

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Topos of threat and metapolitics in Russia's securitisation of NATO post-Crimea

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Abstract

This article makes a twofold contribution on the relationship between self/other securitisation, ambiguous threat constructions, and anxiety at the intersection of Securitisation Theory (ST) and Ontological Security Studies (OSS). First, we develop the concept *topos of threat* (TT) as a potent linguistic anchor in securitisation processes. TTs depict an entire self/other threat situation that warrants escape, serving identity needs while staying flexible and ambiguous. However, their frequent rhetorical deployment can blur the threat construction and increase anxiety: this challenges the classical scholarly assumption that antagonism necessarily alleviates anxiety. Second, we theorise metapolitics as an anxiety mediation strategy. Metapolitics is a mode of interpretation – a relentless analysis of surface clues to expose a deceptive, powerful adversary – which in the final event fails to alleviate anxiety. The dual practice of nurturing topoi of threat and metapolitics drives conflict because it sets in motion a vicious securitisation spiral that entrenches rigid patterns of self/other representation and fosters a bias of anticipating hostility. We employ abductive theorising: working with established theory alongside empirical discovery through a discourse analysis of Russia's official rhetoric on NATO and the use of the TT 'colour revolution' since the conflict in Ukraine began in 2014.

Keywords: anxiety; discourse analysis; NATO; ontological security; Russia; securitisation

Introduction

The long-term deterioration of Russia–West relations and Russia's perception of Western intent were arguably key reasons for Russia's catastrophic decision to (re-)invade Ukraine in February 2022.¹ A widespread view among Russian military thinkers and the Kremlin is that of the West fighting a civilisational war against Russia employing both political and military means, an approach typically denoted as waging a 'colour revolution' (CR).² In the West, the similar concept of 'hybrid warfare' has been repeatedly used by NATO as a shorthand to denote Russia's approach in Ukraine or for describing Russia's way of waging war as such; it has even been 'routinely used to describe Russian foreign policy in general'.³ Contrasting recent efforts to debate the analytical or

¹Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun, 'Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43:3 (2022), pp. 482–97.

²Tracey German, 'Harnessing protest potential: Russian strategic culture and the colored revolutions', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:4 (2020), pp. 541–63; Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Katri Pynnöniemi and Minna Jokela, 'Perceptions of hybrid war in Russia: Means, targets and objectives identified in the Russian debate', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:6 (2020), pp. 1–18.

³Bettina Renz, 'Russia and "hybrid warfare"', *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 283–300 (p. 293).

military value of terms like ‘hybrid warfare’,⁴ critically oriented theory work has shown that such security buzzwords are powerful performatives used to securitise adversaries in the hope of alleviating anxiety: in the European Union (EU) and NATO, managing ‘hybrid warfare/threat’ relied on reviving Cold War tropes of Russia as rival,⁵ and the ‘return’ of Russia as the West’s geopolitical adversary provided a framework of knowability in the otherwise-destabilising mid-2010s.⁶

In this article, we study Russia’s CR as one such security buzzword and theorise the role such ambiguous linguistic threat constructions play when states relapse into framing an *other* as an existentially threatening adversary.

There is a vast literature on actors routinising antagonistic self/other relationships, within both securitisation theory (ST) and ontological security studies (OSS). ST and OSS have yielded wide-reaching insights on how (in)security produces state policies – with the former focusing on the linguistic construction of threat, and the latter on states seeking a secure sense of being-in-the-world (ontological security [OS]). The traditional assumption that securitisation boosts ontological security⁷ has been challenged by recent scholarship⁸ arguing that securitisation may sometimes *exacerbate* anxiety.⁹ Thus, the relationship between securitisation, ambiguous threats, and anxiety, and the role of language in mediating it, remains an unresolved question at the ST–OSS intersection.

To help fill this gap we first ask: *How do linguistic resources shape self/other securitisation processes, and to what effect?* We introduce the concept of *topos of threat* (TT) as a potent linguistic anchor in securitisation processes, linking OSS to ST in its linguistic guise. Within ST, we focus on the political clout and independent securitising effects of specific security buzzwords. We uncover and theorise a TT as a shared linguistic resource that establishes an entire social situation: a threatening other and a threatened self, positioned in a particularly significant experience that calls for escape. A TT derives its clout not only from its central place in a given rhetorical topography but also from the significance and direction it bestows on political communities. TTs are also potent because they are sufficiently ambiguous to incorporate new events and to legitimate diverse forms of political action. In terms of effects, TTs fix a wider flow of securitising representations. Repeatedly invoking TTs has conflating effects on the structural level of discourse, merging actors, actions, past/present, geographical locations, and war/peace.

Building on this, we inquire into the relationship between self/other securitisation, ambiguous threat constructions, and anxiety. Here, we start from our finding that while TTs alleviate anxiety

⁴Sergey Sukhankin, ‘The Western Alliance in the Face of the Russian (Dis)Information Machine: Where Does Canada Stand?’, (September 9, 2019) *The School of Public Policy Publications, University of Calgary*, 12:26 (2019), available at: [<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3454249>]; Sandor Fabian, ‘The Russian hybrid warfare strategy – Neither Russian nor strategy’, *Defense & Security Analysis* 35:3 (2019), pp. 308–25; Mark Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia’s “new way of war”?’; *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27:2 (2016), pp. 282–301; Renz, ‘Russia and “hybrid warfare”’.

⁵Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics: Hybrid warfare, civilisational geopolitics, and the Janus-faced politics of anxiety’, *Political Geography*, 92 (2022), 102502; Maria Mälksoo, ‘Countering hybrid warfare as ontological security management: The emerging practices of the EU and NATO’, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 374–92.

⁶Christopher S. Browning, ‘Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood: The European Union and the “New Cold War”’, *Political Geography*, 62 (2018), pp. 106–15; Dmitry Chernobrov, ‘Ontological security and public (mis)recognition: Uncertainty, political imagining, and the self’, *Political Psychology*, 37:5 (2016), pp. 581–96.

⁷Prominent exponents of this assumption include Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Bahar Rumelili, ‘Peace anxieties: A framework for conflict resolution’, in Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 10–29.

⁸Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

⁹We use the following terms interchangeably in this paper: ‘anxiety’ and ‘ontological insecurity’ and, conversely, ‘alleviating anxiety’ and ‘providing (etc.) ontological security’. We use both ‘mediation strategies’ and ‘OS seeking’ to denote behaviour aimed at alleviating anxiety/boosting OS; the wider literature also refers to ‘coping behaviour’. OS stands for ‘ontological security’ as a concept whereas OSS refers to the literature engaging this concept.

by naming the threat, over time TTs perform threat connotations that increase ambiguity and reinforce anxiety. Empirically, we observe a particularly problematic strategy to mediate this anxiety: an a priori dismissal of the securitised other's 'appearances', such as its stated intentions, looking instead for clues of collusion. The article theorises this mediation strategy as *metapolitics*:¹⁰ a mode of interpretation similar to conspiracy theorising and a context-dependent political choice. While the use of TTs is widespread and tends to deepen the securitisation of self versus other, their openness retains the radical change potential inherent in post-structuralist ST accounts. By contrast, adding metapolitics radically reduces self versus other openness.

TTs and metapolitics are illustrated and informed by our empirical analysis of the Russian case: we detail the workings of CR as a TT in Russian official speech in the five years following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and document this TT's shaping effect on the Russian leadership's view of NATO and the current state of world politics. We then show how, as this TT was combined with metapolitics over time, the Kremlin leadership became entrapped in their own rhetoric on NATO hostility.

The theory section explains how we draw on existing scholarship to develop the concepts *topos of threat* and *metapolitics*. Our abductive methodology, data, and empirical analysis of TTs and metapolitics in Russian official discourse are explained in the third section. In the conclusions, we sum up and reflect on our findings in light of Russia's war of aggression launched in 2022 and discuss how our proposed theorisation can be generalised.

Existing theory and our contribution

The politics of existential threats and dangerous others has been a focal point within IR since the Copenhagen School's theorisation of the security speech act¹¹ and other pioneering works on the politics of othering.¹² The scholarship in the wake of these works is enormous, and a full review is not possible here.¹³ Securitisation theory was highly influential but also criticised, *inter alia* on normative grounds,¹⁴ for being insufficiently attuned to context and audience,¹⁵ and saw recurrent criticism that theoretical developments were not matched by efforts to strengthen empirical work.¹⁶ Consequently, new strands of ST developed, most notably a discursive versus a practice-oriented strand. The latter (sometimes known as the Paris school or 'sociological' ST) sought to go beyond linguistic representations and focused on everyday security practices that normalise and legitimise politics of insecurity.¹⁷ The former, which we rely on in this article, has emphasised threat constructions as unfolding over time within a collectively shared but fluid web of meaning,

¹⁰After Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹¹Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86; Ole Wæver, 'Security, the speech act: Analysing the politics of a word', *Research Training Seminar, Sostrup Manor* (1989), pp. 25–6; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

¹²See esp. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

¹³But see e.g. Stephane J. Baele and Diana Jalea, 'Twenty-five years of securitization theory: A corpus-based review', *Political Studies Review*, 21:2 (2023), pp. 376–89; Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka, "'Securitization" revisited: Theory and cases', *International Relations*, 30:4 (2016), pp. 494–531.

