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Responses to uncertainty in global politics

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This book was born of uncertainty. First, it was the uncertainty about answers – answers that may or may not exist, and perhaps answers that should or should not be sought and, when sought, may lead to multiple and even contradictory understandings, further complicating the original uncertainty that motivated the search. What is uncertainty and how are political actors affected by it? How does uncertainty shape their – our – experiences of everyday life, “normal” politics, and transformative events? What does uncertainty make us do, if anything? These questions popped up through our readings of the International Relations (IR) literature, our observations of the political world, and our discussions in classrooms and conference venues as well as our exchanges when writing this book.

In one exchange on the core question of the book – “why didn’t we see this coming?” – Kelman, for example, invited us to think about whether any disaster can be considered a surprise. ‘It is a philosophical struggle to defend the thesis “Because of (any form of) uncertainty,”’ he wrote to us,

It is also about what is (i) uncertain, e.g., earthquake epicenter magnitude and depth, and what is not uncertain, e.g., that poorly constructed buildings collapsed and those with seismic resistance measures did not, and (ii) surprising, e.g., that we did not bother learning from recent pandemics, including a coronavirus one. In other words, in “why didn’t we see this coming?”, what is “this”? Nature always produces surprises, aleatoric uncertainties, unpredictabilities, and never-before-seen phenomena. But social changes always seem to have analogies and precedents... At least, now we have enough to know. At what point in history did genuine “social uncertainty” morph into “can’t be bothered to learn”?

(Kelman, personal correspondence, 4 Aug. 2021).

The dialogue between the contributors in this book centers on these and other difficult questions and uncovers different answers that can help us make better sense of the varied nature and effects of uncertainty in global politics. We learn from these contributions that uncertainty manifests itself not only as a phenomenon that is inherent to human and externally produced contexts or routinized in everyday political processes, that shocks and confuses actors in extreme ways or presents as of yet unconceivable potentialities, but also as a feature of knowledge production, including our own.

This latter, epistemic uncertainty that involves questions about how to find answers, too, motivated the book. How do we know uncertainty when we see it? How do we capture it, analyze it, and present it? And should we try to understand it at all? These are the questions that scholars of (global) politics know well. They reflect the challenges of converting often abstract, directly unobservable forces behind “the political” into something that can be better imagined, measured, categorized, and referenced. Accepting uncertainty as a force in global politics defies the view of a fully comprehensible social world. The positivist training that many scholars of (global) politics have received dictates that categorization and measurement of the inherently muddled and complex world are indeed possible – we simply need the right tools to do so. Working on this book has shown us, among other things, that such categorization and measurement may not always be possible. Yet, this actual or perceived impossibility can help push the boundaries of our imagination on multifaceted and difficult-to-study concepts like uncertainty where different forms and understandings of the concept compete and overlap.

Time and again, the contributors to this volume pointed out that the neat categorization of the different forms of uncertainty that we arrived at by putting the chapters in conversation with the stories about uncertainty developed in different traditions of IR scholarship could be further nuanced or even challenged. For example, while our imagination placed the consequences of the development of space technologies in the realm of uncertainty about the future, writing specifically about satellites and their associated ground-based infrastructure, Bower insisted that

my focus is the various existing and near-term prospective uses of orbital space, rather than future technologies or human and robotic exploration beyond Earth orbit. So, the emphasis is more contemporary (what is happening now) than future-looking (what might happen in the future).

(Bower, personal correspondence, 15 Nov. 2021)

Further challenging our original analytical framework, Elliott highlighted that his chapter on sustainable finance tackles the intersection between epistemic uncertainty in the sense of competing interpretations of uncertainty in policy paradigms in this area and ontological uncertainty over possible and potential environmental consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Similarly, Bedford saw both the human sources of uncertainty in electoral authoritarian regimes and external sources given the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic for how the presidential election in Belarus unfolded in 2020 where inherent, regular, and extreme forms of ontological uncertainty were simultaneously at play.

