

Chapter 7: The Myth of Exceptionalism and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Does the EU Need War?

This aim of this chapter is to analyse how the myth of exceptionalism has been used by EU elites to legitimate the European project, using the case study of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whilst a number of political myths exist within the EU, and particularly within EU élite discourses, one that is particularly understudied and mis-characterised in EU studies is that of the myth of exceptionalism. Moreover, from understandings provided by post-structuralist discourse theory (PDT) and the political myth literature more broadly, political myths are particularly significant for processes of legitimation during moments of 'crisis'. As it is in these moments where political elites can re-produce narratives about why a political community was formed, as well as the reasons for its continued existence. Therefore, using the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a case study, this chapter will present a discourse analysis of speeches made by key supranational EU elite actors during the 'crisis'. In doing so, this will enable an understanding of precisely how these actors use the myth of exceptionalism to construct widely held understandings of both the past, present, and future of Europe, that provides a contextualised rationale for why the European project should continue, as well as moral justifications for the EU's continued role in the world.

N.B. This chapter will be the third and final empirical chapter of my PhD thesis. At present, this draft is still in its early stages, and requires more analysis. Having over 115 official speeches and statement to analyse has been very fruitful but has yielded a lot of interesting themes to analyse. I also recognise that a lot more theory and analysis needs to be intertwined within my findings. So, what is presented below is a very rough draft of some of these ideas and how they piece together. That being said the jigsaw pieces are very scattered at this moment in time, and I would greatly appreciate your feedback/insight as to how to tell this 'story' more clearly, and how some of the pieces presented may fit together.

N.B.B. The concepts of the myth of exceptionalism and the EU's foundational myth are used interchangeably in this paper, owing to the previous chapter whereby it was outlined that the EU's foundational myth *is* fundamentally one of exceptionalism.

“There will be a free and sovereign Ukraine.

There will be peace and prosperity.

And there will be Europe.”

(Ursula von der Leyen, Twitter 25/02/2023)

This chapter will now look at how the EU elites have used and adapted the myth of exceptionalism to legitimise the European project in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As highlighted in Chapter 4, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been chosen as a case study owing to the fact it marks a particularly prominent ‘crisis’ faced by the EU. Moreover, it is during moments of crisis that political myths, particularly the myth of exceptionalism, play a significant role in processes of legitimation (see Chapter 3; Bennett, 2022). However, this raises the important question of: legitimation of what? Referring back to this thesis’s central understanding of legitimation as a normative justification process that attempts to shape widely held understandings that a political community’s *actions are ‘right’* and their *continued existence is ‘necessary’* – consequently, this project is concerned with how EU élites use the myth of exceptionalism to justify that the EU’s actions in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine are ‘*right*’ and that in light of the invasion, the EU’s continued existence as a political project is ‘*necessary*’.

Presented below are the findings from the discourse analysis conducted of 117 official statements and speeches made by the President of the Commission (Ursula von der Leyen), the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Josep Borrell), and the President of the European Council (Charles Michel) concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 19th February 2022 to 13th October 2023. The primary focus on the discourses of EU elites is important for this research project as political myths are more likely to have a legitimation effect “in situations where their ability to offer grander visions for the communal future appear relevant” (Kølvraa, 2016, p.173). However, the discourses of the above three actors have been chosen in particular on the basis that they: 1) Represent the EU externally and responsible for the articulation of EU foreign policy and thus its legitimation; and 2) Can be seen to have formal authority over matters of foreign policy and therefore their discourses are relevant and authoritative (Hansen, 2006). Within the speeches, the analysis has specifically

picked out (re)articulations of the myth of exceptionalism (i.e., the EU's foundational myth and derivative myths), and will focus on how this myth has been deployed in the process of normatively justifying the EU's policy response to the 'crisis' of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the EU's continued existence.

Therefore, the structure of this chapter will be as follows...

However, before going into the analysis, it is necessary to give a brief contextualisation of the case study and explain why this case study in particular is important for this research project.

7.1. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Rebirth of the EU's Myths?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 can be seen to mark a further critical moment for the EU, seemingly adding to its current constructed state of 'permanent' or 'poly' crisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019; Voltolini et al., 2020; Della Sala, 2023). This is particularly the case when taking into consideration that this invasion marks a protraction of an existing crisis, that of the Russo-Ukrainian War, that began following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Gasparini, 2021). At the heart of this widespread understanding within Europe that the EU is facing a 'crisis of crises', lies a more fundamental 'crisis', that of the EU's legitimacy and ontological security (Kinnvall et al., 2020; Voltolini et al., 2020; Della Sala, 2023).

As highlighted in Chapter 3, myths and narratives are key means through which political communities can achieve both legitimacy and ontological security. Therefore, this more fundamental crisis can be seen to stem from the widespread questioning of one of the central narratives of the EU that 'crises' exist as opportunities for European integration to move forward (Della Sala, 2023, p.1). As Della Sala (2023) goes on to point out, there is very little room for manoeuvre within this narrative outside of the idea that story of the European Union "is one of the onward march of integration, [and] how the arc of history bent in favour of universal values that emphasised democracy, human rights and solidarity" (Della Sala, 2023, p.1). Therefore, given the rigidity of this narrative, this has led many to call for a 'new narrative' for Europe in order to restore both legitimacy and ontological security (Kølvraa, 2016, p.180; Kaiser, 2017).

