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PARADIGM CHANGE AND SENSE-MAKING EXERCISE

WAR IN UKRAINE AS A LEADERSHIP PUZZLE

ABSTRACT Leadership is commonly considered a key factor in crisis management. Extraordinary situations influence judgement and decision-making processes, so leaders bear the burden of directing attention, embracing uncertainty, and managing expectations.¹ Sense-making is a necessary component of every leadership practice, shaping the way individuals enact change and adjust to new circumstances.² The article touches upon two major issues: the role of sense-making in the time of war and new ideational sources of thinking about Western international politics that emerged as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It examines influential narratives constructed within Western political leadership with relation to the war in Ukraine, revealing their role as cultural formulations contributing to structural changes at the international level.

Keywords: war in Ukraine; paradigm change; leadership; Russia foreign policy; American foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual framework for this article was based on research concerning sense-making processes in international politics oriented at providing favorable conditions for a social change.³ It stems from research on the influence exercised in sense-giving, revealing connections between sense-making and power, both conditioning political leadership. Relying on work from organization studies, sociology, social psychology and cognitive science, sense-making research emphasizes intersubjective micro-level processes;⁴ its role in politics and international relations has also been acknowledged.⁵ Even in the case of well-established concepts and rules of the international game, their meaning is not inherent but rather a subject of constant definition and redefinition. While seeking common ground for collective action, international policy actors need to negotiate different understandings of the root causes of problems, which provides a base for a different understanding of their interests and shaping the vision of the actions needed to attain the goals.

The methodological basis for this article is a qualitative exploratory case study. It discusses how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been described and understood within the international arena and how sense-making processes were linked to some transformative policy actions that resulted from this war. The debate around the motivations that lead to the war has been shaped around the validity of competing norms, identities and interests. All of the participants put forward diametrically opposed versions of the same story to justify their actions. Analysis is organized around the role of change agents, their conceptualization of the political moment and behaviors. The mechanisms guiding these agents' orientations result in certain outcomes within the political arena, and these are examined here to expose the role of the leaders in sense-making processes and defining the historical moment in terms of paradigm change. Essential elements of this analysis include:

Leaders: the examination of the political history of the world bears the conclusion that processes resulting in social change do not organically emerge from particular historical or cultural circumstances. They are, rather, constructed by the interactions between states, decision-makers, societies and their political leaders – faced with disruption, turbulence and crisis, they all search for ways in which to get their needs addressed. The responsibility of the decisive political action most often lies with

³ N. Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations*, London–New York 2013; M. Zonis, "Self-Objects, Self-Representation, and Sense-Making Crises: Political Instability in the 1980s," *Political Psychology*, vol. 5. no. 2 (1984), pp. 267-285.

⁴ E.g., K.E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations*, Thousand Oaks 1995; S. Maitlis, M. Christianson, "Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward," *Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2014), pp. 57-125; G. Fairhurst, D. Grant, "The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide," *Management Communication Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2010), pp. 171-210.

⁵ D. Jacobi, A. Freyberg-Inan, (eds), *Human Beings in International Relations*, Cambridge 2015; P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York 1996; M.B. Steger, *The Rise of the Global Imaginary: Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror*, Oxford 2008; M. Zachara-Szymańska, *Global Political Leadership in Search of Synergy*, London 2022.

power-holders and power brokers; therefore, the article seeks to reveal the role of leaders in fostering political change. They are identified as sense-making agents imposing a preferred meaning-system on followers in order to achieve certain goals.⁶ Leadership is understood as a discursive process that contributes to social change by introducing social practices, generating motivation and providing justification for certain actions. The central role of the leader's ability to recognize, transform and manage cultural contexts has been well recognized by theorists.⁷

Sense-making: this is analyzed here as a leadership instrument through which, by virtue of filtering and interpreting, leaders construct and distribute meanings which then become social in their persistence.⁸ The article focuses on the sense-making practices that are necessary for undertaking political action. They are especially important in the case of challenges requiring a collective action, in the process of which, different interests, perceptions and orientations have to be merged or negotiated into one consensual meaning enabling a common undertaking. Sense-making is one of the basic tasks of public deliberation that shapes individual beliefs and behaviors, which also applies in the context of foreign policy.⁹

Paradigm change: the turns in the understanding of the international environment and the roles of actors are examined in the context of the prospect of the envisioned 'paradigm change', adapted from Thomas Kuhn's¹⁰ view of scientific inquiry and the nature of scientific revolutions. Sense-making practice is seen here as a primary practice in shaping the collective understanding of events, which can be either aligned with or different from the dominant views of the structure and the roles of actors within this structure. The article analyzes the hypothesis of the paradigm shift in the politics of the Western countries towards Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, highlighting the link between the abstract realm of concepts and the practical sphere of policy-making.

