

# Bachelorthesis

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Differences in mainstream media coverage of the Ukraine crisis  
in Poland and the Netherlands

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## Introduction

When violence broke out in Eastern Ukraine in April 2014, Europe was in shock. The situation had completely spiraled out of control. What had initially started as a peaceful pro-European Union demonstration in Kiev, soon became a nightmare. Europe could no longer deny the problem it was facing. The Ukraine crisis would not just affect Ukraine, but it would have consequences for the whole continent. The annexation of Crimea and the downing of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 plane provoked horror, and many would have thought such events to be impossible in twenty-first century Europe. As Andrew Wilson accurately describes, “European incomprehension predominated over anger” (2014, p.viii). Slowly, Europe realized, this was not just a Ukrainian problem, it was a European problem. Of massive proportions. The Ukraine crisis was widely covered by television channels, radio stations and newspapers all over the world. The media were of crucial importance in these events. Not only was the media the primary source of information, but it was also an important actor in determining how people receive the news. Media give a certain perspective on events and through this, play an important role in how people interpret events. Media’s representation can sway public opinion and, therefore, framing is particularly important in wartime (Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015, p.146). As politics does not happen in a vacuum and public opinion affects political decisions, the media can indirectly steer political decisions.

The Ukrainian crisis is an interesting case for studying media coverage because it was covered very differently by various media outlets. The discrepancy between Ukrainian and Russian news was especially large. Some even go as far to say that one can speak of a full blown media war (Sukhov, 2014). The role of the media in this conflict goes further than simply reporting on the events: quite to the contrary, media was used as a tool of ‘soft power’ to influence public opinion to the detriment of the opponent. This would sometimes even lead to media outlets reporting “fake news”, such as the story of the Ukrainian government filling the MH17 planes with dead bodies in order to make Ukraine look like the bad guy (Dougherty, 2014, p.2). It is not just the media of the countries directly involved in the crisis that framed events, also countries that were not directly involved in the conflict framed news. Although the West did not directly participate in the conflict, it still played a pivotal part in the whole situation. The way the media in the West portrayed the conflict, is the way the public in the West saw it.

While a lot of research has focused on the contrast between Russian and Western media in coverage of the Ukraine crisis, there is very little research about potential differences among

Western media outlets. “The West” encompasses a lot of states, each very different , and it can be misleading to assume that they would all report in the same way about the crisis. Does media coverage in countries from the “the same side” of the conflict differ? Could the diverse characteristics, historical legacies and other factors play a role in the way media covered the Ukraine crisis? This is a topic which is rather underexposed in the academic world. The aim of this article is to be an interesting addition to the bulk of literature about conflict and media coverage. Hopefully, this research can shed a light on how media influences our perceptions of events through framing and how public opinion is formed.

This research take two Western countries, Poland and the Netherlands to analyse media coverage of the Ukraine crisis. Both these countries can be said to have been on “the same side” of the conflict, namely the side of Ukraine. Comparing the media coverage in these two countries can provide interesting insights into how initially similar seeming media, can differ in their news reporting. Therefore, the main question in this article is: “How was the Ukraine crisis covered by mainstream media in Poland and the Netherlands?”. This research combined quantitative and qualitative analyses in order to see whether news about the Ukraine crisis differed notably in Poland and the Netherlands. A content analysis revealed that it is indeed possible to determine a different pattern of media attention in the two countries, and that although the use in frames does not differ enormously, there is still a different focus between the two countries.

## **Literature review/ theoretical framework**

### **Background**

The start of what is now known as the Ukrainian crisis, can be traced back to November 2013 when Ukrainian president Yanukovich withdrew from a trade agreement with the European Union (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.4). That decision sparked initially peaceful, anti-government protests on the Maidan square in Kiev, under the name Euromaidan (Wilson, 2014, p.66). The protestors wanted a more pro-European course and an end to widespread corruption which tormented the country. “The Maidan protestors wanted to change Ukraine” (Wilson, 2014, p.184). The protests in Kiev grew bigger and bigger every day and by December 8<sup>th</sup> the demonstration had reached massive proportions of 800.000 people protesting in the streets (BBC, 2014). As the protests continued but without any desired effects, resentment against the sitting government grew and the call for change became louder. The atmosphere in Kiev was becoming increasingly sinister and “the mood on the Maidan grew more radical” (Wilson, 2014, p.85). The protests continued in early 2014, with protestors storming government buildings and barricading the streets. Violent clashes between anti-government protestors and riot police occurred. Protests became bloody and resembled a nightmare with the Maidan becoming a true battlefield. A reporter described what he saw as “a vision of hell” (BBC, 2014). On February 22, president Yanukovich fled to Russia and an interim government was installed. Not long after, unidentified gunmen, also known as “little green men”, appeared on the Crimean peninsula. They had the same guns as the Russian army, the same number plates on their lorries and spoke in Russian accents (Shevchenko, 2014, March 11). The international world called Russia out for sending the troops, but Putin denied any involvement, and instead named them “self-defense groups” that protected the Russian speaking population in Crimea. Events moved rapidly and a secession referendum in Crimea was held in March. The outcome of the referendum was, according to the organizers, 97% of the voters wanting to secede, but the outcome was condemned as a sham by the Western world (BBC, 2014). In April 2014 the unrest started to spread throughout Eastern Ukraine and separatist groups in the region of the Donbass started to call for more autonomy or independence. Media reported that Russian troops were being stationed near the Ukrainian-Russian border, which was an alarming signal to observers, fearing direct military Russian involvement. The conflict was becoming increasingly violent and the situation was starting to spiral out of control. Russia started threatening to intervene in

Eastern Ukraine if the rights of the Russian-speaking population were not ensured (McMahon, 2014). In May, Pro-Russians separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk their independence after a referendum had been held. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014 a Malaysia Airlines plane from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur crashed in the war territory in East Ukraine (BBC, 2014). On the plane were 193 Dutch passengers. The tragedy came as big shock to the Netherlands and it directly pulled the country into the conflict. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, an agreement between the Pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government was signed in Minsk, with the aim to end the fighting. Unfortunately the agreement was not long lived and fighting continued not soon after. The situation continues to be unclear and the Ukrainian government has not been able to regain control of Eastern Ukraine or Crimea.

