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# "DYING CHILDREN, MOTHERS IN DESPAIR" – A COMPUTER-MEDIATED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF UKRAINIAN CIVILIANS AND A NATION AFFECTED BY WAR (ON THE BASIS OF INTERNET FORA IN POLISH)

Keywords: Ukraine, war, discourse, Internet forum.

## ABSTRACT

This article presents a preliminary examination of the discursive portrayal of civilians and nation affected during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, based on entries from Internet forums in Polish. The methodology adopted follows the principles of qualitative discourse analysis, with insights obtained from the exploration of the texts with the help of Sketch Engine. While there have been a number of studies on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine since 2014, based on broadly understood media discourse, it seems that the events in Ukraine since 2022 have not yet been studied in depth. The theoretical and methodological parts of the article discuss issues such as discourse and narrative, and the analysis of computer-mediated discourse, including the genre of the forum post. The analytical part, from a micro-perspective, focuses on textual references to civilians and nation, as well as on their textual context. The macro-perspective examines longer structures, i.e. discourses and narratives, as well as the metaphors used. As the results of the study demonstrate, Ukrainian civilians tend to be portrayed in a passive manner, i.e. as Grounds during the presentation of military activities, which can be seen at the level of sentential salience as well as metaphorical expression. From a macro-perspective, the data were analyzed for the presence of specific discourses and narratives that appeared in previous studies (on other data, in a different context and time frame). The current study also identifies the discourses of the divided nation as well as narratives centring on criticism levelled at the West, on Russian building of nationhood, and on the fight against fascism. In light of the results obtained, since it is assumed that there is a relationship between discourse and social reality, the social role of the media in shaping specific views and attitudes should be emphasised.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Assuming that there is a dialogic relationship between discourse and social reality (Bazerman 1988; Gee 1999), in that the way people communicate may affect the reality around them and vice versa, various media producing different text-types may contribute to the construction of certain concepts and to the development of particular attitudes and values (see Romaniuk 2016 for the discussion of this issue in the Ukrainian context). For example, while Internet forums may be primarily informative (the Internet was mentioned as one of the sources of historical information by both Poles and Ukrainians in a study conducted by Konieczna-Sałamatin 2021, 50–52), many of their users turn to them in order to express their views and share experiences or support. However, following Markowska and Stryjek (2021, 9), who emphasise the major role of media in the creation of our views and preferences, the way particular topics are dealt with may be seen as influencing their audiences' perception, and this potential cannot be disregarded. This is especially relevant in these unprecedented times of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, as a result of which over 9500 civilians have lost their lives (as of September 2023, Statista) and millions of Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries. As the war is still in progress, the numbers continue to rise.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Ukrainian language studies, the examination of political language and language policy has already clearly distinguished itself as an important, autonomous sphere of political science, with many linguistic foci: i.e., argumentation, metaphor, clichés, idioms or slogans. The formation of political discourse and its purposeful development became possible due to the rapid evolution of the media, which contributes to the strengthening of state power and political institutions (Akinchits 2007). Drawing on various theoretical perspectives, Romaniuk (2016) defines political discourse in a three-fold manner-any form of communication about politics, including by politicians and in places typically connected with political activities (2016, 40) or, more generally, any communicative event touching upon issues of primary importance to any society that serves integrating, social, and informative functions (2016, 41). A comprehensive analysis of political discourse concerning the peculiarities of the functioning of political parties in Ukraine has been carried out by Primush and Yarosh (2020). Emphasis is placed here on the fact that, like any discursive interaction, political discourse not only reflects ideas about the current state of development of political parties and the party system, but also creates and changes them (for a more detailed discussion see Romaniuk 2016), because in the process of interaction citizens analyse, perceive or reject beliefs, accordingly transforming those that were previously held. It was found that, in contrast to political discussions on specific political issues faced by political parties in their activities, political discourse includes not only rational statements but also emotional ones.

The importance of examining political discourse in the context of the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine has long been recognised in broadly understood discourse studies, with many linguistic foci, metaphors among them. Since Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors we live by* (1980) proposing that metaphors are not merely a decorative element of language but the underlying scheme of human cognition, metaphor studies have established their position in linguistics. Since then, metaphors have begun to be regarded not only "as a means of expressing beliefs, values and attitudes, [but] also [as] essential to human communication and […] of high social, ethical and political significance" (Musolff 2016, 2).

