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Final dissertation

Zelensky's discourse during the Russian invasion of Ukraine

How the war of narratives influences conflicts

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1. Introduction

On 24th February 2022, the Russian Federation began the invasion of neighbouring Ukraine. The conflict has cost the lives of thousands of soldiers and civilians, along with a massive exodus of refugees fleeing the barbarity of war. On the one hand, Russia is a strong military power which holds a seat at the United Nations Security Council. On a televised speech for the nation, President Putin announced that Russia pursues a "denazification of Ukraine" through a so called "special military operation" (Rivas, 2022). On the other hand, Ukraine is a former Soviet Republic which gained independence in 1991, however, nowadays is struggling to retain it.

Historically Ukraine has been an ally of the Kremlin, however, in the wake of the 2013 Maidan Uprising Ukraine has moved progressively closer to the European Union and NATO, which has led to frictions between the West and Russia (Kudelia, 2014). The outcomes of the conflict transcend the borders of Ukraine and Russia, and it has been mediatised around the world. The *Time* magazine defines the situation as a "social media war", which has had an enormous impact on public opinion and awareness (Ducharme, 2022). For example, as of 7th March 2022, tagging with #ukrainewar has had over 600 million views on TikTok and 180.000 posts on Instagram (Ducharme, 2022).

Ukraine aims to convince the international community to support them in the conflict, either politically, economically or military. An example would be the no-fly zone requested by President Zelensky to NATO leaders (Segal, 2022). Thus, Ukraine is aware that its communication strategy is crucial to achieving its goals on and off the battlefield and obtaining foreign assistance. At the same time, Russia is also communicating to justify the invasion, reduce its reputational crisis and win support at home and abroad. Therefore, parallel to the military conflict, there is a confrontation between the two countries' communication campaigns.

The "communication war" is a direct confrontation between Ukrainian and Russian narratives, which are disseminated both within and beyond their borders in an attempt to influence public opinion and gain support or legitimisation for their actions (Vinson & McDonnell, 2007). Ukraine and Russia are constantly communicating to gain the

confidence of their own citizens (sense of unity and patriotism), to gain more allies outside their borders (legitimisation and foreign assistance), and to negotiate agreements with the counterpart (peace talks). Thus, communication has proven to be a determining factor and tool used by both counterparts.

An article of the *London School of Economics* illustrates how this communication war of narratives is taking place in new scenarios, like social media, the internet and fake news, at the same time that is has some traditional elements from political and institutional communication such as propaganda, polarization techniques ("us vs. them"), patriotism, press conferences, etc, (Manenti, 2022).

If there is one actor who is of particular interest for study in the field of communication, it is Ukrainian President Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky. During these days of war, Zelensky, as head of state of Ukraine, has been the visible face of Ukrainian resistance and has communicated to the whole world the Ukrainian narrative in order to gain a competitive advantage concerning international support and legitimacy. Zelensky has been present every day since early February 2022 in world newspapers, televisions and, most remarkably, in social media. Thus, the relevance of analysing Zelensky's discourse is that, for the very first time in history, a European political leader is constantly communicating through social media with the Ukrainian people and the whole international civic society. At the same time, he carries out high-level and demanding institutional meetings. This is evidenced by his daily meetings with international leaders, his speeches in foreign parliaments, visits to military hospitals, and visits to Kyiv by European prime ministers and presidents.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In the first place, a chapter will be devoted to introducing the main objectives and research questions which are to be answered throughout the paper. In the second place, the state of the art will review the main elements and characteristics of modern political communication, in which the processes of mediatisation and decentralisation stand out.

Both phenomena have completely changed the way politicians communicate (due to the age of technology and digital transformation) and the type of relationship they have with

the media and public opinion. Furthermore, the communication processes of "rally-round-the-flag" and the "CNN effect" will illustrate how political communication functions during time of conflict as the one analysed in this dissertation. Notable attention will be given to the role political leaders play in shaping public opinion and its importance during conflict times (turning political leaders into heroes, like Zelensky for some Ukrainians).

The chapter on the theoretical framework will demonstrate why interpretative approaches to communication are best equipped to answer questions related to narratives and discourses, which are highly subjective and biased. Consequently, narrative theory seems to be the most suitable for determining the role of politician's discourses and communication strategies during times of conflict. For this reason, words and symbolism play a central role. The following section will be focused on the methodology used during the research, which is based on qualitative data. This is because the main sources of information and knowledge to form the arguments are Zelensky's official speeches, social media posts, interviews with foreign media, meetings with European leaders, public appearances with the Ukrainian people, resulting in the use of the technique of discourse analysis, which is centred on the examination of qualitative information.

In the analysis part, several essential areas of research will be considered: first, analysing how Zelensky's personal and professional background has influenced his way of communicating as a politician. Secondly, an analysis of the Ukrainian government's communication campaign materialised in the discourse of Volodymyr Zelensky (narrative, messages, symbols, non-verbal communication, target audiences and channels).

Special attention will be given to digital communication on social media (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) and the international repercussions of the narrative defended by Zelensky (meetings with foreign leaders, interviews with Western media, interventions in foreign parliaments, etc.). Finally, the conclusion section will compile the arguments and findings with the aim of answering the research questions.

1.1 Objectives and research questions

This thesis aims to make a critical contribution to the field of communication in general, and more specifically to political, crisis and institutional communication. However, the primary objective is to illustrate how discourses and narratives of political leaders have a direct impact on the development of conflicts. This objective will be illustrated through a case study based on Zelensky's speech and narrative during the 2022 conflict with Russia.

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that meanwhile this research is being written at the same time the conflict persists, and new events and strategies are taking place. Consequently, this study also aims to provide a theoretical, bibliographical, and analytical basis for future lines of research on the influence of narratives and discourses in crisis situations, and particularly on Zelensky's discourse and the development of communication in the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

This research questions will be answered throughout the thesis: Do narratives and leaders discourses influence the development of conflicts? In addition to this central research question, the dissertation will analyse whether Zelensky's communication campaign has succeeded in increasing the support of international political, social and economic actors with the aim of strengthening the Ukrainian position in the conflict, and to determine whether his experience as an actor and his close, direct and disruptive way of communicating has resulted in greater acceptance by Ukrainian and international public opinion.

1.2 State of the art

Political communication, together with the influence of political leaders' discourses and narratives, will serve to explain the state of the art section and provide the thesis with a correct contextual framework. According to Jay G. Blumler, theorist and professor of political and public communication, political communication is a multilevel field which "links political culture, political actors, media organizations, including the roles played

by political journalists within them, and bodies of increasingly heterogeneous and varyingly involved citizens" (Blumler, 2011).

Other authors like María José Canel and Karen Sanders have defined political communication as the "activity of certain individuals and institutions (politicians, communicators, journalists, and citizens) in which, as a result of interaction, there is an exchange of messages that articulates political decision-making and its implementation in the community" (Canel & Sanders, 2010).

The book *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy*, by Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer, conceptualizes the main characteristics of modern political communication, highlighting the processes of mediatisation and decentralisation (Brants & Voltmer, 2011). Political leaders, particularly those in public office such as Zelensky, have historically been one of the main actors in political and institutional communication, because of their public position, symbolism, and power to influence society. However, the way in which leaders engage with communication has changed, as has the message, channels to reach out to the public, their relationship with the media, the digital environment, etc.

