

Embracing Political Ethnography: The Impact of Identity Constructs in Response to Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of geopolitical conflict on identity construction by analyzing the evolution of discourse surrounding Ukrainian identity in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion and situating it within broader discussions surrounding refugees. Critical discourse analysis of Ukrainian and Russian media reveals how conflicting identities are framed, reflecting divergent national, political, and sociological worldviews (Ushchyna, 2022). Drawing on identity theory, this paper analyzes the construction and reconstruction of who qualifies as 'European'. It will explain the conceptualization as a response to geopolitical conflict and its resulting impact on the behavior of political actors. It will show how imperative it is to have a nuanced understanding of race, ethnicity, culture, and identity to provide essential context for a holistic understanding of the shifting nature of responses to geopolitical events.

Furthermore, this paper discusses the value of incorporating a bottom-up and 'from within' approach across various dimensions of geopolitics. Specifically, it highlights the significance of incorporating an ethnographic understanding of identity and advocating for a more reflexive approach that acknowledges diverse perspectives and knowledge systems. Additionally, it examines the potential for reshaping methodological approaches to capture the complexities of contemporary geopolitical landscapes better, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative research methodologies.

Keywords

Geopolitics; Ethnography; Identity; Discourse; Media; Ukraine; Refugees

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Introduction

Identity serves as a catalyst and a consequence of conflict, which is evident in the relationship between geopolitical conflict and identity construction in the Russia-Ukraine war. This paper demonstrates the impact of identity construction on geopolitics by focusing on the evolution of discourse surrounding Ukrainian identity following the Russian invasion in 2022. This analysis is situated within broader discussions on refugees, drawing on identity theories to examine how definitions of 'European' are reconstructed in response to geopolitical turmoil. A nuanced understanding of race, ethnicity, culture, and identity is necessary for comprehending the shifting nature of geopolitical responses.

The paper advocates for a bottom-up approach in political geography and geopolitics, highlighting the significance of incorporating local narratives and diverse perspectives to gain a holistic understanding of geopolitical phenomena. This perspective challenges traditional top-down analyses, emphasizing the value of ethnography in capturing the complexities of contemporary geopolitical landscapes. Ethnography's strength lies in its ability to provide in-depth insights into the everyday experiences and cultural contexts that shape geopolitical events, moving beyond elite discourses to include multiple voices and perspectives.

Two case studies are analyzed: the Russo-Ukrainian war narratives and the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees. The first case study examines how media discourse constructs and perpetuates conflicting national identities, reflecting deeper ideological divides. The second case study analyzes the differing responses to Ukrainian refugees, exploring how narratives of compassion and othering shape refugee policies. Media statements reveal how conflicting identities are framed, reflecting divergent national and political worldviews.

Conceptual Overview

Identity is a construct shaped by mental and material practices that create a distinction between the 'self' and the 'other.' The construction of the 'other' is a core component of identity creation. Carl Schmitt (1932) posits that all politics is based on the friend-enemy distinction; it is inherently public and involves groups finding themselves in situations of mutual enmity. Any distinction can serve as a marker of collective identity and does not inherently hold any intrinsic significance; simply, the distinction is important because a group relies on it to define its own collective identity and believes it is worth defending. Humanity is hidden, and this concealment "requires both individual personality and particular cultures to close onto themselves and requires all individuals and groups to differentiate others as

others" (Plessner et al. 2018; Delitz and Seyfert 2018, vii). This mirrors hegemony theory, which states that the definition of culture also always includes differentiation from a constitutive outside (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Delitz and Seyfert 2018). Research and theorizing on social identity are complemented by psychology's historical emphasis on personal identity (Erikson 1968). This can be seen in the interplay between conceptions of self and group identity. Identity is not neutral; it is embedded within power dynamics, working as a classification system for individuals and groups while imposing societal norms and perceived truths (Burlachuck, 2023).