Klimava (2016) analysed the representation of the Ukraine political crisis in different online news portals. The data constituted selected articles taken from *The New York Times*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Moscow Times* and *Russia Today*, covering the events of the annexation of Crimea, the Malaysian airplane crash (in 2014) and the sanctions introduced by the West against Russia. The method adopted was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the focus fell on the discursive strategies and linguistic means that were used to report on the same events but framed by ideological perspectives represented by particular media. The authors emphasise the importance of the discursive construction of the events and identify such elements as emotive verbs and repetitions which have a normalising effect. From the macro-perspective, they discuss the angle adopted, stance, argumentation, as well as the portrayal of people. "A comparison of texts with similar content allows to trace these differences in the language use strategically employed by the news outlets, and it also allows to conclude that these means make a difference in an ideological stance and finally shape a reader's perception of the events" (Klimava 2016, 2). Pasitselska (2017) analysed the construction of ideological discourse on the basis of the data from two Russian TV channels and pointed to the pattern of "us" and "them" used in the portrayal of the government and opposition activities. CDA was also adopted by Ruzhyn (2021) in her study of media discourse about the hybrid war between Ukraine and Russia. In greater detail, quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined to analyse the content and titles that appeared in the material, focusing specifically on manipulation, propaganda, persuasion, and the effect they produce. Similarly, a combination approach of CDA and conceptual metaphor was adopted by Yavorska (2017, 2018), who studied media texts concerning the war in Ukraine (2014–2016) in relation to the commonly utilised conceptual scheme of WAR. In her approach to the reported events, the author juxtaposes the local and physical character of the war with its global repercussions and the discourse constructed for it. The discourse of "[t]he war narrative represents the discursive mode of warfare" and includes such elements as "weapons (tanks, aircraft, ships, etc.), their usage, attacking and defensive activities, destruction of objects, human casualties, death of soldiers and civilians during the conflict [which] also belong to the physical sphere" (Yavorska 2017). Furthermore, she identifies three smaller narratives about the events as well as demonstrates the evolution in our understanding of the very concept of war (NATURAL FORCE, DECEASE,

JOURNEY). She notes that "the perception of WWII as the prototype is gradually coming into disuse and the current armed conflict moves to the center of the conceptual category" (Yavorska 2017). In addition, Yavorska focuses on the portrayal of war, in particular on the role of performatives ('to declare war', 'to sign a peace agreement') as well as on the concept of victory in relation to the perception of war (Yavorska 2018, see also Yavorska and Chmyr 2018).

A similar theoretical and methodological approach is adopted by Tsirkunova (2016) in her analysis of the British and American online press. She identifies 4 metaphorical models in the coverage of the events in Ukraine: World is Community, Nation is Rival, Sanctions is Punishment, and Politics is Sport. Wasiuta (2016) analyses the origins and development of the concept of hybrid war in western political and military discourse. She observes that at its inception, it was the quality of warfare that was key to the concept, though emphasising the presence of its individual components in the history. Its evolution, however, is more concerned with the "consistency and consolidation of these elements" as well as their dynamic and flexible application, stressing at the same time the role of information (Wasiuta 2016, 39–40).

While metaphors allow for a valid comparison between two things with a view to making the unfamiliar familiar, as Musolff (2016, 4) observes, it is particularly "in politics [that] metaphors are not only used to denote specific target concepts; they always have pragmatic 'added value', for example, to express an evaluation of the topic, to make an emotional and persuasive appeal, and/or to reassure the public that a perceived threat or problem fits into familiar experience patterns and can be dealt with by familiar problem-solving strategies". Following Yavorska and Chmyr (2018), the war discourse about the invasion of Ukraine features a particular narrative including different thematic elements in different syntactic configurations. Both civilians and nation, the focus of the current examination, are part of this picture, as will be demonstrated later in the analysis. A more general linguistic perspective is offered by Romaniuk (2016) in her analysis of Ukrainian politicians' comments in the media from the period 2010–2014, where she pays particular attention to strategies and tactics used by communicating parties, primarily to win or retain political power (2016, 40). Taranenko (2018) also examines Ukrainian media discourse, but focuses specifically on the image of internally-displaced civilians in the time frame 2014–2017. Not only does she emphasise the role of media in shaping and perpetuating particular images of events and social groups in the current circumstances, but also provides an examination of the character of the media portrayal of internally-displaced people and how it evolved between 2014 and 2017. Specifically, she points to: general invisibility of the people; lack of agency and equal status; as well as heavy stereotyping of the group as "poor refugees" (2018, 219). Also, the typical juxtaposition of "us and them" (2018, 217) was observed, which can be used for instance when referring to people as an additional burden for those who have come to be their new neighbours (2018, 214–219).

However, while these studies offer valuable insights into the study of war discourse and metaphors in relation to the military activity in Ukraine in the past few years, the

present authors are not aware of any language-oriented study shedding light on the discourse about the current events in Ukraine, with the exception of Chen and Ferrara (2022) who offer a public Twitter dataset and a brief overview of the discourse contained therein, primarily based on the identification of hashtags and keywords. Also in the Polish context, the project initiated by Jaszczyk-Grzyb promises to shed light on the representation of Ukrainians derived from Polish users' Facebook activity aimed at the Ukrainian minority 8 months before and after the beginning of the 2022 invasion. The methodology adopted in that study is corpus-assisted CDA, and particular focus falls on valuations that can be observed in the analysed comments. However, the present authors know of no study of the representation of Ukrainian civilians and nation on the basis of Polish language data, in the context examined here.

### 3. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The focus of the current paper is on the genre of entries on Internet forums. Genres are defined by Swales (1990) as "communicative event[s]" (1990, 58), "the patterned and recurring ways in which cultural members regularly accomplish elemental social activities" (Muntigl 2006, 234). Witosz (2001) also emphasises their situationally dependent, relative, and flexible character. Discussion forums are a form of computer-mediated communication (Herring 2001) where users can post messages (Christensson 2011). More specifically, these are asynchronous, multiparticipant discussion groups to which messages are contributed ("posted") via e-mail (Herring 2001, 612), where the users "interactively produce and consume [a particular] discourse" (Hunt and Harvey 2015, 135–136) on a particular topic. As the functions of such forums may be informative, expressive, as well as support- and entertainment-driven, they may also play a significant role in difficult times in general, when people seek information, advice and support (Kinloch and Jaworska 2022, 74). In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which pushed millions of Ukrainians to flee to neighbouring countries while other countries rushed to the media in search of information and a space for discussion, the Internet has offered this vital form of social activity, which can, additionally, yield itself to analysis as a vent for human emotions, experience and information.