¹⁴E.g. Claudia Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7:4 (2004), pp. 388–413.

¹⁵Felix Ciută, 'Security and the problem of context: A hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 301–26; Williams, 'The continuing evolution of securitization theory', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory* (2010).

¹⁶Thierry Balzacq, 'Enquiries into methods: A new framework for securitization analysis', in Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory*, 30–54.

¹⁷Thierry Balzacq, 'A Theory of securitization: Origins, core assumptions, and variants', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory*, pp. 1–30.

gradually constituting something or someone as different and dangerous to the referent object¹⁸ and serving to make sense of world politics by advancing ‘differentiated imageries of international security relations.’¹⁹

Meanwhile, a burgeoning Ontological Security Studies literature approached self/other relations from the observation that, like individuals, collective agents such as states have an existential need to feel secure in knowing the self-in-the-world in past, present, and future in order to ‘go on’ as an actor.²⁰ According to this scholarship, the ontological security of collectives can be unsettled by ‘critical situations’ forcing them to confront normally ‘bracketed-out’ existential questions.²¹ For example, the de-intensification of conflict may generate ‘peace anxieties’²² and turn a knowable enemy into an ambiguous stranger²³ so that the anxiety of ultimate uncertainty²⁴ bubbles to the surface. The literature has demonstrated how actors in such situations turn to ‘anxiety-controlling mechanisms’²⁵ such as autobiographical narratives and routines.²⁶ Like ST, the sum total of OS scholarship has grown too comprehensive to review in full. Here, we focus on the OS scholarship that informs our research questions about ambiguous linguistic constructions within adversarial self versus other relationships.

The ‘naming’ of the unknown and unexpected²⁷ and attachment to othering and conflict have been studied as ways of seeking ontological security.²⁸ The allure of (re-)securitising (a former adversary) to boost OS has been explained in terms of the distinction between fear (of concrete objects; inspiring action) and (limitless, objectless; paralysing) anxiety: the argument is that fear of a concrete, known enemy displaces anxiety by providing a threat to confront.²⁹ Mälksoo subscribes to this logic in arguing that the EU and NATO, unsettled by the unknowability of ‘hybrid’

¹⁸Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Matt McDonald, ‘Securitization and the construction of security’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:4 (2008), pp. 563–87; Mark B. Salter, ‘Securitization and desecuritization: A dramaturgical analysis of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11:4 (2008), pp. 321–49; Frank A. Stengel, ‘Securitization as discursive (re)articulation: Explaining the relative effectiveness of threat construction’, *New Political Science*, 41:2 (2019), pp. 294–312; Holger Stritzel, *Security in Translation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Julie Wilhelmsen, *Russia’s Securitization of Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁹Jonas Hagmann, *(In)security and the Production of International Relations: The Politics of Securitisation in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 17.

²⁰Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Reclaiming the vision thing: Constructivists as students of the future’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:3 (2011), pp. 647–68; Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Parameters of a national biography’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 262–88; Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Anxiety, time, and agency’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90.

²¹Filip Ejdus, ‘Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

²²Rumelili, ‘Peace anxieties’.

²³Felix Berenskoetter and Nicola Nymalm, ‘States of ambivalence: Recovering the concept of “the stranger” in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 47:1 (2021), pp. 19–38.

²⁴Jef Huysmans, ‘Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

²⁵Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: Polity Press, 1984), p. 50.

²⁶Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56; Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anchoring Europe’s civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–85; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008); Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan’, *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23, and others.

²⁷Chernobrov, ‘Ontological security and public (mis)recognition’; Browning, ‘Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood’.

²⁸Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (Routledge, 2015); Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, ‘Russia’s relations with the West: Ontological security through conflict’, *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 359–75; Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics’.

²⁹Bahar Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

threats, soothed anxieties by linking hybrid threats to a known adversarial relationship – namely with Russia.³⁰

The specific OS dynamics in processes of securitising an adversary is one among many shared concerns at the ST and OSS theoretical intersection.³¹ Recent interventions have complicated the framework that pits securitisation, concrete objects of fear, and ontological security against de-securitisation, ambiguous threats, and anxiety. Browning and Joenniemi reject that securitising identities against a threatening other *necessarily* fosters ontological security.³² Berenskoetter and Nymalm see *ambiguity/ambivalence* as central for understanding how processes of estrangement (dissolution of friendship or enmity) affect (in)secure selves,³³ whereas Vieira has theorised the ambivalent and anxiety-ridden self-identity of post-colonial subjects, forever defined against the Western other.³⁴ Eberle and Daniel show how some securitisation processes construct threats that seem to oscillate between the known and unknown. They demonstrate how in Czechia, such paradoxical OS-seeking policies – promising to alleviate anxiety but instead reproducing it – were anchored in the securitising buzzword ‘hybrid warfare’.³⁵

Taking these recent discussions on the indeterminacy of OS-production in self/other securitisation processes as our starting point, we seek to further elucidate the relationship between ontological (in)security and securitisation processes relying on linguistic resources that signal ambiguity. We aim to expand the debate with our two conceptual innovations: *topoi of threat* (TTs) are common rhetorical insecurity devices that shape self/other securitisation over time, whereas *metapolitics* is a mode of interpretation driven by a belief in false appearances. Drawing on the distinction between fear-of-the-known and anxiety-of-unknowability, we argue that over time, both TTs and metapolitics aim for fear but instead reinforce anxiety.

We see securitisation as a broad, intersubjective process of constructing threats through discourse-practice which derives impetus from the identity and existential (i.e. ontological security) needs of a collective social entity. This conceptualisation suggests that a discursive securitisation process invests rhetors with the agency to legitimate political action. Given a certain fixity in discourse, some linguistic resources are particularly potent yet endowed with a quasi-independent agency: actors’ deployment of such resources can have significant knock-on effects in terms of a ‘politics of insecurity’ and ‘sticky’ othering. As existing theoretical accounts cannot fully capture this latter aspect, we offer the concept *topos of threat* (TT) to denote and further theorise such resources.

The term *topos* (plural: *topoi*) or rhetorical commonplace hails from ancient Greek studies of rhetoric and denotes a *common space* of assumptions and viewpoints shared between the speaker and the audience: a place where rhetors ‘go’ to form their arguments.³⁶ Within International Relations (IR), Jackson³⁷ theorises rhetorical commonplaces as pre-existing but ‘vague and multifaceted’ historically developed³⁸ rhetorical resources that actors use to make sense of a situation, in ways that fit their claims. Topoi are fundamentally relational, as they contain subject positions,

³⁰ Mälksoo, ‘Countering hybrid warfare’.

³¹ Gabriella Griecius, ‘Whose anxiety? What practices? The Paris school and Ontological Security Studies’, *International Politics* 61:2 (2023), pp. 1–21; Faye Donnelly and Brent J. Steele, ‘Critical Security History: (De)securitisation, ontological security, and insecure memories’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 209–26.

³² Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’; Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’.

³³ Berenskoetter and Nymalm, ‘States of ambivalence’. The authors specify ambivalence as the ‘feeling generated by something that appears ambiguous’, n. 35, p. 24.

³⁴ Marco A. Vieira, ‘(Re-)imagining the “self” of ontological security: The case of Brazil’s ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64.

³⁵ Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’.

³⁶ Jens Elmelund Kjeldsen, *Retorikk i vår tid: en innføring i moderne retorisk teori*, 2. utg (Oslo: Spartacus, 2006), p. 151; Mareike Buss and Jörg Jost, ‘Rethinking the connection of metaphor and topos’, *Interlinguística*, 13:1 (2003), pp. 275–92.

³⁷ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 28–9.

³⁸ On historical resonances as constraining securitisation, see also Donnelly and Steele, ‘Critical Security History’.

creating particular worlds of possible action for particular actors.³⁹ The clout of specific common-places depends on the wider rhetorical topography,⁴⁰ while their deployment also feeds back into the web of meaning, stabilising and/or shifting its links. Building on the theorisation of a general topos, we define a TT as a topos which assumes a security valence that fixes the broader interpretive frame. Depicting a threatening other and a threatened self, positioned in a particularly significant experience that warrants escape, TTs are distilled threat narratives⁴¹ that anchor a wider securitising discourse and provide interpretation for past and future situations. TTs have considerable rhetorical potency due to their central place in the wider rhetorical landscape of threat, and because they are vague⁴² and can incorporate new events.⁴³

A short presentation of our sample TT is in order here. *Colour revolution* is an established term in Russian political and military discourse, where it is used to denote a popular uprising instigated by external forces with the aim of changing the country's regime and weakening Russia geopolitically.⁴⁴ The term is also used in Western academia and press – understood quite differently as ‘an organised unarmed public uprising aimed at replacing a discredited regime with a more democratic government.’⁴⁵ Originally, ‘colour revolution’ was a term used to describe the 2003–5 revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan and was retrospectively applied to the overthrow of Milošević in Serbia in 2000.⁴⁶ For Russian security thinkers, it became a shorthand for ‘non-traditional methods’ (in the words of then-director of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), Nikolai Patrushev, in 2005) by opponents that ‘purposefully and consistently’ seek ‘to weaken Russian influence.’⁴⁷ Hence, for the Russian security establishment, CR referred to a particular non-military instrument – manipulation of protest – as part of warfare and contained a worldview in which the West threatens to destroy Russia.⁴⁸

CR as a TT is embedded within a wider, evolving landscape of other topoi (not necessarily of threat), widely shared among the Russian elites, security apparatus, and population. Other topoi need not be mobilised directly in the securitising argument: they simply make the deployed TT in question more commonsensical. A key related topos is that of Ukraine as an (inferior/weaker) part of Russia; variously expressed as Ukraine being a ‘damsel in distress’ that needs saving,⁴⁹ as a fraternal nation inalienable to Russia,⁵⁰ or as housing Russian ‘compatriots’ under Russia's special duty

³⁹Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 30; Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Aporia: A critical exploration of the agent–structure problematique in International Relations theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 365–92.

