

**Reconstructing the separatist narrative of the DPR:  
A framing analysis of the state-run online media outlet DNR-  
News**

Zoé Baglin

S1983253

Supervisor: Dr. Matthew Frear

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Leiden University

Faculty of Humanities

MA Russian and Eurasian Studies

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## List of abbreviations

DAN-News	‘Donetsk News Agency’
DNR-News	‘Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki’
DPR	Donetsk People’s Republic
DTEK	‘Donbas-Fuel Energy Company’
EU	European Union
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
LPR	Luhansk People’s Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty organization
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
US	United States

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# 1. Introduction

The conflict in the region of Donbas in Eastern Ukraine<sup>1</sup>, which has been ongoing since 2014, occurred as part of a chain reaction that included the Euromaidan protests and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The war waging in Eastern Ukraine is said to be led by separatist forces who want to see parts of the Donbas breakaway from Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DPR)<sup>2</sup> and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)<sup>3</sup>, have in fact been established after a majority of the local population in both Donetsk and Luhansk voted in referendums that were organised on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May in 2014 by local separatist rebels. Nevertheless, the referenda and results have not been internationally recognised, rather they have triggered outrage worldwide especially at the level of the European Union (EU), the United States (US) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Fischer 2019). Certain measures have been taken by Ukrainian and Russian representatives, as well as the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OCSE) in order to contain the situation of conflict. One of them is the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, yet efficient results have not been apparent.

More importantly perhaps, with regards to the disarray that the conflict has caused, is the contested idea that Russia is a driving force behind the war. Media in Western European countries and the US has indeed repeatedly promoted the views that the war in Donbas is just another strategy employed by Russia in a confrontation with Ukraine (Kudelia 2014). While Russia's financial and political support for the separatist states has been evidenced in the course of the conflict, it remains difficult to say what precisely was at the cause of the separatist conflict. East Ukrainian separatism is indeed a contested issue in academic debates. More recently, some scholars have argued on the one hand that ethnicity in the Donbas does not constitute a strong enough factor to justify the local separatist movements (Giuliano 2018; Kuromiya 2019). Rather, it is suggested that separatist intentions were motivated by apprehension in the change of regime and potential rejection from the new government after the Euromaidan protests by the local Donbas population (Giuliano 2018, 18). On the other hand, Russia's involvement in the separatist conflict cannot be underestimated. A combination

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<sup>1</sup> For a map of the conflict zone in Donbas, Eastern Ukraine see Appendix I.

<sup>2</sup> The Russian acronym of DPR is DNR which stands for Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (Донецкая Народная Республика). The acronym DPR is used in this thesis however.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian acronym of LPR is LNR which stands for Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (Луганская Народная Республика).

of events, formation of alliances, and appointment of separatist leaders<sup>4</sup> pointing to ties with Russia cannot be disregarded (Kudelia 2017). Meanwhile, Russia has maintained that it is not involved in the conflict in any way and claims that it is an internal matter of Ukraine (Roman et al. 2017).

It has been established that the role of media in the conflict is of significant relevance in terms of shaping public opinion. As stated by Roman et al. (2017): “How conflicts are framed can have a powerful impact on public perceptions. Framing can influence public perceptions about causes of a conflict, the success or failure of a conflict and even who is responsible for the conflict.” (359). Russian media has been criticised for using information strategies as part of their warfare method with regards to Russia’s conflict with Ukraine following the Euromaidan and the Crimean annexation (Darczewska 2014; Galeotti 2015; Mölder and Sazonov, 2018). By using the internet and social media as a tool for manipulating information, Russia has succeeded in controlling to some extent the kind of information it wants to see published. This is reported to be done via troll factories<sup>5</sup> and the dissemination of fabricated information among other methods (Mejias and Vokuev 2017). It has accordingly built anti-Western narratives to influence foreign audiences, which as specified by Hutchings and Szostkek (2015) corresponds to the formulation of its foreign policy concept. What is not yet clear is whether Russia also controls the narratives that are disseminated by the separatist republics of DPR and LPR in a warfare move against Ukraine. So far there has been no account on the kinds of narratives that media of the separatist republics intend to propagate. One reason may be that, since it is implied by Western media that Russia is behind the separatist conflict, it might also be overseeing what content is being published by separatist media.

This research attempts to find out through what kinds of frames one state-controlled news website of DPR, namely DNR-News, shapes the separatist narrative. Studying the frames may bring us closer to understanding if Russia exerts its influence through the media in the context of the separatist conflict with Ukraine. Framing analysis is conducted in order to grasp the way the media attempts to shape the meaning of certain news stories. More specifically, the relevance of this research lies in finding out whether Russia controls the narrative that DPR-

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<sup>4</sup> As an example, through the Party of Regions a pro-Russian political party that dominated the political scene in Donbas, local political elites gained more power and formed ties with separatist leaders (Kudelia 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Troll factories have been identified in Russia as ‘Internet Research Agencies’ where employees are paid to post online content onto social media that promote the views of Putin and the Kremlin (Mejias and Vokuev 2017, 1034).

News intends to disseminate. This potentially adds new knowledge to previous research on Russia's influences in the war between Ukraine and the separatist republics. Therefore, the research question is formulated in the following way: How has the local state-run online media outlet DNR-News framed the separatist narrative during periods of heightened conflict in 2017 and 2018 in the separatist-held territory of Donetsk? This research will focus on the way that separatism is endorsed at the level of the media, and thus how the separatist narrative is shaped throughout specific periods during 2017 and 2018. Events that have generated more tensions with regards to the war are taken as period samples. Articles that are published at the time of these events are in turn analysed. A qualitative content methodology is used in the data analysis, with an inductive framing analysis that is meant to reconstruct the frames. This research finds that the framing of the separatist narrative is done through an approach that is highly inclusive of Russia, and points to Russia's influence on DPR. At the same time, some frames also seek to legitimise DPR's goals of separatism by underlining its right to pursue self-determination.

With regards to the limitations of this research, the reader should bear in mind that the study focuses on themes and frames that the media conveys to its audience. Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of the framing effects on the audience is not given as it goes beyond the aims of this research. Furthermore, this study does not engage with identifying potential disinformation and overall information strategies within the media articles. While this could help clarify the involvement of Russia in endorsing separatism, it is not undertaken for this thesis due to practical constraints. Finally, it should be noted that although measures have been taken to limit subjectivity when doing the analysis, there may still be issues affecting the interpretation due to the qualitative nature of this research.

The overall structure of this thesis takes the form of eight main chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research and looks at different pre-existing themes employed in Russian media on the topic of Ukraine and the war in Donbas. It also elaborates on the notions of 'framing', 'narrative' and 'separatism'. The third chapter is concerned with the methods employed for this study. It provides a step by step explanation of the kind of analysis is dealt with along with the purpose, goals and sampling of this research. The fourth chapter presents the findings, first in a general manner and later discussed into more detail. The discussion of the findings is divided into three chapters that are dedicated to interpreting and analysing the frames which were found, each categorised in accordance with their relations to Ukraine, DPR and Russia. Chapter 8 closes

this study by offering a conclusion that includes a brief summary and implications of this research as well as potential recommendations for further investigation.



## 2. Literature review

This section will explore the existing academic literature on the concepts and notions that are key to this research. It will first examine the pre-existing narratives in the Russian media on Ukraine and the war in Donbas to highlight the deficiencies and the gaps that this research will attempt to fill. It will in turn shed light on what is understood by ‘framing’ in the context of the media and provide an explanation as to how media narratives may be looked at through frames to fill the research gap. The concept of ‘narrative’ will also be clarified to understand which sense of the term is used throughout this thesis. It will further theorise on the way separatism is shaped and pinpoint the internal and external influences that may do so. Finally, it will synthesise a repertory of theories together in order to provide a framework to conduct this research.

### *2.1. Themes in the Russian media about Ukraine*

A review of the literature has shown that the most important themes in the Russian media about Ukraine relate to orientalist narratives and myth-based emotional appeal. Firstly, an ‘orientalist’ lens was used already prior to the launch of the separatist conflict, portraying Ukraine as a medium for the EU to compete with Russia (Horbyk 2015). The development of the Euromaidan crisis was particularly framed with the intention to blame the EU and the ‘West’ for conducting actions with the primary goal of dominating and beating Russia. These actions, the media claimed, were operated under the guise of partnerships and deals (namely the Eastern Partnership) into which the EU was trying to pull Ukraine for its own interests. Thus the media tended to look at the broader geopolitical picture and constructed a narrative of West vs. East or more specifically EU vs. Russia, with Ukraine being a decisive factor for the competing forces. There is indeed a consensus in the literature that Russian media narratives comprise a confrontational dimension mostly portraying a world in which the ‘West’ is constantly competing with Russia (Darczewska 2014; Szostek and Hutchings 2015; Mölder and Sazonov 2018). That narrative claims both actors perceive the world differently: the West is an aggressor whose main goal is to pull Ukraine further apart from Russia, whereas, Russia is acting in accordance with its strategic interests in reaction to Western aggression. It goes so far as to encompass Ukraine into its territory by making allusions to participating in a partisan war through its military actions, which implies it sees it as its duty to help local civilians regain their lost territory (Kalinina 2016). There is in this sense, the tendency to portray Ukraine as

an actor that only serves the purposes of strategic geopolitical goals, making it look inferior by not taking into account its national aspirations.

Horbyk (2015) adds that the media framed certain narratives by using emotions, through a careful choice of words bearing a negative connotation. As an example, Ukrainian national forces were usually attributed the term of 'boeviki', meant to depict them as "criminal insurgents". Whereas, the Kiev government was mostly referred to as 'khunta' (junta), pointing to its illegitimacy in the way it overtook power as former president Yanukovich was ousted (507-508). In a similar perspective Marples (2016) underlines media narratives that contend that the overthrow of president Yanukovich was not lawful, but rather driven by extremist groups who had antisemitic and racist motives. The group Right Sector is referred to, in connection with themes that evoke nationalism and Nazism. Interestingly, history is a recurrent element used by the media to draw parallels with Ukraine's' chaotic situation during Euromaidan. It was for example, compared with the terror brought about by fascism in the past or the Russian Civil War in 1919 (427). In a more detailed account of how Russian television portrayed the unfolding of events concerning the Odesa tragedy<sup>6</sup> during the Euromaidan crisis, Hale et al. (2018) argue that the media highlighted certain aspect of the story while ignoring others. But more importantly, they drew an analogy between Nazis who killed civilians by trapping them in a burning building during the Second World War in a Belarusian town, with the pro-Maidan protesters intending to do the same with anti-Maidan protesters who perished in the enflamed building. Additionally, claims were made regarding an alleged conspiracy of police forces purposely staging the attack on pro-Maidan individuals and provoking them into retaliating against anti-Maidan individuals. According to the media, this was regarded as evidence that law enforcement agents were conspiring with Ukrainian nationalists.

What is more, there is the idea that indoctrination is a phenomenon which is becoming increasingly widespread in Ukraine. It goes as far as to maintain that former president Yushchenko sought to "rewrite history" by reinventing versions of World War II that ignored the importance of Soviet victory. According to the media, the main purpose is to fuel anti-Russian sentiment and detach itself from Russia. Other accounts that retrace the origins of medieval Ukraine are claimed to be pure invention and a way to indoctrinate the younger

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<sup>6</sup> 42 people died in a fire that was started in the Trade Union Building as a result of a clash between pro and anti-Maidan protesters (Hale et al. 2018).

generation (Marples 2016, 430). Ukraine is thus being demonised and held guilty of instigating anti-Russian hate, as well as triggering the resurgence of an aggressive form of nationalism.

There are thus recurrent themes that can be identified in the Russian media, which have shaped the image of Ukraine through a negative lens even before the beginning of the conflict in Donbas. Firstly, in the context of an ‘orientalist lens’, Ukraine finds itself in the middle of a geopolitical confrontation which is widely represented as: ‘East vs. West’. This has led the media to downplay the importance of Ukraine’s aspirations as a state. Secondly, the Euromaidan crisis has triggered the portrayal of Ukraine as a Nazi sympathiser. Historical references are indeed used as a tool to revive memories of barbaric practices and events, which are in turn compared to the current actions of the Ukrainian government. This systematically decreases the legitimacy of Ukraine because of the impact that it has on the audience and the emotional appeal that it makes. We will now turn to more specific Russian media narratives on the situation in Donbas, in order to examine the lens through which the separatist conflict is framed.

## *2.2. Themes in the Russian media about Donbas*

With regards to themes on Donbas in Russian media, scholarly literature points to the presence of strategically-driven aims in the way that Russia propagates information on the war in the Donbas. Cultural memories that collectively bind people together are also found to be widely used along with misleading claims that the Russian ethnicity is endangered. There is an unambiguous relationship between Russia’s media presence in the Donbas and the course the war in the region has taken. Russia has indeed developed elaborate strategies of information warfare through which it succeeded in annexing Crimea, and has then proceeded to steer chaos in the Donbas region by supporting separatists. Mölder and Sazonov (2018) claim that a different strategy has been employed by Russia in the Donbas than that of Crimea, which seems to be a “never-ending perpetual war” with the primary purpose of destabilising the region (230). More importantly they talk of the omnipresence of local and Russian media in the region, and very poor access to Ukrainian media<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Important Russian media channels include LifeNews, Russia Today (RT), Pervyi Obshestvennyi, Rossiya 1, Rossiya 2 and NTV which gained prominence after Ukrainian channels were banned. The local media of Donetsk and Luhansk consist of channels such as Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki, Lugansk24 and Tsentralnoye informacionnoye agenstvo Novorossii (Mölder and Sazonov, 2018).

When looking at the recurrence of themes used throughout Russian information campaigns in the Donbas region which has been identified in existing academic literature, fascism seems to be a prominent one (Katchanovski 2016; Kuzio 2016; Roman et al. 2017; Szostek 2018) . Portrayals of Ukrainian soldiers as fascists and executioners, are often brought to the headlines of channels such as Russian Channel One, along with horrendous accounts of the murders and other barbarities they have committed against locals from the Donbas. An account of a woman who associates the soldiers with Nazis by making references to the SS, and asserts they are the descendance of the Galician division of SS-volunteers, was for example reported. The soldiers are also often identified as ‘Banderovtsy’, referring to Stepan Bandera the leader of the nationalist party and Nazi-collaborator, who vowed to remove non-ethnic Ukrainians (Khaldarova and Pantti 2018).

It should be noted that Russia’s strategy to deny its involvement in the region makes it complex to distinguish between true and false accounts that are being proliferated through the media and incites locals to believe them. The fact that Russian politicians assert their passive involvement through statements and confirm that ethnic cleansing and genocide against Russian speakers take place, makes it even more convincing to individuals that are susceptible of believing such tales. This was the case with Sergei Ivanov, back then secretary of the presidential administration who gave an interview for Komsomolskaya Pravda in 2014, backing the idea that Ukrainian soldiers had murdered civilians in mass in the Donbas (as cited in Darczewska 2014, 9). Similarly, Putin has also exposed his view, more generally over the Euromaidan protests by condemning the orchestrators to be “nationalists, neo-Nazis and Russophobes” and depicted them as murderers and criminals (as cited in Kuzio 2016). Kuzio (2016) believes that Putin makes allusion to the way nationalists were perceived during Soviet times, as conspirers and inferior to others. This may indeed serve to reinforce the message that he tries to get across and the impact he wants to make by referring to something as impactful as Soviet history. He may also want to emphasise the return of an aggressive form of nationalism in the guise of Ukrainians and any other pro-Euromaidan supporters, which is in turn used to create disinformation campaigns or stories. Kuzio further reports absurd accounts that have been proven to be disinformation, such as the story of a three-year old boy who was crucified by Ukrainian soldiers in front of its mother, who was then dragged onto a tank until she died.