    The present research is located in the area of social linguistic analysis which can be characterised as being constructivist and text-based in nature (Phillips and Hardy 2002). The aim of this framework is "to undertake a close reading of the text to provide insight into its organization and construction, and also to understand how texts work to organise and construct other phenomena" (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 22). Consequently, the discursive analysis of the corpus will help to describe the portrayal of the civilians and nation, from both micro- and macro-perspectives, in the context of the current events in Ukraine.

    As an example of this visibility, consider the following reference to 'civilian' (textual civilian references in bold), derived from exemplary Internet posts about the recent events in Ukraine:

*It is not our war of course one sympathises with* **children and women** *as it is genocide* […] *I know* **women and men of Ukraine** *and* **they** *speak ill of our country but we are still helping* [*To nie nasza wojna oczywiście szkoda* **dzieci kobiet** *bo to jest mordo bóstwo* […] *Znam osobiście* **Ukrainki i ukraiń-ców** *i bardzo źle wypowiadają się o naszym narodzie a my i tak pomagamy.*] (Gowork.pl, *Other topics*).[1]

**heroes, all of them***!* (comment in social media).

Additionally, since entries from discussion forums were examined, the present study is informed by the methods of computer-mediated discourse analysis (henceforth CMDA), which is "a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication (CMC), distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus" (Herring 2001, 612).

The approach also assumes that CMC discourse exhibits particular recurrent patterns (Murray 1990, 617), also present in the data under analysis:

- Deleted subject pronouns, determiners, and auxiliaries; abbreviations; uncorrected typos; no mixed case
- Fewer subordinate clauses and a narrower range of vocabulary
- Spoken language features, or creative expression

One more reservation should be made here. Although the topics of discussion (whose virtual representation is the object of the study) may contain political undertones, in the present paper they are seen primarily as a CMC discourse, and the analytical tools adopted are the ones typically suited to CMDA.

Regarding methodology, the data was subject to qualitative discourse analysis via computer-assisted examination of the corpus, "celebrat[ing] richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity" (Mason 2002, 2). Following Yavorska (2017), the war discourse about the invasion of Ukraine features a particular narrative, including different thematic elements in different configurations. Civilians and nation, the focus of this current paper, are part of this picture. In other words, one receives a story with particular participants in particular circumstances, which, at the sentential level, refers to thematic and argument structure respectively (Van Valin 2001, 23). From the micro-perspective, what are studied here are the linguistic resources referring to the civilian (directly or indirectly) and the examples of their absence. Emphasis is put on particular language resources indexing civilians in the texts, e.g., general references, such as *civilians*, *average*/*innocent people*; particular groups, e.g., *mothers*, *children*; or more impersonal terms, e.g., *victims*, *casualties*. Moreover, the textual indices of civilians are studied with reference to their co-texts i.e., their status of Subject, Object, or Other which function as semantic-syntactic categories pointing to the

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[1] All the excerpts of the data analysed are presented in its original form (Polish) and were translated by the author. In this case, in the original form, Ukrainians are spelled in small letters, which is against the rule in the Polish language. This, however, cannot be reflected in the English version, which follows the rule of the English language.

thematic role and sentential position of a reference (Van Valin and Lapolla 1997, 139). This may allow one to answer the question of how communicative accents are placed in the texts when they describe civilians (thematic-rhematic analysis and transitivity). For example, do discussants write about civilians as being only those affected by the war crisis, e.g., *pushed them to…*, *left homeless*, or also *taking initiative* and *things in their hands*? Or, do they also talk about their war experience/trauma, and, if so, what, e.g., is emotional/metaphorical character of these accounts (e.g., the metaphor of *Holy hate*)? From the macro-perspective, this portrayal will be examined in larger segments of the data in order to determine particular discourses and narratives, as identified in the previous studies (see Section 2 above). In this way, the parameters adopted in the analysis are grounded in the functionally and cognitively-based grammar of discourse (Halliday 1979; Duszak 1987; Halliday 1994; Smith 2003; Gardner and Alsop 2016).

Consequently, this analysis is primarily qualitative (discourse analysis), focusing on the discursive construal of the civilian and nation, complemented by the computer-assisted analysis of the corpus, in which the frequency of textual references to civilians was determined, as well as keywords and particular word frequencies and patterns, including those – identified in the entries – which contribute to their discursive image; thus "putting flesh on the bones" (Dörnyei 2007, 45). This was achieved with the help of reference corpora, and a corpus manager and text analysis tool – in this case Sketch Engine. The analysis was further complemented by the examination of some discourses and narratives about the Ukrainian nation, as identified in previous studies of the topic and discussed in the literature review in Section 2 above. Since these studies were conducted a few years ago, in Ukraine and outside of the Polish context, the aim here is to explore new data with reference to only those particular discourses/narratives identified on the basis of different research material.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1. Data and methods

The process of data collection for the current paper took place between April and September 2022. Regarding the data, the forums of interest (e.g. GoWork.pl) were searched with the help of search engines via relevant keywords. Related entries on forums were then identified by careful reading of their content. The consent of the forum administrators was sought, and all the entries were anonymised. Due to the preliminary character of the study, the corpus was not planned to be large, thus the results cannot be treated as definitive; however, following Sinclair (2001, xi), "[even] a small corpus is seen as a body of relevant and reliable evidence".

