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Express your Self. Expressivism and ontological security

Cornelia Baciu

Cluster for European Research, Saarland University, Germany
Email: cornelia.baciu1@uni-saarland.de

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Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated the entanglements between the security of Self and IR, yet it remains unclear how ontological security of the IR Self can be created. I argue that ontological security can be attempted through expressivist practices. Informed by perspectives from arts, law, and philosophy, I develop an analytical framework to explain how expressivism relates to ontological security. The implications of this framework for ontological security theory are that it proposes to re-define ontological security as a process of becoming secure, helping to understand how ontological security is expressively asserted. The empirical attainment of the nexus between expressivist practices and ontological security is illustrated by a case study of EU counter-measures adopted after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This article makes a twofold contribution. First, it provides a new theoretical distinction, applying expressivism to illuminate how ontological security can be creatively begot, moving beyond the long-standing dichotomy in the ontological security literature of being secure or insecure, and focusing instead on the actuation of becoming secure. Second, it illustrates various expressivist practices, showing how the EU transcended from a civilian power to becoming a global security and emerging criminal justice actor.

Keywords: European Union; expressivism; ontological security; security and norms; Ukraine

Introduction

'This is be the first time in the history that the EU will provide lethal equipment to a third country', stated EU High Representative Joseph Borell in an EU Council meeting four days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[1] This statement is par excellence an example of the expressivist transformation that the EU has undergone to ensure security on the European continent after 24 February 2022 in an imminent context of US retrenchment and regional and global uncertainty. The premiere delivery of lethal weapons, along with a series of other practices, demarcates the transcendence of the EU personifying a civilian power to an EU that is more apt of protection and ontological security creation. While expressing a new Self[2] epitomising a security actor, the EU

[1]Council of the EU, 'EU adopts new set of measures to respond to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine' (2022), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/28/eu-adopts-new-set-of-measures-to-respond-to-russia-s-military-aggression-against-ukraine/}.

[2]Resonating with accounts claiming that for a long time, ontological security studies in IR 'have tended to conflate the self with identity' and 'reduce ontological security down to a question of identity preservation' – see Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 45) – in this article I propose to study ontological security as a notion of Self that is not conflated with identity but is immanently creatively transforming. Studying the Self and identity as distinct concepts allows us to capture how agents change and how change happens. Focusing on the notion of Self allows us to overcome the dilemma of thinking about agents as possessing individual identities, instead considering them as engaging in multiple identification dynamics to pursue ontological security-seeking. Hence, self is not about ordering, but rather about becoming.

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maintained its core values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, which form the principal nucleus of the EU. In short, the EU mimetically[3] replicated parts of the old Self, while creatively metamorphosising into a security and emerging judicial actor.[4] Self is something that needs to be continuously created.[5]

This paper brings into conversation two curls of literature, expressivism and ontological security in international relations (IR), providing an empirical study of the EU response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ontological security studies (OSS) has long emphasised the puzzle of continuity and change at the IR level,[6] and a few studies have emphasised the need for a more dynamic mode of becoming,[7] claiming that a perpetual sense of existence is materialised as becoming otherwise[8] or as agency change in time.[9] Overcoming binaries of to be or not be, becoming emerges as a creative category of cognitive order formation. Yet the *creative configurations* through which the travel from being insecure to becoming ontologically secure happens still remain a black box. Tapping into this rather conceptual problem, I put forward a two-level argument. First, I argue that IR agents embrace expressivist practices aiming to surmount anxiety and worries. Second, these expressivist practices embody a constitutive force of ontological security.

Commencing from the meaning of expressivism in law, arts, and philosophy, this paper proposes expressivism as a mechanism[10] of ontological security creation in international relations. I *define* expressivism as an epistemological and aesthetic framework. It is epistemological because it provides a way of knowing. It is aesthetic because it sheds light on how meaning, form, and perception coalesce. Expressivism reveals *how things are known, experienced, and valued*. Expressivist lenses mediate the development of a reflective understanding and the awareness that materialises and becomes intelligible through action and practice, allowing us to study the dynamism of processes.

I show how ontological security is attempted to be created, through expressing a new existential state of order, mimetically stemming from the initial order and its intrinsic values. Security and identity are coupled to form security communities and nurture stability.[11] Contributing to the

[3]For a definition of mimesis in IR, see Cornelia Baciu and Klaus Kotzé, 'Mimesis and status-seeking in the global order: BRICS summit diplomacy and performative practices', *Defence Studies*, 22:4 (2022), pp. 709–35.

[4]Previous literature has problematised the parallels between physical and ontological security. See Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The embodied state: Why and how physical security matters for ontological security', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:1 (2022), pp. 159–81; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008); Filip Ejdus, 'Ontological security and the politics of memory in international relations', in Maria Mälksoo (ed.), *Handbook on the Politics of Memory* (Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023), pp. 31–45. While physical and ontological security might not overlap or may even be largely distinct from each other, they can also re-enforce each other, aligning with the definition of ontological security as a sense of continuity and order. In the empirical case examined in this article, physical security, understood as deterrence and the provision of infrastructures that enable Ukraine to succeed on the battlefield, becomes closely intertwined with European security, which is grounded in democratic norms, human rights, and freedom. In this case study, security and norms are mutually connected, and so too are physical and ontological security. I do not, however, claim that this relationship holds universality.

[5]See also Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Polity, 1991), p. 52.

[6]Trine Flockhart, 'The problem of change in constructivist theory: Ontological security seeking and agent motivation', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 799–820.

[7]Catarina 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; Jason Ralph, 'Securing the self, embracing anxiety, or nurturing growth? How the pragmatism of Dewey, James, and Mead speaks to ontological security studies', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), pp. 1–11 (p. 3).

[8]Badredine Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving (while becoming otherwise) through performative leaps of faith', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 291–305.

[9]Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90; Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Anxiety, time, and ontological security's third-image potential', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 322–36.

[10]For an extensive and attentively developed study on the interpretivist approach to mechanisms as a feature of social processes, see Stefano Guzzini, 'Power and cause', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 20:4 (2017), pp. 737–59.

[11]Ole Wæver, 'European security identities', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34:1 (1996), pp. 103–32.

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idea of turning the negative into positive and ontological insecurity into ontological security (see introduction of this special issue[12]), in this article I offer a new conceptual mechanism of ontological security creation: expressivism. I propose to understand EU counter-measures as expressivist assemblages entailing practices and their intentions. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted an ontological shock to the EU, given that several EU countries share a border with Russia and that nobody really knows how far Putin's claims for pursuing the imaginary of Ruskii Mir might actually go.

Expressivism is a constitutive force of ontological security (OS). If ontological security denotes who am I and what I want from the world, then the shock destabilises it, and the question becomes, how can an agent restore OS and its understanding of Self? Expressivity can be seen as a mechanism through which the restoration of OS may be pursued. The shock, epitomised in this case by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, no longer allows the same Self or the previous Self-understanding to unfold. Following an existential shock, agents must adopt expressivist processes that allow them to articulate a new Self in order to aim to reach stability. In other words, to regain balance, agents undergo transformation.

I make two theoretical contributions. First, I propose expressivism as a novel mechanism of ontological security creation, advancing existing work by Steele,[13] Berenskoetter,[14] and Arfi[15] as well as Kinnvall and Mitzen.[16] Second, in my framework, I conceptualise the nexus between expressivism and ontological security as becoming. I illustrate empirically two examples of expressivism: the EU expressions of becoming a security actor, and the EU expressions of becoming a criminal justice actor.

