

## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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**Abstract:** *Our research analyzes the narratives employed by the Russian president Vladimir Putin and the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in their speeches regarding the military actions in Ukraine from the 19<sup>th</sup> of February to the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2022. The battle on the ground between Russia and Ukraine is doubled by the two presidents' discursive confrontation. They both address their own audiences, opposing audiences and the international audience affected by this confrontation. They express powerful ideas that are the building blocks for strategic narratives through which they justify their action, they highlight the role they play in the conflict and set expectations for the future. Our narrative analysis identifies the major frames and topics of these narrative strategies as they unfolded at the beginning of the war and the results of these discursive confrontations.*

**Keywords:** *strategic narrative; actors; events, setting*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the present informational ecosystem, wars are as much fought on the narrative battlefield as they are fought in the physical domain. In the current conflict in Ukraine, we see two strategic narratives that are battling for superiority: on the one hand, the Russian president's narrative regarding the rights and threats that the Russian Federation has and perceives, respectively, with respect to Ukraine; on the other hand, the Ukrainian president's narrative about the courage, values, fortitude of the Ukrainian people in face of a war and their penchant for democracy. In order to better comprehend how strategic narratives function and what their societal and security power resides in, we have conducted a narrative analysis of the speeches given by Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky in the period 19 February - 10 March 2022, a timeline that includes speeches delivered before and shortly after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Our objective is to understand what strategic narratives the two heads of state employ in order to shape international and domestic perceptions of and reactions to the war.

To this end, we have reviewed the literature with respect to strategic narratives and we have extracted a conceptual framework to be used in analyzing the strategic narratives of the two above-mentioned actors.

### 2. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Narratives have been part of humanity's culture since the beginning of time because they respond to an inherent and omnipotent need to understand one's environment and experiences, to make sense of the world around, by identifying the hidden causal and temporal relations that order events and confer meaning over apparently random sequences of occurrences. As Holmstrom explains, narratives are more than simple stories. Their role is to "describe the past, justify the present, and present a vision of the future" (2016: 119). The explanatory, correlational and organizational nature of narratives provides control over large volumes of information that could otherwise overwhelm humans' ability to function in the world. They give structure and meaning to experiences, which is why they are so attractive and could be used for multiple purposes and at various levels of complexity. Joseph Campbell (1991) has identified the typical narrative structure as containing: a character/an actor that the audience can identify or empathize with, tension built through curiosity, danger, crisis, the struggle to overcome the moment of crisis and the solutions, the satisfying denouement. Gottschall (2019:47) explains that narratives train the human mind's associative processes to handle difficult situations when and if confronted with them.

Holmstrom further explains that narratives become even more important when a crisis is unfolding, when people are confronted with an unknown situation, which creates a void of knowledge and understanding. In these cases, when people cannot resort to a narrative to explain the events, there is a void that any explanation available could fill, irrespective of its viability and merits.

Facts alone cannot ease the feeling of being lost intellectually. Narratives answer the basic human need for structure and predictability. If one side fails to provide a meaningful narrative, others will fill the void (Holmstrom, 2016:120).

However, narratives could be used to shape the understanding of international relations and systems as well, as they can operate at a strategic level. In this case, they could be used to shape policies, to determine strategic advantages, to project certain states or organizations' image in the world, to inform reactions to crises or conflicts, to determine expectations regarding certain actors' behavior, to create desirability to cooperate or reluctance to engage with certain actors, to make predictions about future courses of action. These are strategic narratives and are defined as

representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2013: 7).

In our opinion, this attempt is, in fact, meant to create a feeling of eternity and stability, by bridging the past, present and future into a continuous and comprehensible sequence of events unfolding towards a clearly defined goal. Strategic narratives confer power and influence in international relations. As Madisson & Ventsel (2021:22) explain

telling a story entails segmentation of a flow of experience, which has been perceived as continuous, into many concrete units which are thereafter ordered in a definite way: temporal and causal relations are created with other elements of the story and meaningfulness is attributed to the whole story.

Narratives are not about true facts, but about specific perspectives which reflect particular interests, and their goal is to intentionally shape the meanings of conflicts to suit their proponents' needs (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2013, Miskimmon *et al.*, 2017).

Strategic narratives are employed by every governing power that “tries to connect its story to the existing societal narratives, but these ties are seldom perfect” (Maan, 2020: 34) Moreover, conflicts, crises

and wars are complicated and dangerous times which can create further disruption in societal narratives. As Maan explains, these moments of disruption are the perfect opportunity for successful narrative entrepreneurs to “interpose their own story between the government story and the societal narrative,” (2020:34) thus leading to more disruption and an alteration of societal understandings and positionings.

Strategic narratives bring together and recontextualize various distinct narratives related to history, traditions, norms, culture, values, symbols which enhance their persuasive power because they trigger associations, evaluations, point to solutions that the audiences then more readily embrace since they already feel to a certain extent connected to them. We have noticed that, in the context of warfare strategic narratives can integrate even narratives that at previous times had been contradictory, for example, accusing people unrelated to Nazism that they are Nazis. Given the volatility and anxiety of the context, people are more willing to accept these conflictual reinterpretations of historical and cultural references.

