Volume 1, Issue 1

A war beyond the war: the use of propaganda in social media in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict

ALEXANDROS MOUTZOURIDIS[1]

Abstract

This study examines the use of popular social media platforms by individuals and institutions acting on behalf of Ukraine and the Russian Federation, in relation to the 2022 war and conflict between the two countries. In this paper, critical discourse analysis is applied to identify, outline and analyse major narrative frames employed by official users, individuals and institutions in social media. Accounts in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tik Tok have been operated to enhance each side's narrative and disseminate their views in the framework of war propaganda, for instance combining calls for assistance/action, content that appeals to emotion and political or ideological reasoning. The study explores the approaches utilised by the two sides in conflict by observing data that includes content —text, audio and video— posted during the first 30 days of the war.

Keywords

Russo-Ukrainian war, social media, propaganda, discourse analysis

[1] Phd candidate, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Introduction

On 24 February 2022 the Russian Federation launched a military operation, invading Ukrainian territory and marking the failure of implementation of the Minsk agreements. The operation was a major escalation of the armed conflict that has been ongoing since 2014 and after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. The broader operations and implications of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war have assumed unprecedented international dimensions, with several countries in Europe, the United States, and other NATO members launching severe economic and diplomatic sanctions against the Russian government, Russian entities, and individuals, while offering political support, financial assistance, and military equipment and hardware to the Ukrainian government.

The mainstream media in Europe and the Americas and international media in general have been extensively covering the developments in the field of war as well as the political turmoil at diplomatic level between NATO countries and Russia. Notably, the war of information and propaganda has been a critical part of the conflict in eastern Ukraine ever since 2014.

Some media outlets of international scope have dubbed the Russian-Ukrainian 2022 war as the 'first social media war', explaining that war-related content on social media has sidelined mainstream television coverage[2] and stressing the power of social media to shape the way people receive and experience

[2] Stephen L. Miller, 'The Ukraine invasion is the first social media war' (The Spectator, 28 February 2022), available at https://spectatorworld.com/topic/ukraine-invasion-first-social-media-war-volodymyr-zelensky/ (last accessed 14 May 2022)

information.[3] Other commentators argue that it is not the first social media war but rather 'the most viral'[4] due to the scale of content dissemination and the ample instrumentalisation of social media by the warring parties and the belligerents. Indeed, social media have become multipurpose tools in a number of conflicts across the globe, as means of propaganda, surveillance, activism, violence monitoring, and other political and military ends.

One of the most recent alternative example of institutional exploitation of social media in war context was the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan incorporated social media strategies in their propaganda campaigns, following patterns employed in previous years.[5] An information war of varying intensity has actually been unfolding for decades, evolving into 'propaganda attacks by mass media and social media', as well as cyber-attacks.[6] This information war culminated after the Azeri invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.

For years, the Syrian civil war has been an extraordinary setting of social media content production, mainly videos, used by 'military, paramilitary, and

[3] Peter Suciu, 'Is Russia's Invasion Of Ukraine The First Social Media War?' (Forbes, 1 March 2022), available at https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2022/03/01/is-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-the-first-social-media-war/?sh=888697c1c5cd (last accessed 14 May 2022)

[4] The Economist, 'The invasion of Ukraine is not the first social media war, but it is the most viral' (2 April 2 2022), available at https://www.economist.com/international/the-invasion-of-ukraine-is-not-the-first-social-media-war-but-it-is-the-most-viral/21808456 (last accessed 13 May 2022)

[5] Anahit Hakobyan, 'Armenian Digital Communications in Karabakh War of 2020: Critical Discourse Analysis', (2021) 12(1) *Journal of Sociology, Bulletin of Yerevan University* 32

[6] Arthur Atanesyan, 'Media Framing on Armed Conflicts: Limits of Peace Journalism on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict' (2020) 14(1) *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 534, 542

rebel actors'[7]. A little further to the East, the advance of the so-called Islamic State did not materialise without a digital aspect. As Singer and Emerson argue, 'with careful editing, an indecisive firefight could be recast as a heroic battlefield victory'[8]. ISIS was an extraordinary case of exploitation of digital media not only for propaganda purposes but also for recruitment and financing.

In Afghanistan, the government of Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban had been engaged in a ceaseless propaganda and information war via social networking platforms, mainly Twitter and Facebook, until the regime change in 2021.[9] In Israel, social media practices have become an integral part of the state's military toolbox. The phones of soldiers operating in the Gaza Strip and West Bank have been sharing images and frames of the occupation, contributing to what Kuntsman and Stein define as 'digital militarism'. They describe the term as the 'process by which digital communication platforms and consumer practices have, over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, become militarized tools in the hands of state and nonstate actors, both in the field of military operations and in civilian frameworks'[10].

Evidently, the use of social media by state and state-like actors is not a novelty in the Russia-Ukraine conflict of 2022. Propaganda and communication campaigns

[7] Mareike Meis, 'The Ambivalent Aesthetics and Perception of Mobile Phone Videos' in Philipp Budka & Birgit Bräuchler (eds), *Theorising Media and Conflict* (New York - Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020) 76

[8] P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston - New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2018) 8

[9] Hazrat M. Bahar, 'Social media and disinformation in war propaganda: how Afghan government and the Taliban use Twitter', (2020) 47(1-2) *Media Asia* 34

[10] Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism - Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age,* Stanford California (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) 6

at times of war are used by the belligerent sides for a number of reasons; addressing the citizens and/or soldiers to preserve and boost morale, to encourage mobilisation and volunteerism or even to obscure the severity of losses or instances of defeat on the battlefield.

What has changed though over the years is the growth of the total reach of the main social media platforms, the content versatility, and the ever-growing capabilities of streaming, sharing and interacting.[11] Social media users create, modify, circulate and engage with content like never before, and they do it almost instantly. Videos of drones, buildings being shelled, tanks being destroyed, missiles being launched become part of the daily feed of those accounts. Of course, such capabilities are available to institutional users, increasing the capacity of states, governments, military authorities and so on, to promulgate their official positions or propaganda and exert influence over a potentially limitless number of individuals. This has already propelled changes in the systematic study of warfare. As Bräuchler and Budka put it, 'scholars are grappling with the variety and increasing mediation of conflict experiences and the extents of conflict immersion in people's everyday mediated life'[12].

This study investigates the discursive strategies employed in the official social media accounts of Ukraine and Russia on the outbreak of the war of 2022, identifies frames and narratives projected in published content, and lays out the contextual envelope that determines the meanings this content conveys.