⁴⁰Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. vii.

⁴¹For narrative approaches in IR, see Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, ‘Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 7:1 (2014), pp. 70–84; Jack Holland and Xavier Mathieu, ‘Narratology and US foreign policy in Syria: Beyond identity binaries, toward narrative power’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:4 (2023), sqad078.

⁴²Ambiguity also evokes fear, which is conducive to securitising policies. Iver B. Neumann, ‘Introduction to the Forum on Liminality’, *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 473–79 (p. 474).

⁴³This definition sets TTs apart from discursive ‘nodal points’. While both terms denote privileged, ambiguous linguistic resources that are sites of contestation, a nodal point refers to a specific signifier that is ‘empty’, i.e. without a signified, as theorised by Laclau in *Emancipation(s)* (Verso, 2007), pp. 36–46. In contrast, a topos has a certain semantic positivity and can be signified by multiple signifiers, as per Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 76.

⁴⁴German, ‘Harnessing protest potential’, p. 550.

⁴⁵Pavel K. Baev, ‘Re-examining the “colour revolutions”: The turn of the tide from Belgrade to Ulan Bator’, in Kristian Berg Harpviken (ed.), *Troubled Regions and Failing States: The Clustering and Contagion of Armed Conflicts* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2010), pp. 249–76 (p. 249).

⁴⁶see e.g. Baev, ‘Re-examining the “colour revolutions”’; Susan Stewart (ed.), *Democracy Promotion and the ‘Colour Revolutions’* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁷German, ‘Harnessing protest potential’, p. 550.

⁴⁸Ofer Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst, 2018); German, ‘Harnessing protest potential’; Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*.

⁴⁹Elizaveta Gaufman, ‘Damsels in distress: Fragile masculinity in digital war’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 16:4 (2022), pp. 516–33.

⁵⁰Ted Hopf, ‘“Crimea is ours”: A discursive history’, *International Relations*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 227–55.

of protection.⁵¹ CR further draws on the topoi of US unilateralism,⁵² Western ‘double standards’,⁵³ NATO as a threat and a tool of Western expansionism,⁵⁴ and Russia’s ‘exceptional’ vulnerability – a topos deep-seated in its strategic culture.⁵⁵ These are again connected to the ‘master’ topoi of ‘West/Europe’ and Russia’s ambivalent position in it.⁵⁶ Any TT acts as anchor in a broader flow of linguistic threat representations that exceeds the representations in the TT itself.

Topos of threat: Between Securitisation Theory and Ontological Security

As analytical concept, topos of threat reinserts certain ‘classical’ Copenhagen School⁵⁷ insights that have been lost in the drive to develop more distinct and coherent versions of ST. The discourse-theoretical strand of ST stresses securitisation as a broad discursive political process through which identities are (re)constituted.⁵⁸ These works see self/other identifications as reproductions of the past, moulded through intertextuality. Although we subscribe to such a genealogical understanding of threat constructions, it downplays the radical potential for change implicit in post-structuralist claims, Copenhagen School theorising on ‘politics as action’,⁵⁹ and securitisation as illocutionary speech act.⁶⁰ We return the focus to change and constitutive linguistic configurations by conceiving of TTs as *performative* in the way originally described by the Copenhagen School: identifying a threat to a referent object, a sense of urgency, and a way out.⁶¹ We suggest that the repeated rhetorical deployment of TTs can radically reconstitute identities and become powerful hubs in the broader process of securitisation.

TTs are attuned to context by default, albeit without bestowing context with causal weight.⁶² Any topos is characteristic of a set of rhetor, audience, and issue and must be uncovered empirically in a given discursive topography. Rhetorical analysis of topoi is necessarily processual and intersubjective, because it is *the pattern of deployment* in a collective debate that reframes reality and creates political outcomes.⁶³

We thus conceptualise TTs (deployed within a broader process of securitisation) as powerful rhetorical resources, noting that their frequent use boosts their clout. TTs would not be powerful if uttered only once, and without the broader context around the threatened referent object which a particular experience (such as CR) conveys. Thus, we conceptualise securitisation as speech act and discursive process combined, anchored in repeatedly uttered TTs.

The TT concept also draws on OSS insight: unlike ‘any’ threat representation, a TT as a distilled threat construction provides ontological security by answering questions such as who are we, where

⁵¹Minda Holm, ‘The politics of diasporas and the duty of care: Legitimizing interventions through the protection of kin’, in Nina Græger and Halvard Leira (eds), *The Duty of Care in International Relations: Protecting Citizens beyond the Border* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 118–35.

⁵²Hopf, ‘“Crimea is ours”’.

⁵³Kristian Lundby Gjerde, ‘Russia, “double standards”, and the contestation of equivalence 2000–2019. A Corpus-Based Exploration’ (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2023).

⁵⁴Andrei P. Tsygankov, ‘The sources of Russia’s fear of NATO’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 51:2 (2018), pp. 101–11; see also Julie Wilhelmsen and Anni Roth Hjermann, ‘Russian certainty of NATO hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic’, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 13 (2022), pp. 114–42.

⁵⁵Götz and Staun, ‘Why Russia attacked Ukraine’.

⁵⁶See esp. Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁷Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, *Security*; Wæver, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’.

⁵⁸Croft, *Securitizing Islam*; Hagmann, *(In)security and the Production of International Relations*; Hansen, *Security as Practice*; Stengel, ‘Securitization as discursive (re)articulation’; Wilhelmsen, *Russia’s Securitization of Chechnya*.

⁵⁹Ole Wæver, ‘The theory act: Responsibility and exactitude as seen from securitization’, *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 121–7.

⁶⁰Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, *Security*, p. 26.

⁶¹Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, *Security*, p. 26.

⁶²Rita Floyd, *Security and the Environment: Securitisation Theory and US Environmental Security Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 21.

⁶³Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 44.

are we, what have we experienced, what are we currently experiencing, and what should we do? When the ontological structure of the Self is understood (as by Heidegger) ‘as a process whereby the Self comes to know itself by continuously disclosing the world and itself within it’,⁶⁴ and this world is specified in an ‘experienced space’,⁶⁵ the answers TTs provide are significant. The TT CR, for example, suggests and constitutes such spaces of experience when narrating popular uprisings that take place as the beginning of a global geopolitical war that must be responded to and situates the threatening West/threatened Russia within it. TTs are not only a site for alleviating anxiety via sharp antagonism: they also give the urgent sense of an experience we want to escape from. They point forward and call for ways to survive. In this, they build agency and motivate collective action. Here, securitisation and ontological security are mutually reinforcing: not only do TTs order a potentially chaotic social reality into a more stable cognitive landscape for the self-in-the-world, by voicing a call for future survival, they are also rhetorical securitisation tools that political actors can use to communicate *what needs to be done*, playing on notions the audience takes for granted. TTs are rhetorical places that actors go to for what Mitzen saw as OS seeking through ‘routinised antagonism’.⁶⁶

However, as TTs are by definition part of a *discursive process*, the relationship between securitisation and ontological security becomes less straightforward. As momentary rhetorical acts, TTs provide ontological security, boosting their securitisation potency. TTs promise to make the other’s ambiguous and anxiety-inducing actions knowable by giving them a familiar name: some OSS scholars call this practice ‘misrecognising’ uncertainty.⁶⁷ However, when analysed as a process, over-reliance on the TT tool can backfire in OS terms, resulting in a loss of direction and a heightened sense of existential threat. This challenges the neat assumptions made in previous works, that securitisation always produces fear and not anxiety, and construes known rather than unknown threats. Instead, we align with Eberle and Daniel, who tease out the paradoxical nature of naming a diffuse threat (e.g. ‘hybrid warfare’) linked to a known adversary (e.g. Russia): while this threat construction promises to fend off anxiety by pinning it to the *known*, it simultaneously paints the threat as invisible and shape-shifting – as *unknowable* – thereby reproducing anxiety.⁶⁸

Drawing on our empirical study of the Russian case, we further specify the indeterminacy of ontological security production in securitising processes anchored in TTs by outlining how these vague and open resources shape the discursive process when they are routinely deployed by security elites. We show how TTs acquires a quasi-independent agency via discursive knock-on effects that reinforce the sense of unknowable danger. Specifically, based on abductive theorising, we argue that topos of threat performs five types of conflation, all resulting in a heightened sense of ambiguity and insecurity.

