

The Colonial Imaginary of ‘Europe’ in the EU’s Asymmetrical Response to the Russian and Israeli Aggressions: Ukraine as a Member of the ‘Family’ Whilst ‘Othering’ Palestine

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Abstract

What is ‘Europe’? The response to this question is not straightforward, as ‘Europe’ is a floating signifier that is in constant renegotiation. In this article, we focus on the imaginary of ‘Europe’ that has been deployed in the most salient international crises of the last years that have heavily shaken European Union (EU) politics: the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the attack of Hamas on 7 October 2023, followed by the ensuing offensive of Israel on the Palestinian Gaza Strip. More concretely, we ask: *what is the narrative of ‘Europe’ articulated by the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the HRVP, Josep Borrell, in response to these events?* We argue that, in the context of these two cases, two distinct imaginaries of ‘Europe’ have been mobilised based on differentiated conceptualisations of the relationship of ‘Europe’ to Ukraine and Palestine. Whereas Ukraine is conceived as part of the ‘European family’, there is a process of ‘othering’ Palestine. Our article exposes the racism and double standards of the EU in regard to the defence of international law and human rights, the exclusiveness of who belongs to ‘Europe’ and the continuity of the colonial thinking that permeates the narratives of EU leaders.

Keywords: coloniality; European Union; Israel; Palestine; Russia; Ukraine

Introduction: The Imaginary of ‘Europe’ in the Context of International Crises

What is ‘Europe’? The response to this question is not straightforward, as ‘Europe’ is a floating signifier that is in constant renegotiation. Political actors and the European Union (EU) institutions have promoted specific conceptions of ‘Europe’ since the early stages of European integration (Calligaro, 2013). The anchoring of ‘Europe’ within a shared narrative is closely related to attempts to strengthen the EU’s democratic legitimacy (Oleart and Van Weyenberg, 2019; Roch, 2024; Schmidt, 2019; Sternberg, 2013), as this legitimacy is often questioned. The close relationship between the imaginary of ‘Europe’ and the legitimacy of the EU was illustrated by the project ‘New Narrative for Europe’, launched by the European Commission (EC) in 2013 (see Bouza Garcia, 2017). EC President José Manuel Durão Barroso expressed it in the following terms: ‘I think we need, in the beginning of the XXI century, namely for the new generation that is not so much identified with this narrative of Europe, to continue to tell the story of Europe’ (EC, 2013).

The articulation of the ‘story of Europe’ holds important ideological implications, as it contributes to the identification of collective identities by formulating who the ‘we’ is, as well as its relation to its ‘others’. It also rewrites history as a way to make sense of the present, emphasising the role of certain communities whilst omitting that of others. As Delanty (1995, p. 2) puts it, ‘the European idea has been more the product of conflict than

of consensus'. In this sense, a central element in the articulation of a shared imaginary of 'Europe' is foreign policy and the international stage more broadly, as it is here that we can clearly see what 'Europe' is and who are its 'others'. In this article, we focus on the imaginary of 'Europe' as deployed by two key supranational EU actors, the EC President and the High Representative/Vice President (HRVP), in the most salient international crises of the last years, which have heavily shaken EU politics. These are, namely, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the aftermath of the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, followed by the months-long subsequent full-scale assault by the Israeli military forces on the Gaza Strip and Palestinians. More concretely, we ask: *what is the narrative of 'Europe' as articulated by the EC President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the HRVP, Josep Borrell, in response to these events?*

We argue that, in the context of these two cases, the imaginary of 'Europe' has been renegotiated in the differentiated articulation of the relationship of 'Europe' to Ukraine and Palestine. This is relevant not only for shedding light on the 'othering' effect in relation to Ukraine and Palestine but also in relation to the repositioning of the EU in a context of increasing global tensions. Several voices within the EU are calling for an 'EU sovereignist turn', as well as a redefinition of the role of the EU in the world (see Bora, 2023; Roch and Oleart, 2024), with international conflicts constituting an opportunity to define and mobilise these new narratives about Europe and the EU. More concretely, our article exposes the double standards of the EU in regard to the defence of international law and human rights, the exclusiveness of who belongs to 'Europe', and the continuity of colonial thinking and racism that permeate the narratives of EU leaders. Whilst the EU has always been a geopolitical actor, the increasing discursive emphasis of 'Europe' as a distinct geopolitical actor in mainstream EU narratives and its focus on 'defending Europe' is reinforcing the EU's coloniality, illustrated by the asymmetrical response to Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine.

After this introduction, we develop an analytical framework designed to capture the discursive articulation of Europe as an imagined community. Next, we describe the methodology upon which the article is empirically based. We then discuss the empirical results by introducing the imaginary of 'Europe' in the two cases by the two actors selected. Finally, the article's conclusion summarises the argument put forward and its political and academic implications.

I. Europe as an 'Imagined Community': The EU's 'Defensive Turn' and its Political Boundaries

In 1957, the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community (EEC), whose member states included West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Ever since, the European integration project has increasingly included more countries, extending to countries in all geographical directions: West, South, North, and East. A peak of 28 EU member states was reached in 2013, when Croatia joined, which decreased to 27 when the United Kingdom officially left the EU in 2020. Meanwhile, many countries are currently considered 'candidate' countries, such as Ukraine, Serbia, or Moldova. The changing nature of the EU as a polity and its potential (yet uncertain) prospects has led to vibrant debates surrounding its identity and its ideational borders: *where are Europe's political borders?* Furthermore, how is Europe

narrated as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006)? Who is Europe's 'we', the subject of EU democracy? The 'demos' that constitutes European democracy has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, primarily regarding whether it has a single European 'demos' or rather a European 'demoi' (Nicolaidis, 2013), with some decolonial critiques to this literature introducing the idea of the 'decolonial multitude' (Oleart, 2023) – a 'we' that transcends traditional 'European' boundaries. This debate confirms that the collective political identity of 'Europe' is not settled. And, crucially, the establishment of where the borders lie, which territories and communities are included and which ones are not, is a matter of political contestation.

In terms of narratives, traditional accounts of 'Europe' as articulated by EU institutions emphasise 'peace' as a central component of the European project, with a set of 'shared' values that are articulated in the successive treaties, such as democracy, human rights, equality, and rule of law. At the same time, the EU institutions have had difficulties in integrating its colonial history into its narrative of 'Europe' as an imagined community. Although Europe is portrayed in the dominant narrative as a civic and open community promoting universal values of democracy, human rights, freedom, and equality, the historical boundaries of Europe have been built on ethnic and geopolitical markers. For instance, the fact that Algeria (at the time, still part of France's colonial empire) was part of the first EEC (Brown, 2022) is often forgotten and omitted from mainstream EU narratives (see Garavini, 2021; Pasture, 2018). Similarly, when Morocco applied in 1987 to become a member of the EEC, its application was denied on the grounds that it was not a 'European country'. More recently, right-wing political actors, especially in central and northern Europe, have opposed Turkey's accession to the EU (see Roch, 2021, 2023) arguing that there are no common 'cultural' foundations. This shows how the EU's 'civic identity' is intrinsically linked to an ethnic one (Kundnani, 2023) and that historical narratives are discursive formations that are shaped by present political dynamics (see White, 2002).