Ultimately, for the purpose of the current paper, a 74,149-word collection of entries has been compiled and studied, derived from discussion forums (Gowork.pl, gazeta.pl/wyborcza.pl and tokfm.pl). In the case of the former, Gowork.pl (5,237 words, topic: *other topics*) is primarily dedicated to job-seeking people; discussion forums available

there feature various topics, mostly job-related ones, but also some including issues connected with the conflict in Ukraine, as a separate additional service. On the other hand, tokfm.pl (9,443 words) and gazeta.pl/wyborcza.pl (59,469 words) are Polish nationwide information portals offering articles on both current issues and other various topics which offer the possibility of commenting on them below – this is where the entries were taken from. These data sources were chosen based on their open nature, and the consent of the forum administrators to use the data in the study. Both original posts and comments were taken into consideration with a view to shedding some light on the discursive construction of the Ukrainian civilian and nation in forum discussions. Particular focus was placed on metaphors, e.g., metonymy, transitivity in the portrayal of the participants, as well as specific sentential configurations in which the civilian is presented as a Ground. The selection of these particular linguistic resources was dictated by their usefulness in the characterisation of the portrayal of the civilians as well as of the entire nation.

The ultimate outcome of this preliminary examination is the discursive portrayal of the civilians and nation affected during the war in Ukraine, on the basis of the analysis of the linguistic resources used by the participants of Internet forums, as an example of a particular social behaviour, having a potential to shape public opinion, as well as the discussion of the potential effects these choices may produce.

## 4.2. Results and discussion

### 4.2.1. Frequencies, keywords, and word patterns

In the comments collection under analysis, 'Ukraine' (Pol. 'Ukraina', 497 hits) and 'Russia' (Pol. 'Rosja', 380 hits) are the 4th and 6th most frequently occurring words (identified with help of Sketch Engine, limited to content words only), which clearly shows the topic of the issues being discussed. Also, among keywords connected to the current events in Ukraine one can identify: 1st/2nd 'Russian' (Pol. 'kacap', noun, and Pol. 'kacapski', adjective, colloquially and pejoratively referring to Russian people); 'Dugin' 3rd; 'Puttin' or 'Putin' 4th; 'footwrap' 5th (Pol. 'onuca', a square or rectangular piece of fabric – linen or cotton – used as additional insulation for feet, commonly used in the former USSR armies, pejorative meaning); 'Russian' 7th (Pol. 'ruski'); 'Ukrainians' 10th (Pol. 'Ukraińcy'); 'Putin-like' 11th (Pol. 'putinowski', adjective); and Pol. 'Putler' 12th, a blend of surnames Putin and Hitler, commonly used on Polish discussion forums.[2] The word composition of the group illustrates the topic of the discussions, including negative valuation towards Russia, one side of the conflict, in some of the keywords. Among key expressions, multiword terms, the three most frequent include: 'this war' (Pol. 'ta wojna'), 'this assassination' (Pol. 'ten zamach', referring to the assassination of Daria Dugina, a daughter of a Russian ultranationalist Alexandr Dugin) and 'red line' (Pol. 'czerwona linia'), which also point to the topic of the online conversations.

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[2] Compared against the reference corpus Polish Web 2019 (plTenTen19).

### 4.2.2. References to civilians and nation

The references to civilians, average people during a war, include: 'people' (Pol. 'ludzie'), 'civilians' (Pol. 'cywile'), 'Ukrainians' (Pol. 'Ukraińcy'), 'children' (Pol. 'dzieci'), 'women' (Pol. 'kobiety'), and victims (Pol. 'ofiary'). Regarding the word 'civilians', all but one verb used as its predicate refers to them as being passive objects of actions aimed at harming them, i.e., 'murder' (Pol. 'mordować'), 'shoo away' (Pol. 'przepło- szyć'), as if referring to animals, 'execute by firing squad' (Pol. 'rozstrzelać'), 'use as' (Pol. 'wykorzystać jako'), or 'kill' (Pol. 'zabijać'). The verb 'to give' (Pol. 'dać') is slightly different in its meaning i.e., denoting the act of receiving on the part of the person and not being done to, but even in this case it was used in the sense of being given time to escape. The situation is similar in the case of 'children' (Pol. 'dzieci', 73 hits), where in constructions as objects they are usually victims – of resettling, of rape or murder. It is interesting that although in coordinated phrases children tend to appear together with the word 'women' (Pol. 'kobiety'), there are far fewer instances of the latter (24 hits) and in those few they are portrayed as victims of rape. There is also another reference, the word 'victim' (Pol. 'ofiara'), in the sense of (physical/mental) suffering, the consequences of particular actions/situations or death, collocating most frequently with the adjective 'innocent', and thus also passive in character. Finally, the most general is the textual referent 'people' (Pol. 'ludzie'), which also includes instances of people suffering.