Awareness of the 'constitutive outside' can be explained by social identity, which refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular social group and significantly influences their behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. Rooted in Social Identity Theory, it emphasizes the collective self over the individual self, where identification with a group involves cognitive awareness, value connotation, and emotional attachment to the group (Guan and So, 2022). It relies on self-categorisation of group memberships (the "we"), while personal identity refers to the unique ways that people define themselves as individuals (the "I"). Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that the perceived differences between groups with which one self-identifies can lead to increased occurrences of otherization. The fear of an outside 'other' mobilizes individuals, communities, countries, and global regions into social and political action.

Situational identity refers to how individuals express different identities in different contexts or situations. It is the idea that one's sense of self and identity can vary depending on a particular situation's social, cultural, and environmental factors. This can include identifying situations based on images and negotiating identity in different cultural settings, especially when incorporating online spaces (Qin and Lowe 2021). The notion of situational identity highlights the dynamic nature of identity and how it can be influenced and shaped by various situational factors. Social and situational identities are interrelated as the interplay between individual self-conception and the surrounding social environment shapes both. They are mutually reinforcing, each shaping and being shaped by the other in a dynamic, context-dependent process.

Identities are not static structures; they are discursive constructions constantly in flux that only gain stability and meaning within specific contexts and situations (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Törrönen 2013). Narratives fuel the fluidity of identities. They become "subjective meaning-making tools for shaping people's thoughts and beliefs, which provide a framework for explaining and justifying social and political events, thereby constructing the boundaries between 'we' and 'others'" (Demirel,

2023, p.1). Social identity influences information consumption, fueled by narratives, where individuals tend to favor information that enhances their in-group's status while discrediting out-groups. This phenomenon can lead to misinformation (Klandermans and Van Stekelenburg 2020).

Othering naturalizes exclusion, justifies discrimination, and fuels xenophobia (Holohan, 2019). The reaction to refugees is often characterized by fear, suspicion, and antipathy. It perpetuates a neocolonial discourse of otherness, further embedding refugees within a narrative that diminishes their humanity and rights. This is compounded by the exclusion of refugees from knowledge production and historical narratives, which not only marginalizes their experiences but also reinforces the epistemic injustice that silences their voices and contributions (Reed and Schenck, 2023). The process of empathizing with and understanding the experiences of refugees, particularly those from different cultures, challenges Western norms and structures.

The way that states craft refugee policies built on othering narratives and an 'us' versus 'them' mentality can be explained by defensive nationalism. Rabinowitz's (2023) defensive nationalism is a form of national populism that combines anti-liberalism and anti-globalization sentiment with economic nationalism. Nationalism is concerned with ensuring that the rights of 'true citizens' are safeguarded against the encroachment of 'outsiders' and necessitates the creation of an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy with clearly defined in and out-groups. Defensive nationalism emerges when states face global economic pressures and demographic changes simultaneously and stems from the need to protect the 'nation' against global forces under the assumption that these forces are inherently hostile. Four dimensions necessary for defensive nationalism include a precise construction of who constitutes the 'national people,' construction of the global enemy, organizing principles, and clear policy objectives (Rabinowitz, 2023).

The implementation of discriminatory refugee policy is justified by constructing the identity of the national people while othering the external enemy. Creating narratives that clearly define 'us' establishes a logic to delineate which refugees deserve assistance and protection under the law due to the constructed proximity of the refugees' identity to that of the national people. The more similar the refugees' identity is perceived to be to that of the host country, the more positively they will be received due to a reduction in the othering of that identity compared to the national people. Media narratives on refugees exemplify how elements of intersecting identities can be employed to humanize or other both the refugee and the conflict, leading to varying levels of acceptance from countries expected to receive refugees. How identity narratives are constructed, interweaving elements

that evoke feelings of compassion and shared plight or the unlikelihood of shared suffering and experience, directly impact the attitudes and policies concerning refugees.