This brings us to the colonial continuities of the EU. Rather than overcoming the colonial past of its member states, colonialism is inherent to the European integration project (Hansen and Jonsson, 2014), even if it is under a different form. Whereas colonialism refers to the direct control of a country by another political entity, decolonial scholars such as Aníbal Quijano or María Lugonés have put forward the notion of *coloniality*. Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243) defines this as the 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration'. Whilst colonialism materialised in the subjugation of some (primarily European) countries over other countries, the horizon of political independence is insufficient to reverse postcolonial power relations and practices. In this sense, the imaginary upon which the EU situates itself as the global champion of international law, human rights, and democracy is part of such coloniality and reproduces colonial Europe's '*mission civilisatrice*' towards the rest of the world, assuming a hierarchical relation between 'civilised Europe' and its 'others'. This tendency has grown with EU leaders' growing 'geopolitical' conception of 'Europe'.

Whereas traditional narratives about 'Europe' have emphasised 'peace', 'defending Europe' as a narrative has recently emerged, introducing an important geopolitical dimension into the imaginary of 'Europe'. For instance, research has shown a trend towards EU 'strategic autonomy' (Jacobs et al., 2022), particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, as

well as ‘European sovereignty’ (Bora and Schramm, 2023). A text-book example of this is the recent narrative of President Emmanuel Macron during the French presidential election that Bouza García and Oleart (2021) describe as ‘make Europe great again’. The rise of this new discursive articulation has implications for the political struggle around sovereignty in the EU (Roch and Oleart, 2024). In line with this narrative, the von der Leyen (VdL) Commission (which kicked off in December 2019) framed itself from the start as ‘the geopolitical Commission’. The emergence of the notion of ‘European sovereignty’ is closely associated with a geopolitical perspective in which rival powers, such as Russia or China, are increasingly influential in how the global ‘rules of the game’ are set. In this context, it is only by legislating and taking decisions at the EU level that any EU member state will be able to shape global political and policy-making processes. This leads to a process of ‘geopoliticisation’ of the EU (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019). Evoking ‘European sovereignty’ in this geopolitical context constructs the EU political community in opposition to ‘systemic rivals’ such as China or Russia (or potentially the United States).

The resignification of ‘sovereignty’ as ‘European’ focuses its community-building effort on defining Europe by its internal cohesion in contrast to a changing world, one in which Europe is losing its weight in global geopolitics in favour of players like China or Russia. Therefore, European sovereignty emphasises the necessity to act with a single voice on the global stage to increase the global influence of the EU. This is a discursive innovation, given that ‘defending Europe’ has not traditionally been part of EU institutional narratives (Biegoń, 2013). This implies a departure from the idea of the EU as a site for democracy and as a global player that seeks to expand democracy and human rights internationally as universal values. This divergence between the two conceptions of the EU (geopolitical versus democratic/universalist) is likely to produce tensions, at the same time as innovative forms of discursive legitimation.

The ‘geopolitical turn’ implies the need to redefine the borders (physical and imaginary) of Europe and identify the exact locus of European sovereignty. There is a growing need to specify what needs to be defended (who is Europe’s ‘we’) and against whom (who are the ‘others’). In this process, the representation of Europe’s borders and its ‘others’ is at stake (Balibar, 2016), a process that has important implications from a decolonial perspective. Wars and invasions force the EU to position itself, especially if there is an ‘ally’ involved, and the Russian and Israeli invasions are relevant examples of this. Of course, these are different conflicts susceptible to lead to divergent reactions by the EU, dependent on its interests and international alliances. The core of this research is to uncover the nature and contours of the new imaginary about Europe that is being mobilised by the EU and the tensions between the geopolitical EU and the EU as the global ambassador of democratic values and universal human rights. This serves to map current and future moves in the reconfiguration of European identity and its implications for internal and global EU politics.

II. Cases, Data and Methods

Case Studies: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli Offensive on Palestine

This article explores the discursive articulation of ‘Europe’ at the EU level by the most relevant supranational actors in foreign policy, the EC President and the HRVP. The

speeches by the EC President and the HRVP are an appropriate corpus for this endeavour (see De Ville and Orbie, 2014; Oleart and Theuns, 2023), given their central role in constructing meaning and shaping narratives at the EU level (especially at the global stage), as well as contributing to the legitimacy of particular policy actions (Pansardi and Battagazzorre, 2018). Whilst the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) requires unanimity across all EU member states, the narratives put forward by these two actors are an important part of the puzzle to make sense of the asymmetry with which the EU has responded to the two conflicts. More concretely, we focus on the narrative of 'Europe' that has been deployed, exploring speeches delivered during two periods across two different contexts: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli offensive against Palestine after the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023.

Why are these two cases pertinent for comparison? Whilst they are not fully symmetric conflicts and have their own distinct political and historical specificities, there are strong similarities between them: a militarily powerful country (Russia and Israel) attacking a neighbouring nation (Ukraine and Palestine) with whom it has historically unequal relations (potentially even conceived as colonial ones). However, in spite of such similarities, the response in terms of EU foreign policy has been very different, as well as its narrative. Whereas the EU response to the Russian aggression was largely driven by concerns relating to human rights, democracy, and anti-authoritarianism, the months-long Israeli aggression on Palestine following the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023 was driven by Israel's 'right to defend itself', thus uncovering the 'geopolitical face' of the EU and the inherent contradictions that can be found in its institutional narratives and political choices. Such differentiated foreign policy responses are extremely relevant for the interests of this research.

More concretely, the EU responded fiercely and decisively to the Russian invasion, mobilising multiple channels of support to Ukraine. The EU gave political support in the international arena to Ukraine, financial assistance, and even helped develop its defence capabilities. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was invited multiple times to the European Parliament (EP) and EU leaders (including both VdL and Borrell), as well as many member state political leaders, visited Ukraine several times as a gesture in support of the country's struggle against the Russian government. Furthermore, the EU imposed a wide range of sanctions against the Russian government, as well as Russian companies and individuals connected to President Vladimir Putin. 'War crimes' have been regularly alleged against Russian forces, as they have been reportedly targeting hospitals and other civilian infrastructures.¹ The gravity with which the EU conceived the Russian invasion of Ukraine even led to the mobilisation of the European Peace Facility (EPF) to not only support Ukraine financially but also provide weapons, breaking a longstanding taboo on supplying weapons collectively to a third country. The EU also banned Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, two state-sponsored Russian media outlets, from broadcasting in the EU. Furthermore, the EC put forward the Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) project to help EU member states to integrate Ukrainian refugees as soon as possible. Symbolically, Russia has been excluded from

¹The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant on the grounds of war crimes against Russian President Putin in March 2023. Similarly, the ICC (see United Nations, 2024) also issued an arrest warrant application for arrest warrants on the grounds of war crimes and crimes against humanity against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 21 November 2024.

the Eurovision Song Contest by the European Broadcasting Union since 2022, and no Russian football teams are allowed to play in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League – in fact, the 2022 final, which was scheduled to take place in Saint Petersburg, was relocated to Paris.