Regarding nation, 'glory' (Pol. 'sława') is the content word which most frequently collocates with 'Ukraine' (Pol. 'Ukraina') in its left context. Also, the word 'nation' itself, when preceded by a verb, appears with verbs denoting actions done to it, i.e., 'annihilate' (Pol. 'unicestwiać'), 'murder' (Pol. 'mordować') and 'treat badly' (Pol. 'traktować').

Although textual references to the other side of the conflict are beyond the scope of this paper, the metaphorical character of one type is of note, which admittedly stands in stark contrast to the previous passivisation of the civilians. These cases feature animal- isation, exemplified by referring to Russians as animals, e.g., "killed Russian animals" or "Russians aren't even animals" (Pol. 'kacapy', colloquially for Russians, already mentioned as a keyword above in Subsection 4.2.1, gazeta.pl), thus emphasising their bestiality. Animalisation can also be observed when referring to civilians, through the use of the verb 'to shoo away' (see above), metaphorically portraying them as innocent animals and victims of a cruel hunter.

### 4.2.3 Figures and grounds

Firstly, the comments made by the discussants contain references to or general obser- vations on particular events in Ukraine, which feature a specific juxtaposition in which the civilians appear as a background to the main events, at the same time being acutely affected by them. Such an approach draws on the cognitive paradigm in linguistics in which it is assumed that the elements of language are indicative of more general

cognitive processes (Langacker 1987, 99; Evans and Green 2006). One of the basic cognitive abilities is the Figure/Ground distinction (or segregation, as in Evans and Green 2006, 69), i.e. the ability to differentiate between a focal point and its scene (Langacker 1987). It is based upon the premise that if a person is shown a black board with a white dot on it, he/she will probably focus on the white dot (Langacker 1987, 120). Following this line of reasoning, "[w]hile one entity is typically privileged and represents the figure, the second entity is given less prominence and is referred to as the ground or reference object" (Evans and Green 2006, 69). According to Talmy (2001), this distinction is also omnipresent in language. Here it is Figure that "needs anchoring" whereas Ground "does the anchoring". These two may refer to each other in various configurations, for instance those of time, cause/result, etc., yet what lies at the heart of this distinction is the different allocation of prominence to the two (Talmy 2001, 311). Consequently, the Figure is defined in terms of its orientation to the Ground (Talmy 2001, 312), in temporal or spatial terms. In the examples below, particular events are described (economies in crisis, political ambitions, violence) as the Figure against the Ground of suffering/dying civilians. In a) and b) the "perspectival centres" (Smith 2003, 192–193) are economies and political ambitions respectively and only later are the civilians and their situation described, explaining what may seem to be obvious but still deemed necessary to be mentioned by the author.

a) *Although the war was unavoidable because countries' economies are floundering another solution should be sought. Without violence.* **Because the innocent are suffering here** *regardless of race colour religion. [...] I am not siding with Russia or America. The fact is that* **innocent people are dying**. [*Mimo, iż wojna była nieunikniona, bo gospodarki państw kuleją powinno szukać się innej drogi. Bez przemocy. Bo tu akurat* **cierpią niewinni** *bez względu na rasę kolor wyznanie. [...] Nie bronie ani Rosji ani Ameryki. Faktem jest jedno.* **Giną niewinni ludzie**.] Gowork.pl, *other topics.*

b) *So far, political ambitions of the few are* **the reason why so many are suffering** [*Póki co to przez polityczne ambicje* **niektórych cierpi bardzo wielu.**] gazeta.pl.

c) *We should consider whether now after* **the evacuation of civilians** *from Donbas chemical weapons should not be used against occupant*s. [*Powinniśmy zastanowić się nad tym czy teraz po* **ewakuacji ludności cywilnej** *z Donbasu, nie należy użyć broni chemicznej przeciwko okupantom*.] gazeta.pl.

Furthermore, it is the civilians who are affected or, in Francis and Kramer-Dahl's (2004) perspective, who "play a role of Goal, or 'done to'" (2004, 173) as a result of the war, whether indirectly, due to shortage of food, power cuts, etc. but also directly, sheltering from shelling, fleeing from the country or dying.

d) *How is it possible that they are still fine after* **what Russians are doing to Ukrainians**. [*Jak to możliwe że nadal funkcjonują po tym* **co Rosjanie robią Ukraińcom**.] gazeta.pl.

e) *Nevertheless, so far,* **it has been Russians who have murdered entire villages of civilians in Ukraine**, *not Ukrainians in Russia. And so far,* **it has been Russians shelling Ukraine**, *not Ukraine. [Niemniej, póki co* **to Rosjanie wymordowali całe wioski cywilów w Ukrainie**, *nie Ukraińcy w Rosji. I póki co,* **to Rosjanie ostrzeliwują Ukrainę**, *nie Ukraina Rosję.*] gazeta.pl.

f) *I cannot fathom that **soldiers are at war with civilians***… [*Nie mogę pojąć, że **żołnierze prowadzą wojnę z ludnością cywilną**…*] gazeta.pl.

g) *They can always **shoot some civilians, blow a kindergarten, bomb a hospital**. They do not need an efficient army.* [*Zawsze mogą **rozstrzelać trochę cywilów, wysadzić przedszkole, zbombardować szpital**. Do tego nie potrzeba sprawnej armii.*] gazeta.pl.

h) *The goal is to prevent evacuation, so that people could stay. And then in order to enter the city, **rape the children, kill,** plunder and start fire. It is the aim of Russian bandits and monsters. That is their objective.* [*Chodzi o to, żeby powstrzymać ewakuację, żeby ludzie zostali. A potem by wejść do miasta, **gwałcić dzieci, zabijać**, grabić i podpalać. O to chodzi rosyjskim bandytom i potworom taki jest ich cel.*] gazeta.pl.

