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## THE DESTABILISATION OF EASTERN EUROPE: QUANTIFYING THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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### ABSTRACT

This paper quantifies the regional destabilisation of Eastern Europe resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war (2014-2025), drawing on empirical data from a mixed-methods study of 435 respondents across stakeholder groups. The study evaluates two hypotheses: H<sub>01</sub> (the war does not significantly affect Eastern European stability) and H<sub>02</sub> (NATO's involvement does not alter regional stability). Paired t-test results ( $p=0.047$ ) reveal statistically significant pessimism among Ukrainian officials ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=0.756$ ) compared to citizens ( $M=2.00$ ,  $SD=0.00$ ), confirming profound destabilisation. Regression analysis demonstrates a strong positive relationship between NATO involvement and stability perceptions ( $R=0.839$ ,  $R^2=0.704$ ,  $F=338.239$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that alliance engagement partially mitigates but cannot reverse war-induced instability. Qualitative findings from 41 experts highlight infrastructure destruction, mass displacement (86.4% of Ukrainian respondents abroad), and economic collapse as measurable destabilisation indicators. The paper concluded that Eastern European stability has been fundamentally undermined, with NATO's deterrent role providing limited counterbalance against ongoing Russian aggression, necessitating enhanced forward defensive postures and reconstruction frameworks.

**KEYWORDS:** Eastern Europe, regional stability, Russia-Ukraine war, NATO deterrence, security architecture, displacement, paired t-test, regression analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked the most significant military confrontation in Europe since the Second World War, fundamentally disrupting the post-Cold War security architecture that had governed Eastern

European relations for three decades (Antis & Mullis, 2023). While the conflict's origins trace back to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent hybrid warfare in the Donbas region, the 2022 escalation transformed a simmering regional tension into a conventional war of attrition with far-reaching consequences for regional stability (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). Eastern Europe, comprising states from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, has experienced unprecedented security challenges, including territorial integrity violations, forced population displacements, critical infrastructure destruction, and the re-emergence of great power rivalry along NATO's eastern flank.

Regional stability, as conceptualised in international relations theory, refers to the absence of armed conflict, the predictability of interstate relations, and the resilience of political and economic systems to external shocks (Safranchuk, 2022). The Russia-Ukraine war has systematically undermined each of these dimensions. Ukraine has lost about 20% of its land to Russian occupation. In some frontline areas, the population has dropped by more than 50% (OECD, 2023). The humanitarian toll has been staggering: over 14 million people have been displaced, making this Europe's largest refugee crisis since 1945, while civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and energy grids, has been systematically targeted (International Organization for Migration, 2023). The economic contraction in Ukraine exceeded 30% in 2022, with spillover effects destabilising neighbouring economies through disrupted trade routes, energy price volatility, and refugee integration pressures (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, 2022).

NATO's involvement in the conflict, while carefully calibrated to avoid confrontation with Russia, has emerged as a critical variable in shaping regional stability outcomes. The alliance has activated its Response Force, deployed multinational battlegroups to Poland and the Baltic states, and coordinated unprecedented military assistance to Ukraine, accounting for approximately 99% of the country's defence support (NATO, 2025). However, a scholarly debate persists regarding whether NATO's engagement stabilises or further destabilises the region. Proponents argue that alliance presence deters Russian expansionism and reassures vulnerable member states (Yoshizaki & Shinoda, 2025), while critics contend that NATO's eastward expansion provoked Russian aggression and that continued support prolongs the conflict without addressing underlying security dilemmas (Mearsheimer, 2022).

This article addresses two fundamental research questions: First, to what extent has the Russia-Ukraine war quantitatively destabilised Eastern Europe? Second, does NATO's involvement significantly influence perceptions of regional stability among affected populations? Drawing on primary survey data from 382 respondents across Ukrainian,

Russian, and NATO citizen groups, supplemented by 41 expert interviews, this study tests two null hypotheses derived from the broader thesis research:

**H0<sub>1</sub>:** The Russia-Ukraine war has no significant impact on the stability of Eastern Europe.

**H0<sub>2</sub>:** NATO's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict does not influence regional stability.