The conflating effects of topoi of threat: Ambiguity and anxiety

In Pouliot’s words,⁶⁹ topoi ‘often acquire an epistemic life of their own’. For TTs, this life includes the pervasive sense of ambiguity they create, instilling anxiety. We draw this conclusion from our analysis of texts by the Russian foreign policy and security elite. We find that elites nurture and routinely rely on the TT colour revolution, crafting it as a catch-all commonplace that lumps threatening phenomena together in various ways. Here, we specify the five distinct conflating effects of TTs in securitising processes.

⁶⁴Berenskoetter, ‘Parameters of a national biography’, p. 268.

⁶⁵Berenskoetter, ‘Parameters of a national biography’, p. 277. Building on the concept ‘space of experience’ from Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 260.

⁶⁶Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics’.

⁶⁷Browning, ‘Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood’; Chernobrov, ‘Ontological security and public (mis)recognition’.

⁶⁸Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’.

⁶⁹Vincent Pouliot, ‘The materials of practice: Nuclear warheads, rhetorical commonplaces and committee meetings in Russian–Atlantic relations’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45:3 (2010), pp. 294–311 (p. 298).

The first is conflation of multiple actors into one. TTs (re)construct subjects into threatened selves and different, dangerous others. As TTs travel, representations of the other become increasingly monolithic, as is implied in both securitisation processes⁷⁰ and the ontological security-seeking logic of giving the threat a recognisable but imprecise name.⁷¹ In the Russian case, the TT CR conflates various distinct actors into a single threatening West. Our discourse analysis shows that Russian official discourse constructs NATO as ‘genetically’ set on expanding its geopolitical reach while claiming to seek security for all, using both soft and hard means and instrumentalising any situation to weaken Russia. Colour revolution as a topos of threat serves as the vehicle for this subject position to include any others that Russia sees engaging in CR-type activities – for example, human rights activists – the list of which keeps expanding.

Secondly, TTs produce a specific situational reading which conflates war and peace. Colour revolution and similar terms such as hybrid warfare express a profound ambiguity regarding what war is and how it can be identified. For example, CR implies that political acts are simultaneously part of military strategy. Politics and war are entangled: the TT decouples the binary war/peace epistemologically.⁷² This conflation is typical of the insecurity politics of ‘creeping threats’ – named, yet ultimately unknowable threat constructions, framed as deceptive and undetectable.⁷³ War–peace conflation creates feelings of insecurity because ambiguity signals disorder and the impossibility of knowing.⁷⁴ The war–peace conflation we observe is akin to how the Western TT ‘hybrid warfare’ intensified the indeterminacy about the nature of war itself and emerged as ‘an epitome of ontological *insecurity*’ in need of mitigation.⁷⁵

Thirdly, TTs conflate past and present. A topos’s independent epistemic life may involve locking present-day social interactions into dynamics of the past.⁷⁶ In unsettling, unreadable situations, actors can make the self/other relationship knowable again by mobilising familiar interpretive frames such as Cold War signifiers.⁷⁷ We observe how the memory of past enmity is rekindled through the work of a TT; we find that the TT CR stretches back in time, (re)colouring past historical events, discursively marrying the ambiguity and inimical interaction of past and present. In this sense, TTs function similarly to myths: as a ‘locus in which the past can re-emerge as a contested site.’⁷⁸

The fourth and fifth conflating functions of TTs are of action types and geographical locations. TTs fuse diverse action types into a single CR action scheme, and diverse geographical spaces into a single geopolitical world of zero-sum influence games. Such merging is made possible by the ambiguous quality of TTs, accommodating almost all action types as manifestations of a single quasi-war. CR became defined as a ‘universal scheme’ and ‘template’ in Russian discourse and has come to include activities ranging from NATO’s operation in Afghanistan via its ‘Eastern flank’ military presence to official statements about Russian assertiveness.⁷⁹ Thus, multiple action types in diverse geographical locations get lumped together via the lens of one security buzzword.

These mutually reinforcing confluences occur through securitisation as a discursive process. TTs like CR are meaning packages – made sense of within a discursive topography – which, as they solidify and travel, bundle a range of past and present interactions together with a monolithic other

⁷⁰Julie Wilhelmsen, ‘Spiraling toward a new cold war in the north? The effect of mutual and multifaceted securitization’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), available at: { <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa044> }.

⁷¹Chernobrov, ‘Ontological security and public (mis)recognition’.

⁷²Tarak Barkawi, ‘Decolonising war’, *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2 (2016), pp. 199–214.

⁷³Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’.

⁷⁴Berenskoetter and Nymalm, ‘States of ambivalence’, p. 24; Huysmans, ‘Security!’.

⁷⁵Mälksoo, ‘Countering hybrid warfare’, pp. 377–8; see also Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’.

⁷⁶Pouliot, ‘The materials of practice’, pp. 303–4.

⁷⁷Eberle and Daniel, ‘Anxiety geopolitics’; Browning, ‘Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood’; Chernobrov, ‘Ontological security and public (mis)recognition’.

⁷⁸James Kent, ‘Traces of the past: History and myth in Vico, Benjamin and Blumenberg’ (Monash University, 2019), available at: { <https://doi.org/10.26180/5DC0B7E38D3E3> }.

⁷⁹See also Wilhelmsen and Hjermann, ‘Russian certainty of NATO hostility’.

into an identification loaded with danger. Thus, when various elements of Russia's policy elite join the 'ritual chanting'⁸⁰ of colour revolution, they increasingly see the NATO/US/Western other as threatening, with war and peace overlapping.

Radical othering using TTs may *reinforce* profound ambiguity and anxiety due to TTs' conflating effects, contrasting the classical OSS assumption. The known adversary NATO/USA/West is radically othered, but the connotations render this threatening adversary and its dangerous schemes amorphous – in sharp contrast to 'specific threats' that would keep anxiety at bay.⁸¹ Such securitised othering can be a double-edged sword for actors seeking ontological security. While in an isolated sense the self versus other schema stabilises the cognitive landscape, TTs' strategic ambiguity and conflating effects create new uncertainties as they render war and hostility near-omnipresent: any actor, any action type, at any time or place could pose a threat. To understand why othering does not always alleviate anxiety, the distinction between fear (of concrete objects) and (limitless, objectless) anxiety is useful. As a stand-alone rhetorical moment, TTs are fearmongering and thus soothing, but their repeated deployment ends up inducing anxiety because the threatening other is rendered amorphous and omnipresent.

Metapolitics as ontological insecurity mediation strategy

From our close reading of Russian texts, we argue that Russia turned to *metapolitics* to fence off the anxiety of their own making, having securitised the West as a limitless threat. As theorised by Rancière,⁸² metapolitics dichotomises appearances and reality through the dictum of the 'truth of the false'; Rancière finds that this logic is epitomised by Marx's privileging of the social as the real beneath false politics.⁸³ We conceptualise metapolitics as a mode of interpretation: a relentless analysis of surface clues confined by a pre-given conclusion of enmity, which in the final event is a counterproductive OS-seeking strategy.

Russian state metapolitics post-2014 resembles the post-Kosovo drive within the Russian foreign policy establishment to expose the smokescreen of Western liberal values, assumed to be concealing the real, malicious goals of the West.⁸⁴ In our empirical material, metapolitics manifests as an overarching discourse that sees the NATO other's *appearances* as hiding its *real* enemy core and works in tandem with the TT CR. It is structured by a separate set of terms such as *pretext* (*predlog*), *artificial* (*iskusstvennyj*), *in practice* (*na praktike*), *alleged(ly)* (*jakoby*), *invented* (*priduman**), *pseudo-* (*psevido*), and the like.⁸⁵ This metapolitical discourse essentialises and organises ambiguity according to the rule that whatever ambiguous actions may be undertaken by the NATO other, the underlying reality is always NATO enmity.

⁸⁰We borrow this heuristic device from Ido Oren and Ty Solomon, who operationalise audience acceptance of securitisation as the 'ritual chanting' of the key securitising phrase. See Oren and Solomon, 'WMD, WMD, WMD: Securitisation through ritualised incantation of ambiguous phrases', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 313–36.

⁸¹Rumelili, 'Peace anxieties'; Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory'.

⁸²Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 81–7.

⁸³Rancière, *Disagreement*. For analyses of metapolitics in Russia, see Viacheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Anni Roth Hjermann, 'Depoliticising democracy through discourse: Reading Russia's descent into autocracy and war with Jacques Rancière's political theory', *New Perspectives*, 31:2 (2023), pp. 49–76.

⁸⁴Viacheslav Morozov, 'Resisting entropy, discarding human rights: Romantic realism and securitization of identity in Russia', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37:4 (2002), pp. 409–29.