In contrast, the reaction to Israel's invasion of Palestine after 7 October 2023 has been marked by the EU's support for Israel and its right to 'defend itself, in line with international law'. Not only have Palestinian leaders not been invited to speak in plenary sessions at the EP, but in fact, there has been a heavy backlash against political actors advocating for solidarity with Palestine on the grounds of maintaining 'public order' and 'security' across several EU member states (Amnesty International, 2023). Only Israeli leaders have been invited to speak at the EP, and EC President VdL with EP President Roberta Metsola even made a visit to Israel and held a joint press conference with Israeli President Isaac Herzog on 13 October 2023 (EC, 2023). Crucially, there has been little EU foreign policy change in relation to Israel–Palestine, when it is clear that the EU could have made different policy choices. For instance, in March 2024, almost 200 civil society organisations called for the suspension of the EU–Israel Association Agreement (International Federation for Human Rights, 2024), as human rights and democratic principles are an essential component of the agreement. In spite of the alleged human rights violations by the State of Israel on Palestine and the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed by the Israeli Defence Forces, as of December 2024, the EU continues to maintain the association agreement intact.

Thus, whereas there has been an urgent EU foreign policy change in regard to Russia in support of Ukraine, the EU's foreign policy response in relation to Israel has not changed in spite of its aggression towards Palestine. In other words, how can we explain the urgent 'collective European responsibility to act' (Maurer et al., 2023) that was mobilised in relation to Ukraine, and the lack of it in relation to Palestine? What is the imaginary of 'Europe' that EU leaders put forward in order to make sense of the urgency to support Ukrainians in contrast to the reluctance to support Palestinians? We will address this question by mobilising a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) approach.

Methods and Data: An NPF Approach

This research seeks to unearth the narrative that justifies the very different policy and political positions of the EU vis-à-vis Ukraine and Palestine. In order to do so, methodologically, we undertake our analysis by using a NPF approach (see Shanahan et al., 2018). This methodological approach distinguishes several components present within the narratives that we will explore empirically in policy-makers' speeches. First, a problem is identified by policy-makers. Subsequently, the series of events that have led to such a problem are established and are 'emplotted' in particular ways to establish causal connections, and a moral plot about what should, and should not, be done normatively. There are a set of characters, primarily three: the victims of the problem; the villain responsible for the problem; and the hero, that is, the actors able to address and correct the problem. We are particularly interested in the role attributed to 'Europe' in the narrative deployed by the two selected EU policy-makers in relation to Ukraine and Palestine: who is 'we' in EU leaders' narratives, and who is 'they'? Furthermore, how is the conflict defined, and who are conceived to be the main opponents? The NPF approach is particularly

suitable to address these questions as it connects public policy decisions (the EU's asymmetrical support to both Ukraine and Israel) to the articulation of narratives. Thus, unlike other types of narrative analysis, the NPF approach serves to map the different foreign policy positions taken by the EU in regard to Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine, while also uncovering the embeddedness of these positions in long-term overall narratives (see Schlauffer et al., 2022).

Our methodological strategy relies on quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore the textual corpus. The quantitative exploration serves merely to provide 'entry points' into the textual corpus and does not contradict the basic interpretive approach of this study, which seeks to capture the main intersubjective meanings mobilised by key EU actors. As such, our main task is to identify emerging meaning constellations, in our case in the form of narratives, and relate them with the position of the actors. Computer-assisted exploration of collocates is only a more systematic way of processing text and identifying the most important elements of the narratives, as well as visualising their relative importance. The key point here is that we integrate these quantitative findings into a broader interpretive framework by relying on the main qualitative NPF approach. In sum, both quantitative and qualitative techniques serve the same end: the reconstruction of interpretations by situated actors about 'intersubjective facts' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2015, p. 11), in this case the Russian and Israeli invasions.

Collocation analysis is a technique of corpus linguistics that identifies all words co-occurring with the node word, serving to capture one of the main forms used to generate patterns of signification (Baker, 2006; Baker and McEnery, 2015; Fairclough, 2003, p. 131). Following the logic of the NPF approach, we focus on the main collocations of the key actors involved in the conflicts: the EU, Ukraine, Russia, Palestine² and Israel. Collocates are extracted by exploring the textual corpus with the software R, identifying all textual segments surrounding the node words, specifically five words to the left and five to the right – as is generally recommended in the literature (see Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008, p. 11). All pre-processing steps and the computation of the collocates are carried out with the R package *Quanteda* (Benoit et al., 2018) and other additional packages necessary for calculations in R. The primary collocates attributing meaning to the node words (e.g., Europe and Ukraine) are used as entry points into the textual corpus, which is explored qualitatively in a second step. In it, we concentrate on the specific discursive articulations mobilised by the EU to frame the conflict, identify key causal events and the actors involved, and examine how Europe is portrayed.

More specifically, we identify the diagnosis made by the EC President VdL and HRVP Borrell about the main threatening processes for 'Europe' and the prognosis about the measures or proposals to address them. We focus on these actors as two of the most important executive actors in the EU: VdL, as the head of the EC, represents the EU supranational dimension and the main body for policy-oriented decision-making, whereas Borrell is the highest representative of foreign affairs and security policy in the EU. To precisely capture the position and narrative of the EU on these international conflicts, we focus on these two actors and avoid institutions such as the European Council, which,

²As we will show below, the preliminary exploration of the corpus required us to include 'Gaza' as an additional term to capture the discursive articulation on Palestine. VdL and Borrell did not mention Palestine frequently in the corpus; in fact, they avoided referring to Palestine as a nation with political legitimacy and sovereignty, preferring to use 'Gaza' or 'Gaza Strip' rather than 'Palestine'.

Table 1: Number of Speeches by Actor and Period.

Textual corpus (speeches)		
<i>Periods</i>	<i>Commission President</i>	<i>HRVP</i>
Russian invasion of Ukraine 24 February 2022–9 May 2022	Von der Leyen (16)	Borrell (33)
Israel–Palestine conflict 7 October 2023–11 January 2024	Von der Leyen (30)	Borrell (31)

Abbreviation: HRVP, High Representative/Vice President.

although a very central EU institution, is more directly determined by the intergovernmental bargaining between member states. Hence, this analytical strategy allows us to disentangle the different meanings given to ‘Europe’ in the context of these two different conflicts and illustrate the limits of legitimate EU foreign policy (Diez, 2014).

In terms of the specific time periods examined, we have collected all the speeches by VdL and Borrell that mention ‘Russia’ or ‘Ukraine’ from the EC and the European External Action Service (EEAS) press corners from 24 February 2022 (the day that Russia started its invasion of Ukraine) until 9 May 2022 (the closing date of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which had an important geopolitical component as it intertwined the internal efforts to democratise the EU with the external threat to EU democracy by the Russian invasion of Ukraine). For Israel–Palestine, we have followed the same methods but based on the keywords Gaza, Palestine and Israel from 7 October 2023 (the Hamas-led attack on Israel) until 11 January 2024 (the first day of the public hearing in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against Israel, led by South Africa). The two time periods have been selected on the basis that they are relevant dates that capture the initial EU responses to the case studies and are broadly similar in terms of the amount of speeches. All speeches analysed by period and actor are shown in Table 1.³

