A New Word War? A Frame Analysis of How Different Russian News Outlets Report on the Conflict in Ukraine

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A NEW WORD WAR? A FRAME ANALYSIS OF HOW DIFFERENT RUSSIAN NEWS OUTLETS REPORT ON THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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Master's Thesis

International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era

Supervised by Dr Andrew Gawthorpe

7 June 2024

14,963 words

On the morning of 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared on Russian national television and declared, 'I made a decision to carry out a special military operation' (Putin 2022). While the Russian President did not speak of a war during his statement, the world knew war had once again struck the European continent.

President Putin wanted the Russian people to believe this was not a war. Instead, it was an operation to 'protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the [Kyiv] regime', aiming to 'demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians' (Putin 2022). The Russian leadership had carefully constructed a narrative to frame Russia as a reactionary and peacekeeping actor rather than the provoking actor in this event, seeking to justify its involvement in the conflict to audiences abroad and at home. The Russian authorities have attempted to influence public debate on the subject through other means as well. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the Russian leadership has intensified media repression in an attempt to control what narratives enter Russian society. The Kremlin has attacked nearly all Russian independent media, banning or blocking them, as well as declaring them 'foreign agents' or 'undesirable organisations', forcing news outlets to comply with the Kremlin's rules (RSF, n.d.).

Media repression is not new to the Russian citizens. In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Soviet authorities strictly controlled the media and prohibited critical narratives (Oates 2016, 404-5). The Soviet authorities perceived the media as an extension of the regime and used media outlets to spread communist ideology and values among the Soviet population (Oates 2016, 404-5). For an extended period, Soviet citizens thus only consumed state media and were unaware of alternative narratives. Media repression in the USSR softened with the arrival of the new General Secretary of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, in 1985. Gorbachev's *Glasnost* policy during the mid- and late-1980s led to more media independence. Moreover, after the collapse of the USSR, the privatisation of media outlets in the 1990s allowed Russian journalism to flourish and alternative opinions to enter Russian society (Oates 2016, 404-5). Due to the shift in leadership and societal changes that followed in the mid- to late-1980s and 1990s, the journalistic realm in Russia thus opened up, and the Russian population experienced unrestricted media freedom for the first time.

However, the period of unrestricted media freedom did not last long. Since the rise of Russian President Vladimir Putin, media freedom in Russia has consistently declined as the Kremlin has once again sought to strengthen its control over the media (Oates 2016, 404-5; Bodrunova et al. 2020, 2925). Particularly since the 2011-2012 anti-government protests, the

Russian authorities have strongly reinforced their control over the media. The increasingly strict media laws have complicated the work of Russian journalists and increased self-censorship. Privatised news outlets now seem to oblige to the Kremlin's rules (Mejias and Vokuev 2017, 1030). In the wake of the current conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin utilises its firm grip on the domestic media. It has carefully constructed narratives around its invasion of Ukraine to gain support for its policies, and it uses media to broadcast these narratives. Moreover, by repressing critical media, the Kremlin seeks to reduce the impact of alternative framing of the events in Ukraine. While we are far away from reliving Soviet times, the Kremlin's current stance towards the media seems similar to that of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, media liberalisation during the late 1980s and 1990s still impacts society today. The policy of *Glasnost* has not been forgotten, and journalists are aware of the benefits of journalistic freedom abroad. Additionally, Russian citizens know where to find alternative news sources, for example, online or published by foreign news outlets (Erbsen and Põldre 2020, 1790; Bodrunova et al. 2020, 2925). Despite the Kremlin's crackdown on the Russian media, critical media have continued to exist, for example, by moving their editorial offices abroad (Bodrunova et al. 2020, 2925). Although the Kremlin's approach of promoting state media while silencing criticism seems similar to the Soviet approach, alternative narratives still manage to reach the Russian public today.