Moreover, it is also possible to view this more fundamental ‘crisis’ as a direct result of the paradoxical ‘success’ of the EU’s foundational myth. This is because for many, particularly younger generations, the narrative of the EU as a post-war peace project has faded into a distant past, with the vast majority of EU citizens having never experienced war or conflict in their lifetimes (Kølvraa, 2016, p.175). Put more bluntly, both the EU’s legitimacy and ontological security can be said to be in ‘crisis’ directly *because* the EU has ultimately delivered on the fundamental promise of the Schuman declaration: that war between Member States has now indeed become unthinkable (Kølvraa, 2016, p.175). It is quite ironic that the EU can be said to be in a state of fundamental ‘crisis’ owing to the very fact that it had succeeded in delivering what many throughout European history had only dreamt of (Kølvraa, 2016, p.175).

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine marks the return of war on European soil, raising a big question mark both for the Schuman declaration and the EU’s foundational myth more broadly. This return of war to Europe raises another paradox, on the one hand it can be seen to pose a significant challenge to the EU’s foundational myth and the EU’s *raison d’être* as a peace project. But on the other hand, the conflict also presents itself as an opportunity for the re-articulation of the EU’s foundational myth, and in doing so re-invigorates it with contemporary resonance. However, most importantly for EU elites, it puts one of the EU’s historically most successful means of providing ontological security and legitimacy back on the table.

Therefore, it is now necessary to turn to look at exactly how the EU has used the myth of exceptionalism within this ‘crisis’ to provide both the EU as a political project, as well as its response(s) to the crisis, with the illusion of legitimacy.

7.1. Initial Construction of the ‘Crisis’: A Defining Moment for Europe

It is first important to pay specific attention to how the ‘crisis’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was constructed by supranational EU elites. This is owing to this project’s discursive understanding of crises, and in particular what Hay (1996) calls the ‘essential narrativity of crisis’: by studying how ‘crises’ are discursively constructed by particular actors it is possible to pick out what is cast as the cause(s) of the ‘crisis’ as well as what is deemed the ‘necessary’

solution(s) in order to rectify the crisis. Therefore, from this it is possible to see how the myth of exceptionalism has been used in processes of legitimation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

From the analysis conducted, three ‘crisis’ constructions appear to be particularly dominant: 1) the war is *unprecedented* and marks a critical moment in the history of the EU; 2) the war represents an *existential threat* to the very basis of the European project; and 3) the war is constructed as a fundamental conflict of *values*. In highlighting these three crisis constructions, this section overarchingly aims to point out the significant role the EU’s myth of exceptionalism has played in constructing the invasion as a ‘crisis’.

The first particularly prominent construction of the ‘crisis’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that of being ‘*unprecedented*’ (von der Leyen, 10). In the days following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is possible to see EU supranational leaders begin to construct this invasion as a ‘crisis’, with the severity of the moment being emphasised in statements that claimed that the invasion was “a watershed moment for Europe” as well as “the beginning of a new era” (von der Leyen, 4). Josep Borrell even doubles down on how unprecedented a moment this is for the EU, in his statement that: “everybody perceives that we are in unprecedented times, that we are living a historic moment. And I know that the word “historic” is often overused and abused, but this is certainly a historic moment.” (Borrell, 4). These statements that cast the invasion of Ukraine as ‘unprecedented’ or emphasise that Europe has entered a ‘new era’ or awakened “to a different world” (Michel, 3), are indicative of a clear ‘crisis’ construction. This is on the basis that such statements convey sentiments of particular anxiety and uncertainty concerning the situation and the world around them, and therefore they are indicative of an intersubjective understanding of a ‘crisis’, owing to this project’s theoretical understanding of ‘crisis’ (See Chapter 3; Laing, 2010; Vieira, 2016; Ejduš and Rečević, 2021; Della Sala, 2023).

Furthermore, not only is it possible to see a clear ‘crisis’ construction through the emphasis of the ‘unprecedented’ nature of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, these statements are revealing of how serious a ‘crisis’ this is constructed to be. For example, statements casting the war as a “defining moment for the European Union” (Borrell, 2, 4), a “historic moment” (Michel, 4), a “serious moment in history” (Borrell, 30), and a “moment of truth for Europe” (von der Leyen, 6), indicate a particularly severe ‘crisis’ that has both

significantly disrupted the normal functioning of the European Union, as well as the cognitive and normative maps that tell EU actors how the world is organised and what is the right course of action (Della Sala, 2023, p.2).

Moreover, as highlighted earlier, ‘crises’ force political communities to address fundamental questions about ‘who they are’, ‘why they have come together’ (Mitzen, 2018; Della Sala, 2023, p.5). Claims that “we all woke up to a different Europe” (Michel, 7), and that the invasion “has been our wake-up call to a new reality” (Borrell, 38), can be seen as particularly good examples of immediate uncertainty surrounding the questions of ‘who we are’ and ‘why we have come together’, following the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, this understanding of the ‘crisis’ as ultimately a crisis of ‘who’ and ‘what’ Europe is most evident in the remarks made by Josep Borrell in a speech given to the European Diplomatic Academic in October 2022:

“we are certainly living also a “moment of creation” of a new world. Because this war is changing a lot of things, and certainly it is changing the European Union. This war will create a different European Union” (Borrell, 30).

This quote from Borrell can be seen as an attempt at addressing the questions of ‘who’ and ‘what’ Europe is, however, there is still significant uncertainty surrounding the specifics in answering these questions. However, what this does show is that this ‘crisis’ construction opens up the possibility of change in how the EU is understood, as evidenced by the claims that the crisis is a ‘moment of creation of a new world’ and will ‘create a different European Union’.