By employing paired t-tests and regression analysis on perceptual data from Ukrainian officials and citizens, along with NATO citizens' assessments, this article provides empirical quantification of regional destabilisation and the moderating role of alliance engagement. The results support theoretical debates in security studies regarding the relationship between great power competition, alliance politics, and regional order, while offering policy-relevant insights for NATO's strategic posture in Eastern Europe.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptualising Regional Stability in Eastern Europe

Regional stability constitutes a multidimensional concept encompassing military security, political resilience, economic functionality, and social cohesion within a geographically bounded area (Millen, 2022). Historically, stability in Eastern Europe has depended on the balance of power between Russia and Western institutions, especially after the Warsaw Pact fell apart and NATO and the European Union grew (Eichler, 2024). Safranchuk (2022) identifies three critical layers of instability arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict: the collapse of negotiated settlement frameworks, exemplified by the Minsk Process failure, the irreversibility of territorial changes through forced displacement and annexation, and the securitisation of NATO enlargement as an existential threat in Russian strategic discourse.

The war's destabilising effects exist across multiple scales. At the interstate level, it has shattered the post-Cold War norm of territorial integrity inviolability, undermining the Helsinki Final Act and the Budapest Memorandum (Pszczel, 2022). At the regional level, it has created a new frontline that runs from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. NATO member states have significantly increased their defence spending and permanently stationed combat troops near Russian borders (NATO, 2024). At the societal level, the war has produced demographic upheaval through displacement, labour market disruptions through mobilisation and emigration, and psychological trauma affecting millions of civilians (University of Ottawa, 2023). Cassidy, Todorov, and colleagues (2024) argue that these cumulative effects constitute a "regional security complex transformation," wherein Eastern Europe transitions

from a zone of cooperative security governance to a theatre of renewed great power confrontations.

## 2.2 NATO's Role in Regional Stabilisation

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict represents a significant evolution in its strategic posture. Historically focused on the collective defence of member territories, NATO has increasingly assumed responsibilities for supporting partner nations facing external aggression, blurring the distinction between Article 5 guarantees and extended deterrence (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). The alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly identifies Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area," marking a doctrinal departure from previous cooperative security frameworks (NATO, 2022).

Empirical research on NATO's stabilisation effects yields mixed results. Quantitative studies using conflict databases suggest that alliance membership reduces the likelihood of territorial aggression against member states, consistent with deterrence theory predictions (George & Sandler, 2022). However, the relationship between NATO engagement and stability in non-member states is more complex. RAND Europe's (2024) analysis of the Ukraine war's implications for joint doctrine notes that, while NATO support has enhanced Ukraine's defensive capabilities, it has not reversed Russian territorial gains or compelled Russian withdrawal, suggesting limitations in the alliance's stabilisation capacity. Qualitative research by Kunertova and Schmitt (2024) identifies internal alliance divisions, particularly between Eastern European states advocating accelerated Ukrainian membership and Western powers urging caution, as potential constraints on NATO's stabilising effectiveness.

The peace-security dilemma framework offers theoretical leverage for understanding NATO's ambiguous role. Actions intended to preserve peace through deterrence, such as forward deployment of forces or weapons transfers to Ukraine, may simultaneously heighten insecurity by provoking adversary responses or creating escalation risks (Řehka, 2025). This dilemma is particularly acute in Eastern Europe, where geographical proximity and historical grievances amplify threat perceptions on both sides, leading to increased military posturing and a cycle of mistrust that complicates diplomatic efforts. Russian officials consistently frame NATO's involvement as aggressive encirclement rather than defensive stabilisation, with 71.9% of Russian citizens in this study viewing the alliance as escalating tensions rather than supporting peace.

### 2.3 Measuring Regional Stability: Indicators and Approaches

To operationalise regional stability for empirical analysis, it is necessary to select suitable indicators that reflect both objective conditions and subjective perceptions. Objective indicators include conflict intensity metrics (battle-related deaths, territorial changes), displacement statistics (internally displaced individuals, refugee flows), economic performance (GDP contraction, trade disruption), and military posture changes (force deployments, defence spending increases) (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). Subjective indicators encompass elite and public perceptions of security, trust in institutions, and optimism about future stability, which may diverge from objective conditions but importantly influence policy preferences and societal resilience (Pew Research Center, 2023). This study adopts a perceptual approach to stability measurement, recognising that stakeholder assessments fundamentally shape political outcomes. Ukrainian officials and citizens, as direct conflict participants, provide ground-level evaluations of stability trajectories. NATO citizens, as members of the principal security alliance engaged in the conflict, offer external assessments of regional conditions. By triangulating these perspectives, we can identify convergence and divergence in stability perceptions, thereby revealing the extent to which stakeholder groups recognise war-induced destabilisation.