When explaining why there are differing responses to refugees, we can call on Nussbaum's position of compassion to analyze how narratives are constructed. If observing suffering leads to compassion, which motivates action to spur an individual, or in this case, any political actor, one must frame the plight of the refugee in a way that facilitates the emotion of compassion. If inaction is the desired outcome, then issue framing should impede compassion. Highlighting the suffering of a refugee group should be done in a way that emphasizes the severity of their experience, shows the suffering was not due to the observers' direct action, and emphasizes how the observer may meet a similar fate to motivate the observer into action (Nussbaum, 1992; Schriefer, 2011). Alternatively, if inaction is the goal, then the severity of suffering should be trivialized or normalized, the culpability of the observer should be emphasized, and the observer should be framed as different from the refugee to underscore the unlikelihood of the observer experiencing similar suffering. Inaction typically occurs through the construction of normative discourse, which otherizes the experience and identity of the refugee and leads to a lack of compassion and action.

Why Ethnography as Methodology?

It is vital to have a holistic and contextual understanding of the intricate interplay between power, space, and human agency. To achieve this, researchers incorporate ethnography and analyze politics as a process that demands the inherent inclusion of all processual elements. This approach to the analysis of politics incorporates "the study of the processes involved in determining and implementing public goals and in the differential achievement and use of power by the members of the group concerned with those goals" (Swartz et al. 1966, 3). To understand how political actors behave within the political process, it is necessary "to know how the political "units" think, feel, and will in relation to their understanding of the issues that they generate or confront" (Swartz et al. 1966, 18). The 'Processual Paradigm' is primarily concerned with rejecting government structures as the primary unit of analysis and provides room for local perspectives and multiple levels of analysis (Swartz et al., 1966). This approach allows for an analysis that prioritizes how various political actors engage with conceptions of the 'self,' 'other,' and 'the nation' and their direct impact on creating or reacting to geopolitical events and resulting policies. The Processual Paradigm aligns with Holland's (2020, 2) assertions that "critical

constructivist perspectives conceive ethnic, racial, and nationalist identities as social processes that are historically contingent, plastic, and varying in degree of social and political importance across time and place."

Political ethnography is research based on immersion in the subject, including reasoning originating from social practice that leads to contextual knowledge claims (Bellah et al. 2007; Snow and Benford 1988). The approach emphasizes analysis and knowledge 'from below' and 'from within.' It requires investigating situational actors' practices, concepts, and processes to generate holistic understanding. Political sociology and political science traditionally look at formal politics as the object of analysis, including the clear distinction between civil society and state actors. The referent object is not static. Ethnography focuses on "the nature of the political bond, such as how it is organized and whether people invest their sense of sovereignty in other citizens and organizations or in state institutions." (Benzecry and Baiocchi 2017, 234).

Complimentary to the Processual Paradigm, a political ethnographic approach justifies the inclusion of local perspectives and accounts of personal experience and opinion in understanding political action and the multi-level analysis and decentralization of the state. Benzecry and Baiocchi (2017, 230) explain that "political ethnographies get to the lived experiences of the political. Where previous studies of politics used broad strokes to paint a picture of political life, political ethnography allows the researcher to bring up the mundane details that can affect politics, providing a 'thick description' where one was missing". Tilly (2006, 410) furthers this with the statement that "political ethnography provides privileged access to [the] processes, causes, and effects" of political processes.

Overall, as a research method, ethnography is "well equipped to capture a messy and complex picture at the local level by privileging the informants' point of view or the emic perspective" and provides an "opportunity to study politics from the insider's viewpoint, relating it with other domains of life" (Kumar, 2014, 237). Examining the construction of identity as a 'from-within' process allows for a more nuanced conceptualization of identity and its relation to geopolitics and resulting policy. Reflexivity and the centering of local voices give nuanced insight into how individuals create the 'self' and how that 'self' informs all other intersecting forms of identity from the bottom up. Understanding how individuals create and interact with the 'self' provides a pathway for changing thoughts and behaviors based on identity. This impacts everything from how an individual may view another person to how states craft foreign policy.