WAR IN UKRAINE AS A SENSE-MAKING EXERCISE

Theoretically, sense-making has been developed on the grounds of linguistics and constructivism.¹¹ The first approach is oriented at identifying a shared understanding in the language, especially the linguistic tools used in sense-making, such as metaphors

⁶ P. Vlaar, F.A. Van Den Bosch, H.W. Volberda, "Coping with Problems of Understanding in Interorganizational Relationships: Using Formalization as a Means to Make Sense," *Organization Studies*, vol. 27, no. 11 (2006), pp. 1617-1638.

⁷ L. Smircich, G. Morgan, "Leadership: The Management..."; K.E. Weick, "Cosmos vs. Chaos: Sense and Nonsense in Electronic Contexts," *Organizational Dynamics*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1985), pp. 61-64.

⁸ P. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London 1966.

⁹ H. De Jaegher, E. Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-Making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2007), pp. 485-507.

¹⁰ Th.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1970.

¹¹ S. Maitlis, M. Christianson, "Sensemaking in Organizations..."; K.E. Weick, *Sensemaking...*

and analogies,¹² while the latter posits that knowledge is not passively received from the world or from authoritative sources but constructed by individuals or groups making sense of their experiential worlds. Constructivism left a firm imprint on political science and international relations. Constructivists argue that human interaction is not shaped by material factors but primarily by ideational factors and that international relations are constructed by social factors which can exist only by human agreement.¹³ Norms, rules and institutions create meanings and make different forms of social action possible and at the same time, social forces shape individuals' understanding of knowledge and truth. The assumption that many of the features of international politics are produced and reproduced in the concrete practices of social actors has led to questions about the role of identities, norms, causal understandings and power in the constitution of national interests about institutionalization and international governance. Social constructivism has thus been accepted as middle ground theory – it is ontologically realist in its recognition of the material world,¹⁴ but it is epistemologically poststructuralist, as *ideas always matter, since power and interest do not have effect apart from the shared knowledge that constitutes them.*¹⁵

Sense-making is the basic practice of this shared-knowledge production, exercised by actors who seek an understanding of reality by attaching meaning to it. It can be defined as *the cognitive and communicative processes through which humans understand, describe, and relate to phenomena.*¹⁶ As a result, the complexity of the world is being turned into *a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action.*¹⁷ A key factor of the analysis of the interpretative practices is the recognition of the patterns of sense-making, which is made difficult by the fact that different collective meanings are attached to the social reality twice. People make sense of the world by describing and creating meaning of the material reality as well as through theories, concepts, and symbols embedded into scientific knowledge: *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human actions and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.*¹⁸ While research

¹² J. Balogun, C. Jacobs, P. Jarzabkowski, S. Mantere, E. Vaara, "Placing Strategy Discourse in Context: Sociomateriality, Sensemaking, and Power," *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2014), pp. 175-201.

¹³ E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997), pp. 319-363; S. Guzzini, "A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2000), pp. 147-182; A. Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 71-81.

¹⁴ E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground...", pp. 322-323.

¹⁵ A. Wendt, "Constructing International...", p. 74.

¹⁶ B.-O. Linnér, V. Wibeck, "Conceptualising Variations in Societal Transformations towards Sustainability," *Environmental Science and Policy*, vol. 106 (2020), p. 11.

¹⁷ K.E. Weick, K.M. Sutcliffe, D. Obstfeld, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking and Organizing," *Organization Science*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2005), p. 409.