⁸⁵We have identified many metapolitical tropes in the material: 'Pretext' in MO-T5, MID-T6, MID-T11, MID-T15, MID-T16, MID-T26, MID-T29, MID-T41, MID-T42, MID-T51, MID-T53, MID-T59, MID-T62, MID-T65, MID-T67, MID-T69. 'Artificial' in MO-T1, MID-T8, MID-T15, MID-T31, MID-T39, MID-T42, MID-T55, MID-T57, MID-T83. 'Alleged(ly)' in MID-T6, MID-T18, MID-T41, MID-T44, MID-T45, MID-T54, MID-T55, MID-T63, MID-T69, MID-T89, MID-T94, MID-T96, MID-T99. 'In practice' in MID-T6, MID-T53, MID-T77, MID-T83, MID-T88. 'Pseudo-' ('pseudo-facts', 'pseudo-liberal', 'pseudo-historical', 'pseudo-mass media', 'pseudo-experts') in MID-T69, MID-T93, MID-T81, MID-T84, MID-T94, MID-T96. 'Invented' in MID-T14, MID-T15 MID-T40, MID-T52, MID-T54 MID-T69, MID-T100. 'Veil of informational noise' in MID-T99. See also Wilhelmsen and Hjermann, 'Russian certainty of NATO hostility'.

Metapolitical sensitivity attaches itself to the TT CR, for example, in the repeated framing of the colour revolutions in Libya⁸⁶ and Ukraine⁸⁷ as Western ‘pretexts’. Thus, mixed with metapolitics, a security buzzword that originally denoted regime change comes to encapsulate and frame Russia’s understanding of NATO as inimical *in nature*. Likewise, when Russian officials repeatedly refer to the ‘rotational basis’ of NATO’s ‘Enhanced Forward Presence’ as a cover-up move, metapolitics interprets this ‘clue’ as evidence for malevolent intent behind *all* CR activities.

Russian state metapolitics is thus marked by a heightened sensitivity to cover-ups, hidden realities, and far-reaching agency of powerful actors, not unlike conspiracy theories in pop culture. According to Mark Fenster, conspiracy theories are best understood as interpretive practices. This mode of interpretation ‘investigates the secret treachery of true political power’ by means of ‘continually collect[ing] and interpret[ing] evidence’, but since hidden truth is the assumption, ‘the explanation of that evidence is always already formed.’⁸⁸ Fenster observes that conspiracy narratives start from the problem of agency crisis in a complex and tragic political present, and the very act of intense interpretation and exposure ultimately restores political order and re-establishes individual agency as embodied in the conspiracy-exposing protagonist.⁸⁹ Put differently, such hyper-interpretation is OS-seeking. Psychologists hold that conspiracy theorising offers a ‘symbolic coping which transmutes the diffuse anxiety arising from [complex events that destabilise our sense of safety] into specific threats caused by the purportedly malevolent action of powerful actors.’⁹⁰ And the Kremlin relies on metapolitics to alleviate the anxiety aroused by the sense of vague yet omnipresent threat produced through their own rhetorical nurturing of the TT CR.

Metapolitics as defined here – a mode of interpretation, a drive to expose a deceptive, powerful adversary – represents a hitherto unexplored OS-seeking strategy: to fend off anxiety by espousing the dogma of ubiquitous smokescreens, always looking for clues to uncover enmity. Metapolitics expels the radical openness of ambiguous threat by essentialising antagonism.

However, metapolitics is ultimately a counterproductive OS-seeking strategy. Like conspiracy theorising, this interpretive practice is ‘active, endless’: it ‘never arrives at a final, determinate answer.’⁹¹ This mode of interpretation is typical of individuals who navigate relationships and information via rigid binaries, who see selves and others as either fully ‘good’ (associated with safety and security) or ‘bad’ (associated with anxiety and threat): this ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position is extremely *insecure*, associated with a defensive self-organisation focused around threat, identity encapsulation, and distrust in the world and other people.⁹² Metapolitics feeds upon such rigidity and lack of trust. This ‘limits our ability to perceive and tolerate our own considerable otherness and strangeness to our sense of self’, leaving no room for acknowledging our perpetual process of becoming and our necessary incomplete self-knowledge.⁹³

For these reasons, metapolitics further undermines the potential of long-term ontological security provision through securitisation. This conclusion dovetails with recent OSS interventions: securitising a fixed identity against vague threats from a radical other is likely to intensify ontological insecurity by fostering a rigid identity that *retains* high levels of anxiety and the perceived need

⁸⁶MID-T4, MID-T5, MID-T6, MID-T11.

⁸⁷MID-T15, MID-26, MID-T51.

⁸⁸Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 94–5.

⁸⁹Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, pp. 124, 270.

⁹⁰Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter, Martin W. Bauer, Matthew Hall, and Mark C. Noort, ‘Beyond ‘Monologicality’? Exploring Conspiracist Worldviews’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 (2017), available at: { <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00861> }. in Richard E. Webb and Philip J. Rosenbaum, ‘Conspiracy theory vulnerability from a psychodynamic perspective: Considering four epistemologies related to four developmental existential-relational positions’, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 11:1 (2023), pp. 60–74.

⁹¹Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 13.

⁹²Webb and Rosenbaum, ‘Conspiracy theory vulnerability’, p. 67.

⁹³Webb and Rosenbaum, ‘Conspiracy theory vulnerability’, p. 67.

for vigilance.⁹⁴ In contrast, ontologically *secure* identities are flexible, fostered through deliberate self-reflection, dealing with anxiety and cultivating friendship.

Topos of threat and metapolitics combined: Rigid identity, misplaced certainty

We argue that the dual practice of nurturing topoi of threat and metapolitics drives conflict because it sets in motion a vicious securitisation spiral that entrenches rigid patterns of self/other representation and fosters a deterministic bias of anticipating hostility. Moreover, while both TTs and metapolitics are attractive partly because of the immediate ontological security needs they serve, both are more likely to *increase* anxiety when part of a broader discursive process. Previous scholarship has warned against security agents' 'hubris over the limits of their knowledge'⁹⁵ and the resulting 'misplaced certainty' of intent behind the adversary's ambiguous actions.⁹⁶ Here, we have specified how such hubris can come about: first, TTs articulate an entire existential threat situation, thereby offering readability of the other and the situation, making TTs salient and potent for securitising efforts. The threat-conflating effects associated with routinised TT deployment further amplify ambiguity. Second, metapolitics seems to alleviate the resulting anxiety of amorphous threat by maintaining that the other is always necessarily hostile beneath its false appearances. For example, in judging whether an invitation to a summit meeting is a diplomatic gesture or a propaganda stunt, the TT CR incorporates these two options but solves the question in favour of the latter interpretation when coupled with metapolitical discourse. Finally, the 'truth' about this ambiguous gesture then feeds back into the TT.

In this way, metapolitics entraps securitising actors in its rigid mode of interpretation, looking for real hostility under a false surface. This reduces the spectrum of logical policy options to address the urgent situation brought into being by TT deployment. Even without metapolitics, TT use will constrain the self's range of options, because any deviation from the future path (of survival) plotted into the TT would induce anxiety.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, TT-infused rhetoric retains some contingency because of the conditional link between identification and policy – 'the availability of a rhetorical commonplace does not necessitate or even unproblematically imply a particular course of action.'⁹⁸ The topos CR illustrates this, as it was previously deployed to support policies far from those advocated by the Russian state post-2014. For example, a 2005 Russian policy piece that shared the understanding of CR as a Western geopolitical tool argued that Russia itself must learn to master the instruments of human rights and democracy.⁹⁹ The same topos that in 2005 was used to argue for strengthening Russia's soft power was deployed in 2022 to legitimise the escalation of Russia's war in Ukraine as a defensive 'counter-intervention'. Metapolitics lacks this conditionality. We therefore hold that, with metapolitics added, the contingency in a securitisation process is further reduced.

The desire for a secure self and the need for political readability are universal, making TTs an attractive choice for most political entities. By contrast, the metapolitical recourse to essentialised enemy is a more extreme OS-seeking strategy. The reduction of politics to an undifferentiated sphere of violence is not inevitable, and, as Morgenthau argued, it is not only possible but highly important to 'distinguish legitimate forms of power, to insulate the political sphere from physical violence'.¹⁰⁰ Thus, we see metapolitics as a political *decision* to deny ambiguity and anxiety rather

⁹⁴Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'; Eberle and Daniel, 'Anxiety geopolitics'.

⁹⁵Eric Van Rythoven, 'The securitization dilemma', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5:3 (2020), pp. 478–93 (p. 482).

⁹⁶Jennifer Mitzen and Randall L. Schweller, 'Knowing the unknown unknowns: Misplaced certainty and the onset of war', *Security Studies*, 20:1 (2011), pp. 2–35.

⁹⁷Berenskoetter, 'Reclaiming the vision thing', p. 663.

⁹⁸Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 28.

⁹⁹Vladimir Frolov, 'Democracy by remote control', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 (2005).