Moreover, it is clear in the discourses of the actors analysed that new understandings of Europe are constructed as ‘necessary’ as a result of the crisis. Whilst Charles Michel’s claim that “Europe must also rise to this historic moment” (Michel, 4), can be seen as a call to action, in his report to the European Parliament plenary session in April 2022, constructs this crisis as a moment of urgency whereby new understandings of Europe are needed:

“The war in Ukraine is a moment of truth, and a moment of urgency, for the European Union. The war in Ukraine has opened our eyes – if they weren’t already open – to the urgent need to strengthen European sovereignty, to build a strategic European Union” (Michel, 9).

This is something that is similarly articulated by Josep Borrell, who argues that this ‘crisis’ marks a key moment in which the EU can “turn the page on the history of the European integration and also on the history of Europe” (Borrell, 5). Or in more concrete terms, Borrell points out that “this is the moment to rethink the future of European capacities to face challenges like a war” (Borrell, 10). Therefore, what is clear is that the construction of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an ‘*unprecedented*’ ‘crisis’ is not only indicative of an overarching discursive dislocation of existing understandings of ‘Europe’, but also it invites the legitimization of new meanings of ‘Europe’ in response to the dislocation.

Related to this ‘crisis’ construction, the second significant construction of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that it represents an ‘*existential threat*’. Alongside the ‘crisis’ of the invasion being cast as ‘unprecedented’, during the initial stages of the invasion, the severity of this crisis was emphasised through constructions of it being ‘biblical’ (Borrell, 3), ‘exceptional’ (Michel, 8), “a global tectonic shift” (von der Leyen, 19), and “an existential challenge for Europe” (Borrell 36). The main significance of this crisis construction is that it is used to create a sense of urgency and gravity to the situation. This important for the process of legitimization as by creating an ‘exceptional’ situation, this legitimates possibility of ‘exceptional’ measures to remedy the crisis ([insert references](#)).

In order to emphasise the severity of the ‘threat’ that ‘war’ poses to the EU, throughout this period ‘war’ was constructed as a ‘pest’ (Borrell, 3), a ‘tragedy’ (Borrell, 6), and ‘evil’ (von der Leyen, 30). However, what is particularly interesting is that ‘war’ is frequently spoken about in terms of a ‘darkness’. In this construction the EU is cast as being in ‘its darkest hour’ (von der Leyen, 6, 7), a ‘dark reality’ (von der Leyen, 38), as well as in ‘dark times’ (von der Leyen, 15). This also refers back to the EU’s foundational myth and this idea of ‘rising from the ashes’ or ‘emerging out from the darkness’. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Josep Borrell claimed “these are among the darkest hours for Europe since World War II” (Borrell 2). This reference to the EU’s foundational myth and in particular, the metaphor of darkness, is a good example of how the EU’s foundational myth is used to construct the severity of this discursive dislocation using powerful emotive imagery.

However, it is particularly interesting that the ‘crisis’ has not only been constructed as an existential threat for Europe, but for the whole world. For example, in her first statement on

the day of the invasion, von der Leyen highlighted that “Russia’s target is not only Donbas, the target is not only Ukraine, the target is the stability in Europe and the whole of the international peace order, our peace order” (von der Leyen, 2). This was re-iterated in her State of the Union address, where she pointed out that “Much is at stake here. Not just for Ukraine – but for all of Europe and the world at large” (von der Leyen, 30). This can be seen as a good example of ‘threat universalisation’ (Holsti 2010) whereby the crisis of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is something that poses a danger ‘for the whole world’ (Borrell, 18, 20). This universalisation of the threat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not only important in the sense that it puts pressure on other international actors to rally behind Ukraine, but also because it indicates that the prevalence myth of exceptionalism within the EU élites’ construction of the crisis. This is highlighted by Holsti’s (2010) typology of the myth of exceptionalism, whereby she points out that a key part of exceptionalist foreign policies is that they construct threats as “all pervasive, limitless, and enduring”. As such, this hints towards the idea that the myth of exceptionalism is being used by EU elites in their attempt to construct the ‘crisis’ (Holsti 2010, 391).

The third construction of the ‘crisis’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that was especially frequent was the construction of the ‘crisis’ as a *conflict of values*. Instead of constructing the conflict as an attack on Ukraine, or an attack on Europe, it is specifically emphasised that “this war is not only a direct assault on Ukraine and its people, but also on the *core principles* on which the European security order is built” (Borrell, 40; emphasis added). Such a construction is similarly echoed by Charles Michel, who states that “it is not only Ukraine that is under attack. International law, rules-based international order, democracy and human dignity are also under attack” (Michel, 5). This construction became increasingly explicit as the ‘crisis’ unfolded, with the invasion being cast as “a war on our values” (von der Leyen, 30), and “what is at stake is our values, our beliefs” (Michel, 5). However, across all the speeches analysed, one principle in particular came up repeatedly, that of *democracy*. For example, the crisis is repeatedly constructed along the lines of a “fight for democracy” (von der Leyen, 31), or “a critical battle for *democracy*” (Borrell 9). Similarly, Josep Borrell emphasises that “Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is also an attack on *democracy* and the rules-based order... the *founding principles* of our societies are at stake.” (Borrell, 59; emphasis added). Moreover, during her special address at the World Economic forum in May 2022, von der Leyen constructs the crisis as a “defining moment for all democracies in the whole globe” (von der Leyen, 21), emphasising the critical nature of the crisis, the universal dimension of the threat, as well as framing the conflict around values.