This article is organised as follows. The next section defines the notion of expressivism and unearths the nexus between expressivism and the creative production of ontological security. The third section theorises the nexus between expressivism and becoming. In this section, I also provide a brief overview of the philosophical viewpoints of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, which inspire us to better understand expressivism and its transformational ethos. This is followed by a case study of the EU expressivist practices embraced in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, showing how the EU has been stepping up to becoming a security and emerging justice actor, seeking to create a new repertoire of self. The fifth section unpacks the entanglements between expressivism, becoming, and ontological security creation, at both theoretical and empirical level, elucidating what express your self ultimately means. I conclude that agents can mimetically craft new orders. This means that orders can be re-created, imitating or stemming from the values that underpin initial orders. This journey implies a theoretical re-definition of routines, subsequently denoting a dynamic state of Self and a notion of being that incarnates a transformational category of becoming.

Ontological security and expressivism

The definition of ontological security is well known, or at least so we thought. OS has been defined as the security of Self,[17] meaning feeling secure and agentic in time and space. Routinised practices have been central to OSS since the emergence of the field in the international relations discipline, thanks to early works by Anthony Giddens, Jennifer Mitzen, and Brent Steele. According to Mitzen,[18] 'ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as a being rather than a constantly changing entity – in order to realize a sense

[12]Cornelia Baciu and Brent Steele, 'Creating ontological security: Introduction to special issue', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[13]Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relation*; Brent J. Steele, *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[14]Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'.

[15]Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving'.

[16]Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security'.

[17]Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'.

[18]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 342.

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of agency'. The attachment to routines has been influential in understanding the way ontological security can be attained. Routines can be 'comforting' because they 'reduce the number of things about which we can feel anxious', yet at the same time they reduce our freedom.[19]

Conceptualising ontological security at the IR level, I introduce expressivist lenses to the idea of OSS's traditional routinised practices, contributing new forms of conceptualisation of OS creation, and how to turn the negative into positive, or insecurity to security. Brent Steele[20] conceptualises these creative and re-creative moves as *flow* (see Brent Steele in this special issue). Irem Cihan highlights the role of aesthetics,[21] Xander Kirke foregrounds the function of myths,[22] and Pauline Heinrichs emphasises the significance of transformation.[23] Complementing this work, I propose a novel category of ontological security (re-)creation: expressivism as a mechanism that focuses on an understanding of Self that is not a routinisation of the order that it *was*, but a Self that is dynamic and forward-looking, epitomising an expressivist category of becoming that can re-discover and re-create itself.

I claim that feelings of ontological security do not emerge from walking the same path again and again, because this enterprise is always another one. This is not surprising. Given genuine changes in the threat environment, how can an *eternal return*[24] (implied by routines) to the same knowledge and the order *that it was* provide ontological security in the *is*-moment? Changes in the environment spark new anxieties, ultimately yielding updated knowledge and agency that are actually apt to address dangers and anxiety. Ontological security stems thus from the courage to walk the path, knowing that the agent is well equipped to walk this path. This is core to understanding the expressivist idea of ontological security. Feelings of security emerge not from going back to the path, but rather from the processes themselves that we go through again, even though they are new paths. Even if not necessarily focused on an outcome, approaching the assertion of the endeavour and the phenomenological experiences linked to it can have meaning that translates in perlocutions of ontological security.[25]

The equipment and manifestations enabling this reflexive mode can vary, as conditions and dangers along the path can vary. It is expressive because it enables variation of the being and of the Self, who is perpetually becoming otherwise.[26]

Expressivism as a theoretical lens illuminates the creative moves in ontological security and how ontological security can be attempted at a phenomenological level, i.e. the level of the conscious lived experience, while the *forms* of ontological security are not always constant. It is enmeshed with a reflexive mode entailing cognitive and affective thoughts, as well as with the anticipation of the consequences in time. Knowing and being convinced that one is well equipped with the necessary means to overcome dangers translates into an agent *feeling ontologically secure*. Thus, the dialectical mode of Self is genuinely entangled with rather 'flexible' routines, learning, and reflexivity.[27]

[19] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 61.

[20] Brent Steele, 'Re-creating ontological security: Flow and optimal experience', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[21] Irem Cihan, 'Aesthetics of ontological security', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[22] Xander Kirke, 'Political myth and the generation of ontological security: The case of UK responses to terrorism', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[23] Pauline Heinrichs, 'Climate change and the production of ontological security: Towards transformative politics, reflexivity and emotive agency', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[24] For a definition of the concept of eternal return, or eternal recurrence, see Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 544–50.

[25] Expressing emotions can embody an illocutionary mode, while ontological security can be perlocutionary produced; see Cornelia Baciu, 'Expressing emotions and ontological security in international organizations', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 21:1 (2026), pp. 126–40.

[26] Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving'.

[27] Cf. Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 364.

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Expressivism as becoming

To instantiate the nexus between practices and ontological security creation, I introduce the notion of expressivism and explain its conceptual assemblage in the following. I define expressivism as an epistemological and simultaneously aesthetic category that helps us to understand how agency is created – in other words, how something is *known, experienced, and valued*.

Expressivism is a multi-disciplinary concept. In linguistics, that is, in relation to language and how this relates to the world, renowned expressivist scholar Huw Price highlights the 'role of assertoric language', distinguishing between 'descriptive and non-descriptive uses of declarative utterances'.[28] Yet expressivism does not only work at the level of language, and this is what significantly distinguishes expressivism from the debate on narratives in IR.[29] Expressivism is not only communicating narratives but also about practices. This is demonstrated by the understanding of expressivism in law, which has emerged as a self-standing theory already after the Second World War, in the context of the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals. In this context, expressivism is understood as a performative articulation of a moral reaction to a certain political behaviour, embodying a reflexive moral commitment or attitude.[30] Through expressivist practices, in courts, the guilt of the perpetrator is re-created through evidence, its responsibility materialised and thus accounted for. Theoretically, the perpetrator could be declared guilty through a letter sent home, yet the public hearings expressively contribute to the internalisation of the deeds through the re-creation of the entire plot. Notwithstanding, expressivism in law is genuinely associated with prosecution, and I have demonstrated elsewhere that expressivism can work outside the courtroom, in norm articulation and re-creation.[31]

In this article I further expound a theory of expressivism in IR, applying its *re-creation logic* in the case of ontological security, and show that expressivism is a constitutive process of OS. Following a shock that destabilises agents' OS, expressivist processes allow actors to re-reach stability. While the shock no longer permits the respective stage, or a return to the old stage, in order to regain balance, agents undergo transformation. To better understand expressivism's transformational ethos, I borrow ideas from expressivism in arts (sometimes called expressionism) and philosophy, from which both expressivist approaches in law and linguistics are ultimately inspired. A re-engagement with the original expressionist ideas in arts and philosophy allows us to re-activate thoughts that have remained previously unconsidered or overlooked.

In arts, expressivism emerged in the early twentieth century in Germany and Austria – where it is often referred to as expressionism – as an artistic reaction to Impressionism[32] and Wilheminism. From the Latin *expressio*, expressivism refers to the idea of expressing something of particular intensity. Expressionism as a new stream in the arts rapidly gained influence across Europe and even further afield, particularly following the release and multilingual translation of Matisse's *Notes of a Painter*.[33] Initially inspired by Nietzsche's phrase 'God is dead',[34] in the context of industrialisation and renewal, expressivism in the arts (expressionism) was a reaction to an existential crisis, a crisis of meaning, as depicted in paintings by Munch, Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse, or Van Gogh, along with many others. Expressionism has at its core the idea of 'agency enacted by artistic practice', being based on a belief that 'materials and objects manipulated by artists can themselves

[28] Huw Price, *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 22. See also Matthew Simpson, 'What is global expressivism?', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 70:278 (2020), pp. 140–61, https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqz033.

