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From historical bias to historical insight: shifting stereotypes about Central and Eastern Europe after the invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract *Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), several Western European leaders expressed regret for previously disregarding the warnings of multiple Central and Eastern European (CEE) governments concerning the threat of Russian aggression. In the past, such warnings were seen as residual anti-Russian sentiment rooted in the region's historical experience during communism. Borrowing from social psychology, this article proposes a novel lens to study perceptions about CEE in European Union (EU) external policy through the concept of regional stereotypes. The empirical focus is on the Council, the main institution responsible for adopting EU policy on Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood. Using an interpretive approach, the goal is to examine how Council officials perceive the position of CEE governments after the invasion, compared to earlier reports. The exploratory analysis shows an emerging transformation of stereotypes about the region, which is starting to be recognised for its historical insight into Russia. The findings highlight the justificatory role of stereotypes in multilateral negotiations and how exogenous shocks can reshape their meaning.*

Introduction

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), several Western European leaders expressed regret for previously disregarding the warnings of multiple Central and Eastern European (CEE) governments concerning the threat of Russian aggression. Speaking at the EU's annual State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (a former German defence minister) made explicit reference to Poland, the Baltics, and 'all across CEE' to acknowledge that 'one lesson from this war is *we should have listened to those who know Putin*' (von der Leyen 2022; emphasis in original). In a similar vein, French President Emmanuel Macron reversed the words of one of his predecessors, Jacques Chirac, who had told CEE countries (CEECs) in 2003 that they 'missed an excellent opportunity to shut up' about the United States' invasion of Iraq (Smith 2003). Talking at a security forum in

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Bratislava, Macron argued: ‘Some said you had missed an opportunity to shut up. I think we also lost an opportunity to listen to you. This time is over’ (cited in Rose 2023). The sentiment is seemingly shared among Western European diplomats more generally, who were reported for saying: ‘We always listened to them. Now perhaps we listen a little more’ (cited in The Economist 2023). The expression of regret implies a recognition of error (for ignoring repeated warnings of CEECs about Russia) and is accompanied by a promise of change (this will no longer happen after 2022).

For their part, CEE governments who rang the alarm about Russia also echoed the sentiment of having felt dismissed in the past as Russophobic within European foreign policy circles. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, multiple CEE officials confessed publicly to feeling patronised over the years by Western European colleagues when it came to Russia, as they received comments along the lines: ‘you know, you over-nervous, over-sensitive Central Europeans are prejudiced against Russia’ (former Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski) or ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re just being Russophobic’ (former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves) (both cited in Lau 2022). Bringing the two sides together, there is a clear connection *between* the willingness of Western European actors to heed the advice of CEE governments about the threat of Russian aggression *and* their perceptions about the region. In the past, such perceptions were also convenient from an economic perspective, allowing several Western European governments to preserve profitable ties to Russia (Casier 2020).

To what extent has the situation changed after the full-scale invasion of 2022? In this article, I study perceptions about CEE in European Union (EU) external policy through the concept of regional stereotypes. In this context, I define CEE as a geographical region whose countries experienced communist rule in the twentieth century and have since become EU member states. The CEECs include the eight countries that joined the EU in the 2004 enlargement (Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013. Borrowing from social psychology (Correll et al. 2010, 46), I conceptualise regional stereotypes as automatic cognitive shortcuts through which non-CEE officials associate CEE governments with specific traits, such as a deep-seated animosity towards Russia rooted in the region’s historical experience during communism. The goal is to examine if and how these perceptions have changed among foreign policy officials working in the Council of the European Union (henceforth ‘the Council’). I focus on the Council because of its centrality in EU foreign policy, bringing together national governments to take collective decisions (Juncos and Pomorska 2011; Puetter 2014). For analytical purposes, I contrast the CEE region with ‘the West’¹ according to the commonly used distinction between ‘new/Eastern’ and ‘old/Western’ EU member states, reflecting divisions present in academic literature and political discourse (CNN 2003; Edwards 2006). By default, this simplification obscures national differences within both regions, which rarely operate as unitary actors in practice (for an

¹ In following the distinction between CEE and the West, I acknowledge that the European ‘West’ comprises three geographical subregions: Western Europe, Northern Europe, and Southern Europe—all sharing the lack of a communist legacy (see Appendix 1, supplementary material).

overview of regional heterogeneity within CEE, see Klin 2023; Leonard and Popescu 2007).

Using semi-structured interviews with Council officials, I examine how national representatives understand regional stereotypes about CEE in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The analysis is exploratory and draws on interviews conducted in 2024 with 10 officials from different Permanent Representations of Member States working on EU policy on Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood. The use of interviews ensures a crucial interpretive component meant to capture how respondents refer to regional stereotypes about CEE, and how—if at all—these have changed since the invasion. The findings suggest an emerging transformation of stereotypes about the region, particularly when it comes to Poland and the Baltics, who are increasingly recognised for their historical insight into Russia. Before 2022, the positions of CEECs in EU negotiations on Russia were often perceived as biased due to their communist history. According to interviewees cited in this article, that same history is now increasingly associated with the region's expertise on the Eastern neighbourhood. Put differently, what was previously perceived as a weakness of CEE governments in the Council is gradually being framed as a strength—a development which, thus far, has enhanced the agency of several countries in the region in shaping EU external policy.

The findings contribute to the academic literature on intergovernmental decision-making in the EU and beyond. By adopting an interpretive approach, I emphasise the justificatory function of stereotypes (Crandall et al. 2011) in multilateral negotiations, which enables officials to rationalise their treatment of conflicting viewpoints. Empirically, the scope of the article is limited to Council interactions among mid-level officials working on the Eastern dimension of European Neighbourhood Policy, including the response/relationship to Russia and the opening of enlargement negotiations with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. However, one could easily see the applicability of the argument to any field of intergovernmental decision-making where national governments articulate strong positions. By default, intergovernmental conflict generates distinctions between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' (Tajfel 2010) across policy issues; in these situations, stereotypes offer ready-made justifications that allow actors to dismiss out-group perspectives without engaging with the reasoning behind them, thereby undermining the quality of deliberation. From this perspective, stereotypes do not drive behaviour in themselves: in fact, all officials interviewed for this study have consistently reported that national interests take clear precedence over cultural differences during negotiations in the Council (Interviews A-I). Simultaneously, they also recognise that national interests and cultural aspects are intertwined in the sense that national positions are sometimes rooted in culturally significant issues at the domestic level. Overall, stereotypes reinforce national positions by allowing officials to make sense of how they treat others in intergovernmental negotiations. Moreover, while stereotypes are enduring, they are not fixed (Garcia-Marques, Santos, and Mackie 2006) and can shift in response to changing circumstances that challenge commonly held views about other groups.

