

# The Beginnings: Russian-Ukrainian War in European, Ukrainian, and Russian Media in 2014-15

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**Abstract** This article presents the findings of a corpus-based analysis of the first stage of the Russian war on Ukraine and its representation in Russian, Ukrainian and European media in 2014-15. The study presents the key actors of the conflict by looking at the most frequent words and attitudes towards these actors in different media sources.

**Keywords** Russian-Ukrainian war. Conflict. Corpus analysis. Media.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Research Questions. – 4 Methodology. – 4.1 Corpus. – 4.2 Materials/Instruments. – 4.3 Procedure. – 4.4 Type of Data. – 5 Results/Discussion. – 6 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The media has the power to create, shape, and change public opinion. At the same time, it is also created and shaped by the community (Bell 1991; Lukin 2019). In war or conflict discourse the power of media is crucial because it affects the country's image on the international stage and the public mood and atmosphere in the country by establishing and reproducing ideology (Chiluwa 2022; Lukin, 2019). The ongoing Russian war on Ukraine has not suddenly started on February 24, 2022, and the first acts of current aggression against Ukraine could be seen in 2014. By focusing on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-15, I present the key actors of the conflict and attitude toward them by looking at the most frequent words in op-eds of different media sources (European/UK - *The Guardian*, Ukrainian - *TSN*, and Russian - *RT*). The present study seeks to determine whether this war and its key actors were viewed and discussed differently in Russian, Ukrainian, and European media, and whether media sources reflected particular attitudes toward the conflict. This research is important to understand the effect of the rhetoric around the war at its start.

## 2 Literature Review

The present study covers the beginning of the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine and its representation in Russian, Ukrainian and European media, using the following publications as a methodological foundation. This literature review comprises an overview of relevant media corpus-based and corpus-assisted studies on international war or conflict discourse and a critical analysis of news articles on the Russian-Ukrainian war. These studies are used as a theoretical framework, although some of them focus on different political conflicts.

Previous research emphasises the inextricable link between language and ideology (Chiluwa 2022; Lukin 2019): “language is always ideological, and ideology depends on language” (Lukin 2019, 16). Therefore, understanding ideology is impossible without analysing language. A comparative analysis of BBC and Al Jazeera (Timotjevic 2022) investigating the Israeli and Palestinian representations in the media discovered that in contesting narratives, despite the attempted neutrality of the BBC coverage, the socially more powerful side of the conflict is given preferential treatment therefore legitimising some actions of the Israeli side. Another way to justify the war or conflict is to linguistically separate *war* from the cruelty that comes with it (Lukin 2019). The word *war* can be avoided or replaced with an alternative that carries a positive connotation and its collocates are likely to “tend towards more taxonomic lexis, and less evaluative or emo-

tional lexis" (21) to depersonalise and detach the war from its victims. Similarly, in Kutter and Kantner (2012), the term *intervention*<sup>1</sup> was often replaced with words, such as *troops*, *forces*, *strikes*, and *attack*, which were regarded by authors as constituents of intervention. Further, deconstructing the war discourse through the Critical Discourse Studies lens reveals a set of strategies for conflict legitimisation in society (Goulding 2022). Positive-self and negative-other representations as well as political argumentation may rationalize war without drawing attention to the violence it brings. In other words, a positive and superior image of 'self' antagonising the negative image of 'other' creates a need for conflict (Bicer, Brink, Camacho 2022; Partington 2015; Shaheen, Tarique 2022).

Analysis of collocations of the most frequent words in the media-based corpora in the conflict discourse may reveal the attitude these collocates represent (Kutter, Kantner 2012; Nisco 2013). For example, a corpus-based content analysis of humanitarian or military interventions by Kutter and Kantner (2012) identified frequent occurrences of *failures* or *incapacities* as collocates to the adjective *European* which shows a negative attitude towards the EU policy. Nisco (2013) concluded that in media representation of Arab Spring the same lexical items might collocate with different words and thereby reveal different attitudes in respect of key actors and actions of the conflict. Corpus-assisted comparative study of the representation of the *Arab world* in English media sources revealed negative stereotyping and association with violence, lack of democracy, and turmoil (Partington 2015).