Miskimmon *et al.* (2013:7-10) explain that strategic narratives have a particular structure through which meaning is obtained. This structure involves: actors, events (plot and time), and setting (including space). Actors work to present their own character by selecting historical references, values, actions that promote the desired image. In other words, they select certain frames which coordinate how their meanings are transmitted to the audience. In the case of international relations involving states or organizations, events can be historical, long ranging or punctual and precise, such as when a crisis or conflict breaks out. Events are governed by chronology and causality and the goal of a strategic narrative is to provide these organizations so as to best suit the interests of the actor. The setting refers to the context in which the events unfold and the actors make certain decisions. The context itself dictates how certain events are perceived by the audience, to what extent they can visualize the events and the actors. Moreover, we argue that the setting can rely not solely on spatial representations, but also on historical background, as the actors choose to present it, as well as on the legal framework provided by conventions, treaties, memoranda, agreements that govern the interactions among states and international organizations. The setting determines the actions of the actors and affects the evolution of events and therefore the construction of meaning that strategic narratives propose.

Along the same lines of analysis, Maan (2020:121) points out that strategic narratives rely on

## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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three elements: identity, meaning and structure. Identity (or actors in Miskimmon's interpretation) represents the sum of

behavioral patterns, attitudes, values, beliefs, perceptions, history, culture all congregated into a cognitive, affective and expectational network that allows members of a society to make sense of the events that surround them and to become integrated into the social fabric.

Secondly, narratives give meaning to a series of events, they construe an understanding of what is happening. Maan emphasizes the fact that narratives do not necessarily tell the truth, as they create a meaning for those events in question and a justification for the interpretation they propose. Lastly, structure (loosely associated with setting from Miskimmon's classification) refers to how the narrative is organized and presented and it determines to a great extent how the audience will perceive the content of the strategic narrative, given the chosen pattern. Generally speaking, for a Western audience, a linear, chronological pattern which enumerates causes and then explains their effects is the more common and easily understood. It is our contention that this model may not function for an Eastern audience who is familiar with the circular and eternal vision of history and in which nostalgia for the past is more attractive.

All these elements that a narrative relies on are constructed via frames which Castells defines as structures corresponding to "neural networks of association that can be accessed from the language through metaphorical connections" (Castells, 2009: 140). For this reason, it is important which elements are chosen to construct the narrative because they will dictate the associations in the audience's minds and only those frames that manage to activate and connect to already existing frames in the public's minds will create the desired effect.

Frames are effective by finding resonance and increasing the magnitude of their repetition. The greater the resonance and magnitude, the more likely the framing is to evoke similar thoughts and feelings in a larger audience (Castells, 2009:158).

Frames are based on selection and emphasis of some aspects of an event or an actor so as to guide interpretation in the desired direction.

### 3. REFERENCES

We have employed narrative analysis as our research methodology, which presupposes the

analysis of texts as a reflection of the diverse stories that nations, governments, organizations construct about themselves, with respect to history, current events, cultural behaviors etc. Narratives presuppose that "events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" and they are interpreted as such by the storytellers (SESSRM 2014). We have chosen to focus on thematic narrative analysis, that is on the "study [of] the substance of narratives" to determine the topics present in the narratives (SECRM 2017), the reasons they were chosen, and the world view they construct.

Bearing in mind what Dumitriu & De Graaf (2016:3) explained that "strategic story-telling can serve to explain strategic issues in a more personal, meaningful way" and that political actors may employ strategic narratives in order to make events meaningful, socially relevant and relatable for the audiences, we examined the ways in which the Russian and the Ukrainian presidents constructed their strategic narratives regarding the war in Ukraine.

More precisely, we have collected the speeches of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky from the period 19.02.2022 to 10.03.2022 with respect to the war in Ukraine. We have focused on this 20-day period because it represents the week prior to the conflict, the explosive beginning of the conflict and a short period afterward in which the two president's discursive positions became clear. The sources for the scripts were the two presidential web pages: <http://en.kremlin.ru/> and <https://www.president.gov.ua/en>. In total, we have analyzed five speeches by Vladimir Putin and 23 speeches by Volodymyr Zelensky.

In order to identify the strategic narratives that the two heads of state propose for the interpretation of the war in Ukraine, we have identified in our analysis the three components of narratives: actors, including the ways their identities are created, events i.e. what meaning they are given, and setting, context, i.e. the structure, the framework in which the actors and the events unfold. In order to understand how these components are constructed, we have looked at the frames that the speakers employ and the ways in which they interact to build the strategic narratives.

**3.1. Vladimir Putin's strategic narrative.** The narrative analysis of Putin's speeches reveals that he uses three main actors in the strategic narrative he constructs: **the Russian Federation, Ukraine** and international organizations and alliances: **NATO** (with particular focus on the **United States**) and **the European Union**. Our analysis has identified several frames that Putin resorts to in order to create the

image of these actors. In order to create the image of Russia, several frames interact. The first one is of **honest Russia**: “Russia always worked with Ukraine in an open and honest manner and, as I have already said, with respect for its interests”; Russia worked in “openness and goodwill” with NATO in the 1990s and 2000s; Russia fulfilled its obligations after the Cold War and proposed cooperation with the West, showing “its readiness to work honestly with the United States and other Western partners” (21.02).

The second one is of **Russia as an innocent victim of foreign scheming**. NATO is moving forward, towards Russia’s borders despite promises not to do so and protests from Moscow:

our biggest concerns and worries, and (...) the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year.

Moreover, NATO and the US in particular, respond with “either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail” to Russia’s concerns. Part of the same frame is the statement that the Pentagon develops missile systems in Eastern Europe that could easily hit Russian territory.