Example h) above points to the plan for the people to remain in the city, again being the Ground for the war activities, but then it turns out that the Ground becomes the "goal", of raping and killing. Similarly, in c) above, the evacuation of civilians serves as the background for more radical measures against the enemy. Related to this is another comment, i) below, where it is explicitly observed that what is important is the configuration, i.e., who does what to whom, and this should be changed.

i) *Dear Editors, let's change the narration, it is not **Putin's war with Ukraine**, but **Russia's war with Ukraine**. It is **Russians who are fighting on the front against the civilians of Ukraine**. After the war we were also taught that it was Hitlerites who were bad germans were not mentioned. Hitlerites were from Mars? Then just like now it is **people of a particular nation who are murdering who invaded the neighbour**.* [*Panowie i Panie redaktorzy zmieńcie narrację, to nie jest **wojna Putina z Ukrainą to wojna Rosji z Ukrainą**. Na froncie walczą **rosjanie przeciw mieszkańcą Ukrainy.** Po II Wojnie Światowej też nas uczono, że hitlerowcy byli źli o niemcach nie wspominano. A hitlerowcy to byli z Marsa?. Tam jak i teraz **mordują konkretni przedstawiciele narodu który napadł na sąsiada**].* tokfm.pl.

What can be observed here is the metacharacter of the comment, indicting the author's awareness of the importance of ensuring that the language used to describe a particular reality faithfully reflects it. The same motif is also visible in the previous examples (c–h above), illustrating the civilians' semantic-syntactic role of "the done to".

### 4.2.4. Other metaphorical aspects

One more type of discursive reference has been identified in this pilot study, namely metonymy. It involves either referring to wholes in terms of their parts and vice versa, or "naming by association" (Knowles and Moon 2006, 37). Following this line of reasoning, the former would be, for instance, referring to workers as 'hands' while the latter would be calling the theatre 'the stage' (Knowles and Moon 2006, 37). In the current sample, examples of the use of the word 'Ukraine' standing for different referents have been identified: as an entire nation ("Putin's war with Ukraine", tokfm.pl); nation/civilians ("GLORY TO UKRAINE AND THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE", Gowork.pl); or the government ("Ukraine can buy warplanes from…", Gowork.pl).

### 4.2.5. Discourses and narratives

Another theoretical underpinning that helps to understand the data at hand are the concepts of discursive event (Foucault 1989) and narrative, which, although referring to larger communicative chunks than words and sentences, also concern – centrally or peripherally – civilians. In the collection of articles edited by Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa (2015), which sheds light on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia (though focusing on the 2014 events), the latter concept is referred to by Hutchings and Szostek (2015) in their chapter entitled "Dominant narratives in Russian political and media discourse during the Ukraine crisis", whereas Chebankova (2015, 175) refers to the former. As we learn from Flynn (2005, 53), a *discursive event* is a "basic unit of communication […] unique as event and repeatable as thing". It is then repeated, elaborated on, and thus everything that is communicated accumulates, and contributes to the creation of this event as the totality of what can be said about a particular event. As Foucault puts it, such events "suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it off from its empirical origin and its original motivations, cleanse it of its imaginary complicities" (Foucault 1989, 4). An example of such discourse is for instance "two Ukraines"/"divided nation" (Zhurzhenko 2014, 249), which has been instrumental in the creation of the country's image in Russia and the West. As the author observes, it "juxtaposes the Ukrainian-speaking pro-European west and the pro-Russian, Soviet-nostalgic east as two historical and cultural entities" (2014, 249). Narrative, on the other hand, is a smaller unit, presenting a particular way in which given issues are discussed or events recounted; a particular configuration i.e., the presence or absence of particular elements and the way they are presented. In the socio-political context of the current paper, Hutchings and Szostek (2015) discuss dominant narratives in Russian state-owned and commercial media during the 2014 crisis, pointing to their constant presence, and the changes they underwent during that particular time. In general, the aim of the narratives was to orient Russia with respect to the West with a view to criticising the latter, showing the advantage of the former, and strengthening its position. The authors enumerate "double standards" in relation to the way the West comments on Russia's actions and how it behaves in other situations, advocating for Russia and supporting the countries' greater role with an emphasis on the ongoing cooperation with Europe in various contexts, supposedly against Western plans (2015, 184–188). A separate group of narratives is related to Russian nationhood and these include Ukraine, among other countries, as part of the great "nation-building mission" (2015, 188). This particular concept seems to have been Russia's pretext for the annexation of Crimea, where Russia was supposedly defending the rights of its compatriots, also labelled as "ethnic Russians/Russian speakers" (2015, 190). Also key to this narrative was the presence of another element, namely fascism, which was attributed by Russia to the actors behind the Euromaidan movement and the new Ukrainian government, against whom Russia claimed to have been fighting together with Ukraine in the "the Great

Patriotic War" (2015, 191). Other narratives related to Ukrainian national identity are discussed by Korostelina (2014).

