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## **Popular Geopolitics in the Shadow of Russia: The Ukraine Conflict in Finnish and Estonian Newspaper Editorials**

**Markus Ojala and Sigrid Kaasik-Krogerus**

The end of the Cold War marked an upheaval in European geopolitical imagination (Agnew, 1998, p. 1). With the fall of the Iron Curtain that had separated the “Free West” from the “Communist East,” and in the spirit of globalisation that was supposedly eradicating all physical boundaries, the 1990s raised hopes that Europe would leave behind the era of divisions and unite into a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Yet the subsequent eastward expansion of the EU and NATO has been accompanied by a failure to integrate Russia into European and global political and security arrangements, gradually exacerbating the tensions between the rhetoric of Russia’s inclusion and the practices of its exclusion (Haukkala, 2015; Sakwa, 2015). In the Ukraine conflict, these contradictions seem to have finally come to a head, potentially providing a fatal blow to the visions of an undivided Europe (Orenstein, 2015; Rutland, 2015). Indeed for many, the Ukraine conflict marks the return of Cold War antagonisms, and the geopolitical boundary-making between East and West is very much back in fashion (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2014; Walker, 2015).

Geopolitics should also be considered a key element in the exploration of how the Ukraine conflict became “mediatized,” that is, how various media-related practices influence the way in which the conflict is enacted, performed, represented, perceived and experienced (Cottle, 2006). Not only do the “geopolitical interests and political alignments” of news organisations often influence the way international conflicts are presented to national and international audiences (Cottle, 2006, p. 188; Cottle, 2009, p. 109), the news media are also key arenas in the very constitution of geopolitical knowledge and perceptions of national interest (Dittmer, 2010; Ó Tuathail, 1996). Being closely connected to the enactment of foreign policy, the news media tend to circulate elite narratives of international relations and turn them into popular narratives for national audiences (McFarlane & Hay, 2003; Sharp, 1996). As a result, national media are closely involved in the construction of dominant geopolitical rationalities and the legitimization of foreign policies (Ojala & Pantti, in press; Robison, 2004).

The influence exerted on foreign policy by the news media in general and newspaper editorials in particular is typically addressed through the notions of agenda setting and framing, referring both to the power of news media to increase the salience of certain issues in the minds of

the public and to their ability to naturalise certain routinised points of view, which guide argumentation over the politicised issues (e.g., D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Reese & Lewis, 2009). Less attention has been paid to the role of news and editorials in naturalising dominant discourses and ideologies, which are essential elements of social identities and the reproduction of social order (cf. Robison, 2004; Triandafyllidou, Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2009). These discursive dimensions of the power of the news media and editorials are particularly relevant when viewing international conflicts from the perspective of geopolitical practices, which typically concern the reproduction and mobilisation of national identities, boundary-work between “us” and “others” and the associated definition of loyalties, security and threat, for the purposes of certain domestic and foreign policy interests (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 2002).

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the role of popular geopolitics in international conflicts by focusing on the mobilisation of geopolitical discourses in Finnish and Estonian newspaper editorials on the Ukraine conflict. In the two EU countries sharing a border with Russia, the conflict has had major repercussions on the public debates surrounding national security and foreign policy, both particularly fruitful grounds for geopolitical reasoning. Accordingly, we observe the similarities and differences in how *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees*, as the leading dailies of Finland and Estonia, respectively, evoke geopolitical positions and identities in their editorial commentary on the Ukraine conflict and in how they simultaneously shape the public articulation of foreign policy.

In the following two sections, we briefly outline the national contexts of popular geopolitics and foreign policy discourses in which the Finnish and Estonian debates on the Ukraine crisis take place. Subsequently, we move on to present the methodology guiding the empirical analysis of the newspaper editorials, as well as the main findings of the analysis. In the final section, we discuss the observed similarities and differences in the geopolitical discourses between the two newspapers, the relevance of popular geopolitics in shaping national foreign policy and the role of the news media in driving the Ukraine conflict.

## **Finland: An Uneasy Trajectory from Geopolitical Neutrality to Increasing Western Alignment**

Since World War II, Finnish foreign policy has been premised on military nonalignment and coping with the “Eastern threat” by fostering good bilateral relations with the Soviet Union and Russia (Browning, 2003; Harle & Moisio, 2000; Moisio, 2008). Even though Finland has steadily moved into closer military cooperation with NATO since the end of the Cold War, including participation in a NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, it has not applied for membership of the alliance. Thus, the Ukraine conflict is unprecedented for Finland, in the sense that the country has found itself with other EU members, the United States and NATO in a common front against Russia. In these circumstances, geopolitical boundary-making has become a pronounced part of the Finnish foreign policy debate on the Ukraine conflict.