It is like a knife to the throat. I have no doubt that they hope to carry out these plans, as they did many times in the past, expanding NATO eastward, moving their military infrastructure to Russian borders and fully ignoring our concerns, protests and warnings (24.02).

Another frame this actor plays in is that of **Russia as a savior**: Russia feels compassion for the oppressed people in Donbass.

It became impossible to tolerate it. We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us (24.02).

Russia respects their aspirations, the feelings and pain of these people that were the main motivating force behind our decision to recognize the independence of the Donbass people’s republics (24.02).

In relation to this frame, we find another one, **pacifist Russia**: Russia supported resolving “the most complicated problems by political and diplomatic means, at the negotiating table” (21.02). Moreover, Putin portrays **Russia as the eternal fighter against Nazism** that continues the battle that Russian forces started in the Great Patriotic War. “The Ukrainian authorities denied everything that binds the Russian and the Ukrainian people together” (24.02), which led to

the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. This resulted in the participation of Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis in the terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and the increasingly loud territorial claims to Russia (21.02).

Putin states that Ukrainians attack the communities in Donbass on a daily basis with heavy equipment, while the Western world does nothing because the 4 million people affected

did not agree with the West-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014 and opposed the transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy. They are fighting for their elementary right to live on their own land, to speak their own language, and to preserve their culture and traditions (21.02).

He goes even further to claim that the nationalists and neo-Nazis are using their own citizens as “human shields”

It is only fascists that did this, they were the ones that treated civilians so inhumanely when Soviet forces were fighting them, including as they were liberating Ukraine (03.03).

Another set of frames involving Russia focuses on the fact that **Russia is still a power to be reckoned with**: Russia still has military and nuclear power

today’s Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country (24.02).

Putin also frames Russia as being eternal, focusing on the Russians’ respect and promotion of their cultural heritage.

The culture and values, experience and traditions of our ancestors invariably provided a powerful underpinning for the wellbeing and the very existence of entire states and nations, their success and viability (24.02).

These cultural traditions are the source of Russia’s power and status in the world and the bedrock for their sovereignty:

We all know that having justice and truth on our side is what makes us truly strong. If this is the case, it

## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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would be hard to disagree with the fact that it is our strength and our readiness to fight that are the bedrock of independence and sovereignty and provide the necessary foundation for building a reliable future for your home, your family, and your Motherland (24.02).

The second actor Putin employs in his strategic narrative is Ukraine. A very important frame that Putin creates with respect to Ukraine is that it does not exist independently of Russia, neither from a cultural nor from a statehood point of view. We have termed this the **Ukraine non-existence frame**. Ukraine cannot be accepted as a separate country from Russia because they share the same history, culture. “I will never abandon my conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation”;

Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties (03.03).

Moreover, Ukraine has never been a real state

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 (21.02).

This led to clans with self-serving interests and oligarchs, and not to better conditions and protections of the citizens’ interests and well-being. Within the same frame, to accentuate Ukrainian lack of statehood, Putin delegitimizes the Maidan protests by stating that Maidan was a nationalists’ coup d’état and it pushed the country “into the abyss of civil war. Eight years later, the country is split. Ukraine is struggling with an acute socio-economic crisis” (21.02). Given the fact that it did not have the traditions of statehood, Ukraine “has been reduced to a colony with a puppet regime”;

The state was privatised. As a result, the government, which designates itself as the “power of patriots” no longer acts in a national capacity and consistently pushes Ukraine towards losing its sovereignty (21.02).

In all, the Ukraine actor is nothing more than a cultureless and statehoodless puppet in the hands of foreign powers, which introduces the second frame regarding Ukraine: **Ukraine as an instrument of foreign manipulation**. Ukraine blackmails Western countries to support it, by using its potential ties with Russia as a bargaining chip.

The officials in Kiev replaced partnership with a parasitic attitude acting at times in an extremely brash manner. Suffice it to recall the continuous blackmail on energy transits and the fact that they literally stole gas (21.02).

Kiev used its dealings with Russia to blackmail the West.

Kiev tried to use dialogue with Russia as a bargaining chip in its relations with the West, using the threat of closer ties with Russia for blackmailing the West to secure preferences by claiming that otherwise Russia would have a bigger influence in Ukraine (21.02).

With respect to the actors NATO (the US in particular) and the EU, Putin employs an **external aggression and superiority frame**. NATO and the EU have an aggressive stance against Russia and its legitimate interests and complaints

Where did this insolent manner of talking down from the height of their exceptionalism, infallibility and all-permissiveness come from? What is the explanation for this contemptuous and disdainful attitude to our interests and absolutely legitimate demands? (24.02)

Russia understands that international relations evolve and change, but believes the change should be professional, smooth, patient, taking into account and respecting all the actors’ interests and responsibilities. However, this is not the stance that Western countries have adopted:

we saw a state of euphoria created by the feeling of absolute superiority, a kind of modern absolutism, coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves (24.02).

Moreover, the West has constantly tried to destroy Russia in two ways. First, culturally

they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature (24.02).

Secondly, by infringing on its territorial integrity by expanding NATO infrastructure on Ukrainian territory.

Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance’s infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO

itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile “anti-Russia” is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons (24.02).

As these operations continue, Russia’s very sovereignty is threatened. “It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it” (24.02).

Another frame connected to the previous one refers to the fact that **NATO and the US are deceitful**. All the exercises that NATO organizes in Ukraine are “an impudent development of Ukrainian territory as a theatre of potential military operations” against Russia. NATO has deceived Russia with promises not to expand eastward.

