EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The threat of abandonment: Images of the EU's crises in post-Maidan Ukraine

Natalia Chaban[1] ⬤ and Ole Elgström[2]

[1]Media and Communication, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand and [2]Department of Political Science, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
Corresponding author: Natalia Chaban; Email: natalia.chaban@canterbury.ac.nz

Abstract
This article further theorises and develops the notion of a threat of abandonment while trying to elucidate the applicability and usefulness of this concept in the case of Ukraine in its fight against Russia since 2014. If Ukraine perceives the European Union (EU) as weakened by multiple crises, it may translate this image into a scenario of less attention to Ukraine and its problems, and – ultimately – to a threat of abandonment, of being left alone with a powerful aggressor. Theoretically, we employ a perceptual approach. We contribute to the literature on threats of abandonment, linking it to the existence of critical expectation gaps and introducing amplifying conditions that tend to result in such gaps: a broken frame of involvement and a perceived moral injury. We also introduce a set of key factors behind a perceived risk or threat of abandonment. Empirically, we investigate how Ukrainian elites think, feel, and speak about the threat of abandonment and to what extent the two amplifying conditions were perceived to be present. Our data come from 50 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian decision makers (2016–17, C3EU Jean Monnet Network) and 53 experts' comments published in 2022 by a Ukrainian leading social research group, Razumkov's Centre.

Introduction
According to Realist thinking, a state which is confronted by an aggressive, more powerful neighbour will first of all strengthen its own defensive capabilities, but also turn to its friends and potential allies for support and material assistance. A case in point is Ukraine. Faced with the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Russian war by proxy in eastern Ukraine, it has revisited its Soviet-times narratives of Russia as a 'senior brother' within the USSR 'family'[1] and sought external support from the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and their member states.

---

[1]N. Chaban, S. Zhabotynska, and M. Knodt, 'What makes strategic narrative efficient: Ukraine on Russian E-News platforms', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 58:4 (2023), pp. 419–40.

In trying to gain support from potential allies,[2] the threatened state becomes vulnerable to the risk or even the threat of *abandonment:*[3] a situation when major supporters, on whose help the state is dependent, will defect – totally ending their support – or, less radically, decrease their level of help. Importantly for this study, risk refers to a potential danger, a threat of an actual danger. This may, for example, be due to internal splits within the supporting actor or, especially in a long, ongoing conflict, to increasing costs for the moral and material help given to the threatened state. It may also happen due to external pressures on the supporting actor, as well as 'misbehaviour'/breach of trust by the supported side.

In this study, we further theorise and develop a concept of *threat of abandonment* by engaging with a novel theoretical concept of *critical expectation gap* developed within the perceptual approach to EU foreign policy studies.[4] In this approach, the focus is on the Other – 'not a passive receiver of EU messages/actions but an agent informed by a range of cognitive, emotive and normative images of the EU, feeding into how the Other diagnoses the situation and maps the course of actions'[5] (or how humans *think, feel, and speak* to security situations). Within this theorisation, a *critical expectation gap* is when hopes for strong support and commitment from a potential ally encounter a perception of performance that indicates 'a severe, or absolute, contradiction and shaken or even abandoned hope.'[6] In this novel contribution to knowledge in the security field, and moving beyond the case of Ukraine, we argue the notion of *critical expectation gaps* to be a key cognitive mechanism explaining how the perceived risk of abandonment (perception of potential danger) may morph to the perceived threat of abandonment (perception of actual danger). Specifically, this concept presents an opportunity to involve a set of *amplifying conditions* to understand the transition from a risk to a threat perception (in our case of Ukraine's expectations and hopes of EU support and protection against perceived Russian aggressiveness). Such *amplifying conditions* include (1) a 'broken' frame of involvement[7] when someone who holds power (the EU) is violating the frames of engagement and its limits in the imagination of a perceiver (Ukraine) and (2) perceived moral injury (stemming from 'a betrayal of what's right by someone who holds legitimate authority … in a high-stakes situation'[8] on the background of a wider notion of moral responsibility.

In our second innovation, we contribute to the literature that continues to explore how weaker military powers infer threat from stronger adversaries. We add to this debate by moving beyond a binary construct of threat perception, arguing *different types* of threat perception. We address an understudied area of *indirect threat perception*, namely how states perceive threats which are conveyed through the perception of threat to their powerful 'allies'/'donors'. When Ukraine perceives the EU being threatened/weakened/distracted by multiple crises, it translates this vision into the perception of less attention to Ukraine, its problems, transformation, and challenges. These may morph into a perceived risk of and, ultimately, a perceived threat of abandonment, of being left alone with an aggressive Russia. To explain this dynamic, we unpack the concept of threat abandonment further. We argue a set of factors behind the perceived risk or threat of abandonment, namely

---

[2]We extend J. Snyder's use of the concept by not only referring to a threat of abandonment from major allies, but also from *potential* major allies (*Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambitions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[3]G. Snyder, 'The security dilemma in alliance politics', *World Politics*, 36:4 (1984), pp. 461–95; J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; N. Pedersen, 'Abandonment vs. Entrapment: Denmark and military integration in Europe 1948–51', *Cooperation and Conflict*, XXI (1986), pp. 169–86; O. Elgström, *Images and Strategies for Autonomy: Explaining Swedish Security Policy Strategies in the 19th Century* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).

[4]N. Chaban and O. Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps: Advancing theorization of the perceptual approach in EU foreign policy studies', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61:4 (2023), pp. 1047–64.

[5]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps', p. 1050.

[6]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps', p. 1050.

[7]E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[8]J. Shay, 'Moral injury', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31:2 (2014), pp. 182–91, p. 183.

the *solidity of the frame of involvement* and *the form and nature of the commitments* made by the EU to Ukraine (factors that influence the 'scope' and 'depth' of Ukraine expectations) and the *nesting of the cause of the apprehended abandonment* (such cause may relate either to the 'source'/giving partner or to the 'target'/receiving partner who recognises its own deficiencies).

We reiterate that our analytical focus is on the *receivers* of support and commitments, in contrast to the important strands of the alliance-security literature that prioritise the perspective of the *producers* of support. Analysing *receivers*' perceptions of commitments and risks of abandonment is important as shifting expectations of receivers complicate the security assessments of the producer and may deepen its security dilemma, not least in a situation where an ongoing conflict escalates, influencing security policy choices and their potential consequences. Our study of Ukraine perceptions of the EU as a supporter in its defence against Russian aggression is a unique case, with data tracking perceptions of the receiver of the support over time and following the escalation of the conflict.

In this article, we integrate interdisciplinary theoretical insights, methods, and evidence, linking IR and EU studies, typically not talking much to each other. We assess cognitive, emotive and normative image elements in Ukraine's perceptions of the EU in our objective to address a key research question – how humans *think, feel*, and *speak* to security threats. Our data come from 50 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian political, business, civil society, and media leaders conducted in 2016–17 within the framework of the C3EU Jean Monnet Network and 53 experts' comments/interviews published in 2022 by a Ukrainian leading social research group, Razumkov's Centre, on its website. The data demonstrate how and to what extent Ukraine elites have perceived and expressed the indirect risks and/or threats of abandonment by its potential EU partners, in (a) the period following the annexation of Crimea/the start of the war in Donbas and (b) in the period following the start of the full-scale armed invasion in February 2022.

We start the article by introducing the concepts of risk and threat of abandonment, situating the phenomena in existing literature. We continue by presenting our *perceptual approach* and its conceptual pillars, also explicating how we relate the threat of abandonment to this approach. We also suggest two amplifying conditions for transforming a risk of abandonment to a perceived threat and relate this discussion to the emergence of a *critical expectation gap* and build on it by proposing a set of factors unpacking further the notions of perceived risk or threat of abandonment. After a note on methodology, we turn to our empirical analysis. We end the article with an account of our main findings and the importance of our theoretical contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the threat of abandonment in security dilemmas.