The process of selecting and shaping the chapters in this volume thus challenged our own views of uncertainty, our own visions for this book as well as our understanding of the political world. So it did for the contributors to the volume as the authors responded to our and other contributors’ comments in multiple rounds of internal and external review and we incorporated the authors’ reflections into our analysis in an ongoing way. Through this iterative, dialogic process, the volume turned out to be a genuinely collective product.

One moment of coproduction, the contributors' workshop, for example, revealed that our audience need not be limited to IR, as we had originally envisioned, given that the contributors come from an interdisciplinary background and tackle questions about uncertainty from different theoretical perspectives. 'IR and CP [Comparative Politics] are two sides of the same coin,' Noakes evocatively argued about the need to include and recognize both international and domestic issues among the contributions of the volume, 'if we are talking to dolphins, we should be able to talk to porpoises as well. We are all here for world politics' (workshop transcript, 2 June 2021). This call to broaden the scope of the volume is reflected in our resulting coverage of individual and interpersonal psychological (biases, perceptions, beliefs) and emotional (hope, fear, resentment) dynamics, various internal and external actors' social interactions (conflict, cooperation, competition) in the context of domestic politics, international relations, and global interconnections, and processes of knowledge production. Analysis of these issues in the volume engages and intertwines the literatures on political psychology and sociology; institutional design, delegation theory, and complexity theory; international political economy and law; global governance, norms, and disaster diplomacy; sociology of knowledge; and critical, feminist, and decolonial approaches.

Through this interdisciplinary conversation, we found some answers to our initial questions, while stumbling upon new ones. What other forms of uncertainty are there and how can we capture those forms in our understanding of uncertainty as outlined in the introduction to this volume? For example, is legal uncertainty that stems from 'the diffuse nature of lawmaking authority and lack of hierarchy among the principal sources of international law' different from routine uncertainty in "normal" politics (Yüksel in this volume)? Is it useful to separate uncertainty from other, similar concepts like risk or (un)predictability? For instance, aren't potential existential risks posed by emerging weapons technologies that Prem discusses themselves are a source of uncertainty? Don't people experience uncertain or risky or unpredictable phenomena in the same way, as Bedford's and Driscoll and Savelyeva's chapters on ordinary people's experiences in situations of intersecting uncertainties, risks, and unpredictabilities suggest? And what can centering our own responses to uncertainty, as Krystalli, Tripathi, and Hunfeld do, help achieve in exploring uncertainty that mainstream approaches cannot?

Our final coproductive moment in the lead up to the publication of this volume, the two "Uncertainty in Global Politics" panels at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in 2022,¹ put further questions on the table. For example, can uncertainty in fieldwork that Noakes focuses on empower rather than merely limit researchers? How do we reconcile the destructive and productive effects of uncertainty evident in Moore and Orchard's analysis of Fiji's leadership as a global norm entrepreneur, which was made possible by the destruction of community livelihoods as a result of the rising sea levels? And how can we address the "dark side" of agency in actors' attempts to manufacture certainties and uncertainties to their own advantage, as Bedford, Elliott, Prem, and others in this volume demonstrate?

The authors in this volume agree that uncertainty cannot (and should not) be eliminated but embraced, transformed, and, in some cases, managed and reduced or, at the minimum, correctly identified. Uncertainty is temporal; it can be individually or collectively manufactured, whether intentionally or not. As Krystalli, Tripathi, and Hunfeld powerfully convey, certainty is a performance. It is an image we try to forge, a distorted reflection of the disarray of politics and the social world. Yet, many contributors in this volume suggest that uncertainty is to some extent controllable, directing us to the possibility of reclaiming some sense of agency. If humans create uncertainty – whether intentionally or not – and that uncertainty leads to suboptimal political choices and policy actions, then humans can also lessen, channel, or repurpose uncertainty to solve, address to the best of our ability and current knowledge, or, at least, better understand the complexity surrounding pressing problems. This pertains not only to academic and pedagogic practice that Krystalli, Tripathi, and Hunfeld address but also to practice and policymaking in different domains of global politics and simply everyday life that other chapters reflect on.