This type of con-artist behaviour is contrary not only to the principles of international relations but also and above all to the generally accepted norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around (24.02).

In particular, the US is framed as “an empire of lies”:

All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it at the slightest pretext but also imitate its behaviour and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them. Therefore, one can say with good reason and confidence that the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same “empire of lies” (24.02).

As far as events are concerned, two main narrative threads are identifiable in Putin’s speeches: (1) the future the Russian president desires for Russia; (2) the justifications for the present war in Ukraine.

The **future Vladimir Putin desires for Russia** is clearly stated in his speech on 21st of February, before the invasion began and which should look as follows: NATO should no longer expand or deploy assault weapons on Russian borders and, in fact, it should retreat to the positions it held in 1997. This vision for the future is in fact a past situation. Even when he attempts to speak about the future, Putin returns to the past and the injustices the believes Russia has suffered. These three proposals have been ignored by Western states who claim that “each state is entitled to freely choose ways to ensure its security

or to join any military union or alliance. That is, nothing has changed in their stance, and we keep hearing the same old references to NATO’s notorious “open door” policy” (21.02). Additionally, the West attempts to blackmail Russia with sanctions, which, in Putin’s estimation “they will introduce no matter what as Russia continues to strengthen its sovereignty and its Armed Forces” (21.02). He goes even further to claim that the West may actually be “fabricating a pretext for yet another sanction attack regardless of the developments in Ukraine”, because “their one and only goal is to hold back the development of Russia. And they will keep doing so, just as they did before” (21.02). Putin restates the idea of a circular historical vision in which what has come before will come again.

With respect to the second line of events, **justifications for the present war in Ukraine**, Putin considers that Russian proposals for

an equal dialogue on fundamental issues have actually remained unanswered by the United States and NATO, when the level of threats to our country has increased significantly, Russia has every right to respond in order to ensure its security. That is exactly what we will do (21.02).

This is the moment in which pacifist Russia becomes Russia the savior and fighter against Nazis, which are reflected in the ways Putin presents the events in the war. He announced on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 that

in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia’s Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.

The objective of the operation is to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” Therefore, the Russian forces “will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.” It is not part of the plan “to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force” (24.02).

Relying on Russia’s frame as the eternal fighter against Nazism, Putin states that the West does not intend to respect the treaties signed in the aftermath of the Second World War, documents which he

## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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deems “sacred” because they enshrined the “sacrifices our people had to make to defeat Nazism.”

Putin reminds that the people living in territories now belonging to Ukraine had not been asked how they want to live after the Second World War, and he wants to protect their rights

Freedom guides our policy, the freedom to choose independently our future and the future of our children. We believe that all the peoples living in today’s Ukraine, anyone who wants to do this, must be able to enjoy this right to make a free choice (24.02).

He addressed the citizens of Ukraine to remind them that Russia had to act in 2014 “to protect the people of Crimea and Sevastopol from those who you yourself call “nats.”” But he will not “infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people”, as his only goal is to defend Russia “from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people.” He emphasizes that the Ukrainian’s “fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine” (24.02)

He also warns against foreign interference that would extort a terrible cost.

No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history (24.02).

This is in fact a threat against NATO and EU states.

As the intervention progressed (25.02), Putin presented the events and stated that the clashes

are taking place not with regular Ukrainian armed forces’ units but with nationalist groups that, as we know, bear direct responsibility for the genocide in Donbass and the spilled blood of the citizens of the people’s republics.

He states that objective monitoring reports

banderites and neo-Nazis are putting up heavy weapons, including multiple-rocket launchers, right in the central districts of large cities, including Kiev and Kharkov

and assimilates Ukrainian defense to terrorists using civilian covers.

In his updates on 03.03, he stated that Russian soldiers are acting courageously, like “true heroes” in order to protect the people in Donbass and provide security for the Motherland.

Our servicemen are fighting hard, fully understanding the righteousness of their cause. Soldiers and officers remain in position even after being wounded. They sacrifice themselves, their lives, to save their fellow soldiers and civilians.

He also explains that foreign nationals, Chinese and Indian students, have been taken hostage by the neo-Nazis.

He restates the objectives of the operation “a peaceful life for the citizens of Donbass, and for the denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine.” Putin resorts to Russia as a victim frame implying that Ukraine, with Western help, was preparing to become a nuclear power again.

In his 05.03 discussion with the pilots of Aeroflot Group he reiterates the idea that Ukraine needs to be denazified because the neo-Nazis have infiltrated the government and they are the one who are fighting Russian troops, taking foreign nationals as hostages and even using the Ukrainian civilians as “human shields”. The authorities in Kiev had called to ask for humanitarian corridors out of Mariupol, but despite the fact that “our people responded instantly and even suspended hostilities”, the civilians were not allowed to leave by the neo-Nazis. He explains again that one of their main requests is demilitarization as Russia is a savior and protector for oppressed people.

With respect to a no-fly zone over Ukraine, he clarifies that this cannot be done from Ukraine, only from neighboring states and declares that

we will consider any move in this direction as participation in the armed conflict of the country from whose territory a threat to our servicemen is created. We will consider them participants in hostilities that very second. Their membership in any organisation will not matter then.

This is Putin’s way of reasserting Russia as a power to be reckoned with.