Mapping the concepts

The threat of abandonment

A common assumption in much of the international relations (IR) literature, and certainly in Realist thinking, is that states, and not least weak or small states, primarily base their security policies and their strategy choices on concern for safety. States have to think about their future survival, and in dealing with great powers – and especially great power neighbours – this is supposed to be their main concern. In many instances, of course, survival is not at stake. It is only under certain circumstances that states are threatened by extinction or external domination. Their usual condition is to live relatively undisturbed by the machinations of great powers.

Present-day Ukraine is of course an exception. It has a great power neighbour, Russia, that does not seem to recognise its claims to sovereignty, and certainly not its territorial integrity. Russian threats to Ukraine's survival have been made abundantly clear by the escalation of Russian aggression since February 2022, but were present already since Ukraine's independence after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and increasingly so after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's war by proxy in the Donbas region of Ukraine unleashed in 2014. Despite not being a weak state, Ukraine is still facing a clear-cut and daunting threat to its survival.

States confronted by a stronger adversary have been claimed to face an alliance security dilemma[9] When trying to protect its security by seeking support from other great powers, they confront the risks of *abandonment* or *entrapment*.[10] *Entrapment* means being involuntarily drawn into the sphere of interest of the great power that it seeks protection from. *Abandonment* in its original sense implied the risk of a major ally's defection and realignment.[11] More generally, it refers to the risk that supporting powers decrease their level of help and commitment. In both senses, abandonment means leaving the threatened state more or less at the mercy of its threatening neighbour.

For Ukraine, entrapment is not much of a problem: rather, it actively seeks to become a member of both NATO and the EU, its main potential protectors. On the other hand, we contend that abandonment constitutes a real and serious threat – in this case a *perceived indirect threat*, emanating from the actors Ukraine considers to be its allies, although informal. With our conceptual focus firmly on perceptions, where a perceived risk might become a threat and a perceived threat indicates a perceived acute action, we argue that the risk (a perceived potential danger) and a threat (a perceived actual danger) that NATO and the EU decide to diminish or end their support must be a considerable worry for Ukraine decision makers. Such worries may be counteracted by attempts to increase the *commitment* of its potential allies, to make it more difficult for them to withdraw their support. The ultimate commitment, of course, is membership in the EU and, even more importantly, NATO.

Critical expectation gap

Previous publications on the perceptual approach in the studies of EU foreign policy[12] describe clashes between perceptions, or between expectations and actions, in terms of 'gaps'. These authors link the concept of Others to such gaps, defining Otherness as 'perceived distance between an external actor and the EU and suggesting the following gaps to be of particular importance'.[13] One of the key gaps argued in this theorisation is the *expectation-performance* gap: between Others' expectations and their perception of EU performance. The distance here is indirectly indicated by the fact that third countries do not perceive the EU to act as expected, possibly leading to disappointment and frustration. One particular type of the expectation-performance gap is the *hope-performance* gap: between Others' hopes and their perception of EU performance. It is an 'intensified and deepened expectation gap of a particular nature – when confidence in attaining desired goals that would benefit the perceivers (either as citizens of their own countries or citizens of the world) is perceived as impacted negatively'. They postulate that 'hope is linked to a perceived positive outcome for yourself, while expectations may also be negative'.[14]

Chaban and Elgström[15] advance this classification of gaps and consider cases where perceptions reveal 'struggle over meaning in its most acute form' – that is, 'when an entrenched image (and thus expectation) of the EU encounters a perception of performance that indicates a severe, or absolute, contradiction and shaken or even abandoned hope'. They call such instances *critical expectation*

[9]G. Snyder, 'The security dilemma'; J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; Pedersen, 'Abandonment vs. entrapment'; Elgström, 'Images and strategies'.

[10]J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; Elgström, 'Images and strategies'.

[11]J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 93.

[12]N. Chaban and O. Elgström, 'A perceptual approach to EU public diplomacy: Investigating collaborative diplomacy in EU–Ukraine relations', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15:4 (2020), pp. 488–516; N. Chaban and O. Elgström, 'Politicization of EU development policy: The role of EU external perceptions (case of Ukraine)', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59:1 (2021), pp. 143–60; N. Chaban and O. Elgström, 'Theorizing external perceptions of the EU', in S. Gstöhl and S. Schunz (eds), *Studying the EU's External Action: Concepts, Approaches, Theories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021), pp. 265–77; N. Chaban and O. Elgström, *The Ukraine Crisis and EU Foreign Policy Roles: Images of the EU in the Context of EU–Ukraine Relations* (Cheltenham, UK/Northampton, US: Edward Elgar, 2021).

[13]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps', p. 1050.

[14]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps', p. 1050.

[15]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps', p. 1051.

gaps. Such gaps are important as their existence increases the risk of misunderstandings and disagreements, while shared images of actors, situations and context encourage cooperation. In this article, we utilise and advance this concept to understand the perceived *threat of abandonment*.

We argue that a perceived *risk* of abandonment can be turned into a perceived *threat* of abandonment if expectations or hopes are continuously and repeatedly confronted with bad perceived performance – for example, if the hope of the EU becoming a supportive ally is confronted by evidence of a crack in EU unity or of 'war fatigue' within the EU or if hopes of EU membership are dashed by lack of real progress.

The probability that such a hope/expectation-performance gap will be considered a *critical expectation gap* is, we suggest, amplified when perceptions of broken frame of involvement and moral injury are at hand. These are thus *amplifying conditions* that may turn a hope-performance gap into a perceived critical expectation gap. It is the degree of perceived threat (including the perceived *intensity* of the threat) and the strong emotions associated with perceptions of disengagement and moral injury that transform a hope-performance gap into a critical expectation gap. Emerging perceptions of a critical expectation gap may be countered by different types of commitments made by the EU (membership status being one, membership promise a potential one). Such commitments could mitigate the degree of perceived threat, not lastly through a promise of a long-term involvement, and arouse emotions linked to the feelings of belonging, appreciation, recognition, and kinship.

Amplifying conditions for creating critical expectation gaps

In a previous publication, Chaban and Elgström[16] proposed the concept of critical expectation gap but left unanswered the question *how* a hope-expectation gap may turn into a critical expectation gap. In this article, we propose one possible answer to that question, while adding to our theorisations, by introducing the novel notion of *amplifying conditions*. We suggest the following two types of conditions.

A) 'Broken' frame of involvement

The first *amplifying condition* in our theorisation relates to a set of *attributes* of an actor that constitute the framing of activity of that actor. Here we are guided by Goffman, who states that a frame 'organizes more than meaning; it also organizes involvement'.[17] The expectation of involvement is of key importance – in our case, involvement in terms of engagement/disengagement of a stronger partner with a weaker partner where the former commits to help the latter to tackle existential challenges and problems. Goffman continues with an argument that '[a]ll frames involve expectations of a normative kind as to how deeply and fully the individual is to be carried into the activity' – 'in all cases, … understood limits will be established, a definition concerning what is insufficient involvement and what is too much'.[18] Yet major disruptions may occur and the existing frames establishing the limits may not be applied, leading to the surprise and even disappointment of the participants. In his book *Frame Analysis*, Goffman describes two forms of disengagement. The first one, an 'orderly retreat',[19] is 'leave is taken in an authorized manner, with the establishment of an official time-out through the use of internal brackets … one who thus returns re-establishes appropriate involvement on his return'.[20] The second kind of disengagement 'involves a disruption in the portraying of appropriate, respectful involvement'.[21] In this scenario, 'no authorization is available

[16]Chaban and Elgström, 'Critical expectation gaps'.
[17]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 345.
[18]Goffamn, *Frame Analysis*, p. 345.
[19]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 350.
[20]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 349.
[21]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 350.

for the withdrawal', and it is difficult to 'to easily insert' yourself back 'into appropriate involvement, back into control by the frame'.[22] Importantly, this type of disengagement 'can disrupt the proper involvement of other participants' and even give them an additional reason 'for improper involvemen'.[23] Arguably, a disengagement of the second type may lead to the creation of a *critical expectation gap*.