While a geopolitical identity that sees Finland as part of Western civilisation has traditionally been dominant among Finnish elites, integration into Western political, economic and security structures was constrained during the Cold War by the simultaneous effort not to antagonise the Soviet Union (Moisio, 2008; Vinayaraj, 2011). The careful balancing act in foreign policy, premised on geopolitical neutrality, was associated with a positive national identity discourse about Finland as a “bridge-builder” between East and West. In international conflicts, political elites were careful not to position themselves prominently as belonging to the Western camp or to present Russia as an adversary.

After the end of the Cold War, and in conjunction with Finland building closer ties with the West both politically and militarily, those advocating military alliance and deepening political integration with Western countries have increasingly gained ground among the Finnish political elite at the expense of the defenders of the geopolitically neutral and nonaligned orientation (Browning, 2002; Moisio, 2008). The Westernisers tend to view international politics from a perspective in which Russia, as an authoritarian state, represents an “other” to the West and a threat to international order (Browning, 2002; Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2014, p. 155). According to the pro-Western foreign policy orientation, Finland’s position in the camp of Western democracies obliges it to defend Western values, thus the policy of neutrality is no longer an option. However, even with the successes of the Westernising project, the policy of military nonalignment and the need to foster good bilateral relations with Russia still enjoy wide popular and elite support in Finland (Etzold & Haukkala, 2011; Palosaari, 2013).

The shifts and continuities in Finland’s foreign policy orientation have been largely reflected in the news media coverage of international matters. During the Cold War, media elites shied away from taking strong positions on international conflicts, and the self-restraint in political communication even extended to practices of self-censorship in the media coverage of the Soviet Union (Browning, 2003; Lounasmeri, 2015; Salokangas, 2015). In the post-Cold War period, however, editors of national newspapers and other public opinion leaders have been among Finland’s most eager advocates of a Western orientation (cf. Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2014, p. 155). Nevertheless, even in recent years, public criticism of Russia has been relatively restrained in the Finnish news media in comparison with many Western nations and former Eastern Bloc countries (Heikkilä & Valtonen, 2011; Ojala & Pantti, in press; Salminen, 2011), suggesting that the perceived importance of bilateral relations with Russia may continue to influence the mainstream media’s geopolitical narratives.

The Ukraine conflict, therefore, takes place in a context in which the continuing Western orientation of Finnish foreign policy runs against the tradition that emphasises the value of good relations with Russia. By forcing Finland into a front against Russia, the Ukraine conflict brings forth these barely latent tensions in Finnish foreign policy (Hiltunen, 2014). As a result, public debate on the conflict involves fundamental questions regarding Finland’s geopolitical identity and position in the world.

## **Estonia: European Estonia Challenged by the Reintroduction of the Fear of Russia**

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia regained its independence and started to integrate into Western alliances (the European Union and NATO being the most significant) to ensure the country's safe future as part of the Western world (Feldman, 2001, pp. 9–11; Lauristin, Vihalemm, Rosengren & Weibull 1997). Since the security guarantee was aimed against “historically aggressive and unstable neighbouring Russia” (Mälksoo, 2006, p. 277), on the level of practical geopolitics, the EU and NATO accession process meant making a clear distinction between “Western” Estonia and “Eastern” Russia (Kuus, 2002). Both foreign political goals were also openly supported by Estonian mother-tongue national media as popular geopolitics. After joining the EU and NATO in 2004, the Schengen Area in 2007 and the eurozone in 2011, Estonia was mapped as the most integrated Baltic Sea Region country (Kaas, 2010).

Although expectations about the improvement of asymmetrical relations between small Estonia and its much larger neighbour Russia (David, Gover & Haukkala 2011, p. 187) were expressed in connection with Estonia's accession to the EU and NATO during the accession period, reality did not meet these expectations. The Estonia-Russia relationship, which consists of conflicts and crises, has been characterised as “remarkably poor” and “dominated by manifestations of distrust and animosity” (Ehin & Berg, 2009, p. 1). One of the major crises took place in 2007 as a result of a decision made by the Estonian government to relocate a Soviet-era monument from Tallinn City Centre to a military cemetery (Ehin & Berg, 2009, p. 5; Mälksoo & Šešelgytė, 2013, p. 398).