While in the introduction to this volume, we discuss the various forms that uncertainty may take in global politics, below we turn to questions of effects and responses to uncertainty: What does uncertainty “do” in global politics? How do political actors respond to uncertainty and how should they? These questions are interlinked and many contributors to this volume observe the various effects of uncertainty in different political settings, with implications for effective responses. We tease out these effects and responses and then illustrate the application of our uncertainty forms in the case of Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We have chosen this case as an illustrative example of multiple, qualitatively different forms of uncertainty that can be traced in war but also across other global phenomena.

Responding to the effects of uncertainty

Political responses to uncertainty are based on a complex mix of factors that are determined as much by institutional environments as by individual experiences. Uncertainty depends on human perception – we both generate uncertainty through our “reading” of events and grapple with uncertainty when perceiving the world as uncertain. Therefore, as Matchett reminds us in her study of armament choices in the US Congress, an important lesson about uncertainty is that it cannot be addressed simply by information updating, because information is not neutral and information processing is shaped by idiosyncrasies and cognitive biases of individuals who are embedded in different social and normative contexts. Driscoll and Savelyeva come to a similar conclusion while focusing on difficult decisions that ordinary people make in wartime about whether to fight or not. In this politically charged information environment, the authors show, competing narratives about the war shape powerful emotions like fear that guide people’s actions. Such an individual perspective may help us better understand political or public policy decisions whether in missile defense, local dynamics of war, or other areas.

Yet, explaining responses to uncertainty is not a simple story of individual perceptions. Uncertainty, as Yüksel reveals, can result from collective as opposed to (and in addition to) individual human information processing. Uncertainty is as much about (collectively) acquiring knowledge as about (collectively) interpreting it; uncertainty accumulates and evolves, and if the conditions are ripe, it thrives. In both studying and teaching global politics, the potential for accumulation and evolution of uncertainty suggests the necessity to reflect on our own practices as scholars and educators: Do we – intentionally or not – perpetuate uncertainty in scholarship and classroom? What are the possible effects, whether positive or negative, of such practice? What lessons can we learn and pass on from working in and with uncertainty? While states and nonstate actors endure uncertainty as a pervasive condition, uncertainty may not be all encompassing, and it surely does not always signal trouble. Yüksel’s case study of Mexico-US maritime boundary demarcation in the 1970s shows that states can in fact cooperate despite the obstacles to cooperation created by high (legal) uncertainty.

Perpetuating, or exploiting uncertainty, can also lead to socially desirable, if unexpected, outcomes. As Bedford shows in her discussion of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, individual and collective processing of uncertainty works side by side and the interaction of individual and collective responses to uncertainty can sometimes generate change even in the least likely settings such as electoral autocracies. Here individual authoritarian leaders manage two kinds of uncertainty: one that results from them lacking a democratic mandate, and the other from regularly occurring, albeit superficially legitimate elections where voters’ true preferences cannot be known. Regime challengers, nonetheless, can use elections as moments of uncertainty to convince citizens that their individual choices matter and that they, therefore, can (and should) collectively voice popular discontent. Bedford shows that challengers can succeed in these efforts, particularly during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which can motivate individual citizens to make their personal preferences public through collective action. When citizens respond with mass mobilization, change may become possible.

Hence, at the core of the interaction between individual and collective processing of uncertainty is the question of who stands to win or lose from uncertainty, and, more specifically, from particular interpretations of uncertainty. Whereas Bedford illustrates how uncertainty can underpin socially desirable change, for example, by creating windows of opportunity for undermining an authoritarian regime, it can also have perverse effects by benefiting those with narrow political interests and goals. We should, therefore, ask in whose interest it is to reject or embrace uncertainty. In his study of the financial sector’s responses to climate change, Elliott tracks how uncertainty has been consistently and purposefully interpreted as risk. Unlike uncertainty, risk is calculable, orderly, stable, and thus desirable by those who depend upon that stability. Elliott’s analysis suggests that rejecting and repackaging uncertainty in one area may have downstream effects for addressing problems that are often revealed only when uncertainty is acknowledged – problems like how to prepare for the unpredictable impacts of climate change. The most likely solution is regulatory action that tackles manufactured uncertainty that is

not perpetuated by private individuals but by institutions. Elliott shows that understanding uncertainty is an epistemological choice and that aligning interests of the involved actors may prove an effective way of making optimal policy choices.