### 2.4 Research Gap and Hypothesis Development

Despite extensive scholarly attention to the Russia-Ukraine war, quantitative assessments of regional stability impacts remain underdeveloped. Existing literature predominantly employs qualitative case study methods (Antis & Mullis, 2023), historical analysis (Eichler, 2024), or policy-orientated strategic assessments (RAND, 2025), with limited systematic hypothesis testing using primary perceptual data. Furthermore, the relationship between NATO involvement and regional stability perceptions has not been rigorously quantified, leaving unresolved debates about whether alliance engagement stabilises or further destabilises Eastern Europe.

This study addresses these gaps by testing two hypotheses derived from the broader thesis framework:

**H0:** The Russia-Ukraine war has no significant impact on the stability of Eastern Europe. Rejection of this hypothesis would provide empirical confirmation that the war has produced measurable destabilisation effects as perceived by affected populations.

**H0<sub>2</sub>:** NATO's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict does not influence regional stability. Rejection would demonstrate that alliance engagement significantly shapes stability perceptions, whether positively or negatively.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This paper employed a quantitative research design within the mixed-methods framework. The approach focuses on hypothesis testing through inferential statistics applied to primary survey data collected from March to July 2025. The design prioritises precision measurement and statistical inference to quantify the war's regional impact and NATO's moderating role.

#### 3.2 Sample and Participants

The analysis draws on two respondent groups from the larger study's sample of 435 participants:

**Ukrainian Citizens (n=132):** Selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across age groups, genders, and regions. Demographic characteristics include 63.6% female, 50.0% aged over 65, and 86.4% currently residing abroad due to displacement. This group provides ground-level perceptions of regional stability impacts, particularly regarding how displacement has affected community resilience and local governance.

**Ukrainian Officials (n=7)** were purposively sampled to include policymakers and experts who have direct involvement in conflict response. Experience distribution includes 42.9% with 11-20 years, 28.6% with 5-10 years, and 14.3% each with <5 and >20 years. Expert areas include foreign affairs (42.9%), peacebuilding (28.6%), and defense/security (14.3%).

**NATO Citizens (n=144):** Chosen from six member states (Netherlands 35.4%, Canada 29.2%, UK 16.7%, US 8.3%, Germany 6.3%, France 4.2%) through stratified random sampling. Demographic profile: 70.8% male, 72.9% aged 35-54, 64.6% holding bachelor's degrees. This group provides external perceptions of NATO's role in regional stability, highlighting how citizens from different member states view NATO's effectiveness in maintaining peace and security in their regions.

### 3.3 Instrumentation and Variables

Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered online via Qualtrics, with items measuring stability perceptions on 5-point Likert scales. Key variables for this analysis include:

**UkrCit\_Q14:** "How optimistic are you about long-term peace in Eastern Europe?" (1=Very pessimistic, 5=Very optimistic). Serves as a measure of citizens' perceptions of stability.

**UkrOff\_Q15:** "What is your outlook on regional stability in Eastern Europe over the next 5 years?" (1=Very pessimistic, 5=Very optimistic). Serves as official-level stability perception measure.

**NATOCit\_Q12:** "Should NATO increase, maintain, or reduce its involvement in the conflict?" (1=Withdraw completely, 2=Reduce, 3=Maintain, 4=Increase). This question serves as a proxy for the perceived appropriate level of NATO involvement.

**NATOCit\_Q14:** "Do you believe NATO's actions contribute to global peace and stability?" (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). This question serves to gauge perceptions of NATO's contribution to stability.

Instrument reliability was established through pilot testing (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.7$ ) and content validity through expert review.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Two primary statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 21:

**Paired Samples t-test for H0<sub>1</sub>:** Comparing mean stability perceptions between Ukrainian citizens (UkrCit\_Q14) and Ukrainian officials (UkrOff\_Q15) to assess whether these groups converge or diverge in their stability assessments. The paired design accounts for common contextual variables while elucidating group-specific perceptual disparities.

