

TO BLAME OR NOT TO BLAME? THE PLACE OF THE WEST IN UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN WAR NARRATIVES

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DOI: 10.36169/2227-6068.2024.02.00004

Abstract. *This paper explores the place of the West in the competing political narratives during the first months of the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine. We focus on comparing the statements of top-level national leaders in Russia and Ukraine from December 2021 until May 2022. Using discourse analysis, we hone in on the key themes from the dominant war narratives. In particular, we examine the portrayal of the West in the dominant narratives in each country, focusing on the origins of this war, the key groups in this war, and the possibility of compromise or ceasefire. In addition, we evaluate the degrees of consistency and change in the political narratives during this dynamic war. Overall, we find that official state narratives on the West do evolve and change during the early months of this war as both Ukrainian and Russian leaders adjusted their political narratives to fit changing circumstances. While Russia focused increasingly on the West, as opposed to NATO, Ukraine directed much of its communications at NATO in particular. This reveals differing goals in the utility of both narratives, with Ukraine focused on concrete military support while Russia painted the West as a unified threat to Russia.*

Keywords: *narratives, war, Russia, Ukraine, the West*

Submitted: 13 July 2024; **accepted:** 3 November 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

To what extent are outside actors implicated in the political narratives of a violent interstate conflict? In this article, we examine how Ukrainian and Russian political leaders engage with the role of the West in their political narratives both before and in the early months of the ongoing war (from December 2021 until May 2022). Since the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, the course of this dynamic war has presented significant shifts in the short-term aims of Russia as well as the territory held by both sides. Based on these changing conditions, we look to statements made by the government leaders of both states, in the form of traditional speeches and in online posts and messages, to gauge when and how they implicate the West in their public narratives.

We contend that political narratives are especially salient during a war. The degree of urgency and the severity of the consequences is much higher, which means that the words of political leaders are not just aimed at persuading government officials or voters. Instead, the words of leaders can have an impact on the very safety of the population and the territorial integrity of state. They may use narratives to build domestic coalitions, to seek outside support, and to potentially elucidate the conditions for ending the war. We are especially interested in how the wartime narratives in both Russia and Ukraine discuss the role of the West, as both states have increasingly pursued competing foreign policies relating to the West over the last 20 years. How have Ukrainian and Russian leaders attempted to frame the place of the West in this war?

In particular, this research allows us to consider both pro- and anti-Western narratives in Ukraine and Russia, based on the evolving political discourse of the political leaders in the early months of the war. By tracking the way that each side characterizes the West, we can evaluate the way Ukrainian and Russian leaders involve and blame the West as the intensity of the war grew. While the Russian side was decidedly more anti-Western in its rhetoric, we detected changes to the tone and frequency of such language as the Russian effort pulled back from its push towards Kyiv. We also noticed that the Ukrainian side was not consistently pro-Western in its narratives, with narratives evolving depending on the on-the-ground conditions and the West's degree of involvement in the war. We observed a growing gap between the two sides in the conception of what role the West plays in this war, and what role it should play in the post-war reality.

Given our focus on political narratives, this article begins first with a brief overview of the relevant literature on this topic. Next, we provide the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, followed by the discussion of Russian and Ukrainian conflict narratives, especially as they pertain to the place of the West. Then, we explain our usage of discourse analysis to examine how each side characterizes the West. Finally, we present our findings and draw our conclusions related to the context of this war.

2. WHY POLITICAL NARRATIVES

We focus on political narratives based on the understanding that political leaders use the power of their words to achieve their goals. Political narratives allow leaders to influence how the public perceives and responds to key events. The analysis of political narratives

helps us identify dominant explanations used by political leaders to persuade, inform, and control society directly and indirectly. State officials use political narratives in all aspects of policymaking because stories help the public better understand how and why the government creates policies (Borins 2011). We can also see the value of political narratives as tools of soft power internationally. According to Laura Roselle, Alister Miskommon, and Ben O'Loughlin (Roselle et al. 2014: 76), political narratives are "setting out what characterizes any state in the world, or how the world works." In this paper, we are particularly interested in strategic narratives around war. We consider the work of state officials in creating political narratives during war time to be deliberate and intentional. Political leaders have to make strategic decisions regarding the content of their narratives and the meaning behind their words. Therefore, we assume that the speeches, statements, and comments of political elites, particularly in times of conflict, are neither accidental nor random. At the same time, we do not assume that political narratives are always factually correct, coherent, consistent or effective. In fact, leaders may want to intentionally mislead their audiences by providing inconsistent or inaccurate messages.

Our paper builds upon prior research on strategic political narratives pertaining to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Since this article focuses on the full-scale war between the two states, we are particularly interested in how state leaders use political narratives in times of conflict. Academic literature highlights the value of these narratives in explaining and simplifying the reality of war for different audiences. According to Laura Roselle, Alister Miskommon, and Ben O'Loughlin

the combatants and their grievances, claims and aspirations are all subject to characterization, the attribution of motives, and attention to any reputation earned. (Roselle et al. 2014: 79)

Narratives help construct and reconstruct positions of participants in a war while helping guide the public in their understanding of how events evolve. We also use political narratives to better understand all sides in a conflict, the so-called in-groups and outgroups. This allows leaders to establish their own understanding of a war, their adversaries and allies. Leaders often make their narratives personal and relatable by using stories and familiar cultural or historical references (Claessen 2021). We can also trace how a conflict has evolved and escalated into a violent war by examining the transformation of stories and worldviews in political narratives over time. The literature highlights that political leaders often rely on conspiracy theories and disinformation in their political narratives. While strategic narratives are rarely explicitly violent, the use of conspiracy theories can help vilify an adversary in a conflict and justify violence against this adversary (Baele 2019).