What makes this construction of the ‘crisis’ as a conflict of ‘values’ of ‘beliefs’ particularly interesting is that it can be viewed as a clear attempt by EU attempt re-assert their sense of ‘self’ in response to the discursive dislocation; such a ‘self’ that is ultimately underpinned by the values of democracy, peace, multilateralism, and the rule of law. As highlighted in Chapter 3, discursive dislocations exist as moments whereby established and common-sense assumptions become de-stabilised (Jacobs et al., 2023). This applies to both individual and collective identities as they exist as ‘structures of meaning’ (Laclau 1990). And whilst these moments of discursive dislocation exist as ‘windows of opportunity’ (Nabers 2017, 276) for new articulations and meanings to be attributed to concepts such as ‘Europe’, for actors, however, discursive dislocations are ‘traumatic’ experiences where their very sense of ‘self’ is disrupted, leaving them ontologically ‘insecure’ (Kinvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Kirke 2020). In order to remedy this traumatic experience for actors, they will attempt to re-assert their sense of ‘self’, and engage in sense-making practices, to understand the social complexity that they are experiencing. Therefore, the construction of the crisis as a ‘conflict of values’ can be seen as a key example of the EU attempting to re-assert its sense of self *through* values, and that the EU fundamentally understands its sense of ‘self’ in terms of *values*, namely: democracy, peace, multilateralism, and the rule of law.

Ultimately, this points towards the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism playing a significant role in the construction of the ‘crisis’ for these élite actors, given the centrality of values such as peace and democracy to the EU’s foundational myth (Della Sala 2010, 2016; Lähdesmäki 2019; Bennett 2022). This is on the basis that it is through political myths that communities deal with discursive dislocation, providing actors with both cognitive and normative maps that allows them to navigate social uncertainty and complexity (Kolvraa 2016; Laclau 1990; Della Sala 2023). In this instance, the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism forms the fundamental basis (a prism or lens) through which these EU élite actors understand not only the world around them, but the ‘crisis’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, given the eminence of the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism in the EU élite actors’ construction of the ‘crisis’, it is now necessary to turn to analyse how this myth has been used to legitimate the European project in response to this ‘crisis’.

7.2. ‘War is back’: Return of the EU’s foundational myth

Following the initial onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism played a significant role for the EU's political élites in allowing them to make sense of the discursive dislocation of the invasion. This marks a powerful return of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism, which some authors had argued was long in decline (e.g., Bottici 2009; Zielonka 2016; Moulton 2023).

The first particularly prominent example of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism being deployed in the EU élites' construction of the crisis is in their direct reference to the Second World War. As highlighted by scholars studying the EU's foundational myth, the narrative of how Europe emerged from the ashes of the Second World War to renounce the nationalism and violence of Europe's past, comprises a significant part of the EU's foundational myth (Della Sala 2010, 2016, 2023; Smith 1992; Lähdesmäki 2019; Bennett 2022). In the immediate response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, all three leaders remarked on how for the first time since the Second World War, war had returned to Europe (von der Leyen 3; Borrell 2; Michel 2; Borrell 3; Borrell 4; Michel 5), von der Leyen in particular remarked "today, war is back in Europe" (von der Leyen, 45). In the initial construction of the crisis, this reference to the Second World War, and the EU's foundational myth more broadly, was deployed to emphasis the severity of situation, but constructing the 'crisis' as of comparable severity to that of the Second World War. For example, Josep Borrell stated that "Nothing comparable to what is happening in Ukraine has happened in Europe since the end of World War II." (Borrell, 13). In a similar manner, Charles Michel emphasised that what was occurring was "unlike anything on European soil since the end of the Second World War" (Michel, 2).

This referring back to the narrative of the Second World War within the EU's foundational myth is something that was not only commonplace in the initial construction of the crisis but was pervasive within the discourses of these actors throughout the first year of the invasion. In this sense, it is evident that the EU's foundational myth plays a significant role in how EU élite actors made sense of the discursive dislocation of the invasion, with 'war' playing a central part of the EU's construction of the new 'reality' of the 'crisis', and therefore highlighting a crucial way in which the EU's foundational myth has been able to fill the void in meaning left by the discursive dislocation.

What is especially interesting is that this re-articulation of the EU rising from the ashes of the Second World War is indicative of a key temporal dimension of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism. In particular, what is evident here is the myth's narrative structure, whereby the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism is able to provide a simplistic and coherent account of the past that reduces complexity (Rufolff 2022; Schopflin 1997, 28). In the following speech made by Ursula von der Leyen, at the closing event of the Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2022, it is presented how the EU's 'past' is having a constitutive effect on the EU's future.

"... for Europe, the memory of our past has always framed our future. And that is all the more important at a time when the unthinkable has returned to our continent. Russia's flagrant attempts to redraw maps and to rewrite even the most tragic parts of our history have reminded us of the dangers of losing our grip on both our past and our future." (von der Leyen, 20)

This strong referencing back to the EU's foundational myth in constructing a 'future' for the EU was also prevalent within Ursula von der Leyen's 2023 State of the Union address, where she stated:

"Our Union today reflects the vision of those who dreamt of a better future after World War II. A future in which a Union of nations, democracies and people would work together to share peace and prosperity. They believed that Europe was the answer to the call of history. When I speak to the new generation of young people, I see that same vision for a better future. That same burning desire to build something better. That same belief that in a world of uncertainty, Europe once again must answer the call of history. And that is what we must do together. " (von der Leyen, 49).