**Linear Regression for H0<sub>4</sub>:** Regressing NATO citizens' perceptions of the alliance's contribution to global peace (NATOCit\_Q14) onto their preferences for NATO involvement level (NATOCit\_Q12). This tests whether support for greater NATO engagement predicts confidence in its stabilising role.

Assumption testing confirmed normality of residuals (Jarque-Bera  $p > 0.05$ ) and absence of multicollinearity ( $VIF < 2$ ). Statistical significance was evaluated at  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Port Harcourt Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent, with assurances of anonymity and

confidentiality. Given the sensitive nature of conflict research, particular attention was paid to protecting vulnerable respondents, including displaced Ukrainian citizens.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for key stability perception variables across respondent groups. Ukrainian citizens (n=7 in this paired analysis) reported a mean optimism score of 2.00 (SD=0.00), indicating uniformly pessimistic assessments of long-term peace prospects in Eastern Europe. The zero standard deviation reflects complete consensus among this subsample, suggesting that war experiences have produced uniformly negative outlooks among directly affected populations.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Stability Perception Variables.**

Variable	n	Mean	SD	Interpretation
UkrCit_Q14	7	2.00	0.00	Pessimistic
UkrOff_Q15	7	2.71	0.756	Leaning pessimistic
NATOCit_Q12	144	3.08	0.42	Support maintaining involvement
NATOCit_Q14	144	4.58	0.82	Strongly agree NATO contributes to peace

Ukrainian officials (n=7) demonstrated a mean stability outlook of 2.71 (SD=0.756), indicating less pessimistic but still negative assessments. The greater variability among officials indicates a divergence in strategic evaluations, likely due to unequal access to information or differing assessments of Ukraine's defensive capabilities.

NATO citizens (n=144) expressed strong support for maintaining alliance involvement in the conflict (M=3.08, SD=0.42 on a 4-point scale) and substantial agreement that NATO contributes to global peace (M=4.58, SD=0.82 on a 5-point scale). These high means and relatively low standard deviations indicate broad consensus within NATO populations regarding the alliance's stabilising role.

### 4.2 Hypothesis Testing: H0<sub>1</sub> (War Impact on Regional Stability)

A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare Ukrainian citizen and official perceptions of regional stability. The analysis included 7 matched pairs, with citizens providing optimism

assessments (UkrCit\_Q14) and officials providing stability outlooks (UkrOff\_Q15). Results are presented in Tables 2-4.

**Table 2: Paired Samples Statistics.**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Pair 1	UkrCit_Q14	2.00	.7	.000	.000
	UkrOff_Q15	2.71	.7	.756	.286

**Table 3: Paired Samples Correlations.**

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	UkrCit_Q14 & UkrOff_Q15	.7	.000

\*Note: Correlation could not be computed due to constant variable (UkrCit\_Q14 SD=0.00).\*

**Table 4: Paired Samples Test.**

	Paired Differences	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)							
					Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper		
Pair 1	-.714	-.250	6	.047	-.714	.756	.286	-1.413	-.015		

The mean difference between citizen and official assessments was -0.714 (SD=0.756), indicating that officials were significantly less pessimistic than citizens. The 95% confidence interval [-1.413, -0.015] does not include zero, confirming the direction and magnitude of the difference. The t-statistic of -2.500 with 6 degrees of freedom yielded a p-value of 0.047, which is less than the conventional alpha level of 0.05.

**Therefore, H<sub>0</sub> is rejected.** The statistically significant difference between citizen and official stability perceptions, combined with the uniformly pessimistic citizen assessments (M=2.00), provides empirical evidence that the Russia-Ukraine war has significantly impacted regional stability in Eastern Europe. The fact that citizens who are directly experiencing displacement, economic hardship, and security threats report maximal pessimism, while officials who may have broader strategic perspectives report somewhat less

pessimistic but still negative outlooks confirms the war's destabilising effects across stakeholder levels.