[29] Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

[30] Carsten Stahn, *Justice as Message: Expressivist Foundations of International Criminal Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[31] Cornelia Baciu, 'Norm expressivism and punishment in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, online first, pp. 1–21.

[32] Ashley Bassie, *Expressionism* (Parkstone International, 2008), p. 83.

[33] Colin Rhodes, *Expressionism* (Thames & Hudson, 2025), p. 73.

[34] Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: or the Joyful Wisdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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possess a fundamental ability to communicate directly with viewers'.[35] According to Rhodes,[36] 'expressionism is always phenomenological, stemming from the profoundly individual experience of the creator of the work, and relying for its reception on a similarly direct, and relatively unmediated psychological emotional experience on the part of viewers'.

An example of *expressionism's power to create agency* is Kandinsky's colour study, illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts a number of concentric circles with different colours.

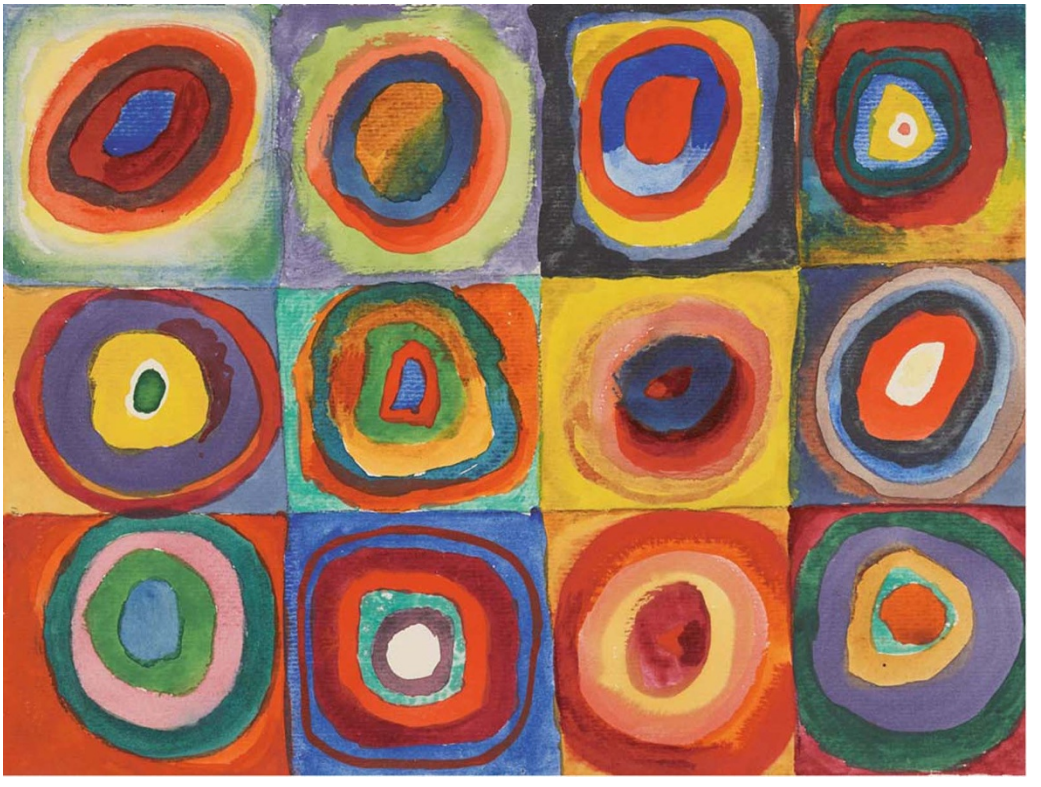


Figure 1. Colour study – square with concentric circles, Wassily Kandinsky, 1913 (Wassily Kandinsky, Farbstudie – Quadrate mit konzentrischen Ringen, 1913, Aquarell, Gouache, Kreide, 23.9 cm x 31.5 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Gabriele Münter Stiftung 1957, https://www.lenbachhaus.de/en/digital/collection-online/detail/farbstudie-quadrate-mit-konzentrischen-ringen-30017624). Credit: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Gabriele Münter Stiftung 1957.

The main attribute of this painting is that it shows how the same colours can change their effects and appearance depending on the neighbouring colour, a phenomenon called synaesthesia. Like in music, where the same musical notes put in a different order can enable different acoustic pronouncements, neighbouring colours can enable different perspectives.[37]

In many countries, expressivist paintings denote a desire to disentangle from the past and break free from old forces, such as the Chinese *Portrait of Miss L* (1929) by Guan Zilan, the Dutch *Bohemian Interior* (1925) by Jan Wieger, or the Danish *Fantasy II* (1943) by Carl-Henning Pedersen, which are entangled with themes of becoming epitomised by modernism, community, renewal, avant-gardist new visions, or fantasy.

[35] Rhodes, *Expressionism*, p. 7.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Echo Point Books & Media, 2020).

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The Self and becoming constitute inherent attributes of expressionism. Bassie[38] notes that 'a potent aspect of expressionism was the conviction, held by its creators, that their endeavours were carrying art into a wholly new realm of experience' and that 'expressionists sought an intimate, subjective, and deeply resonant communication between the artist and the viewer'. Intermediating the relationship between the Self and the viewer, expressionist paintings often depict strong emotions, as exemplified by Eduard Munch's *The Scream* – which is often referred to as a visual metaphor of ontological insecurity due to its emphasis on anxiety.

To further elucidate expressivism's creative and re-creative potential for ontological security, I moot the aporia between freedom and routines, interweaving Kierkegaardian–Nietzschean ideas further in this section. It is the regaining of the freedom and attenuation of anxiety towards which practices' expressive intent is focused. Agents immanently discover and re-discover new ways of becoming secure.

A notion of being as a transcendental becoming allots a motional, vibrant, and creative dimension in which the agent *travels* to another ontological state. During this journey, agents liminally transcend from one state of existence to another, again and again. Movements are understood as transitions or 'intermediaries between two existences'.[39] The creative element emerges through the orientation towards the *forthcoming* existential point.

This hopeful stance is captured by Kierkegaard's concept of repetition (in Danish *gjentagelsen*). Speaking to the example of walking the same path that I mentioned in the introduction, repetition is understood not as recollection but rather as a future projection.[40] The hopeful projection of a future ontological state establishes knowledge and cognition within a process of becoming. Attaining ontological security as becoming is sought through projection of hope, trust, experience, and choice for a certain future purpose (even though we do not know whether this outcome will be achieved or not), rather than through a backwards *return* to a previous state (a fixed being). Notwithstanding, becoming is entangled with the core values of the old Self.

Opposing the idea of repetition as a state of anamnesis due to its lack of freedom, it is this freedom that 'makes the transition from potentiality to actuality a real event, a genuine movement, a qualitative change', and it is the inner kinetic force that actuates power[41] and thus agency.

Mirroring Kirkegaard's pondering, Nietzsche proposes to understand becoming as a *creative will to power* breaking from the past condition.[42] In the preface of his book *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche claims that only as an aesthetic category is existence justified. An aesthetic category here means permanent re-creation. Agents, especially at the IR level, perpetually express their Self, undergoing endless transformations. As Nietzsche puts it:

> The world, even if it is no longer a god, is still supposed to be capable of the divine power of *creation*, the power of infinite transformations; it is supposed to consciously prevent itself from *returning* to any of its old forms; it is supposed to possess not only the intention but the *means* of avoiding any repetition.[43]

Hence, while ontological security as an ideal condition might never be achievable and might remain only at the level of desire, according to Nietzsche, to embrace freedom, agents must avoid repetition and a return to previous states. The return to previous states in the belief that this might enable stability would actually constrain agents, as they would only have the choice to return, to a condition that might or might be not sufficient for coping with anxiety and challenges. Starting from the sober observation that God, which hitherto (especially in Kantian metaphysics) was believed

[38]Bassie, *Expressionism*, p. 83.