In line with the theme of the special issue, this contribution addresses the editors' central question about the CEE region 'coming out of the periphery' following the invasion of Ukraine (Kavalski and Pomorska 2025). Theoretically,

I contribute to conceptualisations of the dynamic between Western and CEE member states through the lens of stereotypes, highlighting hierarchical power relations in a social structure (Tajfel and Turner 2004). The implicit hierarchy aligns closely with the notion of ‘pecking orders’ proposed by Lovato and Pomorska (2025) in this special issue, as well as with Noutcheva’s argument that CEE actors are aware of their ‘liminal’ position in Europe—situated between the West and Eurasia (Noutcheva 2025). As they struggle for recognition (Bátora forthcoming 2025) in EU foreign policy, CEE governments have experienced a shift in their regional perception since the invasion, in contrast to negative connotations associated with their ‘Eastness’ (Zarycki 2014) or ‘Euro-Orientalism’ (Kuldkepp 2023) in the past. However, the long-term durability of this transformation remains uncertain.

In the remainder of the article, I first situate CEECs in EU external policy and develop a theoretical understanding of the concept of regional stereotypes, drawing on literature from social psychology. I then outline the research design, explaining the choice to discuss regional stereotypes under the umbrella term ‘cultural differences’ when interacting with interviewees. Next, the exploratory findings are structured into two sections: one focused on regional stereotypes more broadly, the other examining the changing connotations of stereotypes about CEE in the aftermath of the invasion. The conclusion reflects on the implications of the findings.

CEECs and EU external policy

For many CEECs, the aspiration to join the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) became a central foreign policy priority following the fall of communism (Tulmets 2014, 2). With respect to the EU, the Eastern enlargement marked the accession of eleven countries from the region, often categorised into subgroups: Visegrád (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), two former Yugoslav republics (Croatia and Slovenia), as well as Bulgaria and Romania. From the early days of their EU membership, the governments of these countries ‘have expressed a heightened sense of solidarity among themselves as countries of Central and Eastern Europe (...) and with European countries remaining outside, whether to the East or in the Balkans’ (Edwards 2006, 146). In the Council, the region’s sense of solidarity has been reflected in coalition-building patterns, as CEE governments frequently coordinate with one another in the formulation of common positions within committees and working parties. For example, network analyses of Council officials reveal stable cooperation partners across the region from 2006 to 2021, with the eleven CEECs forming a recognisable ‘Eastern’ subgroup—although Romania is also aligned with Southern Europe (Johansson et al. 2023, 3–4).

Following their accession to the EU and NATO, the foreign policy priorities of CEECs have primarily centred on their immediate neighbourhood—Eastern Europe (including relations with Russia), the Western Balkans, and the Black Sea region (Baun and Marek 2013, 210; Tulmets 2014). In this context, Raik (2006, 25) described the ‘dividing line’ of the Carpathian Mountains, which separated the northern CEECs (namely Poland and the Baltics, which bordered only Eastern Europe) from those located south of the Carpathians (which also

bordered the Western Balkans and/or the Black Sea region). Crucially, this line was not merely geographic: unlike their southern counterparts, Poland and the Baltics had direct historical experience being part of the Russian Empire and/or the Soviet Union, which also helps explain why their post-1989 governments have been more vocal and critical towards Russia (Bossuyt 2017). In her work on memory politics in CEE after the Cold War, Mälksoo highlights how political elites in Poland and the Baltics sought to ‘set the record straight’ on the Second World War by ‘seeking an all-European condemnation of the crimes of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe as equal to those of Nazism’ (Mälksoo 2009, 655). Focusing on Poland, Mälksoo (2021) later showed how the country’s 2018 memory law exemplified a militant mnemonic revisionism that elevated Poland’s self-image as a ‘gravely victimized state’, entitled to recognition and a historical debt from Europe. As Toth (2019) demonstrates, however, it is misleading to treat such developments as reflecting a homogeneous ‘Eastern’ memory agenda, since in practice these initiatives have been driven above all by right-wing political actors rather than by CEE states as a whole. Notwithstanding these differences, the common thread uniting CEECs in foreign policy concerned their shared communist past as a source of solidarity and a basis for taking responsibility towards the EU’s post-communist neighbourhood (Tulmets 2014, 112).

From a normative perspective, the geographic location, historical experience, and status of the CEECs as ‘new’ member states have cast a shadow over their membership in the EU. Drawing from anthropology, Mälksoo introduced the concept of ‘liminality’ to describe CEE as a transitional, in-between space—‘neither here nor there’—where actors remain on a perpetual ‘quest to be part of the “true Europe” as opposed to “Europe but not quite Europe”’ (Mälksoo 2009, 653). As shown elsewhere in this special issue, the very stages of the EU’s accession process produce varying degrees of liminality—from non-candidates to potential candidates to official candidates at different stages of negotiation—which do not necessarily disappear when a country formally joins the EU (Noutcheva 2025). At the same time, it would be inaccurate to claim that the CEECs have been uniformly relegated to a subordinate position in EU intergovernmental negotiations; in foreign policy, for instance, some demonstrated notable agency over the past 20 years. Most famously, Poland was one of the chief architects of the so-called ‘Eastern Partnership’—a 2008 initiative under the European Neighbourhood Policy aiming to develop closer relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Copsey and Pomorska 2014). In other words, there is no evidence that the CEECs have been systematically marginalized by Western member states in EU foreign policy negotiations.