**4.3 Hypothesis Testing: H0<sub>2</sub> (NATO Involvement and Regional Stability)**

Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether NATO citizens' preferences for alliance involvement (NATOCit\_Q12) predict their perceptions of NATO's contribution to global peace (NATOCit\_Q14). Results are presented in Tables 5-7.

**Table 5: Model Summary.**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.839	.704	.702	.413

The model demonstrates a strong positive relationship between the variables, with a correlation coefficient (R=0.839) indicating that preferences for greater NATO involvement are strongly associated with positive perceptions of its peace contribution. The R-squared value of 0.704 indicates that 70.4% of the variance in peace contribution perceptions is explained by involvement preferences, a remarkably high proportion for social science research.

**Table 6: ANOVA.**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	57.578	1	57.578	338.239	.000
	Residual	24.172	142	.170		
	Total	81.750	143			

The ANOVA results confirm the model's statistical significance, with an F-statistic of 338.239 (p<0.001). This indicates that the regression model explains a significant portion of the variance in the dependent variable and that the relationship observed is highly unlikely to occur by chance.

**Table 7: Coefficients.**

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients	Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	-1.352	.327		-4.138	.000
	NATOCit_Q12	1.551	.084	.839	18.391	.000

The unstandardised coefficient (B = 1.551) indicates that for each one-unit increase in the preferred involvement level (e.g., from "maintain" to "increase"), agreement that NATO contributes to peace increases by 1.551 points on the 5-point scale, a substantial effect. The standardised coefficient (Beta=0.839) confirms the strong positive relationship, and the t-statistic of 18.391 (p<0.001) establishes statistical significance.

The constant term (B=-1.352) suggests that without NATO involvement, baseline perceptions of its stabilising role would be negative, further emphasising the importance of engagement for positive stability assessments.

**Therefore, H0<sub>2</sub> is rejected.** NATO's involvement significantly influences regional stability as perceived by alliance citizens. The strong positive relationship between support for engagement and confidence in NATO's peace contribution indicates that populations view alliance presence as stabilising rather than destabilising, which contrasts with Russian narratives portraying NATO expansion as provocative.

**4.4 Qualitative Triangulation**

Expert interviews (n=41) provide qualitative context supporting the quantitative findings. Ukrainian experts consistently emphasise infrastructure destruction and displacement as primary destabilisation indicators:

*"The systematic targeting of energy infrastructure means that entire regions face winter without heating, water, or electricity. This is not collateral damage; rather, it is a deliberate strategy aimed at making life impossible for civilians.*

NATO officials acknowledged the alliance's stabilisation limitations while affirming its deterrent role:

*"We have prevented further Russian advances into NATO territory and enabled Ukraine to defend itself, but we cannot force Russian withdrawal or guarantee Ukrainian territorial*

*integrity without confrontation. Stability, in this context, means preventing worse outcomes rather than achieving ideal ones"* (NATO official).

Russia's perspectives diverged sharply, with officials framing NATO involvement as inherently destabilising.

*"Every additional weapon sent to Ukraine, every NATO exercise near our borders, convinces Moscow that the alliance seeks not peace but encirclement. How can this be called stabilisation when it provokes the very escalation it claims to prevent?"* (Russian diplomat)

These qualitative contrasts underscore the contested nature of stability perceptions and the role of identity and threat framing in shaping assessments of NATO's regional impact.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Interpreting the Rejection of H0<sub>1</sub>: Quantifying Regional Destabilisation

The rejection of H0<sub>1</sub> through statistically significant differences between citizen and official stability perceptions provides empirical confirmation of the war's profound regional impact. The finding that Ukrainian citizens report uniformly pessimistic outlooks (M=2.00, SD=0.00) while officials demonstrate slightly higher but still negative assessments (M=2.71, SD=0.756) reveals important nuances in how destabilisation is experienced and evaluated across stakeholder levels.

Citizen-level maximal pessimism likely reflects direct exposure to war's consequences: 86.4% of Ukrainian respondents in this study reported current residence abroad, indicating personal experience of displacement. The 50% unemployment rate among Ukrainians shows how bad the economy is and how it affects daily life and future plans. These objective conditions translate into uniformly negative subjective assessments, suggesting that war-induced instability operates not only through military outcomes but also through the lived experiences of affected populations' disruption of homes, livelihoods, and social networks.

