

BORDERS AND BORDER REGIONS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ORDER: TERRITORIAL NARRATIVES OF EUROPE'S MARGINS FROM AN EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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Abstract

This article explores how two global powers narrate and politicize the territorial margins of Europe – Ukraine and Greenland – by analyzing official presidential rhetoric from the United States and the Russian Federation between 2019 and 2025. Adopting a qualitative, discourse-analytic methodology, the study treats public speeches as performative acts of statecraft that shape geopolitical perception and legitimacy. Focusing on the cases of Ukraine, a contested post-Soviet buffer zone, and Greenland, an autonomous Arctic territory, the analysis uncovers distinct yet parallel rhetorical strategies. Russia, through President Putin, constructs a historical and civilizational narrative justifying territorial claims in Ukraine as part of restoring the Russian homeland. In contrast, U.S. President Trump frames Greenland's acquisition as a strategic necessity for national and global security. Both leaders use speech acts to challenge existing territorial sovereignties, normalizing exceptionalism and projecting power by redefining borders through externalized narratives.

Keywords

borders, geopolitical order, territorial narratives, European margins, border conflicts, Greenland, Ukraine

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM SETTING

In the (still) globalized 21st century, the relevance of borders remains a central analytical concern across political science, sociology, or economics. Once perceived primarily as

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static (geo)political demarcations, borders are now increasingly examined as dynamic and contested spaces that reflect shifting power relations, social identities, and economic flows. The multidisciplinary scholarship on borders emphasizes their evolving significance in shaping governance, identity, and capital in a post-Westphalian world (Agnew, 2008). From a political standpoint, borders continue to be foundational to state sovereignty and territorial integrity (Brown, 2010; Sassen, 1996). However, their meaning has expanded in response to complex transnational phenomena such as migration, terrorism, and environmental change as well as growth of the supranational international groupings. As Andreas (2003) and Newman (2006) suggest, borders are not merely lines on a map but regulatory regimes that reflect a states' attempts to control mobility and assert sovereignty. Currently many examples illustrate how borders are leveraged for political ends, often as tools of populist discourse or nationalist policy. This happens, among others, because borders serve as both material and symbolic demarcators not only physical spaces but also cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities (Rumford, 2006). Critical border studies – drawing from Foucault and Butler – emphasize the performativity of borders in constructing the 'other' and maintaining social hierarchies (De Genova, 2013). For instance, refugee and asylum policies often reflect racialized logics that reinforce exclusionary narratives. Furthermore, borders serve as zones of hybridity where cross-cultural identities emerge, evident in the social fabric of borderland communities. Finally, in the economic domain, borders influence the flow of goods, labor, and capital. While globalization has blurred some borders through supranational institutions, others have become more rigid in response to protectionist trends. Trade tariffs, cross-border taxation, and customs regulations continue to affect global supply chains. Moreover, informal economies flourish in many border regions, challenging conventional economic models and calling for more nuanced, localized economic analyses (Donnan and Wilson, 2010).

Against this conceptual overview of critical border studies and the evolving scholarship on territoriality, this article undertakes an inquiry into how the concepts of borders and territoriality are narrated, constructed, and politicized by global powers in relation to the EU's western and eastern edges. Instead of focusing on internal EU discourses or institutional definitions of space, this study shifts the lens outward to examine how external state actors articulate the geopolitical and symbolic contours of Europe's margins. Specifically, the investigation concentrates on two geographically and politically significant peripheries of the Europe: Ukraine and Greenland. The approach adopted in this investigation is grounded in the concept of European margins. A longstanding scholarly tendency has been to examine the internal dynamics of the European integration project from the perspective of the European Union's territorial peripheries. Seminal works – such as those by William Walters (2004), and Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2008) – have provided influential categorizations of the EU's geopolitical models and geostrategies. More recent contributions, including those by Loftsdóttir, Hipfl and Ponzanesi (2024), have further deepened academic understanding of Europe's discursive and spatial configurations. However, much of this literature tends to focus on EU-based, actors situated within the expanding territorial framework of the Union or on the EU as an institutional actor itself. By shifting the

analytical lens toward external actors and the broadly defined European margins – including contested or complex spaces such as Ukraine and Greenland – this study offers a novel and potentially illuminating perspective on the geopolitical narratives that shape Europe’s evolving borders.

Ukraine, situated at the eastern frontier, has long functioned as a geopolitical buffer zone between Russia and the West, while Greenland, though politically associated with the Kingdom of Denmark, occupies a distinct Arctic position with increasing strategic value in global climate and security politics. The central objective of the article is to explore how the European project – understood as both a political entity and an imagined territorial community – is framed by foreign powers through narratives of inclusion, exclusion, threat, and proximity. To that end, the article adopts a qualitative, discourse-analytic methodology centered on official presidential rhetoric. The primary sources for this analysis are key speeches and public statements issued by the heads of state of the United States and the Russian Federation, allowing for a comparative assessment of how these two influential actors conceptualize and engage with European borders. These speeches, viewed as performative acts of statecraft, are treated not merely as reflections of policy but as discursive instruments that help shape international perceptions of territorial legitimacy and strategic importance. The analysis spans the period from 2019 to 2025 – a timeframe that encompasses several critical developments in European and global politics, especially the ongoing war in Ukraine and reorientation of the American foreign policy.