Prem, too, examines uncertainty as a strategically manufactured condition. Working with the concept of “strategic ignorance,” Prem reminds us that uncertainty is socially constructed; it is an outcome of a process that is both interactive and contested. Like Elliott, Prem argues that the condition of uncertainty may be advantageous to some, specifically those who seek to delay problem-solving. Her study of norm antipreneurs in the creation of norms linked to autonomous weapons systems reveals a way forward in handling this kind of manufactured uncertainty. One may, for example, shift focus to a different aspect of the contested issue, an aspect that is less vulnerable to exploitation. Alternatively, one may move discussions to another forum and reduce strategic uncertainty by restricting access to those who seek to manufacture it.

In other contexts, in contrast, efforts to reduce uncertainty can be counterproductive to an adequate policy response. As Swedlund finds, some political actors, specifically ground-level diplomats, stand to benefit from a swift return to “business as usual” from extreme moments of uncertainty such as unconstitutional regime change. Foreign state and international organization staff located in these settings favor such a return to a critical assessment of the situation that could better inform policymakers due to the incentives for stability and routines embedded in their organizations. Policy responses to unconstitutional regime change that we see are as a result vague and even contradictory, and the analysis of these responses often focuses on statements made by states and international organizations in the aftermath. In turn, Swedlund clearly shows that introducing mechanisms of preparedness for unconstitutional regime change, including by shifting diplomats’ incentives to develop nuanced knowledge of the political context in which they operate, can help respond to these events in more effective and coordinated ways.

Uncertainty may also be transformed, as Moore and Orchard reveal in the case of climate mobilities and Fiji. As the citizens of the states at risk of sea-level rise face the existential pressures from climate change, their governments must grapple with the lack of a clear international framework for response. Much like Yüksel, Moore and Orchard reveal uncertainty as something that is not static, a condition that changes throughout time. Uncertainty today affects uncertainty (and life) in the future, while the shadow of future uncertainty shapes policy decisions today. Moore and Orchard suggest that government actors can manage extreme uncertainty through ‘stretching, translating, and contesting potentially applicable norms,’ which can then be formalized. This, in effect, transforms uncertainty that disrupts everyday lives into “normal” politics and what we call a routine form of uncertainty.

Kelman’s chapter also suggests the possibility – if not necessity – of uncertainty transformation albeit from a different perspective. Like others in this volume, Kelman believes that manufactured uncertainty prevents meaningful political action. In addition, he points us towards uncertainties that are not inherent or purposefully manufactured but those that are assumed. Kelman’s examples of climate

change, disasters, and outer space sudden catastrophic events demonstrate how sources of uncertainty that are out of human control often become the focus of human decisions – they are used as justifications for inaction. While there may be external uncertainties, focusing on these rather than on those we can influence is futile. What to do about uncertainties that political actors assume? Kelman argues that we should stop hiding behind the “un” (e.g., unexpected, unprecedented, unusual, and uncertain) and address the uncertainties that are within our ability. We should not take for granted any assumptions about uncertainty and we need to accept the responsibilities for both knowing and not knowing. If we scale down threats and reframe them back from seemingly unsurmountable to manageable problems, we take back some control to enact meaningful change.