Geopolitics, Identity Construction, and Ethnography

Identity and conflict are mutually constituted and reinforcing; therefore, it is vital to incorporate an ethnographic understanding of identity when analyzing geopolitics. This paper advocates for a methodological framework grounded in political ethnography to address critical lacunae in contemporary geopolitics research. Traditional approaches often prioritize top-down analyses, overlooking the nuanced dynamics and voices embedded within socio-political landscapes. By advocating for a bottom-up perspective that privileges local narratives, experiences, and perceptions, this paper argues for a paradigm shift in how scholars conceptualize and investigate key themes within political geography and geopolitics. By centering the experiences of individuals and communities, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the socio-political processes that shape our world. This approach enriches theoretical understandings of geopolitics and fosters more inclusive and equitable analyses.

Using ethnography is crucial for understanding geopolitics because it provides a nuanced and in-depth perspective that traditional methods often overlook. Ethnography allows researchers to capture the everyday experiences and cultural contexts that shape geopolitical phenomena, moving beyond elite discourses to include multiple voices and perspectives (Firat 2022; Käihkö 2022). Furthermore, ethnographic approaches also challenge the assumptions of traditional political studies by offering real-time, long-term observations that reveal the micro aspects of politics and the discrepancies between what people say and do (Neumann, 2022).

Ethnography's focus on the everyday and emic perspective challenges the dominance of elite discourses in critical geopolitics, advocating for a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis (Sturm 2008). By integrating diverse insights, ethnography enriches theoretical conceptualizations. It provides practical tools for analyzing and intervening in geopolitical events, making it an indispensable method for contemporary political geography and international relations (Hagene, 2018; Petsinis, 2019).

An interdisciplinary approach to anthropology and geopolitics can recalibrate geopolitics as an ethnographic object, enriching the field with more diverse perspectives and methodologies (Firat, 2022). Ethnography significantly enhances the understanding of geopolitics by providing a nuanced, ground-level perspective that challenges traditional, often elite-focused analyses. It captures the micro aspects of politics, revealing the intentions and meanings behind actions that broad-based models might overlook (Kumar, 2014). This method allows for the exploration of

the 'cultures of geopolitical expertise,' offering insights into how geopolitical knowledge is produced and enacted in various contexts (Firat 2022).

Ethnography's strength lies in its ability to restore ambiguity to polarized understandings of war and strategy, emphasizing the human face of conflict and the ethical responsibility of researchers (Käihkö 2022). It also provides a unique lens to scrutinize institutional habits and bureaucratic norms, highlighting the tension between individual ambitions and institutional dictates (Brigg and Bleiker 2008; Jackson 2008). Incorporating ethnography and its 'from within' approach to defining identity helps provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of geopolitics. This approach demonstrates how everyday phenomena and local contexts shape and are shaped by geopolitical forces. It allows for observing discrepancies between what people say versus what they do, which can provide a more accurate account of political dynamics (Kumar 2014).

The study of identity through ethnographic narrative reveals how dominant and alternative political discourses inform personal experiences and identities (Price 2018). The approach aids in adding to the cultural competence of analyses, which is required for accurate understanding and interpreting of the social forms of politics and policy processes (Neumann 2022). However, the concept of identity has been muddled in disciplinary practice, with ethnicity, culture, and identity being analytically distinct notions (Chun 2016). Identity is not solely tied to the existence of groups but also to evolving social and political forces (Kearns et al. 2018). Therefore, examining identity as fluid, situational, and contextual is essential when analyzing its impact on geopolitics.

Geopolitical conflict and identity construction are intricately related, with identity often serving as both a catalyst and a consequence of conflict. In protracted conflicts, identity building becomes multigenerational, reinforcing negative perceptions of the 'self' and 'other,' thus perpetuating the conflict (Ricarte 2023). Beyond the individual, geopolitical practices play a role in forming national and cultural identities (Nestoras 2021).