The solidarity the EU showed toward Estonia during this crisis strengthened Estonian faith in the EU (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 105; Kasekamp & Veebel, 2007, p. 19). Accordingly, as an EU member state, Estonia has been active in supporting democratic reforms in post-Soviet countries like Georgia and Ukraine (Ehin & Berg, 2009, p. 5) and willing to see these as EU candidate countries (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 105). Thus, as Mälksoo and Šešelgytė (2013, p. 399) wrote, the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 was perceived in Estonian political discourse as the signal for a new Cold War (Luik, 2008). Logically, the war both launched political solidarity for Georgia but also raised concerns about the possible reemergence of similar scenarios in the Baltic region. Additionally, Estonian statecraft demanded a tough response from the EU to Russian aggression in Georgia (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 108).

In the same spirit, the Ukraine conflict has been called an attack against “the peace and borders of Europe” by Estonia's president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves (2014), and, in practical geopolitics, strict measures against Russia are supported. Furthermore, the crisis has awakened a fear of possible parallels between Estonia and Ukraine. In this context, Estonia is mapped as Russian borderland that is aware of the potential military threat, according to Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas (“Rõivas,” 2015). Consequently, Estonia has unwillingly positioned itself discursively in the post-Soviet space it had tried to “escape” from during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

## Material and Method

To study how the Ukraine conflict resonates in the popular geopolitics of Finland and Estonia, we observe the editorial commentary on it in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees*. As leading national newspapers and public agenda-setters in their respective countries, both publications exert an authoritative voice in national policy debates, including questions of foreign policy. Their editorial commentary on the Ukraine conflict provides a window into the ways in which the news media act as political institutions and participate in government (cf. Cook, 1998). At the same time, the public nature of the editorials grants them a significant role in popular geopolitics, both reflecting and shaping the shared conceptions of the nation's geopolitical position and identity. As the Ukraine conflict brings forth difficult issues in both countries' historical self-understanding, the editorials of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees* are expected to reflect and negotiate some of the tensions.

When conducting an analysis of popular geopolitics, newspaper editorials have particular relevance. First, editorials differ markedly from ordinary news reports due to their often explicitly opinionated and argumentative tone, with the purpose of influencing both elite and general opinion (Bloch-Elkon, 2007; Golan & Lukito, 2015; Trenz 2007). Second, and somewhat paradoxically, editorials tend to diverge little from the official line promoted by the government, especially on foreign affairs (Golan & Lukito, 2015; Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007). Thus, they usually map the current elite consensus on public issues, presenting themselves as windows into the available range of views and opinions that are considered credible and realistic among the national elite. Third, editorials typically deal with national concerns and address the nation as a whole. As officially nonpartisan newspapers, both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees* claim to speak on behalf of the "national interest" and not as mouthpieces of any single interest group or political party. Fourth, when addressing international affairs, the editorials of a national newspaper usually "translate" foreign events for their domestic audiences by explaining how they touch on the home nation; it is possible to draw conclusions from the coverage of these events and place them in regard to national foreign policy. They provide answers to such questions as who "we" are and what is "our" place in the world (cf. Dittmer, 2010, p. 16).

We examined the editorials of *Postimees* and *Helsingin Sanomat* during six periods in the Ukraine conflict: (1) President Yanukovich's decision to reject the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (November 2013), (2) the Maidan protests and the ousting of Yanukovich (February 2014), (3) the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the imposition of EU and US sanctions on Russia (March 2014), (4) violent clashes in Odessa and the escalation of violence in the Donbas region (May 2014), (5) the downing of the Malaysian Airlines passenger plane and the imposition of further sanctions on Russia (July 2014) and (6) the signing of the Minsk cease-fire agreement and the battle for the town of Debaltseve (February 2015). The papers were scanned online over those six months using the keyword "Ukraine" to collect all the editorials which explicitly dealt

with the geopolitical conflict. The search resulted in 43 editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat* and 25 editorials in *Postimees*.

As a methodological orientation into the reproduction of national geopolitical positions in the newspaper editorials, we adapted some of the ideas and principles of critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995). Accordingly, we started from the premise that, in the struggle over meanings, Finland and Estonia are formed as geopolitical entities in discourses which position and identify the countries both in geographic terms and in relation to other relevant entities in the conflict. Therefore, in Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, we focused on the representations of Finland and Estonia and how they construct geopolitical identities in relation to the conflict. We also paid attention to the potential tensions between competing geopolitical identities and how they are negotiated in the editorials.