¹⁰⁰Quoted in Michael C. Williams, 'Why ideas matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, classical realism, and the moral construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 58:4 (2004), pp. 366–665 (p. 637).

than embrace it.¹⁰¹ The latter alternative, according to existentialist IR scholars, is the road to a more authentic and change-conducive agency.¹⁰²

Metapolitics is also a choice made by leaders in a particular historical context and rhetorical topography. For the Russian case, research indicates that the Kremlin has practised massive and long-term institutionalisation of a 'post-truth' discourse.¹⁰³ Moreover, Russia and the wider post-Soviet space are said to be prone to conspiracy thinking as a response to a 'yearning for political significance' in the wake of the colossal social, political, and economic transformation that followed the Soviet collapse.¹⁰⁴

Lastly, the metapolitical choice may be particularly tempting if rhetors have continued to rely on a particular TT despite the other rejecting the self's experience and expectation as expressed through this TT. The ontological security of the self is constantly in danger of being undermined by significant others failing to validate or outright rejecting expressions of one's self-concept, triggering more anxiety in need of mediation.¹⁰⁵ The metapolitical credo of exposing deceit is attractive to a self that needs to account for this lack of recognition. With CR, Russia relied heavily on a TT that was not even recognised by the West as a matter of Russian security in the first place: CR was rooted in a geopolitical imaginary where Russia has a *droit de regard* in its neighbourhood. The Kremlin's metapolitics interpreted this discrepancy as evidence of the West trying to dupe Russia.

Abductive methodology and empirical analysis

Our theorising is abductive, combining established theoretical concepts with inductive (empirical) discovery.¹⁰⁶ This section explains the inductive side: our in-depth discourse analysis of official texts. We have scrutinised public documents from the Russian Ministry of Defence (MO) and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) in the period February 2014–February 2019. Wishing to analyse the dominant view of NATO, we used the quantitative *corporaexplorer* tool¹⁰⁷ to retrieve bodies of texts according to threshold criteria of mentions of NATO: 27 texts from the MO with at least 3 mentions and 104 MID texts with minimum 7 mentions.¹⁰⁸ President Putin's pivotal role in Russian foreign politics notwithstanding, Kremlin.ru texts were not included in the corpus, as these focus primarily on domestic politics.

We see official texts as a site of collective sensemaking *within* the Russian leadership. Despite the high level of propaganda in Russian official rhetoric, studying *public* sources is epistemologically and ontologically crucial because the processes we aim to study – the effects of rhetoric – take place

¹⁰¹As such, it is similar to the strategy of 'avoidance' as coping with 'ontological dissonance', as theorised by Lupovici through the case of Israel's unilateral steps and building a separation barrier after the Second Intifada. Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians', *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 809–33.

¹⁰²Berensköter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'; Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory'.

¹⁰³Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2017).

¹⁰⁴Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo, and Liliia Makashova, 'Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45:3 (2022), pp. 334–68; Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity*; Scott Radnitz, *Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, 'Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space', *The Russian Review*, 71:4 (2012), pp. 551–64.

¹⁰⁵Chernobrov, 'Ontological security and public (mis)recognition'; Browning, 'Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood'.

¹⁰⁶Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, *Data Analysis in Qualitative Research: Theorizing with Abductive Analysis* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); see also Richard Swedberg, 'Theorizing in sociology and social science: Turning to the context of discovery', *Theory and Society*, 41:1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

¹⁰⁷Kristian Lundby Gjerde, 'Corporaexplorer: An R package for dynamic exploration of text collections', *Journal of Open Source Software* 4:38 (2019), 1342.

¹⁰⁸We retrieved the MID texts from this corpus: Kristian Lundby Gjerde, *Mid.ru press documents 2003–2019, Russian* (v1.1), 2023, distributed by Zenodo, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7558544>.

in the public sphere.¹⁰⁹ By combining quantitative (collection) and qualitative (analysis) methods to establish the Russian position we enhance transparency, flexibility and accuracy.¹¹⁰

In-depth discourse analysis is a hermeneutical analytical process focused on delineating a specific discursive landscape¹¹¹ and identifying topos deployment¹¹² and its effect. We began this process deductively, aware that ‘colour revolution’ was a privileged Russian military-strategic phrase. Tracing this TT, we ascertained the connotations and ambiguity created by its repeated deployment. This finding led us to a more inductive stage in which we studied how the texts represented ambiguity. We discovered here the cluster of terms stabilising the metapolitical discourse as explained above. In line with abductive theorising, we included the metapolitics concept alongside ideas from conspiracy theory research in this process of empirical discovery, addressing the need to conceptualise the workings of ‘pretext’, ‘in practice’, and the like.

In our empirical analysis below, we first show the pattern of deployment of the TT CR in Russian official discourse, how it conflates threatening actors and collapses war and peace. We then analyse the agency of this TT as it takes hold and spreads to new action types, spaces, and times. Finally, we delve into the twin work of TTs and metapolitics in Russian discourse.

Actor and war/peace conflation performed by CR

Within the many representations of NATO/USA/West (versus Russia), CR functions as an overarching, structuring commonplace of Western hybrid war targeting Russia. Throughout our empirical analysis, NATO, the USA, and the West are frequently mentioned with a slash (/) between them, because the three are often referred to as the same actor in Russian discourse – in effect, these actors are collapsed into one social entity: ‘NATO, read the US, the state which occupies the leading position in this organisation and controls it fully.’¹¹³ As we theorised above, this discursive production of the other as undifferentiated threat is one of five conflating effects performed by TTs like CR.

Through such actor conflation, CR simplifies agency and responsibility in world politics, reducing it to Washington, DC as *the* privileged Western actor: the ‘patron’ or ‘Western curator of Ukraine’,¹¹⁴ is ‘steering Kiev’¹¹⁵ or ‘drawing Kiev into its orbit’¹¹⁶ – playing also on the topos of Ukraine as free to be dominated.¹¹⁷ In MO texts, this agency is often narrowed down to NATO and the Pentagon.¹¹⁸ MID texts emphasise that the consensus of the Western bloc is ‘artificial’ and forced by the USA, using ‘stick discipline’ in United Nations voting, for example.¹¹⁹ The USA is Turkey’s ‘older brother’¹²⁰ and ‘overseas sponsor’ of Central and Eastern European states.¹²¹ CR also expresses the idea that NATO weaponises everything and everyone against Russia, thus linking to Russia’s topos of Western ‘double standards’, ‘politicisation’, and ‘ideologisation.’¹²² We find that CR implies that any actors on the Western side (human rights activists, journalists, diplomats)

¹⁰⁹Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 32.

¹¹⁰Gregor Wiedemann, *Text Mining for Qualitative Data Analysis in the Social Sciences: A Study on Democratic Discourse in Germany* (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2016).

¹¹¹See e.g. Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

¹¹²Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, p. 51.

¹¹³MID-T98.

¹¹⁴MO-T19.

¹¹⁵MO-T15.

¹¹⁶MO-T18.

¹¹⁷Gaufman, ‘Damsels in distress’.

¹¹⁸MO-T26, MO-T27.

¹¹⁹MID-T11, MID-T20, MID-T31.

¹²⁰MID-T32.

¹²¹MID-T55.

¹²²Gjerde, ‘Russia, “double standards”, and the contestation of equivalence 2000–2019’.

can be agents of war.¹²³ Thus, CR conflates a range of subjects into a single, one-dimensional, and exceptionally threatening other.

Simultaneously, the TT CR renders Russia equally undifferentiated and exceptionally vulnerable:¹²⁴ the colour revolution in Ukraine becomes ‘an attempt to turn Ukraine into the frontline of confrontation with Russia,’¹²⁵ ‘Russia has been chosen as a target country.’¹²⁶ The view of NATO/USA/West as punishing Russia for seeking independence and refusing to be ‘subordinate’ in foreign policy is strongly communicated.¹²⁷ Previous ‘calls to isolate and punish Russia’¹²⁸ like the ‘pumped-up press’ on Magnitsky, Snowden, and Sochi, are subsumed under the same logic, as these ‘PR projects’ are escalated into an unprecedented and ‘very confrontational scenario’ against Russia.¹²⁹

TTs’ war/peace-conflating effect appears early in our data material. The term ‘colour revolution’ was in use in 2005 in Russian political science, rising to prominence in a 2013 article by military theorist Gerasimov, who emphasised colour revolutions as a key technology in 21st-century warfare characterised by blurred lines between military and non-military conflict.¹³⁰ The echoes of Gerasimov’s monumental text¹³¹ and its war/peace conflation reverberate throughout our body of texts from Russian officials. CR is defined in detail by a 2014 MO text, where Defence Minister Shoigu states:

the phenomenon of ‘colour’ revolutions is becoming a significant factor in the destabilisation of the situation in many regions of the world. Under the guise of spreading democracy, other people’s values are being imposed ... these ‘colour’ revolutions are increasingly taking on the forms of armed struggle, being developed according to the rules of the art of war.¹³²

The 2014 MO text solidifies the CR commonplace as a point of reference and showcases this TT’s production of war/peace ambiguity, which persists throughout the entire text corpus.