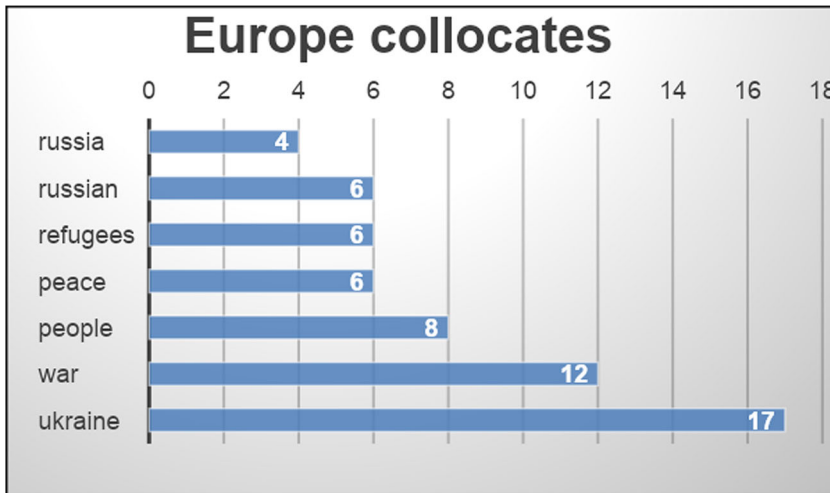
III. From the Russian Invasion of Ukraine to Israel’s Offensive on Palestine: The ‘Deserving’ Refugees and the ‘Others’?

The EU’s Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022–9 May 2022)

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a shock to EU leaders, who reacted in a quick and united manner to counter it (Bosse, 2023). The speeches of EC President VdL and HRVP Borrell are an illustration of the united front the EU took to confront the Russian aggression, outlining a coherent narrative. The villain of the narrative is clear: the Russian government and its complicit allies. Such a straightforward identification also articulates who the victims of the story are: Ukraine as a state and as a people, as well as what should be done about it: sanctioning the Russian government and its allies whilst financially, politically, militarily, and diplomatically supporting Ukraine. In this context, ‘Europe’ is imagined as encompassing Ukraine, as Europe’s collocates

³There are more speeches by Borrell than by VdL, which is understandable as the former is the primary EU actor in regard to foreign policy, even if the latter is also a relevant actor, especially as she conceived her Commission as the ‘geopolitical’ Commission in 2019.

Figure 1: Collocates of 'Europe' in the Russia–Ukraine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13719)]



illustrate (see Figure 1). Ukraine is closely linked to 'refugees', as the EU openly advocated for the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees in EU member states. As argued by VdL,

After Bucha, more than ever, Europe stands firmly with Ukraine. We stand with Ukrainians in their devastated cities and their bomb shelters. We stand with them in their parliament, surrounded by sandbags and barricades. We stand with the millions who flee the invaders. (EC, 2022a)

Whilst they emphasise slightly different timelines, both Borrell and VdL contextualise the Russian invasion with the post-World War II context and the Cold War. For instance, VdL explicitly mentions the Soviet invasions of Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. As Borrell and VdL respectively put it,

We are facing a full-fledged invasion of a country by another one. It is not a special forces operation, like Russia intends us to believe. It is a fully fledged invasion with bombing, killing of civilians, with confrontations between two armies. This is the worst thing that has happened in Europe – let me say – since the end of the Cold War. (EEAS, 2022a)

War has returned to Europe. Almost thirty years after the Balkan Wars, and over half a century after Soviet troops marched into Prague and Budapest, civil defence sirens again went off in the heart of a European capital. Thousands of people fleeing from bombs, camped in underground stations – holding hands, crying silently, trying to cheer each other up. (...) Men, women, children are dying, once again, because a foreign leader, President Putin, decided that their country, Ukraine, has no right to exist. And we will never ever let that happen and never ever accept that. (EC, 2022b)

Ukraine is the primary victim, and one of the heroes of the narrative. Both EU leaders also share a broader framing that conceives the international system and community as a further victim, with the Russian aggression affecting not only Ukraine but the world as a whole. As Borrell argued,

It is not just we, Europeans, or the United States, it is the whole world who is being affected by the fact that a powerful country invades militarily a neighbour, who has done nothing against him. This is something extremely grave. (...) If the United Nations does not condemn what Russia is doing, then it is the law of the jungle. It is the law of the stronger. One that is mighty then invades the others using brutal force. If the United Nations does not condemn the Russian behaviour, then it is the whole international system that is being put in question. That is the real problem. (EEAS, 2022a)

Such framing of what the problem is, who the aggressor and the victim(s) are, is justified through the language of ‘peace’ (another relevant collocate of Europe), ‘security’, ‘democracy’, and ‘freedom’. In fact, VdL argued that ‘if freedom has a name, its name is Ukraine. And the Ukrainian flag is today the flag of freedom’ (EC, 2022c). The question of (Russian) disinformation is also integrated as an important element to make sense of the situation. In fact, on the question of ‘foreign interference’, which is mostly related to the question of disinformation (on the geopoliticisation of regulating disinformation in the EU, see Bouza García and Oleart, 2023), Borrell explained that Russian state-sponsored media ‘are an integral part of the aggression – it not just bombing houses, infrastructure, the bodies of the people; they are bombing their minds, they are bombing their spirits’ (EEAS, 2022b). The banning of RT and Sputnik (one of the collocates) in the EU responds to the fact that ‘they are not independent media; they are assets, they are weapons in the Kremlin’s manipulation ecosystem (...) Both channels [Sputnik and RT] facilitate and engage in cyber-facilitated influence operations, including those that have been attributed to the Russian Military Intelligence, the famous GRU’ (EEAS, 2022b). In contrast, Borrell endorsed reclaimed the role of the EEAS StratCom team and the EUvsDisinfo initiative, which attempt to counter Kremlin narratives through monitoring and debunking methods.

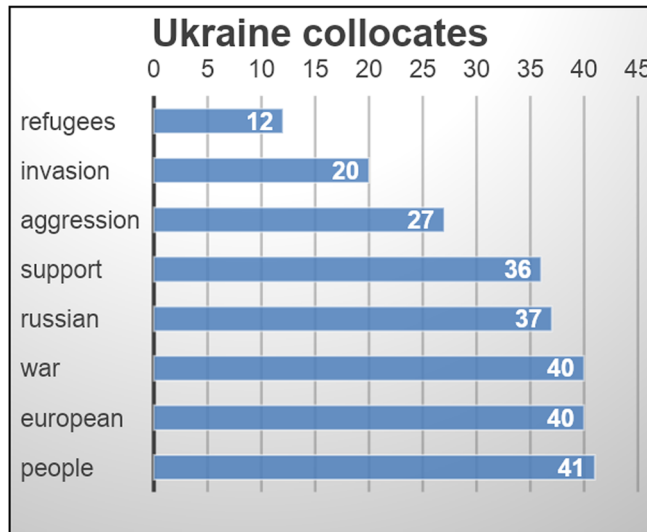
In terms of the imaginary of ‘Europe’ deployed by both actors, they share an understanding of European integration as a ‘project of peace’, which largely reproduces the longstanding narrative of the EU:

The European Union is a peace project. It is based on peace. On peace between the member states who fought for centuries and thanks to the Union we brought peace to Europe. And what we do in the world is support peace. We are the opposite of war. We are the opposite of those who seek solutions to interstate problems through violence. (EEAS, 2022c)