In fact, the different initiatives of CEE governments in the Council illustrate the heterogeneity of the region (Baun and Marek 2013; Bossuyt 2017; Tulmets 2014). Depending on the political priorities of the governments in power at any given time, the CEECs can find themselves more or less aligned with one another in EU external policy. Recent developments within the Visegrád Group—including divergent positions during the 2015–16 refugee crisis and democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Kazharski 2022)—highlight internal divisions among CEECs. Their response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the subsequent military aggression in Donbas serves as a

case in point. While all EU member states have formally supported sanctions against Russia since 2014, Poland and the Baltics adopted a decidedly more ‘hawkish’ stance than Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, or Bulgaria, whose high energy dependence on Russia prompted a more ‘pragmatic’ approach (Klin 2023; Sydoruk and Tyshchenko 2018). More controversially, Hungary went further by deepening economic ties with Moscow during the period (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017). In short, CEE is, in many ways, a region like any other: appearing much more cohesive from the outside-in than from the inside-out.

Given these circumstances, can we still study stereotypes about the region as a whole? A basic premise of the process of stereotyping is the human tendency to simplify reality—in this case, by reducing broad social groups to a few traits (Nelson 2016, 392). In this context, the question is not whether stereotypes about CEE accurately reflect the region or its internal heterogeneity. Instead, the question is whether a predominant stereotypical narrative about the region exists at a given moment in time. The next section introduces the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

The concept of (regional) stereotypes

In social psychology, the study of stereotypes has a long tradition of over a century (Nelson 2016). Cognitively, stereotypes have been linked to automaticity and the unconscious mind (Dijksterhuis 2010): from this perspective, stereotypes are defined as ‘automatic cognitive shortcuts’ through which individuals attribute specific traits to social groups (Correll et al. 2010, 46). While stereotypes are connected to prejudice, the concept is broader and more neutral; for instance, one can have knowledge of a negative stereotype but their personal beliefs might differ from it (Devine 1989). By contrast, prejudice captures negative attitudes towards individuals based on their membership to a social group, which in turn paves the way for discrimination, that is, negative actions based on someone’s membership to a social group (Dovidio et al. 2010). To sum up, stereotypes are about cognition (and can be both positive and negative), prejudice assumes an affective reaction (which is always negative), while discrimination is about negative behaviours.

In addition to facilitating information-processing about other groups (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994), stereotypes have a justificatory function, allowing individuals to rationalise why they treat groups in a certain way (Crandall et al. 2011). Once the element of justification appears, stereotypes have shifted from the unconscious to the conscious mind—as explanations of existing prejudice. As a conscious mechanism, stereotypes can also be used strategically for political reasons, for example the stereotypical portrayal of immigrants by far-right parties (Wodak 2015). Linguistically, stereotypes are communicated by describing situations (for example, girls are bad at math), using abstract adjectives (girls are sensitive), but also through innuendo and omission (girls are nice, so by implication less competent leaders) (Durrheim 2021).

To theorise the presence of stereotypes about the CEE region, I build on the Stereotype Content Model (SCM)—one of the most popular frameworks for understanding stereotypes in social psychology (Cuddy et al. 2009; Fiske 2018). According to the SCM, all stereotypes can be categorised along two

dimensions—warmth and competence—which can receive either high or low ratings (Fiske et al. 2002). Warmth is about how individuals perceive the intent of other groups (positive or negative) vis-à-vis the self and the in-group, while competence is about the perceived ability to act on that intent (which requires capable, assertive agents). When measuring the two dimensions, Fiske linked the adjectives ‘warm, trustworthy, friendly, honest, likable, and sincere (in order of priority)’ to the dimension of warmth, while competence was associated with being ‘competent, intelligent, skilled, efficient, assertive, and confident’ (Fiske 2018, 68). Moreover, the SCM explains that the way in which we categorise others depends on how we see ourselves in a social structure: are we competitors *and* do we have high or low status compared to the other group? Put differently, ‘in the stereotype space, competitors lack warmth, while non-competitors are warm; high status people are competent, while low status people are incompetent’ (Cuddy et al. 2009, 2).

Furthermore, the SCM links combinations of warmth and competence with specific emotions, which in turn trigger specific behaviours. For example, groups stereotyped as having high warmth/high competence evoke pride and admiration (for example, the middle class), while groups stereotyped as low warmth/low competence evoke disgust or contempt (for example, poor people). Combinations of the two dimensions are also possible (Fiske et al. 2002): for instance, groups stereotyped as high warmth/low competence are linked to paternalism (for example, towards the elderly), whereas groups stereotyped as low warmth/high competence stereotypes provoke envy or resentment (for example, elite professionals). Table 1 provides an overview of the key categories of the SCM.

Transposed to the discussion about CEECs in the introduction, we must consider the specificities of EU policy towards Russia prior to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. There is, therefore, a distinction between how other EU member states perceive CEE governments in their general interactions—in light of their shared membership in a regional organisation—and how they relate to them on specific policy issues. According to the SCM, the boundaries of an in-group can change depending on the situation. In our case, being described as *anti*-someone suggests a perception of low warmth. Before the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Donbas, only two CEECs were seen as overly hostile towards Russia (Lithuania and Poland)—with the rest categorised as ‘frosty pragmatists’ (Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Romania) or even ‘friendly pragmatists’ (Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia) (Leonard and Popescu 2007). After 2014, Poland and the Baltics became ‘hawks’ on Russia (Sydoruk and Tyshchenko 2018), while Romania and Czechia moved, to varying degrees, in the ‘anti-Russian’ camp (Klin 2023). Although these portrayals come from academics and think tanks, they were confirmed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by several CEE officials, who confessed previously feeling dismissed in EU policy circles as ‘Russophobic’ (Jourová 2023), ‘alarmist’ (McCausland 2022), or ‘over-sensitive’ about Russia, with governments who ‘don’t know what they are talking about’ (Lau 2022). Such descriptors imply a tendency towards negativity, poor judgement, and exaggeration, which in the SCM suggests a pattern of ‘low warmth/low competence’ associated with contempt (Fiske 2018; Fiske et al. 2002). With regard to ‘warmth’, the additional question is whether CEECs were perceived as competitors because their views