Moral injury and moral responsibility

Our second amplifying condition is perceptions of moral injury. Present-day literature in the studies of mental health uses this concept to emphasise the psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of trauma[24] – an injury to an individual's moral conscience and values resulting from an act of perceived moral transgression carried out by themselves or others.[25] Relevant literature argues the presence of moral injury through a combination of three elements: (i) there has been a betrayal of what is considered morally right (ii) by someone who holds legitimate authority (iii) in a high-stakes situation.[26] Arguably, these elements – acting alone or in combination with each other – can *intensify* feelings of betrayal and fear associated with a perceived *threat of abandonment* and turn the gap between expectations and hopes into a critical expectation gap.

While 'the concept of "responsibility" is an elusive one',[27] 'many decisions about responsibility are moral ones'.[28] Arguably, the EU – perceived as a strong leading actor with authority to influence Ukraine – was expected by Ukrainians to hold moral responsibility for Ukraine. Expectations tracked by earlier studies[29] indicated a perception among Ukrainian elites of the moral responsibility of Europe not to turn its back on a liminal nation of Ukraine, the only European nation who fought for its values and freedom under the EU flag on the EuroMaidan in 2013–14.

In brief, abandonment in a high-stakes situation would be considered an ultimate betrayal by the EU, an actor with authority and moral responsibility, and would therefore likely result in a perception of moral injury. For Ukrainians, who have seen the EU as a protector and an informal ally, this would amplify the gap between hopes and perceived performance, and thus constitute a paramount example of a critical expectation gap.

However, can you abandon someone you never gave a formal commitment? How much should you commit before it makes sense to talk about abandonment? What are the material and constructed components of abandonment? Does it make sense to talk about different degrees of abandonment (perceived or real)? If yes, is there a scale of abandonment? To answer these questions, we propose to unpack the concept of threat abandonment by engaging with the notion of the *factors* that may trigger and (re)shape the perceived risks.

Factors behind perceived risks

(a) Solidity of the frame of involvement *and* the form and nature of the commitments

We argue that important factors behind the perceived risk or threat of abandonment are the *solidity of the frame of involvement* and *the form and nature of the commitments* made by the EU to Ukraine, factors that influence the 'scope' and 'depth' of Ukraine expectations. The perceived risk or threat of abandonment is influenced by the perceived credibility of the various types of

[22]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 350.

[23]Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 350.

[24]A. Haleigh, R. Hurley, and K. Taber, 'Moral injury and PTSD: Often co-occurring yet mechanistically different', *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 31:2 (2019), pp. A4–103.

[25]B. Litz, N. Stein, E. Delaney, L. Lebowitz, W. Nash, C. Silva, and S. Maguen, 'Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29:8 (2009), pp. 695–706.

[26]Shay, 'Moral injury', p. 183.

[27]J. Glover, *Responsibility* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 1.

[28]Glover, *Responsibility*, p. 3.

[29]Chaban and Elgström, 'A perceptual approach'; Chaban and Elgström, 'Politicization of EU development policy'.

commitments made by the EU.[30] Such commitments may be of a legal nature (e.g. the EU's grant-ing of membership status to Ukraine), may take the form of actions (the provision of military materiel, administrative assistance, or humanitarian aid, or instigating sanctions) or consist of writ-ten or oral statements made by EU authorities. These types of commitments vary in their degree of firmness and their perceived credibility. A commitment may thus be perceived and interpreted dif-ferently by the sender (the EU), the target (Ukraine), and outsiders (e.g. Russia). Legally secured obligations are commonly seen as the most credible, as the cost of breaking them is considered high. Provisions of material are also deemed credible, as they are costly to the sender. Statements can be made more credible by being repeated, by being issued by high-ranking officials, and by being unequivocal.[31] One particular way of increasing credibility is by generating *audience costs*: the domestic or external political costs a leader suffers from publicly issuing a threat or promise and then failing to follow through.[32]

It should also be noted that receivers and senders of commitments may differ in their incen-tives for firm promises. Receivers want strong commitments to diminish the risk of abandonment. Senders not necessarily so. Though they want to keep their partners satisfied and to increase the credibility of joint defence commitments – which is accomplished by strong commitments – they also have incentives to keep their commitments to help their weaker partners less binding. This is because firm commitments often are costly, but also because binding commitments diminish their freedom of action – for example, to withdraw from a commitment if circumstances and conditions change.

Given our focus on commitments and risks of abandonment, our study of Ukraine perceptions and expectations of the EU is unique and challenging, considering that much of research in these areas have been dealing with unitary nation states. The EU is a supranational actor where both EU authorities and its member states contribute to its foreign policy behaviour. For example, assess-ments of EU commitments must consider the risk of internal disunity in a context of 27 sovereign members with varying foreign policy priorities. Also, the strength of verbal commitments may be difficult to evaluate in the intricate EU decision-making system where partners have to consider the position not only of several EU formal representatives, but also representatives from the member states.

Our focus in this article is on *perceptions* of risk/threats of abandonment and on the *perceived* credibility of commitments. Abandonment is thus in the eyes of the beholder: a risk of abandon-ment may, for example, be perceived without an existing formal or legal commitment. In general, the higher the perceived credibility and firmness of commitments, the lower the perceived risk of abandonment. Our perceptual approach also indicates that the perceived risk of abandonment to a certain extent is influenced by the level of shared culture, norms, and identity. If you feel that you 'belong to the same family' as the actor you rely on for help and support, the perceived risk that you will be abandoned will arguably decrease.

b) Nesting of the cause of the apprehended abandonment

Another factor behind the perceived risk or threat of abandonment is the *nesting of the cause of the apprehended abandonment*. Such cause may relate either to the 'source'/giving partner (e.g. the crises in the EU), or to the 'target'/receiving partner who recognises its own deficiencies (e.g. Ukraine's understanding that its inability to cope with its own corruption may cause a breach in its relations with the EU). In the former case, the giving partner's inability to help (a failing commitment increasing the apprehended risk of abandonment) is perceived to be outside of the

[30]See R. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) and T. C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

[31]R. Jervis, 'The logic of images'; C. Jönsson, *Communication in International Bargaining* (London: Pinter & New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[32]J. D. Fearon, 'Signaling foreign policy interests: Tying hands versus sinking costs', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41:1 (1997), pp. 68–90; K. Quek, 'Four costly signaling mechanisms', *American Political Science Review*, 115:2 (2021), pp. 537–49.

receiver's control. The perception of the external locus of control may trigger a particular framing of responsibility: if the receivers are not performing well, they may blame the source for their poor performance. In the latter case, a receivers' internal locus of control suggests taking responsibility and putting blame of poor performance on their own failures. In this nesting, the *expectation-performance* gap has a chance to decrease, as recognition of your own failures and taking responsibility for them may prevent the apprehended abandonment. However, if both types of nesting are taking place at the same time, the *expectation-perceived performance gap* has a strong chance to morph first to a *hope-performance* and then to a *critical expectations gap*, where the giver is perceived as unable to commit to help despite all hopes and the receiver is perceived as unable to commit to overcome deficiencies.

Method

Complicating the study of national threat perception is the fact that the term is a misnomer: states do not perceive threats – people do.[33] As such, our method focuses on the study of perceptions among decision-, policy-, and opinion-making individuals, national elites of Ukraine.

Sample

Data for analysis of the post-Maidan/pre-2022 perceptions come from face-to-face in-depth interviews with 50 decision makers from Ukraine conducted within the framework of the 2015–18 Jean Monnet Network 'Crisis, conflict and critical diplomacy: Perceptions in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine' (C3EU). The sample includes 10 politicians (members of the Ukrainian parliament as well as members of national/regional government structures dealing with Europe/the EU), 10 business leaders (those who lead business networks on national/regional levels and those who trade with/invest into the EU), 10 media practitioners (journalists, editors, and news producers of leading media who specialise in the coverage of foreign/EU news), 10 leaders of civil society (representing a range of organisations of local and international profile, supported and not supported by the EU), and 10 cultural personalities (those who influence creative and intellectual discourses in Ukraine and abroad). Respondents came from three cities: Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Cherkasy. The sample features respondents differing in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and language.

