from the Baltic states, Ukraine is still "post-Soviet," with values that differ markedly from the European/Western values of peace, tolerance, and the rule of law (providing support for H1: Ukraine is used to demonstrate the Baltic states' firm move toward the European normative "core").

Mixed emotive images appeared: Ukraine's efforts to revise its normative foundations (in particular through democracy) were seen in a positive light. Yet elites saw Ukraine lagging behind in embracing European values due to the strong inertia of "Eastern"/"Oriental"/"post-Soviet" normative outlooks (providing further support for H1: Ukraine is used as a point of comparison to stress that the three Baltic states have departed Europe's periphery, where Ukraine currently is, for the European "core"). Cognitively, respondents in the three locations singled out corruption as the main divide and a major disadvantage for Ukraine's capability to succeed on the road to Europe economically and politically (providing some support for H1 as well as H4, where reference to Ukraine invites a positive self-reflection as a model/example governed by the rule of law for other post-Soviet states besieged by corruption).

Strong similarities in perceptions of Ukraine and the *Selves* across the three interview samples—in addition to the resonances across the three countries for the media "storylines" in cognitive, emotive and normative images of *Self, Other*, and *Self-Other* relations—allow us to argue for existing *shared regional* networks of meanings. In these networks, the case

of liminal Ukraine—something Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can relate to—is used as a reference point to convey a message that each Baltic state is moving toward the European "core" and away from the "periphery" where Ukraine currently is. Employing Ukraine as a reference point seems to be a shared strategy on the part of the three Baltic countries for re-shaping their identity narrative among agenda-setters. Arguably, this regionally shared strategy does not contradict the Baltic states' determination to craft individual country "brands" within the EU, the region, and the world.

We did observe some differences in how meanings were "bundled" when engagement was considered in terms of perceived capability, opportunity, and affinity. Opinions by Lithuanian and Latvian respondents were more closely aligned to each other than to visions from Estonia. Latvian and Lithuanian interviewees were more inclined to see Ukraine as promising and intriguing, with distinct opportunities in the economic and business spheres (echoing the media "storyline" 5 discussed above and providing support to H4: Ukraine is used to underline the image of these two Baltic states as a "core" in contrast to Ukraine's status as a new "reliable" periphery). Estonian respondents, meanwhile, tended to see Ukraine's economy as backward (resonating with media "storyline" 4 and thus providing support to H1: Estonia used Ukraine to solidify its self-vision as already part of the European economic "core"). Estonian respondents also stressed a need for a pragmatic attitude toward Ukraine, not to be confused with friendship (providing further support to H4: Ukraine is framed as a "periphery" rather distant from Estonia, which, guided by certain norms and principles, is at the "core"). Interviewees in the other two countries saw Ukraine as a friend, some even as a brother (the latter vision was more frequent in Lithuania) (echoing media "storyline" 7 and arguably offering further support to H3 with regard to why the Baltic states should offer a helping hand to Ukraine). Another important distinction was the visibility of and attitudes toward Ukrainian labor migrants, which is a relatively new phenomenon in interactions between the Baltics and Ukraine (providing support to H4: Ukraine is framed as a periphery not just to Europe but to the Baltic states, which emerge as a "new core"). The case of Ukrainian labor migrants highlights disparities in income, welfare, and standards of living between the three Baltic states—post-Soviet countries that became EU members—and Ukraine, which "missed the train." Estonian reflections tend to be more negative, with migrants seen as carrying *Other* values into Estonian society (resonating with media "storyline" 6 and in support of H1), whereas Lithuanian reflections noted that it is other EU countries that are pragmatically taking advantage of Ukrainian migrant labor.

Of the three, Estonian respondents were most inclined to describe Estonia as a model for other post-Soviet states, including Ukraine (providing support for H4). Historical links were not a dominant reflection. The

view that Ukraine must work hard to move toward Europe—"do it itself," like Estonia did—was frequently expressed (providing support for H1). Latvian responses stressed a vision of a forward-thinking Latvia. At the same time, the theme of liminal identity featured prominently: Latvia was described as a "bridge" between Ukraine and Europe (L1) and a "transition between Eastern and Northern Europe" (L3). This resonates with Latvia's vision of Ukraine as possessing a similar liminal status—i.e., being a "buffer" country located between two normative poles and geopolitical "heavyweights," namely Russia and the EU. It is also indicative of a certain identity confusion. Lithuanian responses highlighted a narrative of a "brave Ukraine" that is not afraid to stand up to a major aggressor. This narrative paralleled Lithuania's own *Self*-vision as a small but brave and outspoken country in the EU and the world (providing support for H2 and H3: using Ukraine to formulate a self-vision as already in the "core" of Europe and as an expert on security in the region). Lithuanian responses also stood out for their reflections on the risks of the European integration process for themselves and—should it join the EU—for Ukraine. They further noted a fading narrative of Lithuania as a friend of Ukraine (arguably providing support for H4: Ukraine serves to underline the growing "core" status of Lithuania vis-à-vis Ukraine, which is increasingly a "periphery" in relation to Lithuania rather than a periphery equal to Lithuania in relation to Europe).