In the same vein, Osipian (2015) argues that the ‘Soviet Great Patriotic War’ is widely used by Russian media to appeal to the audience’s cultural memory. By comparing Ukrainian army men to “karateli”<sup>8</sup> for example, they make a direct reference to the Gestapo and SS subdivisions during the Second World War (Osipian 2015, 116). It is also symbolic in that these ‘karateli’, usually German Fascist occupiers, were described as the typical Soviet enemy in Soviet literature and films. This is thus used to promote the idea that Fascism is widespread among Ukrainian soldiers, which represents a serious threat. Thus by appealing to anchored memories, the probability of impacting the audience is high if they feel emotionally connected to the story. These narratives are indeed strong because they retrace remembrances of Soviet history and culture. Similarly, in their study Roman et al. (2017) note that Russian media Channel 1 referred most of the time to World War II events to represent the current situation in the war. Elements of history are thus widely used with the intention to appeal to a collective memory and beliefs of the public. History can be seen as a binding factor among people because of its cultural character, and the meaning it provides when it comes to interpreting information. This ties into the view that the media frames certain perspectives in strong relation to culture as mentioned in the beginning of the literature.

In another dominant narrative, Russia depicts itself as being the protector of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, represented as compatriots. Through this vision it has encouraged the support of separatist rebels and the overall intransigence of Russian speakers in Donetsk and Luhansk. Demonstrations of Russian and Ukrainian speakers manifesting their desire to reunite with Russia was presented in the media through Channel 1, as way to confirm the will of the people. Statements such as: “We Ukrainians are with the Russians; we are one country, one nation; we have both Ukrainian and Russian blood in us... The fraternal people of Ukraine are connected to us historically, culturally and by their spiritual values”, were broadcasted to establish the fact that Russia is within its right to take any measures in protecting its ‘compatriots’ (as cited in Szostek and Hutchings 2015,m180). This also reflects Russia’s positioning as the mediator and possible peacemaker in a situation that requires great sensibility. It gives itself the role of safeguarding what is traditionally and morally correct. In that regard, it facilitates the credibility of such messages. This view also corresponds to that of

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<sup>8</sup> “*Karateli* was the conventional term used in Soviet war literature, memoirs and films for Gestapo and SS troops, who played an especially prominent role in the Soviet enemy image of the ‘German-fascist occupiers’”. (Osipian 2015, 116).

Lankina and Watanabe (2017) who find in their study that Russian media coverage of the war in Donbas is mostly about the status of the disputed territories, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. They claim that the use of accounts concerning the status of ethnic Russians intensified after Crimea was annexed and a proxy war in Donbas started with the prospect of creating a frame of chaos and disorder.

As it can be observed, pre-existing themes in the Russian media mostly relate to key historical periods and occurrences which are used to support the claims made by the media and in turn ensure the public of their reliability. The association of strong stereotypes such as fascism and nationalism with Ukrainian soldiers in a generalised manner, also seems to be an effective way to appeal to people's emotions and wider cultural beliefs. The media paints a gloomy picture of Ukrainian soldiers with the intention to expose their barbarity. What is more, the idea that these soldiers contribute to genocidal actions and the 'ethnic cleansing' of the population in Donbas reinforces that image of cruelty. Finally, Russia is given the role of pacifier by pointing to the alleged needs and protection of a population in distress when referring to ethnic Russians. This systematically enhances its credibility and legitimacy. It is thus an efficient way of reaching out to an audience that is already strongly and culturally connected to the themes evoked by the media. The use of disinformation enhances these effect even further by inviting the audience to connect on an emotional level, but more importantly to manipulate it into believing a twisted version of a story.

Whereas it has been established that Russian media shape their narratives around the war and Ukraine in general in function of their wider geopolitical interests, it is less clear whether the separatist republics' local media follow the same course. Their convictions of being independent republics are supported and influenced by Russia, and one may suppose that similar themes will be found in the media as in the Russian one. However, they must promote their separatism and their struggle for self-determination in a way that shows their relative detachment from Russia. In that sense their narratives to promote separatism may indicate slight differences that are not taken into account by the literature. There is indeed no academic account of the way in which local media from the DPR or LPR disseminate their information, and more importantly how they frame separatism to their audience. The next section will clarify the concept of frames and how they may help us understand the way in which certain media narratives occur, which can in turn be specifically applied to the case of the separatist media.

### *2.3. Defining 'framing' and 'frames'*

The literature reveals that the notion of framing in media analysis as understood by scholars, is a process that comprises two principal functions: that of frame-building and frame-setting. Next to that, a generally accepted definition of 'frames' consists of viewing a frame as a tool that shapes the perception of reality and provides a certain meaning. However, what it precisely encompasses remains less clear. Scheufele (1999) looks at framing from the perspective of media effects on the public and how that reinforces the "construction of a social reality" (104). He claims that four stages during which media effects have developed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have led to the way media impacts us presently. This way of framing is based on social constructivism, which is especially relevant in the field of political communication. Thus, framing is a process through which an audience is influenced, but who in turn influences media to build on the previous frames in a two-way mechanism. Frame-building is defined as the internal and external factors that influence journalism and more precisely the "continuous interaction between journalists, elites and social movements" (De Vreese 2005, 52). On the other hand, 'frame-setting' is more about the relation between the media and the pre-existing knowledge of its audience. As a result, the process of 'frame-building' rather than 'frame-setting' will be the focus for this thesis.

The current literature reflects a lot of ambiguity with regards to what constitutes a frame. Entman (1993) helps us understand framing in a less abstract fashion: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (52). Gamson and Modigliani (1987), add to this by defining a frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (As cited in Scheufele 1999, 105). Through these two definitions one can understand the underlying function and purpose of a frame, however what is less clear is what precisely constitutes a frame. Van Gorp (2007) draws our attention to the connection a frame has with culture. It is according to him embedded in culture, referring to a large set of collective beliefs, values and norms, which cannot be altered by individuals because it is deeply institutionalised. These frames are thus brought about by the media to their audience in what Van Gorp calls a "cultural stock of frames". The effect of these frames is strong because of their connection to cultural phenomena, even though they may not be explicitly expressed through the media. Taking this into consideration might be helpful to acknowledge the presence of cultural themes

within the texts when identifying frames, which could be potentially used to unify the local population of Donbas.

Similarly, Bantimaroudis and Kampanellou (2007) share the idea of culture being a binding phenomenon among people, which encourages them to interpret the news in a certain way. They argue that analysing the element of culture is essential when looking at frames in media because it provides an audience with meaning, especially in the context of a political conflict. In this regard, the media usually translate the ideological conflict between two actors into frames that resonate with the public and stem from common cultural values. Following that line of reasoning, the way in which the media in the Donbas frames separatism may very well fall in a 'stock' of frames that range from one cultural subject to another. These should thus have the potential of binding the people of Donbas behind a common cultural value. If these frames do exist in the form of cultural values, in what way do they appear and how can they be identified? Through his extensive research on the expression of culturally shared notions in media frames, Van Gorp (2010) suggests that these translate into "symbolic significance, such as stereotypes, values, archetypes, myths, and narratives" (85). He describes these elements as being interconnected with each other, yet they point to distinct facets of the news story. While the meanings of these concepts tend to overlap, it is important to understand what is meant by 'narratives' and how it differs from the concept of 'frames'. Narratives in media framing theory are thus stories that are constructed through time and space, which emerge as a result of framing (Arowolo, 2017). In that sense the process of framing will eventually lead to creating narratives.

On the basis of these theories, this thesis will lean towards the cultural elements that constitute a frame. In order to reconstruct the frames found in the media articles, it will be based on Van Gorp's approach of identifying binding cultural values that translate into symbolic meanings. The following section will evaluate factors that shape separatism to fully grasp the motivation behind the endorsement of separatism and to be able to identify themes in the media that relate to it.

#### *2.4. Internal and external factors that shape separatism*

The question of framing is significant not only for understanding the perceived social reality as a product of the media, but in a broader sense to grasp its role in times of conflict. The norms



of journalism<sup>9</sup> can indeed become overshadowed by the national and military interest of the state in conflict, to fulfil strategic goals. Neutrality in reporting events, as an example of these norms, may be compromised as a result. The state may then be the judge of what kind of information needs to be propagated, that essentially align with its interests (Nygren et al. 2018). In the case of the separatist republics, media operating locally may adopt information strategies in conformity with pro-separatist views and thus implicitly or explicitly promote actions by separatist authorities. As mentioned above, that could consist in disseminating information with the potential of unifying the people of Donbas through cultural phenomena. But it could also contain themes meant to emphasise self-determination which is usually sought by separatist states. It is thus important to deconstruct separatism and examine what aspect of it will most likely be employed in the media. For this thesis the notion of separatism will be based on the idea that it seeks to “challenge the territorial integrity of a state, undermine its central authority, and question the legitimacy of state government” on a quest to self-determination (Pokalova 2010).

The concept of separatism holds that ethnic separation is an alternative to national unity, and thus the separatist states pursue the ‘right’ to self-determination (the right to a state of their own). They also claim the rights to an independent culture, detached from the national one which serves as a basis to their existence. These are the grounds on which separatism should be successfully achieved (Tullberg and Tullberg 1997). Horowitz (1981) adds to that by suggesting that claims to self-determination within ethnic separatism is a way to legitimise the latter, allowing for its development. He maintains that these claims are ideological insofar as they advocate the “political self-expression” of a separatist group, which distinguishes them from others (167). Thus, the ability to not only claim the rights to an independent culture and territory, but to also express them politically is a determining factor for separatism to work in favour of the states that want to detach themselves from a pre-existing nation.

On the basis of these assumptions, one cannot ignore the role of politics in the making of a separatist state and its measurement of success. This may include domestic politics, but more importantly the politics brought about by its surrounding environment, prone to influence whether the states will succeed in becoming independent. Interestingly, the emergence of a separatist state is possible in an environment where internal politics is sympathetic to claims

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<sup>9</sup> Reference is made here to norms that exist in Anglo-Saxon journalism (Nygren et al. 2018)

of territorial divisions and thus relies much on the dynamics that define domestic politics. However, the success of its establishment and achievement of its aims will eventually be determined by international politics and by the national interests of countries for which the detachment of the separatist states will be decisive (Horowitz 1981). External factors are indeed prone to influence separatism, such as foreign powers who may or may not choose to stand behind the state and offer support. This is of course not an altruistic move, as the foreign power's decision to do so relies on interests that go beyond the issue of separatism (Tullberg and Tullberg 1997).

With that in mind, the way Eastern Ukrainian separatism in the Donbas is being shaped needs to be considered. With Russia backing the separatist republics, it can be assumed that the course separatism in the Donbas will follow is one that will encompass the interests of Russia. Claims to separatism in the media will thus be identified on the one hand, in accordance with internal factors such as the right to self-determination by seeking cultural and territorial independence. On the other hand, it will be identified on the basis of external factors such as foreign influences and more particularly, Russian interests in the fight for separatism.

The literature review has built a repertory of theories that will help reconstruct the frames used by the media in Donbas. More specifically, it has screened the existing themes found to be recurrent in Russian media with regards to Ukraine and the situation in Donbas and. In both cases it appears that the use of historical references facilitates the appeal to wider cultural beliefs. This goes hand in hand with the strong connection that the notion of framing has with cultural meanings. On top of that, having identified factors that shape separatism will help us determine the way in which Russia's involvement is a decisive factor in the course that it takes and how it is portrayed in the media.

### 3. Methods

This chapter will give an account of how the research for this thesis was carried out. It will firstly provide an explanation as to why a qualitative content analysis was chosen as opposed to discourse analysis. It will then proceed with a justification of the media choice and the purpose of this research. Next, the process for identifying frames in a qualitative content analysis will be established and illustrated with the mechanism of a framing device. Four different samples are in turn carefully selected in accordance to the war's heightened tensions in the years 2017 and 2018. Finally, limitations concerning the methodology used to carry out this research is given.

#### *3.1. Qualitative content analysis*

The research process will consist of analysing the transmission of media messages to an audience. Athleide and Schneider (2013) suggest a qualitative research process for content analysis which is focused on “capturing definitions, meanings, process, and types.” (7). More specifically, they do this through protocols which serve to categorise relevant items in the gathered data. This should be a list of questions that illustrate and encompass the conceptual problem comprehensively. These can be seen as variables of sorts, except that they are not applied in the same way as in a quantitative approach. The identification of frames in this research process is relevant as it will allow us to understand the way news media shapes social meanings to convey a certain message to the public. Frames can be seen as the way in which the issue at stake will be reviewed and discussed through the news text of a particular medium. More precisely the interpretation that is given of the issue should be analysed to deconstruct the way these frames are built.

Hence, qualitative content analysis appears to be the most appropriate method to interpret those messages. A quantitative mechanism is indeed not suitable for this research as there is no pre-determined pattern to identify in the analysis. It will also not be treated in a quantitative fashion as occurrences of elements that will help us understand how Donbas authorities justify the separatist narrative, will not be systematically counted. Qualitative content analysis rather than discourse analysis remains the preferred method because the latter is increasingly focused on revealing the way social reality is formed, whereas the former seeks to understand the current state of it (Hardy, Harley and Phillips 2004). This will indeed be more valuable for this research

as coverage of the war in the Donbas will allow us to understand the current views as conveyed by local state-controlled media to their audience and not how they are constructed.

### *3.2. Research goals & choice of media source*

This research aims at finding out the frames that the local state-controlled media use in news articles covering the war in the Donbas area, to legitimise actions of separatist forces. The focus thus lies on the legitimacy of separatist forces in the Donbas area. This implies that legitimacy is a theme that can be identified on multiple occasions in the media and is repeated over time in the chosen news sources. It will in turn attempt to identify information which intends to frame actors or events that may undermine or have a negative influence on the project of separatism. An example of actors could be the Ukrainian nationalist forces who are involved in the conflict between Ukraine and the areas in the Donbas under separatist control. Since the pre-existing assumption for this research is that the local state-controlled media sustains the separatist narrative through anti-Ukrainian/anti-government discourses, news articles that contain stories meant to defend the separatists and accuse opposing forces of depriving them of their rights will be primarily looked at.

The articles will be selected according to a specific timeframe during which certain events took place that may have triggered a surge in pro-separatist discourse in the chosen local media. The covered time frame will consist of key periods which may in turn reveal patterns in the way narratives are constructed. The qualitative nature of the study will hopefully provide a wide and rich variety of articles to analyse. Thus, events that have had a major influence on the course of the war, such as a surge in violence and conflicts between the Ukrainian and separatist forces, will especially be looked at and included in the samples. As an example, at the start of 2017, fighting between both sides escalated in the surrounding area of Avdiivka, on the Northern outskirts of Donetsk. Although a ceasefire was enforced, a Ukrainian soldier was killed (Pauwee 2017). On top of that the Ukraine Crisis Media Center reports that since renewed hostilities in early 2017, 19 people were killed during the period of January 23 2017 until February 5 2017 (Ukraine Crisis Media Center 2017). The timeframe during which these incidents are worthy to analyse as heightened tension may have provided pro-separatist media with the motivation to frame them in a certain way. They are thus be taken into consideration when selecting the samples to analyse.