Officials' somewhat higher stability outlooks may reflect several factors. First, access to strategic information about Ukrainian defensive capabilities, international support commitments, and Russian vulnerabilities could temper pessimism with awareness of countervailing factors. Second, professional responsibility for national resilience may encourage more measured assessments that acknowledge challenges while maintaining operational focus. Third, officials may discount immediate hardships against longer-term strategic prospects, viewing current instability as temporary rather than permanent. The greater variability in official responses (SD=0.756 versus 0.00) supports the interpretation

that professional assessments incorporate diverse strategic calculations absent from citizen-level experiential responses.

These findings align with and extend existing literature on war's societal impacts. Antis and Mullis (2023) documented patterns of recurring violence in Russian-Ukrainian relations, suggesting that cumulative historical trauma shapes contemporary pessimism. The uniform citizen pessimism observed here provides empirical confirmation that such historical patterns translate into present-day hopelessness among directly affected populations. Similarly, Gheciu and von Hlatky's (2024) analysis of NATO's strategic adaptation notes that hybrid warfare creates conditions of pervasive uncertainty that undermine societal confidence, a phenomenon reflected in citizen-level stability assessments.

The significant difference between citizen and official assessments ( $p=0.047$ ) carries important implications for post-conflict reconstruction. If populations have lost faith in stability prospects while elites maintain conditional optimism, rebuilding efforts must address not only physical infrastructure but also psychological infrastructure: the collective confidence that peace can be sustained. This suggests that reconstruction frameworks should incorporate mental health components, community reintegration programmes, and transparent communication about security guarantees to rebuild public trust.

## **5.2 Interpreting the Rejection of H0<sub>2</sub>: NATO's Stabilising Role**

The strong positive relationship between support for NATO involvement and confidence in its peace contribution ( $R=0.839$ ,  $R^2=0.704$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) demonstrates that alliance citizens perceive NATO as a stabilising force in Eastern Europe. This finding challenges narratives that frame NATO expansion as primarily provocative or destabilising, at least within member state populations.

Several mechanisms may explain this relationship. First, deterrence theory suggests that a visible alliance presence reduces threat perceptions among member populations by signalling collective defence commitments (Lupovici, 2023). Citizens who support greater involvement likely believe that enhanced deterrence capabilities will dissuade Russian aggression against NATO territory, contributing to regional stability. Second, the "security community" framework proposed by Adler and Barnett (1998) holds that shared democratic values and institutionalised cooperation create expectations for peaceful change among member states. Citizens who identify with these values may view NATO engagement as extending this security community to neighbouring Ukraine, thereby stabilising the wider region. Third, information environments in NATO countries predominantly frame alliance actions as

defensive and necessary for upholding international norms, reinforcing positive associations between involvement and stability (Pew Research Center, 2023).

The remarkably high explanatory power of this model ( $R^2=0.704$ ) indicates that involvement preferences are exceptionally strong predictors of peace contribution perceptions. This suggests that attitudes toward NATO's regional role are highly coherent and logically consistent among member populations: those who want more engagement already believe it serves stabilising purposes, and those who doubt its peace contribution prefer reduced involvement. Such coherence may facilitate alliance decision-making by providing clear signals of public preferences, though it also risks polarisation if engagement outcomes fail to match public expectations.

The negative constant term ( $B=-1.352$ ) in the regression model is particularly illuminating. It suggests that in the absence of NATO involvement, baseline expectations of regional stability would be negative. This implies that populations recognise the precarious security environment and view alliance presence as necessary to prevent worse outcomes, consistent with the "deterrence by denial" framework that has gained prominence in NATO's post-2022 strategic thinking (Řehka, 2025). Citizens apparently believe that without NATO engagement, Eastern Europe would be substantially less stable, even if they acknowledge that involvement cannot fully eliminate instability.

These findings contrast sharply with Russian perspectives documented in qualitative interviews and in Russian citizen survey responses. Russian officials ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ) and citizens (71.9% viewing NATO as escalating tension) frame alliance involvement as inherently destabilising. This perceptual divide reflects deeper identity-based and normative differences. Russian strategic culture, shaped by historical experiences of invasion and post-Soviet vulnerability, interprets NATO presence through security dilemma logic: defensive preparations by one side appear as offensive threats to the other (Eichler, 2024). The Ukrainian and NATO populations, by contrast, interpret involvement through sovereignty-protection frames that emphasise Russia's aggression as the primary source of instability.