With respect to the setting, and more specifically the context of the invasion, there are two main lines along which Putin constructs his speeches (1) historically; (2) legally. Putin narratively reinterprets past events and legal documents to suit his interests, as we previously argued, not the truth. From a **historical perspective**,

modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia.

This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land (21.02).

In their quest to attain greater support, the Bolsheviks gave the republics in USSR “the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession”, which was enshrined in the Soviet Constitution of 1924. Putin calls this the

the mine laid at the initial stage to destroy state immunity to the disease of nationalism was ticking. As I have already said, the mine was the right of secession from the Soviet Union.

Even though Ukraine’s independence was due to this oversight in the founding USSR documents, Russia, as a savior, accepted

the new geopolitical reality that took shape after the dissolution of the USSR, and recognised the new independent states. Not only did Russia recognise these countries, but helped its CIS partners, even though it faced a very dire situation itself. (...) Our country provided this assistance while respecting Ukraine’s dignity and sovereignty (21.02).

In his speech on 05.03 he presents another historical analysis with respect to the Maidan protests, as a reaction to the Crimeans’ people decision to unite with Russia. He terms Maidan as “the anti-constitutional coup in Ukraine, which was, unfortunately, strongly supported by Western countries.” He also explains that Crimea made a free decision, through a referendum, to become part of the Russian federation, but the nationalists and neo-Nazis who obtained power in Kiev after the coup d’état refused to acknowledge this. The people in Donbass who did not approve of the new regime in Kiev were then persecuted in two military campaigns which both failed.

From a **legal** point of view, Putin states that the operation in Ukraine

does not contradict the high values of human rights and freedoms in the reality that emerged over the post-war decades. This does not mean that nations cannot enjoy the right to self-determination, which is enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter (24.02).

Putin analyzes the laws passed in Ukraine with respect to official language use and minority rights. He concludes that Russia cannot sit idle in the face of policies that attempt “to root out the Russian language and culture and promote assimilation”, and which state that Ukrainian is the state language and

the Russian language has no place in schools or public spaces, even in ordinary shops. The law on the so-called vetting of officials and purging their ranks created a pathway for dealing with unwanted civil servants (21.02).

He accuses Ukrainian military and law enforcement agencies of cracking down on “the freedom of speech, dissent, and going after the opposition.” Moreover, Ukraine prepares the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. “The Ukrainian authorities have cynically turned the tragedy of the schism into an instrument of state policy” (21.02).

Kiev’s intentions to join NATO are also part of the framing, as Putin declares that every state has the right to construct its security system as it sees fit, and enter what military alliances it wants as long as international legislation is respected. He refers to

international documents expressly stipulate the principle of equal and indivisible security, which includes obligations not to strengthen one's own security at the expense of the security of other states. This is stated in the 1999 OSCE Charter for European Security adopted in Istanbul and the 2010 OSCE Astana Declaration (21.02).

He declares that Ukraine joining NATO poses a direct threat to Russian security.

### 3.2 Volodymyr Zelensky’s strategic narrative.

With respect to **actors**, Zelensky has a more personalized approach, meaning that each actor, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, NATO and the European Union (in this case addressed separately) is divided into subcategories. He does not only construct state or organizational actors, but also addresses the people living in those countries, as they are the force behind any change and any resistance.

When presenting Ukraine, Zelensky praises the courage and endurance of its **people**, and this forms one frame in his speeches: “great people of a great country”; “nobody is going to break us, we are strong” (08.03). They are mobilized against the enemy: “It is up to you and all of us whether the enemy will be able to advance further into the territory of our independent state” (24.02) and they are defenders of Ukraine, who demonstrate real heroism, “the enemy was stopped in most directions” (25.02). The only way to preserve freedom and state integrity is through the Ukrainians’ “solidarity and determination” (25.02). In framing the qualities of the Ukrainian people, Zelensky goes further than simple collective structures and refers particularly to people who, in doing their jobs, help the country withstand the invasion.



## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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You are now at the height of your spirit, at the maximum of possibilities. Every soldier on the lines of defense. Every doctor who saves lives. Every firefighter who extinguishes fire. Every entrepreneur who continues to work. Dozens and dozens of other professions. Millions of people which became one whole. Superpower of the spirit. Programmers who joined the information troops. Everyone who joined the territorial defense. Teachers and educators who do not leave children. Police officers. Civil servants. We all withstood the blow together (05.03).

Another frame refers to **Ukraine** as a great united country in the face of a terrible war.

During this time, we have had more unity than for over thirty years before. At first, we were equally scared, then we felt equally painful. And now we do not care. Except for victory. Except for the truth. Except for peace. (...) Except for Ukraine. During this time, we have truly become one. We forgave each other a lot. We started loving each other (02.03).

Due to its people and their resistance, Ukraine is a great, powerful country, a symbol of freedom.

We responded to the invasion as we can in times of greatest danger. Responded with heroism. Solidarity. Mutual assistance. We responded in Ukrainian. So that the history of Europe will remember it forever (04.03).

Moreover, the identity of Ukraine is shaped in this conflict as the antithesis of evil, as the light that can banish evil. "Even in complete darkness we will see the truth. And we will fight until it darkens in our eyes. Because we are warriors of light" (04.03).

With respect to the frames pertaining to **Russia**, first there is a frame related to the **Russian people** as possible allies of Ukraine in this conflict as the ones that could stop the Russian president from pursuing this war. From the first day, Zelensky addresses the Russian population directly asking for their help and explaining that the war damages both sides:

War deprives everyone of guarantees. There will no longer be any security guarantees for anyone. Who will suffer the most from this? People. Who does not want this more than anyone? People. Who can prevent this? People (23.02).