### **Media and conflict**

“We live in a mediatized world”, Simon Cottle famously said (2004, p.1). What he meant by this is that in a mediatized world, media and conflict are closely related to each other. Actors such as politicians, try to influence and shape public opinion in a way that legitimizes their actions and positions. Because mainstream media can reach a wide audience, it often finds itself in the center of the conflict. Therefore, political conflicts are defined and often enacted in the media (Ojala & Pantti, 2017, p.475). This makes the media a powerful actor. However, this puts reporters in a tough position. BBC war correspondent Katie Adie once stated that “the very nature of war confuses the role of the journalist” (1998, as cited in Allan & Zelizer, 2004, p. 3). It is often a struggle for journalists to maintain professional autonomy when they have to face the ethical dilemma of balancing impartiality with a sense of citizenship or patriotism (Nygren et al., 2016, p.10).

### **Existing literature about media coverage of the Ukraine crisis**

The Ukraine crisis is a conflict that has become highly mediatized (Ojala & Pantti, 2017, p.475) and that is particularly interesting because it was the stage of very conflicting media coverage. Especially the difference in news reports between Russian and Western media is striking. According to Sukhov, media deliberately presented news in a biased way. “At times, it seems like Western media reports and Russian ones are describing completely different places and situations, with the latter portraying as a humanitarian crisis what the former describes as a Russian-manufactured provocation to justify military intervention” (Sukhov, 2014). Both sides have accused each other of saying half-truths or simply lying in a bid to sway public opinion in their favor. “The conflict in Ukraine has thus become an ‘information war’ as much as a

conventional one” (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p.174). Through this, media has become an actor in the war itself. Raluahpuia has also noted that media have increasingly become the site of power struggles, and as a result, “media framing often becomes highly political and at times politicized” (2016, p.3).

Because of the discrepancy between Russian and Western media, a lot of research has been done about the differences in these news reports. Scholars have looked in-depth into how exactly the news is portrayed differently and what the mechanisms behind this are. In other words, scholars have looked at how events were *framed* differently in the news. A cross-country research on media coverage of the Ukraine crisis in four countries (Ukraine, Russia, Poland and Sweden) found “significant variations in the framing of the conflict, portrayal of actors involved, and word choice across national settings” (Nygren et al., 2016, p.1). Depending on the country, the news was, thus, portrayed or framed differently. In Poland and Sweden, the media was concerned with the consequences for the two countries, while in Ukraine the conflict itself was the main focus. “In Russia, the picture was more diverse. The fighting and civilians were given a lot of coverage, but international politics, sanctions, and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) were given even more coverage” (Nygren et al., 2016, p.5). In Russian media anti-Western narratives have been especially salient. These narratives attribute various negative characteristics to the USA and EU states, such as hypocrisy, foolishness double standards and lack of moral integrity (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p.174). This narrative is part of a bigger national security context. Controlling the mainstream media in Russia is a way of securing and influencing public opinion and “mass communication is viewed as “a crucial arena of global politics, in which rival powers work to undermine each other and further their own interests at others’ expense” (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p.173). Schwalbe and Dougherty have also notice that “the news media is a key arena in the contest for political influence” (2015, p.145).

A research concerned with visual framing in the Ukraine crisis tested three frequently occurring frames used in Western media to portray the events in Ukraine, namely the national power struggle frame, Russian intervention frame and geopolitical frame. They found that the newspapers imagery was highly congruent, because Western photo agencies drive much of the visual coverage and they dictate the patterns of representation. The visuals were often in line with the broader political context of the Western public sphere, which is dominated by the three frames above mentioned (Ojala & Pantti, 2017, p.493). Although some variation among Western media reports can be distinguished, Dyczok states that there are some general trends visible in the media reporting (2015, p.187). Different narratives dominated the news during different periods of the crisis. However, the news was overall often sensationalized and there

was little attention for underlying structures and problems. The fast-changing and complex stories were simplified and often “reported in easily recognisable portrayals of protesters vs. police, East vs. West, a new Cold War” (Dyczok, 2015, p.192).