[11] Graham Meikle, *Social Media. Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (1st edn., New York and London: Routledge, 2016) 24-25

[12] Philipp Budka and Birgit Bräuchler, *Anthropological Perspectives on Theorising Media and Conflict*, in Philipp Budka and Birgit Bräuchler (eds), *Theorising Media and Conflict* (New York - Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020) 4

1. Digital media warfare in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict

In eastern Ukraine, the information war had erupted in concert with the armed conflict. Russia, despite not officially at war with Ukraine, made preparations at multiple levels; mainstream media, social media, cyberwarfare and other digital channels were combined since 2014 as part of a 'hybrid warfare'[13] in an effort to steer the conflict. Russia's s strategy in this field has been thoroughly studied and analysed[14] over the years, while NATO has developed practices of monitoring and countering Russia's information warfare activities, which it considers part of hybrid warfare.[15] In this view, it was expected that Ukraine joined the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO) in March 2022, while conflict regions were to be provided with satellite cellular and internet connectivity by the US government.[16]

[13] Christopher Whyte, A. Trevor Thrall & Brian M. Mazanec, *Information Warfare in the Age of Cyber Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) 4 and 22

[14] Keir Giles and Anthony Seaboyer, Defence Research and Development Canada, *The Russian Information Warfare Construct*, October 2019, available at https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc341/p811007_A1b.pdf (last accessed 20 May 2022)

[15] Lord Jopling, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security, *Countering Russia's Hybrid Threats: An Update* (2018), available at https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2018-12/166%20CDS%2018%20E%20fin%20-%20HYBRID%20THREATS%20-%20JOPLING_0.pdf (last accessed 17 May 2022), at 10-11

[16] Dustin Carmack, The Heritage Foundation Border Security and Immigration Center, *U.S. Must Implement Lessons on "Hybrid" Conflict from Ukraine War*, April 2022, available at https://www.heritage.org/cybersecurity/report/us-must-implement-lessons-hybrid-conflict-ukraine-war, (last accessed 22 May 2022), at 9.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has been a major case study of strategic social media use in the context of an interstate war[17] that essentially became official in 2022. As the production of social media content by both sides soared and the involvement of other countries became manifold, the digital aspect of the confrontation intensified.

The Russian government took restrictive measures against 'Western' social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, blocked access to 'Western' broadcasting outlets such as BBC News and Deutsche Welle, while it penalised the publication of what it viewed as fake news with regard to the military operation.

With assistance from NATO, the EU and the United States, the Ukrainian government has also actively engaged in the field of information warfare. Access to Russian websites, such as the social media platform VKontakte, has been blocked in Ukraine since 2017.[18] Access to broadcasting media and news websites controlled by the Russian government, such as RT, was also blocked in the European Union, as part of the respective sanctions. Sharing content from those websites was blocked by the major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Youtube.

Twitter and TikTok, have removed or restricted Russian accounts considered to spread disinformation. The example of TikTok is fairly indicative;

[17] Drew Herrick, 'The Social Side of "Cyber Power"? Social Media and Cyber Operations' in N. Pissanidis H. Rõigas, M. Veenendaal (eds), *8th International Conference on Cyber Conflict* (NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2016)

[18] Yegveniy Golovchenko, 'Fighting Propaganda with Censorship: A Study of the Ukrainian Ban on Russian Social Media' (2022), 84(2) *The Journal of Politics* 639

the platform enjoys a billion or more active monthly users worldwide.[19] War-related posts on TikTok by Ukrainian and Russian users have millions of views,[20] rendering the platform one of the most significant in terms of potential reach of official content made by the two belligerent governments. TikTok introduced a state-controlled media policy, using labels that allow users to discern content from state-controlled media accounts in Russia and later Ukraine and Belarus. They further employed fact-checking and safety teams to remove content and ban accounts that were deemed to violate the platform's policies against misinformation.[21]

Finally, Telegram is another platform that should be taken into account, as it has accommodated a considerable portion of war-related message sharing. As opposed to other platforms, Telegram uses an open-source API and focuses greatly on privacy and encryption. Although it is basically a messaging platform, it has been increasingly used by governments and political officials,[22] as mainstream social media intensify moderation.

2. Critical discourse analysis, propaganda and social media

[19] TikTok, *Thanks a billion!*, 27 September 2021, available at https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/1-billion-people-on-tiktok (last accessed 16 May 2022)

[20] Jacqueline Evans, 'War in the Age of TikTok' (2022) 280 *Russian Analytical Digest* 17, 17-19

[21] TikTok, *Bringing more context to content on TikTok*, 4 March 2022, available at https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/bringing-more-context-to-content-on-tiktok (last accessed 14 May 2022)

[22] Vera Bergengruen, 'How Telegram Became the Digital Battlefield in the Russia-Ukraine War' (*Time*, 21 March 2022), available at https://time.com/6158437/telegram-russia-ukraine-information-war/ (last accessed 1 June 2022)

In the context of this study, we draw on the theoretical framework of discourse analysis to determine the ideological, social and political foundation on which our communication content is based. Fairclough conceptualises Discourse Analysis as the analysis of language which is shaped by relations of power and invested with ideologies[23]. Its purpose is

> to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power.[24]

Van Dijk describes discourse through the prism of a communicative event, allowing us to understand 'who uses language, how, why and when'[25]. He argues that language is used as means to communicate ideas, beliefs as well as emotions. The use of language occurs as part of complex social events. 'Whatever else may happen in these sometimes complex communicative events, the participants are doing something, that is, something else beyond just using language or communicating ideas or beliefs: they interact'.

Van Dijk also distinguishes three aspects of the concept of discourse; the use of language, communication of beliefs and interaction in social situations. Discourse

[23] Terry Locke, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London - New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2004)

[24] Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (2nd edn., Oxon - New York: Routledge, 2013), at 93.

[25] Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Structure and Process*, Vol. 1, (London: SAGE, 1997)

analysis can hence be divided into two major categories: the one that focuses on the language in use and the one that focuses on its social and political context. Researchers also accentuate multiple levels of context, including intertextual context, extralinguistic variables or an adequate consideration of who produces discourses and whom they address.[26]

As a socio-political method, discourse analysis takes a particular interest in the relation between language and power[27]. Critical discourse analysis or CDA subsumes a variety of approaches which differ in theory, methodology, and the type of research issues to which they give prominence. A central tenet of CDA is that discourses should not be examined without reference to context, therefore it draws on extra-linguistic factors in its research approach, particularly social processes and structures.

The methodology of CDA can be accounted as a non-predefined process that is built along the emergence of research questions. Meyer & Wodak highlight some key-points in Siegfried Jager's analysis, according to whom CDA research ought to take into account types of argumentation, cognitive strategies, implicit meanings, symbols, metaphors, style and references; and not merely in language but also in visual content. Effectively critical discourse analysis that analyses audio, visual, textual content, or a combination of those is classified as multimodal CDA. Consequently, CDA is associated both with language semiotics and the meanings conveyed, ideas articulated in the public sphere they are addressed to.

[26] John Flowerdew, 'Introduction' in John Flowerdew (ed.), *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics Vol. 3* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

[27] Michael Myer, 'Between theory, method, and politics: Positioning of the approaches to CDA' in Ruth Wodak & Michael Myer (eds), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (London: SAGE, 2009)

This process becomes instrumental in cases where strategies and devices of propaganda are to be identified. Propaganda 'has earned itself a bad reputation'[28], not least because it is widely associated with the form it has taken historically in war contexts. State actors engaging in conflict inevitably must wield propaganda. However, in either peace or war, it is defined a 'consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group'[29].