As in the case of the Ukrainian people, Zelensky does not call upon the population as a whole, but upon individuals in their various fields of work to assist him in stopping the invasion:

Public figures, journalists, musicians, actors, athletes, scientists, doctors, bloggers, stand-up comedians, Tik-Tokers and many more. Regular people. Regular,

normal people. Men, women, the elderly, children, fathers, and most importantly, mothers. Just like people in Ukraine. Just like the authorities in Ukraine, no matter how much they try to convince you otherwise (23.02).

He also acknowledges their efforts to stop what is happening and the Russian reactions against the war on social media, but he demands more decisive actions:

If you hear us, if you understand us, if you understand that you are attacking an independent country, please go out to the squares and address the President of your country (24.02).

He also explains the situation as succinctly as possible, drawing a line of demarcation both in terms of nationality, as well as in terms of territory:

We are Ukrainians. We are on our land. You are Russians. Now your military has started a war. The war in our state. I would very much like you to speak on Red Square or somewhere else on the streets of your capital, in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities in Russia (08.03).

The second aspect of the Russia frame refers to the **state** as such, which Zelensky describes as a **purveyor of terror**, as the war progresses: "Russia's criminal actions against Ukraine show signs of genocide"; "[the Russian soldiers] showed their true faces. This is terror";

They [The Russian soldiers] 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 (27.02).

His frame extends and comes to be **Russia as a terrorist state** which must be condemned as such:

This attack on Kharkiv is a war crime. This is state terrorism of the Russian Federation. After that, Russia is a terrorist state. Obviously. And it must be official. We call on all countries of the world to respond immediately and effectively to this criminal tactic of the aggressor and to declare that Russia is committing state terrorism. We demand full responsibility for terrorists in international courts (01.03).

The frame includes references to the effects of this terror on Ukrainian citizens: "This is torture. Deliberate. Systematic. Organized by their state. Foreign to us. And ruthless for everyone, even for its citizens" (08.03). In order to further the frame of deliberate terrorist attacks, Zelensky explains that

Russia had planned the attack for years, but this does not mean that Ukraine is weak:

We are a nation that broke the enemy's plans in a week. Plans that have been built for years. Treacherously. Deliberately. With hatred of our country, of our people - of any people who have heart and freedom. But we stopped them. We beat them (03.03).

The **European Union** is framed around the **democratic principles** it embodies and which are defended by the Ukrainian people. The EU should be grateful to Ukraine for standing and fighting against the Russian aggression that threatens EU countries.

Europeans are aware that our soldiers are fighting for our country and, consequently, for the whole of Europe. For peace for all European countries, for the lives of children, for equality, for democracy. And this gives us the full right to do the following (28.02).

Ukraine is also described as the catalyst for European unity. Zelensky frames Ukraine in relation to the EU as its guardian and protector against invaders.

I'm very glad to sense this mood, the uniting, unifying mood. I'm happy that we have unified today, all of you, all the countries of the European Union (08.03).

He extends the frame of the war to include the EU, so that the Union would feel compelled to act by accepting Ukraine:

This is not just Russia's invasion in Ukraine, this is the beginning of the war against Europe. Against the unity of Europe. Against elementary human rights in Europe. Against all coexistence rules on the continent. Against the fact that European states refuse to divide, yes, to divide the borders by force (25.02).

In light of what Ukraine has done for EU, Zelensky claims that it has proven worthy to become a member of the Union:

The European Union is going to be stronger with us. We have proven that at a minimum, we are exactly the same as you are. So do prove that you are with us. Do prove that you will not let us go. Do prove that you indeed are Europeans (08.03).

Moreover, he frames the integration as the reunification of the forces that fight the darkness into one united body: "And then life will win over death and light will win over darkness" (08.03). He uses the same antithesis as when he described the way Russia acts against Ukraine.

Once more, he addresses **the citizens of the union**, the people themselves, because he is aware that any state or organization's position is, eventually, determined by the will of their people.

Ordinary people can also do their part of the job, I'm sure, in every country of the world, in each country of Europe. Go out on the square of your cities and demand peace for Europe, peace for Ukraine, stop this war. Go out, go out on the squares and demand to stop the war. This is our right. This is your right (25.02).

The frames Zelensky uses to create the image of the actor EU all have one common goal, to equate Ukraine to Europe so as to scare the European population into understanding that this is not a distant war that does not concern them, but a very close one, that could affect them to the same extent that it affects Ukraine:

demand from your governments more financial, more military assistance to Ukraine. For this help is a help to you. For it is a help to Europe. You help yourself (25.02).

Thus he hopes to garner their support and project Ukraine on a course to European integration.

Another actor that is present in Zelensky's speeches is **NATO**. He demands repeatedly and insistently that NATO should intervene to protect Ukraine, either by sending troops or by closing the skies over Ukraine. However, when this does not happen, the NATO frame shifts from being a possibly strong ally for Ukraine, to being a weak actor that does not fulfill its potential and is in fact responsible for loss of lives: "all the people who will die starting from this day will also die because of you. Because of your weakness. Because of your disunity."

Today, the Alliance's leadership gave the green light for further bombing of Ukrainian cities by refusing to make a no-fly zone. You could close our sky. But... I do not know who you can protect and whether you can protect NATO countries. You will not be able to buy us off with liters of fuel for liters of our blood (04.02).