When choosing the medium of news sources which is analysed it is important to consider whether it is independent from the local authorities. The latter may indeed want to exclusively convey its preferred views and political orientation for its own benefits and in turn shape the frames that are built around certain topics. In the aftermath of the war that started in 2014 in the Donbas area between Ukrainian and separatist forces, the media in Donetsk underwent significant changes. In Donetsk oblast, a large number of media outlets were destroyed and many journalists were forced out of the province. The remaining news outlet that are operational on the territory are affiliated with Party of Regions members (a pro-Russian political party), DTEK and Metinvest, two energy and mining companies, as reported by the Institute of Mass Media (2016). The mass media outlets are thus not independent and abide to the position of the owners. ‘Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki’ (DNR-news) and ‘Donetsk News Agency’ (DAN-news) are among some of the websites that remain operational on the occupied territories of Donetsk Oblast, and which have approximately 10-15,000 users on social media accounts as well as about 40,000 number of hits on their websites (Institute of Mass Information 2016).

Donetsk being at the heart of the ongoing war between separatists and Ukraine, this research focuses on an online media outlet that operates in DPR and that clearly positions itself on the separatists’ side. DNR-news is the preferred option to analyse online news as it appears to have a broad online public in DPR. On its home page, DNR-news appears to have more than 23,000 followers on the social media platform Vkontakte and more than 30,000 on Facebook<sup>10</sup>. On the home page of DAN-news, however, the number of followers on Vkontakte is not made visible, and therefore it is harder to determine its level of online popularity. DNR-News also exclusively publishes Russian-language news, which has more chances of reaching out to the local population than the English-language, DAN-news, which attempts to get through an international-oriented public. While there is also a Russian version on DAN-news, the fact that DNR-news is solely Russian may appeal as a more familiar and reassuring source to obtain news from.

### *3.3.Framing in qualitative content analysis*

In order to carry out a qualitative content analysis the specific issue which will be paid attention to when analysing media articles needs to be identified and formulated. For this research, the

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<sup>10</sup> These numbers were last checked on November 25, 2019 on the website of DNR-News.

endorsement of separatism through various frames in the news is determined as the underlying problem which contributes to maintaining a separatist narrative. This does not imply that separatism is endorsed in an explicit manner for all the articles that will be analysed. It suggests instead that through framing, the media succeeds in constructing an image or a social reality of a certain actor or event which eventually leads to favour or be sympathetic to separatism. In order to identify media frames as accurately as possible, D'Angelo (2017) stresses the importance of establishing a 'framing device'. This should act as a link between the pre-existing knowledge concerning the context in which the frames are constructed and the criteria through which they are analysed (5). A three-step process to identify the framing device entails looking firstly at presentation features such as headlines or any other visual representation that is context-relevant. Secondly, discourse structures that may reinforce a frame such as metaphors, keyword patterns and catchphrases must be detected. Thirdly, narrative conventions are identified. These are used to stress the importance of the issue at stake, thus the news values that are highlighted in the media articles (D'Angelo 2017).

*Table 1: Framing Device (D'Angelo 2017)*

<b>Framing Device</b>		
<b>Presentation Features</b>	<b>Discourse Structures</b>	<b>Narrative Conventions</b>
Headlines	Metaphors	News Values
Visual scenes	Catchphrases	Cultural themes
Still images	Keyword patterns	Stereotypes
Pull quotes		
Backgrounders		
Hashtags		
Charts		

What is understood by 'discourse' and 'narrative' is important to define in order to clarify the way that it will be interpreted within the framing device. As Athleide and Schneider (2013) put it, "Discourse refers to the parameters of relevant meaning that one uses to talk about things" (15). A narrative can be considered as the overall story that is produced by the media. The presentation features, discourse structures and narrative conventions will thus be identified for each selected article in order to establish a coding scheme. They will then be regrouped under each coded item, using D'Angelo's (2017) method to create a 'framing device' (see Table 1).

The next step will then consist of carrying out an in-depth analysis of the coded items by identifying patterns which could fall under a unified theme.

For the purpose of analysing the coding this research has used Van Gorp's (2010) method of framing analysis which attempts to remove as much subjectivity as possible during the process of analysis. He characterises it as "arranging the codes around axes of meaning" after carrying out an open coding of the texts (95). The goal is to classify the devices according to their similarities and differences in order to establish these axes. The following step consists in creating a frame matrix which organises the different frame packages that correspond to the framing devices in a table (see appendix III). This has enabled the inductive reconstruction of the frames, which have emerged at the end of the analysis.

### *3.4. Selection of samples*

Sampling is an important aspect of this study's framing analysis. It is defined on the basis of its relevance in relation to the issue of separatism. The chosen timeframes consist of four samples in total: two in 2017 and two in 2018. The two first samples of 2017 cover events which may have triggered tensions between the separatist authorities and the Ukrainian ones. The battle of Avdiivka which was one of them, is covered by selecting the three days during which fighting was intensified as well as three days after in order to note a possible difference in framing. The second sample covers the economic embargo imposed by Kiev on separatist-occupied areas, which entered into force on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2017. For the year of 2018, the third sample comprises articles published on the day of DPR leader Alexander Zakharchenko's death which occurred in August. With the fourth sample the study looks at the heightened tension in the Kerch Strait<sup>11</sup> between Russia and Ukraine in November. The latter may seem less straightforward as to how it directly impacts the separatist forces, however, rising tensions in the sea of Azov are prone to influence the war zones in direct geographical contact (Fischer 2019).

For each sample, six days were looked at to find out whether the shifting tensions may have impacted the frames employed by the media (see table 2 and 3). All of these events have a significant impact on the separatist authorities insofar as they affect the position of the DPR in

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<sup>11</sup> The Kerch strait incident occurred in the Sea of Azov, with Russia blockading and detaining two Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait as they attempted to go from Odesa to Mariupol (Fischer 2019).

the war against Ukraine. This makes it valuable to analyse in the media as the frames may have changed as tensions died down after the first few days. It should be noted that the analysis of articles is not limited to stories that specifically cover the chosen events, but rather it looks at whether the framing of separatism is peaking in the articles published during the period of the events in question. Additionally, articles were selected based on their length and relevance. The number of articles published per day varies but only the ones that are long enough and that have detailed information about an event or a story will be selected. Articles that appear to be a few sentences and in which it is unlikely that a frame would appear are not a part of the samples. The articles were also selected based on their relevance: events or stories that do not evoke the subject of separatism, such as local sports events, were not taken into account.

<i>2017</i>	<i>Article dates</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>Articles dates</i>
<i>Battle of Avdiivka</i>	29-01-2017	<i>Death of DPR leader</i>	30-08-2018
	30-01-2017		31-08-2017
	31-01-2017		01-09-2018
	01-02-2017		02-09-2018
	02-02-2017		03-09-2018
	03-02-2017		04-09-2018
<i>Economic embargo</i>	15-03-2017	<i>Kerch Strait incident</i>	25-11-2018
	16-03-2017		26-11-2018
	17-03-2017		27-11-2018
	18-03-2017		28-11-2018
	19-03-2017		29-11-2018
	20-03-2017		30-11-2018

Table 2: Samples 1 & 2 for the period of 2017

Table 3: Sample 3 & 4 for the period of 2018

### 3.5. Limitations

It should be noted that there are downsides to using a qualitative frame analysis approach. Linström and Marais (2012) point out the limitations with respects to the way the frames are defined, as they may be on the one hand subjective and on the other indistinct. This may give results that are not fully reliable or valid. They also stress the difficulty of creating a coding scheme due to the qualitative nature of the study. Questions on the amount of frame elements



needed to create an effect, may arise. Subjectivity is also seen as an issue due to the interpretation by the researcher carrying out the analysis which may be influenced by their own bias. An inductive framing analysis can help to limit that subjectivity by first “reconstructing the applied frames” which was carried out for this thesis (Van Gorp 2010, 104). Additionally, the reader needs to take into account the limitations that come with identifying the framing devices. Certain framing devices emerged more evidently than others. Not all articles contained the presentation features, discourse structures and narratives conventions necessary to constitute a framing device. Therefore, framing devices in the analysis should be interpreted with caution.

## 4. Findings

In this chapter the overall findings for this research are given. A discussion of the emerging frames follows in the next chapter to grasp the intention behind the formulation of each frames. Examples of the interpretation of some of the articles is also given in order to illustrate the most significant results. The Russian terms and expressions taken from the articles are provided in the footnotes in their original form and were directly translated and inserted in the main text by the author of this thesis. An overview of all the selected articles can be found in Appendix II<sup>12</sup>.

### *4.1 Emerging frames*

After having inductively reconstructed the frames through framing analysis, the identification of six main frames for each analysed sample came out as a result. Thus the following frames have emerged: ‘Ukraine as an aggressor’; ‘Ukraine as a disruptor’; ‘weakness and incompetence of Ukraine’; ‘legitimacy of DPR’; ‘DPR citizens as victims’; and ‘Russia as a mediator’. An overview of the reconstructed frames in framing matrices can be found in Appendix III.

The aggressor frame emerged as a result of analysing the way in which Ukraine and Ukrainian forces were portrayed when news stories gave accounts, or contained topics related to Ukrainian acts of aggression. In this frame the most significant themes that were identified as recurring patterns were the perception of criminality and barbarity as a common act inflicted by Ukrainian forces. This is especially true for the first sample, possibly because most stories covered detailed attacks perpetrated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. This was also visible when describing the Ukrainian government, such as in sample 2 during which the authorities were characterised as criminal for imposing a blockade and harming the life of innocent civilians. Ukrainian nationalism was also a repetitive subject evoked in many articles, which was characterised as an increasing threat coming from the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian army.

An interesting outcome was the emergence of a frame that depicted Ukraine as a disruptor. In this frame Ukraine is seen as an actor that tries to sabotage the relationship between Russia and

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<sup>12</sup> For each sample the articles are numbered and referred to their number in the discussion when an example is specified.

the US and the EU. Its unwillingness to cooperate in seeking a peace settlement and abiding by the rules of the Minsk Agreements is underlined in all analysed samples. In sample 4, however, there is a tendency to highlight Ukraine's deliberate provocation and acts of sabotage. This is evidently linked to the occurrence of the Kerch Strait incident, during which Ukraine is considered to have violated territorial waters.

Another frame was identified as 'weakness and incompetence of Ukraine' because of the recurrence regarding accounts and reference to internal division and conflicts in the government of Ukraine. There were also many articles that underlined the incompetence of Ukraine in the war, possibly to highlight its deficiencies and decrease its legitimacy.

During the analysis it was noted that the legitimacy of DPR as a state was constantly emphasised in topics that discussed the deeds of DPR in the conflict with Ukraine but also those that substantiated its ability to function as an independent state. In some instances, it portrayed itself as an advocate for seeking peaceful solutions to the conflict. In other instances, it was illustrated as an advocate for its citizen's rights and protection which was mostly contrasted against the image of Ukraine as a violator of human rights. It should be noted that sample 3 differed slightly in that regard, because it covers the period of Zakharchenko's death in an attack. Most articles indeed, promoted Zakharchenko as a leader loved and respected by all to legitimise his reign and qualities as a leader of DPR.

The framing of DPR citizens as victims, was prominent in samples 1, 2 and 3 but was absent in the fourth sample. This can potentially be explained by the fact that the events which were covered in the first three samples, affected citizens in a more direct way than the Kerch incident. The vulnerability of DPR citizens was indeed highlighted in the first two samples because attacks by Ukrainian forces and the imposed economic blockade were considered life threatening.

Lastly, an important frame that arose from the analysis was the perception of Russia being a mediator in the heart of the conflict between Ukraine and the separatist republic. This was mostly apparent in the form of discourses or statements that praised Russia for acting in a certain way or portraying it as a role model on different levels. Another pattern was the way Russia was considered to be an impartial actor and an advocate for settling the conflict

peacefully. Additionally, its duty to protect citizens of Donbas from a humanitarian crisis was widely represented.

#### *4.2 Expected outcomes: Similarities and differences*

Based on the pre-existing themes in the Russian media found in the literature, the expected outcome of this study was the following. On the one hand, the assumption that Ukraine's national aspirations are underrepresented in the media through an orientalist lens because of its position in the geopolitical confrontation between the 'West' and the 'East'. On the other hand, the portrayal of Ukraine as a Nazi sympathiser substantiated by historical references which decreases its legitimacy. These themes relate to the wider perception of Ukraine in the Russian media. Looking now to the themes on the war in the Donbas covered by the Russian media found in the literature, the following outcomes were expected to be found. First, the perception of Ukrainian soldiers as being barbaric towards the people of Donbas and their association to fascism and a radical form of Ukrainian nationalism. Second, the idea that Ukrainian soldiers are responsible for the cleansing of the ethnic population in Donbas and other genocidal actions. Third, the portrayal of Russia as a pacifier in the protection of ethnic Russians' rights to increase its legitimacy. Finally, in a more general perspective, the recollection of historical events that appeal to a collective cultural memory. Another expected outcome was the presumption that Russia's interests should influence the way separatism in the Donbas is shaped because of the support that it provides the separatist republics with for its wider geopolitical goals.

The results of the framing analysis had both similarities and differences in these respects. With regards to the first assumption, Ukraine is mostly portrayed as a disruptor in the relations between Russia and the 'West', especially in the dataset of sample 1. In one example, it was implied that Ukraine was depicted to be deliberately sabotaging the relation between Russia and the US because of its inferiority complex. Thus, Ukraine is not seen as a passive actor that is easily influenced by the EU or the 'West', but rather it is actively looking to cause disorder in the rapprochement East-West. The confrontational aspect of 'East' vs. 'West' was thus not so much present in the themes encountered, however there is still the notion of Ukraine's role in aggravating the conflict by maintaining relations with the EU. The expected outcome of Ukraine as a Nazi sympathiser was recurrent in many of the news stories that were analysed. This theme recurred throughout all 4 samples, by emphasising the association of Ukrainian

forces with nationalist groups such as ‘Right Sector’ and ‘Azov’. A common descriptive term for these groups which was encountered when conducting the analysis was the word ‘Death squads’<sup>13</sup>, which as mentioned in the literature review refers to the Gestapo and SS subdivision during the Second World War. In most cases these nationalist groups were depicted to be partaking in acts of aggression, with news stories placing an emphasis on their barbaric nature. However, there is also reference to government officials being sympathisers. As an example, one article denounced a Ukrainian politician for his overt admiration for Hitler calling him “The biggest democrat”<sup>14</sup> (DNR-News 2018a). The theme of nationalism is also a recurrent pattern that appears in articles as an increasing threat, especially at the level of the Ukrainian government.

On the themes which were found in previous studies, specific to the war in Donbas, there were several corresponding outcomes. The perception of injustice and acts of cruelty inflicted to inhabitants in the Donbas by the Ukrainian forces was indeed reflected in the analysis through keyword patterns that emphasised their lack of humanity. More specifically, they were in some instances dehumanised and portrayed as monsters for killing innocent civilians. Moreover, the idea that they contributed to a genocide also persisted in the data samples, especially in sample 2 during the period of the economic blockade imposed by Kyiv. A possible explanation for this may be that the blockade prevented DPR citizens from basic primary needs and were portrayed to be on the brink of survival which was illustrated in the analysed articles as a humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, this study confirms the idea that Russia gives itself the role of a pacifier/mediator. This was indeed visible on a high scale through many quotations and statements given by Russian politicians in most articles. Three dominant themes emerged in relation to that: Russia as a role model for DPR; Russia as an advocate for a peaceful solution to the conflict; Russia as the protector of Donbas’ Russian-speaking population. Finally, the assumption that DPR’s separatism is shaped according to Russia’s interests is not an obvious outcome. The focus rather lied in DPR demonstrating its legitimacy as an independent separatist republic.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘каратели’

<sup>14</sup> “самым большим демократом”

## 5. Frames pertaining to Ukraine

This chapter has gathered the frames that are primarily connected to Ukraine and more specifically, convey the perception of Ukraine as a state that perpetrates aggression, disruption and reflects weakness. It discusses the emerging frames into more detail, provides an explanation as to why these frames in particular have emerged and suggests what their implications are for this particular study.