Such an understanding is not in contradiction with the supply of weapons to Ukraine. As Borrell argued, ‘until now, it was considered that the European Union, which is a peace Union and not a military Union, was not allowed to supply arms to a third country. That is what we are doing now. This is another taboo that falls’ (EEAS, 2022b). Breaking this taboo is thus deemed necessary for the EU because the Russian aggression ‘is not just a war, in the military sense of the word, it is an attack against the population of Ukraine, its cities, civilians, including women, children, schools and hospitals. The Russian armed forces are causing death, desperation and massive damage’ (EEAS, 2022e). Along the same lines, VdL emphasised the need to support Ukraine on the grounds of international law and the United Nations (UN) Charter:

Two weeks ago, I visited Bucha, the suburb of Kyiv, which was devastated by Russian troops as they withdrew from the north of Ukraine. I saw with my own eyes the bodies

Figure 2: Collocates of 'Ukraine' in the Russia–Ukraine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13719)]



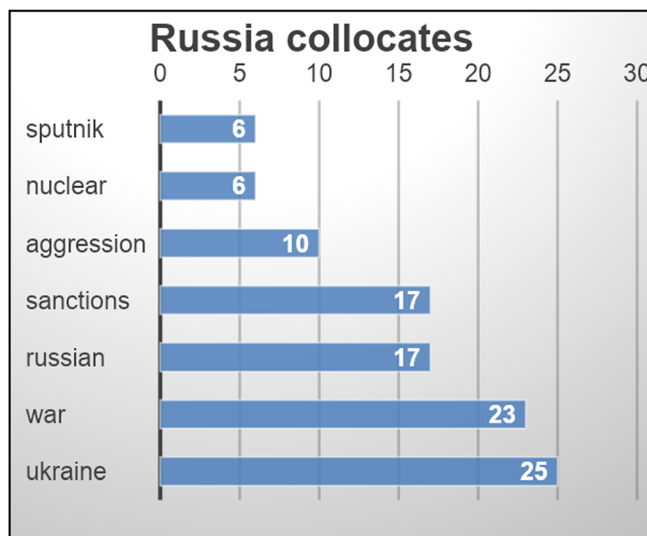
lined up on the ground. I saw the mass graves. I listened to survivors of atrocious crimes that the Kremlin's soldiers committed. I saw the scars of bombed schools, resident houses and hospitals. These are severe violations of international law. Targeting and killing innocent civilians. Redrawing borders by force. Subjugating the will of a free people. This goes against core principles enshrined in the UN Charter. (EC, 2022d)

Examining the Ukraine and Russia collocates (see Figures 2 and 3), there are additional positive connotations related to the Ukrainian people and Ukraine and negative portrayals of Russia. The EU proposed and adopted sanctions (a major 'Russia' collocate) against the Russian government and its allies (primarily the Belarusian government) and diplomatic efforts to isolate Putin, while also providing strong support to Ukraine politically (for instance, inviting Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on multiple occasions and also visiting Ukraine), financially, and militarily. The heroes of the story are thus presented as being not only the Ukrainian people but also 'Europe', which needs to unify against the Russian aggression and also move away from its energy dependency on Russia.⁴

The guiding story that both VdL and Borrell adopt is that of 'democracies' fighting 'authoritarianism'. They both reproduce the story whereby the Russian invasion of Ukraine is part of a broader struggle where 'democracies' that 'share values' oppose 'authoritarians'. They share this narrative, as both have a 'civilisational' understanding of the conflict, and reclaim the closeness of Ukraine with 'Europe' and 'European civilisation'. As Borrell argued, 'If we want to protect European civilisation, we have to unify. Being united is precisely what we have done in responding to Russia's aggression against

⁴Borrell even reflects critically on EU policies after the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, given that rather than reducing energy dependence on Russia, the EU increased it (EEAS, 2022f).

Figure 3: Collocates of ‘Russia’ in the Russia–Ukraine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13719)]



Ukraine. Usually, we don’t take decisions that quickly or in a united manner. This time was different’ (EEAS, 2022g). The interests of the EU are perceived as inherently connected to Ukraine. As Borrell further argued, ‘we have no other choice than standing together, as European Union, in support of Ukraine. Keeping in mind that it is not just supporting Ukrainian, it is also supporting our security and the stability of the world’ (EEAS, 2022d). This explains the open arms with which the EU has welcomed Ukrainian refugees (which appears as a relevant collocate of Ukraine, as shown in Figure 2). In this sense, VdL argued that ‘until Ukrainians can safely return home, and rebuild their independent and democratic country in peace, we will welcome and support them. Because they are part of our *European family*’ (EC, 2022e, emphasis added).

Similarly, VdL makes the case for supporting refugees, because ‘they deserve it’, and praises EU citizens for the solidarity shown towards Ukrainian refugees – specifically the member states that neighbour Ukraine:

Today, a Union of almost half a billion people has mobilised for Ukraine. The people of Europe are demonstrating in front of Russian embassies all across our Union. Many of them have opened their homes to Ukrainians – fleeing from Putin’s bombs. And let me thank especially Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary for welcoming these women, men and children. Europe will be there for them, not only in the first days, but also in the weeks and months to come. (...) *They deserve it*. We need to do that now. We know this is only the beginning. More Ukrainians will need our protection and solidarity. We are and we will be there for them. (EC, 2022b, emphasis added)

However, whereas Borrell’s understanding is mostly oriented towards practical support of ‘Europe’ to Ukraine, VdL mobilises an imaginary that situates Ukraine as part of the ‘European family’, even using Ukrainian language in some of her speeches.

Ukraine is part of the 'we' that constitutes 'Europe' in VdL's political imaginary. Speaking in the EP, VdL argued that 'Nobody in this hemicycle can doubt that a people that stands up so bravely for our European values belongs in our European family. And therefore, Honourable Members, I say: Long live Europe. And long live a free and independent Ukraine. My z vamy. Slava Ukraini' (EC, 2022b). Interestingly, rather than straightforwardly 'othering' Russians, both Borrell and VdL make an explicit distinction between the 'Russian people' and the 'Kremlin' or 'Putin'. In fact, the EEAS even published an interview of Borrell in Russian. As argued by Borrell,

I want to stress that we are not targeting the Russian people. Many of them spoke up against this senseless war and I want to salute their courage. The courage of the people that in 58 Russian cities have been demonstrating against the war. And we certainly make a difference between the Kremlin and Russia. Putin is not the Russian people. (EEAS, 2022c)

Last, it is relevant that VdL's final words in the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe – framed initially as an attempt to internally democratise the EU – on 9 May 2022 were focused on Ukraine:

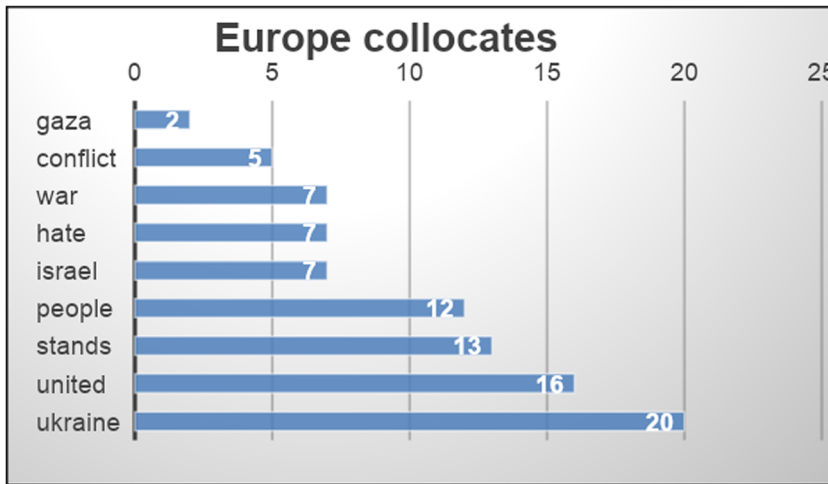
I want to give a very special message to our Ukrainian friends and family. The future of Europe is also your future. The future of our democracy is also the future of your democracy. 72 years ago, war in Europe was replaced with something different, something new. First a Community, today a Union. It was the day when the future began. It is a future that we have been writing together ever since – as architects and builders of Europe. And the next page, dear Ukrainian friends, is now being written by you. By us. By all of us together. Slava Ukraini. Long live Europe. (EC, 2022f)

The EU's Response to the Israeli Offensive Against Palestine (7 October 2023–11 January 2024)

The 7 October 2023 Hamas-led deadly attacks on Israel also shocked EU leaders, who responded by extending their political support to Israel. However, as the Israeli government responded by killing tens of thousands of Palestinians in the ensuing months, the EU continued to support its 'friend and partner', Israel. In the Israel–Palestine narrative of VdL and Borrell, 'Europe' is represented as being united, but, in this case, the threat appears more abstract than a particular entity – in some ways similar to post-9/11 landscape in the United States, in which 'united against terrorism' was the prevailing narrative. Israel is situated in a positive relation to Europe, unifying both conflicts in the solidarity from Europe to Ukraine and Israel. The initial reaction of VdL was her full support for the 'defensive' reaction of Israel: 'It is pure terrorism. And Israel is entitled to defend itself. The European Union stands with Israel in this ordeal. Dear friends, this ordeal is the latest on a long list of challenges that we will overcome together' (EC, 2023a).

As the collocates illustrate (see Figure 4), there is a much closer relation between 'Europe' and 'Israel' than with 'Palestine'. In fact, 'Palestine' is barely mentioned, replaced by references to 'Gaza', which is not portrayed as an occupied nation but as a territory in which a tragedy is taking place, as if it were a natural disaster with no aggressor. Borrell argued the following:

Figure 4: Collocates of ‘Europe’ in the Israel–Palestine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13719)]



And on Gaza, where a humanitarian tragedy is taking place and over which Europe has taken its division to the United Nations. What is happening in Gaza is the consequence of a political and moral failure of the international community, which has not done everything it should have done, 30 years after the Oslo agreements, 30 years!, to make the two-state solution a reality. (EEAS, 2023a)

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is depicted as a war against terrorism, relating to hate (which collocates strongly with Europe) against Jewish people and antisemitism the main source of the conflict. As in the case of Russia–Ukraine, there is a civilisational dimension in the narrative, as the struggle against ‘terror’ may appear as a proxy for ‘Western civilisation’. Europe is strongly collocated with the people of Israel and the Jewish people, which is represented as the victim of terrorist attacks, as can be read in the following excerpt of a speech by VdL:

For decades Kfar Aza was a flourishing kibbutz of 750 people. Today it is a ghost town. The Hamas terrorists went from house to house. They burned people alive. They mutilated children and babies. They forced the elderly out of their homes. And why? Because these people were Jews. Because they lived in the state of Israel. (EC, 2023d)

The excerpt above illustrates that the villain of the EU’s narrative on Israel–Palestine is primarily Hamas, as ‘they aim to eradicate Jewish life from the land’ (EC, 2023c), according to VdL. Hamas, especially in VdL speeches, is the leading aggressor and responsible for both Israeli and Palestinian deaths. The denial of Palestine as a political community, or the fact that ‘Nakba’, ‘genocide’, ‘occupation’, ‘settler-colonialism’, and ‘apartheid’ do not feature in the EU’s narrative, is illustrative of the understanding that VdL and Borrell have of the conflict – in spite of the fact that, as we will see, Borrell’s speeches are more nuanced than those of VdL. In fact, in February 2024, Borrell publicly criticised VdL’s trip to Israel on 13 October 2023, arguing that ‘Von der Leyen’s trip, with such a

completely pro-Israeli position, without representing anyone but herself in a matter of international politics, has carried a high geopolitical cost for Europe' (Pérez, 2024).

Rather than foregrounding the longer term historical context, in VdL's speeches, it appears as if the 'clock' of the Israel–Palestine conflict starts on 7 October 2023. In her own words, 'This horror calls for a united response from us. As human beings, as defenders of a free world, as citizens of Europe where hate, terror and racism have no place. Europe stands with Israel in this dark moment' (EC, 2023b). Thus, Hamas is not only the aggressor against Israel but also the actor responsible for the 'humanitarian crisis' in Palestine. The few cases in which other 'peoples' are named in the narrative are rather impersonal and not pertaining to a legitimated community, nation, or state, such as 'hundreds of wounded people' in a hospital in Gaza (EC, 2023b). This narrative is also corroborated by the collocates of Israel and Gaza/Palestine (see Figures 5 and 6). Israel collocates first with Hamas as the struggle between a democracy and a terrorist group, which is the primary representation of the conflict (as we have shown above). 'Peace', another relevant collocate, serves to emphasise the obstacles to reach ceasefire agreements, in which Hamas is pointed to as the main culprit. Borrell argued that

Hamas has been boycotting any attempt at peace. It has opposed United Nations and Arab League resolutions that would pave the way for a possible peace agreement between Israel and Palestine. Hamas wants to eradicate Israel. It does not want peace; it wants destruction. But its actions are also making it impossible for the Palestinians to achieve a just peace. (EEAS, 2023b)

'Gaza' and 'Palestine' appear as relevant collocates of Israel, and there are some new discursive articulations associating Israel, Gaza, and Palestine. It is particularly Borrell who suggests an excessive response by Israel, as he attempted to prevent a further escalation of the Israeli attacks on civilians or the further occupation of Palestinian lands:

Figure 5: Collocates of 'Israel' in the Israel–Palestine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

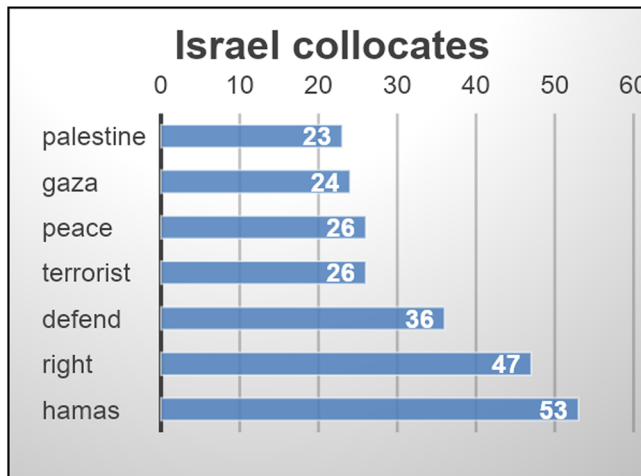
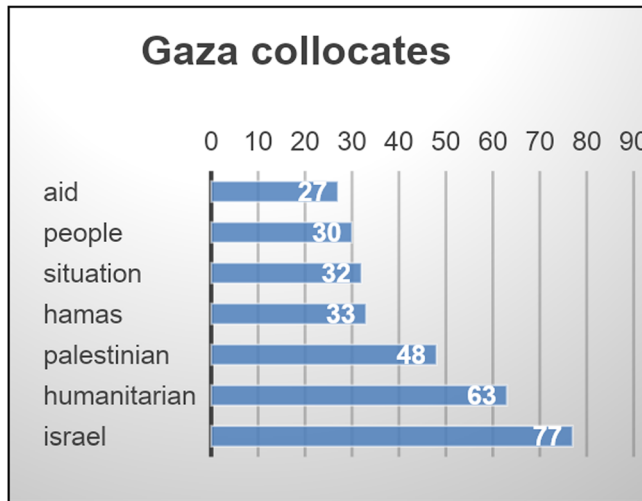