[39]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (Penguin Classics, 1970).

[40]Cf. Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 2; see Søren Kierkegaard, *Die Wiederholung* (Gütersloher Verlag, 1991).

[41]Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, p. 16.

[42]Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Anaconda, 2026); Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

[43]Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 546, 550.

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to be the imminent source of stability and creativity, is 'dead', the faith of agents' stability is in their own hands, posits Nietzsche. To be agentic and transcend anxiety or fear, actors must embrace the power of creation and infinite transformations.

To summarise, expressivism expounds the creative power of ontological security. I propose to re-define ontological security as a *condition of Self re-creation*, through an expressivism mechanism personifying a transformational journey of becoming, instead of an *eternal return to a previous state*.

The next section empirically unpacks expressivist practices and how they enable ontological security creation, applying a case study of EU responses and counter-measures in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Case study: EU counter-measures following Russia's invasion of Ukraine

The EU's predisposition to crises and the anticipated effect on ontological security and security identities has been long penned in the literature.[44] The idea of studying international responses and normative dynamics in relation to the Russian war in Ukraine is not new, with notable studies by Gholiagha and Sienknecht,[45] Bosse,[46] Heller,[47] and Lupovic[48] theorising collective actor's behaviour in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Extending this literature, I apply expressivist–ontological security lenses to take stock of EU's responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is the type of authority built upon relational axes of social interaction that form expressivism's intermediation of ontological security creation. I explore the EU moves towards becoming a security and emerging criminal justice actor, unpacking how the EU expressed its (new) Self after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, tracing and hermeneutically interpreting[49] the practices and the accompanying discourses.

Being ontologically secure, becoming ontologically secure

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU can be interpreted as making the leap from a once-civilian power to *becoming* a global security actor and emerging criminal justice actor. In the following, I present how the EU sought to express its new Self, as, first, a security and defence actor and, second, an emerging criminal justice actor, emphasising how this is transformational.

EU becoming a security and defence actor

First, what shows the transcendence towards becoming a security and defence actor is that, for the first time in its history, the EU transferred lethal equipment to a third country, which had not happened before. The military assistance measures under the European Peace Facility (EPF) in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine included, for the first time, the delivery of lethal weapons: 'assistance measures, worth in total EUR 500 000 000, will finance the provision of

[44]Catarina Kinnvall, Ian James Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Introduction to 2018 special issue of European security: "Ontological (in)security in the European Union"', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018); Wæver, 'European security identities'.

[45]Sassan Gholiagha and Mitja Sienknecht, 'Between (ir)responsibility and (in)appropriateness: Conceptualizing norm-related state behaviour in the Russian war against Ukraine', *Global Constitutionalism*,13:2 (2024), pp. 1–22.

[46]Giselle Bosse, 'The EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Invoking norms and values in times of fundamental rupture', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62:5 (2024), pp. 1222–38.

[47]Kevin J. Heller, 'Options for prosecuting Russian aggression against Ukraine: A critical analysis', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 26:1 (2024), pp. 1–24.

[48]Amir Lupovici, 'Securitization, deterrence, and extended deterrence by denial: The war in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 20:4 (2024), pp. 1–24.

[49]Fo an ample definition of the interpretative-hermeneutic approach, see Cornelia Baciu and Anders Wivel, 'Junior allies in wars of choice: Party politics and role conceptions in Danish and Romanian decisions on the Iraq war', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:2 (2024), pp. 241–62.

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equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, including – for the first time – lethal equipment'.[50] As the EU High Representative expressed this historical move:

> Following the request by Foreign Affairs Minister of Ukraine, we are immediately responding by mobilising the European Peace Facility for two emergency assistance measures to finance the supply of lethal and non-lethal material to the Ukrainian army. This is the first time in history that the EU will be providing lethal equipment to a third country. We are doing everything we can to support Ukraine, we stand by the Ukrainian people.[51]

This groundbreaking decision marks a clear departure from a once-civilian power. In this new condition, the EU finds itself in a position to speak with a stronger voice, a sine qua non condition for offering safety and protection. EU demanded Russia to immediately cease its military actions, unconditionally withdraw all forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine and fully respect 'Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence within its internationally recognised borders', calling on 'Russia and Russia-backed armed formations to respect international humanitarian law and stop their disinformation campaign and cyber-attacks'.[52]

What further marks a considerable transformative point is the support of member states. The EPF is an off-budget mechanism to which all EU member states contribute based on their national income. Between 2022 and 2024, seven support packages were allocated to Ukraine through the EPF. On 18 March 2024, the Council allocated 5 billion EUR to support the Ukraine military, establishing a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund that allows delivery by the EU of both lethal and non-lethal military equipment and training, enhancing the EU's contribution though more effective operational support to Ukraine, and complementing the bilateral initiatives of EU member states, along with prioritising joint procurement. These packages included financing 'both the provision of equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian Armed Forces by EU Member States, including personal protective equipment, first aid kits and fuel, as well as military equipment designed to deliver lethal force for defensive purposes'.[53]

However, EU assistance to Ukraine and its transformational becoming consisted of not only joint funding or procurement but also historical mobilisation to provide weapons to a country in conflict, through the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), which was launched on 15 November 2022, partially under the EPF.

The EUMAM Ukraine marks a different role in comparison to the EU's previous military missions, with the EU becoming and experiencing itself otherwise.[54] It was the first time when the EU provided military assistance in an active and ongoing war zone.[55] Previous military missions entailed military training support in fragile or post-conflict states, such as the EUFOR in the Central African Republic[56] to stabilise the capital, Bangui, after internal conflict, or EUFOR Concordia in North Macedonia, which was the EU's first military operation, taking over NATO's Allied Harmony peacekeeping mission[57] in post-conflict Macedonia. The number of trained military personnel is much larger than in previous missions, with 60,000 soldiers being trained under

[50] Council of the EU, 'EU adopts new set of measures'.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Council of the EU, 'EU support to Ukraine' (2022); Council of the EU, 'EU support to Ukraine: Council agrees on third tranche of support under the European Peace Facility for total €1.5 billion' (2022), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/13/eu-support-to-ukraine-council-agrees-on-third-tranche-of-support-under-the-european-peace-facility-for-total-15-billion/}.

[54] See Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving'; Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'.

[55] The training modules are offered outside Ukraine.

[56] EEAS, 'EUFOR RCA', (archived 1 January 2015), available at: {https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/eufor-rca/index_en.htm}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[57] Government of Canada, 'EUFOR – Operation CONCORDIA', available at: {https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/past-operations/europe/fusion.html}, accessed 21 May 2025. The EU CONCORDIA took over responsibility for the NATO Allied Harmony peacekeeping operation, while it continued to be

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EUMAM Ukraine,[58] in comparison to 20,000 soldiers under EUTM Mali or 7,000 soldiers under EUTM Central African Republic. Due to the active war zone context, all training modules are offered outside Ukraine, and twenty-four EU member states have hitherto contributed.[59]

Security and defence are intergovernmental policy dossiers among EU policy areas that require consensus in the Council for any collective decision, and it is remarkable how often consensus was achieved. For example, in May 2022, in a historical vote, aligned with what it called a *Zeitenwende*, Germany's parliament agreed, with 586 votes in favour (and only 100 against), to the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine.[60] In February 2024, following an eleven-hour round of negotiations, the EU agreed to a 50 billion Euro package for Ukraine, after a small group of leaders persuaded Viktor Orbán to withdraw his veto.[61] Although it was not always easy, it was for the first time since Brexit that the EU member states showed so much agreement on security matters.