Thus NATO is too lenient with Russia.

With respect to events, Zelensky constantly creates a parallel counter-story to that presented by Vladimir Putin in support of the invasion. Ukraine is portrayed as a builder and promoter of peace, the exact opposite of what Russian audiences have been told:

You are told that this flame will bring liberation to the people of Ukraine. But the Ukrainian people are free.

## **THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY**

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We remember our past, and we are building our future ourselves. Building, not destroying, as you are told every day on the television. Ukraine in your news and Ukraine in real life are two completely different countries. And the main difference is that ours is real.

We want to define and build our history ourselves. Peacefully. Calmly. Honestly. Hear us. The people of Ukraine want peace. The Ukrainian authorities want peace. We want it, and we make it. We do everything we can (23.02).

The second debunking story that Zelensky promotes refers to Putin's claims that Ukrainians are neo-Nazis:

You are told that we are Nazis. But how can a people who gave more than eight million lives for the victory over Nazism support Nazism? How could I be a Nazi? Tell that to my grandfather, who went through the entire war in the infantry of the Soviet Army and died as a colonel in independent Ukraine (23.02).

He again moves to a personal and concrete level, that of his own personal narrative, in order to support his statements that there are no neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

Moreover, Ukrainians are not the ones who started the attacks, they would not attack those they are related to by family or friendship ties:

You are told that I will order an attack on the Donbas, to shoot and bomb without questions. Although there are questions, and very simple ones. Shoot at whom? Bomb what? Donetsk, where I have been dozens of times? Where I have seen people's eyes and faces? Artyom street, where I walked with friends? Donbas Arena, where I rooted with the locals for our Ukrainian guys at the Euro [the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship]? Sherbakova Park, where we drank together when our guys lost? Luhansk? The home where my best friend's mother lives? The place where my best friend's father is buried? (23.02).

Once more, Zelensky resorts to his personal narrative to illustrate the strong bond of respect and friendship that Ukrainians share with their co-nationals in Donbass. The only reason they fight back is to protect the freedom they already have and their families:

We know for certain: we don't need war, neither cold, nor hot, nor hybrid. But if forces attack us, if someone tries to take away our country, our freedom, our lives, the lives of our children—we will defend ourselves. Not attack. Defend ourselves. While attacking, you will see our faces. Not our backs. Our faces (23.02).

And they will fight bravely to defend their country. Step by step, Zelensky debunks the frames

that Putin's speeches promote and presents events from the Ukrainians' perspective.

Zelensky's speeches also tell the story of the invasion, naming each day the cities and towns that have been attacked, creating a particular, concrete representation of the war, taking it from an abstract level of an almost impossible event in the 21st century, to the devastating images of killed civilians, bombed buildings, attacked cities, millions of refugees. He tells stories regarding the bombing of Freedom square in Kharkiv, of a maternity hospital "Children's hospital. Maternity hospital. What did they threaten the Russian Federation with? (...) Was it the denazification of the hospital?" (09.03) He also speaks of a bakery

Today in Makarov, Kiev oblast, they shot up a bakery. What for? An old bakery. Think about it. Why the hell would you shoot a bakery? (...) Or ruin yet another church in Zhytomyr oblast. The church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, built in 1862. This is inhumane (07.03).

These are everyday places, part of every person's life, and their association to bombs and destruction makes the war more comprehensible to people who have not seen a war in their lifetime. This is a strategic narrative of war as something that could happen anywhere, even in the most mundane places.

The events that he describes exhibit the same antithesis that he created for the actors involved; it's a clear dialectic of a conflict in which there is a good side and an evil side that consciously destroys civilian lives:

They lied that they would not touch the civilian population. But since the first hours of the invasion, Russian troops have been hitting civilian infrastructure. They consciously chose tactics to destroy people and everything that makes life just normal. Power plants, hospitals, kindergartens, residential buildings - all this is under attack every day (27.02).

Zelensky also presents future developments, he takes the narrative into the future, projecting a bright image of a future beyond the destruction of war. The refugees will be able to come back, the reconstruction of the country will begin with funds from the World Bank and the IMF

We have an agreement among the largest financial institutions to support Ukraine. There is already a decision on emergency aid and tens of billions of dollars for the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war (05.03).

The cities will be rebuilt and all traces of the war will be removed “We will rebuild everything. We will make our cities that the invader ruined better than any city of Russia” (07.03). He assures his people that there will be a glorious after the war

After the war. Because everyone saw that for the people who defend themselves so heroically, this “after the war” will surely come. There will be a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine. The West will form this support package (08.03).

Moreover, it is worth noticing that Zelensky constructs event lines in tune with the audience he has. During his speech to the British Parliament he constructed his timeline per days, presenting the fights that took place each day, the suffering but also the heroic acts of the Ukrainians. He also drew parallels and built associations with Winston Churchill’s speech in front of the Parliament during the Second World War in which he swore that they will defend each piece of British soil against the Nazis.

We will not give up and we will not lose. We will fight until the end, at sea, in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the shores, in the streets. I’d like to add that we will fight on the banks of different rivers and we’re looking for your help, for the help of the civilised countries (08.03).

These powerful associations activate frames that the British are extremely proud of and thus Zelensky manages to garner support from the audience.