The analysis revealed a number of similarities in the two countries' dominant geopolitical discourses. Accordingly, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees* located Finland and Estonia, respectively, within three distinct geopolitical positions: (1) The "EU member" discourse identified Finland and Estonia as fully integrated European countries which act in league with fellow EU members to defend European security, stability and values; (2) the "Russia's neighbour" discourse viewed the countries from the perspective of their shared border and history with Russia; and (3) the "member of the international community" discourse represented Finland and Estonia as independent countries which interact with others while making their own decisions in international conflicts. In addition to the three shared geopolitical positions, *Helsingin Sanomat* editorials included a fourth discourse, which locates Finland in a Western community. This "Western nation" discourse was not reproduced in *Postimees*.

Despite their apparent congruence, each of the geopolitical locations carried rather divergent implications in the editorials of the two newspapers, reflecting the differences in the national contexts of practical and popular geopolitics. We discuss each discourse separately, highlighting the similarities and differences in how the newspapers evoked their geopolitical identities when discussing the Ukraine conflict and national foreign policy. We deal with the discourse of Finland as a "Western nation" in conjunction with the "EU member" discourse, due to the close connection between the two discourses in *Helsingin Sanomat*.

## **Mapping Finland and Estonia in the Ukraine Conflict**

### *In Defence of Europe*

In both newspapers, the editorials position their home countries geopolitically as members of the EU. The discourse is grounded in a distinct narrative of the Ukraine conflict as a confrontation between the EU and Russia. Outlined in these terms, the obvious position of Finland and Estonia in the conflict is in the EU's common front against the aggressor. Yet there are significant differences in how the two papers represent Europe. In *Postimees*, Europe and the EU

as geopolitical designations are often used interchangeably. In the wake of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 incident in July 2014, for instance, *Postimees* discusses the potential evolution of “European-Russian relations” (*Postimees*, 2014c, 2014i). This not only effectively equates the EU with Europe, but it also creates an exclusionary binary between Europe and Russia as geopolitical entities. The exclusion of Russia from a conception of Europe serves as a way to naturalise the position of Estonia among European countries which stand against an “outside threat” that is posed by Russia. In its commentary on the outcome of the Minsk cease-fire negotiations in February 2015, it is natural for *Postimees* to imply Estonia’s national allegiance with Angela Merkel as the leader of Europe:

We do not know today what will result from these efforts. However, Europe is probably lucky that an experienced and vigorous head leads one of the leading countries of the continent during these complicated times. (*Postimees*, 2015c.)

In contrast, *Helsingin Sanomat* tends to employ a broader conception of Europe, which includes Russia. For the Finnish paper, the conflict appears as a struggle over Ukraine’s place in Europe between the “integrated Europe,” represented by the EU, and the Russian sphere of influence. According to this narrative, Russia is trying to block Ukraine’s trajectory toward Western Europe through military aggression that is endangering peace in Europe, a threat to which the EU must react. As a result, *Helsingin Sanomat* does not place the common threat outside Europe but instead constructs a strong internal division in Europe between the EU as “Western Europe” and the rest. This serves to underline Finland’s proper position in the conflict as part of Western Europe. When arguing for the necessity of Finland to actively support common EU sanctions against Russia in March 2014, the paper outlines Finland’s position in an explicit manner:

In Finland, there has . . . been discussion on the nature of [EU] sanctions [against Russia], on whether Finland should participate in them and on their consequences for Finland. There has been less discussion on the position of Finland in the crisis and in its aftermath. In the crisis, Finland stands with other EU countries in efforts to persuade Russia to let go of activities that endanger European peace, result in long-term economic harm and create insecurity, also in Finland’s neighbourhood. There is a price to pay now for defending the Western community. If Finland were alone in a grey zone, the price would be of a different kind. (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014d.)