Similarly, a particularly interesting quote is made by von der Leyen in a joint statement with Joe Biden:

"Putin is trying to turn back the clock to another era, an era of brutal use of force, of power politics, of spheres of influence and internal repression. I am confident he will fail. We are working together to forge a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future. And I know that we will succeed." (von der Leyen, 11)

Here von der Leyen is seemingly projecting the EU's foundational myth onto the present day, by constructing that the same violence that the EU faced during the Second World War has re-emerged today in the form of Russia invading Ukraine.

[More analysis on the temporal dimension to be added]

7.3. The EU as a 'peace project': a more active role for the EU?

Moreover, what makes this deployment of the narrative of the Second World War within a modern-day context particularly important is that it enables a broader re-articulation of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism to make sense of the discursive dislocation. For example, within the discourses analysed, narratives of the EU as a 'peace project' typically accompanied references to the Second World War (Della Sala 2010, 2016, 2023; Lähdesmäki 2019; Bennett 2022; see Chapter 3), both of which are key constitutive narratives of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism. For example, In the initial aftermath of the invasion Charles Michel highlighted that the war was something "we all thought was impossible in Europe a few days ago" (Michel, 3). Such a statement underscores the attitude held amongst many EU elites that the very *raison d'être* of the EU is that it is a peace project and therefore to make war unthinkable let alone materially possible (Della Sala 2010). This self-understanding of the EU as a 'peace project' is pronounced more explicitly by Josep Borrell, who claims:

"We say often that the European Union was born in the aftermath of World War II, because we wanted to get peace and prosperity. And we got peace and prosperity. The European Union is a peace project. We want to continue fighting for peace, for us and humankind." (Borrell, 4).

In a similar manner, Charles Michel emphasises repeatedly the EU's fundamental existence as a peace project: "the European Union is of course a project bringing countries together for peace, security and prosperity" (Michel, 6), "all of us here know that the European project is built on the promise of peace and prosperity" (Michel, 7), and "of course, we must absolutely never forget that the European Union is a project of peace" (Michel, 9).

A lot can be taken from these repeated re-articulations of the narrative of the EU as a ‘peace project’. First, this can be seen as a clear example of the EU attempting using its foundational myth of exceptionalism to re-assert its sense of ‘self’ in response to the discursive dislocation, in part to provide itself with a sense of ontological security (Della Sala 2023). Second, this narrative of the EU as a ‘peace project’ plays into the construction of the crisis in terms of values. It is therefore possible to see how the EU’s foundational myth has been able to fill the void in meaning left by the discursive dislocation, as well as see the rationale behind *why* the EU has constructed the invasion of Ukraine as such a fundamental and existential threat to its justification for existence.

However, the third, and most important takeaway from the re-articulation of the narrative of EU as a peace project within the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism, is that it re-affirms the EU’s rationale for political action. In this sense, the foundational myth here is used not only to (re)articulate who the EU *is*, but what the EU *should be*, and what the EU *should do*. In constructing the EU as a ‘peace project’, the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism is used by these EU élite actors to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility surrounding what is considered ‘legitimate behaviour’ (Buttler 1993, 187; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000, 15-16), and subsequently are able to delineate what is considered to be ‘legitimate’, ‘necessary’, or ‘appropriate’ in response to the discursive dislocation.

Take, for example, the following speech made by Josep Borrell at the closing of the 2023 Schuman Security and Defence Forum, which can be seen as a particularly stark example of the use of the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism:

“I want to send you a message: the European Union was born in order to solve intra-European problems. The European Union came from the ashes of the war, from an awful war. Europe almost committed suicide. We were killing each other so much that, at the end, we decided that peace had to be done – and we did [it]... Later, the Cold War finished, and the world became global. And now the European Union has to do something more than just making peace among Europeans, but to be an actor in the world that could contribute to a better world. Now the European Union has to take their responsibilities.” (Borrell, 48)

This speech by Borrell is particularly revealing in that he directly invokes the EU's foundational myth to legitimate a more active role for the EU in world affairs. It is a direct result of the EU rising 'from the ashes of the war' that enabled it to make peace with Europe. However, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the EU has to 'do something more' in order 'to contribute a better world', not only because of the invasion, but because it is ultimately one of the European Union's 'responsibilities'. Here, the narrative function of the EU's foundational myth is particularly powerful, as Borrell is able to use an ethical-moral interpretation of the past in order to not only construct a 'present', but also a future for the European Union (Rudolff 2022, 42). Such a present and future constructed here is one in which the EU contributes to a better world and takes their responsibilities. In spite of the type of action that Borrell is legitimating here being ambiguous, Borrell here uses the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism to construct a reality whereby the EU is more active in world affairs, particularly in promoting peace. However, this notion of the EU taking 'their responsibilities' and something that this chapter will now go on to explore in greater detail.

7.4. The EU's special responsibility to promote peace: a superior world actor?

When looking at the specific calls to action made by the three EU political élites analysed by this chapter, it is possible to see a further way the EU's myth of exceptionalism has been used. In particular, the EU's myth of exceptionalism is used to legitimate a greater role for the EU in the world in promoting its values, in particular, that of *peace*. Within the discourse of the actors analysed, one narrative that comes up frequently is that the EU has a special responsibility to both defend and promote its values around the world. For example, in a speech given to the European Parliament by Charles Michel, he points out that "as we speak, the Ukrainian people are battling for their freedom. We will not abandon them. Because this is our political and moral duty. They are fighting not only for themselves, but for our common values and principles" (Michel, 7). Furthermore, in the same speech, Michel goes on to point out "We are aware of our responsibility... in order to ensure that we live up to the European Union's promise of peace and prosperity." (Michel, 7).