In the article *Mediatization of Politics: A challenge for Democracy*, mediatization is defined as the process by which "political actors increasingly adapt to media demands,
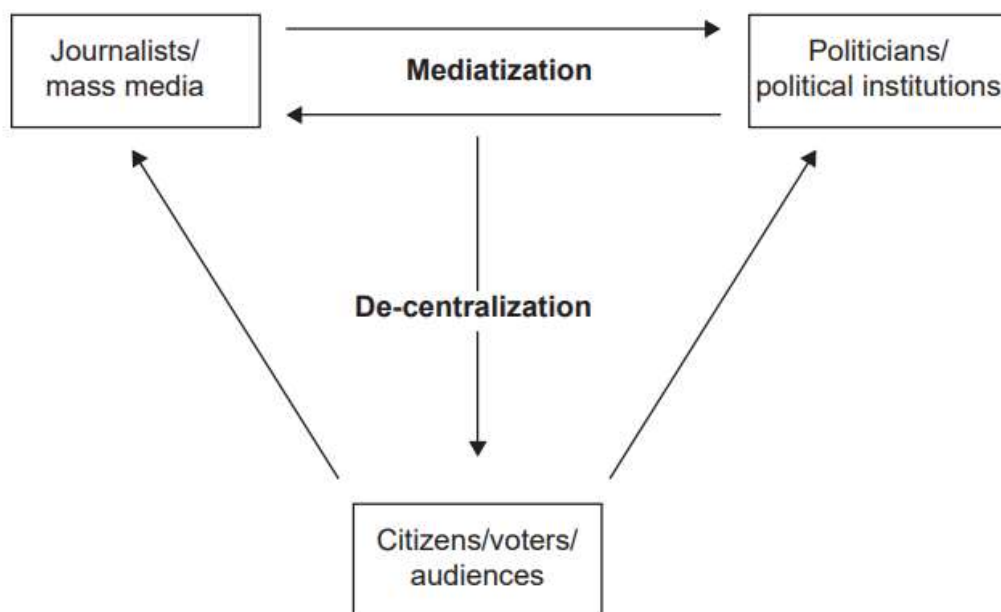

Figure 1 Changes in political communication (Brants & Voltmer, 2011)

media logics and media perspectives on politics itself" (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). On the one hand, the mediatization process is central to understand the communication style of any political leader and is considered a horizontal dimension encompassing politicians/political institutions and journalists/mass media (see *Figure 1*). Politicians and media are required to work and cooperate with each other, however, at times this relationship is not always friendly since there is an open struggle for power and the control of the agenda-setting. Thus, the media and politicians are "involved in negotiations over the political agenda that is publicly communicated, the frames in which contested issues and political realities are defined, and the visibility and image of its players" (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1977).

This is because both politicians and the media need each other to achieve its goals. On the one hand, politicians need media for publicity and awareness, and on the other hand, the media needs politicians as authoritative sources of information (Brants & Voltmer, 2011). Consequently, there are several factors that influence in the relationship between the media outlet and politics like the credibility and transparency of the actors, alterations in public opinion, institutional shifts, new communication technologies and the particular cultural and political context in which political communication takes place (Brants & Voltmer, 2011).

Decentralization refers to the "new relationships, roles and voices, as well as new challenges, problems and frustrations" which political communication faces (Blumler, 2011). The decentralisation of political communication is the product of various developments in relation to information technologies. Today, any citizen can become a journalist, and platforms such as social media give citizens a greater say in public opinion. As a result, citizens are no longer just consumers of information, but also producers and can influence public opinion with a simple tweet expressing their ideas, thoughts, or beliefs (Lammi & Pantzar, 2019). Hence, citizens have become what is now known as "prosumers" of information and data. Nevertheless, these new tools also have their downside, as they can be used as propaganda tools for disinformation purposes. The latter is closely linked to political communication.

E. I. Sheigal argues that political discourses are regularly "in contact with other forms of communication including advertising, scientific, pedagogical, legal, religious, sports, and military discourses, art, and everyday discourse" (Sheigal, 2000), thus proving the relevance and influence that political leaders speeches and other ways of communication can have on public opinion and conflicts and vice versa. On the one hand, political discourses can reflect the main characteristics of a political culture, since a democratic and elected politician would not communicate in the same way as an authoritarian or totalitarian despot.

On the other hand, as exposed in the article *Weaponizing Words: Rhetorical Tactics of Radicalization in Western and Arabic Countries*, political discourses "manifest the struggle for the power of individual politicians and pressure groups, thereby marking certain ideological guidelines, expressing the interests of certain political forces, and influencing the target audience consciousness" (Abdelzaher & Essam, 2019).

The International Communication Gazette illustrated this differentiation by comparing the communicative practices of democratic and authoritarian leaders (Bulovsky, 2018). The result found out that democratic leaders tend to be more present and active in social media, while authoritarian leaders accounts of less diverse, have a higher proportion of inactive followers and the message of authoritarian leaders is sought to communicate projections of power. In contrast to this, democratic leaders' message is centred about policy statements (Bulovsky, 2018).

The other relevant aspect to be introduced in this section is the role played by political leaders in the construction of narratives through political communication and discourse analysis. In the essay *Audience Democracy: An Emerging Pattern in Postmodern Political Communication* Jos de Beus stresses that political leaders, whether they are members of parliament, party leaders or government officials, perceive themselves as "autonomous and central", which means that they do not have to be hold accountable to other powerful actors like corporations, intellectuals or media outlets, because if so they could be perceived by its constituents as weak and powerless (Beus, 2011).

In essence this means that political leaders reject to take a secondary place in politics. Modern political leaders do not come from old professions like the military, judiciary, or economics, but rather are come from new professions from the service economic such as TV journalism (as Zelensky), mass media content creators, or marketing (Beus, 2011).

Moreover, today's political leaders pay special attention to the image they portray in television or social media because it is vital for constructing and reaching target publics without the need of engaging face-to-face with them (Beus, 2011). Thus, political leaders receive training to improve their communicative skills, both verbal and non-verbal, and are directly engaged in political and institutional communication campaigns. Consequently, contemporary political communication has experienced a personification of the figure of the leader. This means that the political message is primarily carried by the leader of a party, marginalising other political personalities and heaping much of the communicative responsibilities and obligations on the leader's activities (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009).

It is important to consider the relationship between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy, as the thesis will be based on a conflict involving two independent countries where the media (traditional or non-traditional) and the communication strategies of governments influence the opinion of citizens and have an impact on the development of conflicts (Baum & Potter, 2008).