As this example illustrates, the notion of the West (and its implicit juxtaposition with the East as the necessary “other”) is closely entwined in *Helsingin Sanomat*’s positioning of Finland as an EU member. The “Western nation” discourse renders the Ukraine conflict narrative into one told in civilizational terms: It is about the defence of the Western community against the Russian threat. In the wake of the downing of the Malaysian Airlines plane, the Russian threat narrative reaches new heights, with barely concealed associations with Nazi Germany and warnings against the policy of appeasement: “What would be the price if the West turned a blind eye and let things

evolve according to Putin's plans?" (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014h). Hence, in *Helsingin Sanomat's* view, when the stakes are this high, there should be no ambiguity concerning Finland's geopolitical positioning. Finland, both as an EU member and a Western nation, must, by definition, stand in the ranks which confront Russia.

Overall, the Ukraine conflict, and the Russian threat it has exposed, serve to clarify both Finland's and Estonia's geopolitical position within the EU. While *Helsingin Sanomat* employs geographic terms to distinguish between different parts of Europe and to place Finland in league with Western countries, similar conceptions are not evoked by *Postimees*, suggesting that the West–East binary is not a central element in the Estonian geopolitical discourse.

### *Borderlands in Harm's Way*

In addition to the positioning of Estonia and Finland within the common front of EU countries, the Ukraine conflict prompts both newspapers to emphasise the location of the countries within Russia's neighbourhood. However, while recognising the importance of the eastern border, the two papers often make highly diverging interpretations of its actual significance. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, the "Russia's neighbour" discourse tends to emphasise the necessity of "well-functioning neighbour relations" (2014a) and to underline Russia's significance as a "vital" economic partner for Finland (2014c). The Ukraine crisis thus emerges as a troublesome event in the history of bilateral relations between Finland and Russia. To underline the special nature of Fenno-Russian relations, *Helsingin Sanomat* often presents Finland as a country that is quite apart from Russia's other neighbours, including the former Soviet or socialist states. In contrast to the others, the Finnish leadership maintains "good and confidential relations" with Russia, which entail the capacity to talk in a "straightforward manner to a friend" as well as listening to her concerns (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014g). While the paper openly supports EU sanctions against Russia, Finland's positioning as "Russia's neighbour" thus stands partly in tension with the geopolitical positioning of Finland as part of the EU and the West, because it tends to question the rationality of the proposition that Finland should align itself with powers confronting Russia.

In *Postimees*, the geopolitical identity of Estonia as neighbouring Russia creates no such tensions. Bilateral relations with Russia are not a concern to *Postimees*, and the EU measures against Russia do not create a contradiction of interests for Estonia. If anything, the "Russia's neighbour" discourse is used to emphasise Estonia's expertise in the EU concerning proper policies on how to deal with Russia. In full support of the Estonian government's drive for tougher sanctions, the paper laments the mildness of the sanctions and argues that not all EU members have understood the real meaning of Putin's aggression and its potential impact on Europe and the international system (*Postimees*, 2014e). Accordingly, the debates within the EU on the common policy in the Ukraine conflict are not presented in terms of diverging interests but as a question of either understanding or not understanding "how things really are." A wedge is thus drawn between

those in Europe and the West who are said to realise and those who do not realise that the conflict is not only a problem for Ukraine and Eastern Europe (*Postimees*, 2014g, 2014h).

In both countries, the sharing of a border with Russia has amplified anxieties concerning national security. While the spectre of Russia's military intervention is not directly voiced by either of the papers, they often deal with the anxiety indirectly. *Helsingin Sanomat*, for instance, creates a parallel between Finland and the former socialist states, arguing that Finland too has been subject to Russia's "power politics" in the past (2014b), thus implicitly questioning the idea of Finland's "special" relationship with Russia. Elsewhere, the paper posits that the Ukraine conflict should be taken as a warning in Finland—"the use of force and military operations as a means to redraw Europe's boundaries" is "a very serious issue from Finland's perspective" (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014e). Accordingly, the conflict should spark a reassessment of Finland's foreign policy of avoiding any disputes with Russia (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014i). When the positioning of Finland next to Russia coincides with the "Russian threat" narrative of the Ukraine conflict, the "Russia's neighbour" discourse works not so much to challenge but to support the geopolitical positioning of Finland as part of the Western European community—as it confronts Russia over events in Ukraine.