Data for the analysis of the 2022 perceptions came from the dataset of the 'Experts comments' published in 2022 on the site of the Razumkov's Centre, Ukrainian leading social research group.[34] The experts' comments are grouped on the Centre's website 'Research' page according to the following categories: Economy (28 comments), Security (28), Energy (47), Foreign Policy (4), Domestic and Legal Policy (1), and Social Policy (2). In total, in 2022, the Centre features 110 expert comments and 53 have references to the EU/EU member states as Ukraine's European partners.

Protocol and questionnaire

The 2016–17 interviews followed a semi-structured protocol to provide for 'detail, depth, and an insider's perspective'[35] without jeopardising the comparability of the data. The questionnaire contained 31 questions, with the majority of the questions being open-ended. The format generated wide-ranging discussions, backed up by a set of probes and follow-up questions to maximise the valuable flexibility of the open-ended semi-structured protocol and elicited rich nuanced narratives paramount to track images and perceptions.

---

[33] E. Oren and M. Brummer, 'Threat perception, government centralization, and political instrumentality in Abe Shinzo's Japan', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74:1 (2020), pp. 1–25.

[34] https://razumkov.org.ua/en/.

[35] B. L. Leech, 'Asking questions: Techniques for semi-structured interviews', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35:4 (2002), pp. 665–8.

In this article, we focus on the answers to a set of open-ended questions asking about the perceptions of the impacts of the EU's multiple crises:

1. How do you see the euro in the context of the sovereign euro debt crisis?
2. How do you see the impact of Brexit on the image of the EU globally and in Ukraine?
3. How do you assess the impact of the EU migration crisis on the EU's image globally and in Ukraine?
4. How do you see the impact of the terrorist attacks on the EU (Paris attacks, Brussels attacks, etc.) globally and in Ukraine?
5. Of these four, which has the biggest impact on EU–Ukraine relations?
6. How do you see the impact of the rise of populism and far-right activation in the EU on the EU's image globally and in Ukraine?

The 2022 dataset included 53 articles written by the experts commenting on the situation in Ukraine affected by the escalation of the war in specific issue areas. They are published by the Razumkov Centre online on its 'Research' page. They are all in open access.

Data collection

The 2016–17 dataset was collected by a team of five highly educated pre-trained researchers who conducted interviews in Ukraine in winter 2016 and spring 2017. All interviewers are native speakers of Ukrainian and Russian. Transcripts, translated verbatim, underwent a double-coder reliability check by team leaders who are linguists. The interview protocol was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of University of Canterbury, New Zealand, which prescribed to de-identify all respondents (in quotes below, B stands for business respondents, M for media, P for politicians, CS for civil society, and C for culture).

The 2022 dataset is compiled of the commentaries published post February 22, with full acknowledgement of the authors, their affiliations, and their positions within an organisation. Experts' comments are published in English. It is beyond our capacity to identify if the comment was written in English or translated from Ukrainian into English.

Since we seek to show how a critical expectation gap might emerge for individuals, ideally the data would have shown how this critical expectation emerges in the same individual(s). Yet re-interviewing was not possible on two accounts. First, the war makes elite interview research in Ukraine challenging. Second, under the project rules, we have access to the de-identified dataset only. This follows a strict rule by the UC's Human Research Ethics Committee. We mitigated this limitation by engaging with the comments by Ukraine's leading elite commentators in the field of politics, law, security, foreign policy, economy, energy, and social policy – the profile that matched that of the original sample in 2016–17.

Data analysis

We use qualitative interpretation techniques for our data analysis, essential to explore and understand beliefs and opinions among specific individuals and/or groups. Yet the qualitative interpretive approach must deal with a challenge of a researcher's own interpretations and judgements. To minimise this risk to reliability and validity of conclusions, we examine rich textual responses following the logic of three types of codes: *manifest, latent*, and *global*.[36] The *manifest* type of coding involves dealing with 'direct responses to particular questions' – in our case, a set of questions about multiple crises that challenged the EU. These questions elicited responses referencing the EU in the context of the crises in general, and specifically the impact of the crises on the EU in relation to Ukrainian events and actors. The *latent* type coded the characteristics of the responses that 'were not explicitly

---

[36]A. Aberbach, J. Chesney, and B. Rockman, 'Exploring elite political attitudes: Some methodological lessons', *Political Methodology*, 2:1 (1975), pp. 1—27.

called for by the questions themselves' (in our analysis, negativity and positivity in responses, or evaluative judgements).[37] The *global* type of coding required researchers to form 'judgement from the interview transcripts about general traits and styles'.[38] In qualitative interpretative analysis, the *manifest* items are the most reliable and *global* the least.

Operationalisations

To discern how Ukrainian policy-, decision- and opinion-makers *think* (cognitive image-element, manifest code), *feel* (emotive image-element, latent code) and *speak* (normative image-element, global code) about the risk of/threat of abandonment, we engage with an image theory paradigm of perceived *attributes*[39] as our structuring device for the empirical section. A modified list of attributes includes perceptions of an actor's *capability, cultural/government similarities, support-iveness*, and *goal compatibility*. Out of all, *supportiveness* is especially important for us, as it is clearly linked to the risk of abandonment. This structure helps us to discern not only perceived risks/threats of abandonment, but also the existence of amplifying conditions and the gradual development of a critical expectation gap. We investigate how Ukraine perceptions of each attribute (a) are associated with threats to the EU and (b) how this is translated into perceived risks and threats to Ukraine itself. We also discern to what extent Ukraine's narratives and images are linked to expressing the two amplifying conditions: signs of perceived disengagement and/or moral injury. In turn, this analysis would lead us to conclude to what extent Ukraine experiences a critical expectation gap in this regard.

Findings: Ukraine perceptions of the EU and the threat of abandonment
Capability
Following the Maidan, annexation of Crimea and a start of the war in Donbas
In 2016–17, Ukraine elites portrayed the EU as a great power in the economic sphere, with resources that could help Ukraine in many areas, including coping with its aggressive neighbour. On the contrary, the EU is almost unanimously not considered a military power. More broadly, applying a more general understanding of capabilities, the EU is seen as weakened and destabilised by the crises that have plagued it in recent years. In the words of our informants, the EU is 'desta-bilized' (CS6, cf. M5) and 'in serious difficulties' (M9; cf. M2, B5). It is also argued that 'there has been a weakening of the union itself' (C5, cf. CS4, CS5).

The EU is, in the eyes of many respondents, facing *threatening tendencies*. Mainly, it is a risk of fragmentation: it is the coherence and internal unity of the EU that is under pressure. This opinion is linked to the Brexit crisis but also to increasing disunity around migration politics. 'The EU is not as united as it used to seem to me' (B5) is a telling quote. 'Everyone thought that Europe should grow like a snowball, adding on and adding on the surroundings of itself. Suddenly it began to disintegrate' (CS5, cf. B9). There is thus a perception that the EU is in crisis. 'There is even a perception in Ukraine that the EU may fall apart' (CS10).

Still, other observers contend that the EU is still a 'great and prosperous' union (B10) and that the effects of the crises are 'transient' (C6). Its 'authority is not reduced' (C4, cf. P7) and while serious problems exist, 'there is no point making it a tragedy' (M9). 'It is a very powerful union of very important and very powerful countries. It is a Russian narrative that tells that Europe is weak, that there is nothing in Europe, that it is falling apart. It is completely wrong' (M9).

The main conclusion is that the EU's crises have led to *risks or even threats* also to Ukraine. A weaker EU has fewer resources to help Ukraine to survive and prosper and to defend itself against the Russian threat. Furthermore, a fragmented EU comes, according to some elite voices, with a

---

[37]A. Aberbach and B. Rockman, 'Conducting and coding elite interviews', *Political Science and Politics*, 35:4 (2002), pp. 673—6.

[38]Aberbach and Rockman, 'Conduction and coding'.

[39]M. Cottam, *Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986).