In times of war, propaganda 'involves the enemy, the ally and the neutral' and 'it implies the control of attitudes toward various forms of participation'[30]. This is meant to highlight the significance of the target audience to which propaganda is addressed; how it reaches the individuals comprising this audience, by what means and —more importantly— who uses it.

Despite the domination of the digital means today, Ellul's assertion remains relevant: propaganda is *total*, otherwise it is not propaganda.[31] Therefore it must exploit all available technological means to achieve its objectives. Wodak describes how textual and visual content, control (of the message) and manipulation practices contribute to the discursive construction of propaganda,[32] especially in view of the changes it has been undergoing due to the evolution of

[28] Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the mind. A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day* (Third Edition, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003) 324

[29] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (first published 1928, New York: Ig Publishing, 2005) 20

[30] Harold D. Lasswell, 'The theory of political propaganda' (1927) 21(3) *American Political Science Review* 627, 630

[31] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (first published 1965, New York: Vintage Books, 1973)

[32] Ruth Wodak, 'Shameless Normalization as a Result of Media Control: The Case of Austria', (2022) *Discourse & Society* 1, 5

technology and means of communication.[33]

Information wars or '"media wars", are [...] deeply embedded in local (conflict) culture and cannot be disconnected from earlier conflict phases when non digital media were utilised'[34]. This approach leads to a comprehensive interpretation of certain narratives, including those purported by posts on social media. Instead of being mere products of propaganda, they can be examined in the historical, social, and political context to which the conflict is anchored.

The role of state and national media is understandable in a war context, since they are organisations operating under the jurisdiction of a government fighting a war. However, social media platforms are not to be considered neutral or independent either. Fuchs associates the operation of dominant social media with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, highlighting their centralised ownership, profit orientation, the mechanism of building visibility and attention online, the use of automated lobbying, the amplification of ideologies by algorithms online.[35]

Fuchs recognises the differences between the communication model of broadcast media and the digital media model. However, he assesses that power asymmetries not only remain but are 'further complicated'[36]. The power structures within the digital media ecosystem and their technological nature render the social

[33] Ruth Wodak, 'Argumentation, Political' in Gianpetro Mazzoleni, Kevin G. Barnhurst, Ken'ichi Ikeda, Rousiley C. M. Maia and Hartmut Wessler (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication* (Elsevier, 2016)

[34] Bräuchler & Budka (no 11) 6

[35] Christian Fuchs, 'Propaganda 2.0: Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model in the age of the internet, big data and social media in the age of the Internet' in Joan Pedro-Carañana, Daniel Broudy & Jeffery Klaehn (eds.), *The Propaganda Model Today* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018) 71

[36] Ibid., 86

media platforms subject to political, economic and cultural influences.

Social media have grown to be effective tools of institutional communication in the hands of state administrations and state agencies, especially in cases of armed conflict. They have expanded the potential field of propaganda penetration, shaping a *digital* battlefield, and have allowed for new forms of warfare. In these forms, information and content are being used as ammunition in a distinct field along with cyberattacks and other aspects of modern online warfare.

3. Research questions and data collection

This study seeks to reveal the narrative frames and discourses used by the official social media accounts of Ukraine and Russia in the 2022 war context. Based on the theoretical framework and observed events up to March 2022, the following research questions arise that will guide the discourse analysis:

- What are the main discursive strategies used by each entity?
- How does each belligerent frame itself vis-à-vis the other?
- How does the current international political landscape and historical context pervade their narrative frames?
- Does the social media setting affect the way meaning is communicated?

The data used in this study consists of 38 posts (see Annex) from official Ukrainian and Russian accounts published on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok between 24 February and 24 March 2022. The final sample was formed with the selection of an equal number of posts from each side: 19 posts by Ukrainian accounts and 19 posts by Russian accounts. The number of posts by platform differs, since each one of the belligerents' activity is not uniform; the

Russian official accounts are quite active on Twitter throughout the selected time span, while they seldom post on Instagram.

The posts were selected based on purpose and relevance criteria. They are a) posts containing text published directly in English, with or without visual material, b) posts that are automatically translated (for Facebook)[37], c) posts in Ukrainian or Russian that provide an English translation, d) posts with video displaying subtitles in English e) posts with video and images with English text overlay. For a limited number of posts, the number of shares or user reactions, and topics that attracted international media attention were also considered.

The volume and focus on English language posts is supported by ongoing research; Shevtsov et al. for example collected a dataset of Tweets related to the Russo-Ukrainian war, of which more than half are in English[38]. English was the top language in Chen and Ferrara's dataset as well[39]. The omission of purely non-English posts serves the purpose of centering at the content and language used by the belligerents in their desire to address non-native audiences, that is users primarily outside Ukraine and Russia. This intention is evident from posts explicitly stating so as well as from the frequency and sheer number of posts uploaded after the date of invasion compared to previous weeks.

[37] Facebook, *Why is a Facebook post written in another language being automatically translated?*, available at https://www.facebook.com/help/541469169337994 (last accessed 8 May 2022)

[38] Alexander Shevtsov, Christos Tzagkarakis, Despoina Antonakaki, Polyvios Pratikakis, Sotiris Ioannidis, 'Twitter Dataset on the Russo-Ukrainian War' (2022) (Manuscript submitted for publication, Computer Science, Cornell University 7 April 2022), available at https://arxiv.org/abs/2204.08530 (last accessed 7 June 2022)

[39] Emily Chen and Emilio Ferrara, 'Tweets in Time of Conflict: A Public Dataset Tracking the Twitter Discourse on the War Between Ukraine and Russia' (2022), (Manuscript submitted for publication, Computer Science, Cornell University, 14 March 2022)

The social media accounts selected as sources representative of official communication are profiles (Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok) and pages (Facebook) that have acquired a blue badge, the checkmark symbol used by these platforms to signify that a certain profile/page has been verified as authentic. In cases where the verification badge is missing, official websites were checked to confirm the links to their respective social media accounts.

Profiles and pages verified to belong to Russian government officials were also omitted, whenever they indicated they express their own views. With regard to some platforms, especially TikTok, distinguishing official accounts from other users, supporters of either of the belligerents has been a substantial challenge.

The sample was also deliberately chosen using purposive sampling. For Krippendorff 'relevance sampling […] aims at selecting all textual units that contribute to answering given research questions […] [since] the resulting sample is defined by the analytical problem at hand'[40]. Purposive sampling is a 'type of convenience sampling which the researcher selects the sample based on his or her judgement'[41] and this speaks to the value of the data in addressing specific issues. This type of sampling is flexible as it can be used in 'even less structured ways'.