This research examines how different Russian news outlets have framed the conflict in Ukraine. The literature on Russia's domestic media realm is limited, and it primarily contends that Russia's media landscape consists of a binary divide where media outlets either strictly follow the Kremlin or move abroad and provide alternative narratives from there. Building on 3,223 search results from five different newspapers, this research explores whether the Russian domestic media landscape has become a one-sided stream of pro-Kremlin narratives or whether alternative frames on the conflict in Ukraine still exist. In confirmation with the literature, this research finds that news outlets aligned with the state and independent news outlets that have moved abroad report on the conflict in opposing ways, representing two contradictory extremes. However, unlike the literature, this research finds that the other newspapers follow the Kremlin's narratives in different gradations. This research contends that rather than a binary divide, the Russian media realm is more like a spectrum where some newspapers closely follow the Kremlin's rules while others provide fertile ground for alternative interpretations of events. In a world where powers weaponise information, this study furthers the research field of Russian media studies as it challenges previous understandings of the Russian media realm. It

contends that alternative understandings of events could still enter Russian society through traditional media, highlighting the increased complexity of the Russian media landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, the Russian domestic media landscape has changed, with the Kremlin cracking down on critical media (Hutchings and Szostek 2015, 173-4). Still, some independent media continue to report on contested events. This research seeks to uncover the current state of the Russian media landscape and answers the question: How have different Russian news sources framed the Russia-Ukraine War? This analysis will provide insights into whether Russian news outlets can still freely report on the conflict and the level of the Kremlin's control over the media. The following section outlines current debates in the literature on the Russian media environment, particularly focusing on censorship, media plurality and framing.

Russia's Information Warfare

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the buzzword 'information warfare' has gained popularity among journalists and academics discussing Russian disinformation abroad (Baumann 2020, 288). Some scholars heavily compare the Russian media landscape to a battleground. For example, Lupion (2018, 329; 353) contends that information warfare is an aspect of hybrid warfare and calls disinformation 'the weaponisation of mass media', concluding that 'the keyboard [...] might very well be mightier than the sword'. Likewise, Roman et al. (2017, 358) and Skillen (2019, 369) argue that the conflict in Crimea occurred not only on the battlefield but also in the media landscape as Russia has sought to shape public opinion abroad. Contrastingly, Watanabe (2017) contends that the term 'information warfare' is flawed, as it cannot explain Russian disinformation beyond the near abroad. Other scholars, therefore, connect Russia's media involvement abroad to Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which Nye describes as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments' (Nye 2004, xi). For example, Decker (2021) contends that Russian state media outlets serve as a soft power tool to shape the opinion of the Russian-speaking population in Germany. Likewise, Simons (2015) builds on public diplomacy and soft power to analyse, among other aspects, Russian media influence in the Baltics. Szostek also analyses Russian media as soft power but is more critical of the approach and concludes that the soft power scope is too narrow to evaluate Russian media, as it simplifies it to state-run media, ignoring other factors (2014, 482).

Contestations regarding the term 'information warfare' and the increasing popularity of soft power in the aftermath of the Crimea Crisis exemplify that the literature strongly focuses

on the impact of Russian media abroad. As a result, there is much literature on the effects of Russian media on foreign countries. For example, Baumann (2020) and Yablokov (2022) analyse how Russian disinformation campaigns could destabilise the West. Likewise, much of the literature focuses on post-Soviet countries that engage with the West and have Russian-speaking minorities. Hutchings and Szostek (2015) and Golovchenko et al. (2018), for example, analyse Russia's influence in the Ukrainian media landscape, and Simons (2015) and Vihalemm and Juzefovičs (2022) study the Baltics. The literature on 'information warfare', soft power and the influence of Russian media abroad is plenty. However, although the internal Russian media realm has faced significant constraints since Putin's rise to power and the domestic audience remains the Kremlin's primary target, Russia's domestic media landscape has received less attention (Szostek 2017, 285).