On the one hand, *Figure 2* illustrates all the different interactions that exist between public opinion (citizens and other stakeholders), decision makers (political leaders) and foreign policy (conflicts between states as the Ukraine-Russia war). It is observed how "the media influence public opinion, public opinion influences the media, public opinion influences decision makers, decision makers influence public opinion, decision makers influence the media, foreign policy influences public opinion, decision makers influence events, and the media influence foreign policy" (Baum & Potter, 2008). The result is a complex matrix of information exchange, where each actor influences the final communicative outcome.
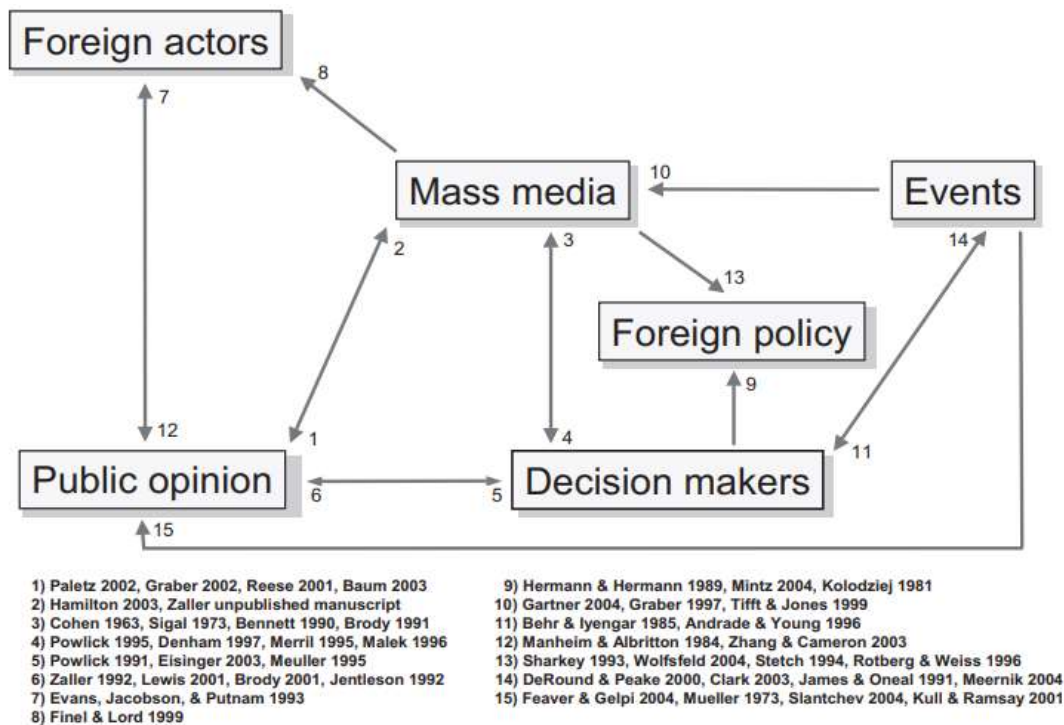
Figure 2 Interactions between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy. The citations associated with each arrow are illustrative rather than exhaustive. They represent simplifications of the authors' arguments, intended to highlight the absence of a clear causal chain across the broader system. (Baum & Potter, 2008)

On the other hand, *Figure 3* refers to the information gap between political leaders and the public over a military conflict. As a result, it is observed that in times of crisis or conflict, political leaders have more information, and thus become "primary traders of information", and this gives them a certain advantage over public opinion and the media. However, as the conflict progresses, this gap progressively narrows as more facts about the
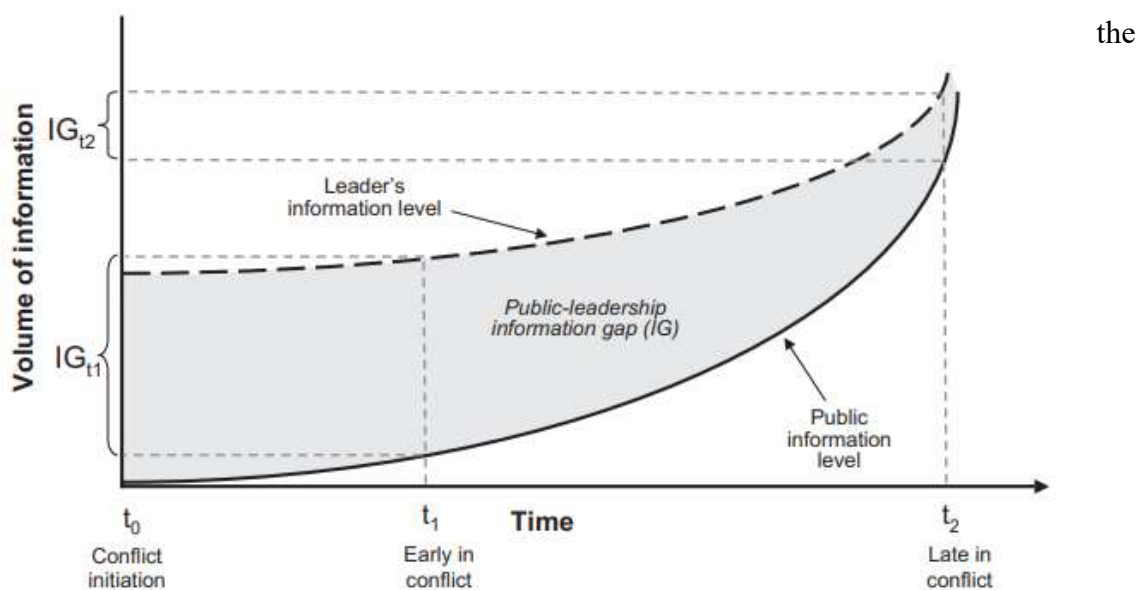

Figure 3 Information gap between leaders and the public, over time during a military conflict. (Baum & Potter, 2008)

conflict become known, there is more media on the ground to report on the situation, political authorities may start to lose popularity and new leaders emerge, conflict stagnates, etc, (Baum & Potter, 2008).

It is worth highlighting the role played by two modern communicative phenomena: the "rally-round-the-flag" on the one hand, and the "CNN effect" on the other hand. The rally-round-the-flag argues that, in times of crisis or conflict, public opinion tends to respond in a positive way in the short term to military actions (whether abroad or domestically (Oneal & Bryan, 1995). In addition, the rally-round-the-flag effect provokes a greater support for the country's political leaders and include a feeling of patriotism in supporting presidential actions (Oneal & Bryan, 1995). Thus, in times of conflict or crisis people tend to unite around symbols that represent them (flags, political figures, standards, religion).

The CNN effect serves as a communication theory to explain the response of governments to international events such as humanitarian crises, wars, terrorist attacks or natural disasters, due to the influence that the media exert on public opinion by broadcasting such events (Gilboa, 2005). According to J. Neuman when CNN effect "floods the airwaves with news of a foreign crisis, policymakers have no choice but to redirect their attention to the crisis at hand. It also suggests that crisis coverage evokes an emotional outcry from the public to 'do something' about the latest incident, forcing political leaders to change course or risk unpopularity" (Neuman, 1996). Therefore, any type of media, conventional or otherwise, can somehow compel governments to undertake military intervention or send humanitarian aid as a way of responding to the crisis and demonstrating to their constituents their commitment to peace and morality.

As a result, some experts began to address to this new reality, in which the media shapes some policies and agenda-setting, by using postmodern terms like "telediplomacy" or "mediapolitik". "Telediplomacy" refers to "the emergence and expansion of real-time global news coverage caused the shift in communication, while the "new diplomacy," mostly characterized by openness, caused the shift in foreign policymaking" (Ammon, 2001). Lastly, the "mediapolitik" paradigm examines the "reality of media power and its impact on the politics of the nations of the world" and is not exclusive to a single political

system but operates in liberal democracies as well as in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Edwards, 2001).

1.3 Theoretical framework

In the book *Communication Theory*, written by Minnesota's University communication professor Ernest Bormann, theory is defined as "an umbrella term for all careful, systematic, and self-conscious discussion of analysis of communication phenomena" (Bormann, 1989). Other authors like Judee Burgoon, addressed communication theory as a "set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things operate" (Burgoon, 2003). As a consequence, there are several communication theories which are able to explain all or some of the dynamics, processes, messages and narratives used by President Zelensky as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In the book *A First Look at Communication Theory*, professor, and communication theorist Em Griffin, explains the main differences between the objective and interpretative approaches. On the one hand, the objective approach defends the assumption that "truth is singular and is accessible through unbiased sensory observation, committed to uncover cause and effect relationships" (Griffin, 2015). An essay by Billy Dunaway explores the relationship between objectivity and realism and argued that the characterisation of the absolute fundamentality of realism makes this theory fit the objectivity approach (Dunaway, 2017).