However, it is necessary to point out that this belief that the EU has a special responsibility towards the rest of the world is something that is derived specifically from its foundational myth of exceptionalism. As highlighted in Chapter 4, the myth of exceptionalism fundamentally encapsulates "unequivocal belief in a *particular* insight into the *universal* good

that is understood as vital for international society/mankind/progress in international relations” (Nymalm & Plagemann 2019, 16; emphasis added). However, as Nymalm & Plagemann (2019) also point out, the myth of exceptionalism provides “a conviction of moral superiority over virtually every other society, based on which the self-ascribed exceptionalist state pursues an allegedly *universal* common good” (Nymalm & Plagemann 2019, 14). For example, when Charles Michel pointed out in a speech on the main challenges faced by Europe, that “how symbolic it was for us, who wage war against one another so much, to be there a century later to build peace today, at a time when bloodshed and military conflict have resurfaced on European soil” (Michel, 8), it is evident here that the EU’s past history of ‘war’ and ‘violence’, has bestowed upon it this feeling of becoming ‘enlightened’, or in the words of Nymalm and Plagemann (2019), possessing a particular claim to a universal good. The universal good in this case being peace and prosperity.

The starkest example of the myth of exceptionalism constructing this sense of moral superiority can be seen in a speech given by Charles Michel on the main challenges facing Europe:

“For example, countries in the northern hemisphere find it difficult to cast off the veil of suspicion in countries that have endured colonialism. Our narrative on values and democracy is often perceived or presented as moralising, preaching and paternalistic.

That is why I often explain to my African friends that it is the horror of the two world wars and of the Holocaust that has probably, or certainly, so firmly entrenched a sense of responsibility in Europe to promote respect for democracy and human dignity.” (Michel, 8).

Here, Michel justifies the EU’s narrative on values and democracy as being perceived as ‘moralised, preaching and paternalistic’ using the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism. It is precisely its constitutive narrative of the EU as a ‘post-war peace project’, as Michel highlights, that gives the EU this sense of a ‘special responsibility’ to promote its values around the world, such as democracy and human dignity.

Moreover, this morally superior self-understanding that is afforded by the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism is also especially clear in a now infamous speech made by Josep Borrell to the European Diplomatic Academy:

“Yes, Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build – the three things together.” (Borrell, 30)

Here, not only does the metaphor of the EU as a ‘garden’, but the very claim that the EU represents the ‘best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion’ that humankind has been able to build is a particularly stark example of the myth of exceptionalism being used to construct a utopian image of the EU, and in doing so bestowing upon it a strong sense of (moral) superiority. What is interesting is that Borrell repeats this claim in an earlier speech at the European Parliament Plenary in April 2022 (Borrell, 12). This construction of the EU as some form of ‘utopia’ is also engaged in by Charles Michel who states that:

“A peaceful Europe, a united Europe, an increasingly strong Europe. A Europe where laws and rules protect the rights and interests of everyone. A free Europe, a Europe of solidarity. It is an innovative political project, unprecedented in history, based on dialogue, on respect and on tolerance” (Michel, 8)

Therefore, it is evident that élites analysed hold this shared idea that the EU, as a political project is unprecedented and is somewhat unique, and as a direct consequence of this, the EU has bestowed upon it a sense of superiority – directly tapping into the EU's myth of exceptionalism.

However, what especially re-enforces this sense of superiority in this speech is how the EU constructs its sense of ‘self’ against the ‘other’ of the rest of the world, for example, Borrell goes on to contrast the ‘garden’ of the EU against the rest of the world: “The rest of the world... is not exactly a garden. Most of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden.” (Borrell, 30). Borrell was criticised heavily for this comparison of the EU as a garden and the rest of the world as a jungle given its racial and neo-colonial undertones. In spite of this, for this research project this comparison is particularly revealing of how the EU constructs its ‘self’

in superior moral terms against the inferior ‘other’ of the rest of the world. However, it is important to remember that is this construction of the EU as ‘morally superior’ to the rest of the world is a direct influence of the EU’s myth of exceptionalism. It is in particular the EU’s redemption story rising from the ashes of the Second World War and renouncing violence and nationalism, with the aim of achieving peace and prosperity that gives the EU the resultant belief that it exists as “some form of higher order revelation or spiritual or otherworldly character” (Nymalm & Plagemann 2019, 14).

Now turning towards this chapters central research question, later on in Borrell’s speech is particularly revealing as to how the myth of exceptionalism is used in the process of legitimisation, namely the EU’s special responsibility to act in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Having clearly laid out the EU’s supremacy through the ‘garden’ vs. ‘jungle’ dichotomy, Borrell then turns to argue how the EU, constructed as ‘gardeners’ here, should approach the rest of the world:

“The gardeners should take of it [the jungle], but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden.

The gardeners have to go to the jungle. Europeans have to be much more engaged with the rest of the world. Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means.” (Borrell, 30).