The Russian Media Landscape: Questions of Media Plurality and (Self-)Censorship

Recent literature recognises increasing constraints on media freedom in Russia, arguing that the Russian state actively seeks to diminish alternative narratives that challenge the status quo. Alyukov (2022) notes that Russian television has always been subject to censorship and self-censorship, yet argues that the Russian government's grip on domestic media has significantly intensified since the annexation of Crimea, increasing levels of (self-)censorship. Additionally, Hutchings and Szostek (2015) argue that the Russian state seeks to limit the influence of independent media by limiting their rights. Moreover, Lupion (2018) and Golovchenko et al. (2018) argue that Russian state-controlled media have increased their production of disinformation. Furthermore, Teper (2016, 380) recognises Putin as the 'primary newsmaker', arguing that his narratives later re-circulate in state-supported media. The Russian government thus heavily influences media narratives.

However, due to the intense focus on Russia's increasing control over the media, one could easily forget that independent media might still exist in Russia. Mejias and Vokuev (2017) emphasise that the Russian state has lost absolute control over narratives due to the rise of social media. More voices receive a platform through social media. However, they also note that traditional news outlets must still adhere to the Kremlin's demands (Mejias and Vokuev 2017, 1037). Likewise, while Oates (2016) notes that alternative news sources in Russia exist, Oates also recognises that political news lacks diversity, as most media sources refrain from challenging state-imposed political narratives. While Mejias, Vokuev and Oates contend that independent media barely survive in Russian society, Simonov and Rao (2022, 262) argue that both state-run and independent media operate in Russian society and contend that independent

media manage to reach the public. While the literature primarily perceives the Russian media landscape as merely state-run, some scholars emphasise the presence of independent media.

Additionally, scholars debate the issue of censorship in Russia. As stated before, Alyukov (2022) notes high levels of (self-)censorship among different media platforms in Russia. Additionally, Spiessens (2019) and Fredheim (2015) analyse narratives from Western news sources repurposed in Russia and argue that news reporting is not neutral, as repurposed Western articles tend to ignore or remove anti-Russian stances. While these authors argue that Russia actively censors Western news, the issue of self-censorship is more contentious. According to Bodrunova et al. (2020, 290) and Crabtree et al. (2015), the level of self-censorship in Russia is high. They note that the Russian state increasingly suppresses journalistic freedom and that censorship regarding political issues and criticism towards the state is growing, limiting media plurality. On the other hand, Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2014) argue that censorship in Russia is not as extreme since Russian journalists have the creative freedom to discuss their interests. Interviewing celebrity journalists, Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2014, 309) conclude that the journalists 'claimed to enjoy fairly unlimited freedom in their journalistic practise'. According to Schimpfössl and Yablokov, strict censorship creates dull and uninteresting narratives, and as a result, the Russian state prefers journalists to experience some degree of journalistic freedom. However, it must be noted that Schimpfössl and Yablokov completed their research before the annexation of Crimea, and since then, the Russian journalistic realm has severely changed. Still, (self-)censorship and its underlying rationale are critical in studying Russia's domestic media landscape.

While the literature sometimes characterises the Russian media as consisting of Soviet-style propaganda and censorship, the modern Russian media landscape seems more complicated, where media plurality and (self-)censorship remain relevant issues. Moreover, it must be noted that much of the literature on the Russian domestic media environment was published before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukraine war in February 2022. Analysing the media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war could provide more insights into the current state of media plurality in Russia.

Russian Narratives

Narrative framing is an important aspect of the Russian media landscape. Roman et al. (2017) note the importance of linguistic choices in framing, arguing that it affects the audience's perception of a particular issue. To illustrate, they argue that Ukrainian and Russian news sources describe separatists in Crimea differently, shaping public opinion. The literature presents more themes commonly found in Russian narratives.