## **Framing**

From the literature review above it is clear that when examining news coverage, it is inevitable to speak about framing. Framing allows scholars to examine “the selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue, by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages” (Matthes, 2009, p.349). By doing so, it is possible to find differences in how media covers and portrays events. However, framing in itself is a very vague term and is often poorly defined. It is, therefore, important to be clear when defining the concept of framing. There is a wide array of theoretical and operational understandings of frames and there is a huge variety of approaches (Matthes, 2009, p.352). The idea and theory of framing first appeared in the 1970’s with Goffman’s “Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience”. He defined “framing” as a “schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify and label” occurrences or life experiences (1974, as cited in Cissel, 2012, p.68). From this definition it is clear that Goffman was a sociologist, and that he focused more on the actual process of reproducing reality, rather than the source behind it, namely the media. Gamson and Modigliani define framing as “the central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning” (p.143 as cited in Simon & Xenos, 2000, p.367). Framing helps the public make sense of events and news, and the media presents the news in a way that is relevant to the public. In his highly influential article from 1993, Robert Entman says to frame means “to select some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient, thus promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (1993, p. 52). A frame supplies the receiver of the news with a certain lens through which it interprets and sees the news. By emphasizing certain aspects and downplaying others, the media can influence how people think about an issue: “How people think about an issue, especially a political issue that is inherently ambiguous, is dependent on how the issue is framed by the media” (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94, as cited in Baysha & Hallahan, 2004, p.234). This brings up an interesting point: the more complex the reality, the more likely media is to frame it, in order to make it more comprehensible for the public.

Because media are able to frame reality, they have the power to influence public opinion. News can be framed in a way that is in line with public discourse or policy in a given country. Framing, then, can be used as a tool to control public opinion. Media is so powerful because

people usually don't have other sources of information or sources to test the news they are receiving. Due to a lack of personal experience, people are highly dependent on media for information about the world around them. We do not live and experience most situations and, therefore, are restricted to secondhand information. "We deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists" (McCombs, 2004, p.1). When we ask ourselves the question, where we get the facts from on which we base our opinion, "we are reminded of the distance that separates our public opinion from the event with which it deals" (Lippmann, 1922, p.18) and that "the world that we have to deal with politically, is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind", (Lippmann, 1922, p.13). Hence, media have a big responsibility to report the news correctly and justly.

This research is also concerned with frames. Previous research has identified multiple frames that have occurred in news coverage regarding the Ukraine crisis. The frames that are used in this research were constructed by doing a preliminary, exploratory search and from the existing literature (Nygren et al., 2016). The frames comprise various themes and topics that were present in the news. Based on these topics, the frames for this research were created. The following frames are tested :

- National security frame
- International frame
- Humanitarian crisis frame
- Aggressor frame
- Other/none

### **News values**

The theory of news values seeks to explain why and how some events or occurrences become news and others do not (Brighton & Foy, 2007, p.1). What makes news? Out of the billion things that happen every day all over the world, media only reports on a small fraction of it. How does this selection happen? News selection is subjective because journalists judge whether news is newsworthy. Journalists ask themselves: "Does this interest me?". Most of the times, this happens unconsciously and when journalists are asked why something is deemed newsworthy, they reply: "I know it when I see it" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016, p.1). But this judging process is actually guided by an instinctive understanding of news values. News values give journalists a set of rules and dictate how they should work (Brighton & Foy, 2007, p.1). "News values work as a system of criteria which are used to make decisions about the inclusion

and exclusion of material and about which aspects of selected stories to emphasize” (Palmer, 2000, p.45 as cited in O’Neill & Harcup, 2009). News selection, then, does not happen randomly and there are structures behind it that can be determined. Events are ranked and prioritized in an order of applicability and relevance to the audience (Brighton & Foy, 2007, p.1). Galtung and Ruge were the first to create a system for prioritising news based on a few criteria, such as relevance and timeliness. One of the criteria they came up with was “meaningfulness”, meaning that the culturally familiar is more likely to be selected (O’Neill & Harcup, 2009, p.164). Since then, other scholars have elaborated on this theory. As did Golding and Elliott, who developed a criterion named “proximity”. This criterion takes cultural as well as geographical proximity into consideration (O’Neill & Harcup, 2009, p.166). Simply speaking, an event that happens within a shorter geographical distance to the reader, is more likely to be interesting for the reader and capture his or her attention. The news is more relevant to them. Nygren et al. have also recognized geographical distance as a factor for the difference in media coverage, stating that “there are differences (in media coverage) based on the degree of closeness to the conflict” (2016, p.5).

Proximity implies that the way news is presented is dependent on the country the news is reported from. As Dyczok notes, “information and presentation is shaped by country of origin”. (2015, p.187). Therefore, the historical and political context of a country determines not only whether an event is considered relevant, but also the way an event is interpreted and portrayed.

### **Case selection**

The two theories above can be used to explain differences in media reports about the Ukraine crisis. In order to best highlight any differences between media reports, this research takes two countries that are seemingly arbitrary, the Netherlands and Poland. As a neighbour of Ukraine, Poland is an interesting starting point for this research as it is more closely related to the crisis than most other countries. The Netherlands, on the other hand, presents a good reflection of the general representation of the Ukraine crisis in Western media. It becomes, however, suddenly involved in the conflict after the MH17 crash. From both countries it can be said that they fall in the Western influence sphere and that they were on the same side of the conflict, namely the side of Ukraine. Notwithstanding these similarities, it could be interesting to see whether there are any substantial differences to be discovered in the media coverage of the Ukraine crisis between the two countries.

## **Expectations**

Analysing media coverage of the Ukraine crisis in Poland and Netherlands, enables us to see whether there are any differences in the way the crisis was portrayed in the media. Following from the theoretical framework and existing literature, it is expected that this research will show that there is indeed a difference in the way the Ukraine crisis was depicted in the media in both countries. Even when two countries are on the “same side” of the conflict, as is the case with the Netherlands and Poland, there will be differences.