'club of Putin's friends', a powerful lobby inside the EU that denigrates the Russian threat under the influence of economic ties with the great power. Also, the Brexit process resulted in the loss of Britain, considered a true friend of Ukraine, as a security ally within the EU.

2022

In 2022, there were no longer any complaints about a weak EU lacking resources to help Ukraine. Ukraine elites saw 'a change in the approaches of European states to collective and national security. This can be most clearly seen by the examples of Germany, Great Britain, Poland, and other European countries willing to significantly strengthen their armed forces, military and political role in Europe. Political solidarity of the West was shown by the very quick approval of unprecedented sanctions against Russia and aid programmes for Ukraine'.[40] The EU provided 'significant economic, military and humanitarian support'[41] and welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees, despite having not 'recovered from the aftermaths of the COVID-19 pandemic'[42] demonstrating that 'European countries are more united than ever'.[43] Thus the risk of fragmentation decreased: 'Ultimately, the war in Ukraine re-united the European Union'.[44] However, some problems were perceived to remain, as 'there are still forces that are weary of helping Ukraine … and there are also purely objective limits to how Europe can help us militarily, and how quickly'.[45]

In 2022, a *new major threat* appeared for Ukraine in the energy sphere, with electricity, gas, and heat supply threatened by thousands of Russian missiles. According to United Nations reports, by the middle of December 2022, 'Russia has destroyed 50% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, putting millions of people at risk of sickness and death as temperatures continue to plunge.'[46] An expert notes how since the start of the war, the Ukrainian energy sector 'has experienced more than one tsunami: damage, destruction and Russian occupation of energy facilities'.[47]

In the light of the *perceived threats* to the survival of the Ukrainian citizens and the resilience of the Ukrainian energy sector, Ukrainian experts share divided expectations of the EU's *capabilities* to help Ukraine's energy sector. The EU is expected to have enough capacity to supply energy to Ukraine through the import of electricity and energy carriers.[48] This is further facilitated by the unification of Ukraine's energy system with the European one that took place in March 2022. However, these *expectations* are dampened. Elites notice that the technical possibility to address the shortage of electricity in Ukraine through the imports from the EU is limited.[49] There is also a

[40]M. Sunhurovskyi, 'Role and place of Ukraine in the future European and Euro-Atlantic security systems' (3 October 2022), available at: {https://fb.watch/fSuWUJHfmf/}.

[41]V. Yurchyshyn, 'Signs of a new world order?' (18 November 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/signs-of-a-new-world-order}.

[42]K. Markevych, 'Among people: How much will the migration crisis cost the EU?' (5 April 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/among-people-how-much-will-the-migration-crisis-cost-the-eu}.

[43]Markevych, 'Among people'.

[44]V. Yurchyshyn, 'Ukrainian contribution to the global world order' (1 April 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/ukrainian-contribution-to-the-global-world-order}.

[45]O. Melnyk, 'Putin took revenge for the Crimean bridge, Ukraine will act in response' (11 October 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/putin-took-revenge-for-the-crimean-bridge-ukraine-will-act-in-response-interview}.

[46]L. Shlein, 'UN: Half of Ukraine's energy infrastructure destroyed by Russian attacks', Voice of America (2022), available at: {https://www.voanews.com/a/un-half-of-ukraine-energy-infrastructure-destroyed-by-russian-attacks/6874897.html}.

[47]V. Omelchenko, 'Heating season in sight: Gains and losses of Ukrainian power engineering' (August 19, 2022), available at {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/heating-season-in-sight-gains-and-losses-of-ukrainian-power-engineering}.

[48]M. Bielawski, 'What does blackout mean, and how to prevent it? Key risks for Uraine this winter' (November 22, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/what-does-blackout-mean-and-how-to-prevent-it-key-risks-for-ukraine-this-winter}.

[49]V. Omelchenko, 'Under heavy stress: What happens to Ukraine's energy system after Russian missile attacks?' (December 14, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/under-heavy-stress-what-happens-to-ukraine-s-energy-system-after-russian-missile-attacks}.

risk that Ukraine may become an 'importer of very expensive electricity from the EU'[50] as prices in Ukraine are 'two to three times lower than in the EU countries'.[51]

On the other side, the EU's energy sector is seen in Ukraine as *under threat* from Russia. For experts, since the war has escalated, Russia 'seeks to intimidate European politicians' while 'scaring European consumers' and attempting 'tightening the screws'.[52] In its 'gas war against Europe',[53] Russia goes from stopping the gas transit intermittently to completely blocking Nord Stream. The Russian 'blackmail-narrative' spells out that the 'whole matter lies in the Western sanctions, and problems with gas supply will persist until they are lifted'.[54]

The experts recognise the *risk* presented by Russia's energy blackmail to the EU – to 'tighten the grip on Ukraine's allies and to limit financial and technical capabilities of the countries friendly to [Ukraine]'.[55] Importantly, the EU is seen as capable of flexible solutions in 'search of an alternative to the Russian gas needle'[56]: the EU 'managed to diversify gas supply sources, and the share of the Russian gas in the European market fell to 9%'.[57] However, one risk which may impact Ukraine was noted – higher energy prices will 'deepen the economic recession of the EU countries, thus slowing down the pace of development and the availability of financial resources'.[58]

Cultural and value-based similarities and differences

Following the Maidan, annexation of Crimea and a start of the war in Donbas

A number of trends and tendencies in European society have, according to our interviewees, contributed to the *risk of EU fragmentation*. 'European values', primarily its democratic values, 'liberalism', but also openness and transparency are seen as threatened by growing populism and migration. As expressed by one respondent, the rise of populism has created a 'sort of crisis of liberalism' and 'destabilizes the society and creates a lot of problems for the EU as a whole [and] brings reputational risks for them' (CS6). Populism 'causes reconsideration of what we call democratic values, European values. They are in crisis, there and here, too' (CS7).

The 2015 migration crisis has, according to several interviewees, demonstrated 'things which disagree with the very spirit of the EU. I mean openness and transparency of borders' (M2, cf. M1, M6). Taken together, the crises 'weaken it [the EU] in people's eyes. As I said, it is no longer regarded as a joint force with shared values and goals' (CS7). Fragmentation regarding basic values constitutes a threat to the EU's internal cohesiveness.

The perceived weakening of values that are otherwise considered constitutive of the EU indirectly leads to *risks also for Ukraine*. A morally weakened and fragmented EU would also be a weaker ally. Populism and waves of immigration could result in both more attention to the EU member states' domestic concerns and less attention to its struggling neighbour. With a risk of

[50]V. Omelchenko, 'Ukraine's renewable energy sector before, during and after the war' (November 11, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/ukraines-renewable-energy-sector-before-during-and-after-the-war}.

[51]Omelchenko, 'Under heavy stress'.

[52]M. Bielawski, 'Gas for $4,000: Another Kremlin's blackmail, or the winter reality?' (August 19, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/gas-for-usd4-000-another-kremlins-blackmail-or-the-winter-reality}.

[53]M. Bielawski, 'Time is pressing: Will Ukraine have enough time to get ready for the most difficult heating season?' (September 10, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/time-is-pressing-will-ukraine-have-enough-time-to-get-ready-for-the-most-difficult-heating-season}.

[54]Bielawski, 'Time is pressing'.

[55]M. Bielawski, 'When Russia stops gas supply for fictitious reasons, it is a terrorist attack' (September 1, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/bielawski-when-russia-stops-gas-supply-for-fictitious-reasons-it-is-a-terrorist-attack}.

[56]Bielawski, 'Time is pressing'.

[57]M. Bielawski, 'Putin lost control of the European gas market: How the EU managed to diversify gas supply and prepare for the winter' (September 8, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/putin-lost-control-of-the-european-gas-market-how-the-eu-managed-to-diversify-gas-supply-and-prepare-for-the-winter}.

[58]Bielawski, 'When Russia stops gas supply for fictitious reasons, it is a terrorist attack'.

normative vacuum emerging in Europe, preoccupied with its crises, Russia could come with its own different values, trying once again to dominate Ukraine.