Figure 6: Collocates of ‘Gaza’ in the Israel–Palestine Corpus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13719)]



The first ‘no’ is: No to forced displacements of Palestinians in and from Gaza. No forced displacement of Palestinian people out of Gaza. No territorial changes. No to the reoccupation by Israel or a safe haven for Hamas in Gaza. No to the dissociation of Gaza from the overall Palestinian issue. The solution in Gaza has to be embedded as part of the solution to the whole Palestinian problem. So, no dissociation of Gaza from the overall Palestinian issue. (EEAS, 2023c)

This is the harshest critique of Israel by the EU institutions and reflects political differences between Borrell and VdL. Whilst the HRVP also hinted at the Israeli government as a ‘villain’, the EC President focused uniquely on Hamas and defended humanitarian aid for Gaza coupled with her full support for Israel’s military actions in Gaza and Palestine. As can be seen in Figure 6, Gaza is primarily represented as a territory in which ‘humanitarian’ ‘aid’ (two of the main collocates) must be provided to protect civilians and Palestinians more generally (EC, 2023e). This contrasts with the portrayal of Israel as an attacked land with a clear right to ‘defend itself’.

Therefore, there are two victims, although differently conceived, in this narrative: Israelis and Palestinians (or ‘Gazans’). The former is considered a legitimate and recognised nation that has been attacked; the Palestinians, in contrast, appear as victims but not as part of a legitimate political community. The causal chains to explain their tragedies are different: whereas Israel is threatened by globally recognised phenomena such as the war against terrorism or antisemitism, Palestinians are affected by a ‘human tragedy’, unfortunate but unavoidable events as if it were a natural disaster. This narrative allows the Commission to emphasise ‘humanitarian aid’ in Palestine while simultaneously maintaining a close relationship to Israel, the country whose military is in fact causing that very ‘humanitarian crisis’ against Palestinians in Gaza. Far from condemning the Israeli attacks that have devastated Gaza and killed tens of thousands

of Palestinians, VdL instead justified those attacks by arguing that Israel has the 'right to self-defence':

Israel has the right to self-defence, in line with international law. Hamas are terrorists. And the Palestinian people are also suffering from that terror. And we have to support them. And *there is no contradiction in standing in solidarity with Israel and acting on the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people*. [...] This horror calls for a united response from us. As human beings, as defenders of a free world, as citizens of Europe where hate, terror and racism have no place. Europe stands with Israel in this dark moment. (EC, 2023b, emphasis added)

It is precisely in this 'right to self-defence' where there are further nuanced differences between VdL and Borrell, as the latter is more open to criticising Israel and does not situate 'Hamas' as the only villain of the story, even mentioning the perception of the EU's 'double standards' in relation to Ukraine and Palestine. He argues that

now we have to stop the killing of civilians in Gaza. We have to stop this great number of casualties. Hamas has to be eradicated. But Hamas is an idea, it represents an idea, and you cannot kill an idea. The only way of killing an idea – a bad idea – is to propose a better one, to give a horizon to the Palestinian people, to their dignity, to their freedom, to their security, which has to go hand in hand with the security of Israel. (EEAS, 2024)

Borrell emphasises more than VdL the thousands of Palestinians killed in the brutal aftermath of 7 October and Israel's responsibility, yet fails short to situate Israel as the main 'villain' of the story. It is in this way that we can trace the different political sensitivities between EC President VdL and HRVP Borrell. Whereas their narratives were closely aligned on Russia–Ukraine, they have different emphasis in the context of Israel–Palestine.

Conclusion: The Colonial Conception of 'Europe' Illustrated by the Differentiated Articulation of its Relation to Ukraine and Palestine

The idea of 'Europe' has been increasingly contested in recent international debates. The primary goal of this article has been to shed light on how the main EU-level actors in foreign policy deploy the imaginary of 'Europe' and the implication that this may have for a repositioning of EU actors on the global stage. The article has emphasised that, whereas Ukraine is conceived as being part of the 'European family', there is a process of 'othering' or even neglecting the political existence of Palestine. The article outlines not only how successive crises have accelerated the way in which 'Europe' is reconfigured but also how the relationship between 'Europe' and its 'others' is established. Our analysis has shown the dominant imaginary of 'Europe' in the eyes of EU leaders in the global arena. The individual analysis of each of the two cases would have been an interesting endeavour, but it is in the interaction between the two cases that we can draw meaningful conclusions, trace the persistent coloniality of the EU, and, at the same time, identify crucial differences between EC President VdL and HRVP Borrell. Whereas Borrell situates the Israel–Palestine conflict in a broader historical context and recognises Palestinian agency, VdL takes a much more one-sided position.

Table 2: Components of the Narratives of VdL and Borrell on Ukraine–Russia and Palestine–Israel.

Components	<i>Ukraine–Russia</i>	<i>Palestine–Israel</i>
Main problem (diagnosis)	Unprovoked aggression by Putin's Russian government	Hamas 'terrorist' violence
Solution (prognosis)	Sanctions against the Russian government and its allies, diplomatic efforts to isolate Putin, and REPowerEU to overcome energy dependence on Russia	Peace by providing humanitarian aid to Palestine and support for Israel's self-defence
Values and justification	Freedom, democracy, peace, security, rule of law, European values/civilisation, and disinformation	Right to self-defence for Israel, humanitarian aid, peace, and fighting terrorism
Victim	Ukraine, Ukrainian people, Europe, the international system/community, and 'European civilisation'	Israel, Palestinian citizens, and 'Gazans'
Villain	Putin's Russian government and its complicit allies	Hamas (VdL and Borrell) Israel's violent excesses (Borrell)
Hero	Ukrainian people, 'Europe', EU member states (especially Ukraine's neighbours), EU's allies (e.g., Moldova and North Macedonia), NATO, and Russian dissidents	Israel and Europe
Imaginary of 'Europe'	Europe as a 'project of peace' and Ukraine as a member of the 'European family' (VdL)	Europe as standing in solidarity with Israel against 'terror'
What is the story?	War is back to Europe after a long time: democracy versus authoritarianism	Europe versus terrorism

Abbreviations: EU, European Union; NATO, North Atlantic Treaty Organization; VdL, von der Leyen.