Critical discourse analysis and purposive sampling suit to provide answers to our questions under consideration. The analysis focuses on but is not limited to the linguistic, semantic and textual levels of context as the primary analytical categories. CDA effectively takes place already within the sampling process before the posts are selected and fully analysed. This combination of sampling and

[40] Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (first published 1980, 2nd edn., Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004), 120

[41] Ronald D. Fricker Jr, 'Sampling Methods for Web and E-mail Surveys' in Jason Hughes (ed.), *SAGE Internet Research Methods,* Vol. 1 (London: SAGE, 2012), 248

analysis allows for an examination of social media content that takes into account the medium's immediacy and speed.

4. Ukrainian Narrative frames and discourses

A. Dipoles: Good vs evil, Us vs them

Posts on the Ukrainian accounts appear to invest in a polarising representation of the Ukrainian people, state and army in direct contrast to the Russian government. The Ukrainians assume positive and enabling traits, as heroes, defenders of their homeland, potent fighters, exhibiting patriotism, self-sacrifice, courage, endurance, and success in battle.

The Ukrainian president has reiterated that the war is 'undoubtedly People's war'[42], that 'the truth is on our side' and 'Ukraine has gained the sincerity and attention of the entire normal civilized world'[43].

On the other hand, Russia —but not explicitly the Russian people— is portrayed as 'evil', with the exact word used in preference, an aggressor that lays destruction, death and ruin over its neighbour Ukraine through a 'vile invasion'[44].

[42] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), Facebook 26 February 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/videos/961847994466385 (last accessed 16 May 2022).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

> They are going to bomb our Ukrainian cities even more. They are going to kill our children even more insidiously. This is an evil that has come to our land and must be destroyed. [...] Russia is on the path of evil.[45]

Full awareness of the Russian forces conducting extreme warfare is suggested through reference to attacks against 'Europe's largest nuclear power plant. [...] they know where they are shooting, they have been preparing for this'[46]. In his address, President Zelenskiy uses a metaphor referring to Russia as a 'terrorist state' that 'has resorted to nuclear terror.

Elsewhere, the president highlights the difference between Ukrainians and Russians, glorifying the first and vilifying the latter: 'Ukrainians have shown the world who we are. And Russia has shown what it has become'[47]. The contrast between *them* and *us* is amplified through the use of photographs depicting soldiers, men and women, wounded children and civilians, as well as the dramatic tone employed by Zelenskiy. It is notable that references to the defence of Ukraine extend to Europe; 'our soldiers are fighting [...] for peace for all European countries'[48].

The *good vs evil* discourse is further extended by frequent historical references and associations to World War II in the Ukrainian social media

[45] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), Facebook 27 February 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/videos/694287708605642 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

[46] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy_official), Facebook 4 March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CarEIWUFO6c/ (last accessed 18 May 2022)

[47] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), Facebook 28 February 2022, available athttps://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/posts/3020650631518626 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

[48] Ibid.

accounts. 'When facing the evil, it's hard to believe the reality of it', reads an elaborate video produced by President Zelenskiy's communications team and posted on Instagram.[49] The reference introduces a series of images and footage narrating the atrocities of World War II. Text overlay suggests the 'evil' of Nazism that ended in 1945 'did' return to European cities in 2022 through the Russian invasion, while footage of WWII is juxtaposed with footage from the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The analogy between Nazi Germany and modern Russia[50] is linguistically expressed through another metaphor —a common rhetorical device with 'argumentative effect'[51] in political discourse—, the personification of Russia as an evil individual, and is also insinuated in Zelenskiy's address to the US Congress, as he mentions the attack on Pearl Harbor. Along this historical reference he adds one to the 2001 9/11 terrorist attack, alluding to Ukraine's predicament as a victim of terror. In an effort to further approximate the American political culture, he also makes use of the phrase 'I have a dream', a direct hint to

[49] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy_official), 'In a month of the war, 4379 houses were destroyed…', Instagram 24 March 2022, available at https://www.instagram.com/p/CbfwBx8g0kJ/ (last accessed 18 May 2022)

[50] The Nazi metaphor is consistent with other content in the Ukrainian accounts as well. For instance the figure of the Russian President is sketched with characteristics of Hitler's appearance in a professional-made animated video: Ukraine (@ukraine.ua), 'I am Ukraine…', TikTok 12 April 2022, available at https://www.tiktok.com/@ukraine.ua/video/7085683397237951749 (last accessed 19 May 19, 2022)

[51] Andreas Musolff, *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) at 11

the influential and memorable speech of Martin Luther King Jr in 1963, a speech duly noted and studied for its rhetorical impact.[52]

B. Responsibility of others to take action

The Ukrainian government and primarily President Zelenskiy have asked for various types of aid from the international community and especially European and NATO countries. One of the first instances of such calls was on the 28th of February 2022, when Mr Zelenskiy addressed 'the West', urging for a no-fly zone that would deter Russian aircrafts and missiles, following the shelling of Kharkiv.[53] Neither NATO nor any country appeared to consider it as an option. Nevertheless, it was repeated through several posts by official Ukrainian social media, taking the form of a communication campaign by the Ukrainian Ministries spread across Ukrainian official accounts.

Creative videos were posted featuring peaceful images of how life in Ukraine was before the war juxtaposed against war footage and sensitive images of military strikes and wounded civilians, including children.[54] Aerial footage was also used, displaying rallies around the world allegedly in favour of the no-fly zone

[52] Mark Vail, 'The "Integrative" Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech', (2006) 9 (1) *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 51

[53] Mark Trevelyan, 'Ukraine's Zelenskiy urges West to consider no-fly zone for Russian aircraft' (*Reuters*, 28 February 2022), available at https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelenskiy-says-it-is-time-consider-no-fly-zone-russian-aircraft-2022-02-28/ (last accessed 20 May 2022)

[54] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), "Close the sky over Ukraine!", Facebook 16 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/posts/3032455393671483 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

imposition. The same request is recited —'NATO governments, close the sky'[55]— along with a warning that attacks targeting Ukrainian nuclear plants pose a grave danger to the European Union. Images with overlay text were posted, calling for a no-fly zone and also sanctions against the Russian energy sector.

President Zelenskiy spent great effort to convey the Ukrainian call for help as well, while addressing the members of legislative bodies of several countries. For instance, he used historical references familiar to 'Americans', during his speech to the US Congress, constructing a simile between the 9/11 attack and the Russian invasion of 2022:

> ...friends, Americans, in your great history you have pages that would allow you to understand Ukrainians. Understand us now, when you need it right now — when we need you right now. [...] Remember September the 11th, a terrible day in 2001, when evil tried to turn your cities, independent territories in battlefields.[56]

Alongside emotional appeals, the Ukrainian leader is quite specific in his requests:

> we are asking for a reply, for an answer to this terror from the whole world. Is this a lot to ask for, to create a no-fly zone — zone over Ukraine to save people? [...] If this is too much to ask, we offer an alternative. You know what kind of defense systems we need, S-300 and other similar systems. You know how much

[55] MFA of Ukraine (@UkraineMFA), "Millions of people around the world…", Facebook, 9 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=477810657146640 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

[56] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), "Addressed the US Congress…", Facebook, 16 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/posts/3032618336988522 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

> depends on the battlefield on the ability to use aircraft, powerful, strong air — aviation to protect our people, our freedom, our land, aircraft that can help Ukraine, help Europe.