¹⁸ E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground...", p. 320.

within organizational studies and political studies alike prioritizes organizational practices, sense-making, although less perceptible, precedes and conditions everything that happens between people and within organized social structures. *Unlike positivism and materialism, which take the world as it is, constructivism sees the world as a project under construction, as becoming rather than being.*¹⁹ Events are explained on the background of the specific context – data, historical analogies, research outcomes – and as a result, people think about certain actions as ‘natural’, based on *learned knowledge structures*.²⁰

Throughout the sense-making process, leaders mediate reality, guiding followers throughout the social world. The practice is a necessary component of the collective action, most often required in situations of crisis or strategic vulnerability. The occurrence of such events is accompanied by the explanatory activities of international leaders. Pivotal moments of history are rarely decoded as such from the start or they unfold in linear progressions. They are rather defined *ex post* by the reactions of international actors – leaders able to spot and frame a historical moment and provide an incentive for social transformation.²¹ Regulatory or institutional processes that shape the structure of the international realm are composed by interactive endeavors of which contact, a shared understanding of the problem, trust and long-term commitment play the major roles. Leaders’ sense-making efforts determine the character and scale of the possible consensus, negotiation framework or bargaining space, indicating the conditions under which actors can enter into cooperation, what perspectives this cooperation will develop, and how transformative it will be for the international picture.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has posed a challenge as a unique sense-making exercise due to it being accompanied by the disbelief and confusion of the major western capitals in terms of the responsive strategies. A multiplicity of actors – political leaders, citizens, governments and business leaders (both internal and external) were faced with the necessity to rationalize the situation and put it into the context of the recognizable patterns conditioning understanding and shaping political position towards the events. As Weick described it: *Sensemaking is about contextual rationality. It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion.*²² The invasion brought along a lot of vague questions and an urgent need to negotiate the multiplicity of motives that had to be taken into account while providing individual and collective responses for the attack. The outbreak of the war provoked an especially vivid public reaction in Western society. The invasion, which followed the two-year pandemic crisis, severely impacted the sense of

¹⁹ E. Adler, “Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates,” in W. Carlsnaes, Th. Risse, B.A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations*, Thousand Oaks 2013, p. 113.

²⁰ S. Chaiken, A. Liberman, A.H. Eagly, “Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing within and beyond the Persuasion Context,” in J.S. Uleman, J.A. Bargh (eds), *Unintended Thought*, New York 1989, p. 213.

²¹ S. Spoelstra, R. ten Bos, “Leadership,” in M. Painter-Morland, R. ten Bos (eds), *Business Ethics and Continental Philosophy*, New York 2011, pp. 181-198.

²² K.E. Weick, *Sensemaking...*, p. 636.

security of people around the world, and triggered a new surge of anxiety in Europe. The sense of alertness grew with sensational headlines, violent war images flooding social media and TV screens, speculative comments about the heightened nuclear threats, and the devastating potential effects of energy and food crisis. Millions, even though geographically distant from the battlefield, were exposed to the brutality of this theater of war and sought ways for coping with anxiety and helplessness. The need for sense-making was also essential in shaping the participation strategies of both people directly affected by war and those who were indirectly but emotionally involved. In the process, people develop their approach towards reality and towards their relations with others. The assessment of the situation and the meaning participants and observers attached to the events on the basis of media reporting or leader's messaging provided the ground for individual reactions – decisions to flee or stay in the war-zone, to engage in providing direct assistance to refugees with housing and transport, to organize or participate in anti-war protests, to sign anti-war petitions, to get involved in the humanitarian efforts or financially support the victims of the war. In the case of Ukrainians and Russians, the sense-making process was oriented at generating the most desired beliefs and reactions in the context of the political aims of their leaders – maximum engagement in the first case and maximum indifference in the latter. The process of sense-making enabled the shifting of citizens from the sphere of ambiguity and the unknown to conditions in which the clear identification of the common goals and action towards them are possible.

On the operational level, the sense-making practice requires the construction of narratives, representations and assemblages – collections of social, technical, and material elements. The process is initiated by political leaders, who are the first in the line to provide response and map the position of the groups they represent. When, at the beginning of 2022, Ukraine became a global 'hot spot' the situation could not have been clear from the beginning as it takes time for the decision-makers to orient and makes sense of the context and possible courses of action. The only leader involved with a clear sense-making strategy in place was Vladimir Putin, for whom the decision of unprovoked aggression was a part of the wider political campaign that was already communicated to the world and to the Russian public. However, despite the fact that the style of invasion bore little ambiguity and the intelligence data confirmed the possibility of the war prior to its outbreak, for most of the international commentators, the scripts of the international reactions were far from written. They relied on instructions and narratives that heled them to develop the cognitive base in order to deal with realities, modify and transform them. These sense-making efforts were part of the information strategies of the war and were primarily influenced by three of the involved parties:

Ukraine – Shaping the image and position of the Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict was identified as a major task by the country's president. His sense-making efforts were marked by the sudden turn in recognition from two sides – from Ukrainian people seeking guidance in a time of trial as well as from international leaders and

the global public. Before Russia invaded Ukraine on 25th February 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky was presented as an example of a populist leader who reached for power in a country disappointed with politics and exhausted with the destructive influences of the oligarchs and people in power.²³ An actor and comedian, an example of a political pariah who based his electoral success on his personal popularity. Zelensky's presidency had been envisioned by the sitcom script and firmly embedded in the concepts and illusions that the fictional world has to offer. The populist association with the 'servant of the people' rhetoric vanished after it became apparent that Zelensky has a real intention to lead the country through the war, refusing to abandon his country and his capital, famously replying to the US evacuation proposal: *The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride.*²⁴ Since the very beginning of the conflict, he recognized his role as the communicator in chief, shaping the public understanding of the Ukrainian position and his role in the conflict internally and abroad. In response to Russian bombs, he offered a bombardment of heroic imagery and narratives dispelling them to wide global audiences. His sense-making efforts were characterized by a heroic tone and based on several frames of reference. The President's discursive strategy was oriented at urging western leaders to provide necessary support to Ukraine, uniting the nation and infusing the hope of victory in the people. The war was presented in the context of the revival of the grand western civilizational mission of defending the righteous against the oppressors.²⁵ He grounded the narrative in the David and Goliath mythical story, gradually reinforcing the belief amongst Ukrainians and global decision-makers that David can and would win. He put Ukraine in the role of the country that takes the responsibility for European safety and as the one offering relief to others when the danger appeared. Furthermore, David's victory has been pictured as necessary to keep the image of the Western world as value-oriented and powerful intact. By recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks or the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear atrocities, Zelensky incorporated the greatest historical breakthroughs into the current debate, shaping the understanding of the war as another event that is turning the wheels of the history.²⁶ He evokes civilizational rhetoric, using references to events firmly embedded in the political imaginary of the addressed nations. He cited Shakespeare in the House of Commons, mentioned liberty, equality and fraternity in the French parliament,

²³ A. Umland, "The Zelensky Enigma: A Different Kind of Populist," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 April 2019, at https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_zelensky_enigma_ukraine_election_president/, 12 September 2022.

²⁴ Sh. Braithwaite, "Zelensky Refuses US Offer to Evacuate, Saying 'I Need Ammunition, Not a Ride,'" *CNN World*, 26 February 2022, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>, 21 October 2022.

²⁵ M. Manenti, "Making Sense of Western Media's Coverage of the Ukraine War," *London School of Economics and Political Science*, 16 March 2022, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2022/03/16/making-sense-of-western-medias-coverage-of-the-ukraine-war/>, 12 September 2022.

²⁶ "Ukraine's Zelensky Urges Germany to 'Tear Down This Wall' in Europe | AFP," *YouTube*, 17 March 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XX6cljR9TJ0>, 14 August 2022; "Zelenskiy Invokes 9/11 in Powerful Address to US Congress: 'I Have a Need,'" *YouTube*, 16 March 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkAlE7vWfwc>, 14 August 2022.

recalled Martin Luther King in the US Congress, and echoes Winston Churchill in his rhetoric of freedom and resilience.²⁷

The impact of Volodymyr Zelensky's major task of the sense-making of the new realities for his nation can be measured in the determination of the Ukrainian civilians and armed forces. The surprising success of Ukraine's counteroffensive enabled the Ukrainian president to reinforce the myth of his nation as *Invictus* on the international global fora. The general admiration for the bravery of the Ukrainian people coupled with battlefield achievements were the key to maintaining international backing over the months following the invasion and ending the chatter about a stalemate as an acceptable outcome. Zelensky also succeeded in delegitimizing the narrative that Vladimir Putin has been creating for years with regard to treating Ukraine as culturally and politically tied to Russia, a buffer state between the NATO-sphere and the region influenced by Russia. The communication has been organizing the meaning along the lines of the simple dichotomy of the oppressor and oppressed, a hero and a villain, a barbarian and the promotor of moral purity.