Table 1. Overview of the stereotypes content model, based on Fiske et al. (2002)

		Competence	
		Low	High
Warmth	High	Paternalistic stereotypes low status, not competitive <i>for example, the elderly</i>	Admiration stereotypes high status, not competitive <i>for example, the middle class</i>
	Low	Contemptuous prejudice low status, competitive <i>for example, poor people</i>	Envious stereotypes high status, competitive <i>for example, elite professionals</i>

undermined other member states’ profitable ties with Russia, as trade and energy imports bounced back and even reached new peaks after the initial sanctions related to Crimea (Casier 2020, 530–31). Regarding ‘competence’, the labels capture a perceived hierarchical relationship in which higher-status members—in this case ‘old’ member states with economic and geopolitical clout—presume to ‘know better’ than their lower-status, ‘new’ CEE counterparts. In this respect, stereotypes serve an important justificatory function, allowing the dismissal of opposing viewpoints from official policy, following the logic ‘this is how these countries are, so we can disregard them.’

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine provided an exogenous shock to this mindset and created what psychologists call ‘cognitive dissonance’, that is, uncomfortable situations when individuals are confronted with evidence contrary to their beliefs (Festinger 1957). Research shows that stereotypes are likely to change under such circumstances because people naturally seek to reduce the psychological discomfort brought by dissonance—typically by adding new consonant cognitions and highlighting their importance (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 4). For example, when Western European officials recognise Russia as an aggressor and acknowledge the error of not having listened to CEE warnings in the past, they are attempting to minimise the cognitive dissonance brought by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The question is to what extent these new cognitions translate into novel perceptions about CEE governments after 2022. In the next section, I explain the methodological approach of the article.

Research design

To explore the presence of regional stereotypes in EU external policy, I adopt an interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) focused on actors’ perceptions of the importance of cultural differences within diplomatic negotiations. When engaging with the actors under study, I deliberately use the term ‘cultural differences’ as opposed to ‘regional stereotypes’ in order to reduce social desirability bias, namely the likelihood that respondents deny holding stereotypes because they do not wish to appear prejudiced in front of the researcher (Durrheim 2021). ‘Cultural differences’ are both broader and vaguer than regional stereotypes, capturing the ‘collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’ (Hofstede 2001, 9). While culture is about patterns of values,

behaviours, or symbols shared by a group, stereotypes are common depictions associated with that group. Since stereotypes are often linked to prejudice and discrimination (Dovidio et al. 2010), many scholars recommend using indirect measures when interacting with the participants in a study (Bos, Madonia, and Schneider 2018).

Furthermore, the purpose is not to measure the impact of stereotypes on behaviour in a positivist sense, but to examine how actors make sense of cultural traits in the context of changing circumstances (in this case, the exogenous shock created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine). By all accounts, the invasion led to significant changes in the EU's approach to Russia, which inevitably affected dynamics in the Council. The period under investigation covers the first two and a half years following the full-scale invasion (February 2022 to October 2024). Given this empirical focus, the Council structures under consideration are the working parties discussing the EU's response to the invasion and the Eastern dimension of European Neighbourhood Policy more generally. The following analysis is exploratory and includes interviews with 10 attachés of Permanent Representations from four broad geographical regions: five Western European, one Southern European, one Nordic, and three from CEE (for a list of countries associated with the four regions, see [Appendix 1](#), supplementary material). The interviewees represent countries of different sizes and emphasise the non-CEE perspective, in line with the research question of the article. However, since the object of stereotyping captures CEECs, it is crucial to also include their perspective in the analysis in order to identify how they felt portrayed or treated on this topic.

Data is collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in-person or online with national officials based in Brussels and representing their country in Council working parties. The interview guide starts from general questions about respondents' understanding of culture and examples of cultural differences they have witnessed in the Council (see [Appendix 2](#), supplementary material). Next, the topic shifts to the EU's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the changing dynamics among Member States in the context. Finally, respondents are asked about Poland and the Baltics specifically and whether they think attitudes towards them have shifted since the invasion. The analysis below reflects this structure, as the first part provides a general overview of stereotypes in the Council before going into details about the region and shifts prompted by the full-scale of invasion of Ukraine.

During the interviews, I revealed that I grew up in Romania, but moved to Western Europe after my PhD, and later gave examples of my own experience navigating cultural differences in the Netherlands (where I currently live). The intention was to ensure transparency and simultaneously put interviewees at ease by making the topic of the conversation less of a taboo. Inevitably, respondents reacted to my positioning by bringing up unsolicited examples about my country of origin (for instance, to say that Romania was less traumatised than Poland during the communist regime, or that Romania's priorities on the topic revolve around Moldova). Given the subject under discussion, it is possible that my nationality affected the responses received, following the logic that Western European officials were less likely to reveal their stereotypes about CEE to a Romanian, whilst CEE officials were more likely to confide in me because they saw me as 'one of their own.' Nevertheless, the reverse could

also be true: as a CEE academic educated in the West and residing in the Netherlands, I could equally be perceived as someone who left the region behind and found a new home in Western Europe. Overall, except for the references about my country's history and current policy priorities, I did not think my nationality altered the content of the conversation about cultural differences in the Council. While most respondents were concerned about the anonymity of the interviews, they seemed open to talk about their perceptions once they were reassured of the confidentiality of the discussion.

The empirical section is based on discourse analysis (Hardy, Phillips, and Harley 2004) of interview transcripts, with a focus on identifying elements of the theoretical framework. Methodologically, the emphasis was on presupposition, predication, and subject positioning (Doty 1993). Presuppositions were key to uncovering participants' background knowledge and underlying assumptions—as reflected in their own definitions of culture and its manifestations within the Council. Next, predication was essential for highlighting stereotypes, as it enabled the identification of statements in which subjects (in this case, CEECs) were linked to specific attributes through predicates (such as 'hardliners', 'outspoken', 'new member states', etc.; see Appendix 3, supplementary material). Finally, subject positioning involved analysing how relationships were constructed both among subjects (through the identification of similarities and oppositions in attributes and stances), and between subjects and objects (by reflecting on their perceptions before and after the full-scale invasion). The last point allowed for a more meta-level reflection, as participants were asked to consider how their views changed over time. In line with the SCM, I expected respondents to acknowledge a shift in their perception of CEE governments after 2022. Specifically, *I anticipated a change from contemptuous prejudice (seeing countries in the region along the lines of 'low warmth/low competence') to admiration (portraying them as possessing both 'high warmth' and 'high competence')*. As will be shown below, this expectation was only met partially, as CEE governments were more often described along the lines of 'low warmth/high competence' owing to shifting perceptions about the value of their historical experience with Russia.