Through a systematic comparison of U.S. and Russian presidential discourse, this article addresses a set of interrelated research questions concerning the role of external geopolitical narratives in reshaping territorial politics. Specifically, it investigates: 1. How do major geopolitical actors construct external narratives about peripheral or marginal territories in Europe, such as Ukraine and Greenland? What rhetorical strategies do Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump use to legitimize territorial ambitions in these regions? And how do these narratives differ in their appeals to history, identity, security, and legitimacy? By foregrounding the narratives of external powers, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of how the European margins are politically constructed not only from within but also from outside – highlighting the contested and relational nature of borders in a world increasingly characterized by overlapping sovereignties, spatial ambiguity, and strategic narrative competition.

This article employs a qualitative, discourse-analytic approach based on a purposive selection of public statements by the Presidents of the United States and the Russian Federation. The primary criterion for inclusion was the relevance of the statements to themes of territoriality, sovereignty, and geopolitical strategy. The selected materials include formal speeches, interviews, public remarks, and social media posts, with emphasis on those that performatively articulate claims related to border politics and security imperatives.

The time frame spans from 2019 to May 2025, encompassing key phases in both cases: the initial articulation and subsequent escalation of Trump’s interest in Greenland and the intensification of Russian geopolitical narratives toward Ukraine. In both cases, statements were chosen to capture the evolution of presidential rhetoric, with particular attention to

periods of heightened discursive activity: specifically, December 2024 to May 2025 for Trump's statements on Greenland, and from July 2021 to May 2025 for Putin's statements on Ukraine.

Given the asymmetry in the volume and frequency of relevant statements, reflecting both the differing geopolitical contexts and the distinct presidential agendas, care was taken to ensure analytical balance. For Greenland, the relatively short time frame of relevant statements made by President Donald Trump (mainly from December 2024 to May 2025) allowed for a concentrated selection of those directly addressing strategic control, security, and territorial claims. In contrast, the Russian presidential discourse on Ukraine is more extensive and repetitive, requiring a selective approach that prioritized representative statements capturing key shifts and thematic milestones, while excluding redundant content that did not alter the interpretative framework.

Across both cases, the aim was not to comprehensively catalog every presidential statement but to construct analytically coherent corpora that reflects the evolving narratives of territoriality and geopolitical ambition advanced by these actors. By applying consistent criteria for relevance and representativeness, the analysis allows for a comparative assessment of how presidential speech acts are deployed to normalize territorial claims and redefine borders.

Narrative Ukraine: Putin's Historical Rhetoric of Possession

Signals indicating that the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, was increasingly questioning the geopolitical balance of power established after the end of the Cold War emerged well before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine³. Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 caused a stir among public opinion and policymakers in many countries, as he accused the United States of building a unipolar international order, thereby undermining the principles on which global security had been based since the early 1990s (Fried and Volker, 2022). And although at that time few likely considered the possibility of a military revision of state borders, the following 15 years (up to the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022) revealed a consistently implemented shift in the international policy pursued by the Russian Federation.

In relation to Ukraine, the President of Russia grants his state the right to expand its own sphere of influence, justifying this not only by (in his interpretation) the aggressive eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but also by the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians, whom he considers to be one nation. This view was particularly emphasized in Putin's article titled *"On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*⁴ from July 2021, in which he claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union severed Ukrainians from their historical homeland (Putin, 2021). As a result, restoring

3 See more in: Donaj (2010, p. 9–21); Malendowski (1993, p. 128).

4 „Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев” (official title in Russian language).

the rightful imperial borders in the name of rebuilding Russia's power becomes not only a historical necessity, but even a duty. This narrative, subordinated to immediate political goals, deliberately distorts or misrepresents the history of Ukrainian lands, completely ignoring, for instance, the issue of cultural differences and values on which Ukraine builds its identity (Getka and Darczewska, 2022, p. 12).

Just before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, on February 21, 2022, the President of Russia, in a televised address, announced the decision to recognize the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, stating among other things: "So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia." (Putin, 2022a), thereby once again undermining the foundations of Ukrainian statehood. A substantial part of the speech also referred to the weakness of Ukraine's state institutions, its poor socio-economic condition, and its subjugation to external [Western – author's note] influences: "Do they [Ukrainian Nation] realise that their country has turned not even into a political or economic protectorate but has been reduced to a colony with a puppet regime?" (Putin, 2022a). This portrayal of Ukraine, questioning its existence as a sovereign and independent state and emphasizing its weaknesses in a biased manner (while simultaneously distorting some facts), aims not only to justify the Russian Federation's violations of international law but even to present Russia as the liberator of the oppressed Ukrainians. A similar tone was present in the President's statement during a videoconference preceding the Day of the Medical Worker, related to the opening of several new medical centers in Russia (June 18, 2022): "We know how much courage, patience, compassion and self-sacrifice you demonstrated during the critical periods of the coronavirus pandemic. The medical workers of Russia display these very qualities while helping residents of the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and civilians in the liberated territories." (Putin, 2022d).