Due to the recency of the event, the literature on Russian narratives since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is limited, but some research exists. By analysing publications of both independent and state media, Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023) note six Russian narratives: the 'special operation', Western sanctions, the rivalry between the West and Russia, crimes of the Ukrainian army, the Western provocation and the Ukrainian defeat. Their broad analysis indicates that Russia uses these narratives to justify its actions in Ukraine. Moreover, Ononiwu (2023) compares two Russian and two Ukrainian state-owned new sources and notes that they report differently on the conflict. Russian media heavily emphasise the term 'special military campaign' and contend that Russia is liberating Ukraine from neonazis, while the Ukrainian media frame Russia as an invasive actor and Ukraine's actions as self-defence (Ononiwu 2023, 2). Xu and Tao (2023) also note this difference, contending that while Russian media perceive the conflict as a peace mission, Ukrainian media refer to it as an occupation. Stepping away from media and focusing on the Russian government, Cap (2023) also notes the emphasis on the term 'special military operation'. Additionally, Cap (2023) highlights narratives containing Russian historical claims over Ukraine that aim to justify the invasion, such as the claim that the Zelenskyy government is neo-fascist. Cap's analysis indicates that narratives in the Russian state-owned media reiterate the Russian government's points of view regarding the war. Thus, a comparative analysis of different types of news outlets could indicate to what extent media plurality still exists in Russia.

Literature predating the Russian invasion of Ukraine also notes similar themes in Russian narratives. Like Ononiwu (2023) and Cap (2023), scholars contend that Russian news often uses history to justify its actions. Cottiero et al. (2015), Spiessens (2019), and Oleinik (2023, 10) note the emphasis on the comparison to World War 2 (WW2) and the threat of fascism. Moreover, like the more recent literature, scholars contend that Russia frames narratives to create a hostile image of the enemy, particularly Ukraine or the West. Fredheim (2015) notes that Russian translation services frame Western media as prejudiced and aggressive, and according to Baumann (2020, 287), the Russian state media promote the narrative of an aggressive 'other', framing the West as a provoking enemy. Similarly, Hutchings and Szostek (2015) note that Russian state media promote anti-Western narratives. Moreover, Lankina and Watanabe (2017) argue that the Russian state media creates frames to legitimise the annexation of Crimea. Thus, The Kremlin has used historical narratives to legitimise its current behaviour in the near abroad.

While academic work on the narrative strategies of domestic Russian news media in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict exists, it is limited due to the recency of the conflict.

Still, key features of Russian narratives can be identified: the special operation, the image of a hostile enemy and the strong focus on historical ties.

Conclusion

Understanding the Russian media landscape has become increasingly important in the wake of the current Russia-Ukraine war and in a time when information sources have become an essential aspect of yielding power. Much literature exists on Russia's efforts to yield power abroad, yet few scholars analyse Russia's domestic media landscape. Moreover, research on Russia's domestic media typically characterises Russia's domestic media realm as a binary divide. According to the literature, news outlets either align with the Kremlin and reiterate pro-Russian narratives or news outlets move their editorial offices abroad due to the media repression and attempt to influence Russian society from there. Moreover, while the existing research on Russian narrative framing of the conflict in Ukraine identifies common themes, it does not examine these themes across various news sources or time. An analysis of how different Russian news agencies, ranging from Russia-based Kremlin-owned to foreign-based independent newspapers, report on the conflict in Ukraine could provide valuable insights into the current state of the Russian media realm and media plurality, as the analysis could indicate whether news sources simply repeat Kremlin-instated narratives, or whether they provide alternative frames to interpret the conflict.

METHODS AND DATA

This research uses frame analysis to examine possible differences in the reporting on the war in Ukraine across different Russian news outlets. Drawing on five different online news publications and four different search terms, over 3,000 search results were found. These search results form the basis of an in-depth frame analysis that indicates how different Russian media frame the events in Ukraine. The frame analysis provides insights into whether Russian news sources strictly follow the Kremlin's lead in news reporting or whether they provide alternative interpretations of the events that possibly challenge the Kremlin. The frame analysis thus provides insights into the extent to which media plurality still exists in Russia.

Frame Analysis

Much of the literature recognises narrative framing as a vital aspect of Russian media. Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023), Cap (2023), Ononiwu (2023) and Xu and Tao (2023) analyse Russian narratives during the Russia-Ukraine War and contend that Russia strategically shapes these narratives to influence public opinion.