One way to approach this question of strategically framing threats toward socially favorable outcomes is through reflective and deliberative learning in policymaking that can help political actors overcome preexisting institutional constraints and disciplinary boundaries within which decisions are typically made. Hasenkamp discusses the utility of this “anti-disciplinary” approach in the case of governing uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hasenkamp shows that relying on dominant frames based on existing institutional arrangements and knowledge infrastructures limits policy development. Resulting policy overlooks the multifaceted, and commonly gendered, effects of emergency measures, above all on socially marginalized groups. What is needed, Hasenkamp argues, is a change in mindset of decisionmakers to meaningfully incorporate scientific advice into policymaking. Such change would combine an understanding of disruptive forces that require urgent response with that of underlying structural conditions that shape how any response may affect different groups in society. Policy issues can be framed and addressed in socially transformative ways, even if the impact of actual measures will not be known because of multiple confounding factors.

Uncertainty not only opens room for strategic framing (and thus potentially creates more uncertainty) but also for unintended consequences, misperception, and accidents with serious political consequences. Working through the examples of orbital space as an extension of terrestrial space, Bower emphasizes the well-known problem in global politics of the dangers of misperception and miscalculation due to the lack of (accurate) data. Like others, Bower comes to the conclusion that uncertainty, whether from external or human sources, can never be eliminated (and thus information updating is not the best response) – it must be managed. From a state perspective then, political actors must strive for transparency of behaviors and intentions to convey capabilities, perceptions of threat, and resolve. Other ways of managing uncertainty include improving the quality/quantity of data, setting clearer rules, especially in their application to new phenomena, pushing for a better enforcement of those rules, improving coordination in data collection, management, and dissemination, and developing shared understandings. Often, many of these goals can be achieved through consultations with involved actors, including governments, private entities, and civil society. This echoes and extends Hasenkamp’s call for an improved policy–science interface to include a multiplicity of social actors when navigating uncertain contexts and events.

Combined, the contributions in this volume show that responses to uncertainty are multiple; they are not predetermined and are instead actor and context dependent. As a result, they can be surprising from the perspective of dominant theories about human action. Individual and interpersonal psychological and emotional factors may drive some responses. Yet, collective dynamics of interpretation, manipulation, and transformation of uncertainty toward socially (un)desirable outcomes will intervene in how political actors (mis)perceive and act – or not – upon any information that they have at their disposal, receive, or actively seek, including about uncertainty itself. Underlining these responses, therefore, are complex processes of meaning making that variably translate into political actors’ decisions and courses of action, pointing to a nonlinear relationship between meaning and action and the general “messiness” of the political world where unexpected and changing circumstances are the rule rather than the exception.

The changing uncertainty during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

As we began writing the conclusion to this book in February 2022, the Russian military forces entered Kyiv. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleaded with the West to help him save his country, while Kyiv’s subway stations turned into temporary bomb shelters and thousands began fleeing west in the country, away from local epicenters of danger, and into the surrounding countries. By the time we finished writing a few months later, over 10 million people were internally displaced or left Ukraine as refugees. Entire cities were demolished and some like Mariupol besieged. Hundreds were found dead as the Russian forces withdrew from Bucha and other towns. Attempts at peace negotiations were made in the face of mass killing and destruction.

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine casts a long shadow of uncertainty over the stability of the international system as we have known it since the end of the Cold War. That uncertainty is terrifying, crippling, and dividing. Will the institutions and norms of the existing world order and particularly of European security survive? Are we facing a potential international war with the involvement of NATO or, worse, the third world war? Could nuclear weapons be used in any of the foreseeable scenarios? These questions about *potential or possible*, in other words, future *ontological uncertainty*, which we have seen in op-eds, social media discussions, and formal and informal talks, have at their core the extent of the global transformation that could result from the invasion (Mulligan 2022). Before the invasion, the Founding Director of the University of Toronto’s Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy Janice Gross Stein argued, for example, that NATO’s stance toward Ukraine was one of “strategic ambiguity,” giving the country false hope that the organization could not in fact deliver (CBC 2021). Since the invasion, NATO has faced “hard choices” between the continued loss of life in Ukraine and escalation to an even more dangerous war with Russia that Russia’s leaders warned would be nuclear (Stein 2022).