The EU's prompt journey towards becoming a security and defence actor to provide ontological security was emphasised by EU High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Borrell at a speech in 2024, which emphasised Germany's successive 'noes' to providing heavy weapons to Ukraine, followed by the *Zeitenwende* as a transformational, path-breaking point:

> At the beginning, we were talking about providing helmets, and now we are providing F-16 [fighter jets]. It is a long way between one thing and another. We went through this long way because Ukrainians have proved to be able to resist. Remember that in 2014, [Angela] Merkel did not want to support Ukraine in front of Russia's invasion of Crimea. At that time the answer was 'no'.[62]

Moreover, the EU has marked the transition to becoming a security and defence actor through a series of unprecedented reforms in ammunition production. The EU implemented several changes in its ammunition production legislation. On 7 July 2023, a provisional agreement was reached between the Council and the European Parliament on the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), to boost the production of ammunition and missiles in the EU, through a new instrument, the Ramp-Up Fund.[63]

Ontological security as the long-term protection of citizens was the core of the EU's new actions in the security domain. This was illustrated, for example, by Margarita Robles, Spanish minister of defence, who declared:

supported by NATO under the Berlin Plus arrangement between NATO and the EU. See NATO, 'Relations with the European Union' (2025), available at: {https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49217.htm}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[58] EEAS, 'European Union Military Assistance Mission: Ukraine' (September 2024), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/2024-EUMAMUkraine-Oct2024.pdf}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[59] EEAS, 'EUMAM-Ukraine', available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine_en}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[60] Atlantic Council, 'Finally! German MPs back heavy weapons for Ukraine in historic vote' (2022), available at: {https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/finally-german-mps-back-heavy-weapons-for-ukraine-in-historic-vote/}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[61] Politico, 'EU approves €50B Ukraine aid as Viktor Orbán folds' (2024), available at: {https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-gets-eu-aid-as-orban-folds/}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[62] EEAS, 'United Kingdom: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at Oxford University about the world confronted by wars' (2024), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/united-kingdom-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-oxford-university-about-world_en}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[63] Council of the EU, 'ASAP: Council and European Parliament strike a deal on boosting the production of ammunition and missiles in the EU' (2023), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/07/asap-council-and-european-parliament-strike-a-deal-on-boosting-the-production-of-ammunition-and-missiles-in-the-eu/}, accessed 28 November 2025. For an overview of the EU overall financial assistance to Ukraine, see Lukas Spielberger and Moritz Rehm, 'Institutional foundations of financial statecraft: EU assistance to Ukraine and beyond', *Review of International Political Economy*, online first, pp. 1–31.

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> Thanks to today's record time agreement on ASAP the EU will bolster and speed up Europe's own production of ammunition and missiles. This is yet another proof of the EU's unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine, strengthening the EU's defence technological and industrial base, and ultimately *ensuring the long term security and defence of EU citizens*.[64]

In her speech, Robles underscored the protection function of the reforms in ammunition production by stressing that this striking step will fortify the EU's defence base and ensure security, defence, and thus protection of EU citizens in the long-run. Following this, on 20 July 2023, the Council actually adopted ASAP, providing a financial envelope of 500 million EUR for the period July 2023–June 2025 'to support common procurement to replenish stocks, particularly in light of the support provided to Ukraine' and ramp up the Union's 'manufacturing capacities in the area of ground-to-ground and artillery ammunition as well as missiles'.[65]

By the end of 2025, Europe aimed to produce 2 million artillery shells annually with support from the ASAP initiative, and the EU Commission approved thirty-one projects to enhance ammunition production across five areas, backed by 513 million EUR from EU and Norwegian funds.[66] In addition, the 310 million EUR Work Programme under the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) – established just a few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the EU meeting at Versailles – will fund joint EU procurement of ammunition, air and missile defence, and modern military equipment to address urgent defence needs and replenish stockpiles, in coordination with member states. Twelve proposals were submitted in response to the call for proposals in the category of ammunition, like small arms, artillery ammunition, mortars, rockets, air and missile defence and platforms, and the replacement of legacy systems as of May 2025.[67]

The ASAP arms procurement reform initiatives, along EDIRPA, reflect a fundamental paradigm shift in the EU, marking a metamorphosis from being a soft, civilian-oriented actor to becoming one wanting to take additional responsibility for defence and sovereignty in response to evolving security threats.

EU becoming a criminal justice actor

A further plan through which the EU marked the transition to a more agentic actor was through becoming an emerging criminal justice actor. The EU has always paid heed to the rules-based order, but in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it adopted a series of sui generis criminal justice counter-measures, different than the previous ones, for example, those in Kosovo (to which I will return at the end of this section).

The EU's expressivist measures in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine were unprecedented and elevated the EU criminal justice agency, metamorphosising it into an emerging global criminal justice actor. First, the EU's strong support for investigation into war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Ukraine was substantive. In December 2022, the Council adopted 18 billion EUR assistance to Ukraine to enable close judicial cooperation between Ukraine and the International Criminal Court (ICC), calling on Ukraine to adhere the Rome Statue and supporting the Ukrainian prosecutor general's office, while also calling for the European Commission to

[64]Council of the EU, 'ASAP' (emphasis added).

[65]European Union, 'Regulation (EU) 2023/1525 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 July 2023 on supporting ammunition production (ASAP): PE/46/2023/REV/1' (2023), available at: {https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/1525/oj}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[66]European Commission, 'The Commission allocates €500 million to ramp up ammunition production, out of a total of €2 billion to strengthen EU's defence industry' (March 2024), available at: {https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/around-eu2-billion-strengthen-eus-defence-industry-readiness-including-ramp-ammunition-production-2-2024-03-15_en}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[67]European Commission, 'EDIRPA: Procuring together defence capabilities', available at: {https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edirpa-addressing-capability-gaps_en}, accessed 21 May 2025.

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continue evidence gathering to assist national and international investigation.[68] The EU backed the ICC not only politically and financially but also through intelligence sharing and most notably through establishing the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) and other mechanisms coordinated by Eurojust, which involved Ukraine, EU states, and the ICC.[69]

Second, it was the first time when Eurojust coordinated multinational war crimes probes involving the ICC. On 25 May 2022, the Council adopted new rules to empower Eurojust to 'store and preserve evidence relating to war crimes, including satellite images, photographs, videos, audio recordings, DNA profiles and fingerprints' and 'process and analyse this evidence, in close cooperation with Europol, and share the information with the relevant national and international judicial authorities, including the International Criminal Court'.[70] The text was adopted on 30 May 2022 as Regulation (EU) 2022/838 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2022, amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1727 with regard to the preservation, analysis, and storage at Eurojust of evidence relating to genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and related criminal acts and published in the official journal.[71] Traditionally, EU criminal justice targeted trafficking or terrorism, and to a lesser extent international humanitarian law. The EU desire for and commitment to this new role was demonstrated by the enlargement of Eurojust's mandate to allow the storing and analysis of evidence of international crimes under the Core International Crime Evidence Database (CICED) and to support collaboration with the ICC and Europol.