As a method within discourse analysis, frame analysis focuses on how text or speech presents specific issues. Sociological framing theory stems from the sociologist Erving Goffman (1974). According to Goffman (1974, 9), 'it is plain that retrospective characterization of the "same" event or social occasion may differ very widely'. Goffman (1974, 9) exemplifies this by stating that 'opposite rooters at a football game do not experience the "same" game'. Goffman (1974, 10-11) 'assume[s] that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events - at least social ones - and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word [he] use[s] to refer to such of these basic elements'. Thus, frames are subjective ways in which people understand the world around them. In turn, frame analysis focuses on understanding the social behaviour behind the frame and is thus concerned with constructing understood realities. To return to the football match example, a winning team might perceive the referee's decisions at the game as fair, while a losing team might perceive them as rigged or wrong, and frame analysis would be concerned with understanding the perceived realities of both teams.

Moreover, Entman (1993) expands Goffman's notion by focusing more on the political realm and argues that frames shape how an audience remembers issues. Entman (2007, 164) argues that 'frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way'. Like Goffman, Entman thus perceives a frame as a way of understanding realities. Entman (2007, 165-6) contends that frames are a valuable political power tool, as frames provide elites with the ability to shape the behaviour of the public. Entman's description of framing also highlights this. According to Entman (2010, 391), framing means 'selecting a few aspects of a perceived reality and connecting them together in a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation'. Expanding Goffman's notion that frames are subjective perceptions of realities, Entman thus contends that one can purposely use frames to shape an audience's interpretation of a specific event. Other scholars have adopted Entman's notion. For example, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017, 1751) conducted a frame analysis of the media coverage of the 2015 European refugee crisis. They found that frames on refugees and asylum seekers fit into three categories: (1) as innocent victims of a situation they cannot interfere with, (2) as a threat to national security, economy and culture, and (3) as an anonymous, dehumanised group. Greussing and Boomgaarden found that the second frame was most prominent in the media, while the media mentioned the humanitarian aspect to a lower degree. Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017, 1762) argue that '[m]edia coverage provides an essential backdrop for the formation of public opinion, political mobilisation, and policy support [...], because it

employs particular interpretational lenses (i.e. frames) on unfolding events, and thus serves as a cognitive shortcut for the audiences in order to make sense of these events', exemplifying Entman's notion of framing.

Building on Goffman (1974) and Entman (2007; 2010) and following the example of Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017), this research builds on frame analysis. The literature recognises that the Kremlin actively seeks to shape narratives to increase its legitimacy and support for its involvement in Ukraine. A frame analysis of how different Russian news outlets report on the war in Ukraine provides insights into whether Russian news outlets strictly reuse the Kremlin's narratives or report more independently, elucidating the level of media plurality in Russia.

Conducting Frame Analysis

Linström and Marais (2012) have described a seven-step approach to frame analysis of news media: (1) select a medium and topic, (2) determine the time frame, (3) create a sample, (4) identify a unit of analysis, (5) selection of a frame typology, (6) operational definitions, (7) identifying news frames. This research builds on these steps.

Medium and topic

This research seeks to uncover to what extent Russian media outlets freely report on political events by examining how different Russian newspapers frame the conflict in Ukraine. It focuses on Russian online newspapers because newspaper articles often provide much context around issues and are easily accessible for this research.

The existing literature focuses on a variety of Russian state-owned newspapers. Ononiwu (2023) discusses *Izvestiya* and *Russia Today*, Xu and Tao (2023) analyse *TASS*, and Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023) focus on *Kommersant*, *Izvestiya* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. However, the only more independent medium included in the research was *The Moscow Times*, written in English. English media might present Russian news differently, as frames could get lost in translation. As a result, this research only focuses on Russian-language sources. This research focuses on five newspapers: the Russia-based pro-Kremlin news publication *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the foreign-based *Meduza* represent opposites in Russia's media realm and form the benchmarks of this research. Moreover, this research analyses *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti* to examine whether differences in reporting on the conflict in Ukraine exist across various news outlets.