On the other hand, the interpretive approach argues that people assign meaning and value to communication acts and messages. Therefore, for this school of thought there are multiple truths that can answer the same question (Griffin, 2015). For scholars of the interpretive approach, there is no such thing as absolute truth, as the objective approach of communication argues. Much of their study is focused on understanding the different interpretations people have and how communicative acts (such as an institutional speech, a press release, or a tweet) can be perceived in very different ways depending on who you ask (Parsons, 2018). Consequently, constructivism seems to share several characteristics

with the interpretivist approach, which advocates subjectivity and the deconstruction of narratives and beliefs (Sheehy, 2002).

Since the communicative analysis of this thesis is going to be carried out on how narratives and political discourses influence conflicts, the best approach is the interpretative one. This is because the topic to be analysed cannot be explained by a single narrative, and we all are subjected to an innate subjectivity which bias everybody. Consequently, the theoretical framework must be framed within an interpretative theory.

On the one hand, Kenneth Burke's *Dramatism Theory* addresses elements that could prove to be useful to answer the research question and which are present in the topic of analysis, like the use in Zelensky's discourse of "god-term" words ("glory to Ukraine", motherland, patriotism), "devil-term" (negative words- violence, destruction, war, genocide, aggressor), "victimization" (process of identifying an external enemy as the cause of all threats or ills),"identification" (common ground between Zelensky and his audiences, which could be shared beliefs or values), etc (Burke, 1968). However, dramatism tries to explain communication as a "mere mode of action rather than as a means of conveying information" (Burke, 1968) and excluding this last part in Zelensky's discourse would harm the purpose of the research analysis as information, and its manipulation, is present in narratives.

On the other hand, the *Narrative Paradigm* theory is explained in the book *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* by Walter Fisher. The author suggests that humans are storytelling or narrative beings which "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (Fisher, 1987). This theory allows the study to logically understand the development and interpretation of the Ukrainian narrative in the conflict, exemplified by President Zelensky's speech.

Furthermore, Braddock and Dillar explain how narratives are constantly changing due to several factors, among these is the role of leaders' discourses. Thus, both authors defined narratives as "a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic

world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters" (Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

Since the topic to be discussed in this thesis is related to the analysis of the discourses and narratives that emerged as a consequence of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, it is deemed more convenient to make use of the narrative paradigm theory. This is due to the fact that narratives and discourses are aimed "to create symbolic spaces where the hegemony of facts, information and technical rationality can be challenged" (Gabriel, 2004).

1.4 Methodology

The main element of study is the Ukrainian narrative during the Russian invasion, embodied in the discourse of President Zelensky. The paper will be based primarily on qualitative rather than quantitative data. Qualitative methods are better prepared to provide detailed analysis and knowledge of single case studies, in this case Zelensky's discourse during the invasion. The reason lays on the fact that for qualitative research words and narratives play a major role in contrast to numbers (Bryman, Social Research Methods , 2012). However, there will also be some quantitative data to bolster arguments, although these will not be the main ones.

The reason why Zelensky's discourse has been chosen to demonstrate why narratives can influence the development of conflict is because of the advantages and facilities provided by the technique of the case study. Moreover, the case study is often used in qualitative data research (Bryman, Social Research Methods , 2012) . The case study methodology is expected to capture the complexity of a single case and translate its conclusions to a broader reality. Rolf Johansson's book *Case Study Methodology* argues that every case must "be a complex functioning unit", "be investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and "be contemporary" (Johansson, Case Study Methodology, 2007), in order to be considered a rigorous and valid source of knowledge.

Another relevant aspect to consider is the methodology of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis, which is closely linked to the interpretative approach reviewed in the theoretical framework chapter, can be applied to different fields including political and institutional communication (Powers, 2001). A discourse is defined as "a group of ideas or patterned way of thinking which can be identified in textual and verbal communications and can also be located in wider social structures" (Lupton, 1994). Therefore, the methodology of discourse analysis that will be used throughout the research allows for an understanding of "the operation of bodies of knowledge in their specific situated context", as well as creating interpretative statements about the effects of a discourse on the "oppression and empowerment of groups of people in a specific context without claims to generalisation" (Cheek, 2004).

Thus, the vetting process will be carried out using official speeches made by Zelensky between 22nd February (the day Russia recognised the independence of the separatist provinces in eastern Ukraine) and 22nd March 2022. the research will be centred on the first two months of the invasion, a period where the communication machines of both sides if fully working and delivering information to sustain its narrative. One of the key speeches analysed is the one given by Zelensky on 22nd February, broadcast on television to the entire nation and the world. In addition, interviews conducted by CNN, Euronews, and The Economist will be used. Moreover, various communiqués, messages and multimedia content posted on Zelensky's official social media profiles (including Instagram, Facebook, and Tweeter) will be utilized because digital communication constitutes a fundamental pillar of Zelensky's discourse and provides him with a very effective tool to reach millions of stakeholders.

2. Zelensky's personal and professional background

In 2019, 41-year-old Volodymyr Zelensky became Ukraine's sixth president after winning 73,22% of the vote in the run-off, defeating former President Poroshenko (Walker, 2019). Zelensky will be remembered as the president who led the country through the Russian invasion, becoming part of the Ukrainian narrative as a national hero and a symbol of resistance and patriotism (Vincent, 2022).

However, before his presidential proclamation he has already made the front pages of hundreds of international media outlets by becoming the first comedian, actor, and writer to serve as president of a European state. Many believed that his lack of political experience would damage his presidency, however, after the Russian invasion he has proved to the world his ability to manage a crisis and resist against a much stronger opponent. In fact, one of Zelensky's major victories during the conflict has been his communication strategy, centred on a direct, close, and emotional discourse (Segal, 2022).

Part of the success of Zelensky's communication strategy and discourse is linked to his experience as actor and media figure. His popularity helped him to win the elections and to enter the national and, later on, international political scene (due to the invasion). The result is that Ukraine has received Western military and economic backed-up and, at the same time, sanctions were imposed to the Russian economy and political elite (Gressel, 2022).

2.1 Actor and politician: Zelensky as a media figure

Zelensky's professional career as an actor and comedian has influenced his way of doing politics, with an anti-establishment and populist discourse (Kryvenko, 2021), and also the way he communicates to the general public. A differentiation can be observed between Zelensky's way of communicating and traditional politicians, who have a more rigid and formal discourse when addressing their audience. Acting has allowed him to acquire certain essential skills to become a good speaker and communicator, such as adapting to the environment, non-verbal language, improvisation, public speaking, etc.

His most famous role as an actor was in the popular series *Servant of the People*, in which Zelensky plays the role of a schoolteacher who, tired of corruption and mismanagement, decides to run for president and eventually triumphs. Zelensky took advantage of the popularity of the series, as well as the anti-establishment discourse, and decided to name his political party after it (Maloy, 2022). This translates into a clear desire to link his

political candidacy with the series, a decision that some pundits have described as populist.

Zelensky's communicative skills, inherited from his experience as an actor and public figure, have translated into a discourse that appeals to emotions and common experiences with its audience by using a close, simple, and direct language. Therefore, he is one of the most popular personalities of the moment and his notoriety in the media is very high because he uses it to effectively get out its message and the Ukrainian narrative of the conflict (Jones, 2022). This is evidenced by the interviews conducted by different international media such as *The Economist*, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Euronews CBS News*, etc. Next chapter will provide some examples in which Zelensky evokes to emotions in order to persuade his audiences and achieve his political and military goals.