Here, using the ‘garden’ vs. ‘jungle’ dichotomy, Borrell is engaging in a construction of the world which necessitates an EU which is more engaged and involved in global affairs. In doing so, Borrell legitimises a more missionary foreign policy for the EU which actively promotes and defends its values within the ‘jungle’. This type of exceptionalism fits accurately within Nymalm and Plagemann’s (2019, 19) understanding of globalist exceptionalism which reflects “a missionary foreign policy discourse with nonexemptionalism in questions of global politics and multilateralism”. Moreover, the myth of exceptionalism is also particularly prevalent in how the threat of the ‘jungle’ is universalised. In the claim that if the EU is not more engaged in the world ‘the rest of the world will invade us’, the threat of the ‘jungle’ is here constructed as all-encompassing with the outside world being hostile, whilst the ‘garden’ of the EU is

peaceful. As such, this speech made by Borrell is a particularly good example of how different elements of the myth of exceptionalism have been deployed by EU élites to simultaneously construct the ‘crisis’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but in doing so legitimate both the EU’s response to the crisis as well as what role the EU should play in the world as an international actor in the future.

The myth of exceptionalism also plays a significant role here in informing how the EU constructs the world around it. For example, in constructing the outside world as a ‘jungle’, this confers notions ‘danger’ and ‘threat’, in contrast to the peaceful ‘garden’ of the EU. Therefore, in this sense Borrell is constructing a world around the EU that is inherently dangerous and laden with threats, which as Holsti (2010) points out, can be attributed to the myth of exceptionalism. This construction is expressed more explicitly in Borrell’s claim that “[the Russian invasion of Ukraine] may be the moment when Europeans understand the world they live in is a dangerous one, and to confront it, they need to strengthen their Union” (Borrell, 6). Similarly, Borrell points out that “Europeans must become aware of the world we live in... We are surrounded by a circle of instability from Gibraltar to the Caucasus” (Borrell, 12).

What is interesting about this quote from Borrell is that in constructing the world as inherently dangerous, or a jungle, he simultaneously engages in the legitimization of a more proactive role for the EU in the world, in stating that it is a *necessity* for the EU to strengthen its ‘Union’ – which is particularly vague – in order to combat the inherently dangerous world the EU finds itself in. This idea of the EU needing to *do* more in the world is something that is continually emphasised by each of the three EU élites analysed. Charles Michel, for example emphasised this notion multiple times in a single speech regarding the main challenges facing Europe, that the EU needs to “exert greater influence, inspired by our values” (Michel, 8) and “engage with the whole world... with the steadfastness of our values and principles” (Michel, 8). Josep Borrell similarly claims “we need to rejuvenate ourselves, we need to expand our influence, we need to have more capabilities to defend our principles and values. We have to use all the powerful means we have to exert our influence in the world” (Borrell, 12).

7.4.1. Manichean Narratives

One way in which the EU attempts to construct itself and Ukraine as part of the same ‘European self’ is through the use of ‘Manichean narratives’. At a basic level, these narratives construct issues in morally dichotomous terms, i.e., ‘good’ vs. ‘evil’ (McCracken 2003). What makes the use of Manichean narratives particularly important for this research project is that it is key characteristic of the myth of exceptionalism (Kennedy 2013; McCracken 2003; Holsti 2010). Manichean narratives are important in re-affirming a sense of ‘self’ through its construction against another, however, it is particularly the moral superiority that is constructed as a result of Manichean narratives, which makes them an integral part of myth of exceptionalism. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin, and Russia more broadly, are constructed by EU elites as the direct antithesis to ‘Europe’, particularly through values. This is best demonstrated early in on the conflict, whereby during a Speech at the European Parliament in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Ursula von der Leyen stated:

“Let me quote the editorial of one Ukrainian newspaper, the Kyiv Independent, published just hours before the invasion began: ‘This is not just about Ukraine. It is a clash of two worlds, two polar sets of values.’ They are so right. This is a clash between the rule of law and the rule of the gun; between democracies and autocracies; between a rules-based order and a world of naked aggression.” (von der Leyen, 6)

This instance can be seen as a clear example of the use of Manichean narratives to construct the ‘crisis’ of the invasion, with ‘democracy’ and ‘the EU’ being constructed as ‘good’ and ‘autocracy’ and ‘Russia’, being constructed as ‘evil’. Josep Borrell similarly constructs the crisis in Manichean terms where he describes Russia as being part of “the forces of evil, those forces that strive to continue using physical violence as a way to resolve conflicts” (Borrell, 6). Therefore, a key construction of the war is as “a confrontation between us, democracies, people who believe in freedom... with autocratic regimes” (Borrell, 6), and “a fight of our democracies against autocracies” (von der Leyen, 8). Moreover, in this way, this war is re-emphasised as a universal threat, indeed, for von der Leyen “democracies of the world stand together against Putin’s war” (von der Leyen, 12).

Von der Leyen makes this Manichean narrative particularly evident in her claim that “And this is a decisive moment. Will heinous devastation win or humanity prevail? Will the right of might dominate or is it the rule of law? Will there be constant conflict and struggle or a future of common prosperity?” (von der Leyen, 14).

For example, during her speech on the occasion of the International Charlamagne Prize 2023, von der Leyen claims that “Putin is destroying the work of peace that we have built together since the end of the second world war... President Putin aims to destroy the Europe, created by Charlemagne Prize winners” (von der Leyen, 46). Putin is here constructed as a threat to the very foundations of the EU through constructing him as a threat to the EU’s foundational myth

7.5. The EU’s civilising mission: the EU and Ukraine as the same ‘self’

Having looked at how the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism has provided it with not only a belief in ‘moral superiority’, but as a direct result, legitimated the belief that it has a special (moral) responsibility to promote its values more proactively, it is now necessary to discuss how precisely the EU will go about enacting such a moral responsibility.