When addressing Russia's threat to Estonia's national security, *Postimees* is similarly indirect. No open parallels between Estonia and Ukraine are drawn, and the suggestion that what happens in Ukraine could also take place in Estonia is not explicitly stated. Instead, the paper evokes the threat indirectly by referring to history that has a bad habit of repeating itself (*Postimees*, 2014b, 2014c) or by arguing that "war is not far away from us" (*Postimees*, 2014a, 2014d, 2014f). At the same time, the Russian threat narrative prompts *Postimees* to mobilise Estonia's status as an "allied country," referring both to Estonia's membership in NATO and to the conception of the EU as an "alliance." Accordingly, Estonia can only guarantee itself protection from an "external attack" through the unity of its allies (*Postimees*, 2013). In this regard, however, Estonia is in a difficult position as it claims it is the one country that truly understands the seriousness of the situation, but as a small country it does not have the capacity to act and can only speak reason to its allies:

Our word does not weigh much but our allies still listen to it. First and foremost, we have to confirm with our allies that we have to act right now. We need real acts not long speeches. (*Postimees*, 2014b)

It is notable that *Helsingin Sanomat* does not employ similar terminology with respect to the EU, reflecting Finland's status as a militarily nonaligned country.

### *Members of the International Community*

In addition to positioning Finland and Estonia in a European league or at Russia's border, a marginal yet notable discourse identifies the countries as independent actors and positions them

as members of the international community without emphasising geopolitical ties or alliances. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, a geopolitical narrative of the Ukraine conflict occasionally positions Finland as a passive bystander or a victim of a clash among superpowers. Accordingly, the escalating conflict among Russia, the US and the EU has “repercussions that terrify Finland” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014f). Finland does not appear as an active participant in the conflict but as one that can only look on from the sidelines and bear the consequences. On the other hand, a more positive representation of Finland as an independent actor alludes to the country’s status as a militarily nonaligned country and its tradition as an impartial international peace broker (cf. Moisio, 2008). Rather than being a passive outsider, Finland has its own voice in international matters: It makes statements on the Ukraine crisis (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014a) and “strives, with all other countries,” toward a diplomatic solution (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014e). Finland’s political efforts are aimed at reaching a negotiated agreement between Russia and Ukraine, which may involve concerted efforts to put pressure on Putin (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2014d). Thus, the discourse effectively undermines the interpretations of the Ukraine conflict as a clash between the West and Russia and instead presents it as a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. As such, the conflict remains a general problem dealt with by the international community as a whole, and Russia is not presented as a threat to Finland, Europe or the West.

*Postimees* also constructs a similar positive discourse of Estonian agency in the international arena. This discourse emphasises Estonia’s courage to act in a (morally) correct way: Estonia is the one who speaks about “the elephant in the room” (*Postimees*, 2015b) and is brave enough to ask questions that “really matter” in the international arena (*Postimees*, 2015a). The position reflects a broader national discourse concerning Estonian officials, according to which: Estonians do not speak much at EU meetings but are listened to when they do—due to their reputation of speaking only if they have something significant to say (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 107). Both papers reproduce the geopolitical position of a member of the international community in a way which emphasises the home country’s “internationally recognised” virtues.

Overall, a conspicuous difference between *Postimees* and *Helsingin Sanomat* concerns the linguistic modes of address. A characteristic feature of *Postimees* editorials is the frequent employment of the pronoun “we.” The pronoun is habitually used without explicit definition of who exactly is included in this community and seems to refer to the paper itself, to the paper and its readers or to the Estonian leadership, nation and people. Regardless of which imagined community is evoked by the pronoun, it is typically used to express shared feelings and hopes regarding the events and works as a way to naturalise certain positions as commonsense perspectives on the conflict.

In stark contrast, a “we” is entirely absent in *Helsingin Sanomat* editorials. By refusing the rhetorical device which constructs an apparently shared position, *Helsingin Sanomat* claims the discursive position of an outside observer and objective judge with regard to all geopolitical entities and actors, including Finland; it effectively hides the particular interests and location-specificity of its views (cf. Agnew, 1998, p. 8). The absence of a national “we” community,

however, means that Finland's geopolitical identity as an "EU member" or a "Western nation" needs to be made explicit, which, in turn, exposes the potential shakiness of such positioning—indeed, *Helsingin Sanomat* openly raises such questions as, "where does Finland stand in the conflict?" In the end, without the naturalising and obfuscating effect of the "we," *Helsingin Sanomat* is less capable than *Postimees* of hiding not only the controversial nature of EU policies in the Ukraine conflict but also the contestability of geopolitical identity discourses.