Concerning social media, his most active and followed one is Instagram, with a total of 16,8 million and more than 1,7 thousand posts (see *Figure 4*). If compared to other world leaders, he is only surpassed by Indian President Narenda Modi (66,8 million), Indonesian President Joko Widowo (46,1 million), USA President Joe Biden (17,7 million), Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (19,6 million), and former USA presidents Donald Trump (23,6 million) and Barack Obama (35,3 million). In Twitter (6 million) and Facebook (2,88 million) Zelensky has a lower impact, although both platforms are also used as a channel to disseminate the Ukrainian narrative to its millions of users.

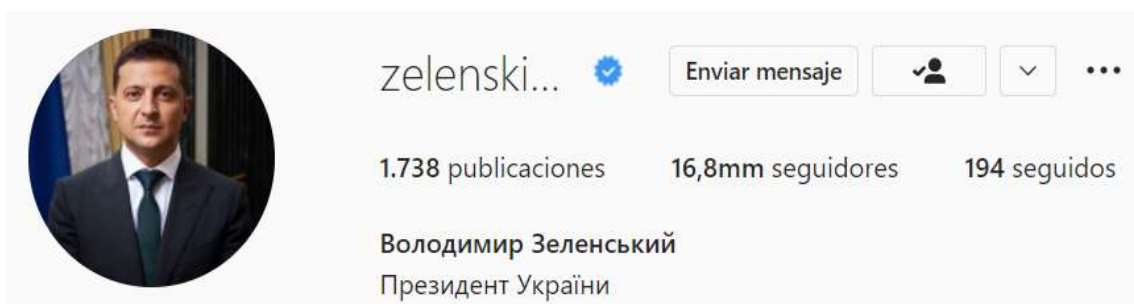*Figure 4 Instagram profile of V. Zelensky (Zelensky, 2022)*

Even though Ukraine has a much smaller population, economy, and international relevance than powers such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, or the USA, Zelensky is one of the most significant politicians of the present day. As a result, Zelensky is the seventh political leader with the most followers on Instagram, a social network characterised by

its visuality, high level of engagement, youth-oriented (under the age of 35), and focused on sharing digital content (posts, videos, reels, live videos, etc.) (Jang, Han, Shih, & Lee, 2015). Zelensky possesses a strong presence and influence on social media, with the ability to directly reach millions of users around the world (Press-Reynolds, 2022). Zelensky's communication on social media is crucial for the dissemination of the Ukrainian narrative with the aim of gaining international support for Ukraine and thus influencing the development of the conflict in some way.

Zelensky's political involvement has increased its communicative pressure in social media, particularly in terms of followers, engagement, and content production. Thus, his social media following has increased during the invasion and has used it as a channel to provide regular updates on the conflict and win the sympathy and support of the world's people and governments (Al-Aqidi, 2022). For example, in April 2020 Zelensky's Instagram profile had 9 million followers, so in two years he has added more than 7,8 million new followers (Statista, 2022).

The Washington Post published an article analysing the effects that had Zelensky's popularity on the conflict and found out that his work as an actor and comedian may have helped him to manage the invasion of Ukraine and lunch an effective communication campaign (Pietsch & Westfall, 2022). Furthermore, *CNN* senior entertainment writer Lisa Respers France maintains that Zelensky's acting career prepared him for "the world stage" and noted that his charisma and oratory skills have been on display since the Russian invasion, drawing praise from the international community, especially the West (France, 2022). For example, today Zelensky holds the highest approval ratings of international leaders among citizens of the USA, in which 72% responded that have "a lot or some confidence" in him (Poushter & Connaughton, 2022).

Figure 5 Twitter profile of V. Zelensky (Zelensky, 2022)

Therefore, his experience as an actor enables him to be a great public speaker and to know how to act in front of the media, whom he knows and seeks their cooperation. In addition, thanks to Zelensky's popularity on social media (which has exponentially grown since the conflict erupted) and the good public relations campaign he is delivering, some experts argue that Ukraine is winning the "communication war" or "narratives war" (Einhorn, 2022). Next chapter will explore some relevant communication techniques Zelensky uses in his daily discourse.

2.2 Zelensky's communication techniques and abilities

Zelensky seeks to differentiate himself from conventional politicians. In order to do so, he works to be seen as a normal citizen with no luxuries around him, and the best way to achieve that is with a close and direct communication and important symbolic acts and messages. Eva Nierman is a crisis management expert who serves as the Founder and CEO of Red Banya, a public relations company. In an article, he reflects how Zelensky use of persuasion during time of crisis has been vital to achieve its political and military goals. He even stated that "political leaders across the globe could learn much from Zelensky's skilfully straightforward talk — so different from the usual Washington partisan sniping or smoke-and-mirrors repartee we often seen" (Nierman, 2022). Zelensky needs to persuade the international community to support Ukraine and punish Russia for the invasion. If Zelensky is able to persuade the public opinion of more and

more countries, the possibilities of receiving greater support increases because public opinion can influence policy decisions because of the CNN effect.

He concentrates its persuasion goals in five main messages: the bravery and patriotism of the Ukrainian people; calling Putin to meet with him and end the hostilities; convince NATO to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine; and to explain why and how the world should support Ukraine (Segal, 2022). It should be noted that these main messages may be accompanied by secondary ones, depending on the situation and the audience. However, with this limit of five messages, he seeks to be direct and clear in his interventions and repeats them constantly. An example of the use of secondary messages occurs when his speech is addressed to public opinion, parliaments, or governments of third countries.
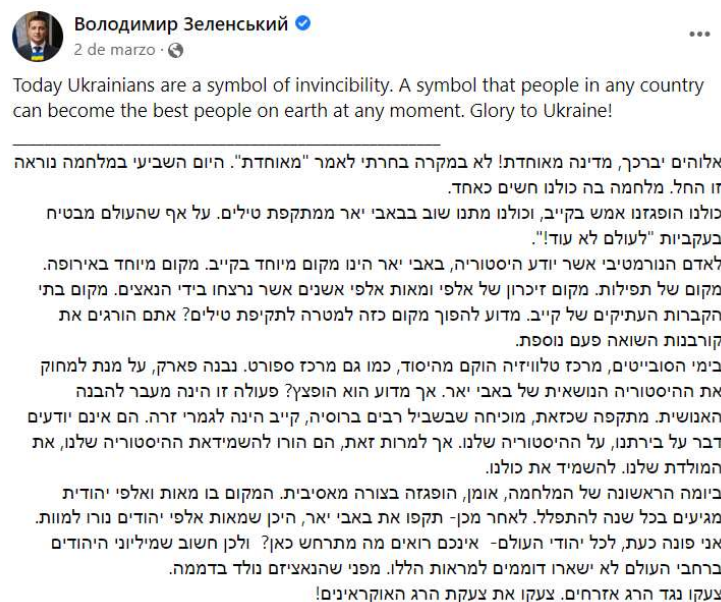
Володимир Зеленський ✔
2 de marzo ·

Today Ukrainians are a symbol of invincibility. A symbol that people in any country can become the best people on earth at any moment. Glory to Ukraine!

אלוהים יברכך, מדינה מאוחדת! לא במקרה בחרתי לאמר "מאוחדת". היום השביעי במלחמה נוראה זו החל. מלחמה בה כולנו חשים כאחד.