Identifying frequent lexical items and personal names in comparative analyses can serve as an indication of the actors of the conflict and war. In research investigating perspectives on the Libyan civil war in 2011, Chen (2013) observed that both socialist (*China Daily*) and liberal (*The New York Times*) media sources had a frequent occurrence of the word *Qaddafi/Gadhafi*, which was interpreted as an indication of his key role in this conflict. At the same time, rare mention of *government* was suggested as evidence of the government's ineffective role in that war. In Partington (2015), a comparison of county names as keywords in UK and Arab newspapers indicated a greater conflict concentration in the *Arab world* as well as an important role of Egypt in the Arab world and the difficult relations between Turkey and the Arab world. The co-occurrence of countries with the names of countries that share similar views was observed in Kim (2014) investigating the image of North Korea in the US media. This corpus study revealed a pattern of co-occurrence of *North Korea* with *Iran*, *Iraq*, and *Cuba*. Even though historically, geograph-

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<sup>1</sup> Lexical items and collocates found through corpus analysis are italicised.

ically, or economically these countries do not have a lot in common, each of them to some degree experienced a conflict with the USA. Therefore, in conflict discourse, there is a tendency for the co-occurrence of country names with the names of countries that share similar political views.

Although the area of conflict and war media reporting analysis often examines the Arab Spring, Israeli-Palestinian, South-North Korean conflicts as well as conflicts in Iraq, and Afghanistan, a few of them involve Russian-Ukrainian war analysis.

Socio-political context and its effect on word meanings have been studied in an analysis of Russian and Ukrainian parliamentary debates at the beginning of 2014 (Karpenko-Seccombe 2021). Cross-linguistics corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the translation equivalents of *separatist* and *separatism* has shown the divergence in meanings of those words that illustrated the differences in ideologies of the two parliaments studied. A discourse of fascism was also notable (Karpenko-Seccombe 2020).

The study of representations of violence in President Poroshenko and President Putin's speeches revealed similar negative-other and positive-self identity portrayals to legitimise in-group members and their actions and criticise the opponent (Arcimavičienė 2020). Although the metaphorical styles of both presidents differ, they both use the Self vs Other dichotomy. To reinforce the idea of negative-other in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, emotionally negative blended words can be used (Beliaeva, Knoblock 2020): *Putler* = Putin + Hitler; *putinomica* = Putin + economics.

The discourse of negative-other and positive-self can also be observed in Jorge (2014). His research of the image of Ukrainians in the British *The Guardian* and Russian *RT News* suggested that *The Guardian* tends to describe EuroMaidan protest participants from the positive side, portraying them as heroes of revolutions who strive for justice and European values, when both Russian and Ukrainian governments in every possible way prevent them from achieving this goal. In addition, the Russian and Ukrainian governments are presented as those opposing the US in the political arena. *RT*, on the contrary, creates a demonic image of the rebels, emphasising their violent behaviour. Even though in *RT* they are still perceived as pro-European similarly to *The Guardian*, the connotation of it is negative. Besides, the roles of victims are assigned to the governments, with the role of villains left to the protesters.

### 3 Research Questions

The studies discussed above demonstrate that some corpus-based and corpus-assisted research has been conducted about conflict representation in media. However, the ongoing international disputes and the effect of media rhetoric on conflict development do not get enough attention from the linguistics perspective. By focusing on the Russian war on Ukraine, I hope to present the key actors at the start of the conflict by looking at the most frequent words and attitudes towards these actors in different media sources. The current research is conducted to bridge the gap between conflict media representation theory and the actual linguistic impact of news articles on the reader by answering the following questions:

- what are the most frequent words in op-eds in relationship to the Russian-Ukrainian war in European, Ukrainian, and Russian media in 2014-15?
- What do these words tell about the conflict in general or about actors of the war in particular?
- Who are the key actors of the Ukrainian-Russian war in 2014-15 from the point of view of different media sources?

### 4 Methodology

#### 4.1 Corpus

For the current study, three mini-corpora were created consisting of op-ed articles published from August 2014 to March 2015 in three news sources: European – *The Guardian*, Ukrainian – *TSN*, and Russian – *RT*. In total, the corpus consists of 68 articles with 62,319 word tokens (*The Guardian* – 24 articles, 20,929 words; *TSN* – 23 articles, 20,647 words; *RT* – 21 articles, 20,743 words).