Three issues are central to the ethnographic study of political life: trajectories of individuation, mediation, and categorical division. When evaluating trajectories of individualization, "instead of thinking of the individual as a finalized and punctuated self, clearly delimited, we want to observe in which relational ways individuals inscribe themselves in groups and activities they qualify as political" (Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017, 238). This often occurs within larger holistic and hierarchical ideas of identity. Thus, it is crucial to identify how someone individualizes themselves.

These individual constructions of identity are essential when evaluating how identities are hierarchically categorized based on their importance to the 'self.'

In addition to self-individualization, it is integral to understand how individuals choose their affiliations and how this self-inclusion and exclusion form a political self, based on pre-existing understandings of political roles and establish bonds they understand as political (Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017). Processes of inclusion and exclusion bring into question the imagining of political bonds and resulting categorical separations. These perceived bonds result in "categories through which participants self-define their experiences and how they imagine what counts as political and what does not, as well as how these categories may be generative of forms of institutionalized inclusion and exclusion" (Benzecry and Baiocchi 2017, 238). This is in alignment with Foucault's (2001) definition of culture as "a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion" (p. 173).

The concept of ethnogeopolitics, which merges ethnopolitics, the politicization of ethnicity, and geopolitics, underscores the importance of defining and understanding the political, ethnic, and geopolitical dimensions to grasp the complexities of global interactions (Holland, 2020; Rezvani, 2018). By integrating these approaches, researchers can challenge traditional assumptions and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of geopolitical phenomena (Petsinis, 2019). This holistic approach ultimately fosters a deeper engagement with social transformation and the politics of identity, ethnicity, and race (Ramirez and Chan, 2021).

Case-study: Russo-Ukrainian War Narratives

Ethnography restores ambiguity to polarized understandings of war, helping to humanize the conflict and reveal the complex strategies and ethical responsibilities involved (Yao, 2022). The Russo-Ukrainian war highlights how media discourses construct and perpetuate conflicting national identities, reflecting deeper ideological divides (Ushchyna, 2022). Crump (1975) and Meertens (1975) stress the necessity of studies with a representative regional focus and account for geography, national history, and ideology (Hutson, 1976). Therefore, studies of the war must be culturally contextual and situational, accounting for unique regional characteristics, which can be done through ethnography.

The geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine is deeply intertwined with the construction of national identities, as evidenced by the contrasting historical narratives and cultural affiliations that shape each nation's self-perception. Russia's

imperial narrative, which emphasizes state power and control, clashes with Ukraine's pursuit of sovereignty and alignment with European values, creating an intractable identity conflict.

The conflict is deeply rooted in the contrasting national identities constructed through various discourses and media representations. Critical discourse analysis of the Ukrainian and Russian press reveals how conflicting identities are framed, reflecting divergent national, political, and sociological worldviews (Ushchyna, 2022). In 2012, Putin stated Russia is a "type of state civilization where there are no ethnicities, but where 'belonging' is determined by a common culture and shared values," which is reliant upon "preserving the dominance of Russian culture" against "hostile forces." Former Putin aide Vladislav Surkov denied the existence of Ukraine but admitted to "Ukrainianism," which he claimed was a "specific mental disorder... There is borscht, Bandera, bandura. But there is no nation" (Chesnakov 2020). Russian economist and political pundit Mikhail Khazin supports a "complete ban on Ukrainian fonts, Ukrainian texts, programs on [the] Ukrainian language, on teaching Ukrainian – i.e., completely" (Melamed 2016). This discourse demonstrated the Russian framing and re-conceptualizing of Ukrainian identity to fit their political goals.

The conflict is also framed as a struggle between the Ukrainian world, aligned with European values, and the Russian world, driven by imperial ambitions (Laplan et al. 2022). In 2022 Telegram posts, Ramzan Kadyrov said, "Sooner or later everything returns to its native freedom. So it was with the Crimea. Donetsk and Luhansk did not take root either. I think this is not the limit" (Apt, 2024). In a Youtube video, Mikhail Khazin stated, "New Russia should be joined to the Russian regions, with full denazification, deukrainization" (Melamed 2016). Khazon refers to Kharkov, Odesa, Zaporozhe, and Dnepropetrovsk. Redefining Ukrainian identity to delegitimize their sovereign land claims, justifies the Russian invasion in the name of their 'nation', and unification of territory based on conceptions of their own identity.