The official narrative shaped by Vladimir Putin emphasizes Russia's peaceful and constructive attitude toward NATO, while accusing the Alliance of aggressive eastward expansion and encroachment upon the borders of Russia's sphere of influence, as already mentioned above. The President underlined this point – neither for the first nor the last time – when, in the morning hours of February 24, 2022, he announced the beginning of the "special military operation" in Ukraine: "It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border." (Putin, 2022b).

Another thematic thread through which the President of Russia attempts to justify the legitimacy of crossing the borders of a sovereign and independent state is by highlighting the benefits that the residents of the "liberated" territories have gained after the "return of their land to the motherland". This element appeared, among others, in Vladimir Putin's speech during a concert marking the eighth anniversary of Crimea's reunification with Russia (March 18, 2022): "Over these years, Russia has done a great deal to help

Crimea and Sevastopol grow. There were things that needed to be done that were not immediately obvious to the unaided eye. These were essential things such as gas and power supply, utility infrastructure, restoring the road network, and construction of new roads, motorways and bridges. We needed to drag Crimea out of that humiliating position and state that Crimea and Sevastopol had been pushed into when they were part of another state that had only provided leftover financing to these territories.” (Putin, 2022c). The “special military operation,” as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is officially called in Russia by President Vladimir Putin, is in accordance with the United Nations Charter, because the “collective West,” by using Ukrainians, is conducting anti-Russian actions. Thus, by defining the “special military operation” as a form of defense, Putin justifies the armed violation of the Russian-Ukrainian border. This justification was echoed in a message from the President of Russia to the participants of the 10th Moscow International Security Conference on August 16, 2022: “They [the West – author’s note] need conflicts to retain their hegemony. It is for this reason that they have destined the Ukrainian people to being used as cannon fodder. They have implemented the anti-Russia project and connived at the dissemination of the neo-Nazi ideology. They looked the other way when residents of Donbass were killed in their thousands and continued to pour weapons, including heavy weapons, for use by the Kiev regime, something that they persist in doing now. Under these circumstances, we have taken the decision to conduct a special military operation in Ukraine, a decision which is in full conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. It has been clearly spelled out that the aims of this operation are to ensure the security of Russia and its citizens and protect the residents of Donbass from genocide.” (Putin, 2022e). The necessity of “defending Russia” as a justification for the attack on Ukraine also appeared in a statement by Putin during a meeting with the winners of Olympiads and competitions in the fields of culture, art, science, and sports in Kaliningrad (September 1, 2022), entitled “Talking of What Matters”: “And our objective, our mission, the mission of our soldiers whom you mentioned, the Donbass militia, is to stop this war, protect the people and defend Russia, since an anti-Russian enclave threatening our country was being created in Ukraine. This is why our soldiers fighting there are defending both the people of Donbass and Russia.” (Putin, 2022f).

The President of Russia addressed the issue of adherence to international agreements during the 26th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 16, 2023, accusing Ukraine and its European partners of deliberately violating the so-called Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015, thus portraying Russia as a victim forced to take corrective measures in the form of military aggression against Ukraine: “We were not the ones who tried to dupe our partners. As it turned out, signing the Minsk agreements, they never meant to implement them, and they have since gone public about this, virtually making a confession. Both the Ukrainians and the Europeans have said so publicly. So we were forced to use our Armed Forces, to recognise the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics, to allow them to accede to Russia at their request, and then to provide military support to them in an attempt to end this armed conflict.” (Putin, 2023a). The Russian Federation is consistently portrayed by Putin as a state that adheres to the norms of international law and advocates for constructive cooperation among states, based on a multipolar world order; simultaneously, in opposition to this narrative, Ukraine

and its “neo-Nazi” governments, supported by the West, are placed: “Ukraine is a case in point, demonstrating where this policy of pouring fuel on the fire leads: by pumping billions of dollars into the neo-Nazi regime and supplying it with equipment, arms and munitions, sending military advisors and mercenaries there, they are doing everything to further escalate the conflict and draw other countries into it. (...) We have always been and remain firm in our adherence to a multipolar world order based on the supremacy of norms and principles of international law, sovereignty and equality of states, constructive cooperation and trust.” (Putin, 2023b).

According to the President of Russia, the annexation of new territories, namely the occupied areas in eastern Ukraine, was carried out in accordance with international law, and the residents of these territories made a voluntary decision to “return to the homeland” (which, of course, is not reflected in reality). Vladimir Putin expressed this in his commemorative speech on the first anniversary (September 30, 2023) of the “rejoining” of these lands to the Russian Federation: “A year ago, on September 30, a defining and truly historic event took place when agreements were signed to incorporate four new constituent entities into the Russian Federation. Millions of residents of Donbass and the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions made their choice to be with their Fatherland. This conscious, long-awaited, hard-won and genuinely popular decision was made collectively through referendums in full compliance with international norms. People showed courage and integrity in the face of attempts to intimidate and deprive them of their right to determine their own future, their destiny, and to take away something every person values, namely, culture, traditions, and mother tongue, in a word, everything that was loathed by nationalists and their Western patrons who orchestrated a coup in Kiev in 2014 and then unleashed a full-scale civil war and terror against dissenters and organised blockades, constant shelling, and punitive actions in Donbass.” (Putin, 2023c).