This reasoning implies that the United States must help Ukraine in order to help Europe, and that, apart from providing military material and financial aid, this help should take the form of further sanctions against Russia. Further requests were put forth, such as the deprivation of Russia's voting rights at the United Nations and the establishment of an international criminal court for war crimes.[57] Nevertheless, the United States not only must help Ukraine, but is also indirectly responsible for its fate:

> All American companies must leave Russia from their market — leave their market immediately, because it is flooded with our blood. Ladies and gentlemen, members of Congress, please take the lead. If you have companies in your districts who finance the Russian military machine leaving business in Russia, you should put pressure.

This reasoning implicates multinational businesses of 'western' interests as involuntary sponsors of the Russian operations, an argument more conspicuously proclaimed with a banner image by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that reads as follows (in English): 'Every ruble paid in taxes to Russia turns into deaths and tears of Ukrainian children', 'Top 50 global brands

[57] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), "What the invaders are doing to Kharkiv…", Facebook 27 February 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/posts/3019840391599650 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

staying on the Russian market as of 09/03/2022'[58]. Beneath, the logos of those businesses are displayed, which —as the post's text asserts— have no moral right to continue operating in Russia.

Ukraine's special envoy on sanctions, Oleksii Makeiev, has been equally forthright on Twitter, referring to the very critical issue of Russian energy exports: 'Stop financing Russian invaders! You pay for every bomb killing Ukrainians and destroying our homes'[59].

The responsibility of Europe to act is specifically associated with the fear factor set forth by a post of the Ukrainian president, following the seizing of Zaporizhzhia nuclear station by Russian forces. 'If there is an explosion, it is the end of everything. The end of Europe'[60].

C. Ordinary people become victorious heroes

The Ukrainian president has repeatedly praised those he describes as ordinary people who have either taken arms to defend their country or contribute to the war effort in other ways, from using their professional skills to volunteering or even protesting.

[58] MFA of Ukraine (@UkraineMFA), We publish a list of companies…", Facebook 9 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/326002166236922/posts/334278322075973 (last accessed 16 May 2022)

[59] Oleksii Makeiev (@Makeiev) "Stop buying Russian gas…", Twitter, 15 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/Makeiev/status/1503642177632616451 (last accessed 16 May 2022).

[60] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy_official), Facebook 4 March 2022, available at https://www.instagram.com/tv/CarEIWUFO6c/ (last accessed 18 May 2022)

'Millions of our people are constantly proving themselves as heroes. Once ordinary Ukrainians, and now fighters. Men and women who stand up to defend our state'[61]. In this discourse, citizens of both genders are fighters no matter the nature of their contribution, as shown by the images accompanying the president's text. A post by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is dedicated to women soldiers, who 'make up more than 15% of the regular Ukrainian army'[62]. The text is accompanied by photographs depicting women soldiers with confident or joyful expressions. The message indicates that Ukrainians are mobilised en masse, determined, and inspired by a noble cause, potentially motivating more to join them. The recurrence of the salutation 'Slava Ukraini' (Glory to Ukraine) on several social media posts and within video content attests to the objective of exaltation and celebration of Ukrainians as heroes.

In addition to appellations such as 'Ukrainians are strong, Ukrainians are powerful, Ukrainians are brave'[63], the element of victory gains prominence. The second day following the Russian invasion, Ukrainians have already 'disrupted the scenario of occupation', although independent military analysis did not indicate so at the time.[64] During that particular speech, President Zelenskiy

[61] Володимир Зеленський (@zelenskiy.official), "Millions of our people are constantly proving themselves…", Facebook, 23 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official/posts/3037576409826048 (accessed 18 May 2022)

[62] MFA of Ukraine (@UkraineMFA), "According to the latest data, women make up…", Facebook, 8 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/326002166236922/posts/333287995508339 (last accessed 16 May 2022)

[63] Зеленський, Facebook, (no 42)

[64] Mason Clark, George Barros and Katya Stepanenko, Institute for the Study of War, *Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment,* 26 February 2022, available at https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-ukraine-warning-update-russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-26 (last accessed 15 May 2022)

repeatedly used the word 'victory' not only as an inspiring exclamation but also to refer to the disconnection of Russia from the international SWIFT network, thus denoting his own success at diplomatic level. In another video post, he presented in a similar manner how an 'anti-war coalition'[65] was being formed, while concluding to an assertion of confidence: 'we will definitely win'[66].

The same message is conveyed towards Russians when the Ukrainian president addresses them directly:

> Four and a half thousand Russian soldiers have already been killed. Why did you all come here? [...] Throw away your equipment. And leave. Do not believe your commanders. Do not believe your propagandists. Just save your lives. Leave.

On TikTok, the platform's more youth-oriented style and user base is taken into consideration by a media agency for the production of animated videos. In one of those videos, the Ukrainians are associated with the role of 'neighbours' as 'neigh*bros*', a wordplay hinting at a concept of the country's friendly relations with the international community. It expresses a Ukrainian 'thank you' towards political leaders, famous artists, entrepreneurs and Hollywood actors appearing on the video, aiming at demonstrating broad international support for Ukraine.[67]

6. Russian Narrative frames and discourses

[65] Зеленський, Facebook, (no 56)

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ukraine (@ukraine.ua), 'To those who #StandWithUkraine…', TikTok 7 April 2022, available at https://www.tiktok.com/@ukraine.ua/video/7083811579308870918 (last accessed 19 May 2022).

A. *The 'Denazification, demilitarisation argument*

By the first day of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Russian government presented the activities of the Ukrainian authorities in Donbass as a justification for its military operation, couching it as an act of self-defence. The self-defence discourse is in line with the Russian diplomatic course of action, that is the invocation of Article 51 of the UN Charter, which specifies that states have an inherent right of individual or collective self-defence. Scholars dispute the Russian claims as baseless and classify its military operation as a breach of international law prohibiting the use of force,[68] or at least unnecessary and disproportionate.[69] In his speech on the 24th of February 2022, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, elaborated on the reasons his government decided in favour of a military intervention.[70] These reasons have provided the narratives for the official Russian social media communication, including the denazification-demilitarisation discourse.