As a limitation of the interview setting, respondents were likely to share post-hoc rationalizations of their behaviour towards the region as opposed to their actual beliefs about negotiation dynamics within Council working parties. By default, semi-structured interviews cannot offer insight into the unconscious dimension of stereotypes, that is, their role in automatic information-processing by respondents. Instead, interviews give access to the justificatory function of stereotypes, that is, how they are interpreted in the conscious mind of participants. In interpretive research, self-justification is important because it captures how respondents make sense of a situation and (in this case) how they explain their evolving views on a topic. After 2022, the participants appeared to reinterpret CEECs' historical experience with Russia—no longer seen as a source of bias for their positions, but rather as a source of insight when deciding EU policy on the Eastern neighbourhood. Finally, although the section generally discusses the region as monolith, it acknowledges important differences in the positions of individual CEECs on Russia and Ukraine since 2022—as highlighted in the second part of the analysis.

Analysis

Before examining the role of specific regional stereotypes in EU external policy negotiations, it is essential to clarify how respondents understand cultural differences in the context of the Council more generally. Across different interviews, people talked about cultural differences in relation to someone's upbringing in a certain nation, region, or social background, with consequences for their views on life, their values, and behaviours (Interviews A-I). Simultaneously, interviewees recognised their shared affiliation to the 'Brussels bubble', meaning the tendency to be inherently familiar with—if not actively embracing—cultural differences. One respondent mentioned this explicitly: 'People who are working in the Council are all moulded in the same form in many ways. A lot of people have studied European studies, a lot of them have done Erasmus. They've become European' (Interview C, Nordic official, 2 May 2024). These points are well-known in the literature: indeed, there is a self-selection of people with European identities who work for EU institutions or accept to be 'posted' to Brussels (Egeberg 1999; Hooghe 2005). Since foreign policy is populated by career diplomats, the sensitivity to different cultural environments should be even higher than in other policy fields.

Moreover, participants mentioned the importance of 'culture' in the institutional setting, as captured by the organisational norms specific to an institution. In line with existing research on EU intergovernmental negotiations (Lewis 2005; Puetter 2014), respondents described the centrality of consensus-seeking and socialisation as key institutional norms in the Council (Interviews A, B, D, F, G). This is especially the case in foreign policy negotiations, where unanimity rules are known to have created a 'coordination reflex' among officials (Juncos and Pomorska 2006). As one respondent put it: 'The Council is a body that has a lot of different cultures in there. But it also has a culture of its own. It has these traditions or way of speaking, way of doing things' (Interview G, CEE official, 18 October 2024). In other words, cultural differences in the Council may stem from heterogenous individual characteristics related to one's nationality or upbringing, but they play out in a homogenous institutional setting focused on continuous collaboration in finding common positions. The next section discusses what regional stereotypes are still visible under the circumstances.

Types of regional stereotypes: Zooming in on CEE

In the EU, regions are bound together by geography, a shared history, and at times linguistic similarities. When asked which countries they consider culturally close within the Council, respondents have consistently highlighted specific groups, namely (1) Benelux and Germany, (2) Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), (3) Mediterranean countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain), (4) Eastern Europe (the Baltics, Poland, Romania), or (5) the Latin countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Romania). Considering the topics covered by the Foreign Affairs Council, these groups might simply reflect 'geopolitical realities', as described by one respondent (Interview C, Nordic official, 2 May 2024). Indeed, for most participants, it is impossible to distinguish cultural characteristics from national positions in foreign policy negotiations, given that

‘a colleague from Finland or a colleague from Romania will, of course, have a different perception of [their] own national interests than a colleague from Portugal’ (Interview E, Southern European official, 11 June 2024). Moreover, most interviewees agree that ‘national interests take clear precedence over cultural aspects’ in the Council because ‘when there are strongly held national positions and the country wants to assert itself, then it really doesn’t matter what part of Europe it is from, or what’s its historical legacy, or to which regional groupings it belongs’ (Interview I, CEE official, 30 October 2024).

While acknowledging the importance of geopolitics in shaping national positions, respondents still point to regional or national differences at play in the Council. A prime example of stereotypical thinking can be found in depictions of negotiation styles, with Nordic officials being consistently described as ‘factual, straight to the point, but at the same time trying to find consensus, or not to be seen to be pushing for positions that would be out of mainstream’ (Interview I, CEE official, 30 October 2024; also in Interviews A, B, D). One respondent talked about people’s negotiation styles in terms of being ‘a little bit more culturally fired, or less [...] There are certain countries that have an approach which sometimes is more direct, saying exactly “this is what I’m aiming at” (...) Other countries might have a different approach’ (Interview E, Southern European official, 11 June 2024). For example, ‘countries from the South are more flexible in certain issues. They tend to have an approach based on exchanges or deals being done on other files, and so on. (...) This is very much related to the culture not only of South but also of Eastern Europe’ (Interview D, CEE official, 21 May 2024).