The war has also reinforced Ukraine's European identity, diminishing alternative identities like Eurasian and Slavic supranationalism, thus aligning more closely with European values and distancing from Russian influence (Minesashvili, 2022). This has caused pushback from Russian officials. On May 1, 2023, Dmitry Mendev posted on Telegram, "Our main task is ... to inflict a devastating defeat on all enemies – the Ukronazis, the United States, their minions in NATO, including vile Poland, and other Western nits. We must finally return our lands" (Apt, 2024). On June 16, 2023, he said, "We do not need Ukraine in NATO. In any case, as long as at least a stump of this state is preserved in its current form. Consequently, for Nazi

Ukraine, the conflict will be permanent. And the new political regime in Kyiv (if it exists at all) will definitely not be asked for in NATO" (Apt, 2024). This demonstrates the position of Russia on their perceived interference of the West.

The integration of ethnography and a 'from within' analysis would lead to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how these conceptions of identity came into being. By examining the Russian 'self' and Ukrainian 'self' and how each perceives the constitutive outside, scholars can understand how they position themselves within the world. Including an ethnographic narrative would show how dominant and alternative political discourses inform identities and how that affects policy and geopolitical conflict more broadly. It would also provide insight into defensive nationalist policies by explaining more intricately how each side constructs the 'national people', and how and why the global enemy is defined (Rabinowitz, 2023).

Case-study: Narrative on Ukrainian Refugees

When examining the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees, it is easy to see how the 'us' versus 'them' worldview is crafted. The narrative simultaneously brings Ukrainian refugees into Nussbaum's position of compassion while otherizing them in juxtaposition to a more mainstream conceptualization of European identity.

CBS News senior foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata received immediate backlash for stating that Ukraine "isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European ...city, one where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it's going to happen" (Bayoumi, 2022). This statement encapsulates the duality of constructed narratives. It immediately degrades places like Iraq or Afghanistan as locations somehow deserving or expected to have this type of conflict and places Ukrainian refugees above those from areas that are perceived to be more 'war-torn.' Simultaneously, it otherizes Ukrainians as somehow different from the rest of Europe or the broader Western world. Ukraine is 'relatively civilized' and 'relatively European,' meaning that they are not equal, they are not civilized, nor entirely European, and that distinction is important because it paves the way for a policy response that's, while better than the treatment given to refugees from the Middle East, still allows for inaction, normalization of suffering, and differentiation to the host population. Furthermore, it trivializes the situation in Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014, and the annexation of Crimea.

Immediately after the Russian invasion, the narrative surrounding Ukrainian refugees frequently tried to include them in the observer's conception of self. Observers perceived Ukraine and the resulting refugees similarly to their own

personal, group, and geographic sense of belonging. Journalist Phillipe Corbé stated: "We're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives" (Bayoumi, 2022). When the BBC (2022) hosted Ukraine's deputy chief prosecutor, David Sakvarelidze, he stated "It's very emotional for me because I see European people with blonde hair and blue eyes being killed every day with Putin's missiles and his helicopters and his rockets", the implication, being that if they were non-Europeans with different phenotypical presentations then somehow these attacks would or should garner less of an emotional reaction. It also presents Europeans as only being blonde-haired and blue-eyed. While the statement was likely made in an attempt to highlight the plight of Ukrainians and humanize them to Western Europeans and the wider world, it plays into Eurocentrism. Also, it does not acknowledge other people fleeing Ukraine who do not fit this description. It is well documented that non-white Ukrainian refugees have faced significantly more barriers while fleeing and increased racism (Ferris-Rotman 2022; Ray 2022). Similarly, Al Jazeera (2022) English presenter Peter Dobbie described Ukrainians fleeing the war as "prosperous, middle-class people so obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war; these are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa, they look like any European family that you would live next door to." An ITV journalist in Poland, Lucy Watson, said: "Now the unthinkable has happened to them. And this is not a developing, third-world nation. This is Europe!" (White, 2022). In *The Telegraph*, Daniel Hannan (2022) wrote, "They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections and read uncensored newspapers. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone". This reflects Nussbaum's model, highlighting how the observer may meet a similar fate. However, despite this narrative creation of the similarity in European-ness of Ukrainian refugees, you still see policy enacted that is based on otherizing language.