Third, EU backing for a special tribunal for the crime of aggression was prominent, and it was the first time when the EU had so proactively supported setting up a bespoke international tribunal for high-level crimes, marking a major step in EU criminal justice diplomacy. Importantly, the EU publicly supported efforts to establish a special tribunal to prosecute Russian leadership for the crime of aggression, providing expertise, political support, funding, and preparatory work for this tribunal,[72] as highlighted by JIT, CICED, and the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine (IPCA) activities. The special tribunal on aggression against Ukraine has eventually materialised. On 9 May 2025, as a result of negotiations, a core group of approximately forty countries announced support for a special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, which is now set to be established within the framework of the Council of Europe.[73]

Fourth, the level of sanctions enforcement and efforts for circumvention avoidance was also remarkable. With the 2022 directive to criminalise sanctions and evasion of counter-measures, the EU established an unparalleled level of harmonised EU criminal law in the field of sanctions enforcement. On 28 November 2022, the Council unanimously decided to include the violation of restrictive measures in the list of EU crimes under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European

[68]EU Council, 'Council adopts €18 billion assistance to Ukraine', available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/10/council-adopts-18-billion-assistance-to-ukraine/}, accessed 1 December 2025.

[69]European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, 'Joint investigation team into alleged crimes committed in Ukraine', available at: {https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/joint-investigation-team-alleged-crimes-committed-ukraine}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[70]EU Council, 'Eurojust: Council adopts new rules allowing the agency to preserve evidence of war crimes', available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/25/eurojust-le-conseil-adopte-de-nouvelles-regles-permettant-a-l-agence-de-conserver-des-preuves-de-crimes-de-guerre/}, accessed 1 December 2025.

[71]European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, 'Regulation (EU) 2022/838 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2022' (2022), available at: {https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/document/regulation-eu-2022838-european-parliament-and-council-30-may-2022}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[72]European Commission, 'International coalition agrees on the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine' (2025), available at: {https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/international-coalition-agrees-establishment-special-tribunal-crime-aggression-against-ukraine-2025-05-09_en}, accessed 22 May 2025.

[73]Janet H. Anderson, 'What to make of the announced tribunal for the crime of aggression?', JusticeInfo.net (2025), available at: {https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/145193-what-to-make-of-the-announced-tribunal-for-the-crime-of-aggression.html}, accessed 17 July 2026.

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Union.[74] EU member states were due to transpose the enforcement directive into national law until 20 May 2025.[75] New EU rules to standardise criminal offences and penalties for violating EU sanctions across all member states entered into force on 19 May 2024.[76]

In conclusion, all these steps marked a major transformation of the EU's role as a justice actor on the global stage through an unprecedented level of scope and ambition, marking a shift from internal crime control to external accountability by supporting war crime prosecution, expanding Eurojust's role, criminalising sanctions evasion, and backing the creation of an international tribunal.

Differently than its previous criminal justice actions in Kosovo, where the EU deployed EULEX, a field-based rule of law mission focused on capacity building, the response to Ukraine marked a different type of reaction that is more legal-coordination intense, ICC linked, and international through initiatives such as JIT, CICED, or IPCA – which have been pivotal for the establishment of the special tribunal for Ukraine.

Re-creating a new repertoire of self after an ontological shock

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted an ontological shock for the EU, given that many EU countries share a border with Russia, or with Ukraine, and considering the unknown of Putin's imaginary of Ruskii Miir. As the president of the European Council, António Costa, evidently put it during his Munich Security Conference 2025 speech: 'Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine shook Europe's security architecture to the core.'[77] The invasion destabilised the EU's previous Self-understanding as mainly a *civilian* and *normative* power,[78] making it clear that the pursuit of routinised practices through a return to the same existence was no longer possible. The invasion destabilised the existing equilibrium, yielding the EU to express a new Self.

Expressivist practices – such as publicly declaring the provision of lethal weapons, adopting sanctions, or framing the war as an assault on European values – allowed the EU to articulate a new state of order and project a coherent sense of *who it is* and *what it stands for*. Expressivism – operationalised as performative practices, including speech acts, through which the Self is expressed and articulated – provides a mechanism generating continuity through transformation and restoring a sense of Self in a moment of uncertainty, very similar to dynamics of expressionism in arts.

The parallels to EU's new expressions of Self and expressionism in the arts are evident. Like expressionism in the arts, which was a reaction to an existential crisis, the EU's articulations of Self, through the newly established institutional framework in both the security and criminal justice domains, were also a reaction to an ontological crisis. As former EU High Representative Josep Borrell clearly formulated during a speech at the University of Oxford University 2024: 'L'Europe peut mourir, nous venons d'entendre. (…) Russia [is] considered as the most existential threat to Europe. Maybe not everybody in the European Council agrees with that, but the majority is behind this idea.'[79] Through re-using Macron's expressive and existential allusion from his 2024 Sorbonne

[74]Council of the EU, 'Sanctions: Council adds the violation of restrictive measures to the list of EU crimes' (2022), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/28/sanctions-council-adds-the-violation-of-restrictive-measures-to-the-list-of-eu-crimes/}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[75]European Commission, 'New EU rules criminalizing the violation of EU sanctions enter into force' (2024), available at: {https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-rules-criminalising-violation-eu-sanctions-enter-force-2024-05-17_en}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[76]European Commission, 'Ukraine: The Commission proposes rules on freezing and confiscating assets of oligarchs violating restrictive measures and of criminals' (2022), available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3264}, accessed 21 May 2025.

[77]Council of the EU, '"No lasting peace without Ukraine and without the EU" – Speech by President Costa at the Munich Security Conference 2025' (2025), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/02/15/speech-by-president-antonio-costa-at-the-munich-security-conference-2025/pdf}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[78]Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe reconsidered: Beyond the crossroads', *Journal of European Public Policy,* 13:2 (2006), pp. 182–99.

[79]EEAS, 'United Kingdom: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell'.

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speech 'L'Europe peut mourir, nous venons d'entendre' (Europe can die, we have just heard), Borell emphasises the EU's active response to the need for action, providing a counterfactual to the ontological shock. That this was an existential shock to Europe has been emphasised on numerous occasions, as for example in the HR/VP blog in April 2024: 'At a time when American involvement in Europe is becoming less certain, this war poses an existential threat to the EU. If Putin manages to destroy the independence of Ukraine, he will not stop there.'[80]

The war as an existential threat to Europe has been emphasised by the HR/VP but also the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola,[81] the president of the European Council, Charles Michel,[82] and the new HR/VP, Maja Kallas, who stated that 'This is a heavily militarised country that presents an existential threat to us all' and that 'Russia poses an existential threat to our security today, tomorrow'.[83]

Not only speeches but also practices denote a new vision of the EU Self. They aim to re-create the EU Self and articulate a much stronger self than before, as it was highlighted by the president of the European Council in a speech in 2023: 'Are we content with a European Union that only manages crises? Or do we want to be a leading global actor that shapes the future?', adding that 'To be stronger and safer, the EU needs to reinforce our bonds'.[84]

In his speech at the European Defence Agency annual conference in 2023, Michel explicitly framed the defence push as part of a new European Defence Union: 'These collective decisions have launched our union into a new era' and 'our European awakening is just beginning to take shape'.[85] Michel argued that the Russian aggression triggered a 'historic decision' and that now 'we must build on this momentum'.[86]

In a speech in April 2024, HR/VP Josep Borrell reflected on Europe's transformation, stating that 'Europe is in danger' and that 'we have to build our common defence capacity':

> Inside NATO we have to build a strong European pillar (…) the European project will be very much related with building a common security and defence. It does not mean saying that the war is imminent and is going to start tomorrow. But we need to make EU citizens to understand that the US umbrella that has protected us during the Cold War and after, may not stay open all the time.[87]

[80]EEAS, 'Three work strands to better protect Europe' (2024), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/three-work-strands-better-protect-europe_en}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[81]European Parliament, 'Russia's war on Ukraine: Speeches by Ukraine's president to the European parliament and national parliaments' (2022), available at: {https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729354/EPRS_BRI(2022)729354_EN.pdf}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[82]European Council, 'Speech by President Charles Michel at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2023' (2023), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/06/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-eu-ambassadors-conference-2023/}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[83]EEAS, 'Defence: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the Annual Conference of the European Defence Agency' (2025), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/defence-speech-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-annual-conference-european-defence_en}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[84]European Council, 'Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum' (2023), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[85]European Council, '"A European defence for our geopolitical Union": speech by President Charles Michel at the EDA annual conference', (2023), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/30/a-european-defence-for-our-geopolitical-union-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-eda-annual-conference}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[86]Ibid.