The United States – The Russian invasion of Ukraine happened at the moment of the redefinition of the US strategic concept. Washington, pressured by home tensions from the pandemic and economic recession and disgraced after the tragic consequences of the badly managed withdrawal from Afghanistan, neither wanted an epochal security shift in Europe nor was prepared for it. For more than a decade, China has been recognized as a major threat to US interests, and different administrations make efforts to concentrate resources and strategic thinking on the Asian Pacific region. The Russian aggression has been presented in terms of a moral and strategic obligation for American decision-makers and their leadership narratives have been built around the themes of the civilizational struggle, human rights protection and the solidarity of Western powers. As Joe Biden put it *Every generation has had to defeat democracy's mortal foes*.²⁸ The US master-narrative emphasized Ukraine's right to self-determination and the responsibility of the NATO ally to support the attacked country. The conflict was framed as a threat to the international order. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken described its impact by saying: *It's bigger than a conflict between two countries. It's bigger than Russia and NATO. It's a crisis with global consequences, and it requires global attention and action*.²⁹ The bestiality of war was

²⁷ "Ukrainian President Zelensky Appeals to US President Biden in Historic Congress Address – BBC News", *YouTube*, 16 March 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoUjYrXnDZA>, 4 July 2022; "'We Are All Here,' Ukraine's Zelensky Says In Video From Kyiv", *YouTube*, 25 February 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkNiYzHeDs>, 4 July 2022; "'Thirteen Days of Struggle': Zelenskiy's Address to UK Parliament", *YouTube*, at https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=zelensky+british+parlament, 4 July 2022; "REPLAY: Zelensky Addresses French Parliament, Compares Mariupol to Verdun Battle – FRANCE 24", *YouTube*, 23 March 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgyeXW9BTY>, 4 July 2022.

²⁸ "State of the Union Address," *The White House*, 1 March 2022, at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/state-of-the-union-2022/>, 13 October 2022.

²⁹ "The Stakes of Russian Aggression for Ukraine and Beyond," *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland*, 20 January 2022, at https://pl.usembassy.gov/russian_aggression/, 13 October 2022.

then covered with the classic narrative of ‘right and wrong’ and ‘civilized’ vs ‘barbarian’, reinforcing the idea that it was the moral duty of Western states to stop the war. As the US Secretary of Defense summarized the American position: *We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.*³⁰

President Biden’s public statements invoking the principles of freedom and democracy were both the response for public engagement in the Ukraine’s case and the way to profile the situation in alarmist terms in order to justify American involvement in the public eye. The language has often been personalized, directly indicating Vladimir Putin’s responsibility for the atrocities of war and linking the current situation with the Nazi threat to the world in the 1930s: *Throughout our history, we’ve learned this lesson: when dictators do not pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos; they keep moving; and the costs, the threats to the America and to the world keeps rising.*³¹

The US leadership has proven to be essential in successfully mobilizing international efforts, especially in coordinating military support for Ukraine. The military, financial and political support for Ukraine has changed the course of the Russian invasion. The US has also taken more long-term steps and increased its presence in Eastern European countries – Estonia, Romania, and Poland. As a result of these strategic shifts, the conflict has been named as a US or Western proxy war, because of Ukraine’s dependence on the West and Putin’s claims about the necessity to protect Russia and its sphere of influence against Western influences. However, neither the US nor other NATO allies ever wanted this war, provoked it or saw any kind of possible gains connected with it. By contrast, their standing for a small, far away country, brought the dramatic effect of reopening a major global competition in nuclear arms. The support for Ukraine has also heightened tensions between the US and non-European countries. For Brazil, India, Indonesia and other players important in the power game, picking sides in the confrontation between Russia and the West is a losing strategy and the US have to engage in a complicated diplomatic exercise to try to get them on board.

Russia – Explanation of the Russian invasion on Ukraine has been connected to the dense network of the sense-making efforts preceding the invasion, oriented at shaping the understanding of Russia’s place in the world and the position of Ukraine within its sphere of influence. Russian President Vladimir Putin signaled the Russian vision of international affairs in his 2007 Munich speech openly opposing the US-led, unipolar model of international relations and expressed Russia’s willingness for the active pursuit of its geopolitical interests.

The Russian leader heavily shaped the understanding of the Ukrainian strategy in civilizational terms, picturing the invasion as a mission *to protect the Russian-speaking*

³⁰ Austin cit. in P. Baker, D.E. Sanger, “Ukraine and the Contest of Global Stamina,” *The New York Times*, 9 July 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/us/politics/ukraine-strategy-biden.html>, 2 November 2022.