But this perversely transformative event is also characterized by other forms of uncertainty and responses to it by ordinary people, policymakers, and knowledge

producers that this volume can help grapple with. We offer a brief discussion of this uncertainty that is changing in real time as a way of illustrating the potential benefit of our approach in future analyses of uncertainty by academics and practitioners alike and of dealing with our own grief as we live through this tragedy that is personal as much as professional in different ways for both of us (one born and raised in Ukraine, the other one not too far from it).

As early as October 2021, warnings of a potential Russian military offensive against Ukraine were voiced by the international intelligence community based on evidence of Russia's troop movements and military build-up near Ukraine (Harris and Sonne 2021; Harris et al. 2022; Sonne et al. 2021). While these warnings prompted fears among Western leaders of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, which were not unwarranted given not only current evidence but also Russia's earlier annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine ongoing since 2014, *epistemic analytical uncertainty* was the order of the day before the full-scale invasion commenced on the night of February 24 (Sonne et al. 2021). As in the past, many analysts did not see it coming. There were too many risks involved in terms of domestic public opinion and the general unpredictability of war, Professor of Russian Politics and then Director of the Russia Institute at King's College London Samuel Greene explained this misprediction in the aftermath of the invasion (Peterson 2022). Thus, '[e]ven with more than a hundred thousand troops poised on Ukraine's borders, it was never certain to many observers that the Russian president would act on his threats to invade – until he did' (ibid.).²

This analytical uncertainty also affected policymakers. While US intelligence produced detailed information about Russia's imminent assault, convincing world leaders and diplomats about a full-scale invasion proved challenging, particularly in light of the failures of US intelligence on Iraq and the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Hence, regardless of the availability of information, most European leaders were skeptical: 'the intelligence was narrated repeatedly, consistently, clearly, credibly, in a lot of detail with a very good script and supporting evidence' but launching a disastrous war appeared so irrational that especially those who had dealings with Putin could not believe this was a possibility (Harris et al. 2022).

After a period of analytical epistemic uncertainty that preceded the invasion, *epistemic practical uncertainty* over knowledge production emerged with the adoption of laws in Russia as soon as on March 4 that criminalized independent war reporting and anti-war protests with penalties of up to 15 years in prison. The ban also included the use of the terms "invasion" and "war" instead of the Russian state-approved "special military operation" and any other information that could be interpreted as "fake news" discrediting the Russian forces and government more broadly (HRW 2022). Numerous Western news media suspended their operations, pulling their staff out of Russia. Some like BBC resumed reporting from inside Russia despite the risks to journalists' safety associated with these laws and restrictions of access to BBC websites to audiences in Russia (BBC 2022).

This practical uncertainty over knowledge production dramatically decreased informed analysis coming out of Russia and the quality of information that ordinary

Russians could receive. It also affected research. Many Russian academics fled the country in the midst of an intensifying crackdown on free speech (Lem 2022). So did Western-based researchers whose institutions now severed ties with Russia on the back of prior legislation and bans such as the “foreign agent” law, first passed in 2012 and expanded a number of times thereafter to silence dissent (Burakovsky 2022). These laws will continue to impose constraints on fieldwork of the kind Noakes discusses in his chapter in the foreseeable future. This means that researchers will not be able to ask many questions that we desperately need answers to in light of the increasing isolation of Russia, which only deepens analytical uncertainty in our understanding of Russia. Furthermore, projects that commenced before the invasion will not be completed, which poses particular concerns for graduate students whose dissertations and possibly future careers will be at stake.

Russia’s efforts to marginalize and repress any opposition through these and other laws and wider controls over the information environment are a sign of *ontological inherent uncertainty* in this electoral authoritarian regime that Bedford so sharply articulates in her chapter. How likely this form of uncertainty – in this setting stemming from unknown true preferences of the Russian citizens – is to transform into opportunities for collective action is unclear given that those who protested were swiftly detained and otherwise repressed while Putin’s approval rating appeared to grow, according to the Levada Center poll conducted in March 2022.³ Could economic sanctions, future elections, or a currently unconceivable crisis bring people to the streets to challenge Putin’s regime, and if not by mass mobilization, could the regime be challenged from within, by the elite or a coup d’état? We did not have answers to these questions in the long term, but the likelihood of these options in the near future appeared to be highly unlikely as a result of repression and coup-proofing from inside of the regime (Casey 2022).