Our analysis identifies a distinct understanding of Ukraine as a member of the 'European family', whilst the relationship between 'Europe' and Palestine is portrayed as that of 'others' or, even worse, as Palestine not even existing. In fact, it is Israel with whom 'Europe' has a strong bond of 'solidarity', in spite of the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed by Israeli military forces. The EU's alliance with Israel is longstanding (see Cronin, 2010), as HRVP Javier Solana argued back in 2009, claiming that 'there is no country outside the European continent that has this type of relationship with the European Union. Israel, allow me to say, is a member of the European Union without being a member of the institution' (Ahren, 2009). Relatedly, as Table 2 shows in the breakdown of the different components of the EU's narratives, Ukraine is included in the 'we' as expanding European identity, and serves to legitimise the potential expansion of EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) borders in the region. In this case, the discursive mobilisation of the machinery of universal human rights, democracy, freedom, sovereignty, and equality is used in consonance with the perceived political interests of the EU. However, in the case of Palestine, Europe does not adopt the role of ambassador of human rights and democratic universal values, and instead relies heavily on the idea of the 'right to self-defence'. Human rights and democratic values appear to be violated in Palestine by the Israeli government, but this does not lead to the extension of the idea of 'Europe' to include Palestinians or stand in solidarity with them.

The application of the NPF approach contributes to explain the evident asymmetry in the EU's reaction to these conflicts: why has the EU taken a united stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whilst taking Israel's side in its aggression against Palestine? Whilst there are important material reasons – Israel is a key state in the Middle East for preserving perceived EU and NATO interests in the region – the narratives that circulate on both conflicts are also central to understand the foreign policy decisions that have been taken.⁵ What if the EU's chronology on Israel–Palestine did not start on 7 October 2023 but rather took into account the context of the so-called 'Nakba' in 1948? What if the EU's story was not about fighting 'terrorism' but instead about fighting apartheid, genocide and colonialism? The 'villains' in the story would likely be different and alternative policies would likely follow. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the colonial and racist imaginary of 'Europe' that permeates the narratives of EU leaders, as it is conceived as primarily 'white' and 'Christian', which, whilst not explicit, appears to underlie much of the narrative in making sense of the difference in approach vis-à-vis Ukraine and Palestine. For instance, could we imagine VdL chanting 'Free Palestine' in Arabic in the same way that she included 'Slava Ukraini' ('Glory to Ukraine') in several of her speeches?

The imaginary of 'Europe' reproduced in these two cases is colonial because it normalises a strict distinction between who 'deserves' to be protected (Ukrainians) and who does not (Palestinians). Such cleavage is heavily racialised and is also based on a particular conception of 'Europe' as a 'garden' that needs to continue to rule over the 'jungle' – following the metaphor used by Borrell himself in a speech at the College of Europe on 13 October 2022 (EEAS, 2022h).⁶ Such a defensive narrative turn of a geopolitical Europe not only reproduces a colonial imaginary wherein 'Europe' has a '*mission civilisatrice*' towards the rest of the world, but also fails to acknowledge and address the colonial origins of European integration (Hansen and Jonsson, 2014), as it disregards the agency from historically marginalised voices from the Global Souths with which 'Europe' has established – and continues to maintain – an asymmetric relation (see Bhambra, 2022). Our analysis illustrates how some lives appear to be worth more than others and how this is connected to the EU's attempt to be an important player at the global level, especially in line with the US' efforts to preserve hegemony vis-à-vis Russia and China. It is precisely in the interaction between the narratives on Ukraine and on Palestine that we can see the emergence of the 'colonial' imaginary of 'Europe' (see also Kinnvall, 2016). Ukraine is imagined as an integral part of 'Europe' not only in a geographical sense but also in a political one – Russia and Turkey are also part of 'Europe' the continent, but EU political leaders do not often imagine them as part of 'Europe' in a political and cultural sense. This illustrates how Europe is conceived as a political community with clear geopolitical interests and also with ethnic markers that clash with the alleged universal values of human rights and democracy (see Bhambra, 2017).

⁵The article does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the complex geopolitical interests involved in this conflict and Israel's long-term aggression and colonisation project (for instance, the role of EU member states or the United States), as it focuses uniquely on the narratives put forward by the EC President and the HRVP. However, the narrative analysis that we have conducted certainly contributes to explain the asymmetrical response by the EU, its role in the region, and the political consequences of the EU position and associated narratives.

⁶To be sure, this colonial and racist imaginary of 'Europe' is not only present among EU leaders but is also fostered through the mainstream media, as Bayoumi (2022) argued in describing the racist media coverage of Ukraine, as several journalists went on to describe it as 'civilised' and 'European' in contrast to countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq.

A key question, which justifies the ‘colonial’ description of the imaginary of ‘Europe’, is based on who is conceived as having the right to resist domination. Considering the longstanding settler–colonial relation between Israel and Palestine (Lloyd, 2012), it is remarkable that the idea of ‘peace’ in the eyes of EU leaders is maintaining a status quo – even if Borrell highlights more than VdL the idea that the Israel–Palestine conflict needs a long-term solution that gives hope to Palestinians. There is still a neat distinction in the EU narrative between those who are entitled to defend themselves and those who are not. Ukraine’s resistance to the Russian invasion is ‘heroic’ and Europe has to support Ukraine as a country, as well as its citizens. Instead, Palestinians are mostly denied agency. In some ways, this colonial imaginary of ‘Europe’ may be based on the idea that Israel is an extension of European colonialism, with strong racial dynamics at play, and Palestinian lives are seen as more disposable than those of Ukrainians in the eyes of EU leaders.

Thus, our paper has important political implications. If ‘Europe’ continues to be imagined as a colonial project, it will continue ‘othering’ the Global Souths and will be unable to adequately cope with its own colonial past and present in order to democratise the EU. In fact, a decolonial understanding of democracy entails confronting the ‘foundational historical myths in social theory and discourse about Europe itself’ (Sabaratnam, 2011, p. 787), without which we are conceptually trapped in the geopolitics of capitalism, oriented towards the competition between empires (e.g., ‘Europe’ vs. Russia) rather than transnational liberation through international solidarity. In this sense, it is illustrative that it was South Africa, and not the EU nor any ‘European’ country, that took Israel to the ICJ on the grounds of committing a genocide against Palestine.⁷ Finally, the article also has lessons for the study of ‘Europe’ and knowledge production processes. European studies have also had difficulties dealing with colonialism in general (see Orbie et al., 2023) and Palestine in particular. Even if it did so mainly by ‘Westspaining’ (Hendl et al., 2024) and the racialisation of Eastern Europe (Kalmar, 2023), in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the academic community overwhelmingly (and rightfully) responded by supporting Ukraine. By contrast, in the case of Palestine, the response of the academic community has been underwhelming, to say the least. This highlights how the colonial imaginary of ‘Europe’ – and the racism embedded in it – described in our article is also reproduced in academic settings and in knowledge production processes. Rather than counterproductively pitting these two struggles against each other, a decolonial analysis should contribute to finding ways of articulating bonds of solidarity across all anticolonial and antiracist struggles.

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⁷In fact, a speech covered in our data set made by VdL on 19 October 2023 at the Hudson Institute (EC, 2023c) was used publicly in the ICJ hearings on 12 January 2024 by Malcolm Shaw, a British lawyer representing Israel, to justify Israel’s violence against Palestine after the attacks of 7 October 2023.

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