Similar to most recent corpus studies investigating war and conflict media representation (Bicer, Brink, Camacho 2022; Oktavianti, Adnan 2020; Sahlane 2022), the current study is confined to op-eds due to their communicative purpose and their sub-register which tends to explicitly articulate the author’s opinion and attitude toward the issue in question. The op-ed section of periodicals represents the opinion genre and includes letters to the editor, leader articles/editorials, and commentaries (Bednarek, Caple 2012). Contrary to factual reports that are meant to be more objective, op-eds are articles with a stance (Biber, Conrad 2009). In addition to allowing for the subjective voice of an individual author, op-eds can display the official stance of a particular media source without identifying an author (Bednarek, Caple 2012, 41). Therefore, choosing op-ed articles for the current study allowed for investigating the attitudes towards

the first stage of the current Russian war on Ukraine in the media of different countries through the research of word frequency and word collocates.

## 4.2 Materials/Instruments

The articles were gathered from three websites: European/UK - *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk>), Ukrainian - *TSN* (<http://tsn.ua/>), and Russian - *RT* (<http://russian.rt.com/>). A concordancer (AntConc) was used to organise lexical items and their co-text into concordance lines. An Excel spreadsheet was used to record the results of the analysis of the articles.

## 4.3 Procedure

The current paper is based on the methodology of corpus-assisted comparative discourse study (CADS) (Ancarno 2020; Partington, Duguid, Taylor 2013). While the four main data outputs in CADS are concordance lists, multi-word expression lists, keyword lists, and collocation lists (Ancarno 2020), the current study uses the latter two in combination with qualitative analysis. To build the corpus for this research, the researcher visited *The Guardian* and *RT* websites and entered "Ukraine" in the search box. Since the Ukrainian source uses *Ukraine* as a keyword anyway, to differentiate the articles about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, for *TSN* search the investigator used the keyword *Russia* instead. The articles were sorted by date and filtered by genre (op-eds only). Only articles published from August 2014 through March 2015 were included in the corpora. The chosen period is frequently studied in literature (Knoblock 2020) and reflects the most drastic changes in the Ukrainian government at the start of the war (post-Revolution of Dignity, annexation of Crimea, occupation of Donbas region) and hence the position of the country in the international arena.

After finding relevant articles for all three mini-corpora to consist of no less than 20,000 words, they were put in separate text documents with UTF-8 coding to be used in the concordancer. First, the five most frequent lexical items from all three corpora were recorded. Additionally, the document included their twenty collocates with the highest parameters of frequency (how frequent is this collocate) and strength (how far in the sentence this collocate appears to the given lexical item). By looking at the data available, the researcher speculated on their significance in war/conflict discourse. Up to ten collocates out of twenty were chosen as the most significant ones and were represented in the analysis. For Russian and Ukrainian corpora,

all forms of the same nouns (nouns in different cases) were summed up and considered to be one lexical item. Then, the search included the proper names (names, places, countries, capitals, etc.) that are expected to appear in the corpus due to their immediate relevance to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Examples of their collocates were also recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. New blended words created by authors of *TSN* op-eds found corpus were added to the spreadsheet. Finally, data with the most frequent lexical items and their collocates was compared between *The Guardian*, *TSN*, and *RT*.

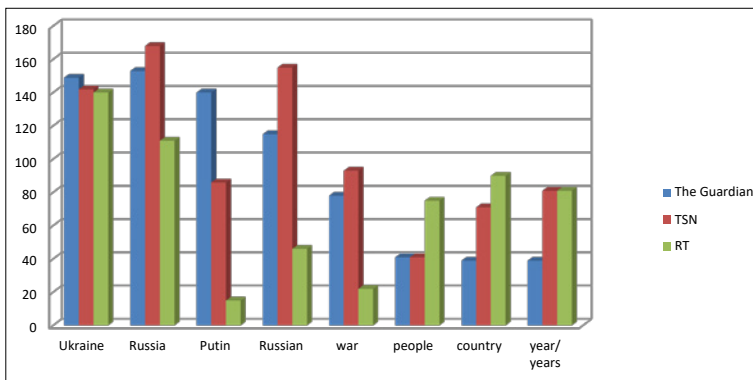
#### 4.4 Type of Data

The resulting data type was concordance lines, collocate lines, and frequency counts of lexical items in three corpora. The five most frequent lexical items from each corpus and their collocates were recorded in a spreadsheet and analysed. Then, frequency counts of lexical items and collocations were compared across the websites; the collocations were analysed according to the tone and attitude they convey towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-15.