What we were observing, however, suggests that particular interpretations and manipulation of uncertainty that we discussed earlier in this chapter were central to meaning making and action – and inaction – in response to the war. While some experts in Russia anticipated the war, calling it ‘the most senseless war in history’ (Yudin 2022), the majority of Russians, including the elite, did not believe that there would be a war in Ukraine (Volkov 2022). Indeed, Putin himself appears to have expected blitzkrieg rather than a war that unfolded instead, likely due to his advisors’ optimistic forecasts (Casey and Gunitsky 2022). Once the war was in full swing, both the regime and ordinary people in Russia had to adapt to the changes from uncertainty over a potential war (or the continuation of the war in Ukraine that started in the east of the country in 2014), to uncertainty over what the now ongoing war might bring about, which transformed into *routine uncertainty* as the war dragged on. This adaptation entailed adjusting beliefs and narratives about key terms such as “Russian world” and “Great Patriotic War” and history writ large that lie at the heart of meaning making in this context as these have been continuously redefined and repurposed toward narrow political goals (Savelyeva 2022).

For ordinary Ukrainians, on the other hand, the first days of this war were marked by *extreme uncertainty* over their own safety and in the longer term the Ukrainian regime’s survival as well as the very existence of Ukraine as an independent state.⁴

While Ukrainians had been divided on whether Russia would attack, according to the Savanta ComRes poll conducted before the invasion in February 2022, many prepared by practicing air raid drills, packing emergency evacuation bags, and even undertaking combat training (Rainsford 2022). Reports of the first days of the attack, nonetheless, document people's shock from the news of the Russian forces crossing Ukraine's borders: 'people in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odessa and other parts of the country woke to the sound of large explosions and air raid sirens. In disbelief, they turned on their TVs and radios to hear news that an invasion had begun' (Kottasová et al. 2022). Many Ukrainians fled and hid in response, while others joined the full-on Ukrainian mobilization led by Zelenskyy, transforming extreme uncertainty into an opportunity to defend their country *en masse* (Onuch and Hale 2022).

Extreme uncertainty also characterized the beginning of the full-scale invasion for Ukrainian decision-makers despite the warnings of a looming Russian attack in its advance, which the Russian elite denied. Reports establish that US policy-makers actively shared intelligence about Putin's plans with the Ukrainian leadership months before the invasion. However, Zelenskyy and his aides remained publicly skeptical about these warnings, viewing them as speculative. They instead sought to avoid panic among the population, not least to prevent destabilization of Ukraine's economy: 'Every comment coming from the United States about the unavoidability of war was immediately reflected in the [Ukrainian] currency exchange rate,' Ukraine's foreign minister said (Harris et al. 2022). The invasion, and the extreme uncertainty that it brought about, dramatically transformed this stance and the activities of the Ukrainian leadership as Zelenskyy mobilized the Ukrainian population, having decided to remain in Ukraine himself, and called on Biden to seek support for Ukraine from the world leaders. With time this uncertainty, too, took a routine form as the war unfolded and became part of everyday life and politics in Ukraine.

Multiple layers of uncertainty have, thus, intersected during the first months of this war and different forms of uncertainty affected ordinary people, policymakers, and knowledge producers. Uncertainty also changed over time, sometimes in the course of days, as a result of evolving circumstances and transformation by the actors involved. The ontological extreme uncertainty brought about by the invasion has also had some generative effects – it brought Ukrainians from different walks of life in an unprecedented collective effort to determine the future of their country, reinforcing the Ukrainian identity both at home and abroad (Bubola 2022).⁵ The initial Western cohesion unseen since the Second World War was another generative effect.