Discussion

Our research found support for the four hypothesized narratives. Reflecting on these global and regional changes, opinion- and agenda-setting discourses, and interviews with multipliers and influencers with the potential to set future agendas in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia explicated an existing *shared regional* strategy to use Ukraine to trigger a particular *network of meanings*. This network is activated to modify an identity narrative of the three Baltic states—away from the image of a reliable, eternally liminal "periphery" to Europe that will never be the center to a more assertive narrative of these states approaching the European "core" and shedding "periphery" status or even already being in the "core." This is a novel characteristic of the NAS Model, which is typically nation-focused. Importantly, in evoking Ukraine as a reference point to shift identity narratives in each state, the three countries resonate with each other in producing a set of particular "storylines" that induce a split image of Ukraine among Baltic audiences. On the one hand, the three Baltic states continue to formulate cognitive, emotive, and normative meanings that demonstrate ongoing approval of Ukraine's European choice and readiness to help and support Ukraine in this choice and on its path toward Europe. On the other

hand, they share meanings that carry the potential to challenge the exist-
ing narrative of the Baltic states as unequivocal supporters and friends of
Ukraine, its European choice, and its position in the conflict with Russia.

> 1. We found deeply split "storylines" in cognitive, emotive,
> and normative terms in each thematic frame in media (politics,
> economy, social affairs) and for the categories of capability,
> opportunity, and affinity observed across thematic frames.
> The third level of agenda setting predicts this, as the model
> suggests that the "news media can actually bundle different
> objects and attributes and make these bundles of elements
> salient in the public's mind simultaneously."[61] Significantly,
> what we observe are consistent splits and thematic frames at
> the *opposite* ends for each category. This suggests uncertainty.
> Yet as our empirical analysis demonstrated, these "split"
> images of Ukraine are in place not to tell a story of Ukraine, but
> to serve as a reference in the revision of the identity narratives
> of each of the three Baltic states—i.e., moving from being a
> "reliable periphery of Europe" to being in its "core."

> 2. Our content analysis found that media framings of Ukraine
> in terms of visibility, local resonance, and emotive charge
> carried different emphases in the news in the three Baltic coun-
> tries. Yet when analyzed in terms of meanings and relations/
> associations between them, as indicated by the NAS Model,
> the three media samples revealed remarkably similar ways
> in which they combined cognitive, emotive, and normative
> meanings, i.e., "split storylines" contributing to the same
> meta-narratives of identity. As such, we argue that there is a
> shared "regional" strategy to activate the network of meanings
> in the revision of the identity narrative via agenda-setting
> discourses on popular e-news platforms.

> 3. Our comparative analysis of young multipliers' and influ-
> encers' perceptions of *Self, Other,* and *Self-Other* relations
> also highlights a number of striking similarities across the
> three countries. These were dominated by a normative image
> element. Importantly, it indicates that for the young genera-
> tion of agenda-setters, their country is already unquestionably
> European, as it lives by Western "core" norms and values,
> whereas Ukraine has not adopted these progressive norma-
> tive outlooks and clings to old values such as corruption

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[61] Guo, Vu, and McCombs, "An Expanded Perspective on Agenda-Setting Effects."

(providing support for H1). The new generation of multipliers and influencers also see their countries—and themselves—as passionately European and EU-enthusiastic (providing support for H2). At the same time, views about Ukraine as an opportunity for these states in the economic and political spheres diverged between countries.

4. We found a number of resonances in mapping and relating cognitive, emotive, and normative meanings between media "storylines" and how young multipliers and influencers from the media and civil society sectors of the three countries imagine Ukraine and its relations with the EU and their own country. These resonances constitute a scope of condition for narrative change. The interviews demonstrate that the way respondents see the *Other* (Ukraine) is ultimately about the way they see themselves: a successful model of post-Soviet transformation in Estonia, a forward-looking Latvia, and a brave Lithuania.[62] The story of the *Self* that emerged through interviews also demonstrated the "fluidity of mental borders" (a concept addressed in the Introduction to the Special Issue). Young Baltic multipliers and influencers see themselves and their countries as belonging to the EU/Europe and the generic "West" and as being firmly outside the post-Soviet space. It seems the liminal identity argued by substantial literature on the region may be less applicable to young people, who comprise the next generation of voters, decision-, opinion- and policy-makers. In contrast, Ukraine, used to re-assert the "Europeanness" of the Baltic states, is imagined as remaining within the post-Soviet/"Eastern" (if not Oriental) realm and as being not yet in the European normative space; it remains a periphery, and potentially not a very reliable one. These shared meanings of "imaginary borders" that split Ukraine and the three Baltic states into new "core" and "periphery" are potentially of concern for the future of Ukraine-Baltic state relations.[63]

5. Such images point to an emerging narrative of detachment and potentially disengagement (as captured in Lithuania, where the narrative of "being a friend to Ukraine" seems to be fading). This evolution in meanings clashes with the current official strategic narrative of the Baltic states as

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[62] See Heinrichs and Sabatovych in this issue.
[63] See also Didelon-Loiseau and Richard in this issue.

ardent supporters of Ukraine's European choice who side with Ukraine in its conflict with Russia and advocate for and champion Ukraine's accession to the EU. Thirty years after the collapse of the USSR, the media and the new generation of multipliers and influencers demonstrate a growing perceptual disconnect and are at a very sharp tipping point. Generational change among opinion-makers means that strategic identity narratives are far from safely enshrined.

This paper asserted a shared regional strategy among the three Baltic states—evident in news discourse and the comments of young multipliers and influencers—to use Ukraine as a reference point to trigger a network of meanings in the process of the identity narrative revisions. This study opens up a number of further questions that are beyond the scope of this paper. Future research may extend this inquiry to the other EU countries and compare the networks of meanings in individual EU member states and/or regions. Future research could explore narratives projected by official discourses vis-a-vis media "storylines" and opinions expressed by young multipliers and influencer. Future studies may also choose to expand the samples, include more news sources from traditional media as well as social media, and interview multipliers and influencers from older age cohorts. Further future studies would allow us to test how well the theoretical framework constructed here could explain the meaning-making of practices in other countries and international organizations.

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