### 5 Results/Discussion

After compiling the corpus of 68 op-ed articles, the most frequent words were found using the Word List menu option in AntConc. Lexical items with the highest frequency of occurrences in *The Guardian*, *TSN*, and *RT* can be seen in the graph below.

**Chart 1** The most frequent words comparison



The above graph shows that the most frequent lexical items in *The Guardian* and *TSN* coincide: *Ukraine*, *Russia*, *Putin*, *Russian*, and *war*.

However, *RT* suggests a slightly different sequence: *Ukraine, Russia, country, year/years* and *people*. Not surprisingly, *Ukraine* and *Russia* are considered key actors in all three sources, even though the number of occurrences of these words is not the same. *Russia* is the most frequently used lexical item in the Ukrainian source *TSN*; the adjective *Russian* takes second place. In *RT*, however, *Ukraine* is the most frequently mentioned word. For *The Guardian*, *Ukraine, Russia, and Putin* have approximately the same frequency. This analysis reveals that from the Ukrainian media perspective, *Russia's* actions deserve the most attention. From the Russian perspective, on the contrary, *Ukraine* is the one that has to be mentioned the most. And *The Guardian*, as the third party, equally describes *Ukraine, Russia, and Russian representative Putin*.

Moreover, this comparison suggests that *RT* does not use the word *war* very often, unlike *The Guardian* and *TSN* where it is used at least three times more often. The reason for this big difference in the frequency of occurrences might be that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-15 was not regarded as *war* in Russia. Even the full-scale invasion of Russia in 2022 is referred to in Russian media sources as a *special operation*. Therefore, we can observe how the Russian rhetoric of 2022 finds a precedent in the data collected in 2014-15. Russian op-ed articles in 2014-15 viewed the conflict as a misunderstanding between *countries* and *people*, not *war*. This point of view is also reflected in the frequency of use of these two lexical items. This lack of use of *war* serves as evidence of an attempt to separate the actions of the Russian government “from the stigmatized uses of violence” and instead focus on a “rational, purposeful [and] directed” type of war (Lukin 2019, 21); the term *special operation* is meant to “carry a positive loading” (Lukin 2019, 21), present it as a structured action (123) and rationalising abstraction, the benefits of which outweigh its costs (137-8).

Similarly to Chen (2013), it was assumed that rare mention of the *government* reveals the government’s ineffective role in the conflict. Instead, the articles use personal names (places, people, etc.) to particularise the actions. In addition, instead of covering only the current state of affairs in the country, the Russian media tends to recollect events that happened in the past year(s). Assumptions about future turns of events can be made based on previous experiences and conflicts between Russia and other countries. This trend can also be observed in media sources in 2022 with some examples being “Russia never starts wars – it always ends them” or “What have you been doing for the past eight years?”. The orchestrated use of terms in *RT* in 2014-15 becomes an ideological resource.

The collocates of the most frequent words in op-eds in 2014-15 with the highest parameters of frequency and strength introduced more detailed information about attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian-



an conflict (see [table 1](#) below). The collocates include premodifiers of nominal group structure, verbal group elements, and nominal associations with both common and proper nouns (Lukin 2019).

**Table 1** Most frequent words

<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>TSN</i>	<i>RT</i>
collocates: Russia		
sanctions, confidence, wrecking, unproductive, unfriendly	power, Federal Security Service, against, war, troll, price	speech, relationship, information, partners, logic, claimed, Europe
collocates: Ukraine		
forces, crisis, NATO, patriot, unacceptable, traumas, suffering, shortage	glory, beginning, war, territory, try, security, alone, difference, situation	extremist, fascist, dying, terror, collapse, system, defense
collocates: Putin		
sanctions, must, war, regime, actions, paranoia	Kim Jong-il, collided with, Stalinism, archaic, imperialist, opposition, ethical	broaden, influence, method
collocates: Russian		
soldier, troops, economy, border, propaganda, media, influence, fighting, weapons	soldier, troops, oil, military, zombie, mantras, Chechnya	
collocates: war		
declared, third, isolation, God, Kosovo, cold, sovereign, civil	outcome, stop, phase, true, separatist, killed, holy, buried, victorious, art nouveau	fascism, civil, tiredness
collocates: people		
		tragedy, millions, thousands, escaped, ashamed, exorcism, Maidan