כולנו הופגזנו אמש בקייב, וכולנו מתנו שוב בבאבי יאר ממתקפת טילים. על אף שהעולם מבטיח בעקביות "לעולם לא עוד!".

לאדם הנורמטיבי אשר יודע את ההיסטוריה, באבי יאר הינו מקום מיוחד בקייב. מקום מיוחד באירופה. מקום של תפילות. מקום זיכרון של אלפי ומאות אלפי אנשים אשר נרצחו בידי הנאצים. מקום בתי הקברות העתיקים של קייב. מדוע להפוך מקום כזה למטרה לתקיפת טילים? אתם הורגים את קורבנות השואה פעם נוספת.

בימי הסובייטים, מרכז טלוויזיה הוקם מהיסוד, כמו גם מרכז ספורט. נבנה פארק, על מנת למחוק את ההיסטוריה הנושאית של באבי יאר. אך מדוע הוא הופצץ? פעולה זו הינה מעבר להבנה האנושית. מתקפה שכזאת, מוכיחה שבשביל רבים ברוסיה, קייב הינה לגמרי זרה. הם אינם יודעים דבר על בירתנו, על ההיסטוריה שלנו. אך למרות זאת, הם הורו להשמידאת ההיסטוריה שלנו, את המולדת שלנו. להשמיד את כולנו.

ביומה הראשונה של המלחמה, אומן, הופגזה בצורה מאסיבית. המקום בו מאות ואלפי יהודים מגיעים בכל שנה להתפלל. לאחר מכן- תקפו את באבי יאר, היכן שמאות אלפי יהודים נורו למוות. אני פונה כעת, לכל יהודי העולם- אינכם רואים מה מתרחש כאן? ולכן חשוב שמיליוני היהודים ברחבי העולם לא ישארו דוממים למראות הללו. מפני שהנאציזם נולד בדממה. צעקו נגד הרג אזרחים. צעקו את צעקת הרג האוקראינים!

Figure 6 V. Zelensky Facebook post addressing Jews in Hebrew (Zelensky, 2022)

Figure 6 shows how Zelensky used Hebrew to address Jews around the world and convince them to support Ukraine (V. Zelensky Facebook post, 2022). The post said: "I am now addressing all the Jews of the world. Don't you see what is happening? That is why it is very important that millions of Jews around the world not remain silent right now. Nazism is born in silence. So shout about killings of civilians. Shout about the murders of Ukrainians" (V. Zelensky Facebook post, 2022). In doing so, Zelensky seeks to create common experiences with its audience by making historical moments of other peoples or nations similar to the current situation in Ukraine. He aims to seek the support of international public opinion by evoking their emotions and empathising with them.

Another example is Zelensky's intervention to the Spanish Parliament: "Imagine if European citizens today had to live for weeks on end in basements to save their lives from bombing and missiles. It is April 2022, but it seems like April 1937, when the whole world knew the name of a Spanish town, Guernica" (Zelensky, 2022). In a USA Congress address, to which President Biden attended, he invoked the events of Pearl Harbour and 9/11 (Zelensky, Ukrainian President Zelensky appeals to US President Biden in historic Congress address, 2022).

Moreover, he has employed memorable words and phrases which are "memorable, repeatable and quotable by the media" (Segal, 2022). Some examples include: "When you attack us, it will be our faces you see, not our backs"; "If we win, and I'm sure we'll win, this will be the victory for the whole democratic world"; "This will be the victory of our freedom. This will be the victory of light over darkness, of freedom over slavery".

Zelensky's close and direct discourse is manifested in his every day and informal character, for example through his use of selfie videos to communicate or how he addresses the war wounded when he visits them. In an interview made by *Euronews* Zelensky was asked about which world leader he most like speaking to (Zelensky, Which world leader does Zelenskyy most like speaking to?, 2022). Zelensky, in a joking tone, replied that "not too many, not too many!", which provoked laughter from the interviewers and underlined the relaxed atmosphere of the moment and the good rapport between the Ukrainian president and the media

However, he later responded directly to the question by saying that he has "a lot of connections" with Polish President Andrzej Duda, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and the Baltic leaders, all of which are Ukraine's major supporters. Since he did not answer who is the preferred one, but rather gave several names, the interviewer insisted on who did he liked the most, to which he replied, "my wife", and everyone laughed again (Zelensky, Which world leader does Zelenskyy most like speaking to?, 2022).

3. Zelensky's communication strategy

Understanding a country's narrative is complicated, as we are all subjectivised and it is the result of a long historical process, where multiple factors have an influence. For reasons of essay length, the main narrative of Ukraine will be that associated with President Zelensky, as the most representative and democratically elected figurehead of the state. The Ukrainian narrative is disseminated to Ukraine's main communication target groups (Ukranian people, Russian people, international public opinion/ civil society, and international heads of state and government- stakehodler will be further explain in *chapter 3.3*) through different channels (social media, interviews, political interventions and public apperarnces). The main arguments of Zelenky's narrative are clearly visible in a speech for the nation following Russia's decision to recognize the independence of the Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. This speech is essential, as it comes just two days before the outbreak of war, so it was Zelensky's last chance to avert war (appeal to Putin and the Russian people), avoid chaos and confusion in Ukraine (send a message of unity and stranght), and convince his international allies to support Ukraine in the event of an invasion.

3.1 The message: 'Slava Ukraini'

The televised intervention of February 22nd was full of symbolism and illustratrates the main message Zelensky pursues to deliver. Zelensky stated: "We are on our land. We don't fear anything or anyone. We don't owe anything to anyone. And we won't give anything up" (Zelensky, 2022). This quote synthetizes a fundamental principle of the Ukrainian modern narrative, its independence and political sovereignty. This principle is embodied in what can be regarded as the slogan, or main message of the Ukrainian communication campaign: 'Slava Ukraini', which means "Glory to Ukraine". The slogan can be replied with a Heroyam slava!" (Glory to the Heroes). He uses a direct and simple language, with the use of strong words ("fear", "owe", "give up"), so that its message can be well understand. These sentences illustrate Slava Ukraini's message: Ukraine will not stand idly by but will fight back.

'Glory to Ukraine' dates back to the early 20th century and became popular among Ukrainian nationalists in the 1930's (Kasianov, 2015). During the period of Soviet rule, this slogan was persecuted and banned, and was used by Ukrainian insurgent, nationalist, and anti-communist movements (Kasianov, 2015). Consequently, after Ukraine's independence in 1991 and the gradual ideological, economic, and political rapprochement with the West, it has been taken as a national slogan in the face of invasion. Its aim is to unite the Ukrainian people under one slogan, as it appeals to patriotic emotions by referring to all those who have fallen to achieve Ukrainian independence.

Additionally, Ukrainian journalist Kate Dobromishev stressed that the slogan has become so popularized because "modern Ukrainians feel descendants of glorious heroes who once fought for the Ukrainian state" (Dobromishev, 2017). The link between emotion, history, and the responsibility to defend Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity is therefore clear. This strong message is constantly used by President Zelensky in both official statements, and informal social media videos, usually at the end of the intervention. The slogan has surpassed the borders of Ukraine, and, for example, USA Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi gave way to the Ukrainian leader's speech to the cry of Slava Ukraini. (Jalonick, 2022). In fact, this slogan has managed to unite Republicans and Democrats in the USA Congress, something very unusual in recent years. This demonstrates the strength, symbolism, and unifying power of Slava Ukraini (Jalonick, 2022). Thus, Zelensky has managed to become Congress' great unifier.