[87]EEAS, 'Defense: Speech by High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell at Forum Europa' (2024), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/defense-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-forum-europa_en}, accessed 28 November 2025.

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This shows that the EU response to the war is not only about responding to immediate war but also creating a structurally stronger, strategically coherent Europe, especially in the context of US restraint.

These speeches express a normative re-framing of the EU. The EU's previous identity as a civilian power managing crises is being challenged by the Russian aggression (and Trump's latest US policy). Michel's language signals a reconstruction of European Self from a reactive actor to a strategic, autonomous, globally capable Union. The 'European awakening' and 'new era'[88] phrasing denotes the will of re-creation of the EU's Self, responding to ontological insecurity epitomised by the Russian invasion, on the one side, and the ambivalent policy of the United States, on the other.

Also, in the criminal justice domain, the invasion marked a moment of new vision and transformation, with numerous joint actions for ending Russia's impunity and enabling steps for accountability. At an event in December 2022, Borrell spoke of 'atrocities and war crimes' that 'cannot and will not go unpunished'.[89] He described three strands of action: backing the ICC, supporting Ukraine's prosecutors, and working with international partners to document and prosecute war crimes.[90] Moreover, in a keynote at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit in 2025, Kaja Kallas highlighted how the EU is filling a void in international criminal justice, highlighting accountability as core: 'while others withdraw from responsibilities to uphold international law, the EU never will'.[91]

The re-framing of the EU Self and the expression of a new vision and renewal after February 2022 constituted a turning point and a transformative moment in the EU renewal. The EU after the full-scale invasion became fundamentally different, with historical decisions being made and institutionalised in the field of security and defence, as well as criminal justice. In this process of re-creation, the EU seeks to re-establish stability not by maintaining or returning to its traditional state of civilian-power Europe but instead by expressing and re-creating its Self. This re-creation process takes the shape of an expressivism mechanism incarnated by becoming a security and justice actor.

Becoming as expression: How agency is recognised and *valued*

The EU's expression of its new Self has been validated through active support and recognition both internally, by member states, and externally, by significant Others.

Internally, member states actively valued the EU initiatives and supported the weapons delivery packages, which were agreed by the heads of states in the Council or in the Foreign Affairs Committee, both requiring unanimity. When all member states agreed in repeated turns to supporting Ukrainian armed forces and delivering non-lethal and, for the first time in EU history, lethal weapons, trust relations among European society rose. The EU has managed to gain the support of non-members, such as Norway, who contributed twice in the context of military assistance to Ukraine, or the UK.

In the context of the EU response following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the level of feeling secure has increased, and the level of anxiety in EU countries declined. This was demonstrated by a longitudinal study across seventeen European countries showing a drop in well-being (due to increased worries) on the day of the invasion and recovery from it over the following weeks.[92]

[88]European Council, 'A European defence for our geopolitical union'.

[89]EEAS, 'Russia/Ukraine: Speech by High Representative Josep Borrell at the event "Joint Actions for Ending Russia's Impunity and Delivering Justice for Victims"' (2022), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/423271_fr}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[90]Ibid.

[91]EEAS, 'Kaja Kallas keynote speech: Copenhagen democracy summit in defence of democratic space' (2025), available at: {https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kaja-kallas-keynote-speech-copenhagen-democracy-summit-defence-democratic-space_en}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[92]Julian Scharbert et al., 'Psychological well-being in Europe after the outbreak of war in Ukraine', *Nature Communications*, 15:1 (2024), pp. 1–12.

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This can underscore the psychological effect that the protective function of international organisations can have. The counter-measures adopted by the EU and its partners have generated credible deterrence, with Russia not exceeding a certain redline, which alleviated anxiety levels.

Recognition of the EU's new expression of Self was also enacted through common declarations. For example, through the Versailles Declaration of March 2022, all twenty-seven leaders agreed to strengthen defence investment, build strategic autonomy, and protect Europe's democratic foundations – an important recognition of a geopolitical EU.[93]

EU's expression of a new Self intermediated ontological security by being recognised and valued not only internally but also externally, by important significant Others such as NATO, the United States, or China. Externally, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recognised Europe's new strength on several occasions. For example, during his November 2024 EU parliament speech, he stated that 'Putin remains smaller than the united strength of Europe. I urge you not to forget this, and not to forget how much Europe is capable of achieving. We can surely push Russia towards a just peace.'[94] In the joint statement following the US–EU summit in October 2023, US and EU leaders both 'recognise[d] the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positively to global and transatlantic security'.[95]

In a speech in March 2025, NATO Deputy Secretary General Radmila Shekerinska praised Europeans for stepping up defence investments and initiatives, stressing 'the need for a stronger European pillar within a strong NATO'.[96] Moreover, during a phone conversation with European Council President Antonio Costa, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed firm support for 'European integration, and backed the European Union (EU)'s pursuit of strategic autonomy'.[97] He also described Europe as 'an important pole in a multipolar world', which signals China's recognition of the EU as a major geopolitical actor.[98]

To sum up, ontological security aims to be created, on the one side, through the operationalisation of EU actorness, in the defence, justice, and sanctions sectors, into concrete action, showing that the EU is capable of providing security and defending core values, beyond diplomacy. Demonstrating collective action through the new agencies and reforms, the EU shows that it can coordinate member states quickly, thus projecting strength. These new expressions and articulations of Self are valued by both member states and external significant Others. Member states value the new initiatives, as these provide them with re-assurance and mutual trust that the EU will defend both borders and core norms in times when other actors, like the UN or ICC, might be blocked or lack jurisdiction. External actors, like NATO, China, or the United States, value the new EU geopolitical Self, citing EU agencies as examples of Europe being a credible and capable partner.

[93]European Council, 'Informal meeting of the heads of state or government: Versailles declaration' (2022), available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[94]European Parliament, 'Zelenskyy to MEPs: "We must end this war fairly and justly"' (2024), available at: {https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241114IPR25417/zelenskyy-to-meps-we-must-end-this-war-fairly-and-justly}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[95]European Council, 'U.S.–EU summit joint statement', p. 4, available at: {https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/67448/us-eu-statement-final.pdf}, accessed 29 January 2026.

[96]NATO, 'NATO deputy secretary general welcomes renewed European defence efforts at the European parliament' (2025), available at: {https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/03/20/nato-deputy-secretary-general-welcomes-renewed-european-defence-efforts-at-the-european-parliament}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[97]The State Council of People's Republic of China, 'Xi says China supports European integration, EU strategic autonomy' (2025), available at: {https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202501/14/content_WS67866a71c6d0868f4e8eed0f.html}, accessed 28 November 2025.

[98]Anadolu Agency, 'China backs EU with "more strategic autonomy": Xi tells Macron' (2025), available at: {https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/china-backs-eu-with-more-strategic-autonomy-xi-tells-macron/3576501}, accessed 28 November 2025.