In Russia, the ontological inherent uncertainty that characterizes Putin's regime may sow fear among activists and ordinary people alike, yet such uncertainty generates 'creative ways to express dissent,' even if from abroad (Dixon et al. 2022). And while uncertainty also sprouts denial in the political world, epistemic analytical uncertainty creates space for discussion as it forces analysts, scholars, and decisionmakers into conversations that may be otherwise too difficult to have. Epistemic practical uncertainty, due to the limitations it imposes on researchers or experts in the field, brings on new, imaginative solutions to the problems of data collection and personal safety. In the end, this may lead to 'a scientific culture

defined by resilience and creativity’ as Ukraine’s history of knowledge production reveals (Poskett and Shaw 2022).

Living with, and in relation to, uncertainty

One of the initial guiding questions for this volume was: Why don’t we see it coming? This question suggests predictability, and associated foresight, as a desirable side-effect of studying uncertainty. As noted earlier, we have since unearthed several more questions, presenting an image of uncertainty that is much more intricate than simple unpredictability. Yet, as part of our concluding remarks, we return to that pervasive need to anticipate surprising events, since many chapters in this volume offer relevant answers.

As scholars of global politics, we may simply be looking into the wrong places. We strive for certainty, regularity, and generalizability; we admire patterns and predictions that come true, and in the process, we forget or ignore uncertainty that entails profound limits for our knowledge and understanding and, therefore, unintended consequences of our actions, even those that are seemingly well intended. Political actors tend to misidentify and shape uncertainty for own purpose and that purpose may not align with the “collective good,” however defined. Individuals, including decisionmakers, are often paralyzed with indecision in the face of uncertainty and prefer waiting until more information becomes available. Uncertainty, thus, justifies inaction and who then stands to benefit from uncertainty is all those who prefer the status quo, no matter how exclusionary, unjust, or destructive it is.

The authors in this volume show us how we can collectively move away from rejecting to embracing uncertainty. Noakes as well as Krystalli, Tripathi, and Hunfeld argue that scholars of global politics ought to embrace uncertainty – adapt to it, make friends with it. Crucially, adaptability implies not simply responsiveness in the face of uncertainty but preparation and training (especially for early career scholars) that emphasize flexibility of project management. In turn, making friends with uncertainty implies critically reflecting on and unlearning how we have been taught to think about and respond to uncertainty. This way we shape new possibilities for knowledge production and coproduction, including in our classrooms (and collaborative efforts such as this volume), that are rooted in learning from feeling, experiencing, and embodying uncertainty.

While it often carries negative connotations, uncertainty may help create knowledge. Noakes argues that uncertainty may both hinder and further academic work and knowledge generation, but minimizing the former requires preparation, planning, and even reconsideration of pursuing particular research topics. Krystalli, Tripathi, and Hunfeld then ask us to consider: What do we sacrifice when we try to tame uncertainty rather than embrace it? Uncertainty is not necessarily a problem but a condition in which we exist, professionally and otherwise.

As scholars of global politics, we must reexamine what we take for granted, step outside of the boundaries of the discipline to learn more, and even stop demanding the completeness and clarity of explanation. Instead of “describe,

explain, and predict,” as traditional politics, and more specifically IR, theorizing urges us to do, we may want to explore the unfamiliar, rethink the established, and challenge the necessity of knowing, at least in some issue areas. In other words, we may want to live with, and in relation to, rather than against uncertainty.

Notes

- 1 The panels' virtual format stemmed from uncertainty over travel restrictions that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to our international group.
- 2 Such uncertainty also characterized Ukraine's and other states' leadership view of a potential attack, which, as Driscoll and Savelyeva note in their chapter, Putin denied.
- 3 Survey results, especially those produced in wartime, should be interpreted with caution. For an analysis of earlier surveys on approval for Putin before and after Russia's annexation of Crimea, see Greene and Robertson (2022).
- 4 Driscoll and Savelyeva touch on this in their contribution to this volume.
- 5 See also Nobel Lecture given by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2022 Center for Civil Liberties, delivered by Oleksandra Matviichuk, Oslo (10 December 2022), available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2022/center-for-civil-liberties/lecture/> accessed 16 December 2022.

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