Provided below are examples of the previously discussed discourses and narratives. First, the discourse about Ukraine as a "divided nation" (Zhurzhenko 2014, 249) can be observed in examples (j-l), where it is described as not homogenous (j), even as an American colony (k), and where two powers collide (j). Interestingly enough, the very wording of this particular excerpt labels Ukraine as the Ground while the aforementioned powers are active on it (see Figure and Ground segregation, Subsection 4.2.3 above) Also, the very nature of the conflict is redefined as having different engaged parties – Russia and the USA, not Ukraine.

j)  *Ukraine has not been homogenous from the very beginnings of its young statehood. It is the ground where both pro-West and pro-Russia powers collide.* [*Ukraina od początków swojej młodej państwowości nie była jednolita. Ścierają się siły prozachodnie i prorosyjskie.*] gazeta pl.

k)  *Western populations have no idea that after the American coup in 2014 Ukraine ceased to be a democratic country and has become an American colony ruled by Washington.* [*Mieszkancy Zachodu nie maja wiec nawet pojecia o tym, ze po amerykanskim zamachu stanu w 2014 r. Ukraina przestaa byc panstwem demokratycznym i stala się amerykanska kolonia zarzadzana z Waszyngtonu.*] gazeta.pl.

l)  *Wiktor Jerofiejew[3] does not understand what is going on in Ukraine: there is a war going on there the USA vs Russia and not Ukraine vs Russia.* [*Wiktor Jerofiejew nie rozumie co sie dzieje na Ukrainie: tam trwa wojna USA – Rosja, a nie wojna Ukraina – Rosja.* gazeta.pl.

As for the narratives, one can identify a related example of a fascism narrative (Hutchings and Szostek 2015, 191): in this case accusing President Zelensky of creating a neo-Nazi regime (m-n), additionally supported by America for whom Ukraine is a puppet. This particular macro-representation of Ukraine in passive terms and as a Groundcorresponds with the one at the micro-level, i.e., looking at individual words and their configurations – see Subsection 4.2.3 above. Also, the presence of fellow Russians in Ukraine is mentioned (Hutchings and Szostek 2015, 190) in (o-p), the defence of whom was declared to be one of the reasons for Russia's current aggression.

m)  *The neo-Nazi regime of Zelensky (who is an American puppet and does whatever Americans tell him to do) is an authoritarian dictatorship, which delegalised all opposition parties and confiscated their assets, shut down all independent media and locked up or killed political opponents.* [*A neo-nazi rezim Zelenskiego (ktory jest amerykanska kukielka i robi to mu kaza Amerykanie) to autorytarna DYKTATURA, ktora zdelegalizowala wszystkie partie opozycyjne i skonfiskowala ich majatki, zlikwidowawala niezalezne media i zamyka albo morduje przeciwnikow politycznych.*] gazeta.pl.

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[3] A Russian writer and publicist.

n) *The neo-Nazi of Zelensky have been shooting the atomic power station in Zaporoze since March.* […] [*Neo-nazisci Zelenskiego strzelaja do atomowej alektrowni Zaporoze od marca*. […] ] gazeta.pl.

o) *It will be difficult to chase civilians away, because most of them lived there before 2014 and not really has anywhere else to run away to. Crimea, in contrast to the rest of eastern Ukraine) was populated primarily by Russians and not Russian- speaking Ukrainians) because it is not the same.* [*Cywilow bedzie ciezko przepedzic bo wiekszosc z nich tam mieszkala jeszcze przed 2014 i nie bardzo ma inne miejsce w Rosji zeby gdzies uciec. Krym (w odroznieniu do reszty wschodniej Ukrainy) zaludniali glownie Rosjanie, a nie rosyjsko-jezyczni Ukraincy bo to nie to samo.*] gazeta.pl

p) *That is why one has to destroy Kerchen bridge as soon as possible, quell the orcs* [Russians] *who are cut off from supplies, Crimea and only then give the civilians a choice: they can resettle (but for Russia's money) or stay as Ukrainian citizens with the prospect of joining the EU.* [*Dlatego trzeba zniszczyc most kerczenski jak najszybciej, zdusic odciete od zaopatrzenia sily orkow, zajac Krym a dopiero potem dac ludnosci cywilnej mozliwosc wyboru: moga sie przesiedlic do Rosji (ale na koszt Rosji) albo pozostac jako obywatele Ukrainy z dalsza perspektywa wejscia do UE.*] gazeta.pl.

Finally, an example related to the idea of "building of the nationhood" (Hutchings and Szostek 2015, 188), where the importance of particular countries as belonging to Russia, or at least being controlled by Russia is emphasised:

r) *What Russia cannot tolerate is tightly controlled borders without buffer zones and neighbours united against it. Ukraine and Belarus are everything for Russians. If they fell into the hands of an enemy, for instance joined NATO, Russia would find itself in deadly danger.* [*Tym czego Rosja nie może tolerować, są zwarte granice bez stref buforowych i zjednoczeni przeciwko niej sąsiedzi." „Ukraina i Białoruś są dla Rosjan wszystkim. Gdyby wpadły w w ręce nieprzyjaciela – na przykład wstąpiły do NATO – Rosja znalazłaby się w śmiertelnym niebezpieczeństwie".*] gazeta.pl.