Among the numerous historical references that the President of Russia incorporates into his speeches, particular attention should be paid to references to the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945); it is to the efforts of Soviet soldiers fighting in this war that Putin compared the struggles of those involved in the “special military operation” on the frontlines in his address on May 9, 2024 (given on the occasion of the central Russian Victory Day celebrations in Moscow): “Russia is now going through a difficult, watershed moment of its history. The fate of our Motherland and its future depend on each of us. Today, on Victory Day, we feel it ever more sharply and never fail to draw inspiration from our generation of the brave, noble and wise victors, and the way they cherished friendship and remained firm in the face of adversity, always trusted themselves and their country, and had a sincere and selfless love for their Motherland. We are celebrating Victory Day against the backdrop of the Special Military Operation. All of those engaged in it, on the frontlines, are our heroes. We are humbled by your fortitude and self-sacrifice. All of Russia stands with you.” (Putin, 2024). Referring to this difficult and important moment in Russia’s history may have another goal – psychologically acclimating Russian society to the internal consequences (e.g., a decrease in quality of life) of the ongoing full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, which has now lasted for more than two years⁵, and thus counteracting

5 At the time of delivering this address, on May 9, 2024.

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potential dissatisfaction and social unrest among Russians. Emphasizing the “greatness” and historical significance of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War is, in fact, a consistently utilized theme in Russian propaganda; it serves as a basis for national pride and is an element around which contemporary Russian state identity is built (Chawryło, 2022, p. 5).

President Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric regarding the violation of national borders in relation to Ukraine is primarily rooted in a historical narrative that seeks to justify the reclamation of territories which, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, came to lie outside the borders of what he terms the Russian “historical homeland.” The Russian Federation’s so-called “historical mission” is thus framed as the reintegration of these territories into this homeland and the liberation of Ukrainians from the perceived dominance of Western powers. This interpretation of events serves specific political objectives and frequently involves the distortion or selective use of historical facts.

Moreover, the emphasis on the “greatness and significance” of key historical moments, not only from Russia’s past but also that of the Soviet Union (particularly the Great Patriotic War), is instrumental in reinforcing national pride among the Russian populace. The framing of the “special military operation” as a difficult yet historically significant and necessary endeavor prepares Russian society for sacrifices deemed essential to the state’s interest, such as a decline in living standards or partial mobilization.

According to Putin, it is the “collective West” that seeks to first weaken and ultimately dismantle Russia, a state which, in his portrayal, consistently upholds international law and promotes a just, multipolar world order. In this context, the preventive “special military operation” in Ukraine, depicted as a Western-controlled puppet state, is presented not as an act of aggression, but as a defensive necessity.

Narrating Greenland: Trump’s Strategic Rhetoric of Possession

Greenland, the world’s largest island, has in recent years moved to the center of international attention due to its growing strategic, environmental, and economic relevance. Positioned between North America and Europe and extending deep into the Arctic, Greenland plays a critical role in the evolving global geopolitical landscape. Its geographical location makes it a linchpin in security calculations, as well as a focal point for emerging global competition in the High North.

From a military and strategic perspective, Greenland holds unique importance as it lies along the shortest potential route from adversarial powers to North America. This makes it a vital outpost for the United States’ early warning and missile defense systems, which rely on the island’s location to detect and respond to potential threats.

From a geopolitical perspective, Greenland is situated in the immediate vicinity of the so-called GIUK gap (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom), one of the most critical strategic transit route for the movement of naval and air forces between the Atlantic and the Arctic. Control and surveillance of this corridor are central to NATO’s ability to project power and monitor military movements in the region, particularly in light of Russia’s increasing

militarization of the Arctic. For over a decade, the Russian Federation has been consistently militarizing the region, rebuilding and modernizing Soviet-era military infrastructure and establishing new installations, including airfields, radar stations, and air defense systems, which significantly shape security perceptions in the Arctic.

Beyond military considerations, Greenland is attracting growing interest due to its natural wealth, including deposits of oil, natural gas, gold, uranium, as well as rare earth elements and, more broadly, critical minerals essential to the development of modern technologies such as lithium-ion batteries, wind turbines, and electronic devices. Already, Greenland possesses 25 of the 34 critical minerals identified by the European Commission as essential for energy transition, electronics, and defense (European Commission, 2023). The island also holds reserves 43 of the 50 minerals classified as “essential”, to the economy and national security, by the U.S. government (Benchmark Source, 2025). In the context of the global energy transition and rising demand for strategic raw materials, Greenland’s resource potential may significantly influence global supply chains in the future. However, despite this considerable potential, the exploitation of these resources faces numerous obstacles, including a lack of developed infrastructure, a shortage of skilled labor on the island, and the need to account for the environmental sensitivity of the Arctic ecosystem. Climate change, particularly the ongoing melting of the ice cap, is also opening up the possibility of new shipping routes across the Arctic, which could shorten transit times between Asia, Europe, and North America. The potential economic and strategic benefits of these developments are drawing attention not only from Arctic states but also from new actors, most notably China. Despite having no geographic connection to the Arctic, China has been steadily building its presence in the region, referring to itself as a “near-Arctic state” and investing in research, infrastructure, and resource extraction projects. It is important to note that while many of these processes remain more potential than actual, such as the full-scale opening of Arctic shipping lanes or the widespread exploitation of mineral resources, their scale and strategic relevance are already making Greenland one of the key reference points in the emerging global geopolitical order.