3. BACKGROUND OF THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Russia officially began its full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. On this day, the Russian military began airstrikes on Ukrainian cities, hitting both military targets and civilian areas with high-powered missiles and artillery. At the same time, the Russian

troops advanced into the territory of Ukraine from multiple directions (Leonhardt 2022). Regional scholars and experts see this full-scale war as an escalation of the existing conflict that Russia started in Ukraine in 2014 (Sasse and Lackner 2018; Shveda and Park 2016). Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014 (the Euromaidan) resulted in regime change when the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, fled Ukraine after mass anti-government protests turned violent. Subsequently, the Kremlin rejected the legitimacy of the revolution, instead asserting that it amounted to an illegal coup that was orchestrated by Western governments. In February 2014, Yanukovich was ousted from power and a transitional government in Kyiv was formed. Russia's leadership used this power vacuum in Ukraine and quickly moved in to occupy and forcibly annex the Crimean Peninsula. President Putin justified the annexation by organizing a public referendum in Crimea that was both non-transparent and illegitimate. Russia's leader labeled this annexation as a successful return of Crimea into its historic homeland. Since 2014, the rhetoric of Russia's government officials has turned progressively more anti-Western and more aggressive towards Ukraine and its pro-European government. President Putin repeatedly called for the defense of Russia and its traditional values from Western imperialism and liberalism. Russian leaders also highlighted the need to protect the Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and the Donbas from what the Kremlin labeled as the nationalist regime in Kyiv. The state-controlled media in Russia ramped up its attacks on Ukraine, calling it a puppet state mired in corruption, mob rule and neo-Nazi forces all controlled by the United States. This perspective contrasted with how most Ukrainians saw their regime post-Yanukovich, as a democracy that may be young and flawed but moving towards Europe (Pomerantsev & Weiss 2014; Sokol 2019).

Russia's leaders viewed the rather effortless and bloodless annexation of Crimea as a success that could be replicated. Just a few months later, they began to actively support the protests in multiple cities across Eastern Ukraine. Local separatists and Russian proxy forces worked together in April 2014 to ignite public protests and gain control over local government administrations with the intention of repeating the "Crimean scenario." In the two regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the separatists were successful in establishing control over the local government and proclaiming the creation of the so-called "people's republics" in May of 2014. A violent conflict broke out between the separatists and the Ukrainian military. Russia has supplied the separatist militias with arms, financial resources, and logistical support while officially denying any involvement in the conflict. The Ukrainian government and its Western allies viewed Russia's actions in the Donbas as a violation of international law. The war in the Donbas and Russia's involvement in Ukraine gained more international attention in July 2014 after rebel groups used a missile provided by Russia and accidentally downed a Malaysian Airlines flight (COE 2022). Russia denied any responsibility for this tragic event, instead blaming the Ukrainian military for downing the aircraft. Russia remained actively involved in the two "people's republics" from April 2014 until February 2022. It helped fund the budgets of the "republics", continued to support their military forces, and initiated the policy of "passportization" in 2015 allowing the residents of the two "republics" to obtain Russian citizenship under simplified procedures (*Президент России* 2019). Interestingly, Russia made no moves to annex the territories of the "people's republics" until February 2022.

The war in the Donbas lasted for almost eight years and took the lives of more than 14,000 combatants and civilians before Russia initiated its full-scale invasion in early 2022 (HRMMU 2022).

Russia began active preparations for the full-scale war against Ukraine in the fall of 2021 when it amassed tens of thousands of its troops and military equipment along Ukraine's border. Western governments shared their intelligence with the government in Kyiv warning the Ukrainian officials that the full-scale war was inevitable. The Russian leadership denied any intentions to escalate the war in Ukraine even when the Russian military had over 100,000 troops deployed to the Ukrainian border in January 2022 (Leonhardt 2022). The start of the full-scale war in February 2022 still came as a shock and a surprise to the public in both Russia and Ukraine. One of the reasons many people were in denial about the war and its severity may have to do with the narratives of state leaders in Ukraine and Russia prior to February 24, 2022. President Putin continued to deny any allegations of Russia's plans to attack Ukraine militarily calling it "Western paranoia" and "provocation", Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, projected the messages of calm. Zelenskyy repeatedly stressed that Ukrainians should not be intimidated by Russia since the Ukrainian military is well prepared to defend the country, and Ukraine had the full support of its Western allies. The intentions behind the Russian war against Ukraine were initially outlined by Putin in his February speech on the eve of the full-scale invasion. He addressed the Russian public announcing the need for the so-called "special military operation", much of which was geared against military threats of NATO and the West. On the side of Ukraine, its armed forces have been particularly resilient on the battlefield while the leadership of Ukraine relied on Western allies in resisting the Russian aggression. At the same time, many Ukrainians see this as a war between Russia and the West with Ukrainians carrying the brunt of the losses. Moreover, President Zelenskyy and the Western leaders have presented different visions of peace and victory for Ukraine (Kube et al. 2023; Tyshchenko 2024). Considering how dynamic and violent this war is, we ask the question: how do state leaders create and evolve their political narratives during an interstate war?

4. POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE SINCE 2014

We will now turn to an overview of past research on political narratives in the context of Ukraine-Russia relations post-2014. The annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbas conflict in 2014 both dramatically changed the relations between the two states, marking the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Since 2014, multiple studies used narrative analysis to gain a better understanding of these events. Most of these studies focused exclusively on the analysis of Russian narratives (Leichtova 2016; Drozdova & Robinson 2019; Claessen 2021; Strycharz 2022). Still, some scholars chose to explore how Ukrainian narratives evolved over the years in response to Russia's aggression (Stebelsky 2018). The assessment of this literature reveals two dominant themes in Russian and Ukrainian political narratives. The first theme focuses on explaining the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict before 2022 from the perspectives of both sides, including Russia's justification for intervening in Ukraine and the role of the West

in these events. The second theme in the academic literature focuses on how each side conceptualizes Ukrainian identity, Ukraine as a state, and the engagement of the West with both Ukraine and Russia.

State officials in both Ukraine and Russia deployed political narratives to explain the events of the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas. These strategic narratives often employed historical references to provide the useful background in explaining these political developments. Russian officials often relied on the narrative of the Soviet Union as beneficial for Ukraine's political and socio-economic development (Hopf 2016). The annexation of Crimea by Russia was presented as the correction of a historical mistake committed by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who "gifted" Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Leichtova 2016). On the Ukrainian side, the dominant narrative post-2014 was that of Russian imperialism, with Ukraine as a European state and a historical victim of this imperial conquest (Stebelsky 2018).

Moreover, political narratives in both countries advanced the vision of the events in Ukraine at several levels, the national level and the level of the international system. At the international system level, Ukrainian narratives linked the events of 2014 to an imbalance of power in the international system. At the national level, Ukraine's leaders explained the loss of Crimea to Russia in 2014 as the result of the weakness and fragility of the Ukrainian government in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution. Ukrainian narratives on Crimea reiterated the idea that this loss was temporary and there is no alternative for the Ukrainian state other than returning Crimea under Ukraine's control (Lenton 2022). On the side of Russia, state leaders often highlighted the perceived "threat to compatriots" at the national level as the justification of the annexation of Crimea (Strycharz 2022). At the international system level, Russian narratives positioned Russia as the pole of power in opposition to the Western bloc of powerful states. While addressing the instability in Ukraine, Russia's leadership blamed American hegemony, Western interference, and NATO expansion. Russia accused Western states of anti-Russian foreign policies, the promotion of *Russophobia* in the former Soviet states, and fueling the Color Revolutions in the region (Hutchings & Tolz 2015). Moreover, Russia's leaders repeatedly utilized the "legitimation discourse" by referencing the example of Western intervention in Kosovo as the justification of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Official state narratives in Russia often emphasize that all states in the international system should respect and follow a rules-based order. Yet when it comes to a practical implementation of this order, Russia's leaders use Kosovo as a convenient precedent for situations when powerful states can circumvent international law in favor of their geopolitical interests (Rotaru & Troncota 2017).

The topics of Ukrainian statehood and national identity have been central in the political narratives of the two states, particularly after the Euromaidan events. Russian narratives have long highlighted the significance of state sovereignty, particularly when discussing international relations and criticizing the actions of the West, and specifically the United States, in undermining the sovereignty of other states (Tsygankov 2019). From the perspective of Russia, the events following the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014 undermined Ukraine's sovereignty. Specifically, Russian narratives portray the ousting of

President Yanukovich as a violent and illegal coup that was sanctioned and even facilitated by the West (Lazarenko 2019; Smoor 2017). This kind of rhetoric highlights the Russian perspective on Ukraine as a state that lacks independence and sovereignty, with its government captured by radical domestic forces and powerful external actors. Even prior to 2014, Soviet and Russian leaders referred to Ukraine and Belarus as “brotherly nations” that along with Russia form a single community. Official Russian narratives often presented Ukraine and its people as part of the broader Russian civilization (Kuzio 2017; Kuzio 2018). After 2014, in response to Western sanctions and Ukraine’s decisive turn toward Europe, Russia’s leaders have expanded the category of outgroups (enemies, collaborators, traitors). Political narratives frequently mentioned internal and external conspirators who worked to undermine Russia in different ways (Lipman 2016). Ukraine and its post-Maidan government became one of the main outgroups for Russia, as Russian officials rejected the legitimacy of the new government in Kyiv and warned the public about the influence of radical ultranationalists in Ukraine’s new government.

Since Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, Ukrainian political narratives implicitly and explicitly centered on the topic of Ukrainian identity (Korostelina 2013). This focus became even more prominent after 2014. After the ouster of Victor Yanukovich, Ukrainian leaders often highlighted the distinctive nature of Ukraine’s national identity. They also presented the Russian state as an aggressor that actively worked to diminish and undermine the Ukrainian nation (Smoor 2017). After the Euromaidan, new security threats brought on by the annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbas conflict prompted Ukraine’s post-Maidan government to renew the country’s pro-European course and reduce its dependence on Russia. The government passed specific decommunization laws in 2015 that involved the removal of communist-era monuments, changing the names of thousands of streets and public places affiliated with Soviet officials and history, among other actions that aimed to commemorate the history of Ukraine as an independent state (Kuzio 2018). Ukraine’s post-Maidan leaders placed a specific emphasis on de-Russification without officially rejecting the Russian language. Instead, the Ukrainian government engaged in promoting the Ukrainian language and culture and highlighting the European vector in Ukraine’s political future (Kulyk 2018).

5. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

After reviewing how political narratives have been used in Russia and Ukraine before the start of the full-scale war, we now turn to a review of the methods and data used in our paper. We utilize discourse analysis, which is a qualitative method of textual data interpretation. Discourse analysis also involves interpreting the meaning behind political narratives to uncover specific positions, views, attitudes, and practices that leaders aim to convey to the public.

We focus in particular on the onset and initial months of the conflict to best capture how the strategic narratives explain the war and the place of the West in it. Based on our observations of these first few months, we focus specifically on three different stages of the conflict:

- 1) December 1, 2021-February 23, 2022, as the pre-war period;
- 2) February 24-March 31, 2022, as the first stage of the war when Russia seemed to be set on capturing control of Kyiv;
- 3) April 1-May 31, 2022, as the beginning of the new stage of the war with Russia pulling back its troops in some regions and focusing on “liberating” the Donbas.¹

We use data from official government websites and social media accounts of top-level national leaders in Ukraine and Russia to collect textual data relevant to the war Russia initiated against Ukraine. We systematically collected the speeches of presidents (Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin) and other key political leaders who actively discussed the war in both countries during the time period of December 1, 2021-May 31, 2022. These were the foreign ministers in both states (Dmytro Kuleba and Sergey Lavrov), Ukraine’s Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, and Russia’s presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov. After the initial data collection, only speeches and posts related to the war in Ukraine were selected for further analysis. We systematically read through the content of leaders’ speeches and posts to identify key themes and patterns.

In our analysis of textual data, we examined how both sides included the West in their discussions of the reasons behind the conflict as well as the battlefield conditions and evolution of the war. Relying on Baele’s (2019) work that highlights major groups involved in conspiratorial narratives, we apply this analytical approach to analyze and compare the strategic narratives of state leaders in Ukraine and Russia. We specifically focus on the extent of including the West in the in-group (pure in-group), the outgroups (close and far outgroups), as well as the hybrid groups (traitors and contaminated in-groups). This allows us to examine whether either side is “othering” or embracing the West in its strategic war narratives.

6. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Discourse Analysis of Ukrainian Statements

The core focus of our discourse analysis was examining the place of the West in this war. We also analyzed how Ukrainian leaders described key actors in this war, specifically zooming in on how different Western actors were portrayed in the early months of the war.

In describing the goals of the war, Ukraine’s leaders discussed the objectives that both Ukraine and Russia aimed to achieve with the West being featured as a key actor in these narratives. While discussing the goals of Ukraine in the war with Russia, all of Ukraine’s leaders in our analysis are consistent throughout the time period under study. They describe the core goals of ending the war, restoring sovereignty and territorial

¹ We concede that the cutoff date for stages 2 and 3 is not exact, but it reflects media reports documenting the Russian retreat at the end of March 2022.

integrity of Ukraine and gaining specific security guarantees for Ukraine with the West as one guarantor of these arrangements. Ukraine's Defense Minister Reznikov also reiterated the need to work with Western allies to stop the Russian aggression and to achieve complete victory over Russia. Both Zelenskyy and Reznikov explain that successful negotiations with Russia would only be possible if Ukraine wins the war on the battlefield. This would allow Ukraine to negotiate from the position of strength and reclaim its lost territory (including the previously occupied Crimea and parts of the Donbas), while also making it possible to obtain future security guarantees from Russia. President Zelenskyy also highlights Ukraine's goal of gaining full membership in the European Union while emphasizing that Ukraine is currently defending Europe from Russia's attacks on its security, democracy, and values.

While discussing Russia's ultimate goals in this war against Ukraine, Ukrainian narratives evolve over time to emphasize the escalation of Russia's aggression. In January 2022, one month before the start of the full-scale war, Ukraine's Defense Minister repeatedly reiterated that Russia's threats were primarily directed at NATO and the EU, not so much at Ukraine. According to Reznikov, Russia was attempting to dominate the international system, "the goal of the Kremlin is not Ukraine, they want the world to be afraid." Even after the full-scale war began, Reznikov argued that even though Russia aimed to destroy the Ukrainian state, its true objective was to challenge Western institutions and to intimidate the world. In the first few months of the war, both Zelenskyy and Kuleba discussed Russia's goals of destroying Ukraine as a state, capturing its capital, and eliminating President Zelenskyy. This rhetoric has escalated over time, with Ukraine's Foreign Minister Kuleba identifying Russia's goals of terrorizing civilians and maximizing destruction. While Zelenskyy repeatedly mentioned Russia's goals of destroying Ukrainian people and their culture, he also emphasized that Russia's aims go beyond Ukraine. In one of his speeches in March of 2022, Ukraine's President addressed Europeans stating,

their goal is Europe. Decisive influence on your life, control over your policy, destruction of your values. Not only ours. Democracy, human rights, equality, freedom... The same values as ours. (*President of Ukraine 2022b*)

By May 2022, leaders' narratives incorporated references to the genocidal aims of Russia by highlighting the imperial aims of Russia's rulers and their hatred of all Ukrainians. Ukrainian leaders explicitly link the destruction of the Ukrainian state with Russian intimidation of NATO and the EU, while the attacks on Ukrainian civilians are portrayed as attacks on European values, culture and democracy. These narratives escalate the degree of threat in describing Russia's genocidal objectives in Ukraine, as they straddle both the national and international system levels.