2022

Following the massive flow of refugees from Ukraine to EU countries, emphasis was put both on the warm welcome that most refugees encountered, showing that most EU citizens saw Ukrainians as belonging to 'Europe', and how relatively easy it was for the refugees to be integrated into the countries they came to. This is due both to cultural similarities and to 'their skills and competences'.[59] The sharing of Western values also, it is argued, helps to materialise French president Macron's idea of 'European political community', consisting of the EU member states, the countries of the western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova.[60]

In the energy sector, experts highlight a *normative opportunity* emerging through the war: 'On 24 February 2022, the countdown began not only to Ukraine's military victory over the Russian invaders but also to its energy independence.'[61] Yet, for Bielawski,[62] a *risk* for Ukraine's energy sector at times of war is perceived to lie with the problems of 'corruption, regulation of the market and resultant loss of liquidity': these problems 'may prevent further integration of Ukraine in the European energy market'. However, other experts see an *opportunity* for Ukraine to become closer to the EU after the war: 'Rehabilitation of energy infrastructure will require enormous efforts and investments, yet, there is an opportunity to reshape Ukraine's energy sector in line with European standards.'[63]

Supportiveness

Following the Maidan, annexation of Crimea and a start of the war in Donbas

For many of our respondents, Ukraine's 'European choice' is not in danger. The EU and Ukraine are still in the early stages of a relationship, 'still studying each other and getting acquainted … and learning to trust each other' (M1). The EU remains 'deeply committed' to 'the Ukraine question' (P45) and the Union's legitimacy is still strong among the elites we studied.

Still, it is evident that *Ukrainian elites are disappointed and worried* by the EU crises and their effects. The *main risk* is that the EU will become 'preoccupied by its own problems' (P6) and lose interest in Ukraine's problems, becoming 'less favourable' (P5) towards Ukraine, which has its own multiple crises. In the words of one respondent, 'I do not think that the interests of Ukraine are a concern for someone in the EU at all' (C11). Such developments would weaken the 'eagerness of the EU for Ukraine' (M4) as Ukraine could 'shift to the background' (C3). Similarly, the migration waves to Western Europe could make the EU 'less open', potentially creating a 'Ukraine fatigue' in the EU (CS10). One interviewee notes that 'the ideas that Europe is obsessed with itself, that the interest in Ukraine has weakened, that Europe is tired of it [Ukraine] are cultivated' (C5).

Elites' reflections, coming not only at the time of the EU's multiple crises but also at the time of the Minsk agreements, which were pushing Ukraine to settle with Russia, also compared the EU to a partner who pursues its own interests first, and does not bother to invest in a genuine understanding of Ukraine's interests and situation (C3). 'The EU, generally speaking, does not know what Ukraine is. That is why the EU builds relations with some imaginary subject which is surely not Ukraine. I mean it is building relations with its own image of Ukraine' (C18). In the words

[59]Markevych, 'Among people'.

[60]Sunhurovskyi, 'Role and place of Ukraine'.

[61]Omelchenko, 'Ukraine's renewable energy sector before, during and after the war'.

[62]M. Bielawski, 'It is critical for Ukraine to continue electricity exports to the EU, for political reasons' (September 15, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/it-is-critical-for-ukraine-to-continue-electricity-exports-to-the-eu-for-political-reasons}.

[63]S. Chekunova, 'The wholesale electricity market in wartime' (July 21, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/the-wholesale-electricity-market-in-wartime}.

of another respondent '[They] do not understand many things not because they are stupid, but because they have not been interested in Ukraine for too long' (B35).

These quotes demonstrate a perceived *risk of abandonment* driven by disillusionment and the risk that the EU will become preoccupied by its own crises. We also contend that perceptions in this time period could at the same time be read as signs of an emerging, more acute *threat* of abandonment magnified by the main outcomes of the Minsk agreements. Further signs of *perceived disengagement* – the first amplifying condition – could widen the gap between hopes and perceived performance, leading to a perceived threat of abandonment and to the creation of a *critical expectation gap*.

2022

Ukraine elites in 2022 expressed gratitude, mixed with relief, over the EU's determined and massive support for their country. 'It turned out that despite internal contradictions, the EU was practically the only one to condemn the aggression, to urgently provide assistance (of various kinds) to Ukraine, to support internally displaced persons.'[64] The assistance was predicted to be prolonged: 'leading developed countries (the USA, Great Britain, the EU, Canada, Japan, etc.) continued to support Ukraine economically and militarily. It may be argued that … comprehensive aid to Ukraine will continue and, probably, even grow'.[65] Earlier concerns for a perceived threat of abandonment were no longer voiced. However, there was still a perceived *risk* of abandonment due to Russian machinations. In the words of one expert, Russia 'hopes to undermine the stability of the EU countries, divert their attention from the war in Ukraine due to migration or lack of grain … /and/ by deepening the energy crisis and provoking discontent of the population of the European countries'.[66]

The warm welcoming of millions of refugees by EU member states was perceived as a significant sign of support by Ukraine elites, also demonstrating their feelings of empathy and understanding. 'Governments, businesses and concerned Europeans are mobilizing billions of euros to build social care centers, childcare facilities, hospitals, schools and higher education institutions.'[67] Ukrainian experts stressed an 'unprecedented support from the local authorities and population' going to Ukrainian refugees.[68] Interactions between refugees and the individuals they encountered would hopefully result in increased understanding between the peoples of Ukraine and the EU.

When it came to energy, Ukrainian experts stressed how 'the issue of heating for households becomes critical not only in Ukraine but also in Europe'.[69] Russia's gas blackmail was seen to come not only with the *threats* (and actions) to cut fuel supplies to the EU countries, but also with *perceived risks* linked to the Russian propaganda towards the EU citizens. For Omelchenko, 'The Kremlin is confident that the fear of a cold winter will make Europeans less supportive of Ukraine.' But so far, 'the blackmail has not worked, even despite the rallies that took place in some EU countries, demanding immediate negotiations with Moscow on restoration of gas deliveries. Europe is sure that these protests were organised by pro-Russian forces'.[70]

Goal compatibility

Following the Maidan, annexation of Crimea and a start of the war in Donbas

For Ukraine elites, the goal is EU membership. Ukrainians see themselves as having a European future. On the other hand, many of them are not so sure about the EU's intentions (while, as seen,

---

[64]Yurchyshyn, 'Ukrainian contribution'.

[65]Yurchyshyn, 'Signs of a new world order'.

[66]Sunhurovskyi, 'Role and place'.

[67]Markevych, 'Among people'.

[68]O. Pyshchulina, 'Dear guests. How Ukrainians who fled the war work for the Polish economy' (July 12, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/dear-guests-how-ukrainians-who-fled-the-war-work-for-the-polish-economy}.

[69]V. Omelchenko, 'Wartime heating season. Interview' (September 15, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/wartime-heating-season-interview}.

[70]Omelchenko, 'Wartime heating season'.

others see the EU as still 'deeply committed' to Ukraine). Some interviewees argue that the goal of membership is not shared by the EU: 'Europeans actually do not believe that Ukraine is ready for Europe … Because Ukraine is not seen in the EU as European, so to say, well, yes they do understand that it is not a country in Asia, but they do not consider Ukraine to be a part of Europe.' (M6, cf. C3). The divergence about Ukraine's future status is strengthened by the EU's crises as these turn the Union's energy towards internal problems, rather than external enlargement.

EU membership is seen by many Ukraine elites as implying a protection from Russian bullying and mistreatment. Becoming a member is not only about formal status but also about feelings of security and about the strengthening of 'European values' in Ukraine. If Ukraine were openly being denied candidate status that could lead to an experience of *moral injury*, thus increasing the possibility of an increasing gap between hopes and perceived EU performance.

2022

Ukraine's ardent ambition to become an EU member state, a part of the European family, was reinforced by the Russian aggression. Its 'efforts were focused on Ukraine obtaining the status of a candidate for EU membership'[71] not least since the EU is 'a significant factor of further partner support, so needed by the country'.[72] For Pashkov,[73] the process of Ukraine's European integration should 'primarily be aimed at strengthening resistance to the aggressor, ensuring Ukraine's stability and development, promoting its recovery and vital reforms in the difficult conditions of war'. When the candidate status was granted in June 2022, this simultaneously decreased any perceived threat of abandonment.