Although Donald Trump’s public assertions in 2019 and 2025 brought global attention to U.S. interest in Greenland, the idea of acquiring the island has historical roots that predate his presidency. As early as 1867 (shortly after the United States purchased Alaska), American officials informally considered the strategic value of Greenland and Iceland. The most concrete attempt occurred in 1946, when President Harry S. Truman offered Denmark \$100 million for the purchase of Greenland (Konina and Sapir, 2022). Denmark declined the offer, and while U.S. military presence on the island continued under NATO frameworks, political ambitions to acquire Greenland remained muted and largely confined to classified or diplomatic channels.

In 2019, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, sparked global attention and considerable controversy when he expressed an interest in purchasing Greenland. The information first emerged in mid-August 2019 in American media and was subsequently confirmed by Trump himself, who described the idea as “strategically interesting” (AP News, 2019).

Interestingly, at the time, President Trump emphasized the strong relations between the United States and Denmark in the context of this proposal. As he stated: “Denmark

essentially owns it. We're very good allies with Denmark. We've protected Denmark like we protect large portions of the world, so the concept came up." He also noted that the idea was not a top priority, but rather a subject open to discussion: "Strategically it's interesting and we'd be interested, but we'll talk to them a little bit. It's not No. 1 on the burner, I can tell you that." (The White House, 2019).

Denmark's reaction was immediate and unequivocal. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen dismissed Trump's proposal as "absurd" and underlined that: "Greenland is not for sale. Greenland is not Danish. Greenland belongs to Greenland. I strongly hope that this is not meant seriously" (Anderson, 2019). In the years that followed, this statement would be repeatedly recalled as emblematic of Denmark's firm stance.

As a direct consequence of this strong response, Donald Trump decided to cancel a planned official visit to Copenhagen. The visit, scheduled for early September 2019 at the invitation of Denmark's Queen Margrethe II, was called off in a tweet by the President. He explained that the meeting would not take place because the Danish Prime Minister had "no interest in discussing the purchase of Greenland" (Allin, 2019).

The cancellation of the visit was widely interpreted as a gesture of diplomatic dissatisfaction and an escalation of tensions in U.S.-Danish relations. In many quarters, it was met with disbelief or seen as a manifestation of Trump's eccentric presidential style. Within the European Union, the dominant tone was one of criticism, emphasizing a lack of understanding regarding the legal status of Greenland as an autonomous territory with its own government. Some commentators, however, pointed out that while the idea of purchasing territory may seem anachronistic, it nonetheless underscored the growing geopolitical significance of the Arctic and the intensifying great-power competition over influence in the region.

In 2025, following his return to the presidency, Donald Trump reignited his controversial focus on Greenland, elevating the issue from a provocative notion to a recurring theme in U.S. strategic discourse. Central to this renewed attention are Trump's public declarations asserting that "ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity" for the national security of the United States. No longer framed as a speculative real estate ambition, his rhetoric now positions Greenland as a critical asset in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Arctic. With statements such as "we'll get Greenland," Trump has shifted the tone from diplomatic overture to strategic imperative.

Throughout the early months of his second presidential term, Donald Trump has repeatedly and unequivocally asserted that the United States will secure control over Greenland. His declarations, made across various public appearances and interviews, reflect not only persistence but growing certainty in the feasibility of such an outcome. "I think we're going to have it," Trump stated plainly (Aikman, 2025). When questioned about the prospect of annexation, he responded confidently: "I think that will happen" (FitzGerald, 2025). Reinforcing this position even more strongly, Trump later emphasized: "I think we're going to get it, one way or the other, we're gonna get it" (The White House, 2025). These remarks suggest a consistent rhetorical strategy aimed at normalizing the idea of acquiring Greenland as a matter of eventuality rather than speculation, reflecting a significant shift in how presidential ambition intersects with Arctic policy and international law.

In his second presidential term, Donald Trump has consistently framed the potential takeover of Greenland not merely as a strategic interest for the United States, but as an imperative for safeguarding global stability and defending the international order. Unlike in 2019, when his proposal to purchase Greenland was met with scepticism and viewed as a hallmark of his unconventional style, Trump now presents the island's acquisition as essential for preserving what he calls "freedom of the world." As he put it bluntly, "I think we'll get Greenland because it has to do with freedom of the world" (Aikman, 2025), adding elsewhere, "...it's for the protection of the free world" (Aikman, 2025).