Russia has accused the Ukrainian government for genocide against the population of Donbass, for abandoning the Minsk process and for militarising the

[68] James A. Green, Christian Henderson & Tom Ruys, 'Russia's attack on Ukraine and the *jus ad bellum'* (2022) 9(1) *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law*, 4

[69] Janhavi Pande, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis of International Law*, 22 April 2022, available at http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5812 (last accessed 16 May 2022)

[70] Vassily Nebenzia, United Nations S/2022/154, *Letter dated 24 February 2022 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General* (2022), available at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959647/files/S_2022_154-EN.pdf (last accessed 14 May 2022)

autonomous regions with the support of NATO. It considers the Kiev authorities a neo-Nazi regime, employing nationalists who committed atrocities since 2014 and continue to do so in the 2022 war, for example blocking of humanitarian corridors and the use of civilians as shields.[71]

In support of their argument, the Russian accounts post photographs depicting members of radical right, neo-Nazi organisations in Ukraine with recognisable Nazi insignia, flags and emblems, as well as admirers of the Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera.

> The so-called Azov Special Operations Regiment, subordinated to the Ukrainian National Guard, is one of the most famous nationalist units in today's Ukraine. It was formed from among nationalist-minded volunteers in May 2014 in Mariupol.[72]

Further visual content consists of graphic images of civilian victims in Donbass, as well as supporting links such as documentaries and external texts.[73] Ukraine's relationship with NATO is seen as an integral part of the argument on the militarisation of Ukraine. The possibility of the Alliance's expansion to the East has been a red flag for Russia's security policy and its Ministry of Foreign

[71] Russian Mission to the EU (@RussianMissionEU), Facebook 18 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/RussianMissionEU/posts/328126599348640 (last accessed 20 May 2022)

[72] Russian Mission to the EU (@RussianMissionEU), 'The scale and frequency of neo-Nazi…', Facebook 4 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/RussianMissionEU/posts/319368643557769 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

[73] Russian Mission EU (@RusMission_EU), 'We invite you to watch the documentary…', Twitter 12 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RusMission_EU/status/1502667131711901706 (last accessed 20 May 2022)

Affairs keeps reminding it using historical references and documentation, such as top-level conversations archived at the US Department of State.[74]

B. Us vs them, Reliable vs fake, Sensible vs insane

The political and diplomatic involvement of European countries, the United States and other members of the so called 'West', in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has been undoubtedly deep, not least due to the tense relationship and the controversies between Washington and Moscow. This may explain to a great extent why the *us vs them* frame, in the case of Russian official communications, seems to be more pertinent to NATO, the United States or the 'West', and less to Russia's immediate adversary, i.e. the Ukrainian political and military authorities. For example, the Russian Mission to the EU has been strikingly vocal on the matter of what they see as anti-Russian propaganda:

> Every day, we hear the West blaming our country for its military allegedly targeting Ukrainian civilian population and infrastructure. No facts or evidence are presented to prove these claims. False information is being disseminated not only by Western media, but, alas, by politicians also.[75]

Information manipulation and fabrication by the 'Kiev regime', as the Russian accounts suggest, are supported by Western governments and political

[74] MFA Russia (@mfa_russia), Twitter 25 February 2022, 'To avoid any doubt on…', available at https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1497231120726994950 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

[75] Russian Mission to the EU (@RussianMissionEU), Facebook 18 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/RussianMissionEU/posts/328126599348640 (last accessed 20 May 2022)

officials, 'turning a blind eye to Ukrainian fighting methods and crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists'[76]. In this sense, the Russian authorities present themselves as the target of misinformation and disinformation practices by the untrustworthy West, including the 'Western media'[77]. In fact, this argument is stressed in retrospect in order to highlight the indifference of the West[78] to the Ukrainian operations in the eastern part of the country since 2014. Similarly, it also deems EU citizens as victims of those practices, having been misled by their governments.

Several videos posted by Russian social media accounts show footage from the eight-year conflict in Donbass, where Russia accuses the 'Ukrainian military-political leadership'[79] for committing war crimes. Those videos often commence with a warning that reads 'graphic content', similar to that used in a news broadcast or documentary. Personal stories, testimonies, and blurred photographs are showcased to make a compelling case about how this war did not actually begin in 2022 but has been ongoing since 2014.

The blocking of Russian officials' social media accounts by moderators working for those platforms is seen as another aspect of the West's response. It's

[76] Ibid.

[77] Russian Embassy UK (@RussianEmbassy), Twitter 23 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/1506671813845262337 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

[78] Russian Mission to the EU (@RussianMissionEU), Facebook 14 March 2022, available at https://www.facebook.com/RussianMissionEU/posts/325443739616926 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

[79] Russian Embassy, UK (@RussianEmbassy), Twitter 1 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/1498690532175974406 (last accessed 13 May 2022)

'not interested in freedom of speech & alternative viewpoints'[80]. The official Russian Mission to the UN complained about Twitter blocking Dmitry Polyanskiy's (Russian permanent representative) tweet related to the shelling of a hospital in Mariupol, one of the most contentious topics circulating the international media in March 2022.

At the same time, the Russian side is portrayed as reliable and trustworthy, able to provide documentation for its claims. One of these involves the accusation that the US is involved in the development of biological weapons on Ukrainian territory[81], or even that chemical incidents may be orchestrated as the Russian side claimed it happened in Syria.[82]

Another argument attached to documentation refers to NATO's broken promises. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indirectly justifies Russia's actions by pointing at released confidential cables and statements by 'Western' leaders and political officials since 1990 with regard to NATO's commitment it would not expand towards the East, following the reunification of Germany.[83]

To further justify the Russian course of action, an interesting post on the Russian Ministry's Instagram account includes a video featuring a young Russian

[80] Russia at the United Nations (@RussiaUN),Twitter 19 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RussiaUN/status/1504848451724615685 (last accessed 17 May 2022)

[81] Russian Embassy in USA (@RusEmbUSA), Facebook 18 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/1504618510315626498 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

[82] Russia at the United Nations (@RussiaUN), 'We see a pattern…', 22 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RussiaUN/status/1506355253616291843 (last accessed 18 May 2022)

[83] MFA Russia (@mfa_russia), "To avoid any doubt…", 25 Febryary 2022, available at https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1497231120726994950 (last accessed 16 May 2022)

athlete who addresses the Hollywood actor Arnold Schwarzenegger.[84] Apparently as a response to a recent war-related video he published, she addresses the former governor of California using his first name as well as a popular title of his films to bring attention to children's letters living the war in Donbass since 2014. This direct reference to American pop culture is combined with an invocation of Mr Schwarzenegger's past support in favour of the 2003 US-led military intervention in Iraq.[85]

On 18 March, on the same account, another video was posted on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the Russian annexation of Crimea.[86] The video features footage of infrastructure, urban scenery and landscapes of Crimea, laying out statistics as proof of prosperity and development following the annexation. 'Crimea is Russia', it concludes, a hint at how Ukraine in general is viewed by Russian foreign policy.