Based on our analysis, Ukrainian narratives contained several categories of in-groups. We began by examining the conceptualization of heroes in this war. Ukraine's leaders continuously emphasize the heroic deeds of the Ukrainian military, border guards, territorial defense units, rescuers, medical workers, policemen, nuclear plant workers, and humanitarian workers. Ukraine's Defense Minister calls the Ukrainian army "the most powerful army in Europe" made up of highly motivated professionals with the unconditional support of the entire Ukrainian nation. Outside of domestic actors,

Zelenskyy also points to European leaders who visited Kyiv since the start of the full-scale war as heroes and true supporters of the Ukrainian people.

Western states and leaders are particularly prominent in political narratives related to Ukraine's allies and partners. Ukrainian narratives mainly identified the Western states (the EU countries, the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Japan, Australia) as the largest allies and supporters of Ukraine. President Zelenskyy continuously refers to Ukraine's allies as "the civilized world" that is facing the hostile and barbaric Russian state, increasingly alienated from the West and many global institutions in the course of the war. Ukrainian narratives describe Ukraine as a European nation that defends European values and requires the help of its allies. Our analysis of political narratives revealed that the biggest focus during all three time periods under study was on the importance of assisting Ukraine with funding, the delivery of arms and security systems. In addition, Ukraine's leaders discuss sanctions against Russia, withdrawal of business from Russia, and ending trade with Russia (in particular, energy trade) as the necessary forms of Western assistance to Ukraine. President Zelenskyy also discusses institutional cooperation with the West as important for collecting and sharing data on Russia's war crimes to keep Russian leaders accountable for the atrocities they commit. He calls on Western partners to create a new international organization that would help make Russia financially accountable for its aggression in different countries around the world. On 20 May 2022, Zelenskyy elaborates,

Under such an agreement, Russian funds and property under the jurisdiction of partner countries must be seized or frozen, and then confiscated and directed to a specially created fund from which all victims of Russian aggression can receive appropriate compensation. (Zelenskiy 2022)

Ukrainian narratives also highlight the heroic deeds of foreign volunteers who travel to Ukraine to fight alongside Ukrainians. Similarly, Ukraine's leaders praise the efforts of Western allies in negotiating with Russia when it comes to prisoner exchanges, humanitarian corridors for civilians, and opening up Ukrainian grain exports. Finally, political narratives frequently reference the West in describing the future for Ukraine. Specifically, leaders discuss the role of Western partners in creating a new collective security agreement for Ukraine, backed by a system of modern air defense. President Zelenskyy also describes the plans for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, which would involve patronage of other countries over individual cities in Ukraine.

While examining the nature of Ukrainian demands and requests toward Western allies, we noticed that those demands evolved and escalated as the war continued. In the pre-war period, Defense Minister Reznikov emphasizes how important it is for Ukraine to receive Western weapons and financial support to be able to contain Russia, while highlighting that it was solely the task of the Ukrainian people to protect Ukraine from its enemies. Understandably, these pleas for military assistance became more urgent in the early war period. In March of 2022, Zelenskyy was more forceful in his rhetoric as he described the slow response of Western allies to the war, the refusal of NATO members to close airspace over Ukraine, and the overall Western fear of Russian escalation. On

3 March 2022 Ukraine's Foreign Minister Kuleba made these demands for assistance more personal for Western allies,

Dear partners who still have not provided Ukraine with military aircraft: how can you sleep when Ukrainian children are under bombs in Mariupol, Kherson, Kharkiv, other cities? You can take this decision now. Do it! (Kuleba 2022a)

Ukrainian narratives present these requests for support not as favors and handouts but as an investment in future European security, and as an immediate necessity in light of the ongoing Russian aggression. Kuleba also describes Western military and financial assistance as an alternative to having Westerners physically fighting in this war. He calls this arrangement the Ukrainian Fair deal, noting that

Partners provide us with all the heavy weapons we need - We fight and stop Russia now, so that partners don't have to fight later. (Kuleba 2022b)

President Zelenskyy repeatedly compares Ukraine to a shield that protects Europe from Russian aggression.

Since the topic of NATO as a military alliance has been quite prominent in Russian narratives since 2014, we examined NATO-related content in Ukrainian narratives as well. Ukraine's leaders view NATO as an important ally in this war against Russia. In the pre-war period, we saw frequent discussions about the place of Ukraine in NATO as a future member and as an important element of NATO's defense system for Eastern Europe. In February of 2022, President Zelenskyy spoke about Ukraine's future in NATO in an ambiguous manner, "We do not signal that NATO membership is not our goal." He also repeatedly described as unacceptable Russia's demands for Ukraine's neutrality and abandoning any future plans of joining NATO. Foreign Minister Kuleba is more direct in highlighting NATO membership as a strategic goal for Ukraine. Foreign Minister Reznikov talks about Ukraine's military cooperation with NATO resulting in de-facto integration of Ukraine into NATO. Reznikov consistently notes that by supplying Ukrainians with NATO-grade weapons and military equipment, Western countries contribute to the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank. Ukrainian leaders changed their NATO-related rhetoric in the early war period. In March of 2022, President Zelenskyy announced his agreement to accept an alternative set of security guarantees for Ukraine from Russia in lieu of NATO membership. During this early war period, Zelenskyy became more critical of NATO. On March 4th, he responded to NATO's refusal to close Ukraine's airspace,

All the people who will die starting from this day will also die because of you. Because of your weakness. Because of your disunity. (*President of Ukraine 2022a*)

In April 2022 he describes the history of NATO's weak response to Russian aggression against Ukraine dating back to 2008,

They thought that by refusing Ukraine (as a NATO member), they would be able to appease Russia, to convince it to respect Ukraine and live normally next to us. During the 14 years since that miscalculation, Ukraine has experienced a revolution and eight years of war in Donbas. And now we are fighting for life in the most horrific war in Europe since World War II. (*President of Ukraine 2022c*)

Foreign Minister Kuleba is more careful in not blaming the Russian aggression against Ukraine on NATO, reiterating the idea that Russia is solely responsible for causing the current war.