This emphasis on international security has become a recurrent theme in his public statements. During a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, Trump stated: "You know, Mark, we need that for international security... we have a lot of our favourite players cruising around the coast, and we have to be careful" (FitzGerald, 2025). These remarks reflect a perception that the Arctic-long seen as peripheral to global affairs – is now a critical frontier in geopolitical rivalry, especially in the face of expanding Russian and Chinese maritime activity. In an interview, Trump further elaborated: "to let them know that we need Greenland for international safety and security. We need it. We have to have it," continuing, "It's [an] island from a defensive posture and even offensive posture is something we need. ... When you look at the ships going up their shore by the hundreds, it's a busy place" (Nguyen, 2025).

Perhaps most revealing is a statement in which Trump links legal sovereignty, national interest, and the threat of foreign presence in the Arctic: "People really don't even know if Denmark has any legal right to it. But if they do, they should give it up because we need it for national security. That's for the free world. I'm talking about protecting the free world. You look at, you don't even need binoculars. You look outside, you have China ships all over the place. You have Russian ships all over the place. We're not letting that happen. We're not letting it happen" (AP Newsroom, 2025b). This remark exemplifies Trump's rhetoric: a blend of legal ambiguity, strategic urgency, and emotional appeal aimed at justifying decisive action. Trump has also sought to reframe the issue as one in which allies, including Denmark, should recognize shared interests. He has asserted that "the world needs us to have Greenland, including Denmark" and warned, "if we don't have Greenland, we can't have great international security" (Brennan, 2025).

Together, these statements articulate a vision in which Greenland is no longer viewed as a remote territory but rather as a central node in the evolving architecture of global security. Trump's messaging indicates that, in his view, U.S. control of Greenland is not only justified but necessary for maintaining the balance of power in the Arctic – and by extension, across the broader international system.

In advocating for U.S. control over Greenland, Donald Trump has increasingly cast doubt on Denmark's capacity to govern and defend the island, both practically and legally. He has questioned the validity of Danish sovereignty, suggesting that historical claims no longer align with contemporary geopolitical realities. In one notable statement, Trump remarked: "That whole area is becoming very important. And for a lot of reasons. The routes are, you know, very direct to Asia, to Russia, and you have ships all over the place and we have to have protection. So we're going to have to make a deal on that. And Denmark is not able to do that. What happened? A boat landed there 200 years ago or

something and they say they have rights to it. I don't know if that's true. I'm not, I don't think it is, actually" (AP Newsroom, 2025a). This statement reflects a broader narrative in which Denmark is portrayed as an insufficient guarantor of regional security in a rapidly militarizing Arctic.

Trump's scepticism toward Denmark's role is not isolated. Key figures within his administration have echoed and amplified these concerns. During a visit to the American Pituffik Space Base in Greenland, Vice President J.D. Vance issued a pointed critique of Danish stewardship of the island: "Our message to Denmark is very simple: You have not done a good job by the people of Greenland" (Harding, Murray and Debusmann, 2025). Framing the issue as both a failure of governance and a lapse in international responsibility, Vance extended the critique further in a video message preceding the trip: "Unfortunately, leaders in both America and in Denmark, I think, ignored Greenland for far too long. That's been bad for Greenland, it's also been bad for the security of the entire world. We think we can take things in a different direction, so I'm gonna go check it out" (McDaniel, 2025).

These remarks suggest a concerted rhetorical shift: away from treating Greenland as a diplomatic or commercial matter and toward presenting it as a security failure necessitating U.S. intervention. In this framing, Denmark is depicted not as a partner but as an absentee custodian – one whose historical claims are outdated and whose strategic capacity is insufficient for the challenges of 21st-century geopolitics. This evolving discourse underlines the degree to which Trump's administration has redefined the Greenland issue, not only as a territorial or strategic concern but also as a judgment on allied competence.

One of the most controversial dimensions of Donald Trump's rhetoric concerning Greenland has been his repeated refusal to rule out the use of military force to secure control over the island. In January 2025, when asked whether he would definitively exclude the possibility of using either military or economic pressure to acquire the autonomous Danish territory Trump responded starkly: "No, I can't assure you on either of those two" (Davies and Wendling, 2025). This declaration was met with considerable shock, particularly in light of the longstanding alliance between the United States and Denmark, both of which are close NATO partners.

Although in a subsequent March interview Trump expressed a degree of restraint, stating, "I think there's a good possibility that we could do it without military force" (AP Newsroom, 2025b), he simultaneously reaffirmed his broader strategic posture by clarifying: "I never take military force off the table" (AP Newsroom, 2025b). This dual message, emphasizing preference for non-military avenues while keeping military action as a potential option, underscored the administration's assertive and ambiguous approach to Greenland.

This tone intensified in the lead-up to Vice President J.D. Vance's visit to the Pituffik Space Base, when Trump declared that the United States would "go as far as we have to go" (Brennan, 2025) to secure control over the island. Such rhetoric not only challenged the political status quo but also introduced strategic uncertainty into U.S. relations with its Arctic partners.