C. Russophobia

The dissemination of statements and official communication via social media often reflects the severity of the US-Russia diplomatic embroilment. 'We call on US lawmakers to return to sanity and engage in dialogue, instead of parasitizing

[84] Russia's MFA (@mid.rus), 'Mr Schwarzenegger, I watched your…', 21 March 2022, available at https://www.instagram.com/p/CbXM8fRjR0K/ (last accessed 30 May 2022)

[85] 'Schwarzenegger cites "a lot of mistakes" in Iraq' (NBC News, 12 October 2006), available at https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna15026620 (last accessed 20 May 2022)

[86] Russia's MFA (@mid.rus), 'Eight years ago…', 18 March 2022, available at https://www.instagram.com/p/CbQj0lejk0a/ (last accessed 19 May 2022)

on gross Russophobia'[87], reads a tweet echoing a phrase from a statement by Russia's ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov. It was a remark the latter made with regard to American politicians contemplating the deployment of US troops in Ukraine, thus risking a direct confrontation between Russia and the United States.

Lack of sense is also observed within European political elites, for which the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, has a clear explanation: 'The EU is being dominated by the [NATO] alliance. There is no longer independence in Europe'[88]. This reflects the evolution of how the Kremlin has come to perceive the relations between Russia and Europe, seeing the United States as its primary interlocutor.

Russophobia could be categorised then as another frame emerging through the contrast between Russia and the West. The Russian authorities have condemned 'the spiral of Russophobic pogroms and outright discrimination of Russians, unwinding in the West now, instigated by the politicians and the media'[89]. The post includes a video with imagery and footage of alleged attacks and bullying against Russian citizens in Europe and elsewhere.

7. Social media setting

[87] Russian Embassy in USA (@RusEmbUSA), Twitter 6 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/1500311322193534978 (last accessed 18 May 2022)

[88] MFA Russia, (@mfa_russia), Twitter 22 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1506348972532715529 (last accessed 18 May 2022)

[89] MFA Russia ,(@mfa_russia), 'The spiral of Russophobic…', Twitter 20 March 2022, available at https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1505507829800738819 (last accessed 19 May 2022)

Following the presentation of discourses and frames, an account of the social media setting seems necessary to articulate the 'conditions of text production, distribution and reception'[90], namely the 'meso' dimension of discourse practice. Trimithiotis, for instance, shows the significance of the production process specifically applying discourse analysis on political communication content and context.[91] In our case, it is the social media setting that determines this dimension.

Russian and Ukrainian official accounts put an effort to publish engaging content that exploits the dynamics of each social media platform. They generally follow the norms of content creation that are accounted as part of an effective communication strategy, leading to the desired engagement. The frequent alternation between text, images and videos, the use of colloquial language, and the carefully marked sensitive content warnings can be such indicators. Moreover, the use of hashtags, mentions, tags, and emojis indicate an attempt to make the content appealing to social media users, familiar with this sort of posts at a commercial/consumer context.

Especially the way Ukrainian accounts are operated indicate a professional approach tailored to the stylistic, linguistic and formal particularities of social media platforms. Such an example is the use of the selfie video type of recording in the Ukrainian president's appearances. This concurs with expert opinions

[90] John Flowerdew, 'Critical discourse studies and context' in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018) 166

[91] Dimitris Trimithiotis, 'Understanding political discourses about Europe: A multilevel contextual approach to discourse' (2017) 29(2) *Discourse & Society*, 160

pinpointing to his successful social media engagement,[92] owing to previous experience and assistance from communication professionals.[93]

Such observations attest to the meticulous work done by the individuals involved in the content creation process, which requires collaboration between political communication experts, political and government officials, as well as social media professionals, including content managers and audiovisual media creators. This collaboration is what essentially adapts the intended messages of discourse to the setting of social media. Understanding its role unveils the answer to our fourth research question and sheds light to what was taken into account in the process that led to the final content.

As noted earlier, extensive use of the English language and provision of local translations reveal the belligerents' purpose to address an international audience. The use of slang words and idioms attest to this desire as well, offering a sense of ideological or cultural proximity[94] to the average social media user. The creators here have shown awareness of how the users of the largest social media platforms engage with media rich content[95] created by news outlets, brands or

[92] Anjana Susaria, 'Why Zelensky's 'selfie videos' are helping Ukraine win the PR war against Russia', (*The Conversation*, 1 March 2022), available at https://theconversation.com/why-zelenskyys-selfie-videos-are-helping-ukraine-win-the-pr-war-against-russia-178117 (last accessed 14 May 2022)

[93] Maryana Drach, Reuters Institute, *How social media shaped Zelenskiy's victory in Ukraine,* March 2020, available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-08/RISJ_Final%20Report_Maryana%20Drach_2020_Final%202%20%289%29.pdf, (last accessed 19 June 2022)

[94] Thomas Gilovich, 'Seeing the past in the present: The effect of associations to familiar events on judgments and decisions' (1981) 40(5) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 797

[95] Gillian Moran, Laurent Muzellec & Devon Johnson, 'Message content features and social media engagement: evidence from the media industry' (2020) 29(5) *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 533

influential individuals, including politicians[96]. They also realise that, at least during the first weeks of the military operations, users in Western countries would view the official Ukrainian and Russian content while being heavily exposed to posts and news related to the war[97], true and fake alike, from multiple sources. For instance, posts from our Russian sample made several references to news stories and broadcasts by mainstream international media outlets.

Finally, when it comes to creators of propaganda for social media platforms with institutional resources, their content is likely to be circulated and its resonance amplified by state-guided or state-sponsored unofficial channels and accounts, from groups and volunteers[98] working pro-bono to paid 'troll factories'[99]. Hence, states do not rely only on their official social media accounts to distribute their official content.

8. **Conclusion**

This study used an indicative sample of official Ukrainian and Russian social media accounts to identify and analyse preeminent discourses in the framework of the official communication and propaganda of the belligerent countries. As

[96] Yilang Peng, 'What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular? Analyzing Social Media Strategies of Candidates and Office Holders with Computer Vision' (2020) 26(1) *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 143

[97] Suciu, (no 2)

[98] John Harrington, 'Global PR community rallies to help Ukraine government comms' (*PRWeek,* 28 February 2022) available at https://www.prweek.com/article/1748159/global-pr-community-rallies-help-ukraine-government-comms (last accessed 17 August 2022)

[99] Ulises A. Mejias and Nikolai E. Vokuev, 'Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine' (2017), 39(7) *Media, Culture & Society,* at 8

expected, either side appears to put a systematic effort to portray itself as being right, employing propaganda in different ways.