Firstly, I expect there to be different patterns in the media coverage between the two countries. More specifically, it is predicted that initially more media attention is given to the Ukraine crisis in Poland than in the Netherlands. This predication is based on the two theories discussed above. Because Ukraine is a neighbouring country of Poland, news concerning Ukraine is more relevant and news on the Ukraine crisis has a higher news value in Poland than in the Netherlands. Because the geographical distance from Ukraine to the Netherlands is much bigger, news regarding Ukraine is not as salient in the Dutch media. However, I predict that if a country is directly affected by a conflict, the relevancy of that topic increases, and so does media attention. Therefore, after the downing of the MH17, it is expected that media attention to the Ukraine crisis in the Netherlands increases, as the crash of the plane was a national tragedy in the Netherlands. In contrast, Poland was not affected or involved in the MH17 crash, and therefore news about it is expected to be less relevant.

Secondly, besides differences in the pattern of media attention, it is also expected that there are differences in how the news was presented in Poland and the Netherlands. Due to different political and historical contexts, it is possible that the news was interpreted differently and that different aspects of the conflict were emphasized. Nygren et al. found in their research that the Polish media focused more on the consequences of the conflict for Poland and for national security. “The threat from Russia completely dominated the coverage” and “Russia and Russian expansion was clearly visible and some events were directly linked to Polish history” (Nygren et al., 2016 p.7). Due to a long and difficult past with Russia, Russia has always had a negative image and negative connotations with the Polish public and relations have often been tense (Zarycki, 2004, p.595). Because of a history of Russian occupation and invasion, it is predicted that there will be an emphasis on the potential threat of Russia to national security in the Polish media. The Netherlands does not have a similar history with Russia, and so the aspect of a Russian threat is expected to be less salient. For the Netherlands, the international and economic aspects of the crisis are perhaps more important as trade relations have always played an important role in Dutch society (Sommer, 2014, May 10).

Based on these expectations the following hypotheses are derived:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is more media coverage on the Ukraine crisis in Poland in the first few months of the conflict than in the Netherlands, because Poland is culturally and geographically closer to Ukraine and news about Ukraine is more relevant.

H<sub>2</sub>: If a country is directly affected by an event, the relevancy of it in the news increases. Therefore, media coverage about the Ukraine crisis in the Netherlands increases after the MH17 catastrophe, because of the high casualties of Dutch citizens.

H<sub>3</sub>: In Poland the Ukraine crisis is framed as a national security problem, with specific attention to the threat of Russia, and in the Netherlands the Ukraine crisis is framed in terms of international politics.

## **Methods**

The research question (“How was the Ukraine crisis covered by mainstream media in Poland and the Netherlands?”) will be answered by conducting a content analysis. The analysis will contain both a quantitative as well as a qualitative component. The quantitative component encompasses a frequency analysis which will reveal the pattern of media coverage. This will expose how media coverage changed over time, and whether there are different patterns in the Polish and Dutch media. This makes it possible to test the first two hypotheses. In order to test the third hypothesis, a relative frequencies analysis of frames is conducted. This analysis will reveal the distribution of the frames in percentages, and as such it will be possible to see which frames were used the most in which country. The qualitative component includes a more in-depth analysis of the themes, words and quotes used in the media reports. This will allow for a more thorough understanding of how framing works.

### **Newspaper selection**

This research is concerned with media coverage. Media, however, is a very broad and vague term that encompasses a lot of different types and forms of news outlets. Therefore, it is necessary to narrow the term “media” down. In this research paper, media is defined as newspapers. Because analysing all the existing newspapers in both countries is close to impossible, this research takes one of the biggest and leading quality newspapers in both countries, namely *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland and *De Volkskrant* in the Netherlands. These newspaper have a big audience and are regarded as reliable and therefore have the power to influence public opinion (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012, p.36; 40), (Bakker & Vasterman, 2007, p.147). *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *De Volkskrant*, thus, serve as a good indicator of what mass media reports about the Ukraine crisis.

### **Selecting time frame**

The unit of analysis of this research is every news article published by *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *De Volkskrant* in the period from November 2013, the beginning of the crisis, to November 2014. This time span includes the most prominent moments from the crisis, namely the Euromaidan protests, the outburst of violence in Kiev, the annexation of Crimea, fighting in Eastern Ukraine, the declaration of independence by Luhansk and Donetsk, the downing of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 plane and the truce to cease fire signed in Minsk.

## **Article selection**

The news articles were collected by using the databases of Lexis Nexis and Factiva. Lexis Nexis provided in the Dutch news articles from De Volkskrant and Factiva in the Polish news articles from Gazeta Wyborcza. All articles that mentioned the words Ukraine and crisis/conflict/war, were used. These are the most common ways of describing the events in Ukraine and cover most of the coverage. Besides these terms, there are multiple other terms that can be used to describe the events that happened in Ukraine during the years and each of them have different connotations. It is important to be aware of the fact that no term is perfect and they all have their pros and cons, whether it is “conflict”, “crisis”, “war” or “turmoil”. This research generally speaks of “Ukraine crisis” because it is the term that is most widely used in the literature. This does not mean that the violence and acts of brutality during this time are not recognized as such. It is simply for the pragmatic reason that this term is chosen. The search query in both databases was: “Oekraïne AND crisis OR conflict OR oorlog” in Dutch and “Ukraina AND kryzys OR konflikt OR wojna” in Polish. The search was restricted to the time period mentioned above (1/11/2013 to 31/10/2014) and to either De Volkskrant or Gazeta Wyborcza. In Lexis Nexis, this search resulted in 1166 Dutch articles and in Factiva in 156 Polish articles. The difference in the amount of articles is remarkable, to say the least. The difference could be explained by precision in the search systems itself. Among the Dutch articles were a lot of articles that were not about the Ukraine crisis but simply mentioned the crisis in a completely different context. The search even resulted in an article about football matches. Perhaps Factiva has a more precise search system and the search therefore resulted in less, but more relevant articles. Either way, the amount of articles did not heavily influence patterns that could be distinguished in the frequency analyses. The results of the searches were put into SPSS IBM Statistics to generate graphs. The frequency analyses will show the amount of articles published about the topic in the two newspapers.