### *5.1 Discussing the aggressor frame*

This frame emerged in the process of identifying the framing devices that portrayed Ukraine as the principal aggressor in news stories covering the conflict between DPR and Ukraine. More specifically, recurrent patterns that were identified were keywords that emphasised the partaking of Ukrainian forces in acts of aggression against DPR. The section is divided into two parts that correspond to the encountered themes within the frame. One that relates to the criminality and barbarity of Ukrainian forces and another to Ukrainian nationalism. Both are linked but there are distinct features that make direct references to one and the other.

#### *5.1.1. The perception of criminality and barbarity*

The use of lexical choice of words, metaphors and hyperbolic expressions that stressed the criminal and barbaric nature of Ukrainian forces were found to be recurrent in many of the analysed articles. In the first sample, some examples are the use of the following expressions: “Ukrainian criminal command”, “the Criminal forces of Ukraine”, “deliberately carrying out criminal orders”<sup>15</sup> (DNR-News 2017u) which are used repetitively throughout some articles. The intention here is to highlight the criminal aspect of the Ukrainian forces and the way they implement orders. Interestingly, as mentioned in the literature review, scholars have found that the choice of words to represent Ukrainian forces is usually connoted in a negative way. Words such as ‘boeviki’ and ‘khunta’ are indeed recurrent in the Russian media and meant to underline their criminal intentions. These terms were not recurrent however and were only encountered once or twice when doing the analysis. Yet the expressions that were identified contribute to framing Ukrainian forces in a way that depicts their aggressivity.

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<sup>15</sup> “украинское преступное командование”, “преступные силы Украины” and “выполняя заведомо преступные приказы”

In a similar thread, there was a recurrence in the way that certain framing devices pointed to the barbarity of Ukrainian forces and government. Concretely, these emerged in news stories that covered the killing of innocent civilians in attacks perpetrated by Ukrainian soldiers. In article 29 of sample 1, a resident of DPR shares a personal testimony in which he evokes the pain of losing his mother in an attack and denounces the cruelty of the soldiers: “I too once loved Ukraine, but those creatures who came with weapons – let them get out of here”<sup>16</sup> (DNR-News 2017j). By calling them creatures, he draws a dehumanised picture of these soldiers, but he also argues that his love for Ukraine has faded away because of the violence that they inflict. This, in a way, substantiates his hatred but also provides the audience with the perspective of a man who did not have a pre-existing bias against Ukraine. This may indeed facilitate the conveyance of the soldiers being barbaric from two points of view. On the one hand, it allows the audience to side with the witness because of his impartiality with regards to Ukraine in the past. On the other hand, it may trigger feelings of empathy because of the proximity of the story to the audience in both physical and emotional terms.

Furthermore, the idea that Ukraine is undertaking genocidal actions against the population of DPR is found in this study. This contributes to amplifying the impression that Ukraine is deliberately perpetrating a mass killing of the ethnic population in Donbas. In article 7 of sample 2 a statement by Dennis Pushilin, the chairman of the People’s council of DPR, expresses that view: “The decision of Kiev to impose a full transport blockade on DPR and LPR, which was taken by the Ukrainian authorities is reckless and aimed at continuing the genocide of Donbas residents... This is not a response, as the Ukrainian press and politicians are claiming. This is a prolongation of the total isolation of Donbas and a genocide against its inhabitants”<sup>17</sup> (DNR-News 2017q). The terms ‘genocide’ and ‘isolation’ are used here as discourse structures to emphasise the perception of Ukraine as an aggressor that is purposely trying to exterminate the separatist states and its people. The accent is also placed on the ‘continuation’/ ‘prolongation’ of the so-called genocide, implying that this has been taking place for a long time. This helps reinforce the view that inhabitants are oppressed by Ukraine

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<sup>16</sup> “Я ведь когда-то тоже любил Украину, но те твари, которые пришли с оружием - пусть убираются отсюда”

<sup>17</sup> “Решение Киева о вводе полной транспортной блокады ДНР и ЛНР, принятое украинскими властями, безрассудно и направлено на продолжение геноцида жителей Донбасса... Это не ответные меры, как их пытаются преподнести украинская пресса и политикум. Это продолжение тотальной изоляции Донбасса и геноцид его жителей”

as they are killed and stripped of their rights. The audience may therefore feel concerned because these actions could possibly target them and their well-being.

### *5.1.2. The perception of Ukrainian nationalism*

The themes of nationalism, Nazism/fascism, extremism and radicalism are almost omnipresent in the analysed samples and tend to overlap. There is a strong association between the Ukrainian forces with nationalist groups such as Right Sector, which as mentioned in the findings corresponds to the image of Ukraine and Ukrainian forces as Nazi sympathisers. This is exemplified in article 4 of sample 1 that highlights the participation of Right Sector members in an attack perpetrated by the Ukrainian Security Forces and thus points to their cooperation. Here they are described as “Militants of the terrorist organisation Right Sector”<sup>18</sup> (DNR-News 2017e) and are altogether referred to as ‘Ukrainian death squads’<sup>19</sup>. These results are consistent with those found in previous studies. Namely, that by using the term ‘karateli’ a strong image is immediately transmitted to the audience in terms of cultural collective memory. As mentioned in the literature review, Osipian (2015) believes that this refers to the way the enemy of the Soviet was portrayed during the Second World War. This facilitates in turn the perception of Ukrainian forces involved in the war as the supreme enemy by inciting a judgement based on comparison.

One unanticipated finding was the recurrence of framing devices that evoked the theme of terrorism. The repetition of terms such as “terrorist attack”, “act of terrorism”, and “terrorist organization”<sup>20</sup> was mostly present when referring to an attack by Ukrainian forces, to the way the Ukrainian government acted or to the behaviour of the nationalist group Right Sector. This was especially detectable in sample 3 in which Ukraine is given the responsibility for killing Zakharchenko in an attack that is characterised of terrorist. Evoking terrorism as a feature that is representative to Ukraine, may lead to believe that Ukraine is purposely instigating terror in order to win the war against the separatist republics. While there were no prior studies that found terrorism to be a theme in the Russian media on Ukraine or the war in the Donbas, it can be assumed that this intentionally underlines the illegitimacy of Ukraine. Terrorism is widely perceived to be linked to criminality and may indeed create an emotional appeal among the audience because of the controversy that it evokes. This ties into the theme of extremism which

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<sup>18</sup> “боевики террористической организации ‘Правый сектор’”

<sup>19</sup> “украинских карателей”

<sup>20</sup> “теракта’, ‘террористический акт’ and ‘террористической организации”



was found to be widely used in the Russian media as an explanation for the events that led to the Euromaidan crisis. The fact that extremism is so often mentioned in the analysed articles suggests indeed that an analogy is drawn between the idea of extremist groups being at the cause of Euromaidan and these same groups leading the war in the Donbas.

The framing of Ukraine as an aggressor is done through a careful choice of themes that foster the image of a controversial state, led by its aspirations of nationalism to eradicate ethnic Russians in the Donbas. It can be suggested that one way of promoting a narrative that is sympathetic to separatism is by offering the public a ready-made image of Ukraine that is constructed on the basis of myth. Thus, the meaning and symbolism behind it generate the construction of a social reality that is supported by deeply established cultural values. This is in line with the theoretical perspective of Van Gorp (2007) observed in the literature review, who claims that culture is a principal driver in forming a frame.

## ***5.2. Discussing the disruptor frame***

One interesting finding as noted in the results, was the framing of Ukraine as a major disruptor in the war but also in general with regards to Russia's rapprochement to the West. Whereas, the literature suggests that the West is trying to interfere in Russia's affairs with Ukraine, the framing of Ukraine as a disruptor suggests otherwise. Rather the focus lies on Ukraine's deliberate intentions of aggravating the conflict and meddling in the relations between Russia and the EU/US, but also to point out the overall illegitimacy of its actions.

### *5.2.1. Aggravation of conflict & disruption of Russia's relations with the West*

In the first sample, Poroshenko is portrayed to be purposely escalating the conflict by meeting with German leader Angela Merkel. Claims that Poroshenko is deliberately prolonging the conflict in order to receive financial and political support from the West are indeed recurrent<sup>21</sup>. His goals of democratising the country is just a pretext to attract western financial investment. This is illustrated in article 9 of sample 1 that describes the meeting between Poroshenko and Angela Merkel as a trigger for the aggravation of the conflict. According to the statement in the article, it is meant as a threat and an intention to spread fear. This is amplified with the use of a metaphorical expression "To raise stakes (in the auction)"<sup>22</sup> and other keywords and

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<sup>21</sup> See articles 9 and 12 of sample 1.

<sup>22</sup> "Поднять ставки в торгах"

expressions such as “To frighten the world with the aggravation of the conflict”, “offensive”, “rattling weapons”, “to threaten with force”<sup>23</sup> (DNR-News 2017g) that emphasise the impact of their meeting. The narrative conventions used in this news story may relate to themes of Ukraine’s rapprochement to the West which as was noted in the literature is perceived as controversial due to the ‘orientalist’ angle used in Russian media. As stated by Horbyk (2015) this can be understood as the framing of the West/EU trying to influence Ukraine in the context of its wider geopolitical confrontation with Russia. Thus, Ukraine’s rapprochement with the West may indeed be perceived as controversial in the case of Poroshenko’s meeting with Merkel.

The idea of the West intending to pull Ukraine towards its side appears to be contested however in the data samples. Rather, Ukraine is stereotyped as the state which attempts to get closer to the EU for its own benefits (such as financial aid). A statement by Putin published in article 47 of sample 1 exemplifies that: “The first reason is that the Ukrainian leadership needs money today, and it is best to ‘extort’ money out of the European Union, individual European countries, the United States and international financial institutions by exposing itself as a victim”<sup>24</sup> (DNR-News 2017r). The words and metaphorical expression ‘raising the stakes’ used by Putin emphasise the idea that Ukraine is acting according to its financial interests and that it relies on the West’s support to wage war against the separatist republics. Whereas the West is not portrayed pejoratively in this example, his statement still evokes the idea that the West would be ready to help Ukraine because of its geopolitical confrontation with Russia.

Ukraine as a disruptor of the relation between Russia and the West or more specifically, the US, is also widely conveyed in data sample 1. This is explicitly expressed by the head of DPR in a published statement in which he comments on the situation at the front. More precisely, he connects Ukraine’s launching of the war on DPR with the fact that Russia and the US were starting to find common ground. He reinforces this idea by alluding to Ukraine’s inferiority complex as an underlining reason for meddling in their relations: “Ukraine does not shine”<sup>25</sup> (DNR-News 2017b). Ukraine is thus regarded as the principal factor in bringing about

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<sup>23</sup> “пугать мир обострением конфликта, “наступлением”, “бряцать оружием, угрожать силой”

<sup>24</sup> “Первая причина заключается в том, что украинскому руководству сегодня нужны деньги, деньги лучше всего вышибать из Евросоюза, отдельных стран Европы, из Соединенных Штатов и из международных финансовых институтов, выставляя себя в качестве жертвы агрессии”

<sup>25</sup> “...Украине ничего не светит”

conflictual relations as opposed to, the EU or the West in general, which is the usual narrative observed in Russian media as it was reported in the literature by Kalinina (2016).

### 5.2.2. *Uncooperativeness in the Minsk agreements & acts of sabotage*

Another aspect that tends to strengthen the perception of Ukraine as a disruptor is its unwillingness to cooperate with DPR and the separatist republics in the implementation of the Minsk agreements. These are indeed illustrated as crucial in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Thus, many articles cover stories and publish statements by government officials who point out that Ukraine has not been respecting the ceasefire agreements and is therefore not seeking to achieve peace nor engage in a dialogue<sup>26</sup>. Article 2 of sample 3 illustrates the immoral and unlawful conduct of Ukrainian forces for not willing to implement a ceasefire agreement in relation to the opening of the academic schoolyear. The lexical choice of words emphasises the impossibility of achieving cooperation with Ukraine and point to a rather fatalistic outcome: "...will not help"; "The situation is not easy and unfortunately not new"; "a tragic case"; "We learned to be realistic"; "...will not work"<sup>27</sup> (DNR-News 2018f). Other expressions and terms in article 26 of sample 1 that are used to stress Kiev's conscious decision of not cooperating are: "Consciously proceeds to refuse"; "undermine the purposes"; "unwillingness, unpreparedness"<sup>28</sup> (DNR-News 2017o). With the help of these framing devices, the message that is being transmitted appeals to feelings of hopelessness and disdain with regards to Ukraine's conduct in the war. This is contrasted with DPR's efforts to engage in a peaceful dialogue, which facilitates the perception of DPR as a lawful state. The notion that Ukraine is seeking to spread even more bloodshed may indeed be regarded negatively and trigger feelings of contempt.

While Ukraine is perceived to be 'passive' in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, it is also portrayed as actively undertaking acts of sabotage. The sample that covers articles in the aftermath of the death of Zakharchenko (sample 3) and the sample on the Kerch Strait incident (sample 4) are especially relevant because Ukraine is given the blame for both and tends to be represented as a saboteur. This is illustrated through the statement of Russia's representative to the OCSE, in which he connects Zakharchenko's murder with Ukraine's intention of stalling the negotiation process of the Minsk Agreements. In the same vein, the

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<sup>26</sup> See for example article 26 & 37 of sample 1 and article 6 of sample 2.

<sup>27</sup> "не поможет"; "Ситуация не простая и, к сожалению, не новая"; "трагический случай"; "Мы научились быть реалистами"; "не получится"

<sup>28</sup> "сознательно идет на отказ"; "подрывают цели"; "нежелании, неготовности"

crossing of the Kerch Strait by a Ukrainian ship is regarded as being an act of provocation and premeditative behaviour. Article 11 of sample 4 exemplifies the latter with the following sentences: “In particular, on the boat ‘Nikopol’, they found a document with the task to secretly move from Odesa to Berdyansk”<sup>29</sup> and “It follows that the Ukrainian sailors were well aware of the order of their passage”<sup>30</sup> (DNR-News 2018c). Additionally, Putin’s view on the issue is widely disseminated which sustains this perspective. His statements usually encompass words like: “Violation”; “provocation”; “calculated/planned provocation”; “a game of escalation/aggravation”<sup>31</sup> (DNR-News 2018g; DNR-News 2018h)

The perception of Ukraine as a disruptor is thus applicable to various dimensions. On the one hand, a geopolitical one in which it is portrayed as attempting to meddle in the relations between Russia and the ‘West’ (US or EU in this case), possibly because of its ‘inferiority complex’ but also as a way to exacerbate the situation of conflict. On the other hand, it also applies to a conflictual dimension in which Ukraine is a provocateur and seeks to maintain the conflict in place. The familiar theme of the EU as the instigator behind the conflict is contested in this case. A possible explanation for this lies in the internal and external factors that shape separatism. Internally, the separatist leadership will attempt to expose the nation from which it is trying to break away, as hostile and contentious. Thus, this frame may be interpreted as a way to promote Ukraine’s antagonistic intentions to justify DPR’s ambitions of separatism. This frame may in this regard emphasise a derogatory outlook on Ukraine rather than the EU.