Furthermore, cultural differences are noted in reference to communication styles and the manifestation of emotion when taking the floor during meetings:

All of my Finnish colleagues tend to be [...] a little quieter. And sort of dryer in the way they intervene without being any more or less effective. And I also see it when [...] Greece and Cyprus discuss anything related to Turkey—[it’s] done in a way that I would never see a Swedish delegate intervene on anything, ever. [...] Clear, but also sometimes quite loud or using more arguments related to emotion, whereas someone like a German colleague will read very clearly the instructions. [...] You also have to learn to read it a little bit: a Swede making a big sentimental statement might be quite different than the Italian colleague putting the same amount of emotion into an intervention. So that means that the Swede really means it. It’s very important to him. (Interview B, Western European official, 5 March 2024)

[You see cultural differences] in daily interactions, whether they are personal or professional, the way you would behave informally, the way you would convey a specific position, whether you’re more volatile, whether you’re very straightforward and straight to the point. [...] It is how you speak, or you defend the position during a meeting, but also the way you interact in-between meetings. (Interview H, Western European official, 22 October 2024)

In the literature on cultural stereotypes in Europe, the communicative differences between Northern and Southern Europeans are well-known, as people from the North are seen as ‘reserved’ and even ‘stern’, while Southern Europeans are described as ‘talkative’ and ‘passionate’ (see list of European

stereotypes in Jha et al. 2023). Similarly, social psychologists working with the SCM have found that Northern Europeans are often depicted as cold (or having ‘low warmth’) but competent, while Southern Europeans are linked to ‘high warmth’ attributes such as friendliness, alongside lower competence (Cuddy et al. 2009, 11). In this respect, one interviewee captured the justification function of stereotypes explicitly: ‘Sometimes you’re not surprised if somebody makes a very long speech and then you think: “oh, it figures they’re from this country or that country”’ (Interview G, CEE official, 18 October 2024).

The clearest example of stereotypes-at-play concerns comments on the organisation of the Council Presidency, with connotations of higher and lower competence—in line with the SCM. As one interviewee put it:

For example, we recently had the Spanish Presidency, right? And, a lot of colleagues were, you know, mentioning the fact that this was less organised or a bit all over the place in certain issues and so on. You could see a difference from a presidency such as a Nordic country, right? Sweden or Finland, for example. This is very much related and entrenched in the culture of how people approach working methods and certain discussions. (Interview D, CEE official, 21 May 2024)

On this point, other interviewees are conscious of cultural preconceptions: ‘If a meeting starts too late under the Spanish Presidency, it’s a cultural trait. If it starts too late under the Swedish one, it’s a fluke. I think generally there is awareness that we have these biases’ (Interview B, Western European official, 5 March 2024). Other respondents also acknowledged their awareness of stereotypes and their deliberate choice to distance themselves from them to maximise the effectiveness of negotiations (Interviews C, F). From this perspective, some consider that personality matters more than culture: ‘A difficult personality is a difficult personality. It’s nothing necessarily to do with their culture. [...] You can have an annoying German just as likely as an annoying Greek’ (Interview F, Western European official, 27 September 2024).

Where do CEECs stand by comparison? Most interviewees underline the importance of their shared historical experience, which brings together officials from these countries regardless of other differences: ‘For those from Eastern Europe is [the] historical experience, which obviously isn’t shared with those from the South’ (Interview F, Western European official, 27 September 2024). In terms of perceptions, the Baltics are generally regarded as ‘straightforward’ (Interview H, Western European official, 22 October 2024) or even ‘very outspoken. (...) People [from these countries] will—even more than the Dutch—really tell you what they think very clearly (...) This is also because the file is so close to their heart.’ (Interview B, Western European official, 5 March 2024, emphasis added). The first point is interesting because it captures the communicative style of the three countries by reference to the well-known stereotype about Dutch directness (Mecking 2018). Others added Poland to the group and characterised them as ‘hardliners when it comes to the EU approach towards Russia’ (Interview D, 21 May 2024), having a ‘maximalist approach’ (Interview A, Western European officials, 2 February 2024), always pushing for ‘firmer reactions’ (Interview B, Western European official, 5 March 2024) from the Council. On the CEE side, one interviewee acknowledged explicitly the

Russophobia label applied to Poland and the Baltics before the invasion but avoided to point fingers at Western colleagues: ‘it’s hard to say if the others viewed us because of culture that we were Russophobic or because of Russia’s narrative and disinformation’ (Interview G, CEE official, 18 October 2024).

In any case, having ‘harsher positions’ is bound to ‘create more friction’ in decision-making in the Council (Interview H, Western European official, 22 October 2024). While this development is seen as normal by most interviewees, it is not regarded in a positive light when officials deviate from the established institutional norm of consensus-seeking. For instance, one diplomat mentioned that ‘people get annoyed’ when some delegates ‘don’t play by the unspoken rules of negotiation’, specifically by failing to limit their comments as a draft document evolves. The unspoken rule is that after the first round of substantive comments, delegates should keep their revisions to a minimum, typically around 2 comments. When countries fail to follow this norm [which apparently is the case for some CEE countries], they are seen as ‘extremely pushy’ for ‘repeating stuff a million times’ (Interview A, Western European officials, 2 February 2024).

Two attributes are visible here: one referring to the communicative style of CEE governments (particularly the Baltics and Poland), and the other about their uncompromising approach to Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood more generally. In light of the list of traits provided by the SCM (see section 3), being portrayed as overly direct or pushy is a sign of ‘low warmth’: in general, traits such as bluntness and brashness are used to indicate disapproval. Furthermore, the portrayal of Poland and the Baltics as hardliners on Russia is consistent with general representations of these countries as ‘hawks’, always demanding the adoption of harsher sanctions against Russia (Kijewski and Barigazzi 2023; Sydoruk and Tyshchenko 2018). In the logic of the SCM, being labelled a ‘hardliner’ carries negative connotations about the disposition of the country, suggesting ‘low warmth’ from those not sharing the same position.

However, concerning the aspect of emotions, while one interviewee mentioned that people from the region continue to ‘have quite strong feelings’ about Russia (Interview B, Western European official, 5 March 2024), no one used the terms ‘sensitive’ or ‘nervous’—expressions that were commonly used before 2022, according to reports from CEE officials (cited in Lau 2022). In research on gender stereotypes, there is an important difference between how men and women are characterised when it comes to ‘strong feelings’, as men are labelled ‘passionate’ while women are described as emotional, that is, unable to control the outwards display of their emotions (Brescoll 2016). The point is that both genders experience emotions to a similar extent, but it is primarily women whose behaviour is perceived as being directly influenced by these emotions. By extension, if CEE officials are no longer characterised as ‘sensitive’, this suggests that their ‘strong feelings’ about Russia are now seen as legitimate or worthy to be considered when deciding on policy. Overall, the adjectives encountered so far do not indicate a change in the pattern of ‘low warmth’ attributed to CEEs since the invasion (see section 3). To capture the full story of perceptions triggered by Russia’s war on Ukraine, the next section delves into the dimension of competence in the SCM, highlighting respondents’ understandings of the historical experience of CEECs.