This table shows collocates to the most frequent lexical items in three mini-corpora. Based on these results the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. *The Guardian* (European source) reflects the negative attitude to ambitious Russia (sanctions,<sup>2</sup> *unfriendly*, *confidence*, *Putin*) and expresses sympathy for Ukraine (*forces*, *crisis*, *NATO*, *patriot*, *unaccep-*

<sup>2</sup> Underlined words are the most frequent collocates among all collocates in the group.

*table, traumas, suffering, shortage*). The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is blamed on Putin (*sanctions, must, war, regime, actions, paranoia*). Russia is viewed as a military aggressor with such collocates to *Russian* as *soldier, troops, economy, border, propaganda, media, influence, fighting, and weapons*. There is also a tendency for the acts of violence to be in the nominalised form: *wrecking, suffering, fighting* (Lukin 2019). Such grammatical forms do not overtly state the agents of the actions.

The word *propaganda* appears to be very common in describing Russian politics. The *war* between Russia and Ukraine is sometimes referred to as the *Third World War* because of the large number of parties involved in the conflict; at times it is also compared with the *cold war*. Even though Russia and Ukraine are two independent countries, European media still thinks about them as one nation when using the term *civil war*. The prevalence of this idea in *The Guardian* might demonstrate the preferential treatment of Russian rhetoric about brotherly nations (Knoblock 2020). The situation in *Kosovo* is frequently compared with the situation in Ukraine because of its common participant - Russia - and because the *Kosovo War* triggered the Russian narrative of an immediate threat from NATO (Bieber 2022).

Similarly to Kim (2014), the results have shown the co-occurrence of *Ukraine* or *Ukrainian* with the names of countries that share similar views on Russian and European policy. Surprisingly, *God* is frequently mentioned in relation to the conflict of 2014-15. It might be explained by the fact that even after several months of appealing for Europe's help in 2014, Ukraine was refused both humanitarian and military intervention. Perhaps, associating the military invasion of Russia with the *civil war* created an idea of "state-internal violence, the concept [that] does not have the sense of disorder" (Lukin 2019, 102); therefore, no significant support was provided. So, praying might have been the only option available as help at that time. Although significant shifts can be observed in moving away from some of these ideas in Europe (for example, the current war in 2022 is no longer compared to the civil war), reliance on God versus practical support is still prevalent in some European countries and communities. Lukin (2019) notes that the term *war* in OED Historical Thesaurus falls into the subcategory of "armed hostility" under the category of "society" which puts *war* in the same order as "morality" and "religion" (89). This might explain how war becomes a part of society as much as *God*.

2. *TSN* (Ukrainian source) represents *Russia* as an oppressor (*against, war, troll, price*), and *Ukraine* as a fighter doing his best (*glory, beginning, war, territory, try, security, alone, difference, situation*). Special emphasis is put on the word *alone* because Ukraine could not get any substantial help from other countries in 2014-15. It means that the

Ukrainian government had to deal with the situation on its own. Putin is condemned and frequently compared with North Korean dictator *Kim Jong-Il*. The Ukrainian media in 2022 might be more likely to compare Putin to Hitler instead (this comparison was only occasionally used in 2014-15). Putin's presidency is described as *archaic*. *Stalinism*, *imperialist*, and *opposition* also reflect unfavourable attitudes to the Russian President and partially support the discourse of fascism found in Karpenko-Seccombe (2020). Collocates to *Russian* suggest the Russian image as an aggressor since most of them are associated with military action: *soldier*, *troops*, and *military*.