## **Selecting a subset and measuring the frames**

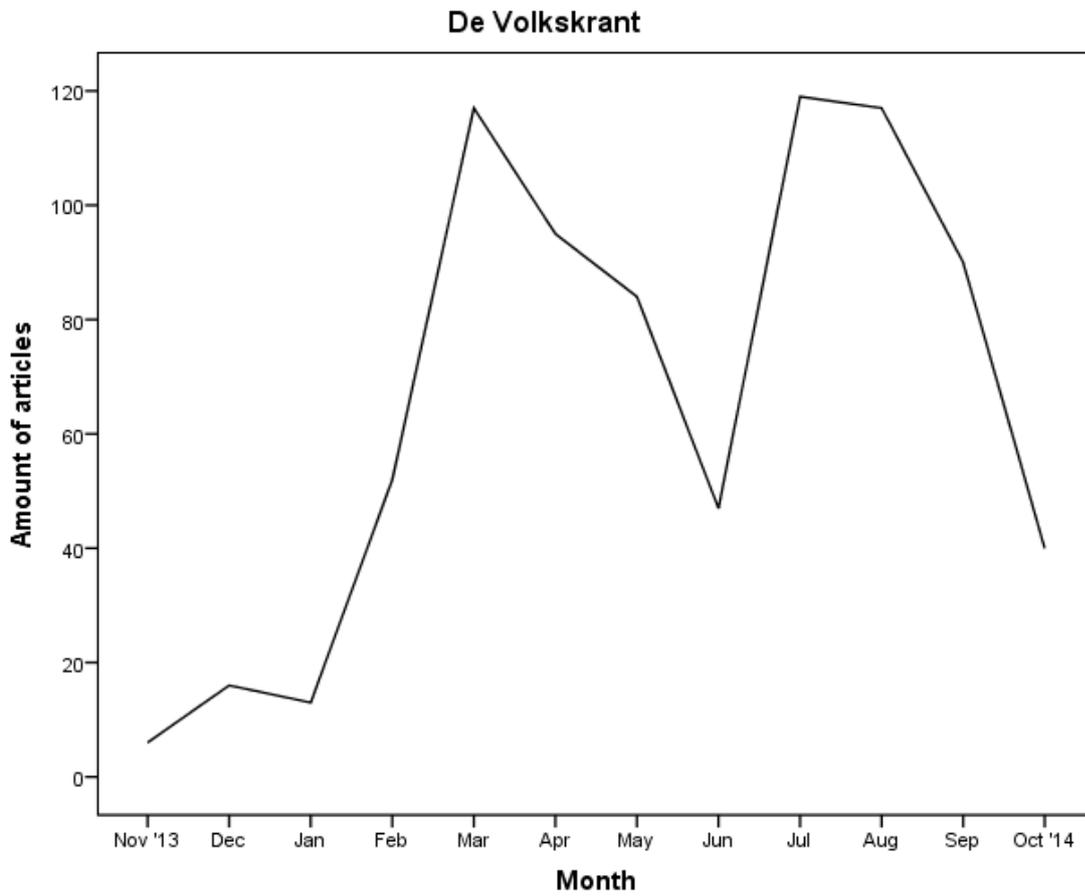
In order to do the qualitative framing analysis, it is necessary to select a subset. Because framing analysis is more detailed and time-consuming than a frequency analysis, it is impossible to analyse all of the articles that come up in the databases. From each newspaper 50 articles are chosen randomly. The sample is taken by selecting one in every few articles, depending on how many articles there are in total. The articles are then analysed with the coding manual and coding sheet by hand. Both the coding schedule and coding manual are to be found in the appendix. In some of the articles multiple frames could be distinguished. However, only the

dominant frame was coded. This is the frame that was the most prominent and set the tone of the article. The articles were coded manually. The frames are measured in the following way:

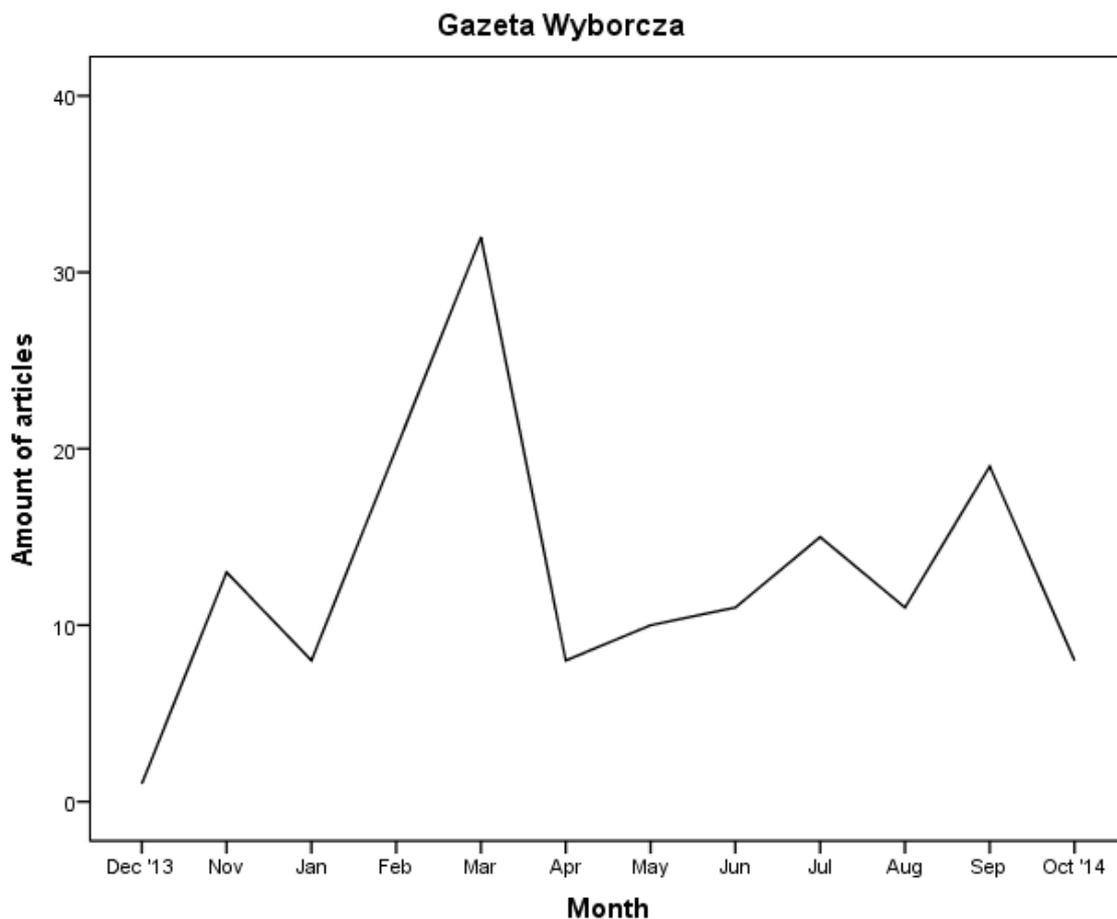
The **national security frame** is detected if the crisis in Ukraine is portrayed as being of national importance and as a potential threat to the security of the country. Any mention of national security, threat, and especially Russian invasion and/or expansionism is a clue to this frame. Also detected when the article speaks of “terrorists” rather than “separatists” and “war” rather than “crisis”. The **international frame** puts emphasis on the international aspects of the crisis. Detected if the focus is on international politics, diplomatic relations among the actors, geopolitics, sanctions, consequences for trade, negotiations and when there is mention of international organizations, such as the European union or NATO. The **humanitarian crisis frame** is recognized when the focus point is on the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, especially for people in the area. Other themes in this frame include humanitarian aid, refugees, casualties and civilians. The fifth frame, the **Russian aggressor frame** is detected if there is a clear emphasis on Russia as the aggressor. Russia dominated the news. When Russia is mentioned, it is often personified in the person of Putin and there is generally frequent mention of “Putin”, especially in headlines. Also detected when there is mention of a Russian invasion, an advance on the West, a plan/strategy/attack/operation to “take over” Ukraine and territories further West. There is also attention for actions involving weapons in the conflict area. The Ukrainian side is underexposed and there is barely any mention of the Ukrainian military. Lastly, there is an extra frame called **other/none** which is coded when no other frame is distinguished in the article.

## Results

The following graphs show the distribution of the articles in De Volkskrant and Gazeta Wyborcza over time.



**Figure 1. Frequency analysis De Volkskrant**



**Figure 2. Frequency analysis Gazeta Wyborcza**

### Frequency analysis

The two graphs look evidently different. Notwithstanding the actual amount of articles, there is a clear difference in the pattern of the news coverage. The first three months of the crisis, November, December and January were much more covered in Gazeta Wyborcza than in De Volkskrant. Especially in December, when the protests in Maidan reached a maximum of half a million people, the Polish newspaper reported a lot more on it than the Dutch newspaper. Then, in both graphs there is a stark rise of published articles visible in March. This is clearly as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea in late February. In both countries the annexation lead to outrage and shock at such “land grab”. In April, May and June the coverage on the Ukraine crisis declined sharply in De Volkskrant. In Gazeta Wyborcza coverage also declined in April but as unrest spread throughout Eastern Ukraine in the following months, coverage increased slightly. In July and August, there is another big peak in De Volkskrant, but only a small peak in Gazeta Wyborcza. This peak is caused by the crash of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 plane.

As the majority of the passengers on the plane were Dutch citizens, the crash was seen as a tragedy for the whole Dutch nation. It was one of the biggest plane catastrophes in the history of the Netherlands and it had a huge impact on public opinion regarding the Ukrainian crisis. What the graphs above show, is that there was far less attention to the Ukraine crisis after the MH17 crash in the Polish newspaper than in the Dutch newspaper. News about the MH17 plane was much less relevant in Poland because there were no Polish passengers on the plane. When reporting on the MH17 crash, Polish articles often made a connection to the TU-154 Polish Air Force plane crash near Smolensk in 2010, which killed prominent government officials, including the former president and his wife. Journalists were especially interested in the technicalities, judicial aspects and how the investigation of the MH17 was handled (Czuchnowski, 2014, July19). Media attention for the Ukraine crisis continues to be high in August in De Volkskrant, but eventually declines in September and October. While in De Volkskrant the amount of articles declined, in Gazeta Wyborcza there was a rise in articles published about the Ukraine crisis, with a peak in September. This increase is even higher than the increase in articles as a result of the downing of MH17. At first, this seems odd, but at further consideration it is explainable. On September 5<sup>th</sup> the Ukrainian government signed an agreement in Minsk with the pro-Russian separatists to cease fighting and to grant the Donbass region more autonomy. The signing of this agreement was much talked and reported about in the Polish media and the graph confirms this. The frequency analyses, thus, show that both the first and second hypothesis are supported. There was more attention to the Ukraine crisis in Poland than in the Netherlands in the first few months of the crisis, which is the result of differing cultural and geographical proximities to the country. After the MH17 crash, attention to the Ukraine crisis increased in the Netherlands due to bigger relevancy. In Poland attention to the Ukraine crisis after the MH17 increased only a little, and instead more coverage was given to the Mink Agreement in September.