The most glaring example of the EU projecting its special responsibility is in its approach to supporting Ukraine in response to the Russian invasion. One way in which the EU does this is through constructing the EU and Ukraine from the same subject position, or as the same ‘Self’. This is demonstrated clearly in the claim by Ursula von der Leyen that the war “will as much determine Ukraine’s future as it will the future of the Union” (von der Leyen, 9). Furthermore, what is also interesting is that von der Leyen also projects the EU’s foundational myth onto Ukraine. In her special address at the World Economic Forum in May 2022, von der Leyen proclaims that the EU “will – hand in hand – help Ukraine rise from the ashes” (von der Leyen, 21). Not only is this a direct reference to the EU’s foundational myth, where Europe emerged out of the ashes of the second world war (Della Sala 2010), but in its deployment, von der Leyen is here projecting the EU’s foundational myth onto Ukraine, and in doing so constructing Ukraine as part of the same ‘self’ as the EU.

Moreover, this construction of the EU and Ukraine as constituting the same ‘self’ is done by highlighting that Ukraine shares the same values of the EU, given how central the values within the EU’s foundational myth of exceptionalism are to its sense of ‘self’. For example, Charles Michel even constructs Zelenskyy as the embodiment of European values in his claim that “Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s face, eyes and voice the voice, face and light of freedom, hope, security, stability and European values” (Michel, 5). This is then applied more

broadly to Ukraine, when von der Leyen highlights that “if freedom have as name, its name is Ukraine. And the Ukrainian flag is today the flag of freedom” (von der Leyen, 10).

Moreover, in her Europe Day speech with President Zelenskyy, Ursula von der Leyen makes the following claim:

“Ukraine has been fighting for the ideals of Europe that we celebrate today, to create lasting unity and peace, to represent the values of freedom, diversity and humanity that Europe is built on. We should never forget that peace in Europe seemed impossible, improbably and far too distant for much of the last century. But it was achieved, despite the pain and despite the divisions of war. As we stand here today in a country senselessly attacked, some might think it is impossible, improbable or too distant to talk about a free and peaceful Ukraine in the European Union. But Europe is making the impossible possible. And so is Ukraine.” (von der Leyen, 44).

This speech can be seen as a clear example of von der Leyen constructing the EU and Ukraine as the same ‘self’. One way in which this was done was through the projection of the EU’s foundational myth onto Ukraine, by equating Europe’s recovery from the aftermath of the Second World War to that of Ukraine’s post-invasion. Moreover, through constructing the ‘crisis’ as ultimately a conflict of ‘values’, von der Leyen is able to construct Ukraine as part of a ‘EU-ropean’ ‘self’ by pointing out that Ukraine fights for essentially ‘European values’ that ‘Europe is built on’.

[\[Bridge the previous point to the following quote\]](#)

“... our continent has embarked on a journey towards democracy. We rebuilt not only our cities but also the moral foundations of Europe. We have put freedom, equality and solidarity at the heart of our societies. Our journey has continued as more and more European countries moved from dictatorship to democracy. And that journey continues today. It continues inside our countries whenever human rights and the rule of law are challenged. It continues in Ukraine and in every place where people are taking to the streets and waving the flag of our common values.” (von der Leyen, 45)

Here, the use of the EU's foundational myth is similarly used to construct the EU and Ukraine as constituting the same 'self' with Ukraine being cast as continuing the 'European journey'. What is particularly interesting about this speech is that it draws on numerous exceptionalist tropes present within the EU's foundational myth. Not only does it reference the EU's path from dictatorship to democracy – framing the EU's foundational myth in a very values-based way – but also highlights the moral superiority that the EU has obtained as a result of such transition, in the claim that this journey towards democracy, freedom, and equality was central to the rebuilding of Europe's moral foundations. Moreover, there is an implied universal aspect to this European 'journey' in that it continues "in every place where people are taking to the streets and waving the flag of our common values" (von der Leyen, 45). This is again a clear presence of the myth of exceptionalism, which here has been used to construct a world in which the EU's values are ultimately universal in nature.

In legitimising the EU's enlargement towards Ukraine, this inclusion of Ukraine as constituting the same subject position as the EU is something that is frequently used. For example, not soon after the invasion, von der Leyen claimed that:

"a people that stands up so bravely for European values is clearly part of the European family of nations. So while this terrible war rages on, we should already reflect carefully about what comes next. The membership application of Ukraine is an expression of national sovereignty, of its will and its right to choose its own destiny. Today, we have opened the pathway towards us for Ukraine. They are part of the European family." (von der Leyen, 9).

Von der Leyen legitimises further enlargement of the EU, particularly to Ukraine, through constructing Ukraine and the EU as constituting the same 'self', or from the same subject position. However, this is fundamentally done through the deployment of the EU's foundational myth of exceptionalism.

More directly, von der Leyen calls for Europe to "stand up for Ukraine. And let us literally bring light to Ukraine" (von der Leyen, 37). However, in this deployment of the 'dark' to 'light' metaphor, the EU is always constructed as the source of this 'enlightenment', this is demonstrated most clearly when von der Leyen emphasises that is essential that "we get from

today's dark reality to Ukraine's bright future inside of the European Union" (von der Leyen, 38).

This utopian image of the EU is also constructed in the repeated claim that Ukraine has a European 'dream' or 'dreams' of the EU. For example, early on in the conflict, von der Leyen states that "we are with you as you dream of Europe. Dear Volodymyr, my message today is clear: Ukraine belongs in the European family" (von der Leyen, 14). Role of 'fantasy' is significant here.

EU is constructed as Ukraine's 'destiny', especially with frequent reference to Ukraine's "path towards the European Union" (von der Leyen, 14).