Making sense of regional stereotypes: CEE in the historical context

All interviewees agreed that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked an important shift in the way in which several CEECs were perceived in the Council. Without being prompted, respondents predominantly focused on Poland, the Baltics, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia, with only limited references to Croatia, Czechia, or Slovenia. As the interviews were conducted in 2024—some during the Hungarian Presidency of the Council—several participants explicitly excluded Hungary and Slovakia from discussions about CEE, as if the two countries were not representative of the region under their current governments (Interviews A, D, G, I). Nonetheless, as part of the Visegrád Group, both Hungary and Slovakia initially condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine and declared their support for Ukrainian refugees (Kaniok and Hloušek 2025). Notably, Slovakia was among the first countries to provide military assistance to Ukraine before reversing its position in 2023 following the re-election of Robert Fico (Czyż 2024). The new government has since been far more obstructive in Council negotiations; most recently, in July 2025, Fico lifted Slovakia's veto of the EU's 18th sanctions package against Russia after winning concessions from the Commission guaranteeing that it would be compensated for losses under a separate plan to phase out Russian oil and gas (Reuters 2025).

By comparison, Hungary has consistently adopted 'Russia-friendly' positions throughout the period—voting against some of the sanctions, delaying EU aid to Ukraine, and refusing to provide military assistance (Thorburn 2024, 1–2). By leaving the room during the vote to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, Viktor Orbán extended the principle of 'constructive abstention' in EU negotiations into a form of 'constructive absence' (Novak 2024). However, as of June 2025, Hungary continued to veto Ukraine's membership bid, citing the support of a national consultation on the issue (Brzozowski 2025). While Hungary and Slovakia are clearly part of any conventional understanding of CEE, their exclusion from interviewees' portrayals of the region highlights the ongoing and fluid construction of stereotypes in EU negotiations, which often lack anchoring in political realities.²

As such, respondents present in Brussels before 2022 describe the contrasting position between CEECs and Western Member States towards the EU's Eastern neighbourhood:

Before the war, we [in CEE] were in the same boat, very much close to this region and wanted to have closer relations, EU integration with this region, while other countries like France, Italy, were hesitant in really referring to the ambitions of the partners when it comes to European integration and [...] thinking that there's still a way that we can deal with Russia. (Interview D, CEE official, 21 May 2024)

[Before 2022] we were really on the edge. We were warning. We had our sources, our information, our culture, also our experience basing our positions. At the time, we were on the other spectrum compared to some many central and bigger European countries who wanted 'business as usual' and were thinking you can still negotiate with Putin (...). So we were like a voice in the desert, continuously bringing it up. It was our role in

² The author would like to thank Reviewer 1 for this formulation.

the Council. But it was a very sad moment of truth when the world saw that actually we were right all the time. (Interview G, CEE official, 18 October 2024)

[The historical experience of CEE countries] was downplayed probably as a result of the then present geopolitical environment. So actually the situation, as perceived or filtered through the optics and experiences of the other member states, the position or approach to Russia stemming from the historical experience of this regional grouping, didn't merit that much attention in those days. (Interview I, CEE official, 30 October 2024)

These quotes reflect the justificatory function of stereotypes in multilateral negotiations: given the interests of many governments to continue cooperating with Russia, national representatives in the Council had little incentive to take seriously the warnings of those officials about Russian aggression. For some interviewees, the changes triggered by the invasion are a normal consequence of evolving circumstances: 'Of course, the feelings were different back then because the situation objectively was different. [...]. After the invasion in February 2022, the perception everywhere in Europe changed a lot' (Interview E, Southern European official, 11 June 2024). When it comes to Poland and the Baltics in particular, respondents think these countries have been vindicated; in fact, the latter are nowadays seen as 'punching way above their weight in terms of Russia policy compared to how small they are' (Interview C, Nordic official, 2 May 2024). Others express similar feelings:

We are trying to cooperate more now with the Baltics and Poland. And we are also usually trying to confirm that our policy changed for good and that we are a reliable partner in support of Ukraine. (...) And if we're talking about topics where we could take a more critical position in comparison with the Baltics and Poland, I think we are sometimes more hesitant to be too public about it. (Interview A, Western European officials, 2 February 2024)

It was very striking for me personally to see the differences of these colleagues from countries that were more sceptical before, how they're very much supportive now. And, in a way, we are now like a big-minded group, which was very much not the case beforehand. (Interview D, CEE official, 21 May 2024)

[The invasion] was palpable and a game changing moment in this sense. There was even some soul searching on the part of France and Germany, while acknowledging that they were wrong before... [Now] for example, within internal debates on Russia or on Ukraine, the other member states tend to wait and really listen to the positions or to what the CEECs have to say on those files because they now know through the experience that there is an asymmetry of knowledge. Or just to put it really crudely, that those countries know better. (Interview I, CEE official, 30 October 2024)

From a psychological perspective, the change can be explained in terms of attempts at reducing cognitive dissonance when confronted with new, contrasting information (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 4). Since all member states recognised Russia as the initial aggressor in Ukraine, the warnings of several CEECs prior to the invasion appear to have been confirmed. In this regard, countries like Poland and the Baltic states are still perceived as overly direct and 'tough' in their stance on Russia, but their concerns are increasingly viewed as legitimate. Even when they are described as hardliners or 'hawks'

in EU negotiations on the topic, their position is more often considered credible and justified. When describing the status quo post-invasion, multiple interviewees highlighted—in an unprompted way—the historical relationship of CEE with Russia:

[...] the historical relations of the Baltic countries, Poland or even Sweden that has been involved for centuries in the region with Russia [...], that history, of course, plays a role in a sense that there is a certain perception of Russia and Ukraine, a certain understanding of what's happened there. (Interview E, Southern European official, 11 June 2024)