The policy implication of this perceptual divergence is profound. As long as Russian and Western populations have diametrically opposed views of NATO's stabilising role, diplomatic efforts to manage the conflict will operate under conditions of fundamental mistrust. Addressing this problem requires not only military deterrence but also strategic communication that acknowledges Russian security concerns while maintaining commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, a delicate balance that NATO's 2025 Strategic Concept attempts to strike.

### 5.3 Limitations and Methodological Considerations

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of these findings. First, the small sample size for Ukrainian official-citizen paired comparisons ( $n=7$  pairs) limits statistical power and generalisability. The significant result ( $p = 0.047$ ), while meeting conventional thresholds, would benefit from replication with larger samples. The zero variance in citizen responses, while substantively meaningful (indicating unanimous pessimism), creates computational constraints that prevented correlation analysis and may reflect sample selection biases.

Second, the cross-sectional design captures stability perceptions at a single point (mid-2025) but cannot track changes over time or establish causal direction. It is possible that pre-existing attitudes toward NATO influence both involvement preferences and stability perceptions, rather than involvement preferences shaping stability assessments. Longitudinal research tracking perceptions before and after significant NATO actions would strengthen causal inference.

Third, reliance on perceptual measures rather than objective stability indicators introduces potential bias. Perceptions may diverge from material conditions due to media framing, elite cueing, or psychological coping mechanisms. However, for understanding political behaviour and policy preferences, perceptions are arguably as important as objective conditions; populations act based on what they believe, not necessarily what they are.

Fourth, the study's geographical scope, while focusing on Eastern Europe, cannot capture the full complexity of regional stability dynamics, which extend to energy security, economic interdependence, and alliance politics beyond the immediate conflict zone. Future research should integrate these dimensions through multidimensional stability indices.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article has provided empirical quantification of the Russia-Ukraine war's destabilising impact on Eastern Europe and NATO's moderating role in shaping perceptions of stability. Through rigorous hypothesis testing using paired t-tests and regression analysis, two key findings emerge with clear statistical support.

First, the war has fundamentally undermined regional stability as perceived by directly affected populations. The significant difference between citizen and official stability assessments ( $p=0.047$ ), combined with uniformly pessimistic citizen outlooks ( $M=2.00$ ), confirms that destabilisation operates at multiple levels, from elite strategic calculations to civilian life-worlds. The humanitarian dimensions of this destabilisation – 86.4%

displacement rates, 50% unemployment among Ukrainian respondents – translate into measurable psychological impacts that will shape reconstruction challenges for decades.

Second, NATO involvement significantly influences stability perceptions among alliance citizens, with a remarkably strong relationship between support for engagement and confidence in peace contributions ( $R=0.839$ ,  $R^2=0.704$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This finding indicates that member populations view alliance presence as stabilising rather than provocative, challenging narratives that frame NATO expansion as primarily responsible for regional tensions. The negative constant term in the regression model suggests that without NATO engagement, expectations of regional stability would be substantially lower; citizens apparently view alliance involvement as necessary insurance against worse outcomes.

The theoretical implications of these findings extend beyond the specific case. They demonstrate the value of perceptual approaches to stability measurement, revealing how war impacts are differentially experienced and evaluated across stakeholder levels. They also highlight the persistence of security dilemma dynamics in contemporary great power relations, with Russian and Western populations holding fundamentally opposed interpretations of the same alliance actions. Addressing this perceptual divide requires not only military deterrence but also sustained diplomatic engagement and strategic communication that acknowledges competing security narratives.

For policy, these findings support enhanced NATO forward presence in Eastern Europe as a stabilising measure but also underscore the limitations of military approaches alone. Stability ultimately requires reconstruction of Ukrainian society, reintegration of displaced populations, and rebuilding of trust between Russia and the West – objectives that exceed the capabilities of any single alliance. The path to sustainable peace in Eastern Europe lies not in choosing between deterrence and diplomacy, but in pursuing both simultaneously while acknowledging their inherent tensions.

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