Ukrainian war with Russia in 2014-15 is compared to the situation in *Chechnya*. Interestingly, *zombies* and *mantras* are used to describe the effect of media propaganda on Russian citizens. The one-sided Russian opinion is constantly broadcasted in media like *mantras*, and people who believe in Russian propaganda are compared to *zombies*. *War* against Russia is represented as something to be proud of - a *holy* and *victorious* fight, where *war* takes positive connotation from its collocations (Lukin 2019). The most unexpected collocate to *war* was found to be *art nouveau* which accounts for the fact that protesting appears to be a new popular trend among Ukrainian citizens. At the same time, the government would rather *stop* it because hundreds of people are already *killed* and *buried*. Similarly to findings in Lukin (2019), these verbs reveal that *war* is closely associated with destruction and slaughter (88).

3. *RT* (Russian source) portrays *Russia* in 2014-15 as the country seeking partnership with Ukraine, presenting a new perspective never imaged in neither *The Guardian* nor *TSN*. Unlike European and Ukrainian sources, only neutral words were found as the collocates to *Russia* (*speech*, *relationship*, *information*, *partners*, *logic*, *claimed*, *Europe*). *Russian* collocates with items that can hardly be attributed to the conflict - *management*, *media*, *manufacturing*, *gas*, and *censorship*. Even *censorship* is presented in a positive light as a means of making sure media sources cover real facts and events. Putin is described as an active statesman who wants to *broaden* and *influence* other countries through innovative *methods*. This rhetoric somewhat evolved since 2014 and in 2022 it seeks to manifest Russia as a country saving the world from *fascism* and protecting the world from unlawful acts of the Ukrainian government which creates a "rightful intention" (Lukin 2019, 104) for violence and cultivating an idea of a just war (Bhatia 2005).

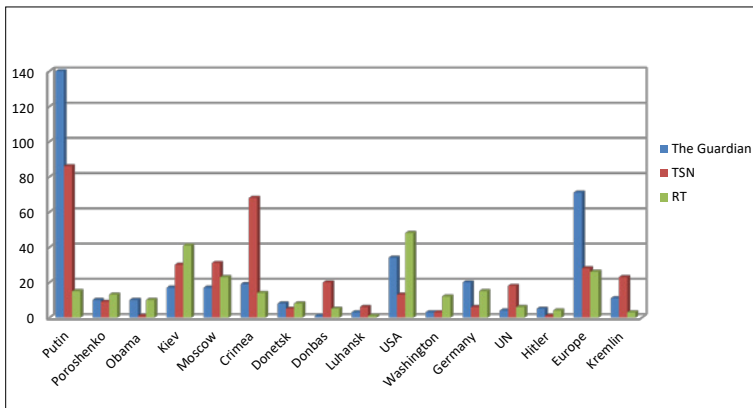
The onset of the rhetoric of saviours can be observed in Russian op-ed articles of 2014-15 that depict Ukraine as extremely dangerous by using lexical items of negative criticism - *extremist*, *fascist*, *dying*, *terror*, *collapse*, *system*, *defense*. Similar results were observed in Karpenko-Seccombe (2020). Moreover, the Russian-Ukrainian con-

flict and war are blamed on Ukraine. Describing the country as the land of *fascism* and presenting *war* as a necessary and unavoidable action (similarly to what is described in Shaheen, Tarique 2022 and Karpenko-Seccombe 2020) yet again creates legitimacy for war. On the other hand, *RT* sympathises with Ukrainian citizens, pointing out that as soon as the current government is *exorcised*, the life of Ukrainians will drastically improve. The possible solution Russia might suggest concerning the new government is to kindly offer their help and their system together with their President. Together these results indicate that the legitimisation of war in *RT* follows conflict discourse strategies (Goulding 2022; Arcimavičienė 2020): positive-self representation, negative-other representation, and argumentation of “striving toward some better state” (Lukin 2019, 105).

Considering that this rhetoric developed even further since 2014 and consolidated in Russian citizens’ minds, the increase in approval of Putin’s actions in 2022 becomes somewhat predictable (Nechepurenko 2022). Besides, the Ukrainian government changed twice since the analyzed articles were published. Yet, the idea of the Ukrainian government being *exorcised* is still prevalent in Russian media in 2022.

In addition to identifying the most frequent lexical items and their collocations, the current research analysed three mini-corpora in terms of the proper names (names, places, countries, capitals, etc.) that are expected to appear in op-eds due to their immediate relevance to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The following graph compares the use of personal names across three mini-corpora.