Discourse Analysis of Russian Statements

We next turn to the statements of Russian leaders, Putin, Lavrov, Peskov and Zakharova, similarly analyzing the extent to which they included the West. While we detected some shifts in Russia's specific goals during this six-month time period, we also observed that the West was consistently cited by Russian officials as a reason for Russian activity. This was done both explicitly and implicitly. Prior to the start of the war, Sergei Lavrov often placed prominent focus on NATO and the West and its actions in deepening military ties with Ukraine. For example, Lavrov stated on December 31st, 2021, that,

NATO member states are systematically transforming Ukraine into a military foothold against Russia, building their bases there and using its territory for military exercises. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021*)

and later stated that,

the West fails to honor its obligations in terms of indivisibility of security and ignores our interests, although we laid them out in an extremely straightforward and clear way. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022a*)

Russian officials often presented the situation as one extending back decades, as Lavrov stated on February 15th, 2022 that,

when NATO started to expand once again by including the Baltic republics, we asked our Western colleagues why it was being done in the absence of any threats. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022b*)

This reference to the 2004 NATO expansion is used to assert that the West and NATO have been responsible for inflaming tensions with Russia for almost two decades. The Russian discourse also explicitly asserted that the Ukrainian government was beholden to the West and that it lacked state sovereignty, connecting this back to the 2014 Euromaidan protests and the Russian perception that the ouster of Yanukovich was “an anti-constitutional coup”, as exemplified by Lavrov on February 15th, 2022:

but why was Europe silent and unperturbed by the Ukrainian coup? Obviously because those capitals, including the three countries whose ministers signed the agreement, which was later broken by the coup perpetrators, were also willing to side with the people who had proclaimed that they were for the West, not for Russia, despite the anti-constitutional coup and the ensuing bloodshed. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022b*).

Overall, prior to the February 24th invasion, Russian accounts of Ukrainian domestic and international politics largely center the West as a guilty party and an active participant in Ukraine's affairs. This also emphasizes how Russia sees the West as an out-group that rejects Russia and that has further pulled Ukraine into its orbit.

The Russian narrative expanded beyond this overt focus on Western dominance at the onset of the war, with Putin's national address on February 21st seen as a crucial turning point. That speech continued to highlight the significance of the West for Ukraine's political trajectory since 2014, stating that the West subverted the independence of Ukraine's judiciary, that there had been a

constant flow of Western weapons to Ukraine. (*Президент России 2022*)

and that the West is only using Ukraine to harm Russia, as

Their one and only goal is to hold back the development of Russia. (*Президент России 2022*)

Yet Putin also attributed much greater agency on the part of Ukrainian officials in their dealings with the West, stating,

Kiev tried to use dialogue with Russia as a bargaining chip in its relations with the West. (*Президент России 2022*)

Moreover, Putin asserted that Ukraine's foreign relations are tied to its own political institutions, since, in his perspective,

Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood. And, therefore, in 1991 it opted for mindlessly emulating foreign models, which have no relation to history or Ukrainian realities. (*Президент России 2022*)

Putin then connects this to the role of Western linkages, stating that,

Ukraine itself was placed under external control, directed not only from the Western capitals, but also on the ground, as the saying goes, through an entire network of foreign advisors, NGOs and other institutions present in Ukraine. (*Президент России 2022*)

In announcing the invasion, or the so-called "special military operation" on February 24th, 2022, Putin explained that Russia's actions were in pursuit of nationwide changes in Ukraine, consistently highlighting his stated goal of "demilitarizing and denazifying" Ukraine. The goal of "demilitarization" has overt connections to the West, while "denazification" has a more implicit tie to the West, based on our discourse analysis. Putin and others described that to them, demilitarization meant that Ukraine would be neutral in its relations and that Ukraine would surrender its capability to attack Russia. For Russia, neutrality means that Ukraine would cease receiving support from the West and NATO, and that it would never join the military alliance. Lavrov stated this quite bluntly on March 10th, saying,

we don't want the militarization of Ukraine...We don't want Ukraine to become a neo-Nazi state...We want Ukraine to be a neutral state. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022c*)

The Russian usage of the word "nazi", in the context of its demands for denazification, quickly increased in the statements of many Russian officials. Their meaning has typically focused on perceived anti-Russian policies and attitudes within Ukraine, and a Western tolerance of those policies. Lavrov has been the most specific, pointing to the shift in Ukraine away from the Russian language, and the historical

connection that Nazi Germany had in fighting the Soviets during World War II. For example, Lavrov emphasized his impression of the widespread embrace of Ukrainian nationalist figures Roman Shukhevich and Stephan Bandera, which have a controversial history due to their collaboration with Nazi Germany (Marples 2007). Lavrov and other Russian officials asserted that these figures were widely revered, and that the West had tolerated or ignored those tendencies¹.