Trump's position remained unchanged in May 2025, when, during an appearance on NBC's Meet the Press, he was directly asked by interviewer Kristen Welker, "But you are

not ruling out military force to take Greenland one day?" Trump responded: "I don't rule it out. I don't say I'm going to do it, but I don't rule out anything. No, not there. We need Greenland very badly" (NBC News, 2025). Notably, in the same interview, Trump drew a distinction by stating that the use of military force to acquire Canada was "highly unlikely," adding, "I don't see it with Canada," which further underscored the uniquely strategic status Greenland holds in his worldview.

Together, these remarks reflect a broader recalibration of American foreign policy under Trump's renewed leadership, one that increasingly views Greenland not merely as a territorial interest, but as a geostrategic imperative worth pursuing by all available means.

In his March 2025 address to a Joint Session of Congress, Donald Trump directed a short part of his rhetoric explicitly toward the people of Greenland, portraying a vision of shared prosperity and security under American governance. "We will keep you safe, we will make you rich, and together, we will take Greenland to heights like you have never thought possible before" (The White House, 2025), he declared, presenting the United States as a guarantor of both economic opportunity and protection. In a notable departure from his usual tone on the issue, Trump also affirmed a commitment to Greenlandic self-determination: "We strongly support your right to determine your own future, and, if you choose, we welcome you into the United States of America" (The White House, 2025). However, this moment of conciliatory language was quickly eclipsed by a return to strategic imperatives, as he immediately added: "But we need it, really, for international world security. And I think we're going to get it. One way or the other, we're going to get it" (The White House, 2025). This rhetorical shift illustrates the persistent tension in Trump's discourse between appeals to democratic legitimacy and an overarching insistence on geopolitical necessity.

From the perspective of critical border studies, Trump's language exemplifies the symbolic violence of border reconfiguration through speech. Borders are not merely geographic demarcations; they are performative constructs embedded in narratives of legitimacy, power, and identity. By publicly entertaining the acquisition of Greenland without regard for the will of its people or the Danish state, Trump's rhetoric constitutes a discursive act of border transgression. In effect, he performs a symbolic annexation – one that, although not enacted through force, repositions Greenland within a U.S.-centric geopolitical imaginary. While in 2019 his comments framed Greenland as a "large real estate deal," the 2024–2025 discourse has adopted more overtly strategic and coercive undertones. Statements like "ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity" and "we'll get Greenland" signal a rhetorical transition from a speculative, transactional register to a more assertive and security-oriented posture. This discursive transformation challenges the normative framework of territorial sovereignty, especially when directed toward a territory tied to a NATO ally.

What makes this case especially significant is the nature of Greenland's status: a semi-sovereign entity with increasing aspirations for full independence. By ignoring these political dynamics and framing Greenland as a passive object of acquisition, Trump's rhetoric undermines not only the principles of territorial sovereignty but also the emerging voices of indigenous self-determination.

Comparative analysis

The territorial narratives advanced by Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in relation to Ukraine and Greenland, respectively, reveal both parallel rhetorical strategies and fundamental divergences rooted in history, ideology, and geopolitical objectives. While each narrative seeks to legitimize ambitions of control or influence over peripheral territories, their underlying justifications and discursive mechanisms differ markedly.

At a structural level, both narratives rely heavily on presidential rhetoric to perform territorial claims. They position the respective heads of state not only as political leaders but as narrators of national destiny, using history, strategic logic, and security imperatives to redefine borders and question the sovereignty of others. However, the basis of legitimacy diverges: Putin employs a historicist and civilizational logic grounded in the post-Soviet imaginary, whereas Trump invokes a future-oriented and securitized rhetoric emphasizing American exceptionalism and global leadership.

Similar Approaches to Justifying Territorial Control

Both Putin and Trump deploy narratives that frame the target territory (Ukraine and Greenland) not as autonomous/independent political entities, but as spaces that are either historically inseparable from the nation (in Russia's case) or strategically indispensable (in the United States'). These narratives are designed to blur the lines between interest and obligation. In Putin's discourse, the integration of Ukraine (or its part) into Russia is cast as a historical duty, rooted in the idea of a shared identity and the artificiality of Ukrainian statehood. Similarly, Trump presents the acquisition of Greenland not merely as an opportunistic desire but as a necessity for the security of the "free world," implying a quasi-moral obligation to act.

In both cases, their rhetoric turns aggressive aims into actions that seem defensive or aimed at restoring order – though in Russia's case, this has led to a full-scale war, while in the case of Greenland, it remains primarily at the level of political discourse. Putin's "special military operation" is described as a defensive reaction to NATO expansion and the so-called genocide in Donbas, while Trump's call to "get Greenland" is framed as a response to threats from Russia and China in the Arctic, and as a protection of international stability. This shared technique of securitization allows both leaders to rearticulate expansionist projects as acts of national or global preservation.

Moreover, both narratives exhibit a skepticism or outright dismissal of the legitimacy and competence of the existing sovereign authorities. Putin depicts the Ukrainian government as a Western "puppet regime", incapable of genuine sovereignty or governance. Trump, on the other hand, repeatedly casts doubt on Denmark's right or capacity to effectively manage Greenland, questioning its historical claims and governance ability. This discursive undermining of the "other's" legitimacy serves to elevate the necessity and righteousness of external intervention.