The Ukrainian accounts focus on establishing the notion that Ukraine is clearly the victim of an act of aggression, defending itself from an evil that threatens not only Ukraine but the West in general (fear factor). Here, it is assumed that the term 'West' is used to designate mainly NATO, Europe and North America. Moreover, they attempt to stir a sense of familiarity and proximity with the users viewing their content. The Ukrainian posts convey simple messages, easy to understand for the average social media user, traits that are important for the success of propaganda.[100]

The Russian posts examined in this study focus on political reasoning through messages that are less simple and that claim more time and attention from the users. Appeal to emotion takes place but to a lesser extent. Overall, the Russian narrative is summarised in the justification of the invasion based on the neo-nazi problem in Ukraine and the protection of the people of Donbass, the responsibility of the West for the continuation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and, finally, Russia's victimisation by the Western governments and media. In general, the Russian social accounts tend to demonstrate a sense of powerfulness and self-sufficiency, using thorough argumentation but also irony. The Russian-side content is more focused on what could be described as standard political communication, that is, a pragmatic approach in line with Russia's public diplomacy since the late 2000s.[101]

[100] Ellul, (no 28), 180

[101] Greg Simons, 'Russian public diplomacy in the 21st century: Structure, means and message', (2014) 40 *Public Relations Review* 440

Linguistic schemes are extensively used by Ukrainian accounts and to a lesser extent by Russian accounts. We may summarise the following schemes based on the discourse analysis: a) Metaphors and similes: *Russia [acts] as Nazi Germany, Ukraine is Europe, Crimea is Russia,* b) Hyperboles: *Europe will end, Ukraine and the West are neighbours/'neighbros', Russians are being bullied in the world,* c) Personifications: *Russia as en evil person/terrorist, NATO as a deceiving individual.* Such rhetorical devices do not simply function as a manner of speaking but, in our context of propaganda, are 'constitutive of meaning'.[102]

The 'digital clash' that emerges through the study of Ukrainian and Russian official social media accounts reflects political, historical, and cultural meanings at a symbolic level; meanings that aid us in resolving the third research question on the broader context that permeates the content of our sample. Ever since the Euromaidan in 2014, the deep political rift that has occurred between Kiev and Moscow marked a historical rift as well. While the Ukrainian state has been forming its political existence by attaching to the West and most particularly NATO, for Russia this comes at a loss of a 'shared historical and cultural legacy'[103]. Albeit not explicitly expressed in the posts examined in this study, the war in Ukraine is domestically associated with the Great Patriotic War. In this sense, the officially created content for social media should be viewed as more than constructs that serve propaganda. To an extent, they are also a manifestation of the current state of play in international relations and specific geostrategic interests expressed through the war in Ukraine; the United States' objective to

[102] Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (London: Macmillan,1982) at 189

[103] Jade McGlynn, 'Historical framing of the Ukraine Crisis through the Great Patriotic War: Performativity, cultural consciousness and shared remembering', (2018) 13 (6) *Memory Studies* 1058, 1074

maintain global political and economic supremacy, the sanctions dilemma of Europe, NATO's role in 'addressing the global shifts of power'[104] and Russia's bidding for a place in a multi-polar world order[105] and other discursive structures pertinent to 'hegemonic (ideological) struggle'[106].

The way these meanings resonate with audiences outside these two countries would present an interesting endeavour for further interdisciplinary research. Similarly, quantitative and computer assisted research would provide valuable findings in terms of assessing and measuring the impact of propaganda content in the Russo-Ukrainian war, taking into account factors such as its potential political objectives and geographical scope.

Besides, official social media essentially are but a fraction, or the facade of an organised state's propaganda mechanisms. Unconventional means, such as bots, troll armies and systematic dissemination of fake news and synthetically created audiovisual content[107] may contribute to propaganda or counter-propaganda.[108]

In the process, organised campaigns by state actors or political actors are likely to spread disinformation or furnish misinformation among individual

[104] Cornelia Baciu and Dominika Kunertova, 'Evolutionary Stable Global Orders: Co-Relational Power and Multilateral Security Organisations' (2022) 18(1), *Journal of Contemporary European Research,* 151

[105] Alan Cafruny et al., 'Ukraine, Multipolarity and the Crisis of Grand Strategies' (2022) *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*

[106] Fairclough, (no 23) 40

[107] Shruti Agarwal et. al, 'Detecting Deep-Fake Videos from Appearance and Behavior' (2020), *2020 IEEE International Workshop on Information Forensics and Security (WIFS),* 1

[108] Johan Farkas and Christina Neumayer, 'Disguised Propaganda from Digital to Social Media' in Jeremy Hunsinger, Matthew M. Allen, Lisbeth Klastrup, *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2020)

users.[109] As research suggests, social media platforms can assume a pro-democratic role by accommodating dissimilar opinions and voices in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.[110] However, disrupting propaganda and disinformation campaigns —often targeted to users in multiple countries— undermine information pluralism and foment political polarisation, while social media posts containing propaganda find their way in the headlines of international and national media outlets. 'The same infrastructure that can empower democratic opposition can also be used for authoritarian purposes'.[111] That said, institutional communication disseminated through social media has a part to play in their ambiguous impact on democracy; not least owing to the fact that the armed conflict may not exceed its geographical boundaries, but the information war quite does so.

This warrants for what Reisigl and Wodak codify as *socio-diagnostic critique*[112] in their account of the discourse-historical approach of CDA, concerning the intent of persuasion or manipulation in discursive practices, i.e. precisely an element we can identify in war propaganda, including social media

[109] Rasmus K. Nielsen and Richard Fletcher, 'Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing

Media Landscape on Democracy' in Nathaniel Persily & Joshua A. Tucker, *Social Media and Democracy*

The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

[110] Persily, N., and J. A. Tucker, 'Introduction' in Nathaniel Persily & Joshua A. Tucker, *Social Media And Democracy: The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

[111] Joshua A. Tucker et al, 'From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media And Democracy' (2017), 28(4) *Journal of Democracy,* 52

[112] Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, 'The discourse-historical approach (DHA)' in *Ruth Wodak & Michael Myer (eds), Methods of critical discourse analysis* (London: SAGE, 2009) at 104

communication in a war context. Like content during peace, this is content that pervades the daily life of people, potentially shaping their views about the conflict and hence their attitudes towards a certain policy decision or course of action followed by state or international actors. True challenges arise for social media users at international level due to a) the intent of the two belligerent countries' leaderships to persuade or manipulate the views and attitudes of the intended audience, b) the internationalisation of the war at the level of political debate, often polarised[113], and c) the domestic agendas pursued by the political and economic elites in every country. Hence, there are forces and parties that may attempt to steer the discourse of the war at national-local level, further hindering the users' capacity to find and access propaganda-free information and bias-free news. The resolution of this issue, however, lies within the social order governing the function and evolution of social media in general, that is beyond the main scope of this study.

This makes social media communication in a war context an all the more uncharted area, justifying the need for combining qualitative and quantitative research on the field. This capacity of social media has also broadened the theoretical boundaries of propaganda. Before the internet even existed,

> Propaganda outside the group—toward other nations for example, or toward an enemy—is necessarily weak. The principal reason for this is undoubtedly the absence of physical organization and of encirclement of the individual. One cannot

[113] Ivan Krastev & Mark Leonard, *Peace versus Justice: The coming European split over the war in Ukraine*, (*European Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 June 2022), available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/peace-versus-justice-the-coming-european-split-over-the-war-in-ukraine/

> reach another nation except by way of symbols, through press or radio, and even then only in sporadic fashion.[114]

Whether the impact of social media use today is adequate to advance this encirclement Ellul refers to is yet to be determined.

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