Another important message delivered was the idea of portraying Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim of an "unjustified, unnecessary and unprovoked invasion" (Bulos, 2022). Zelensky stated that when he tried to telephone Vladimir Putin to reach a solution, the only answer he got was "silence", and goes on to say that the same silence "should be given in Donbas" (the eastern Ukrainian region that was recognised as independent by Russia) (Zelensky, 2022), clearly alluding to the fact that if anything happens, the blame would fall solely on the Russian president, while Zelensky is committed to achieving peace, a word he repeats on seven occasions. Thus, he starts to address to one of his main target groups, the Russian people, and talked about all the elements that unite both cultures in a clear appealing to their feelings. Zelensky urged

Russian people to "look inside them, listen to the voice of reason, of common sense. Hear our voices" (Zelensky, 2022).

Lastly, the last pillar of the Ukrainian narrative is that the invasion of Ukraine is not only a problem for Ukrainians, but also to all of Europe and the world. Zelensky warns that the invasion could lead to a "huge war in the European continent" and defined it as the "a spark that has the potential of burning everything down" (in a clear reference to the nuclear threat that possess Russia). He added that "we are now talking about the security of Europe".

Moreover, in his speech to the Canadian parliament he said: "Russians are shelling from all kinds of artillery, from tanks. They're hitting civilian infrastructure. They're hitting big buildings. Can you imagine there is a fire starting at a nuclear power plant? That's exactly what happened in our country. Each city that they're marching through, they're taking down Ukrainian flags. Can you imagine someone taking down your Canadian flags in Montreal and other Canadian cities?" (Zelensky V. , Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's online speech to Canadian Parliament, 2022). In this quote he is highlighting the risk of a nuclear threat and seeks to appeal to the feelings of Canadian citizens and politicians.

3.2 Non-verbal communication and the power of symbols

We must pay attention to the non-verbal elements that appear during the 22nd of February speech because they embody the main symbols used in the Ukrainian narrative and in Zelensky's discourse. Non-verbal communication in politics "contain substantial information regarding what voters should know about a candidate and function as an important element of the decision-making process, particularly for those who do not possess other information" (Dumitrescu, 2016).

On the one hand, in this speech he appears wearing a suite with a tie, however, this would be the last time the world sees Zelensky wearing formal clothing. Since them he has changed the suit for a basic green shirt which directly links him with the army (sometimes

bearing the symbol of Ukraine's armed forces) and reflects that Ukraine has been invaded and he is serving his country as any other soldier does. Furthermore, in speeches to the USA Congress and the British and Canadian parliaments "he seated in a simple chair and appearing to be speaking from an artificially lit room that suggests an operations centre, or a bunker, thus, there are no visual clues that could give away his whereabouts" (Buncmbe, 2022). Thus, he is also sending the message that he remains in power as president and that his life is under risk.

On the other hand, symbols reinforce the narrative encompassed within the 'Slava Ukraini' slogan and are a communication tool used to present certain ideas, beliefs or goals of a group or community (Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, & Gross, 2007). In this particular case, the group of people they represent is a nation, thus these symbols have an official status all over Ukraine. *Figure 6* shows the stage where the speech took place, with two flags on the left and a screen containing the image of Ukrainian territory on the right.

Figure 7 V. Zelensky during the televised address to the nation on 22 February (Zelensky, 2022)

Flags are used to express unity and patriotism and "they are likely to be able to bring about unity" (Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, & Gross, 2007). Furthermore, flags are institutional symbols that emphasise the official nature of the speech and the person making it, in this case the Ukrainian president, whose flag/standard is shown next to the Ukrainian flag. This is intended to send the message that Zelensky remains the most relevant political figure in Ukraine and that he has no intention of surrendering or letting the invasion occur, stating that if attacked Ukraine will "defend itself" from the

aggression (Zelensky, 2022). As a result, the Ukrainian flag serves as a symbol of struggle, resistance and patriotism for Ukrainians, and hundreds of Western cities have lit up their most significant monuments in blue and yellow as a sign of solidarity and support (Phillips, 2022). The Ukrainian flag is constantly present in his social media posts and press appearances.

However, not only renowned monuments like the Empire State (New York City), the Eiffel Tower (Paris), the Brandenburg Gate (Berlin), the Colosseum (Rome), the Tokyo metropolitan government building, or the Sydney Opera House have been illuminated with the Ukrainian flag. Private companies, public institutions, schools and universities, personalities (including politicians, actors, influencers and businessmen and women), NGO's, sport competitions, and individuals have used it to show their support for Ukraine. Thus, Ukraine has been able to effectively communicate its narrative and gain Western support to resist Russian invasion. Other places where the Ukrainian flag has been projected or used are sports venues (see *Figure 7*); official websites and the internet (Council, 2022); and in worldwide demonstrations rallying for Ukraine (see *Figure 8*).

Figure 8 The Ukrainian flag colors are projected onto the ice prior to the NHL game between the Vancouver Canucks and Montreal Canadiens at Rogers Arena on March 9, 2022, in Vancouver, British Columbia. (Photo: Derek Cain/Icon Sportswire/Getty Images)

Figure 9 Demonstrators wave Ukrainian national flags during the 'London stands with Ukraine' protest march. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP

The other symbol showed in Zelensky's televised address was the image of the Ukrainian map, including all its provinces. This symbol, although not as representative or eye-catching as the flag, has an absolute symbolic and political relevance, as it is defining what is and what is not part of Ukraine. In today's nation-state world, borders separate states (in this case Russia and Ukraine), and this is where the discourse of "us versus us begins to be cultivated. This is due to the fact that "maps do not communicate so much as provide a powerful rhetoric, and therefore can be critically examined as texts themselves" (Crampton, 2001).

This map shows in illuminated form the entire territory of Ukraine, including the Crimean Peninsula (annexed by Russia in 2014) and also the two separatist provinces in the east, which are under the military control of pro-Russian forces (Venditti, 2022). Thus, the other axis of the Ukrainian narrative is the country's full territorial integrity, making it clear to Russia that they will not cede any town or city and that they will fight to defend the entire territory and recover what has been lost.

As a result, the Ukrainian narrative that Zelensky exports to his citizens and the rest of the world is based on the Glory to Ukraine message, which seeks to unite the Ukrainian people, defend Ukraine's independence, and condemned Putin and his government for the invasion. On the other hand, the symbols represent Ukraine's political sovereignty and the principle of territorial integrity. These symbols will be necessary for the message

of the Ukrainian narrative to reach the global public opinion in a more visual and direct way.

3.3 Stakeholders of Zelensky's discourse

As previously discussed, there are four main stakeholders or target groups to which Zelensky's discourse and the Ukrainian narrative is directed: Ukrainian people, Russian people, world public opinion, and international mandataries and governments.