³¹ “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine,” *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland*, 26 March 2022, at https://pl.usembassy.gov/remarks_free_world/, 13 October 2022.

*population and its traditional values.*³² In his 2021 essay “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians” he argued that Ukrainians have always been an inseparable part of the *triune Russian nation*, integral to Russia historically, culturally, and economically. Furthermore, the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia, as Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people.’³³ Ukraine’s independence has been described as a historical coincidence – an anomaly orchestrated by Western infiltration and hostile, expansionistic policies. A long list of grievances meant to justify the invasion has been presented during Putin’s speech prior to the attack on 21st February 2022, stressing the necessity to transform the shape of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, dismissing the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity and statehood. Putin’s sense-making was directly indicating the need for making history, as defining Russia’s identity in imperial terms was a prelude for the ‘special military operation’, brutality and war crimes justified by the higher order of stopping the alleged genocide of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Donbas. The tone in which the political communication about military operations has been carried out for a year, demonized and dehumanized Ukrainians, calling them ‘Banderites’ (referring to the Ukrainian pro-Nazi World War II independence movement leader, Stepan Bandera), fascists junta, and claiming they committed drastic atrocities that were never confirmed, as the widely repeated story of the crucifixion of a boy in the city of Slovyansk.³⁴ Vladimir Putin himself called Zelensky – the first Jewish President in Ukrainian history – a Nazi, while members of his government were presented as narcomans. Military assistance of the Western countries has been presented as yet another chapter of a deliberate Western anti-Russian strategy, marked by bad faith, broken promises, and hypocritical expansionism.

War is as much a sense-making endeavor as it is a military undertaking. Narratives, framing and other tools of leadership communication are used as platform for searching for common ground and providing resources, in the form of data, interpretations and recommendations, for people so as to enable them to engage in active knowledge construction. Its effectiveness cannot be measured in the accuracy or coherence of the information provided but rather in the quality of the relationship between the leader and his followers.

The leader’s political and ethical positions are co-produced with specific and contingent collections of elements. As a consequence, the leadership processes oriented at political results, stall or decay depending on the effectiveness of persuasion, mediation and translation activities. Their effects are reflected in the way in which actors link generalized

³² M. Domańska, “Putin’s Article: ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 13 July 2021, at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-07-13/putins-article-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians>, 12 October 2022.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ M. Snegovaya, *Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare*, Washington, D.C. 2015, at <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin%27s%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf>, 2 November 2022.

norms into a particular vision, desired patterns of behavior or the state of the world, which if accepted, can be translated into institutional arrangements, tools or techniques.

A PARADIGM SHIFT? ANOMALIES AND SIMILARITIES

Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm shifts places the scientific progress in a variety of visions, approaches, theories, laws and perspectives stressing different dimensions of the analyzed phenomena. These are seen as the driving force of the historical development of science ensuring the cyclical emergence of scientific revolutions. Competition drives progress in science – the more numerous the perspectives used, the higher the probability that they will capture anomalies – a necessary component out of which a new paradigm can be born. According to Kuhn's postulate in scientific research, a new paradigm emerges when the field *can no longer evade anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice*,³⁵ and when the accumulation of anomalies in a theory is impossible to ignore. This is a birth moment for the scientific revolution, as scientists eventually recognize the need for a new paradigm. This idea of a discontinuous history of the subsequent scientific revolutions captures the importance of the dominant perspective that in most of the social-science disciplines ensure a relatively long and stable period of cumulative research, which is made possible by the consensus of the members of the scientific community upon a dominant paradigm. The field of international relations is no different in this respect, and as Arend Lijphart, argues: *the development of international relations since the Second World War fits Kuhn's description of scientific revolutions*³⁶ and as Schmidt confirms ... *IR scholars increasingly have turned to Kuhn and other philosophers of science...*³⁷ However, this pattern is not limited to scientific activities, as paradigms – dominant frames in which social reality has been captured – play an important role in policy making and other forms of exercising politics.