These media statements highlight how identity is a construct shaped by mental and material practices, creating a clear distinction between the idea of the 'self' and 'other.' Including Ukrainians in the 'self' automatically imposes societal norms and perceived truths upon them. Echoing Carl Schmitt's (1932) friend-enemy distinction and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) hegemony theory, Ukrainians have been brought into the 'in-group.' The conceptualization of the 'constitutive outside' is no longer divisions within the European Community such as Eastern versus Western Europe, Northern versus Southern Europe, or Slavs versus non-Slavs, but instead a new conception of Ukraine as European 'enough' to be included within the identity and

community. This is then juxtaposed against the external 'other,' Russia. These narratives also highlight the value connotation and emotional attachment to the collective self, which now has been rewritten to include Ukraine by individuals through humanizing narratives. Situational identity explains how this new conception of community, self, and the other has altered due to the social and cultural impacts of the war. It demonstrates how ideas are not static structures as previously when discussing who or what is 'European' Ukraine, and often other Eastern European countries, are either excluded from the narrative or not the primary focus of defining the identity.

This clearly defined 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy with clear in and out-groups provides a foundation for defensive nationalist policies built on othering narratives. Ukrainian refugees have been included in European conceptions of self enough to allow for wide sweeping acceptance of refugees, with more lenient domestic policies than shown to refugees from areas such as Syria or Afghanistan. However, the narrative still others Ukrainians and makes subtle distinctions of difference, which allows for discriminatory refugee policy to be implemented to protect the original 'nation' or 'self' from external forces that are perceived as inherently hostile or detrimental. This reflects Rabinowitz's (2023) requirements of an explicit construction of who constitutes the 'national people' (the population of the host state), the construction of the global enemy (Russia), organizing principles (citizens versus refugees), and clear policy objectives.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the profound impact of identity construction on geopolitical conflicts, using the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the narratives surrounding Ukrainian refugees as a case study. Through the lens of social identity theory, situational identity theory, and critical race theory, the analysis revealed how discourses surrounding Ukrainian identity have evolved, highlighting the fluid nature of concepts such as 'European.' These identity reconstructions underscore the necessity of understanding race, ethnicity, culture, and identity to grasp the shifting responses to geopolitical events, which is best done from ethnography's 'from within' and 'bottom-up' approaches.

Including bottom-up approaches in geopolitics allows for including local narratives and diverse perspectives. This methodology challenges traditional top-down analyses and demonstrates the value of ethnography in capturing the complexities of contemporary geopolitical landscapes. Ethnography's strength in providing in-depth insights into everyday experiences and cultural contexts enriches our

understanding of geopolitical phenomena by moving beyond elite discourses to include multiple voices and perspectives.

The case studies on the Russo-Ukrainian war narratives and the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees illustrate the intricate relationship between geopolitical conflict and identity construction. These studies show how identity serves as both a catalyst and a consequence of conflict, influencing media representations and policy responses. The analysis of Ukrainian refugees, in particular, highlights how narratives of compassion and othering shape public perceptions and state policies, reflecting broader trends in defensive nationalism.

This paper argues for a holistic and inclusive approach to studying political geography and geopolitics. This approach embraces the complexities of human experiences and challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. By centering the voices of those directly impacted by geopolitical processes, scholars can contribute to more robust theoretical frameworks and foster a more socially just world.

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