### ***5.3. Discussing the weakness frame***

The last frame which was identified in connection with Ukraine, consists of perceiving it as a weak and incompetent state. The purpose of this frame is to underline Ukraine’s illegitimacy, possibly to expose its defeat in the war and therefore foster the endorsement of separatism.

#### *5.3.1. Internal division & incompetence of Ukraine*

The representation of conflicts within the government of Ukraine in news stories was widely observed in the analysis. Through this theme the media sought to portray Ukraine as internally divided with the purpose of increasing the perception of chaos and disorder in the way the

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<sup>29</sup> “В частности, на катере "Никополь" нашли документ с задачей скрытно перейти из Одессы в Бердянск”

<sup>30</sup> “Из этого следует, что украинские моряки были хорошо осведомлены о порядке его прохождения.” “It follows that the Ukrainian sailors were well aware of the order of their passage”

<sup>31</sup> “Нарушение”; “провокация”; “заготовленной заранее провокации”; “игра на обострение”

government operates. Surprisingly, article 14 of sample 1 concerned the view of a Ukrainian deputy on Ukrainian politicians, whom he considered to be ‘agents of the Kremlin’ and states that Ukraine is under the ‘effective control of Russia’. While this may engender confusion as to why the media is trying to disclose an unfavourable view on Russia, it can also be interpreted as a way to highlight the Ukrainian government’s dysfunctionalities because of the discord that exists from within. In another example, the Ukrainian ‘opposition bloc’ denounces the current government’s practices and actions which facilitates the transmission of the message that the government is divided. Their statement is highly illustrative of the idea that the Ukrainian government is faulty: “The government provokes new splits and conflicts and itself becomes a source of separatism.”<sup>32</sup> (DNR-News 2017n) More importantly however, the statement suggests that Ukraine is the principal source of conflict and is the one who brings about separatism.

Furthermore, internal political confrontation is depicted to make Ukraine look weak. By making it look weak, the separatist states have an advantage over Ukraine in the conflict because it increases the perception of their strength. Another analysed article exemplifies such internal division in an appeal made by a Ukrainian deputy who questions the decision of the government to place armoured vehicles at the entrance of Kiev. He makes the following statement:

“At the entrances of Kiev, armoured vehicles were already placed. What kind of circus is this? Against whom is the defence? Or is the government scared of protests? ... I appeal to the patriots of Ukraine to focus on countering the external enemy and not to get involved in this internal confrontation.”<sup>33</sup> (DNR-News 2018e).

The deputy’s rhetorical questions emphasise the absurdity of the situation but also underlines the inefficiency of the government by contrasting what should be done (focusing on the enemy) with what is being done (getting involved with issues inside the government). Overall, this contributes to the view that Ukraine’s actions are far from legitimate.

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<sup>32</sup> “власть провоцирует новые расколы и конфликты и сама становится источником сепаратизма”

<sup>33</sup> “На въездах в Киев уже стоят бронетранспортеры. Что это за цирк? От кого оборона ?! Или власть боится протестов? Уважаемые украинцы ... Я обращаюсь к патриотам Украины — сосредоточиться на противодействии внешнему врагу и не втягиваться во внутреннее противостояние”

In a parallel perspective, it was found in the data samples that Ukraine is recurrently portrayed as an incompetent state. Its flaws and fraudulence at the level of its military and government are highlighted in many situations. An example is one of the comments by the head of DPR military forces Eduard Basurin, who intends to expose the corruption that a Ukrainian commander is engaged in: “This indicates the complete incompetence of Sergei Naev, who for the sake loyalty to Poroshenko and love of self-promotion is ready to sacrifice his men to achieve dubious goals.”<sup>34</sup> (DNR-News 2018b). Corruption is widely perceived as an unethical practice and therefore may appeal to feelings of disdain with regards to Ukraine’s contempt for ethics in the war. The same theme applies with respects to Ukraine’s decision-making at the level of the government. This is illustrated by an article on the termination of the friendship treaty between Russia and Ukraine by Kiev, which highlights the consequences for Ukrainian citizens (DNR-News 2018d). The fact that this is quoted in a statement by a Ukrainian deputy reinforces the effect of internal division but also stresses Ukraine’s lack of ability to stand for its citizens as it is willing to sacrifice their well-being over relations with Russia.

Finally, the articles also tend to depict the Ukrainian Armed Forces as flawed and unskilled. Many news stories emphasise the loss of Ukrainian army men in numbers to amplify their position of weakness. They allude to their incompetence by characterising their actions as chaotic with expressions such as: “Friendly fire”; “uncoordinated action”<sup>35</sup> (DNR-News 2017d). They also point out the cowardice of Ukrainian soldiers in stories that describe the way they abandon their fellow army men in a battle: “Abandoned the dead and the wounded”<sup>36</sup> (DNR-News 2017f). By disseminating claims from Ukrainian deputies themselves and DPR’s commander in chief, Ukraine’s actions are undermined and discredited. Ukraine’s legitimacy is thus decreased, which is what the themes encountered in the Russian media on Ukraine in the literature convey. This frame contributes to reinforcing and shaping the views that the separatist republics are better off without Ukraine because of the hostile picture that it paints. This is thus an essential frame in the construction of the separatist narrative.

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<sup>34</sup> “Это говорит о полной некомпетентности Сергея Наева, который ради преданности к Порошенко и любви к самопиару готов жертвовать личным составом ради достижения сомнительных целей”

<sup>35</sup> “дружественного огня”; “несогласованные действия”

<sup>36</sup> “бросили погибших и раненых”

## 6. Frames pertaining to DPR

Two dominant frames were grouped together in this chapter in relation to the perception of DPR and its inhabitants. One that reflects the legitimacy of the separatist state and another that exposes the oppression DPR citizens are subjected to through victimisation.

### *6.1. Discussing the legitimacy frame*

The framing of DPR as a legitimate state was identified through various themes that related to the promotion of DPR as an independent state. Themes emerging from news stories that had a positive outlook on issues regarding DPR's actions in the war or in the lives of its citizens were primarily looked at.

#### *6.1.1. Performance in the war and as an independent state*

The ability of DPR to control the situation of conflict with Ukraine was mostly highlighted through devices that stressed DPR's advance on Ukraine with regards to its performance in the war. One notable framing device in article 25 of sample 2 was the repetition of the expression "Temporarily Kiev-controlled part of Donbas"<sup>37</sup> (DNR-News 2017h) to mark DPR's intention of regaining control over territory that is occupied by Ukraine. This may indeed give a sense of security to the public, as they claim to have the situation under control. There is also a tendency to portray soldiers of the republic as heroes by underlining their bravery, obedience and lawfulness in articles that cover war incidents<sup>38</sup>. Especially with regards to their disciplined and moral conduct such as respecting terms of the Minsk Agreements or displaying courage and determination in the war. This is usually contrasted with Ukraine not conforming to stipulated rules like ceasefires, or the unlawful use of guns which have been prohibited under the agreements. Additionally, the intention to depict DPR authorities as transparent and honest is visible through articles that seek to expose the names of Ukrainian soldiers who partook in unlawful attacks and shelling<sup>39</sup>. Other framing devices underline the ability of DPR to respond to critical situations in an appropriate and professional way. Thus, news stories that disseminate information on the successful prevention of terrorist attacks by the ministry of State Security

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<sup>37</sup> "временно подконтрольной Киеву части Донбасса"

<sup>38</sup> See for example article 21 of sample 1.

<sup>39</sup> See for example article 39 of sample 1.

or the rapidity of local authorities in responding to damages or other problematic situation, stresses the competence and the compliance of DPR authorities with their duties.

Furthermore, the theme of legitimacy appeared in the form of evidence that DPR is a state that operates on the basis of legal mechanisms and institutions. This was demonstrated at the level of the government but also in the field of education, health and external cooperation. In some instances, initiatives such as the opening of a representative office in Greece is characterised in one article as a milestone which highlights the progress DPR is making in officialising its status of independent republic. In other instances, the development of ties with Crimea are represented as a symbolic and significant achievement. One article emphasises the integration aspect between Crimea and Donbas by stressing the prospects of cooperation with Crimea and officialising it as “Integration Committee ‘Russia-Donbas’”<sup>40</sup> (DNR-News 2017a). The meaning behind further deepening relations with Crimea is significant because it symbolises detachment by DPR from Ukraine. What is more, the ‘reunification of Crimea with Russia’ is portrayed as a liberating and long-awaited event for the Crimean people. This may in turn help the audience visualise Crimea’s ‘reunification’ with Russia as a way to achieve DPR’s self-determination goals.

### *6.1.2. Advocacy for peace and cooperation*

As previously mentioned, transparency is one of the characteristics that contributes to shaping the image of DPR as a trustworthy and reliable state. This goes hand in hand with the intention to depict DPR as a state that wants to settle the conflict with Ukraine peacefully. On many occasions, statements by government officials are given in which they assure that they are actively looking to find a solution. The following statement by Pushilin illustrates the situation:

“...I personally addressed Martin Sajdik in writing with the list of all attacks, victims and destructions which followed after the contact group had already reached an agreement on the need to appeal for a ceasefire... That is, I appealed to him so that he takes considerable measures to resolve the situation.”<sup>41</sup> and “At night and presently, I

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<sup>40</sup> “Интеграционного комитета ‘Россия – Донбасс’”

<sup>41</sup> “...я лично обратился письменно к Мартину Сайдику с перечнем всех обстрелов, жертв и всех разрушений, которые последовали уже после того, как Контактная группа пришла к мнению о необходимости призыва о прекращении огня ... То есть я обратился к нему для того, чтобы он принял существенные меры, чтобы ситуация была урегулирована”<sup>41</sup>



am in contact with Alexander Hug – We are trying to find an effective mechanism to stop the escalation.”<sup>42</sup> (DNR-News 2017p)

Their commitment to deescalate tensions in the conflict is reflected so as to transmit the idea that the separatist republic is open and rightfully seeking to limit conflictual relations which may be perceived as morally acceptable. This inevitably implies that Ukraine, in contrary to DPR, is not looking to cooperate in order to settle the war because of its deliberate aggression. In addition to that, the quotes highlight the cooperation between Pushilin and the representatives of the OSCE contact group, demonstrating his impartiality and openness. He is thus portrayed as a reliable official of the DPR government.

### *6.1.3. Responsibility for the safety and protection of people*

In a parallel perspective, the promotion of DPR as a defender for human rights can be observed in multiple articles of data sample 2<sup>43</sup>. In the analysis, terms that emphasise the importance of human rights to DPR and expressions that underline the humane aspect of DPR’s actions are recurrent. In article 17 of sample 2 this is evoked in the context of prisoner exchange with Ukraine, with statements from the Commissioner for Human Rights. Special emphasis is placed on words like ‘Humanitarian sub-group’ and ‘commissioner for human rights’<sup>44</sup>, to emphasise the importance of respecting human rights to DPR. This is contrasted with Ukraine’s hostile behaviour which facilitates the visualisation of DPR as a lawful state versus Ukraine as an unlawful state. In the article it is indeed specified that Ukrainian security forces detain supporters of the republic daily. The same terms emerge in topics related to the protection of citizens, not only in DPR controlled territory but also in Kiev-controlled ones. The term ‘humanitarian’ is indeed used in the context of helping people who need assistance because of the war with Ukraine. This also extends to citizens who reside beyond the border of DPR on Ukraine’s territory. DPR is thus depicted as a mediator of sorts, who intends to relieve the suffering of Ukrainian and DPR residents whom Ukraine is neglecting and thus depriving of their rights.

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<sup>42</sup> “С ночи и сейчас я держу связь с Александром Хугом – мы пытаемся найти действенный механизм для приостановки эскалации”

<sup>43</sup> See articles 2, 8, 13, 15, 17, and 25.

<sup>44</sup> ‘гуманитарной подгруппы’, and ‘уполномоченный по правам человека’

More concretely, article 25 of sample 2 enhances Zakharchenko's image by announcing the leader will set a direct telephonic line (to be diffused on TV) with residents of Ukraine-held territories, for the implementation of a 'humanitarian programme' that strives for the 'reunification of the people of Donbas'. The following quote is illustrative of how the text appeals to feelings of empathy from the audience with regards to the precarity of certain residents, but also empathy for citizens outside of DPR that are supposed to be united as one people with residents of DPR:

“...We know that the economic blockade imposed by the radicals of the government of Ukraine has made your situation even more difficult and has already led to the rupture of social and economic ties. We all see this and are ready to help you in any way we can. To do this, we have launched a humanitarian programme to reunite the people of Donbas. We – are one people.”<sup>45</sup> (DNR-News 2017h)

This emotional appeal and the notion of fraternity evoked in this quote is one way to reinforce the credibility and reliability of DPR's leader which in turn serves to further legitimise his rule and the independence that the republic is claiming.

What does the legitimacy frame suggest in turn? Through the legitimacy frame the state authorities are able to claim the rights to a territory of their own along with the ability to express themselves politically and culturally. While internal politics need to be sympathetic to these claims in order to gain the support of the local population, external politics will determine the final outcome. In the case of DPR, Russia's influence in the conflict will have an impact because of factors that define its international position and relations with Ukraine. Russia's support is indeed visible in the analysed datasets but appears in the form of mediation, which will be discussed in chapter 7<sup>46</sup>. The legitimacy frame is a way to substantiate DPR's actions and existence by appealing to a specific crowd of people who relate to hardships because of the conflict with Ukraine. The framing relies on a careful choice of emotional appeals that are grounded in the desire and determination of people who want to see DPR break away from Ukraine.

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<sup>45</sup> “...Знаем, что введённая с подачи радикалов правительством Украины экономическая блокада сделала ваше положение ещё более тяжёлым и уже привела к разрыву социальных и экономических связей. Мы всё это видим и готовы оказать вам посильную помощь. Для этого мы запустили Гуманитарную программу по воссоединению народа Донбасса. Мы - один народ.”

<sup>46</sup> See discussion on the mediator frame

## ***6.2. Discussing the victim frame***

The framing of DPR citizens as victims was visible in the data samples. This is usually connected to Ukrainian offenses such as in the first sample the battle of Avdiivka, in the second sample the economic blockade and in the third sample the murder of their leader. As stated in the findings, the frame is non-existent for the analysed articles of the fourth sample. DPR civilians are mostly portrayed as innocent beings who have found themselves in a precarious situation because of the war with Ukraine.

### *6.2.1. The vulnerability of DPR citizens in the context of a humanitarian crisis*

Many news stories put the accent on the way that average citizens of DPR are affected by different factors in the conflict. This includes the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who find themselves forced to move from their homes because of the shelling that they are exposed to and other adversities of the war such as territorial division. Elderly people and children are in most cases illustrated as the most vulnerable ones in these situations. In one article, the repetition of terms such as “The status of immigrant” and “displaced person”<sup>47</sup> (DNR-News 2017c) emphasises the magnitude of the displacement of persons from Kiev-controlled territory to DPR-controlled territory because of territorial division. Steps to obtain the status of ‘internally displaced person’ are elaborated in detail in order to amplify the complexity of the process and the number of IDPs is highlighted. The theme of displaced persons seems to be a recurrent pattern in the articles encountered that portray DPR citizens as victims. The media also tends to link it to a humanitarian crisis. As an example, the lexical choice of words that is employed in article 53 of sample 1 conveys the idea that there is an ongoing crisis: “Displaced persons”; “situations of crisis”; “evacuated population”; “necessary medicine”; “heaters”; “warm things”; “psychological assistance”<sup>48</sup> (DNR-News 2017l). This may evoke a physical and emotional proximity among the audience to those civilians that are affected by the crisis because they could easily find themselves in the same situation.