In the energy sector, Ukrainian experts highlighted one major compatible goal for the EU and Ukraine, namely the production of 'green energy'. Volodymyr Zelenskyy suggested that 'Ukraine could become a "green energy hub" for Europe and increase electricity exports to the EU to replace "dirty" Russian energy resources.'[74] In the long run, setting ambitious goals of renewable energy sources development in Ukraine would correspond to the current EU energy policy. Ukraine aimed to 'achieve at least a 50% share of RES in the electricity balance of Ukraine by 2030 … and a carbon-free economy by 2050'.[75] In May 2022, the European Commission approved the REPowerEU plan, which provided for an increase in the RES share in the EU electricity balance in 2030 from 40 per cent to 45 per cent.[76]

Before and after the Russian total war: Comparing Ukrainians' perceptions of the EU across time

On 24 February 2022, Russia's limited war by proxy against Ukraine turned into a total war for Ukraine's sovereignty and survival. The perceived threat materialised. Ukraine's heroic resistance and the EU's position supporting Ukraine in this fight triggered a new set of mutual perceptions. The perceived risk of the EU abandoning Ukraine due to being hit by multiple crises was transformed and this transformation was mending the critical expectation gap that started emerging before 2022.

In terms of perceived *capabilities*, the EU is now seen in a different light. The EU's preparedness and ability to assist with military resources – not recognised as high in 2016–17 – is now among

[71] Sunhurovskyi, 'Role and place'.

[72] V. Yurchyshyn, 'More on interest rates and inflation' (27 September 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/more-on-interest-rates-and-inflation}.

[73] M. Pashkov, 'Association agreement with the EU in khaki' (25 July 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/articles/association-agreement-with-the-eu-in-khaki}.

[74] Cited in M. Bielawski, 'Despite the energy crisis, investors want to build 300 MW of green power generation capacities in Ukraine' (October 29, 2022), available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/despite-the-energy-crisis-investors-want-to-build-300-mw-of-green-power-generation-capacities-in-ukraine}.

[75] Omelchenko, 'Ukraine's renewable energy sector'.

[76] Omelchenko, 'Ukraine's renewable energy sector'.

the dominant images both for EU member states and the EU at the Brussels level. Several EU member states are also among the strong players in other formats – for example, NATO or G7. Brexit, feared to weaken the EU and deprive Ukraine of one of the more supportive member states in military terms, actually worked out for Ukraine's benefit. The UK, now outside of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, could help Ukraine in military terms faster. The EU's capability is no longer seen to be undermined by a lack of coherence. The EU's unity, seen in 2016–17 as shaken due to multiple crises, is seen as reinforced in reaction to the war in Ukraine in 2022. The EU's engagement with Ukraine in terms of providing humanitarian aid, helping Ukraine's destroyed energy infrastructure, and supplying weapons is perceived as high. Yet, in 2022, the EU's security was seen to be threatened due to the energy crisis as a result of the escalation of the war. Ukrainian elite perceptions circa 2022 recognised potential threats to the EU's capabilities to help Ukraine, namely how the EU's energy security and coherence have been jeopardised by its heavy dependence on Russia's fossil fuels, waning yet persisting.

In terms of perceived *cultural and normative similarities*, Ukraine and the EU are seen now to belong to the same side of the ideological divide, and in opposition to Russia defined by authoritarian and aggressive values. In the war, Ukraine defends not only its sovereignty and lives of its citizens, but also European values. In 2016–17, the EU's migration crisis was perceived to carry the risks to tear the EU apart on cultural grounds. In 2022, the perception surrounding Ukrainian refugees highlighted the image of Ukrainians integrating into European society due to cultural and normative similarities. Ukrainian perception also registers how Europeans recognise Ukrainian refugees as 'similar to us'. Such perceptions reduce the perceived risk of alienation between the EU and Ukraine.

In terms of *supportiveness*, not only did the EU did not abandon Ukraine after the escalation of Russian aggression, but it rallied itself in support of Ukraine in political, economic, social, and energy spheres, involving supranational, state, and non-state actors. A Eurobarometer poll[77] revealed the EU's public perceptions register recognition and positive attitudes among EU citizens towards Ukraine and its people. The 2022 material indicated a perceived increase in understanding, empathy, and support towards Ukrainians among the EU's general public encountering millions of Ukrainian refugees in 2022. Echoing elite experts, Ukrainian social research reported Ukraine's high appreciation of the EU countries that hosted Ukrainian refugees.[78] In 2022, in a dramatic departure from the 2016–17 perception, Europeans demonstrated interest and concern for Ukraine and its people. However, our 2022 analysis registered one perceived risk to the EU's supportiveness of Ukraine, namely EU citizens' concerns about a cold winter and high energy bills, which were feared in Ukraine to make Europeans less supportive of Ukraine. Economic insecurity and a potential economic crisis in the EU caused by sudden disconnect of the EU from the Russian fossil energy carriers were perceived by Ukrainian experts in 2022 as threats to the EU's support of Ukraine.

In terms of perceived *goal compatibility*, the perceptions have been influenced by a major decision concerning EU–Ukraine relations – the EU's acceptance of Ukraine as a candidate country. This step should be read as a commitment from the EU not to abandon Ukraine and demonstrate to Ukrainians that the goals of the EU and Ukraine are fully compatible. Our analysis also brings to the fore a very different, future-oriented perception of the mutual goal compatibility, this time in the area of the green/renewable energy sources. Ukraine, like the EU, aims to become a 'green energy hub' and supply clean energy to the EU. The compatibility in goals reduces the perceived risk of abandonment for Ukraine and provides yet another lever to boost the EU's invested commitment to Ukraine: Ukrainian experts stress that for the EU, import of Ukraine's 'green' electricity

[77]European Commission, Press release, 'EurobarOmeter: Europeans approve EU's response to the war in Ukraine,' (2022), available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2784}.

[78]Razumkov Centre, 'Attitudes and assessments of Ukrainian refugees who return home (April–May 2022)', available at: {https://razumkov.org.ua/en/sociology/press-releases/attitudes-and-assessments-of-ukrainian-refugees-who-return-home-april-may-2022}.

would lessen geopolitical dependence on the import of Russia's fossil energy carriers and contribute to the EU's fight against climate change/reduction of green gas emissions.

Tracking transformation of perceptions for each attribute allows us to argue the role of the *amplifying conditions* in shaping the expectation gaps. The broken frame of disengagement tracked in the 2016–17 dataset is now substituted by a frame of engagement. This engagement is now backed by multiple *commitments* (granting Ukraine its EU candidate status, introducing progressive packages of sanctions against the Russian Federation, supplying weapons, providing extensive help to refugees). All these actions can be also seen as examples of living up to moral responsibility not to abandon Ukraine, a country that chose to fight for European values. Further relieving the perception of moral injury is the perception of an EU capable of atonement. Most importantly, the demonstrated commitment is an attitude that may lead to a particular orientation of trust expressed towards the political system in its entirety or its components[79] and results in such behaviours as compliance, sympathetic judgement, and participation.