While Russian officials put forward those demands of demilitarization and denazification, their rhetoric often blatantly cited the West as its true foes. In their statements, Russian officials commonly referred to the so-called “Collective West”, a term used to characterize the West as a unified and coherent block of countries, led by the United States. In using this phrase, Russian leaders highlighted how they were threatened by such a powerful grouping, and that the “Collective West” had attempted to subsume Ukraine. Russian leaders did not treat Ukraine as a sovereign state, alleging that the West had swept Ukraine up into its orbit and was manipulating it for its own geopolitical purposes. As one example, Lavrov stated as much on March 16th, that

this concerns the international order, rather than Ukraine alone... Under President Joe Biden, the United States set the goal of subordinating Europe, and it has succeeded in forcing Europe to implicitly follow US policies. (*The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022d*)

Russia’s version of events paints a coordinated and conspiratorial effort by the West to take control of other states so that they can challenge Russia and its security.

Russia’s military campaign shifted away from its pursuit of regime change in Kyiv in April and May, with the scope narrowing to Eastern Ukraine and the Donbas. We also noticed that Russian statements mentioned the goals of demilitarization and denazification less frequently. Given this change, how was the place of the West in Russian narratives impacted? Analyzing the discourse from April 1st through May 31st, we detected that the West remained a prominent source of instigation and blame for the war in Ukraine. Russian officials asserted that they sought to protect and liberate the Donbas region from the prevalence of so-called Nazis, and they increasingly implicated the West in these arguments, asserting that the West had been meddling in Ukraine since World War I, fostering a culture of anti-Russian sentiment. The West was still presented as a nefarious force that was using Ukraine as a way to get to Russia, such as Putin saying on April 12th, “the main goal of the West is not to help Ukraine. Ukraine is just a means to reaching goals that have nothing to do with the interests of the Ukrainian people.” Putin also demonstrated that he saw a power differential within the West, pointing to, “Europe’s insulting and humiliating position with regard to its sovereign, that is, the United States,” alleging that the U.S. is the primary decision maker among the broader West. We also noticed that Russian officials frequently used terms such as “russophobe”

¹ Both figures were leaders and combatants in the broader effort to fight for independence from the Soviet Union during World War II. They sought training, support and collaboration from Nazi Germany in that pursuit. The popular reverence for figures like them has grown in Ukraine since 2014, in response to Russian aggression.

and “anti-Russian” in connection with the West after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sergei Lavrov was the most explicit and direct in his communications. For example, Lavrov said that “Popular Russophobia has taken on an unprecedented scale in many Western countries, where, to our regret, it is nurtured by government circles” in May of 2022. He also suggested that the allegations of crimes against humanity in the Ukrainian city of Bucha were false, and that they were part of a concerted effort to tarnish Russia’s image, and to prevent any meaningful peace talks. Speaking on April 30th, Lavrov alleged that “the Ukrainian security services staged a crude, bloody provocation in Bucha with the help of the West, to complicate the negotiation process, among other things.” So, while the objectives of the Russian military had changed, the tenor of Russia’s accusations towards the West remained hostile and accusatory.

Our main takeaway on the role of the West in Russian narratives is that they place the West in a central and controlling position, and that the West dictates orders and policies to Ukraine. The Russian worldview underlying these narratives appears to be one with a cabal of Western powers pulling the strings in many different global efforts, manipulating states like Ukraine, and unfairly targeting Russia in the process. Whether or not Russian officials actually believe their assertions is unclear, and that is not a question we can answer with any certainty. Even so, we have observed that these stories are widely disseminated by Russian officials, and that they have been used to provide the justification for Russia’s “special military operation”. As discussed earlier, narratives can help leaders rally support and mobilize their citizenry, and they may also help Russia amass talking points when seeking new allies in China and the Global South. The honesty of the narratives is not a requirement for them to still hold instrumental value for Russia’s foreign policy.

The Place of the West: Comparison of Russian and Ukrainian Narratives

In our analyses, we observed that both the Ukrainian and Russian sides deployed narratives for multiple reasons. By engaging in direct communication with their respective populations, Russian and Ukrainian leaders are aiming to build domestic support for the war effort, and to explain the governments’ actions and objectives. This has been especially clear as the war progressed and the scope of the war shifted more to Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, both sides have engaged with international audiences and regularly bring up the role of the West in connection to the war. Yet we also noted a few differences. One has to do with the primary speakers, when it comes to the war narratives. In Ukraine, President Zelenskyy has been consistently prolific in his public remarks since the start of the war, and has often implicitly and explicitly engaged in outreach to international actors, especially Western states and NATO. On the other hand, in Russia we observed that it was Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who devoted the greatest amount of attention to the war, speaking the most and also implicating the West regularly, both for causing the war and for shaping its course. President Putin spoke far less frequently in Russia when compared to Zelenskyy, but he too supported an anti-Western narrative as the war continued.