Timeframe

Much of the existing literature focuses on Russian media reporting at the start of the war. Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023), Ononiwu (2023) and Xu and Tao (2023) all use the end of February 2022 as the starting point for their research. While focusing on the start of the war is useful for analysing the creation of frames, frames might not have fully developed or spread throughout society. As a result, this research focuses on various timeframes across the duration of the war. It focuses on the first week of the war (22 February 2022 - 1 March 2022), as well as the half-year anniversary (22 August – 29 August 2022) and first anniversary (22 February 2023 - 1 March 2023) of the war. Anniversaries often spark much media publicity. Consequently, these timeframes will likely provide useful and relevant results.

Sample

The timeframe and the newspapers selected provide a broad sample of news articles, many unrelated to the research topic. The next step narrows this down. For *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti*, this research uses the regular search engine on the publication's website. Due to *Meduza*'s lack of an advanced search engine, the research builds on search results in the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA).

Unit of Analysis: Search Words

The literature identifies various common themes in Russian media narratives. Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023), Cap (2023), Ononiwu (2023) and Xu and Tao (2023) focus on the period after the outbreak of the conflict. Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2023) identify six narratives: the 'special operation', Western sanctions, the rivalry between the West and Russia, crimes of the Ukrainian army, the Western provocation and the Ukrainian defeat. However, their discussion of the six themes is relatively short and narrow. Ononiwu (2023) also notes the popularity of the phrase 'special operation' and the narrative of the rivalry between the West and Russia, particularly with a strong focus on neonazism and fascism in Ukraine. Xu and Tao (2023) also contend that the Russian media strongly emphasises the Russian army as liberators of a hostile regime in Ukraine. Moreover, Cap (2023), as well as older literature like Cottiero et al. (2015) and Spiessens (2019), also emphasise the strong focus on historical claims over Ukraine.

The search words for the frame analysis have been formulated based on the literature. The first search words are 'special military operation' (*специальная военная операция*, *СВО* for short) and 'war' (война). The Kremlin uses the term 'special military operation' to illustrate that the war in Ukraine is not an ordinary conflict. Instead, they frame it as a special operation

to liberate Ukraine. The second search words are 'fascist/fascism' (*фашист/фашизм)* and 'nazist/nazism' (*нацист/нацизм*). The Kremlin strongly emphasises that the 'operation' seeks to liberate Ukraine from a fascist leadership. These search words encapsulate the rivalry between the West and Russia, as well as the historical narratives that Russia uses to justify its geopolitical actions.

The combination of the newspapers, timeframe and the search words led to 3,223 search results. Tables 1.1 through 1.4 indicate the number of search results for each newspaper and search word found.

Table 1.1. The number of results finds on the term 'special military operation'.

	Kommersant	*Meduza*	*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*	*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*	*Vedomosti*
Timeframe 1	198	79	56	164	128
Timeframe 2	72	24	36	76	75
Timeframe 3	128	23	49	132	44
Total	**398**	**126**	**141**	**372**	**247**

Table 1.2. The number of search results on the term 'war'.

	Kommersant	*Meduza*	*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*	*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*	*Vedomosti*
Timeframe 1	299	177	22	219	49
Timeframe 2	106	122	3	143	27
Timeframe 3	152	137	23	230	46
Total	**557**	**436**	**48**	**592**	**122**

Table 1.3. The number of search results on the term 'nazist'.

	Kommersant	*Meduza*	*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*	*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*	*Vedomosti*
Timeframe 1	27	22	4	19	10

Timeframe 2	9	0	5	16	0
Timeframe 3	7	7	1	17	1
Total	**43**	**29**	**10**	**52**	**11**

Table 1.4. The number of search results on the term 'fascist'.