**Chart 2** Personal names frequency comparison



The graph above shows that each media source represents the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-15 in relation to the respective coun-

try. So, European *The Guardian* sees *Europe* among active participants; Ukrainian *TSN* considers *Crimea* to be crucial in the conflict; and Russian *RT* has *Moscow* among the top three actors. The more careful investigation of data, however, reveals the difference between how personal names are used in different contexts.

The most frequent personal name in *The Guardian* and *TSN* is *Putin*. The prevalent number of its occurrences tells that he is one of the key actors in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. *RT*'s most frequent personal name is the *USA*. The media represents the US as a Ukrainian ally who will provide it with weapons and send humanitarian support. Even though the American government declined the Ukrainian appeal for help in 2014, the mere intention to do that in the past brought the United States into the foreground of *RT*'s discussion.

*Kiev* and *Moscow* are both very frequent personal names in all three corpora. It is also important to note that *The Guardian* uses exclusively the Russian spelling of the Ukrainian capital (*Kiev*) instead of the one preferred in Ukraine (*Kyiv*) therefore offering preferential rhetorical treatment to the more socially powerful side (Russian), similarly to findings in Timotjevic (2022). This conclusion is unexpected and suggests that the European community in 2014-15 somewhat supported the Russian rhetoric of Russians and Ukrainians being one nation with one language; hence - the Russian spelling of the Ukrainian capital and the idea of the *civil war*.

Another interesting finding is that *Kremlin* is sometimes used as a substitute for *Moscow* and the Russian government in *TSN*. The occurrence of this lexical item is twice more frequent in the Ukrainian source than in *The Guardian* and at least three times more frequent than in *RT*. Indeed, referring to either Russian President *Putin* or the Russian government in *Kremlin* is not very common on *RT*. It might be explained by the overall shifted focus of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Russian media so that attention is paid to *Europe*, the *USA*, and *Kiev* instead of the actions of the Russian government or *Moscow*. Another explanation might be offered by Lukin (2019) who observed that abstract geopolitical entities in a war context are used to "depersonalize[e] people whose decisions and actions wreaked this violence" (133).

*Poroshenko* (Ukrainian President in 2014) and *Obama* are almost equally mentioned across all three corpora (except *TSN*'s lower number of *Obama*) even though only one of them was directly connected to the events of 2014-15. It could be attributed to the fact that Poroshenko's presidency started in 2014, which does not make him responsible for the decisions made by the previous government. *Kiev* instead is a more general term to be used referring to the Ukrainian government that would equate the actions of the President with the intentions of the whole geopolitical entity.

An interesting correlation between *Donetsk*, *Luhansk*, and *Donbas* can be seen across three corpora. Only Ukrainian *TSN* acknowledges

that the war in 2014-15 concerns the whole *Donbas* region, and not only particular parts of it, such as *Donetsk* and *Luhansk*. It speaks to the general awareness of the real situation in Eastern Ukraine. European and Russian media seems to separate *Donetsk* and *Luhansk* and single them out from other parts of the *Donbas* region; hence - limiting the military campaign to only those two cities. In reality, every village, town, and city at a close distance to Donetsk and Luhansk suffered no less than Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014-15. It is the reason why the umbrella term of conflict region is so frequent in *TSN*.

*Germany* in *The Guardian* and *RT* is mentioned almost equally. The co-text of this lexical item is very different, though. *The Guardian* nominates *Germany* as the most influential country representing the European Union. But *RT* describes it as a Ukrainian ally along with the *USA*. Even though the German government expressed its sincere concern about the situation in Ukraine, no significant action was undertaken in 2014-15. The historical name of *Hitler*, traditionally associated with Germany during Second World War, was found in European and Russian sources. *The Guardian* compared Putin to *Hitler*, saying their methods of taking over the territory are very similar. However common this comparison in Ukraine is, only one occurrence of 'Hitler' was found in *TSN*. At the same time, *RT* mentions *Hitler* as a response to the comparison of *Putin* to *Hitler*, usually impersonalising and passivising the accusation ("it is said that..."; "Putin is compared to..."; etc.). By giving textual prominence to passive constructions, *RT* attempts to "mak[e] war a form of happening rather than action that extends to, and impacts, outside of itself" (Lukin 2019, 85). This comparison has become even more prominent in 2022.