### **Framing analysis**

The third hypothesis is concerned with how news about the Ukraine crisis was presented, how it was framed. The expectation is that in the Polish newspaper the national security frame is most evident, while in the Dutch newspaper, the international frame. First, the outcome of the frame frequency analysis is evaluated. Then, the way the frames were used in the coverage is discussed more in-depth. The following table shows the distribution of frames:

	<b>National security frame</b>	<b>International frame</b>	<b>Humanitarian crisis frame</b>	<b>Russian aggressor frame</b>	<b>Other /none</b>	<b>Total</b>
De Volkskrant	6%	40%	14%	2%	38%	N=50
Gazeta Wyborcza	14%	28%	4%	18%	36%	N=50

**Table 1. Frame frequencies**

In De Volkskrant the most used frame is, as anticipated, the international frame. The lead is, however, not as big as expected. The difference between the international frame and the second most used frame, the other/none frame, is only 2%. Together these frames were found in 78% of the articles. The remaining 22% of the articles mostly used the humanitarian crisis frame (14%), the national security frame (6%) and in one case, the Russian aggressor frame. In Gazeta Wyborcza, most of the articles had no frame or another frame. Against expectations, the national security frame was used in only 14% of the articles. The international frame (28%) and Russian aggressor frame (18%) were both used more than the national security frame. The least used frame in the Polish newspaper was the humanitarian crisis frame.

The national security frame was not as evident in the Polish newspaper as expected. Because of the geographical proximity to Ukraine and Russia, it was predicted that the threat of an invasion would dominate the news but this was not the case. Only a small percentage of the articles made a direct link from the Ukrainian crisis to national security. The articles that did, were concerned with what the consequences of the Ukraine crisis for Poland could be and whether an invasion of Russia is likely. But any anxiety was not clearly evident in most of the articles. The few articles from De Volkskrant that used the national security frame, were all from after the MH17 crash.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the table is the dominance of the international frame in De Volkskrant, as opposed to Gazeta Wyborcza, where the frame distribution is more dispersed. The way the international frame was used, however, differs between the two newspapers. In De Volkskrant the Ukraine crisis was mostly discussed in the context of Europe. The articles were concerned with the consequences of the conflict for Europe and how to handle Russian aggression. The crisis was seen as a “wake up call” and was used by critics to point out that European states should be more offensive and give higher priority to its defense and forces (Brill, 2014, April 19). Other pointed out that because of cuts in the defense budget, the Dutch army lacks equipment and skilled people and is incapable of acting in case of an emergency

(Righton, 2014, July 4). As Wilson points out: “Russia’s perversion of soft power led to more talk about the return of some hard power to the region” and “NATO was back on the agenda” (2014, p.195). It led to the realization that Europe has to use a harder tone towards Russia and that it has to recognize the importance of power politics. As one reporter critically acclaimed in one of the articles in *De Volkskrant*: “We like to think that Putin will eventually come to his senses and play the political game according to our civilised rules, if only we talk long enough to him” (translated by author) (Brill, 2014, April 19). Another important element of the international frame in *De Volkskrant* is the dependence on Russian gas. The crisis in Ukraine has brought this problem to the fore. Europe is dependent on Russia’s gas and, therefore, reluctant to take a stance against Russia because it is afraid that Russia might decide to close the tap. This is highly problematic and some reporters suggest Europe should transfer its gas dependency to the United States (Friedman, 2014, March 6). Another frequently occurring theme in *De Volkskrant* is trade and sanctions. Especially as the crisis progressed and Europe imposed more and more serious sanctions on Russia, this theme became more salient and some articles even consider whether we can speak of a true “trade war” (Peeperkorn, 2014, March 22). Some journalists are condemning the European Union because of its caution to take more serious steps with regards to Russia and explain that caution as a consequence of tight trade relations with Russia (Sommer, 2014, May 10). The economic consequences of the crisis for Russia herself and the Eurasian Union were also recurring topics. In *Gazeta Wyborcza* the focus on the international frame was slightly different. For example, there was a lot more attention to NATO than in *De Volkskrant*. NATO was pictured as a strong actor that could solve the conflict in Ukraine. Some articles even framed the crisis as a conflict between Russia and NATO rather than between Russia and Ukraine (Wroński, 2014, September 8). The fixation on NATO can be explained through the fact that Poland pressured NATO to install forces on Polish territory near the Eastern border. However, when these NATO troops were mentioned in the article, the article was coded with the national security frame. The United States were also very visible in the Polish newspaper. For example, one of the articles starts with the following sentence: “What can America do to Russia?” (Zawadzki, 2014, March 2). Another article speaks of the necessity of an “American umbrella of safety” (“parasol ochronny Ameryki”) (Bielecki, 2014, March 26). From the articles analysed, it is also evident that Poland sees itself as having a special role in the whole conflict, namely as the advocate of Ukraine. Poland should mobilize Europe about the Ukrainian case and look for support among the states by forming an international counter against Russia’s actions (Wroński, 2014, March 4). The minister of foreign affairs at the time, Sikorski, confirms this in one of the articles by saying that Poland not only has the status of

being an expert in Eastern affairs but also is also a country that is trusted in these matters (JS, 2014, March 18). And even saying that Poland will support Ukraine in a possible future membership to the European Union: “If the EU door for Ukraine is open, we will hold our foot in it”. (translated by author) (Wroński, 2013, December 3).