	Kommersant	*Meduza*	*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*	*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*	*Vedomosti*
Timeframe 1	2	6	1	6	0
Timeframe 2	3	2	1	3	0
Timeframe 3	1	1	0	13	0
Total	**6**	**9**	**2**	**22**	**0**

Selection of Frame Typology and Operational Definitions

This research focuses on how news articles use a specific search word. It selects frames based on an inductive analysis of various randomly selected search results within one unit of analysis (search word). The analysis notes how the article uses the search word, after which it finds similarities between articles and identifies common uses of the phrase. Tables 2.1 through 2.4 contain the final formulation of the different frames.

Identifying News Frames

The research individually examines all 3,223 search results and places them into one of the frame categories.[1] The research registered the most dominant frame when an article mentioned the search word multiple times. Moreover, since the context around using a specific word is most important to this research, the analysis noted striking examples of each news source and search word. As a result, this research provides a broad overview and an in-depth analysis of how newspapers used words related to the conflict in Ukraine.

RESULTS

Tables 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 on the subsequent pages present the general results of the frame analysis.

[1] A full list of all news article's URLs divided into the different frame categories can be requested through the author.

Table 2.1. Use of the phrase 'special military operation'.

	Kommersant				***Meduza***				***Nezavisimaya Gazeta***				***Rossiyskaya Gazeta***				***Vedomosti***			
How does the article use the phrase 'special military operation'?	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**
Not used / not relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.	9	3	4	**16**				**0**	7	4	3	**14**	11	3	4	**17**	2			**2**
Alongside the phrase 'war'.	29	9	14	**52**	40	16	15	**71**	8		4	**12**	18	6	5	**29**	5	1	4	**10**
As a fact or for context.	72	47	89	**208**				**0**	12	16	16	**44**	33	7	25	**65**	23	52	9	**84**
Referencing Russian officials or an official document.	76	8	15	**99**	32	2	2	**35**	19	4	20	**43**	84	47	84	**216**	89	17	29	**135**
Referencing ordinary citizens and cultural figures.		4	2	**6**		1		**1**	3	3		**6**		4	5	**9**			1	**1**
Referencing foreign people and institutions.	11	1	4	**16**				**0**	7	9	6	**22**	18	9	9	**36**	9	5	1	**15**
Not used, instead uses a different term to describe the event.	1			**1**	7	5	6	**19**				**0**				**0**				**0**

Table 2.2. Use of the phrase 'war'.

	Kommersant				***Meduza***				***Nezavisimaya Gazeta***				***Rossiyskaya Gazeta***				***Vedomosti***			
How does the article use the phrase 'war'?	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**
Not used / not relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.	126	57	74	**257**	17	13	8	**38**	7	2	11	**20**	167	110	168	**445**	22	18	13	**53**
Alongside the phrase 'special military operation'.	114	19	23	**157**	67	17	15	**99**	2		2	**4**	26	7	8	**41**	19	2	9	**30**
As a fact or for context.	5			**5**	35	54	59	**147**				**0**		1		**1**				**0**
Referencing Russian officials or an official document.			6	**6**	10	5	10	**25**			2	**2**	5		3	**8**			1	**1**
Referencing ordinary citizens and cultural figures.	20		1	**21**	34	20	14	**69**				**0**	5	2	1	**8**				**0**
Referencing foreign people and institutions.	10	20	35	**65**	14	13	28	**55**	9	1	5	**15**	1	10	18	**29**	1	1	4	**6**
Not used, instead uses a different term to describe the conflict.	23	10	13	**46**			3	**3**	4		3	**7**	15	13	32	**60**	7	6	19	**32**

Table 2.3. Use of the phrase 'nazist'.