We observed adaptation in the wartime narratives as the conditions of the war shifted in April and May of 2022. In both cases, Ukrainian and Russian leaders adjusted their portrayal of the West and their demands for Western actions. Ukrainian leaders revealed a growing frustration with NATO, and became more assertive in their push for concrete Western support. In Ukraine, the specific demands from the West evolved, with greater attention paid to concrete security guarantees from NATO and for international organizations to pursue war crimes charges. Russian leaders also increasingly demanded security guarantees, just as Ukrainian leaders did. In the case of Russia, these are security guarantees against the West, more specifically against the United States, while for Ukraine these are security guarantees in partnership with the West. For Russia, on the other hand, more direct references were made towards the West, rather than NATO, especially as the war entered its second and third months. This demonstrates that Russia differentiates between NATO and the West, and increasingly focused on the West, and in particular the US, as a foe in the war. Russian narratives highlighted its perception that the West was anti-Russian, guilty of so-called “Russophobia”. This portrayal framed the West as foes that unfairly maligned Russia and that the West ignored the plight of Russian speakers in Ukraine. Russian narratives also pushed the notion that the West were fabricating stories like the massacres and alleged human rights abuses in Bucha, as part of an effort to “cancel” Russia in the global community.

In summation, the narratives of Ukraine and Russia rest upon increasingly distinct worldviews, assumptions and even basic facts. Our analysis shows that Russian narratives rest upon the notion that it is fighting against the West, while Ukraine views the war as fighting both with the West but also for NATO and the West. Another distinction in the narratives of the two states reveals that Russia views the West as a monolithic entity with the U.S. as the leading state and the main aggressor. Ukrainian leaders view the West as a group of actors that are more distinct, with Ukraine being a member of a larger European family. At the same time, as the war progressed, Ukrainian leaders did not shy away from criticizing Western actors like NATO for their weak and inadequate support. Ultimately, both sides in this war seem to view it as the conflict between Russia and the West. While Russia may see Ukraine as lacking sovereignty and as a pawn of the U.S. and the West, Ukraine presents itself as a free European state tragically caught in-between the two battling global forces. Zelenskyy famously summarized this sentiment in a joke during his interview with the American comedian David Letterman in late 2022

Two Jewish guys from Odesa meet up.

One asks the other: “So what’s the situation? What are people saying?”

“Russia is fighting NATO.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, yes! Russia is fighting NATO.”

“So how’s it going?”

“Well, 70,000 Russian soldiers are dead. The missile stockpile has almost been depleted. A lot of equipment is damaged, blown up.”

“And what about NATO?”

“What about NATO? NATO hasn’t even arrived yet (The Time of Israel 2022).”

7. PROSPECTS FOR DE-ESCALATION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began this paper by asking how leaders in Ukraine and Russia have attempted to frame the place of the West in this war. Through our discourse analysis, we have examined and compared the key themes in the political narratives of Ukrainian and Russian leaders during the first months of the full-scale war that Russia started in Ukraine. Overall, we find that these official narratives evolved and adjusted to the changes in this violent war. On the Ukrainian side, we discovered that the narratives describing Russia's goals in this war have changed, becoming more expansive and fatalistic over time. Narratives pertaining to the NATO alliance became more urgent and critical after the full-scale invasion, as Ukraine's leaders emphasized the need for more NATO assistance to Ukraine. On the Russian side, they continued to blame the West, ratcheting up their version of Western blame and complicity.

Both Ukraine and Russia agree that the West is a party to this war, at least based on their public narratives. For Ukraine, this means that any resolution of the war needs to involve the West as well. For Russia, the involvement of the West in the resolution of the war would further solidify their perception that Ukraine is just a tool of the West in its anti-Russia agenda, further undermining Ukraine's sovereignty. What further complicates any future prospects of peace or de-escalation is the notion that Ukraine and the West may have different ideas about the conditions for peace and what the post-war reality may look like. Ukraine as the state carrying the brunt of this war in terms of human and material costs would not want this war to be resolved on Western terms alone. At the same time, public moods and perceptions in the West may not align with this view. The Western public do not constantly agree that the Russian war in Ukraine is a matter of national interest for Western states (Cerde 2023). Others may argue that since the West is so actively involved in supporting Ukraine in this war, the West also gets to decide when, how, and on what terms any potential peace agreement could be signed.

We can identify multiple avenues for future research on this topic. The most obvious concerns the ways that narratives may be tailored towards a particular audience. Given the enormous focus that both Ukraine and Russia devote to the West, we suspect that they may alter their narratives depending upon whether they are speaking to their own populations versus the international community. We also wonder whether each side varies the content of their narratives depending upon the method of communication. While Ukrainian leaders like Zelenskyy ramped up their usage of social media and digital technologies, Russia constricted access to Western social media outlets. Given this notable split in an otherwise globalized world, we see value in a deeper focus on the effects of a growing technological divide between Russia and Ukraine. A third research avenue concerns how Russia intentionally incorporates charged and conspiratorial language into its narratives. We noted the usage of phrases like "nazism", "cancel culture" and "fake news". It seems possible that Russia aims to link their ambitions in Ukraine with these other global trends.

This topic is timely and important. As of this writing, there have been more than 32,000 civilian casualties in Ukraine, including over 11,000 killed and 21,000 injured (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2024: 3). The UN

estimates that since February 24, 2022, this war has displaced more than 13 million Ukrainians (UNHCR 2024). While official statistics on military casualties on both sides of this war have been inconsistent, estimates point to at least 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers having been killed in the first two years of the war (*AP World News* 2024). On the Russian side, estimates for military casualties range from about 50,000 to over 500,000 (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2024). Finally, many estimate that over 800,000 Russians have fled their own country, with waves taking place at the start of the war and again after the mobilization in September 2022 (Matusevich 2024). The research on strategic narratives helps us examine the stories and compare explanations offered by state leaders in this war, especially how they see the place of the West and what role the West must play in its resolution.

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