It could also be added that, following Yavorska (2017), the examples above, as well as the ones below, contain the topical elements of war discourse, e.g., weapons (s); war activities (c) and (f-g); casualties (a-b, d-h); or death of soldiers (t); and civilians (g-h).

s) *I hope that the West will supply weapons to Ukraine systematically…* [*Mam nadzieję, liczę na to, że zachód systematycznie będzie dostarczał broń Ukrainie…*] gazeta.pl.

t) *The Pentagon estimates that Russia has lost around 70–80 thousand soldiers, including both killed and injured. And lots of equipment.* [*Pentagon ocenia, że Rosja w tej wojnie straciła ok. 70 – 80 tys. żołnierzy, licząc łącznie zabitych i rannych. I mnóstwo sprzętu.*] gazeta.pl.

In her book on hate speech in Polish and German, Jaszczyk-Grzyb (2021) refers to this type of discourse as *militarisation*. What is more, in her previously mentioned research on the discourse about Ukrainians, she observes that this militarisation is more characteristic of the communication before the invasion, whereas afterwards it transforms into the discourse of nationalisation where the line between *us* and *them* is clearly drawn and emphasised, seen for instance in reference to the discourse about Ukraine as a divided nation (Zhurzhenko 2014, 249), or the narrative about Russia's criticism towards the West (Hutchings and Szostek 2015) as previously mentioned.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present paper has been a preliminary examination of the discursive construction of the civilian and nation in the context of the 2022 war in Ukraine, on the basis of entries on Polish discussion forums. The intention here was to determine some general features as starting points for further analyses. In the research, a qualitative perspective was combined with computer-assisted examination of the corpus, the latter with the help of the Sketch Engine tool, which identifies patterns in a given sample of language data. In this way, both macro- and micro-perspectives were explored, in which the focus fell on the examination of both particular discourses and narratives, as well as of individual word configurations, which was complemented with a study of keywords and word frequencies and patterns. As the results of the analysis demonstrate, the Ukrainian civilians tend to be portrayed in a passive manner, i.e., as Grounds in the presentation of military activities, which can be seen at the level of sentential salience as well as in metaphorical expressions. Civilians are primarily presented as the targets of particular activities or metaphorically as prey for a predator – the attacking country. From the macro-perspective, the discourses of the divided nation as well as narratives centring upon criticism levelled at the West, of Russia's building of nationhood and of the fight against fascism were identified. Even here, however, Ukraine is still a Ground – to which weapons are sent from the West, and where its operations and decisions are determined by other parties.

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**"Ginące dzieci, rozpaczające matki" – analiza dyskursu zapośredniczonego komputerowo
w odniesieniu do obrazu ludności cywilnej oraz narodu dotkniętych wojną w Ukrainie
(na podstawie polsko-języcznych wpisów na forach internetowych)**

Słowa kluczowe: Ukraina, wojna, dyskurs, forum internetowe.

**STRESZCZENIE**

Celem artykułu jest wstępne zbadanie dyskursywnego obrazu cywili oraz całego narodu dotkniętych zbrojną
napaścią Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 roku, na podstawie wpisów na polsko-języcznych forach internetowych.
Zastosowaną metodą badawczą jest jakościowa analiza dyskursu z elementami analizy wspomaganej kom-
puterowo z wykorzystaniem narzędzia Sketch Engine. O ile istnieje szereg badań dotyczących trwającego
od 2014 konfliktu w Ukrainie na podstawie szeroko pojętego dyskursu medialnego, wydaje się, iż wyda-
rzenia od 2022 roku nie zostały jeszcze dogłębnie zbadane. W części teoretyczno-metodologicznej artykułu
omówiono takie zagadnienia jak dyskurs i narracja oraz analiza dyskursu zapośredniczonego komputerowo,
w tym gatunek wpisu na forum. W części analitycznej, z perspektywy mikro, skupiono się na tekstowych
odniesieniach do cywili i narodu, jak również ich otoczeniu tekstowym. W perspektywie makro z kolei zba-
dano dłuższe struktury tj. dyskursy i narracje oraz zastosowane metafory. Jak pokazują wyniki tego badania,
z perspektywy mikro, ukraińscy cywile oraz naród są przedstawiani w sposób pasywny, jako tło dla lub obiekt
działań, również militarnych, co można wywnioskować na podstawie obecności konkretnych elementów
tematycznych oraz rozmieszczenia akcentów komunikacyjnych na poziomie zdania, a także zastosowanych
wyrażeń metaforycznych. Z perspektywy makro, niniejsze dane zostały analizowane pod kątem obecności
konkretnych dyskursów oraz narracji, które pojawiły się we wcześniejszych badaniach, na innych danych,
w innym kontekście i w innych ramach czasowych. W niniejszym badaniu również pojawił się dyskurs
podzielonego narodu oraz narracje dotyczące krytyki Zachodu, budowania rosyjskiego państwa oraz walki
z faszyzmem. Zakładając, iż istnieje zależność pomiędzy dyskursem a społeczną rzeczywistością, w świetle
uzyskanych wyników należy podkreślić rolę mediów w kształtowaniu konkretnych poglądów oraz postaw.