The CR commonplace subsequently spreads via numerous implicit references, although the number of explicit mentions of the term is quite low. For example, the ‘fundamental goal’ of the EU and the USA in Ukraine is ‘the legitimisation of a regime that they themselves brought to power, on terms favourable to themselves.’¹³³ MID worries that anti-terrorist operations in Syria could be ‘subordinated to narrow-minded interests linked to change of undesirable regimes.’¹³⁴ There are numerous references to the ‘unconstitutional armed coup’ in Kyiv in 2014 and NATO/US/Western support for it.¹³⁵ CR is invoked in Lavrov’s claim that ‘the transformation of the Ukrainian crisis, which arose as a result of an absolutely illegal anti-constitutional coup, into a yardstick of all relations between Russia and the West [...] is an absolutely abnormal, unhealthy situation, artificially inflated from countries further away than Europe.’¹³⁶ Implicit references are a key part of CRs’ pattern of deployment.

¹²³ MO-T27.

¹²⁴ Another topos, as mentioned; see Götz and Staun, ‘Why Russia attacked Ukraine’.

¹²⁵ MO-T13.

¹²⁶ MO-T15, also MO-T19 Russia ‘real’ target.

¹²⁷ MO-T28, MID-T12, MID-T24, MID-T31, MID-T69.

¹²⁸ MID-T12.

¹²⁹ MID-T12, MID-T13, MID-T14, MID-T18, MID-T42, MID-T92.

¹³⁰ German, ‘Harnessing protest potential’, pp. 553–6.

¹³¹ A canonical/nodal text. See Dunn and Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis*, p. 93.

¹³² MO-T6.

¹³³ MID-T7, referring later to Kyiv’s ‘western sponsors’, MID-T16.

¹³⁴ MID-T16.

¹³⁵ MID-T7, MID-T12, MID-T20, MID-T24, MID-T30, MID-T31, MID-T35, MID-T36, MID-T39, MID-T48, MID-T51, MID-T59, MID-T61, MID-T62, MID-T63, MID-T69, MID-T70, MID-T71, MID-T76, MID-T77.

¹³⁶ MID-T39.

CR expands across action types, time, and space

In our body of texts, colour revolution progressively expands to frame ever-new action types as part of the West's hybrid warfare against Russia.¹³⁷ CR incorporates and collapses diplomatic and military-strategic activity, framing NATO's 2015 diplomatic dialogue initiatives as tools of war. Russia sees NATO employing a 'two-track' approach, where NATO speaks of 'dialogue' but uses such attempts to contain Russia, rendering the NATO–Russia Council a zero-sum winner-takes-all playing field where the interests of Russia are systematically disregarded.¹³⁸ Western/NATO counterterrorist efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Syria for example – which Russia has supported in principle and sometimes in practice – are rephrased as cover operations for US hegemony.¹³⁹ The Ballistic Missile Defence in Europe is allegedly not directed against Iran, as the USA claims, but against Russia, to neutralise Russian capabilities.¹⁴⁰

As the 2014 Euromaidan is fleshed out as the epitomic CR, the events in Ukraine and their consequences for Russia confirm colour revolutions as the nerve centre in US/NATO's anti-Russian grand strategy.¹⁴¹ Ukraine has become 'the most vivid and tragic manifestation of the problems that have been systematically created over the years'.¹⁴² Multiple statements convey how events unfolded in Ukraine and that it was NATO/USA/West's plan all along to meddle in Ukraine in order to weaken and contain Russia.¹⁴³ 'Maidan' is even used as a synonym for CR: 'a Maidan was arranged'.¹⁴⁴

CR comes to encapsulate the range of Western reactions to Russia's annexation of Crimea and intrusion into Ukraine. Importantly, new NATO activities in Europe are emphasised as an integral part of colour revolutions. MO texts even indicate that developments in Ukraine confirm an explicit 'adaptive approach' used by the West of gradually introducing 'necessary' military force after first having applied information means and stirred protest in Ukraine¹⁴⁵ – the West allegedly 'speculated in universal values'.¹⁴⁶ The build-up of NATO forces, infrastructure, and activity near Russian borders is seen as part and parcel of the CR approach. In MO texts, such linking and merging is very explicit.¹⁴⁷ New NATO forces or installations in the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, increasing NATO maritime presence in the Baltic and Black Seas and the Mediterranean, aviation activity in the Baltic and Barents Seas, new stationing of US troops in Europe, or large-scale military exercises (Baltops 2017 and Saber Strike 2017) – these activities are mentioned repeatedly, projected as offensive moves, and subsumed under the CR trope as manifestations of the Western threat.¹⁴⁸ MID is focused on Ukraine as a crisis exploited and 'directly' or 'actively' 'supported' – 'if not encouraged'¹⁴⁹ – by the West. The term 'frontline states' is used, reshaping what NATO argues is a defensive deterrence of Russia into a hostile posture.¹⁵⁰ Promises and preparations of new NATO memberships are incorporated into CR – sometimes featuring as part of, or concealed by, NATO's alleged propaganda war,¹⁵¹ sometimes as the trigger of 'traditional' CR: in February 2017, Lavrov

¹³⁷ See also Wilhelmsen and Hjermann, 'Russian certainty of NATO hostility'.

¹³⁸ MO-T29.

¹³⁹ MID-T6, MO-T18, MO-T29.

¹⁴⁰ MO-T23, MID-T14, MID-T24, MID-T28, MID-T46, MID-T51.

¹⁴¹ MID-T7, MID-T10, MID-T11, MID-T12, MID-T13, MID-T14. MO-T1, MO-T6, MO-T11, MO-T13, MO-T15, MO-T18.

¹⁴² MID-T14.

¹⁴³ MID-T7, MID-T11, MID-T12, MID-T13, MID-T14. MO-T1, MO-T6, MO-T18.

¹⁴⁴ MID-T14.

¹⁴⁵ MO-T6, again in MO-T33.

¹⁴⁶ MID-T12.

¹⁴⁷ MO-T3, MO-T18, MO-T33.

¹⁴⁸ MO-T1, MO-T6, MO-T7, MO-T13, MO-T13, MO-T16, MO-T17, MO-T23, MO-T29, MO-T30, MO-T33, MO-T42. MID-T29, MID-T30, MID-T38, MID-T50, MID-T51, MID-T55, MID-T58, MID-T60.

¹⁴⁹ MID-T7, MID-T10, MID-T12, MID-T20, MID-T24, MID-T30, MID-T48, MID-T62, MID-T76.

¹⁵⁰ MID-T25, MID-T26.

¹⁵¹ MID-T76, MID-T80.

holds that ‘the message that Ukraine would join NATO, and, therefore, they could do anything, *materialised* into a coup d’état’.¹⁵² The merging of action types goes hand in hand with the simplified agency typical of TTs described above: NATO is active, ‘frantically dragging Montenegro into its ranks’,¹⁵³ while passive Montenegro ‘succumbed to’ NATO’s ‘ultimatum’.¹⁵⁴

Alongside the conflation of activity types, the CR commonplace acquires a wide *spatial and temporal reach*, sticking and spreading to new spaces and events in the past, present, and future with every new deployment. It incorporates and gives meaning to past international events and crises such as the wars in Kosovo (1999),¹⁵⁵ Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011),¹⁵⁶ and in the former Soviet space in Central Asia and Georgia (2004 and 2008).¹⁵⁷ The story changes concerning when the tide turned in Russian–Western relations: events in Ukraine in October 2014 are singled out as the qualitative turning point,¹⁵⁸ whereas four years later, Lavrov indicates the 2011 Snowden affair as the starting point of US confrontation.¹⁵⁹ As time passes in our material, CR reaches even further back into the post–Cold War settlement.¹⁶⁰ In the Russian reading of ‘current’ crises following the conflict in Ukraine, whether in Venezuela or in Syria, the events are framed as following a CR trajectory.¹⁶¹ Looking into the future, the TT CR shows a distinct fatalistic bias: events in Russia’s near abroad *will* be shaped by this belligerent approach; forces in favour of NATO rapprochement will be ‘spurred on’ inside Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.¹⁶² Future developments in the Arctic are also tainted by this bleak outlook.¹⁶³

As a vague and open TT, CR easily spreads into the future and backwards in time. With the ‘benefit’ of hindsight and with a flexible TT like CR, Russia’s discourse reinterprets past events such as Russia–NATO cooperation and Western promises in the 1990s, so that they become proof of NATO’s double-dealing. Regarding the 2008 war in Georgia, MID texts convey that Saakashvili ‘lost his head’ and ‘attacked South Ossetia’ as a consequence of NATO’s ‘inflammatory’¹⁶⁴ promises of offering membership to Georgia.¹⁶⁵ In 2014, Lavrov states that ‘the same motives’ are at work in Ukraine.¹⁶⁶ In this way, events in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 are *reinterpreted* together via the CR template to serve as proof that NATO statements of membership *cause* war and instability.

As theorised above, TTs’ rhetorically attractive openness results in confluents. Empirically, we find that CR’s spread to new action types, times, and spaces is facilitated by the idea that CR is a *universal* template that can be applied ‘anywhere’. As Secretary of Defence Sergei Shoigu noted in 2014: ‘the scheme for implementing a “colour revolution” is universal and can be applied anywhere in the world. Military pressure, change of political leadership, change of foreign policy and economic vectors of the state – this is the algorithm of actions.’¹⁶⁷ Lavrov agrees that the ‘technology’ employed in regime changes, from Grenada in 1983 to Ukraine in 2014, was ‘absolutely the same’.¹⁶⁸ Over time, these confluents render CR a shape-shifting threat posed by an omnipresent USA/NATO/West.