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Express your Self

Expressivism helps us understand how something is known, experienced, and valued. Expressivism works as a tool for articulating and *be*coming aware and reflexive of, our Self. The IR Self 'is always in the process of coming-into-being, or becoming,'[99] and thus travelling along in time. Expressivism provides a mechanism for articulating a meaning, purpose, and impact.

Expressivism operates as an epistemological and aesthetic category through which cognition can be fashioned and created. It is epistemological because it enables us to know. It is aesthetic (see also Cihan[100]) because it enables us to describe how meaning, form, and perception come together through practice. The achievement of a purpose is equated with the actuation: 'When something is in actuality, it means that it is fulfilled, being in its achieved purpose.'[101] Cognition can only occur in reference to purposes and practices,[102] and expressivism intermediates the emergence of this cognition and the subsequent awareness that becomes real and knowable through action.

Embracing expressivist theoretical lenses, we can understand how the EU recognises its Self as an embodiment of its core values in the present. At the same time, the expressivist potential allows us to capture the new levels of ambition, as a reminder for the future.

Expressive actions entail a judgement of intention and envisioned impact. They do not only denote a de facto activity, as it is not a random practice but has purposeful intent, just like in the arts. The intended outcome is to have a practical and operational effect that can bring protection and create ontological security. EU military and judicial assistance to Ukraine is governed by a logic of intended outcomes such as military resilience, deterrence, accountability, and political signalling.

The speeches and press declarations accompanying the official meetings at which these measures were adopted help to track the EU's trajectory and cumulation of actions. These statements reflect what the EU is doing and why, thus not only describing an action but also reflexively self-positioning itself through the interpretation of its own behaviour and situating it in a broader purpose. It becomes clear how reflexivity can 'be an approach to grappling with thought and action.'[103] Reflexivity stems from its possibilities to express 'certain attitudes, dispositions and activities.'[104] Hence, expressivist assemblages entail a certain activity (practice) and how its meaning, symbols, intentions, and impact come to be articulated, known, experienced, and valued. Expressing the Self thus means to reflexively articulate new attitudes, dispositions, practices, or visions.

Conclusions

This article used expressivism to make sense of the mechanics of the dynamic process of ontological security. Inspired by the meaning of expressivism from arts and philosophy, this article has provided a new reading and understanding of expressivism in international relations, theorising its nexus with ontological security. It has discussed the EU expressivist practices and counter-measures in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Underscoring the utility of expressivism to an *ontological security creation* research programme, the findings of this research contribute to addressing the main line of inquiry, that is: what uplifts agents and groups beyond and through challenging conditions, mobilising or transforming them from being insecure to being secure, helping to turn the negative into positive? The findings point towards expressivist creation as a pivotal factor of agents in their transformational journey. Contributing to better understanding how international organisations grapple with insecurity,

[99] Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', p. 276.
[100] Cihan, 'Aesthetics of ontological security'.
[101] Constantin Noica, *The Romanian Sentiment of Being*, trans. O. Gabor and E. Gabor (Punctum Books, 2022), p. 181.
[102] Cf. Kirke and Steele, 'Ontological security, myth, and existentialism', p. 908.
[103] Jack L. Amoureux, 'A Promise Unfulfilled? Reflexivity as Ethics and Agency', in Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J. Steele (eds.), *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 23–43.
[104] Ibid.

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this study has shown how meaning and agency have been projected in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The EU has sought to provide ontological security through anxiety suspension embedding a move from being civilian-power Europe to becoming the EU as a security and emerging judicial actor. Addressing existential anxiety, i.e. anxiety regarding the Self, is central to the pursuit of ontological security.[105]

This article has several theoretical implications. First, it provided a conceptual framework of *ontological security creation*, proposing expressivism as a mechanism complementing previous ontological security-seeking mechanisms such as routines,[106] fantasy,[107] vicarity,[108] or flow.[109] The article supplied a definition of ontological security in which the security of being is expressively asserted and modulated through a more dynamic becoming.

Second, my work complements theories of becoming and self-creation. Precisely, it enriches the International Theory forum 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics', which emphasised the need of 'shift[ing] the analytical focus away from too strong an identification with ontological security as a "security of being" – something individuals can possess or have – towards an understanding of ontological security that emphasises a "security of becoming"'.[110] It also advances work by Arfi, who highlights performative aspects and agents' perpetual sense of existence, materialised as 'becoming otherwise',[111] and by Berenskötter, who claims that the Self in IR usually takes the form of a collective whereby the IR Self 'is always in the process of coming-into-being, or becoming'.[112] In particular, my findings reveal that security does not emerge from an end state, and becoming involves not an end state but rather a continuous process of expressivist self-creation targeted at anxiety reduction, control, and ultimately freedom. To this end, the article also supplements existing theories of self-creation, such as aesthetic theory,[113] with new expressive mechanisms of agency and power creation.

Through expressivist actions in a changing environment, actors can accommodate and also push for change to ensure a future-proofed mode of being, which epitomises a category of becoming. It is the freedom, power, and agency to actually adopt concrete practices that is enmeshed with emotions of feeling secure, and the way these actions are valued by others, internally and externally. The Self here does not depict a static category, to which an agent perpetually *returns* through routinised practices, but is instead a dynamic category of becoming, apt of transformation.

So, *to be* is *to become*.

My approach focuses on *creative configurations*, elucidating expressivism as a mechanism of OS following an ontological shock. I illustrated the *creative constellations* in which collectives (re-)discover ontological security in global politics through expressivist lenses. Expressivism, I posit, makes it possible to conceptualise the productive nexus between practices and ontological security. Expressivism operates through agency and the recognition of that agency both internally and by external significant Others.

Expressivism plays a key role in the development of reflective thought and the awareness that arises and becomes meaningful through action. It provides insights into how knowledge is formed, how experiences are interpreted, and how this becomes valued. In the case of the EU, the reflexive cognition enabling perceptual change was empowered through intentions expressed through framing and establishing a series of initiatives to enhance security and judicial cooperation.

[105] Cf. Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 245.

[106] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[107] Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development,* 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68.

[108] Christopher S. Browning et al. *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[109] Steele, 'Re-creating ontological security'.

[110] Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 253.

[111] Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving'.

[112] Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', p. 276.

[113] Steele, *Defacing Power.*

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An important contemporary implication in terms of the EU's role in stepping up its role as a security and justice actor arises in the context of an emerging void, materialised as US retrenchment and ambivalent policy. Thus, expressivism not only becomes theoretically interesting but also bears political relevance.

Modulating the becoming of the EU as a security actor and criminal justice actor, the EU strengthens its Self. Overcoming binaries of to be or not be, becoming emerges as a creative category of expression. This article has made a twofold theoretical contribution, and one major empirical contribution, mapping the counter-measures adopted in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its core novelty consists in conceptualising expressivism as a mechanism of ontological security, on the one side, and as a theoretical framework for understanding how agents can creatively produce ontological security through intentional, performative practices that form meaning and agency and stabilise cognitive and emotional orders in moments of crisis, on the other side.

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Cornelia Baciu is a postdoctoral researcher at the Cluster for European Research, Saarland University; a fellow in the research cluster 'The Good Life: What Makes a Good Society', Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, Freiburg University; and a member of the Flemish Peace Institute's COST Action Peace Working Group 'European Peace and Security' (2025–8). Previously she was a postdoc at the University of Copenhagen and Scandinavian Visiting Professor at Kiel University. Her latest articles, 'Expressing emotions and ontological security in international organizations', 'Norm expressivism and punishment in international relations', and 'International organizations as places of remembrance', were published in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, Review of International Studies*, and *Cooperation and Conflict*.

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