Next to that, a connection is made between the DPR citizens unsafe situation with Ukraine’s intentions to discriminate against them. Thus, measures adopted by the Ukrainian government that have a discriminatory aspect are highlighted in the media as oppressive. Article 17 of

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<sup>47</sup> “статус переселенца” and “перемещенного лица”

<sup>48</sup> “вынужденных переселенцев”; “кризисных ситуациях”; “эвакуированного населения”; “необходимыми лекарственными”; “обогревателями”, “теплыми вещами”; “психологической помощи”

sample 1 conveys the views of the former mayor of Transcarpathia who stands against the adoption of the bill on state language.<sup>49</sup> In the article he uses the metaphor of building a wall ‘as Trump’ with the suggestion to demarcate a border with Ukraine in order to ‘protect’ themselves from Kiev’s policies of discrimination. The symbol of the wall is a culturally relevant meaning and makes indirect references to the topic of separatism, which may appeal to the collective understanding of the public. The desire to break away from Ukraine is thus reflected here as a result from Ukraine’s overt discrimination against non-ethnic Ukrainians. What is more, inhabitants living in separatist-held territories are also represented as victims on several occasions because they are deprived from receiving their pensions by Kiev. This may also be perceived as a discriminatory measure against civilians who must suffer the consequences of the war. The following statement by a Russian representative in article 38 of sample 1, emphasises the effect of discrimination with the use of hyperbolic expressions: “It also represents the actual rejection of the people living there and puts them on the brink of extinction”<sup>50</sup> (DNR-News 2017i). This further strengthens the construction of two distinct images: that of Kiev authorities as the villains and that of inhabitants on social welfare as victims.

Furthermore, the recurrence of one theme in the second sample, which is linked to the perception that a humanitarian crisis is going on, is the idea that citizens are undergoing a situation of genocide and isolation. Therefore, the need for humanitarian assistance is widely portrayed in the dataset in relation to the economic blockade imposed by Kiev. More importantly, however, the depiction of citizens of both DPR and Kiev territory as victims is facilitated by the assumption that they are exposed to human-rights neglect. This is also fostered through views exposed in the media by the Ukrainian opposition bloc which denounces Kiev’s discriminatory and oppressive actions against Ukrainian citizens. In their statement they demand the following conditions to be implemented by the Ukrainian government: “To stop the policy of discrimination against citizens, as well as the suppression of their rights in the humanitarian and public spheres”<sup>51</sup> (DNR-News 2017n). Thus, not only are DPR inhabitants victims, those of Ukraine are victims of their own government as well. By

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<sup>49</sup> The bill on state language is a law that was adopted by the Ukrainian government to make the Ukrainian language more prominent in public aspects of life. The bill is meant to make Ukrainian the official language for official duties (Roth 2019).

<sup>50</sup> “Он тоже означает фактический отказ от живущих там людей и ставит их на грань вымирания”

<sup>51</sup> “прекратить политику дискриминации в отношении граждан, а также подавление их прав в гуманитарной и общественной сферах”

conveying this view, it may amplify the understanding of the hardships both populations are exposed to and reinforce the prejudice of negativity towards the Ukrainian government in place.

The victim frame can thus be regarded as a frame that contributes to controlling the way separatism is shaped. In the data samples of this research, separatism is endorsed in a way that seeks, on the one hand, to consolidate the unity between people of Donetsk who can relate to the discrimination they have to endure because of Kiev's actions. On the other hand it conveys goals of self-determination by advocating for the rights of the citizens who find themselves oppressed and want to break free. This relates to the internal factors that shape separatism as reported in the literature. The domestic situation is indeed considered important in political terms in order to influence the success of separatism positively. In this case, the state who is in control of DNR-News is sympathetic to claims of territorial division and is thus conveying a theme that is sympathetic to separatist ambitions.

## 7. Frame pertaining to Russia

The last frame to be discussed concerns the representation and positioning of Russia in the conflict between Ukraine and the separatist state of DPR.

### *7.1. Discussing the mediator frame*

The study has found that Russia is commonly represented as a mediator in the data samples. More specifically, Russia is perceived as a state that stands in between Ukraine and the separatist states to monitor the situation and seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. One frequently conveyed criterion is its irreproachable impartiality. A significant number of articles also contained statements by Russian politicians and representatives (Putin among others) to convey their views. This frame corresponds to one of the pre-existing themes in the Russian media observed in the literature.

#### *7.1.1. Russia as a role model*

Russia being an important supporting actor behind the separatist states, it can be assumed that it is portrayed positively in the analysed articles. While this was indeed the case, it was also widely represented as a model the separatist republics should be based on. This was especially true in the context of Russia's reunification with Crimea. The subject on Crimea was very often evoked and analogies were drawn between the separatist states becoming independent from Ukraine and Crimea's successful reunification with Russia. In sample 2, Crimea's reunification is a recurrent topic and is mostly illustrated as a positive event and a celebration. Article 5 of sample 2, covering the celebration of the third anniversary of the reunification, refers to a photo exhibition named "Crimean Spring"<sup>52</sup> (DNR-News 2017a). This may reflect a symbolic cultural achievement that has liberated the Crimean people. On top of that, Russia is represented as an essential link for DPR's integration plans with Crimea. The success of Russia's reunification with Crimea is indeed compared in article 14 of sample 2 with the potential success of DPR's economic reorientation towards Russia (DNR-News 2017t). It can thus be said that Russia's reunification with Crimea may serve as a model and an inspiration for the separatist republics to achieve their independence from Ukraine. What is less clear is whether it implies that the republics should 'reunify' with Russia.

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<sup>52</sup> "Крымская весна"

In another example, article 19 of sample 4 covers the adoption of a new law regarding the formation of DPR's constitution. It declares that DPR leans on the Russian model as a source of inspiration for its own government: "For the development of the document, the experience of the Russian Federation was taken into account".<sup>53</sup> There is thus a positive outlook on the way Russia functions as a state, which is stereotyped as being a role model for DPR. Following that line of reasoning, Russia is also depicted as the 'motherland' in several instances which reinforces the idea that it serves as a model for DPR. The symbol of motherland strongly depicts the ties between Russia and DPR and may also suggest that its existence is in part 'allowed' by Russia. Zakharchenko evokes that idea in article 11 of sample 2 by stating: "This is our common holiday and most importantly, it is a holiday of our Motherland – Russia"<sup>54</sup>, while talking about the anniversary of Russia's reunification with Crimea (DNR-News 2017v). There is also a sense of unity among the separatist republics of the Donbas, Crimea and Russia. This may indeed be linked to the notion of fraternity among the people of Donbas and Russians, which as stated in the literature is conveyed in the Russian media to promote the idea of separatism.

### *7.1.2. Russia as an advocate for peace and as a protector of Donbas citizens*

As mentioned previously, impartiality seems to be an important stereotype that is attributed to Russia. The theme of impartiality allows the audience to perceive Russia as an actor that only seeks to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This is emphasised by the statement of the Russian representative to the OSCE: "Kiev's actions pose an increasingly acute threat to residents of Donbas and soldiers of the Ukrainian army."<sup>55</sup> (DNR-News 2017k). By specifying the threat that Kiev represents to citizens of Donbas but also to Ukrainian soldiers, he denotes his concern for both sides and thus remains objective by placing the focus on ceasing the violence for the sake of those involved in this war. The stereotype of the 'peace mediator' is thus an emerging theme that plays in favour of Russia. In another example, a Russian representative of the contact group makes direct reference to Russia's impartiality on the topic of the blockade: "Russia has always considered its duty to be impartial mediator in order to overcome the conflict in Donbas. However, with regards to the transport blockade, it is

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<sup>53</sup> "при разработке документа учитывался опыт Российской Федерации"

<sup>54</sup> "Это наш общий праздник и самое главное – это праздник нашей родины — России"

<sup>55</sup> "Действия Киева представляют все более острую угрозу для жителей Донбасса и военнослужащих украинской армии"

impossible to be impartial.”<sup>56</sup> (DNR-News 2017i). Russia’s impartiality as a strong principle is contrasted here against Ukraine’s bias in conducting a blockade. This enhances the image of Russia as being driven by ethical principles and values to the contrary of Ukraine, who acts unethically.

In the same vein, Russia tends to be portrayed as an actor whose duty is to protect citizens of Donbas. This ties into the theme that is encountered in Russian media regarding the depiction of Russia acting as a protector towards ‘compatriots’ abroad, and thus Russian speakers or ethnic Russians. Russian intentions to be a protector are indeed visible in article 45 of sample 1 that covers an investigative report conducted by Russian media RBK on Russia’s temporary recognition of DPR and LPR passports: “The decision to recognise the documents of the LPR and DPR is temporary and necessary, since it shouldn’t be allowed to force people who find themselves in a difficult life situation, to live just like in a reserve and without the right to leave.”<sup>57</sup> (DNR-News 2017s). Here, the fact that passport recognition is done out of necessity is emphasised and justifies Russia’s duty to help citizens that find themselves ‘trapped’. Russia is thus represented as the saviour and protector of these people. While the specific topic of ethnicity and compatriots is not evoked, Russia shows it is committed to its traditional values of ‘saving’ a fraternal people from a potential ‘humanitarian catastrophe’.

Finally, the idea that Russia’s duty is to save the people of DPR from a humanitarian catastrophe is also recurrent in a statement by the Russian foreign ministry: “We call on the leadership of Ukraine not to turn the situation into a humanitarian catastrophe and to finally proceed to the strict implementation of its obligations under the set of measures...”<sup>58</sup> (DNR-News 2017m). By calling on the Ukrainian authorities to act, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs is trying to reason Ukraine to act in the respect of rules and therefore positions itself as a judicious arbitrator and an advocate for a peaceful outcome. From a conflict angle, the news values which are transmitted is that Russia’s support for DPR evokes its role as a peaceful and responsible mediator seeking alternative solutions to resolve the conflict.

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<sup>56</sup> “Россия всегда считала и считает своим долгом быть беспристрастным посредником в преодолении конфликта на Донбассе. Однако применительно к транспортной блокаде беспристрастным быть нельзя”

<sup>57</sup> “Решение о признании документов ЛНР и ДНР временное и вынужденное, так как нельзя заставлять людей, оказавшихся в сложной жизненной ситуации, жить как в резервации, без права выезда”

<sup>58</sup> “Призываем руководство Украины не доводить ситуацию до гуманитарной катастрофы и приступить, наконец, к неукоснительному выполнению собственных обязательств по ‘Комплексу мер’...”



The mediator frame is thus effective in representing Russia's intentions as harmless and more importantly as a potential factor that could help the separatist republics in the conflict with Ukraine. By being portrayed as such, it shows that Russia recognises the separatist struggle and understands the ambitions of self-determination. Nevertheless, this frame also indicates that Russia is more than a mediator. Its role of 'motherland' is crucial in determining what course separatism will be taking. It is the republics' point of reference and while it protects them, it also plays a role in influencing and controlling them. This corresponds to the themes in the literature review on external factors that influence separatism. Thus, considering Russia's international position in the conflict and its choice to stand behind the separatist republics, it can be said that the mediator frame contributes to shaping and influencing the course that separatism will take.

The discussion of the emerging frames has demonstrated that they all contribute in their own way to the construction of the separatist narrative of the local state-controlled DNR-News. On the one hand, the aggressor, disruptor and weakness frames all tend to portray Ukraine negatively and highlight its most unfavourable attributes in different contexts. Separatism may in this regard, appear more favourable for DPR. On the other hand, the legitimacy and victim frames function as bases for claims of self-determination and justify the rightful demands of DPR citizens. The frames portray them as oppressed, yet strong enough culturally and politically to break away from Ukraine. Finally, in the mediator frame, Russia acts as an extension of DPR and a guiding power towards separatist goals.

## 8. Conclusion

This study set out to determine the way in which the state-controlled media of separatist-held territory of Donetsk have framed the separatist narrative. A qualitative content methodology was conducted to analyse a selection of articles that were chosen and sampled according to four different time-frames over the years 2017 and 2018. These periods corresponded to events that led to heightened tensions in the conflict between Ukraine and DPR, namely: ‘the battle of Avdiivka’, ‘the economic blockade’, ‘the death of Zakharchenko’ and the ‘Kerch Strait incident’. Six frames were inductively reconstructed with the help of a framing analysis and grouped into three categories according to their relation with Ukraine, DPR and Russia. With regards to Ukraine the following frames were found: ‘Ukraine as an aggressor’; ‘Ukraine as a disruptor’; ‘weakness and incompetence of Ukraine’. Frames related to DPR consisted in ‘legitimacy of DPR’ and ‘DPR citizens as victims’. Lastly, the frame that emerged in relation with Russia was ‘Russia as a mediator’. Variations in the framing were noted for each frames in accordance to the event samples as specified in the findings. However, no particular or relevant change in the framing was identified for the amount of days selected within each sample.

The results of this investigation have provided significant insights into the way that the emerging frames contribute to the shaping of the separatist discourse by the local state-controlled news website DNR-News. First, this study has found that generally, frames that tend to lessen Ukraine’s legitimacy as a state are usually employed as seen in chapter 5. By decreasing its legitimacy, the media may indirectly help boost that of DPR in order to achieve their ambitions of separatism. Ukrainian troops and armed forces involved in the war are indeed stereotyped as dangerous extremists and nationalist fanatics, which strengthens the perception of Ukraine as an aggressor. One of the most interesting findings to emerge concerned the perception of Ukraine acting as a disruptor, which was not encountered in the literature. Thus, the traditional orientalist lens of the West being at the cause of the crisis between Ukraine and Russia is not present in the findings. Rather, the disruptor frame portrays Russia and the West as trying to find a common ground that is being disturbed by Ukraine’s actions. The weakness frame also contributes to decreasing its legitimacy in the eyes of DPR local inhabitants. This reinforces a narrative that is sympathetic to claims of separatism and may push citizens to endorse it.

Second, this research has shown that DPR is actively conveying an image of legitimacy by portraying itself as a lawful state that follows guidelines and rules in the war in contrast with Ukraine. The legitimacy frame exposes DPR as a state that functions on the basis of legitimate mechanisms such as the rule of law. Through this frame it actively seeks to demonstrate that it has the capacity to take on Ukraine in the war and therefore highlights its performance in terms of combat but also as a well-functioning independent state. This suggests that it wants to appear as a stable and reliable state in the eyes of its citizens. The transmission of a such a frame may be a way to gain their trust and thus their support in order to carry out their goals of separatism. It also attempts to boost its image by accepting its responsibilities to protect its people and by demonstrating it abides by values and ethics such as transparency and peace. The right to ‘exist’ as a separatist state is thus substantiated through the exhibition of rightful actions that DPR partakes in. The victim frame adds to that by communicating a sense of unity and fraternity among DPR citizens who have found themselves victims of the war. A special accent is placed on the oppression that they are subjected to because of Ukraine’s unlawful actions. Through these two frames, DPR can be seen as fulfilling its duty to advocate for the rights that citizens of the separatist republic are entitled to.