They feel more personally affected because they have a history with Russia, specifically of occupation. They feel also a lot of solidarity with Ukraine. (Interview A, Western European officials, 2 February 2024)

It has a lot to do with history. You know that Poland was a traumatized country, more traumatized than most countries by the communist era. (...) They had an even more bitter experience of what the Russians could do than some of the other countries. (Interview C, Nordic official, 2 May 2024)

You can see that for some countries, it is deeply entrenched in their collective identity, but also in their own personal identity. (Interview H, Western European official, 22 October 2024)

In the past, officials from the region complained that their warnings about Russia were disregarded at the EU level, as their historical experience was perceived to bias their positions, limiting their ability to view Russia independently of the Soviet or Russian imperial legacy. As one respondent explains, there are different ways of engaging with one's history:

You could have an appreciation for the historical experiences of countries. Or you could say, it's because of their historical experience that they're like this. So it's a different approach in how you take it seriously. (Interview D, CEE official, 21 May 2024)

Looking back at the period before the invasion, it seems that history was used as an argument to dismiss the concerns of CEE governments about Russia: they were described as 'over-sensitive' because they could not see past their history. Nowadays, there is an emerging tendency to use that same history to emphasise that these countries have unparalleled insight into Russia and the region. All things considered, from the perspective of the SCM, the attributes associated with these countries look closer to the 'low warmth/high competence' quadrant, as shown in [Table 2](#).

In other words, while perceptions about the communication and negotiations style of CEE governments have remained constant, what seems to have changed is the status of CEE officials, whose expertise on the Eastern neighbourhood is more carefully considered post-2022. For example, when asked whether the Baltics and Poland are more listened to in the Council since the full-scale invasion, one interviewee responded categorically: 'Absolutely' (Interview C, Nordic official, 2 May 2024). The sentiment echoes the thoughts of former Polish Prime-Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who argued in February

Table 2. Applying the SCM—stereotypes about CEECs in EU foreign policy, before and after 2022

		Competence	
		<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>
Warmth	<i>high</i>	Paternalistic stereotypes low status, not competitive <i>not applicable</i>	Admiration stereotypes high status, not competitive <i>not applicable</i>
	<i>low</i>	Contemptuous prejudice low status, competitive <u>CEECs before full-scale invasion</u>	Envious stereotypes high status, competitive <u>CEECs after full-scale invasion</u>

2023, a year after the invasion: ‘I see that we are being listened to more and more on what is going on around us. I see that on the security challenge we are understood in a better way’ (cited in Higgins 2023).

Going back to the two dimensions of the SCM, the combination of ‘low warmth’ and ‘high competence’ indicates a pattern of envious stereotypes, which might come as a surprise to many CEECs themselves. Yet a higher status for CEE in EU external policy negotiations might automatically be interpreted in a zero-sum way by other regions with lower status, such as Southern Europe, or even by regions with higher status who have an interest in preserving the status quo—either Western or Northern Europe (cf. Tajfel and Turner 2004; see also Lovato and Pomorska 2025). In any case, as non-CEE officials in the Council were forced to reckon with the reality of Russian aggression in Ukraine, they appear to have revised their assessment of the region’s expertise (or competence) on the topic, at least when it comes to Poland and the Baltics. By contrast, preexisting views about the warmth of CEE governments in EU external policy negotiations remained unchanged.

Conclusion

To sum up, do Council officials perceive CEECs differently since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine? The exploratory analysis presented in this article revealed a tentative shift in stereotypes about the region concerning their past portrayal as ‘Russophobic’ or ‘over-sensitive’ when it came to the Eastern dimension of European Neighbourhood Policy. While the scope of the findings is constrained by the limited number of interviews—related to the sensitivity of the topic—an emergent picture of regional stereotypes begins to take shape nonetheless: since 2022, CEE officials in the Council are described as both blunt (‘outspoken’) and hawkish on Russia (‘pushy’/‘hardliners’), yet their expertise on the region does not seem to be questioned—at least not openly. Above all, we can start to observe differences in the representation of the region’s history with Russia, which is now portrayed more as a source of insight into the Eastern neighbourhood rather than as a source of bias that prevents

governments from taking ‘rational’ positions on the issue. Thus far, this shift has enhanced the agency of several CEECs in EU foreign policy by ensuring their perspectives are taken into greater consideration—which from their perspective is a positive development compared to the period before. The key question is whether this enhanced standing at the EU level will turn out to be a lasting development or merely a temporary one. The 2024 appointment of Kaja Kallas, Estonia’s former Prime-Minister, as the EU’s new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy indicates that the region has indeed strengthened its influence in Brussels—particularly given Kallas’s reputation as ‘one of the EU’s most outspoken Russia critics’ (Jones 2024).

Beyond the Council, the findings have implications for different bodies of literature. The argument concerning the justificatory function of stereotypes could easily be applied to EU studies and International Relations more generally. In theory, any EU intergovernmental negotiation—not just discussions about the Eastern dimension of European Neighbourhood Policy—would be susceptible to the use of stereotypes to defend a country’s lack of engagement with the contrasting positions of its counterparts. In fact, in any foreign policy negotiation, stereotypes provide ‘off-the-shelf’ justifications why other groups should be reprimanded or dismissed for their views (see also article by Lovato and Pomorska 2025 in this special issue). From this perspective, stereotypes reinforce the social construction of national interests to the extent that they help rationalise the rejection of out-group positions while validating the legitimacy of in-group positions. Simultaneously, the presence of stereotypes reflects struggles for recognition (Bátora forthcoming 2025) or against perceptions of dominance in multilateral negotiations (Góra and Styczyńska 2025). However, if CEE is indeed ‘coming out of the periphery’ (Kavalski and Pomorska 2025)—as suggested by this special issue—then the shift in stereotypes about the region must extend beyond their position on Russia.

Author’s note

Parts of this manuscript were proofread using OpenAI’s ChatGPT (version GPT-4, May 2024) to improve grammar and clarity. The tool was used solely for language refinement; all ideas, arguments, and interpretations are the author’s own.

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