Divergences in Justificatory Logic

Despite structural similarities, the narratives diverge significantly in their ideological orientation and temporal focus. Putin's narrative is deeply embedded in a mythologized historical continuum. He draws upon the Soviet legacy, the Great Patriotic War, and pre-Soviet imperial imaginaries to justify the reintegration of Ukraine. This historico-cultural framing constructs Ukraine not merely as a neighbor, but as a lost province of a larger Russian civilizational space. The language is one of restoration and reclamation, casting Russia as the custodian of historical truth and identity.

Trump's rhetoric, by contrast, is predominantly future-oriented and framed within a logic of strategic utility. Greenland is not positioned as a culturally or historically American space, but as a geographically critical asset for national and international security. His justification is pragmatic rather than historical: focused on emerging threats, resource competition, and geostrategic advantage. This forward-looking rationale contrasts with Putin's emotionally driven historical claims and emphasizes the strategic, functional character of Trump's narrative.

Additionally, while Putin formulates his narrative in terms of ethnic and cultural kinship, claiming unity between Russians and Ukrainians, Trump does not invoke any form of shared identity with Greenlandic inhabitants. In fact, Greenlanders themselves are largely absent from his narrative, reduced to passive recipients of future prosperity under U.S. control. In contrast, Putin at least nominally invokes the protection and liberation of Ukrainian citizens, albeit in a propagandistic frame.

Normative Implications and Legal Ambiguity

Both leaders rely on ambiguous references to international law to legitimize their positions. Putin invokes the United Nations Charter and the failure of the Minsk Agreements to cast Russia's actions as legal, even humanitarian. Trump's discourse, while less legally elaborate, questions the validity of Denmark's sovereignty, suggesting that legal ownership is subordinate to strategic necessity. Both approaches represent attempts to normalize the redefinition of borders outside established international legal frameworks.

However, while Putin frames his actions within a broader civilizational and moral order, claiming to act as a bulwark against Western decadence and aggression, Trump's narrative reflects a more unilateralist and transactional worldview. His statements suggest that power, rather than principle, underwrites territorial legitimacy: if the U.S. "needs" Greenland (for international security"), then it must have it "one way or the other."

In sum, the narratives of Putin and Trump regarding Ukraine and Greenland illustrate how modern territorial claims are embedded in performative and strategic discourse. While both narratives challenge the normative integrity of established borders and seek to legitimize exceptionalist actions, they differ in their temporal orientation, ideological content, and modes of justification. Putin appeals to a mythicized past and ethnic unity to reclaim lost lands, whereas Trump envisions territorial acquisition as a security imperative.

within a future-facing, realpolitik framework. These rhetorical constructions underscore the continued relevance – and contestation – of borders in the contemporary geopolitical imagination.

CONCLUSIONS

This article investigated how two major geopolitical actors – Russia and the United States – construct external narratives around the European margins, specifically Ukraine and Greenland, and how these narratives shape broader territorial and strategic understandings in an evolving global order. By examining key public speeches and statements from Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, the article reveals how these leaders use rhetorical strategies to perform and legitimize territorial ambitions. Putin’s discourse portrays Ukraine as a culturally inseparable extension of Russia, using historical revisionism and civilizational logic to justify military intervention and the erosion of Ukrainian sovereignty. Trump’s rhetoric, especially during his second presidential term, frames Greenland as a geopolitical linchpin vital to U.S. and global security, advocating its acquisition in increasingly assertive terms – ranging from diplomatic overtures to the implicit threat of force. The analysis compares these narratives across several dimensions: historical versus strategic legitimacy, defensive versus offensive postures, and symbolic versus functional territoriality. While both leaders challenge the normative integrity of borders, Putin’s narrative draws heavily on past myths and ethnic kinship, whereas Trump’s is rooted in future-oriented security pragmatism. Despite these differences, both rhetorical frameworks seek to undermine the authority of existing sovereign entities – Ukraine and Denmark – casting them as incapable or illegitimate. In doing so, they normalize external interventions and reframe expansionist ambitions as necessary acts of protection or restoration. The article thus offers critical insight into how contemporary territorial politics are being reshaped by discursive practices that extend far beyond traditional diplomacy, signaling a broader trend toward strategic narrative warfare in global geopolitics.

While this article concentrates on the discursive strategies of two major external actors – the United States and the Russian Federation – it should be noted that both the security cultures of Ukraine and Greenland themselves, as well as the perspectives of regional and subnational actors, offer significant potential for further investigation. A more critical examination of the internal strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and securitization processes within Ukraine and the Arctic region would undoubtedly enrich our understanding of how these territories interpret and respond to external geopolitical narratives. Likewise, the ways in which regional actors (such as Greenlandic and Ukrainian authorities) contest, reshape, or accommodate external rhetorical framings merit deeper analysis. However, due to space limitations and the comparative focus of the present study, these dimensions are not explored in detail here.

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