Finally, it helps us understand the importance of disseminating Russia’s role in the conflict with Ukraine and its support for the republics, as conveyed by DNR-News to its audience. The findings have indeed confirmed that Russia is a major inspiration behind separatist ambitions and that also implies that its interests are encompassed in the way separatism will eventually be shaped. The mediator frame has demonstrated that through Russia’s mediation, the separatist republics can find the support to counter Ukraine. However, it also depicts Russia as more than just a mere mediator: Russia represents the solid foundation in which the separatist struggle finds its roots. It can be considered a role model which maps out the direction that separatism will take. In the articles covered, DNR-News goes so far as to characterise Russia as a motherland to Donbas separatist republics which illustrates this idea.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the separatist narrative is shaped and framed in the state-controlled media predominantly through the demonization and delegitimization of Ukraine which is also observed in the case of the Russian media. While this may imply that DPR follows Russia’s lead in this respect, it does not support the accusations Russia traditionally makes to the West regarding its involvement in the conflict. This raises the

question of whether Russia fully controls the way DPR is disseminating information and thus framing the separatist narrative. This may require further investigation in order to understand the extent of Russia's influence and potential manipulation in the way the separatist cause is endorsed by the breakaway republics. Further research could thus possibly examine more closely the kinds of information strategies such as disinformation techniques that may be employed. The framing of Russia as a mediator has also revealed the significance of Russia's involvement in and backing of the separatist states, which lies beyond simple mediation. This may indeed indicate it has a strong position of influence and that it has interests that are at stake in the conflict. What is more, the study has shown that claims to self-determination of the separatist republic of DPR have a role in shaping the separatist narrative in the media, which is done through the legitimacy frame. However, this frame does not necessarily indicate DPR's relative detachment from Russia as the latter is constantly evoked in subjects that touch upon DPR's legitimacy as an independent state.

In conclusion, it can be said that state-controlled DNR-News has framed the separatist narrative with the help of two dominant approaches. One that is inclusive of Russia by representing it as an actor primarily responsible for ensuring DPR's continuous existence and the success of its separatist ambitions. In a different approach, DPR's independence is marked as a significant goal even though Russia has not yet recognised its independence and it does so by claiming the right to self-determination. There is thus an attempt at finding a right balance between the two and in turn, render the fight for the separatist cause more plausible.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I: Map of Donbas, Eastern Ukraine



Figure 1: Map of conflict area in Donbas, Eastern Ukraine in 2017 (Fischer, 2019)

## Appendix II: List of selected articles

### Sample 1 (timeframe): Battle of Avdiivka

Number	Date	Time	Headline
1	29/01/2017	09:49	В аппарате омбудсмена ДНР рассказали о получении статуса вынужденного переселенца
2	29/01/2017	12:26	В штабе "АТО" признали факт агрессии ВСУ под Авдеевкой, и назвали это "контратакой"
3	29/01/2017	12:47	ВСУ атаковали позиции ДНР в районе Авдеевки, после чего открыли огонь из артиллерии – Басурин
4	29/01/2017	13:00	Басурин рассказал о заградотрядах "Правого сектора", стреляющих в спину ВСУ в ходе атаки под Авдеевкой
5	29/01/2017	18:09	ВСУ готовятся обстрелять подконтрольные Киеву территории Донбасса из РСЗО "Град" — командование
6	29/01/2017	18:30	За день украинские силовики потеряли 20 человек убитыми, свыше 30 получили ранение
7	29/01/2017	21:10	В Киеве прошло факельное шествие в годовщину битвы с советскими солдатами
8	30/01/2017	15:58	Басурин: Потери украинской армии убитыми и ранеными за сутки превысили 65 человек
9	30/01/2017	16:27	Геращенко связала обострение в Донбассе с переговорами Порошенко и Меркель
10	30/01/2017	16:45	Ясиноватский машиностроительный завод получил повреждения при обстреле со стороны ВСУ
11	30/01/2017	17:05	Янукович решил не приезжать на допрос в Киев из-за угрозы его жизни
12	30/01/2017	17:19	Меркель выразила озабоченность ситуацией на линии разграничения в Донбассе
13	30/01/2017	18:53	Киев пообещал выплатить пенсии жителям Донбасса
14	30/01/2017	19:04	Семенченко: Большая часть украинских политиков является агентами Кремля
15	30/01/2017	20:17	В результате обстрела ВСУ обесточена Донецкая фильтровальная станция
16	30/01/2017	22:10	ВСУ потеряли убитыми 10 боевиков, еще 15 ранены при попытке атаковать позиции ДНР под Ясиноватой
17	30/01/2017	17:07	В Закарпатье предложили построить стену на границе с Украиной
18	31/01/2017	08:29	Басурин: ВСУ за двое суток потеряли убитыми и ранеными в Донбассе свыше 150 человек
19	31/01/2017	08:46	В ДНР готовы ввести режим тишины в районе Авдеевки
20	31/01/2017	09:22	В Макеевке за два дня обстрелами повреждены больница и 16 домов
21	31/01/2017	09:35	ВСУ предприняли попытку захвата позиций ДНР под Ясиноватой, потеряв более 45 человек
22	31/01/2017	10:41	МГБ ДНР предотвратило террористический акт, организованный спецслужбами Украины
23	31/01/2017	11:15	ДНР поднимет в Минске вопрос безопасности семьи военнослужащего, которого СБУ вербовала для теракта
24	31/01/2017	12:51	ВСУ предприняли попытку прорыва позиций сил ДНР на юге, есть погибшие и раненые
25	31/01/2017	12:57	Завербованный СБУ военнослужащий ДНР рассказал о подготовке теракта на территории Республики
26	31/01/2017	13:09	Песков: Киев не может контролировать "самостоятельные формирования" в Донбассе
27	31/01/2017	14:33	Пушилин назвал "пиаром на крови" заявление Порошенко о контактной группе по Донбассу
28	31/01/2017	15:31	Бронетехника ВСУ пошла на прорыв позиций армии ДНР в Новоазовском районе — СМИ
29	31/01/2017	16:12	СКР возбудил уголовное дело по факту обстрела Донецка и Макеевки
30	31/01/2017	17:56	Идите, смотрите и вот этим тварям покажите!" - житель Донецка пригласил журналистов в квартиру своей погибшей матери
31	31/01/2017	19:34	Лукашевич: "Действия Киева угрожают жителям Донбасса и военнослужащим ВСУ"
32	31/01/2017	20:26	Александр Захарченко приехал на передовые позиции армии ДНР
33	31/01/2017	20:42	Ученые ДонНУ приступили к созданию словаря и учебников донецкого диалекта русского языка
34	31/01/2017	21:11	Басурин: ВСУ потеряли 27 человек убитыми и десятки ранеными при попытках захватить Коминтерново



35	01/02/2017	15:44	Александр Хуг вместе с российскими представителями в СЦКК попали под обстрел в районе ДФС
36	01/02/2017	18:06	Энергоснабжение Верхнекальмиусской фильтровальной станции восстановлено
37	01/02/2017	18:54	Никонорова назвала циничным нежелание Киева вести переговоры с Донбассом после обострения ситуации на фронте
38	01/02/2017	19:16	Грызлов: невыплата пенсий и экономическая блокада Донбасса обрекает жителей на вымирание
39	01/02/2017	19:22	Глава ДНР назвал имена командиров ВСУ, причастных к обстрелам Донецка и Макеевки
40	02/02/2017	12:45	Мариупольская чиновница притворилась жительницей Авдеевки, чтобы на камеру поблагодарить ВСУ
41	02/02/2017	13:01	131 горняка эвакуируют из обстрелянной ВСУ шахты "Щегловская-Глубокая"
42	02/02/2017	13:33	Украинские силовики за сутки 1617 раз обстреляли территорию ДНР
43	02/02/2017	14:54	В ДНР запрещен ввоз свинины и живых свиней из Украины
44	02/02/2017	16:20	Захарченко: Референдум о вступлении в НАТО станет окончательным отказом Киева от Донбасса
45	02/02/2017	18:16	Расследование РБК: Как в России признали паспорта ДНР и ЛНР
46	02/02/2017	18:25	ВСУ обстреляли пожарный автомобиль МЧС ДНР в районе шахты имени Засядько
47	02/02/2017	18:50	Путин объяснил провокации Киева нуждой "вышибать" деньги из-за рубежа
48	03/02/2017	10:24	Пушилин обратился к Сайдику с призывом принять экстренные меры для прекращения огня в Донбассе
49	03/02/2017	11:13	1168 абонентов Донецка и Макеевки остались без газа в результате обстрелов ВСУ за сутки
50	03/02/2017	15:05	Киев с эскалацией конфликта активизировал в ДНР работу корректировщиков и диверсантов – МГБ
51	03/02/2017	15:11	Песков опроверг слухи о признании Россией паспортов ДНР и ЛНР
52	03/02/2017	17:43	Гиви подтвердил слухи о своём ранении под Донецком
53	03/02/2017	19:34	МЧС ДНР выделило для вынужденных переселенцев Донецка обогреватели, воду и средства личной гигиены

Sample 2 (timeframe): Economic embargo

Number	Date	Time	Headline
1	15/03/2017	09:40	Александр Захарченко объяснил, для чего был подписан указ о госгранице
2	15/03/2017	11:14	В ДНР начался процесс регистрации пациентов из подконтрольной Киеву части Донбасса
3	15/03/2017	13:11	Турчинов: Все дороги, ведущие к линии соприкосновения, будут перекрыты до 13:00
4	15/03/2017	14:48	В ДНР начали работу пункты выдачи материальной помощи по гумпрограмме ко Дню Победы
5	15/03/2017	16:00	Александр Захарченко прибыл с официальным визитом в Республику Крым
6	15/03/2017	16:41	Лавров назвал блокаду Донбасса противоречащей совести и здравому смыслу
7	15/03/2017	17:21	Пушилин прокомментировал решение Киева о полной транспортной блокаде ДНР
8	15/03/2017	20:42	МИД РФ призвал Киев не доводить ситуацию в Донбассе до гуманитарной катастрофы
9	16/03/2017	10:07	Захарченко о блокаде: Пусть делают, что хотят – Украина в наши планы не входит
10	16/03/2017	10:20	Бойцы ВСУ пожаловались телеканалу "Lifeneews" на президента Порошенко
11	16/03/2017	11:26	Захарченко назвал Россию родиной для Крыма и Донбасса
12	16/03/2017	14:53	Украинские партии "Свобода", "Правый сектор" и "Национальный корпус" заявили об объединении
13	16/03/2017	15:01	"Горячая линия" Минобрнауки ДНР начала работу в рамках программы воссоединения народа Донбасса
14	16/03/2017	16:30	17 марта в Ялте Глава ДНР расскажет о переориентации экономики Донбасса на Россию
15	17/03/2017	12:11	В Крыму создали интеграционный комитет "Россия — Донбасс"
16	17/03/2017	12:50	Суд ДНР заочно приговорил сотрудника МВД Украины к 14 годам лишения свободы
17	17/03/2017	18:21	ДНР и Киев на встрече гумподгруппы договорились обменять всех установленных лиц
18	17/03/2017	18:42	Жители подконтрольной Киеву части Донбасса получают в ДНР услугу денежных переводов на КПП
19	17/03/2017	18:57	ДНР 21 марта откроет представительство в Греции, третье по счету в Европе
20	18/03/2017	15:22	"Оппозиционный блок" призвал власти Украины прекратить политику дискриминации граждан
21	18/03/2017	15:30	Украинский оккупант рассказал свою историю участия в "АТО"
22	19/03/2017	15:42	В Крым приехала делегация европейских и украинских политиков
23	19/03/2017	18:49	Активисты "Азова" вынесли "Сбербанку" в Краматорске "последнее китайское предупреждение"
24	20/03/2017	10:57	Украинские патриоты Чорновола и Скрыпина поругались в эфире из-за "дотационного Донбасса"
25	20/03/2017	18:00	Глава ДНР проведет 22 марта прямую линию с жителями подконтрольной Киеву территории Донбасса
26	20/03/2017	18:35	Командование ДНР назвало офицеров ВСУ, причастных к обстрелам Донецка, Ясиноватой и Горловки в марте

Sample 3 (timeframe): Death of DPR leader

Number	Date	Time	Headline
1	31/08/2018	12:06	На Украине приказали уничтожить французскую вакцину из-за маркировки на русском языке
2	31/08/2018	12:47	Пушилин: "Школьное" перемирие в Донбассе не приведет к полному прекращению огня со стороны ВСУ
3	31/08/2018	17:48	В Раде заявили о готовности "уничтожить" любой флот на Азове за пять минут
4	31/08/2018	19:03	Пушилин: За организацией убийства Захарченко стоит Украина
5	31/08/2018	20:42	Путин назвал подлым убийство Александра Захарченко
6	01/09/2018	08:09	Дмитрий Трапезников заявил о неизменности курса на интеграцию с Россией
7	01/09/2018	08:51	В ЛНР объявили траур по погибшему в ДНР Александру Захарченко
8	01/09/2018	09:53	В Совфеде России прокомментировали убийство Александра Захарченко
9	01/09/2018	12:46	Украинская армия начала подготовку к наступлению в Донбассе
10	01/09/2018	16:25	Волкер: США готовы пойти гораздо дальше "Джавелинов" в вопросах поставок оружия Украине
11	01/09/2018	17:29	Советник Захарченко рассказал подробности взрыва в кафе "Сепар"
12	02/09/2018	08:27	Обращение Владислава Суркова в связи с гибелью Главы ДНР
13	02/09/2018	08:57	Церемония прощания с Главой ДНР Александром Захарченко в Донецке. Онлайн-трансляция
14	02/09/2018	13:52	В ЛНР опасаются, что под видом ремонта КПП украинская армия подведет технику
15	02/09/2018	14:14	Зюганов призвал Россию решительно ответить на убийство Захарченко и признать ДНР и ЛНР
16	02/09/2018	16:04	Жители ДНР проводили Александра Захарченко в последний путь
17	03/09/2018	10:55	"Это террористы!": На Украине шокированы словом "повстанцы" в репортаже ВВС из Донецка
18	03/09/2018	11:05	Наташа Королева подала в суд на Украину
19	03/09/2018	12:39	"Нет человека – нет проблемы": "Московский Комсомолец" перечислил "положительные" моменты убийства Захарченко
20	03/09/2018	18:01	Лукашевич: Убийство Захарченко подтвердило саботаж Киевом Минского процесса
21	04/09/2018	16:26	Басурин рассказал о планах украинской ударной группировки во время наступления на юге ДНР
22	04/09/2018	15:31	Андрей Парубий назвал Гитлера "самым большим демократом"
23	04/09/2018	17:53	В Раде обвинили Россию в атаке на украинцев "через телеэкраны"
24	04/09/2018	19:40	Жириновский: Конфликт в Донбассе нужен Порошенко
25	05/09/2018	08:05	На Украине назвали опасность прекращения договора о дружбе с Россией
26	05/09/2018	10:47	"Никакого оптимизма": Константин Затулин озвучил печальный прогноз для Донбасса на ближайшие 5 лет
27	05/09/2018	15:11	Чеснаков: Единственным легитимным органом в ДНР является Народный Совет во главе с Пушилиным
28	05/09/2018	16:20	Пушилин в Минске потребовал запретить деятельность украинских ДРГ в Донецке