## **Popular Geopolitics and the Ukraine Conflict**

In their editorial commentary on the Ukraine conflict, both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees* proved to be highly consistent. The overall narrative of the conflict exhibited little variation and focused overwhelmingly on the aggression of the Kremlin in Ukraine, the threat to Europe posed by Russia and the consequent reactions by the Western powers to the predicament. In this way, both papers closely cued the points of view promoted by the national governments and the EU leadership (cf. Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Ojala & Pantti, in press).

At the same time, however, the two papers exhibited significant variation with regard to the terms on which they reasoned about the implications of the conflict for foreign policy and national security. First, while both countries were firmly placed in the camp of (Western) European nations and opposite to Russia in the conflict, *Helsingin Sanomat* described the character of Finland's reference group as a "community of values," whereas *Postimees* tended to employ more militant terminology by referring to Estonia's "allies." Second, the identification of the countries as neighbours of Russia gave *Postimees* reason to issue indirect warnings of a threat to Estonian national security and to support Estonia's efforts in persuading the "allies" to ratchet up actions against Russia, whereas *Helsingin Sanomat* tended to downplay the threat and to emphasise the value of functioning bilateral relations between Finland and Russia, despite the conflict. The consideration of national security and foreign policy concerns thus prompted the papers to map the position of Finland and Estonia in the world, and, in this exercise of popular geopolitics, both drew from the domestic geopolitical discourses dominant among the national elites.

Even though they typically use domestic elite discourses and rarely diverge from official views, newspapers, and especially their editorial teams, should not be considered as passive observers and neutral interpreters of international affairs for their national readership but as active participants in the processes of policy formation and legitimation (cf. Cook, 1998). In this regard, Moisio (2008) emphasised the significance of national identity discourses as strategic tools in political communication when actors try to influence foreign policy. By successfully mainstreaming a particular geopolitical identity, an actor can influence foreign policy because people (decision-making elites, the electorate, etc.) have a tendency to reconcile their actions with their self-understanding and vice versa. Foreign policy actions thus give substance to and make a claim of recognition for a desired geopolitical identity.

By selectively reinforcing and interpreting dominant geopolitical identity discourses, both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Postimees* claim national agency in the Ukraine conflict. *Helsingin Sanomat* is particularly active in this regard. Not only does the paper support the government's official policy of participation in EU sanctions against Russia, by evoking the geopolitical identity of Finland as a Western European nation, it also employs the geopolitical identity discourse strategically to present any opposition to the sanctions as a threat to Finland's position in the Western community. The policy debate on EU sanctions is made part of a broader struggle over foreign policy orientation in Finland, in which *Helsingin Sanomat* has been a long-time advocate of the Western orientation, including eventual NATO membership (Harle & Moisiu, 2000, pp. 212–236). In comparison, the Ukraine conflict seems to spark little disagreement over foreign policy among domestic elites in Estonia, where the alignment with Western security structures is complete. As a result, *Postimees* has little need to explicitly address domestic opponents regarding official policy. Hence, the paper locates the relevant opposition outside Estonia, namely among its allies who refuse to take seriously the threat posed by the common enemy. The domestic agency of *Postimees* largely consists of legitimising the chosen national policy in the conflict and naturalising the discourses which make it seem rational and legitimate (cf. Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006; Riegert, 2010, p. 199).

Finally, the editorials of the national newspapers should be regarded as influential practices of popular geopolitics. From this perspective, they need to be understood as enactments of two kinds of agency in national foreign policy: While aiming to directly influence foreign policy decisions, the editorials also reproduce popular geopolitical perceptions and identities on which the broader foreign policy orientation is built. In the Ukraine conflict, in addition to arguing for a tougher foreign policy toward Russia, the studied newspapers also reinforce the image of Russia as an enemy of Europe in the popular geopolitical imagination. Despite the differences in the national contexts, both newspapers tend to contribute to the naturalisation of the “new Cold War” narrative and the associated discursive division in Europe between the West and Russia (cf. Ojala & Pantti, in press).

As the perspective of popular geopolitics suggests, the political power of the news media may not arise so much from their direct support or critique of foreign policy but from their indirect contribution to the dominant discourses concerning national identity and geopolitical boundary-making. In this regard, our study corroborates earlier findings, according to which the Western news media have been active in the Ukraine conflict in building a war-like climate of public opinion, a climate in which policy makers need to be wary of not appearing to appease the “enemy” (cf. Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Ojala & Pantti, in press). As an irreconcilable antagonism between the West and Russia becomes a seemingly natural state of affairs, popular geopolitics at the borders of Europe are again guided by the image of an external threat.

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