First and foremost, the most relevant actor is the Ukrainian people, who are the ones directly affected by the conflict and who expect the most from their president. Zelensky's main goal vis-à-vis his compatriots is to keep their morale high and show them that he will give everything for Ukraine, even his own life. To this end, he released a self-filmed video in the centre of Kiev surrounded by members of his cabinet and declared: "We are all here defending our independence, our country. And it will stay this way" (Zelensky V. , We Are All Here,' Ukraine's Zelensky Says In Video From Kyiv, 2022). Therefore, he managed to put an end to rumours that he had fled the country and taken refuge in Poland. Furthermore, he proved his commitment to the Ukrainian people and asserted himself as a leader of the resistance to the Russian invasion. Another selfie video posted on social media, although in this case only Zelensky appeared, showed viewers the seat of the Ukrainian government (of great symbolic significance, as it means that Kyiv has not fallen), he stressed:

"I need ammunition, not a ride" (Zelensky V. , Ukrainian President Turns Down US Request To Evacuate Kyiv, 2022), and turned down the proposal made by the USA to evacuate him and his family from Ukraine. This kind of symbolic acts, along with some public appearances, are the best way to reach and empathise with the suffering of all Ukrainians. Furthermore, the rally-round-the-flag effect has increased popular support for him since more than 90% of Ukrainians approve their leader (see *Figure 10*), compared with just 31 per cent before the Russian invasion (Fitri, 2022).
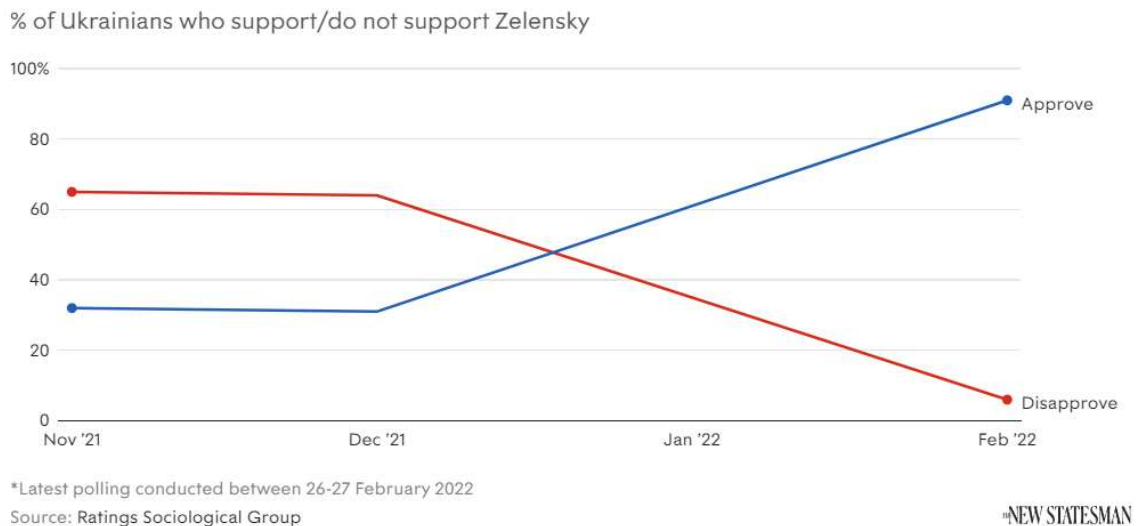
% of Ukrainians who support/do not support Zelensky

*Latest polling conducted between 26-27 February 2022
Source: Ratings Sociological Group

NEW STATESMAN

Figure 10 Zelensky's approval ratings (Ratings Sociological Group, 2022)

Zelensky's messages towards the Russian people are based on explaining all the elements that unite both countries and try to convince Russians to make domestic opposition to Vladimir Putin. It is important to highlight that Zelensky addresses to this target group in Russian, which is his mother tongue, to create a nexus of union with Russian people (Foreign Policy Editors, 2022). Zelensky reaffirmed that "the Ukraine in your news and the Ukraine of real life are two entirely different places, and the difference is that the latter is real" (Zelensky, 2022), in a clear allusion to Russian propaganda and disinformation. In addition, he talks about his personal and family life with the aim of dismantling the Russian argument that the invasion is thought to denazificate Ukraine:

"They- the Russian government- tell you that we're Nazis. But how can a people that lost 8 million lives to defeat the Nazis support Nazism? How can I be a Nazi? Say it to my grandfather, who fought in World War II as a Soviet infantryman and died a colonel in an independent Ukraine. They tell you that we hate Russian culture. How can one hate a culture? Any culture? Neighbors always enrich each other's cultures. However, we are not part of one whole. You cannot swallow us up. We are different. But this difference is not a reason for enmity. We want to determine our own course and build our own history: peacefully, calmly, and honestly" (Zelensky, 2022). It is a way to make the Russian population see that it is impossible for Zelensky to be a Nazi and not to believe Putin's discourse and propaganda.

These two stakeholders are part of the conflict, however, there are external stakeholders to the conflict which are also of high significance: world public opinion and international mandataries and governments. They are a key target group because their support could be translated in a hypothetical Ukrainian win or, at least, resistance against the Russian army. As it has been said throughout the dissertation, Zelensky is ware that, by gaining the support of the world public opinion, governments would be keener to send economic and military help to Ukraine. To do so, Zelensky discourse is customized to every audience he addresses and tries to find common experiences or events that could relate that audience with the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

In addition, in order to gain the empathy and support of world public opinion, Zelensky's social media platforms share explicit images of the horrors of war (pictures of dead bodies, shrunken buildings, fleeing refugees, etc.). This way of giving visibility to the conflict, coupled with Zelensky's leadership, helps to make the Ukrainian narrative the predominant one in the majority of the world. As a result of this predominant public opinion support, several world governments have carried out policies or actions in support of Ukraine (link between public opinion, media outlets and politics). Thus, a total of 141 countries out of 193 voted in favour of a United Nations resolution, which reaffirmed Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as well as a demand to Russia to end the offensive (News, UN, 2022)

In relation to international leaders Zelensky tries to convince them of the threat and risk to international stability that Russia's eventual invasion of Ukraine would pose. He also warned that a failed negotiation with Putin could lead to World War III (Zelensky V. , Ukraine's President Zelensky's Extensive Interview On CNN's GPS Show, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Throughout the thesis, some of the most relevant and illustrative elements and characteristics of Zelensky's discourse and how it communicates the Ukrainian narrative within and beyond its borders have been explained. Ukraine's communication goal is clear: to get as much international support as possible (international society, governments,

international organizations, companies, individuals), as it cannot stand up to Russia militarily or economically on its own.

With this objective in mind, Zelensky's discourse has proven to be highly effective thanks to several factors. Firstly, his professional background has helped him to become a good communicator and public speaker, as well as having the advantage of being a mass leader. His close, informal, direct, and emotionally charged style of discourse facilitates the connection with his audiences and, thus, the Ukrainian narrative is spread.

Moreover, Zelensky has a cordial and close relationship with the media, as he knows that they are opinion leaders and that together with his social media campaign they are the best channels to disseminate his message: Slava Ukraini. His experience as an actor helps him to know how to act in front of the cameras and he manages a remarkable verbal communication which he accompanies with symbols (flags, banners, military clothing).

Consequently, it has been demonstrated that Zelensky's discourse has helped the dissemination of the Ukrainian narrative and is achieving its goal of gaining international support. The war of narratives is being won for now by Ukraine, and the best proof of this is that as of 26th April 2022 Russia has not managed to complete the invasion. Journalist Pepe García sums up well what the Ukrainian communication campaign has achieved in Western countries.: "The West is excited about Ukraine. Zelensky has recognized the means of soft power and emotions in the Western World and is making the best of them to exert pressure and sanctions on Russia. Without it, he would have been very quickly defeated" (Einhorn, 2022).

Future lines of research will have the opportunity to analyse Zelensky's discourse during the Russian invasion more objectively and comprehensively, as this thesis was written at the same time as the conflict was unfolding. One of the major limitations of the work has been the lack of space, as a greater number of arguments could have been explored in greater depth and exemplified. Another important factor to consider is the large volume of information that is presented on this topic, as it is highly mediatised.

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