Sample 4 (timeframe): Kerch Strait incident

Number	Date	Time	Headline
1	25/11/2018	12:22	Три корабля ВМСУ нарушили границу России в Черном море – ФСБ
2	25/11/2018	13:59	Керченский пролив закрыли для гражданских судов после провокации Киева
3	26/11/2018	08:12	Украина потребовала от России вернуть "захваченное военное имущество"
4	26/11/2018	11:01	Спецназ ФСБ охраняет экипажи задержанных украинских кораблей в Керчи
5	26/11/2018	14:27	: В Харькове украинские националисты устроили пожар на территории консульства РФ
6	26/11/2018	15:50	На въездах в Киев появилась бронетехника ВСУ
7	26/11/2018	18:20	Стали известны подробности указа Порошенко о введении военного положения
8	27/11/2018	15:58	"Их даже не били!": На Украине обвинили в предательстве экипажи катеров ВМС Украины
9	27/11/2018	16:22	Безсонов: "Украинские боевики отказались убивать своих братьев в Донбассе"
10	27/11/2018	17:48	Украинские пограничники в аэропортах Киева за сутки не пустили в страну более 70 граждан РФ
11	27/11/2018	19:52	ФСБ обнародовала трофейные документы, изъятые у украинских моряков
12	28/11/2018	13:10	"Убирайтесь из Украины": Порошенко пригрозил Путину и потребовал присутствия кораблей НАТО в Черном море
13	28/11/2018	15:32	Путин прокомментировал инцидент в Черном море
14	28/11/2018	15:49	Путин назвал инцидент в Керченском проливе нечистоплотной игрой Киева
15	29/11/2018	13:42	"Забирайте всё!": Глава Генической РГА Воробьев готов отдать ВСУ все базы отдыха Арабатской стрелки
16	29/11/2018	17:40	Киев ввел ограничения на пересечение границы с Крымом
17	30/11/2018	15:13	Басурин анонсировал декабрьское наступление ВСУ под Мариуполем
18	30/11/2018	17:32	Украинские силовики ограничили въезд в ДНР и ЛНР для иностранцев
19	30/11/2018	19:07	Парламент ДНР запретил совмещать должности Главы Республики и председателя Совета министров
20	30/11/2018	19:42	Трамп отказался от встречи с Путиным из-за Украины, заявили в Белом доме

### Appendix III: Summary of the framing matrices

#### Sample 1 (timeframe): Battle of Avdiivka

Frames	Dominant presentation features	Dominant discourse features	Dominant narrative conventions
<b>DPR citizens as victims</b>	Images illustrating the vulnerability of DPR civilians, especially older people. The emergent themes were: internally displaced persons & innocent victims of the war	Keyword patterns that evoke the precarity of internally displaced persons; the vulnerability of pensioners and the portrayal of the situation as a humanitarian crisis	Stereotyping the Ukrainian government as the villain for discriminating against pensioners and non-Ukrainians; News values that evoke the proximity angle by emphasising that civilian life and primary needs are at risk because of Ukrainian attacks; cultural themes appealing to emotions and feelings of empathy through victim testimonies & evoking injustice caused by Ukrainian government
<b>Ukraine as an aggressor</b>	Images representing the destruction caused by Ukrainian forces and symbolising their aggressivity by displaying damaged properties and heavy Ukrainian artillery	Keyword patterns that compare the group 'Right Sector' (правого сектора) to a terrorist organisation; Repetitive use of the term "каратели" to describe the group; Use of lexical group of words/ metaphors / hyperpolitic expressions emphasising the criminality, threat and aggression that the Ukrainian army represents	Stereotyping the Ukrainian army as collaborators of the Right Sector, criminals and violators of the law & Poroshenko as a murderer and a conspirer; News values that evoke the weight angle by emphasising the consequences of Ukrainian military attacks and the conflict angle by underlining their aggressions as unlawful; Cultural themes that underline the immorality of the Ukrainian army and the controversy around the themes of Ukrainian nationalism ('Right Sector')
<b>Ukraine as a disruptor</b>	Image depicting the complicity between Angela Merkel and Petro Poroshenko; Headline containing statement of DPR foreign minister emphasising Ukraine's unwillingness to negotiate	Keyword patterns that evoke Ukraine's intention to disrupt the relations between the 'West' and Russia and unwillingness to cooperate with DPR on the Minsk agreements	Stereotyping Poroshenko as an opportunistic figure who is using the West's support to his advantage in the conflict with DPR and as a saboteur of Russia-West relations; News values evoking the conflict angle by illustrating Poroshenko's attempt to aggravate the conflict; Cultural themes that highlight the controversy and immorality of Ukraine to get closer to the West
<b>Russia as the mediator</b>	Headlines containing statements by Russian representatives and politicians who are raising concerns for citizens in Donbas	Keyword patterns that emphasise Russia's role to help citizens of Donbas who are in a precarious situation because of the war; evoking the need for humanitarian help; and Russia as an impartial actor	Stereotyping Russian representative to OSCE as a peace mediator and Russia as the protector and saviour; News values evoking the conflict angle by showing Russia's support to DPR as a way to seek alternative solutions to the conflict; Cultural themes that highlight Russia's duty to help ethnic Russians abroad and save them from a humanitarian disaster
<b>Legitimacy of DPR as an independent republic</b>	Statements and quotations from DPR political figures with claims that reinforce DPR's position as an independent republic (ex: position of strength in the war; DPR's role in defending human rights; decisions on policy)	Keyword patterns that refer to DPR's well-functioning governmental mechanisms; DPR's responsibility to protect its citizens; its ability to control the conflict with Ukraine & push back enemy forces; and its self-sufficiency as an independent state	Stereotyping DPR Soldiers as heroes, DPR as a state that advocates for human rights and seeks peace; News values that reflect DPR's position of strength in the war, its role as a protector and a peace-seeker (ex: conforming to the Minsk Agreements); Cultural themes that evoke DPR's compliance with moral obligations and duties to ensure the safety of its citizens, promote peace and show its qualities as a separatist republic
<b>Ukraine as a weak &amp; an incompetent state</b>	Statement by Ukrainian deputy claiming that Ukrainian politicians are 'agents of the Kremlin' (агентами Кремля) to underline internal division of the government	Keyword patterns that highlight the incompetence, weakness and inferiority of Ukraine on the battlefield and inside its government (ex: use of metaphor 'Україне нічого не светит')	News values that evoke the conflict angle by portraying Ukraine's position in the war as weak and vulnerable because of internal division at government level

## Sample 2 (timeframe): Economic embargo

Frames	Dominant presentation features	Dominant discourse features	Dominant narrative conventions
<b>DPR citizens as victims</b>	Headline places emphasis on the precarity of people's situation by evoking the term 'humanitarian disaster' (гуманитарной катастрофы)	Keyword patterns that emphasise the vulnerability of people in the DPR in relation to the economic blockade; repetitions of terms that amplify the negative effects of the blockade (ex: изоляции, геноцида, гуманитарной катастрофы); Evoking the oppression and discrimination of people because of Ukraine's blockade (политику дискриминации, подавление их прав в гуманитарной и общественной сферах etc.)	Stereotyping inhabitants of Kiev-controlled areas as victims of human-rights neglect; News values that evoke the proximity and human interest angle by stressing the lack of medical care for residents of Donbas & overall precarity; Cultural themes that evoke human rights as a universal value, the idea of genocide as a violation of moral & human values
<b>Ukraine as an aggressor</b>	Series of explanatory pictures on the way shelling by Ukrainian officers was planned, and pictures that explicitly state: "они уничтожают свой народ"	Keyword patterns that evoke the themes of Ukrainian nationalism by characterising nationalists of extremists & radicals (экстремистам, праворадикальные партии, карательных батальонов); Enumeration of terms that stress the aggression of Ukrainian forces	Stereotyping Ukrainian authorities as killers and aggressors and Ukrainian nationalists as radicals; News values that evoke the impact angle by portraying Kiev's blockade as an act of aggression and oppression on the people of DPR and the conflict angle by promoting the perception of Ukrainian nationalism as a threat; Cultural themes on the negative perception of Ukrainian nationalism and the idea that Ukrainian authorities are violating human rights
<b>Ukraine as a disruptor</b>	N/A	Keyword pattern that portray Ukraine as a provocateur by not abiding to the Minsk Agreements and thus to disrupt safety and security	Cultural themes evoking the illegitimate conduct of Ukraine by not respecting the Minsk Agreements because of its economic blockade
<b>Russia as the mediator</b>	Statement of Russian foreign minister Lavrov to condemn the blockade; Headline stressing the Russian foreign ministry's address to Kiev not to cause a humanitarian disaster	Keyword patterns that promote Russia as a reasonable & judicious arbiter and the image of Crimea's reunification with Russia as an example for Donbas (Russia as the motherland)	Stereotyping Russia as the most important mediator in the conflict; News values that evoke the conflict angle by illustrating Russia's intervention in the blockade essential because of its unity with the people of Donbas; Cultural themes that promote the idea of Crimean reunification with Russia as a liberating event (symbol of Crimean Spring)
<b>Legitimacy of DPR as an independent republic</b>	Headlines that stress the ability of DPR to undertake important actions as an independent republic and that emphasise the legitimacy of Zakharenko as a leader	Keyword patterns that reflect the impartiality of DPR because it treats citizens of both controlled and uncontrolled areas in the same way; stressing the course of actions that DPR is taking in a legitimate way and has the situation under control	Stereotyping DPR as a state that is preoccupied by the safety of its people; News values that evoke the proximity angle by demonstrating that DPR authorities are willing to help people in a difficult situation regardless of territory and prioritise the well-being of individuals. News values that promote the achievements of DPR as a separatist state; Cultural themes such as the symbolism of DPR distancing itself from Ukraine economically that show it is successfully achieving its goals of independence
<b>Ukraine as a weak &amp; an incompetent state</b>	Headlines emphasising the internal division and conflicts within the Ukrainian government as a sign of disorder and weakness	Keyword patterns that suggest DPR authorities consider Ukraine to be inferior and has the ability to dictate terms in the conflict	Stereotyping Poroshenko as an incompetent leader; News values that reflect the internal division and dysfunctionality of the Ukrainian government; Cultural themes that evoke the illegitimacy of Ukraine

### Sample 3 (timeframe): Death of DPR leader

Frames	Dominant presentation features	Dominant discourse features	Dominant narrative conventions
<b>DPR citizens as victims</b>	Headline placing emphasis on the declaration of national mourning over Zakharchenko's death	Keyword patterns that stress the vulnerability of people in DPR in the aftermath of their leader's death and that emphasise the grieving process	Stereotyping Zakharchenko as a victim of Ukrainian aggression and DPR citizens as victims for losing their leader; News values that evoke a human interest angle by portraying school children and civilians at risk because of Ukrainian shelling; Cultural themes disseminating the perception of mourning as a normal and natural process
<b>Ukraine as an aggressor</b>	Headlines emphasising Ukraine's intentions of destruction & aggression and involvement in the murder of Zakharchenko	Keyword patterns that characterise the murder of Zakharchenko as a terrorist attack (теракта); lexical choice of words that illustrate Ukraine as a threat; recurrent theme of barbarism and aggressivity; reference to Nazism and the Azov nationalist group	Stereotyping Ukrainian forces and government as criminals & the Ukrainian special services as terrorists; News values evoking the conflict angle by highlighting Ukraine's intentions to launch attacks; Cultural themes evoking Ukraine's threats & deliberate aggression as a violation of ethical values
<b>Ukraine as a disruptor</b>	Headlines that portray Ukraine's uncooperativeness especially with regards to the Minsk agreements	Keyword patterns that stress Ukraine's reluctance to engaging in a peace dialogue with the intention to sabotage and aggravate the conflict; emphasis on Poroshenko using the conflict to benefit from it and stay in power	Stereotyping the Ukrainian government as fraudulent; News values that evoke the conflict angle by portraying Ukraine's actions in the war as acts of sabotage by not respecting rules in the conflict; Cultural themes that evoke the unethical conduct of Ukraine in the war
<b>Russia as the mediator</b>	Headline placing the focus on the continuity of the integration policy with Russia	Keyword patterns that highlight Russian officials' intention to help the separatist republics and in particular the metaphor "Donbas is Russia" (Донбасс – это Россия)	Stereotyping Russian official Zyuganov as a spokesman for the people of the separatist republics
<b>Legitimacy of DPR as an independent republic</b>	Series of images & quotation that symbolise Zakharchenko as a leader loved and respected by all	Keyword patterns that emphasise DPR's legitimacy through its successful war operations and legitimate state organs; glorification & idolisation of Zakharchenko	Stereotyping Zakharchenko as a hero and an overachiever; News values evoking the proximity angle because of appealing to emotions by illustrating the mass of people that came to honour Zakharchenko; Cultural themes reflecting the idea of commemorating the death of the Republic's leader as morally correct and the fulfilment of people's duty
<b>Ukraine as a weak &amp; an incompetent state</b>	Headline and quotation that illustrate the termination of the friendship treaty between Russia and Ukraine by Ukraine as a bad decision	Keyword patterns that amplify the gravity of the consequences and highlight the irony of a Ukrainian deputy commenting on his own government's mistake of ending the treaty	News values from the perspective of a conflict angle that bring forward Ukraine's incompetence in handling internal matters because of conflict in its own political sphere and thus shows instability; Cultural themes that evoke Ukraine's termination of the treaty as unethical because of the harm that it can cause to its citizens

Sample 4 (timeframe): Kerch Strait incident

Frames	Dominant presentation features	Dominant discourse features	Dominant narrative conventions
<b>DPR citizens as victims</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Ukraine as an aggressor</b>	Headlines that emphasise Ukraine's provocative actions and the aggression of Ukrainian nationalists	Keyword patterns that point to the illegitimacy of Ukraine's actions, especially the cruelty of the government contributing to a fratricidal war between Ukrainians and people of Donbas (братоубийственной войне); emphasise the aggressivity of Ukrainian nationalists; stress the threat that Ukraine's cooperation with NATO represent to Donbas and its people	Stereotyping Ukrainian commanders as criminals and Kiev as a provocateur; News values portraying Ukraine as a violator of Russia's territorial waters and Ukrainian nationalists as intentionally hostile towards Russia; Cultural themes that evoke the controversy of Ukrainian nationalism and the perception of a fratricidal war being morally wrong
<b>Ukraine as a disruptor</b>	Headlines that stress Ukraine's attempt to disrupt Russia-US relations and imposed travelling restrictions on Russian individuals	Keyword patterns that emphasise the provocative-driven actions and premeditative behaviour of Kiev in the Kerch Strait incident; focus on the limitations and restrictions imposed as a result of the Martial Law	Stereotyping Ukraine as a major obstacle to the improvement of Russian-US relations and Poroshenko as a violator of constitutional rights; News values that promote the idea of Ukraine attempting acts of sabotage and disruption through imposed restrictions, deliberate violations and uncooperativeness; Cultural themes that evoke the illegitimacy of Ukraine
<b>Russia as the mediator</b>	N/A	Keyword patterns that portray Russia as an influential model for a well-functioning government	Stereotyping Russia as a role model for the separatist republics
<b>Legitimacy of DPR as an independent republic</b>	Headline placing the emphasis on the legitimacy of the DPR's parliament	Keyword patterns that demonstrate that DPR is based and built on democratic processes and legitimacy	News values that evoke the efforts of DPR in striving to have a well-functioning government system that is based on democratic practices showing that it is gaining legitimacy an independent republic; Cultural themes that bring forward the shared perspective of democracy being an important tool for a republic to be legitimate
<b>Ukraine as a weak &amp; an incompetent state</b>	Headline containing Putin's statement pointing to the illegitimacy and immorality of Ukraine	Keyword patterns that allude to the internal political confrontations and disputes of Ukraine's government	Stereotyping Ukrainian forces as incompetent; News values that explain Kiev's unlawful actions because it is internally fighting off opponents; Cultural themes evoking the shared understanding that political rivalries are unethical and inefficient in a situation of war