¹⁵² MID-T59, MID-T70, emphasis added.

¹⁵³ MID-T67.

¹⁵⁴ MID-T73.

¹⁵⁵ MO-T6, MO-T11, MO-T13.

¹⁵⁶ MID-T4, MID-T5, MID-T6, MID-T11.

¹⁵⁷ MO-T6, MID-T78, MID-T91, MID-T92, MID-T94.

¹⁵⁸ MID-T13.

¹⁵⁹ MID-T97.

¹⁶⁰ MO-T19.

¹⁶¹ MO-T6, MO-T26, MO-T27, MID-T65.

¹⁶² MO-T2 (‘spurred on’), MO-T6, MO-T11, MO-T19.

¹⁶³ MO-T14, MO-T18.

¹⁶⁴ MID-T59.

¹⁶⁵ MID-T14, MID-T18, MID-T19, MID-T29, MID-T59, MID-T71.

¹⁶⁶ MID-T19.

¹⁶⁷ Quote from MO-T6, again in MO-T18 and MO-T33: ‘global character’ of CR.

¹⁶⁸ MID-T12.

Metapolitics expels uncertainty

Our analysis of Russian discourse has shown how the flexible ambiguity highlighted by the TT CR, and the anxiety created by its multiple and far-reaching deployment, are resolved by adding metapolitics. In particular, the word ‘pretext’ is central in the metapolitical discourse on NATO’s false surface and true enmity. After 2014, NATO’s heightened activity in Europe is consistently coupled with NATO ‘inventing’ ‘the thesis’ of the ‘Russian threat’ as ‘a guise’ and ‘justification’ for NATO military encroachment upon Russia. In January 2016, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova states that, to explain ‘why NATO is approaching Russian borders, one needs a very capacious and simple thesis, and it was invented: the so-called “Russian aggression”’.¹⁶⁹

Metapolitics also suggests that any ideals that NATO claims to promote, like democracy or universal values, are a mere smokescreen for hard geopolitical interests (typically of the USA).¹⁷⁰ NATO’s interests-as-values cover-up operation is contrasted to the view of Russia as *interest-driven*, demanding respect for its legitimate (*zakonnye*) interests.¹⁷¹ Metapolitics interprets disregard of the interests of others as ‘the real’ and very dangerous NATO/USA/West: US interests prevail in NATO *instead* of the ‘legitimate interests’ of individual member states.¹⁷² The alleged exceptionalism of NATO/USA/West is framed as an incurable and extremely destructive trait¹⁷³ that has ‘repeatedly led humanity to disasters.’¹⁷⁴ Thus, the metapolitical ‘real beneath’ discourse, also empowered by the established topos of US unilateralism,¹⁷⁵ takes universalism as a surface phenomenon camouflaging real and dangerous US interests.

Russia’s discourse on democratic values as a cover-up for NATO enmity illustrates how TTs like CR can operate in tandem with metapolitics: initially, it highlights ambiguity, decoupling binaries such as universalism/particularism (values/interests) and war/peace. CR implies that universal norms are often used as weapons serving particular interests, reading ‘norms’ as part of the shape-shifting CR toolkit. This ambiguity is subsequently solved by the metapolitics of surface/reality, with the latter trumping the former in Russia’s interpretation.

Thus, despite *and* because of the metapolitical doubleness in representations of the USA, NATO, and the West, ambiguity is settled firmly on the side of enmity in the text corpus. Signs of NATO idealism become proof of its cynical and treacherous core, as described explicitly: ‘They pursue *only one* goal – to force our country to behave as the North Atlantic bloc needs us to on the international arena’¹⁷⁶ and ‘practise dictatorship of force.’¹⁷⁷ Similarly, the example of Russia framing NATO dialogue initiatives as part of a ‘two-track’ approach is a clear example of metapolitical discourse as it emphasises duality but insists that the second, hidden track of information warfare is the ‘real’ track. Consequently, the Russian MO finds that NATO’s proposal of a telephone consultation in February 2016 was aimed at putting Russia in a bad light.¹⁷⁸

Over time, metapolitics in combination with TT deployments drive the securitisation process by solidifying the sense of certainty of the real enmity beneath, thereby totalising the threat posed by the NATO/USA/West other. The ambiguity accentuated by the CR TT is explained as a surface phenomenon that ‘confirms’ enmity as the only reality in metapolitics’ logical shortcut: *they will use all sorts of ambiguous tricks since they are the enemy – and since they are the enemy, all the ambiguous things they do are acts of war.*

¹⁶⁹MID-T40.

¹⁷⁰As such, Russia generally shares IR realism’s view on norms (our thanks to Paul Beaumont for noting this).

¹⁷¹MID-T38.

¹⁷²MID-T62.

¹⁷³MO-T18, MO-T19, MO-T23. MID T12 US.

¹⁷⁴MID-T12.

¹⁷⁵Hopf, “Crimea is ours”.

¹⁷⁶MO-T2, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁷MO-T18.

¹⁷⁸MO-T29.

Conclusions: The hubris of knowing ‘hybridity’

Topoi of threat such as hybrid warfare or colour revolution are useful rhetorical devices for security actors. The clout of such open and ambiguous security buzzwords centrally placed in the rhetorical topography derives from the instantaneous security reading a TT provides, conjuring up an entire self/other threat situation. However, we posit that TTs acquire an agency of their own. As illustrated by our analysis of CR in Russian official discourse, TTs shape the securitising discourses that they anchor and can entrap leaders in their own rhetoric.

This article has approached TTs through abductive theorising, combining empirical discovery with established insights from Securitisation Theory and Ontological Security Studies. We have showed how routinised TT deployment has discursive knock-on effects: it blurs diverse actors, the war/peace binary itself, past/present, diverse spaces, and action types, thereby constructing the threat as existential but amorphous. This pervasive ambiguity of securitising states’ own making creates ontological insecurity in need of mediation. We have suggested that some states choose to use metapolitics, a mode of interpretation biased towards seeing underlying enmity. Through the double lens of CR and metapolitics, Russian official rhetoric constructed NATO/USA/West as an omnipresent monolithic Other ready to harm Russia geopolitically through any means possible, anywhere, anytime.

While a potent rhetorical weapon, the recoil of combining metapolitics and TTs is that it precludes de-securitisation – disregarding that the adversary might have legitimate security interests and could be interested in cooperation on some issue-areas. In today’s complex security environment, the dual rhetorical deployment of TT and metapolitics fosters the interpretational hubris of knowing hybridity: of ‘knowing’ the hostile intentions behind the adversary’s ambiguous behaviour. In the Russian case, our analysis indicates that official discourse post-Crimea encourages a misplaced certainty about the pervasiveness of NATO’s CR strategy and of NATO/USA/West and Ukraine as enemies of Russia.

In this sense, Russia’s aggressive war unleashed in 2022 is viewed not as a break, but a *break-through* of Russia’s construction of the NATO threat since 2014, anchored in the TT CR. Combined with metapolitics, Russia’s systematic TT deployment precluded de-securitisation of the NATO threat in Ukraine and fostered Russia’s hubris of knowing NATO as essentially hostile behind its Janus face. The continuation of this discursive process eventually made war of aggression a logical policy from the insular Russian perspective. In 2022, Putin was still portraying the Ukrainian government as illegitimate and the 2014 Euromaidan as the CR par excellence. Through CR, Russia sees the threatening NATO/USA/West versus victimised Russia as the only players, with no independent agency for Ukraine, whose armed forces and intelligence are allegedly run by ‘foreign advisers’. Metapolitics is evidently still used: ‘under the *pretext* of exercises’, military contingents of NATO countries have ‘*in practice* constantly’ been present in Ukraine. Warnings of ‘geopolitical adversaries ... pursuing their aims’, ‘ready to provoke a “colour revolution”’ go to the kernel of the TT CR.¹⁷⁹

This article has scrutinised Russian official speech and the TT CR, but we believe our theorisation can be generalised beyond Russia. Repeated use of any topos of threat as conceptualised here could create knock-on effects akin to those observed in the Russian case. NATO states’ use of ‘hybrid warfare’ is one example. However, what sets Moscow apart is the nurturing of metapolitics alongside TTs. Although this strategy might be shaped by the distinct Russian socio-political context and, indeed, the explicit choice of the Kremlin elite, no society is immune to metapolitics and its consequences. We therefore warn against framing an adversary as always-already the enemy.

¹⁷⁹Cited from Vladimir Putin, ‘Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii [Address of the President of the Russian Federation]’, 21 February 2022, available at [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>]; Vladimir Putin, ‘Podpisanie dogovorov o prinjatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoj i Khersonskoj oblastej v sostav Rossii [Signing of agreements of incorporating DNR, LNR, Zaporozhiya and Kherson into Russia]’, 30 September 2022, available at [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>]. Emphasis added.

In combination, TT and metapolitics equip security actors with a fatalistic bias of enmity that can result in war.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000937>.

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