Conclusions

The focus of this article has been the concept of threat of abandonment – the threat that a major ally or supporter will decrease or end its assistance to an actor in a security crisis. We have investigated the applicability and usefulness of this concept in the case of Ukraine, faced by Russian aggression, since 2014. To do this, we used a perceptual approach with an emphasis on how gaps between expectations/hopes and performance were perceived by Ukraine elites in the time period 2014–22. We further theorised the notion of threat of abandonment by introducing two amplifying conditions – broken frames of engagement and perceived moral injury – that can intensify a perceived risk (perceived potential danger) of abandonment and transfer it into a threat (perceived actual danger) of abandonment. We also introduced the notion of factors that may trigger and (re)shape a perceived threat of abandonment – the *solidity of the frame of involvement* and *the form and nature of the commitments* and the *nesting of the cause of the apprehended abandonment.*

We find that in 2016–17, a perceived risk of or even threat of abandonment existed in Ukraine, triggered by the combination of all factors elaborated in this article. The many crises that had plagued the EU had, according to our respondents, led to a fragmented and disunited EU. 'European values' were seen as eroded by the rise of populism and the pressures of immigration flows. There was a widespread perception of a risk that the EU, preoccupied by its own problems, would lose interest in Ukraine and be less willing to spend resources to help the country. We can identify a significant gap between Ukrainian hopes and perceived potential EU performance: a critical expectation gap. Such a gap was facilitated by the 'nesting' of the cause – both on the EU side (the 'giver' perceived to fail in commitment to help despite all hopes) and the Ukraine side (the 'receiver' perceived as unable to commit to overcome deficiencies, and specifically corruption). In terms of the form/nature of the commitment and the solidity of the frame of involvement, Ukrainian data in 2016–17 demonstrated that there was a clash between the perceived high audience costs in Ukraine after the Euromaidan and the perceived lack of the EU's legally secured obligations (and specifically in offering Ukraine EU membership after the Revolution of Dignity 2013–14) and/or an effective legal framework to stop Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Those fed into the growing critical expectation gap. A critical expectation gap feeding the threat of abandonment perception was further facilitated by the perception of EU's commitments as uncertain in the light of the risk of internal disunity in a context of 27 sovereign members with varying foreign policy priorities. These were seen to exist in relation to Russia and Ukraine, with some member states adopting a Russia-friendly position even after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas.

[79]W. Jennings, G. Stoker, V. Valgarðsson, D. Devine, and J. Gaskell, 'How trust, mistrust and distrust shape the governance of the COVID-19 crisis', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28 (2021), pp. 1174–96.

Compared with the situation in 2022, we argue, there is still a perceived risk of abandonment, but no longer a perceived threat of abandonment. The EU's perceived engagement with Ukraine in terms of assistance is deemed to be high. The level of EU coherence has been strengthened. The EU and Ukraine are now seen as ideological allies confronted by the undemocratic and aggressive Russia. We interpret the decision to grant Ukraine candidate status as a major sign of commitment, strengthening the perceived goal compatibility, while mutual understanding seems to have increased. Here, adding to a more nuanced understanding of the threat of abandonment in security dilemmas, we propose an additional concept to our theorisation – the *reduction* of the expectation gap. We conceive it as an alternative pathway for impact that would allow us to minimise the emergence of critical expectation gaps.

However, a comparative analysis of elite perceptions before and after the escalation of the war shows a main change in the perceived geopolitical threats to the EU. In 2022, new major threats were now seen in the energy issue area. In contrast, the EU's multiple crises of the past no longer dominate perceptions. Importantly, in their perceptions, Ukrainian elites see Ukraine as entangled in the EU's potential energy crisis. Perceived threats to the EU in the energy field, where Russia uses energy as a weapon, become threats to Ukraine. In the most feared scenario, once again creating a critical expectations gap, the EU may again turn inwards to solve its crisis, and with this abandon Ukraine.

We also conclude that the two amplifying conditions that were introduced in our framework seem to have had the suggested effect. In 2016–17, in terms of the EU's *involvement*, many Ukrainians perceived a risk of EU disengagement – in 2022, it was replaced by a frame of engagement. In the first period, perceived lack of empathy and a low degree of understanding tended, we have argued, to lead to feelings of *moral injury*. These perceptions have been substituted by a perceived high level of concern and understanding, and willingness to help (changes in *cognitive, emotive* and *normative* image elements). These developments may arguably have resulted in a lower perceived threat of abandonment and a *reduction of the gap* between hopes and perceived performance. This was facilitated by the perceived solidity of the commitments: The EU's granting Ukraine the candidate status is seen as a legally secured obligation. The EU's ongoing support of Ukraine in all sectors communicates commitment in terms of provisions of material costly to the EU. Unequivocal statements by EU high-ranking officials address Ukraine with a consistent narrative of support, while sending the message that the EU and Ukraine are in the same family with the EU (e.g. see the words of the European Commission president in 2024: 'Ukraine belongs in the European family').[80] The disunity between 27 member states in their position to help Ukraine is now seen as more of an exception than a rule. On the other hand, should the EU be perceived as turning its back on Ukraine, the consequences of an abandonment now are much worse than they were in 2016–17.

In brief, we argue that the threat of abandonment is key to understanding EU–Ukraine relations. Ukraine is dependent on strong support from the EU; if this would end, the autonomy or even the sovereignty of Ukraine would be threatened. Much of diplomatic relations between the two therefore concern efforts to manage levels and forms of support and commitment. In our introduction, we stated that the study of Ukraine's perceptions of the EU as a supporter in its defence against Russian escalation of aggression is a unique case. Yet the importance of our study goes beyond the Ukrainian case. The conceptualisations of perceived risk and/or threat of abandonment we offer could be applied to understand interactions between the EU and other post-Soviet countries with a prospect of joining the EU (e.g. case of Moldova and Georgia). These two states lost territories due to Russia's aggression, while the EU failed to commit to their defence

---

[80]European Commission, 'Address of President von der Leyen to the Ukrainian Parliament following the European Council decision granting Ukraine candidate status', Kyiv, 1 July 2022, available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_4253}.

despite their very keen wish to join the EU (see e.g. Delcour and Wolzcuk,[81] who discuss how and EU had built up an expectation in the South Caucuses to act as a strong security actor, yet it had not delivered on it, leaving local observers feeling disappointed and seeing the EU as a weak security actor in the region). Arguably, the current pro-Russian turn away from the EU among Georgian political elites may be a result of the critical expectations gaps that were left unaddressed, despite the EU granting Georgia candidate status in December 2023. These conceptualisations could also be applied to understand the EU's relations with the post-Soviet countries without the prospects of joining the EU (e.g. in the Central Asia, where the EU remains an important development actor and a trade partner yet not a major security actor in this geopolitically contested region) or countries of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, also without accession options.[82] Importantly, the concept of perceived risk and threat of abandonment is useful to apply also beyond the supranational EU – for example, to understand interactions between the US and its Indo-Pacific partners in the changing geopolitical environment vis-à-vis the history of the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan.

We contribute to the theory of threats of abandonment by linking it to the existence of critical expectation gaps. If performance of a stronger partner is perceived by a dependent partner to severely contradict expectations and hopes of commitment and vital support, a perceived threat of abandonment is likely to materialise.

Natalia Chaban is Professor at Department of Media and Communication at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. She focuses her interdisciplinary research on cognitive and semiotic aspects of political and media discourses, image, and perceptions studies within the EU and IR contexts, and public diplomacy and political communication. Natalia widely publishes, including articles in high-impact journals, and directs the UC research centre Public Diplomacy and Political Communication Forum. She is President of Ukrainian Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand and leader of a number of transnational research projects supported by the European Commission and NATO.

Ole Elgström is Professor Emeritus at Department of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden. His ongoing research focuses on the European Union's global roles and on how the EU is perceived by external actors. He is publishing widely in leading journals on outsiders' images of the EU in multilateral trade, aid, and climate change negotiations. His other research interests include negotiation theory, and notably in the EU's negotiation strategies in international negotiations.

[81]L. Delcour and K. Wolczuk, 'Well-meaning but ineffective? Perceptions of the EU's role as a security actor in the South Caucasus', *European Foreign Affairs Review,* 23:1 (2018).

[82]See P. Müller, 'Normative power: Europe and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The EU's peacebuilding narrative meets local narratives', *European Security*, 28:3 (2019), pp. 251–67; O. Elgström, N. Chaban, M. Knodt, P. Müller, and S. Pardo, 'Perceptions of the EU's role in the Ukraine–Russian and the Israeli–Palestinian conflicts: A biased mediator?', *International Negotiation*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 299–318; on perceptions of the mutually opposing perceptions of the EU as a security actor in Israel and Palestine in 2015–18.