The humanitarian crisis frame was, interestingly enough, barely evident in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This is especially remarkable, since Poland has had a flow of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war coming its way. The few Polish articles that were coded with this frame, focused on day-to-day migration across the Polish-Ukrainian border. *De Volkskrant* on the other hand, dedicated multiple articles to the humanitarian aspects of the conflict. The articles were mostly concerned with the consequences for people in the region and also with civilian casualties.

The Russian aggressor frame was, almost exclusively used in the Polish newspaper. In *Gazeta Wyborcza* this was one of the most frequent occurring frames. A simple word search on “Putin” would prove this point. Putin is portrayed as the aggressor and as the main cause behind the war, as is proven by the following quote from one of the articles: “Putin provoked this war and is adding fuel to the fire of rebellion” (translated by author) (Radziwinowicz, 2014, August 8). Or: “Putin want revenge on Ukraine and to severely damage her” (translated by author) (MK, 2014, July 18). The main thought is that Putin is responsible for the war and that he could end it if he wanted to. He pulls the strings. What is particularly remarkable is the tone of the articles. They are often slightly ironic, jeering and rich in metaphors. “Betrayal”, “march on the West”, “attack”, “Pro-Russian hooligans”, “terrorists” “imperialist strategy” are just a few examples. There is also a certain position again the Western European countries. There is explicit mention of “the West” (“Zachód”), and that the Ukraine crisis really opened “the West’s” eyes. The slightly pessimistic tone is evident in these quotes: “Yesterday Poroshenko was able to convince the EU’s leaders to stop pretending that one can come to a compromise with Moscow only by means of goodwill” (Bielecki & Grochal, 2014, June 22) and “The Russian president was attacked by Western politicians with this time serious sanctions (...)” (Radziwinowicz, 2014, July 22). These indicate a certain tone that was evident throughout most of the articles in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Articles that were coded with the other/none frame were often purely factual and had an overall neutral tone. In *De Volkskrant* this included a lot of articles that were direct reports from war correspondents in Ukraine. Correspondents would report and describe events without shedding a particular light on the subject or taking sides. In the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* articles coded with this frame were usually interviews with professors or experts or summaries from other articles published by foreign newspapers.

The framing analysis show that the third hypothesis is only partially supported. While the international frame was indeed the most common frame in the Dutch newspaper, the national security frame was not the most common frame in the Polish newspaper. In both newspapers, the international aspect of the crisis was the most important. The Russian aggressor frame was almost exclusively used in the Polish newspaper. The framing analysis, however, exposed a difference in the tone of the articles. A lot of the articles in *Gazeta Wyborcza* have a very particular, slightly pessimistic tone, whereas the articles in *De Volkskrant* were usually very neutral and official. Dobek-Ostrowska also notices that in Poland “interpretation and political commentaries dominate reporting” (Dobek-Ostrowska, p.36).

## Conclusion

This paper is concerned with the question how mainstream media in Poland and the Netherlands covered the Ukraine crisis. The research showed that it is possible to distinguish different patterns of media coverage in the two countries. In Poland, the first few months of the crisis got a lot of coverage, compared to the Netherlands. In both countries coverage peaked after the annexation of Crimea but declined afterwards. The biggest difference in media attention is, however, caused by the MH17. The plane crash got an exponentially large amount of coverage in De Volkskrant, but only a little more attention than usual in Gazeta Wyborcza. These findings support the first two hypotheses. The third hypothesis, which was concerned with the way news about the Ukraine crisis was framed, was only partially supported. The framing analysis showed that, against expectations, the national security frame was not the most used frame in the Polish newspaper. The majority of the articles did not use any frames. In De Volkskrant, according to expectations, the most common frame was the international frame. Perhaps the most striking contrast between the two newspapers is the different tone in the articles. While De Volkskrant uses a very neutral tone, Gazeta Wyborcza often uses a more sharp and at times ironic, tone. Framing and news values give only in part an explanation for this. More research on this topic is needed.

The goal of this article was to contribute to the growing literature on media and conflict, especially with regard to framing. It is important to be aware of how media can influence our interpretation of the news, and consequently, can influence public opinion. This research, however, has a few limitations. For instance, it was only able to take two newspapers into account. In order to get a more precise idea of the media coverage, it is necessary to analyse also other news outlets, including broadcasting. Analysing media coverage in other countries, can also be insightful. Furthermore, testing other theories, such as the theory of media systems, can provide in a better understanding of differences in media coverage.

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## Appendix

### *Coding schedule*

Case number	Newspaper	Time Period	Dominant Frame

### *Coding manual*

#### NEWSPAPER

1. Volkskrant
2. Gazeta Wyborcza

#### TIME PERIOD

1. Nov.21 – Dec.31
2. Jan.1 – Feb.26
3. Feb.27 – Mar. 31
4. Apr.1 – Jul. 16
5. Jul.17 – Aug. 31
6. Sep.1 – Oct.31

#### DOMINANT FRAME

1. National security frame
2. International issue frame
3. Humanitarian crisis frame
4. Russian agressor frame
5. Other/none