When it comes to the way in which international politics is being envisioned, the political reality plays a role, as well as concepts, and notions being a part of the scientific knowledge providing explanatory toolbox of this reality. Political life is composed by a number of general political problems (security, public goods provision, economic stability) and smaller-scale policy puzzles characterizing a given political system or typical for a given historical period. The history of international relations is marked by the events that provoked the reactions of the international actors in the form of alliances, institutions, wars or military interventions, many of which resulted in the establishment of a new paradigm able to frame the way in which analysts and decision-makers perceived their reality. The shared subjective understanding of meaning attributed to

³⁵ Th.S. Kuhn, *The Structure...*, p. 6.

³⁶ Cit. in B.C. Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations," in W. Carl-snaes, Th. Risse, B.A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations*, Thousand Oaks 2013, p. 11.

³⁷ B.C. Schmidt, "On the History...", p. 10.

objects, events and political figures is a subject of change.³⁸ These shifts in perception, often explained in the Kuhnian terms, is related to the failure of the League of Nations system, the end of the Cold War, and terrorist attacks on the United States. These events not only created the rise and fall of different theories and methodologies but also brought changes to the way in which leaders assess the problems they encounter and how they shape solutions for them. *Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones.*³⁹ The paradigm dictates how to interpret social facts; it secures coherence of the political strategy through the incorporation of 'exemplars' indicating the hierarchy of problems that should be considered important and therefore solved. The paradigm also provides the theoretical language and a largely unquestioned worldview. Its emergence is inevitably connected to the sphere in which knowledge is produced, shared, and transformed, not only framing the axiology of politics and indicating the role of the politicians, but also understanding the nature of the processes that politics as a practice is applied to. While international reality is a subject of dynamic and often chaotic change, expressed in the continuum of time and space, a paradigm is a relatively static view, which over time fails to account for the events that in this paradigmatic context are seen as anomalies. Putting the events of the Russian invasion of Ukraine into this analytical framework can reveal the extent to which the reactions of the major international actors have been driven by the sense of anomaly and could therefore have led to the paradigm change.

The war has been often described by decision-makers and commentators and transformational, the one that *is likely to reshape global order.*⁴⁰ The German Chancellor, after announcing the turn in German politics towards Russia to the Bundestag, defined the situation in transformative terms, concluding that *the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before.*⁴¹ The notion of the *Zeitenwende* – a historical turning point – has served as a justification of the shift in the German strategic orientations that followed the Russian invasion. It has been translated into the indefinite suspension of the opening of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline (before it was destroyed), weapons' supplies to Ukraine, an increase in defense budgets to 2% of German GDP and the immediate military investments of 100 billion Euros. This itself marked a significant reformulation of the conditions of the collective defense of the Euro-Atlantic space; however, the changes were even more far reaching – Switzerland broke from its tradition of neutrality to support sanctions, Finland and Sweden decided to join

³⁸ E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground...", p. 327.

³⁹ Th.S. Kuhn, *The Structure...*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ Ch. Pazzanese, "How War in Ukraine is Reshaping Global Order," *The Harvard Gazette*, 22 April 2022, at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/04/how-war-in-ukraine-is-reshaping-global-order/>, 26 July 2022.

⁴¹ "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin," *The Federal Government*, 27 February 2022, at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>, 3 May 2022.

NATO and the alliance developed a new strategy. Furthermore, the scale of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia created unprecedented pressure on the private sector and foreign companies to pull their activities out of Russia. Business has witnessed a completely new level of political engagement – the leading brands in energy industry, commodities, and foods canceled their investments in Russia and withdrew from the country. The major aviation companies Airbus and Boeing even refused to deliver spare parts to Russian civil aviation. Facebook and Google removed Russian official information channels from their platforms. The way in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine has galvanized the world's democracies in ways that seemed unthinkable just a week before, leading to a paradigm change in the way leaders conceptualized Russia and its role in the international scene. The events, despite being part of the consequential Russian aggressive strategy that included the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the continued destabilization of the Donbas region, were widely framed as unique and extraordinary. The major anomalies which were inconsistent with the dominant paradigm were:

- **Russia as an aggressive actor** – despite the months of military building up at the Ukrainian border, closely observed by the international media, there was still a collective disbelief at Russia's audacious invasion of its sovereign neighbor. This was a sign of Russia's position in the political imaginary of the world. Despite being labeled a disruptive power, Moscow has for a long time enjoyed the privileges of a great power in many Western capitals and influential circles of political influence. Neither the cruelty of the regime, nor the brutality of the Chechen wars undermined the beliefs of Western leaders that Russia is a rational partner that could be part of international and bilateral arrangements. Despite the fact that societies and their leaders alike have held a negative view of the direction the country has taken under Putin; no decisive steps have been taken after Russia's annexation of Crimea and outbreak of war in Donbas.
- **War in Europe** – the political paradigm of Europe after two world wars has been founded on the premise of peaceful coexistence. As a result, the continent, which for much of its modern history was embroiled in internecine warfare, has become one of the most stable regions of the world. The Balkan wars of the 1990s provided an anomaly from this rule, yet they have been widely explained in the context of the temporary turbulence brought by the end of the Cold War. The long-term effect of preserving peaceful relations has been both the effect of the shaping policies according to the dominant paradigm, and the result of the structural conditions that contributed to the emergence of this paradigm. The major role here was played by the development of the modern, highly effective war technologies which make conflicts more deadly and introduced total annihilation to the list of possible war scenarios. The second major framework has been created by the nature of the Cold War global confrontation, which created a favorable environment for the suppression of traditional rivalries on the European arena, the most notable being between Germany and France. The logic of the Cold War was based on the belief that any type or size of hot confrontation would lead to a nuclear clash. With the Russian invasion on Ukraine, the time of cashing in on the 'peace dividend' suddenly ended with the

outbreak of the military confrontation provoked by a nuclear power, which also forced the whole world back into the harsh logic of nuclear confrontation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine represented a major ‘anomaly’, ‘crisis’ or ‘shock’ that is commonly recognized as justification for a change in perception and political behavior. The leadership component is indispensable to the process of this paradigm shift, as the most powerful actors not only write history but also interpret it. Present beliefs and ideas guide a social reading of the past, while the knowledge and mental patterns formulated in the past shape the way people see and understand the present. As demonstrated within different analytical attempts, sense-making is rooted in temporal and spatial settings, a historical framework co-creating interpretative frames, as well as the values and worldviews of actors.

CONCLUSION:

The article draws on insights from a case study of the war in Ukraine, analyzing the historical and contextual factors contributing to the effective sense-making of the war’s events and their interpretation. The Russian attack on Ukraine had a huge effect in the realm of European politics and security undermining the comfortable belief about the peace-building power of modernity. The event not only destabilized the international system and forced millions of people to change their ways of living and spread fear way beyond the Ukrainian border; it also revealed the value of leadership and its inherent links to the most natural human needs of survival and safety. The practice of framing and assigning meaning to the ongoing events in a time of major crisis reveals two major observations.

- Political leaders rely on sense-making in pursuing their aims. It is a primary tool of influence that is used to make citizens or other types of followers think and behave in ways to further particular ends. In this respect, sense-making processes shaping the perspective on the war in Ukraine confirm the recognition of the direct linkage of the sense-making with power. As Marshall and Rollinson⁴² observed: *Sense-making and power relations are closely connected* because sense-making is invariably caught up with the political *struggles over the appropriation and fixing of meaning*.
- The sense-making process is not necessarily driven by the quality of the evidence. The misinterpretations and misconceptions do not equate to a lack of information. The process of collective sense-making is rather based on the leadership qualities – persuasion, trust and bond – so that members of the public representing diverse backgrounds, orientations and values can develop their individual understanding of the situation and produce reactions to it. Sense-making leaders are not necessarily the most informed leaders or the least biased but those who can develop better relations with the national or international public. Sense-making is the space/

⁴² N. Marshall, J. Rollinson, “Maybe Bacon Had a Point: The Politics of Interpretation in Collective Sensemaking,” *British Journal of Management*, vol. 15, no. S1 (2004), pp. 71-86.

activity where the metaphysical aspects of the leadership relations make themselves felt – individuals gather and categorize their emotional attachments and information into a mental construction which comes into existence in their heads.

Analyses of these sense-making patterns reveal that the shift towards solidarity amongst the Western countries in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, bears the potential of becoming a formative event for the Western world. It has from the beginning been framed as an extraordinary situation, which was followed by extraordinary political measures. The type of narrative used for sense-making worked as a self-fulfilled prophecy – profiling the situation in alarming terms lead to the expectation of bold decisions by the public. The decision-making process also proved to be an important part of the sense-making process. Every set of policies adds another layer to the already recognized perceptions and interpretative contexts. Politicians, leaders of public opinion and other sense-making agents generate collective understanding by establishing a connection between the imagined outcome and the present moment.

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