The distinguishing feature of the Ukrainian writing style was found to be the creative use of language, specifically the use of blended names (Beliaeva, Knoblock 2020). The proof of this statement was also found in op-eds from the Ukrainian source. Some of them include the following:

Krymnaš - 'Crimea-is-ours'

Krymčej - 'Crimea-is-whose'

Krymvaš - 'Crimea-is-yours'

These terms refer to the annexed area in Southern Ukraine - Crimea. They were coined after Moscow's frequent claims that *Crimea* is *Russian*. The repetition of the *Crimea-is-ours* phrase in 2014-15 by the Russian government led to the appearance of a whole range of similar expressions that aim to ridicule that the Crimean lack of a self-sustaining economy and heavy reliance on mainland Ukraine for electricity and fresh water is no longer a Ukrainian problem. These expressions might also be intended to motivate the Russian government to take care of the territory if they claim it to be theirs.

One of the most common ways of creating new words is attaching affixes to the nouns that would not be combined otherwise. This is how the following terms were coined:

nedorepublika - 'fail-to-be-republic'

nedoreferendum - 'fail-to-be-referendum'

nedoekonomika - 'fail-to-be-economy'

The above terms all refer to Ukraine's Donbas (eastern) region. This territory was claimed to be independent of Ukraine to join Russian Federation in the future. But neither the Russian nor Ukrainian governments recognised it as an independent state in 2014-15. The affix *nedo-* is used sarcastically to show that even though *Donetsk* and *Luhansk* self-declared themselves as independent republics with their *referendums* and *economy*, the rest of the world still did not see them as such.

The other, not less interesting, way to use the language creatively is to combine the roots of the words as in the following example: 'Putinomics' = Putin + economics. This emotionally negative blend is a loan from English 'reiganomics' = Reagan + economics (Believa, Knoblock 2020) which is used sarcastically to single out the special way of dealing with economic affairs attributed only to President Putin. No equivalents to any of the new words in *TSN* were found neither in *The Guardian* nor in *RT*.

## 6 Conclusion

Based on the above results, it appears that the most frequent lexical items concerning the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in op-eds in *The Guardian* and *TSN* are: *Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Russian, and war*. The most frequent words in *RT* are *Ukraine, Russia, people, country, and year/years*. These words and their collocates indeed describe the attitude of media sources towards the Russian war on Ukraine. Moreover, the key actors of the conflict are as follows:

- in *The Guardian*: Putin, Europe, USA, Germany, Crimea, Kiev, Moscow, Kremlin;
- in *TSN*: Putin, Crimea, Kiev, Moscow, Europe, Kremlin, UN;
- in *RT*: USA, Kiev, Europe, Moscow, Germany, Putin, Crimea.

Even though three mini-corpora included only 62,319 word tokens in 68 articles from three media sources, the results show the difference in the war media coverage in different countries in 2014-15. These results also show that the justification for the current full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022 has been carefully constructed in Russian media in advance. The portrayal of the Ukrainian govern-

ment as *fascist* on RT in 2014-15 has created a way for the population to not only stay compliant with government decisions but also actively approve of and support the military invasion of the independent and sovereign neighbouring country. It also serves as evidence that “a site, territory or people are first colonized by words and names before being physically occupied by soldiers” (Bhatia 2005, 13-14). The long-term effects of this Russian rhetoric have paved the way for the current aggression by legitimising the war (Lukin 2019) which once again proves the importance of media in shaping public opinion, especially if a government censors all media sources except the ones allowed and crafted by the state.

Further research should be undertaken to investigate the shift of Ukrainian, Russian, and European rhetoric before 2014 as well as after the full-scale invasion of Russia. In order to develop a full picture of the portrayal of the Russian war on Ukraine, additional studies can investigate similar questions with a larger corpus, as well as compare the corpus of op-eds with the corpus of news reports. Such a comparison might reveal different results due to the difference in writing styles in op-ed articles and news reports. A further study of the effect of spelling of proper names (e.g. *Kiev* vs *Kyiv*) is also recommended. Finally, research can consider investigating the war in the US media sources and its place in media coverage in other countries and regions.

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