The **setting** that Zelensky activates for his strategic narrative is flexible, requires change, adaptability and quick reaction. In fact he argues that the architecture of security needs to be updated, a new system needs to be built

The rules that the world agreed on decades ago no longer work. They do not keep up with new threats. They are not effective for overcoming them. This is a cough syrup when you need a coronavirus vaccine. The security system is slow. It crashes again. Because of different things: selfishness, self-confidence, irresponsibility of states at the global level (19.02).

Appeasement does not work because it led to the annexation of Crimea. He also extends the spatial setting of the conflict so that Western countries will not perceive this war as isolated to a distant and irrelevant space for their own security, but as a close and potentially dangerous place for their own peace. What affects Ukraine, affects the whole world

That in the XXI century there are no more foreign wars. That the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas affects the whole world. And this is not a war in Ukraine, but a war in Europe (19.02).

Zelensky also reverses the roles on the EU, explaining that it should not be Ukraine constantly seeking to be accepted and allowed to integrate, but it should be the EU offering integration to Ukraine as a reward for protecting its Eastern border from Russian aggressions.

This is your contribution to the security of Europe and the world. Where Ukraine has been a reliable shield for eight years. And for eight years it has been rebuffing one of the world’s biggest armies. Which stands along our borders, not the borders of the EU (19.02).

The EU itself should prove that it is desirable through its actions and worthy of Ukraine.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our narrative analysis of the two presidents’ strategic narratives has revealed the fact that they employ divergent means of construing actors, events and settings despite employing the same actors (Russia, Ukraine, NATO, EU) and referring to basically the same events. Vladimir Putin’s strategic narrative presents Russia as a pacifist, honest actor, who has tried to cooperate with Ukraine and Western powers in an attempt to preserve Russian sovereignty and protect Russian strategic interests, despite constant deceit and infringement by NATO, the US and Ukraine itself. He portrays Russia as an actor from the past, and his narrative is a means of reconstructing and reattaining the glorious old times when Russia was an empire and a force to be reckoned with. He uses somewhat veiled threats, he shapes the international legal framework to justify his actions, he draws parallels to NATO and US actions that could provide justification for his military actions in Ukraine and he rewrites Ukrainian history in order to prove that it has never been a sovereign state, and the independence it has gained was the result of USSR interests at the time when that union was founded and thus it is not warranted at present and it cannot be a justification for Ukraine to bring NATO and Western interests so close to Russian borders. The strategic narrative that Putin creates is based on a language of separation reminiscent of the immediate aftermath of World War II, which proves that Putin’s representations of Russia and of its missions function on the historical scale of eternity, of the permanence and infallibility of his visions of Russia as a defender

## THE BATTLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: VLADIMIR PUTIN VERSUS VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

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of people, sovereignty and culture against foreign, especially European, interferences. This dichotomous and inflexible strategic narrative is anchored in the past and is aimed at constructing a cyclic future that eternalized the ideal vision of Russia that Putin has. This strategic narrative directed towards the past is portrayed in fact by the type of “special military operation” which is not at all different from types of missions in World War II. This proves that Putin has not managed to move beyond that point in history in anything but word usage.

By contrast, Zelensky’s strategic narrative, while based on a similar adversarial dichotomy, is more nuanced and flexible. The Ukrainian president adapts his strategic narrative to the audience he has, to the associative frames that are most familiar to the audience and that are bound to stir the most powerful reactions. The actors he constructs in his narrative are not monolithic, but diverse, he refers not only to countries or organizations and alliances, but also to the people that give these alliances their legitimacy and that could force to stop the aggression or obtain more support for Ukraine. He indicates particular categories of population in his speeches and thus the audience can identify with them. Therefore, his strategic narrative has a less state-based and more a human-centric approach with respect to actors. As far as the events are concerned, Zelensky’s strategic narrative is projected to the future, to what Ukraine and the world could become, after the war, not to a past in which only Russia matters. His approach to the unfolding events is to put them in direct link not only to Ukraine, but to the whole of Europe and to the future of democracy, thus emphasizing that the war in Ukraine relevant and dangerous for all democratic countries. Zelensky’s narrative constantly presents particular happenings, and concrete places as the conflict unfolds, thus creating a referentially valid mental representation of the war zone for foreign audiences and transforming the violence into a very concrete and easily relatable experience for audiences worldwide. Zelensky employs a language of unity, he calls for common action explaining that in protecting Ukraine, democratic countries actually protect themselves. The Ukrainian president creates a strategic narrative that brings the world together, that garners support, by appealing to people’s consciences, while at the same time reaffirming Ukraine’s courage, individuality, democratic aspirations and sovereignty.

Strategic narratives are vital in constructing the image of a state or organization or alliance and the explanations of the actions and events that are unfolding at a particular time or of evolutions on a historical scale. What our analysis has revealed is

how the strategic narratives of the two main actors involved in the conflict in Ukraine are created. Putin’s speech focuses on actors, presented as abstract, generic entities, and less on events because he creates a projection of a situation which must be accepted as indubitable and certain, while passing elsewhere responsibility for current events. Conversely, Zelensky’s speeches focus on the actors’ human nature and more extensively on the unfolding events which he brings to collective debate, in order to foster understanding and inclusive responsibility.

In conclusion, our analysis has revealed two different strategic narratives in Putin and Zelensky’s respective speeches. On the one hand, the Russian president has not managed to be convincing with respect to the “special military operation” in Ukraine, which has led to Russia becoming even more isolated at a global level. On the other hand, the Ukrainian’s president adept construction and use of strategic narratives has led to unprecedented support for his country and to hopes for Ukraine’s future integration in the European Union.

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