	Kommersant				***Meduza***				***Nezavisimaya Gazeta***				***Rossiyskaya Gazeta***				***Vedomosti***			
How does the article use the phrase 'nazist'?	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**
Not used / not relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.	4	5	4	**13**	2		3	**5**	1	1		**2**	4	3	5	**12**				**0**
As a fact or for context.				**0**				**0**				**0**		2	1	**3**				**0**
Referencing officials describing Ukrainians as nazis.	23	4	3	**30**	15		2	**17**	2	4	1	**7**	13	10	9	**32**	10		1	**11**
Referencing officials denying Ukrainians as nazis.				**0**	1			**1**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing citizens describing Ukrainians as nazis.				**0**	1			**1**	1			**1**	2	1	2	**5**				**0**
Referencing citizens denying Ukrainians as nazis.				**0**	2		1	**3**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing responses of Ukrainian officials to Russian claims.				**0**	1			**1**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing people referring to Russians as nazis.				**0**			1	**1**				**0**				**0**				**0**

Table 2.4. Use of the phrase 'fascist'.

	Kommersant				***Meduza***				***Nezavisimaya Gazeta***				***Rossiyskaya Gazeta***				***Vedomosti***			
How does the article use the phrase 'fascist'?	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**	T1	T2	T3	**Tot**
Not used / not relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.	1	2	1	**4**	2			**2**	1	1		**2**	3	3	9	**15**				**0**
As a fact or for context.				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing officials describing Ukrainians as fascists.	1	1		**2**	1			**1**				**0**	3		3	**6**				**0**
Referencing officials denying Ukrainians as fascists.				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing citizens describing Ukrainians as fascists.				**0**		1		**1**				**0**			1	**1**				**0**
Referencing citizens denying Ukrainians as fascists.				**0**	2			**2**				**0**				**0**				
Referencing responses of Ukrainian officials to Russian claims.				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**				**0**
Referencing people referring to Russians as fascists.				**0**	1	1	1	**3**				**0**				**0**				**0**

Special Military Operation

The results indicate that the two benchmark newspapers (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Meduza*) used the term 'special military operation' as expected. *Meduza* used the word most often in combination with the term 'war', while *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* presented the term 'special military operation' as an opinion of a Russian official, part of an official document or as a fact. *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti* seem to follow *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s lead and primarily use the term as a fact or by referencing a Russian official or official document. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*'s use of the term seems more diverse. Still, most articles fit into the categories 'used as a fact' and 'the opinion of a Russian official or an official document'.

War

Moreover, the results show that despite the Kremlin's attempt to prevent news outlets from discussing the conflict in Ukraine as a war, all news publications also use the term, though admittedly, some more than others. *Meduza* strongly favours the term 'war' over 'special military operation'. It rarely combines the word 'war' with 'special military operation' and mainly states it as a fact, but also draws on quoting ordinary citizens, cultural figures and foreign people. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta's* search results often were irrelevant, and when they were relevant, the phrase 'war' was often combined with the word 'special military operation' or not used at all and replaced by a different word. *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti*, like *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, show high numbers in the categories 'not relevant', 'the word "special military operation" was used in the same article' and 'the word was not used and replaced'. However, *Kommersant* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* often quote foreign people, setting it apart from *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

Nazism and Fascism

Regarding the nazist and fascist framing, the results indicate that, interestingly, both *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Meduza* mainly quote Russian officials referring to Ukraine as nazist or fascist. However, while *Meduza* also includes frames denying this statement, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* does not. Contrarily, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* even frames Ukraine's fascist or nazist nature as a fact. *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti* primarily refer to nazist or fascist Ukraine when quoting Russian officials, forming a middle way between the two benchmarks.

While these general findings provide a valuable overview of how different Russian newspapers use different words to describe the conflict in Ukraine, the overview does not provide any nuance or context. For example, the tables do not consider sarcasm, the placement of phrases in articles, or the number of times articles mention a phrase. The following analysis seeks to

explore the different framing categories and how the various newspapers frame the conflict in Ukraine.

ANALYSIS

Rossiyskaya Gazeta

Rossiyskaya Gazeta closely follows the Kremlin's guidelines regarding reporting on the conflict in Ukraine. It mainly uses the phrase 'special military operation' to describe the events and predominantly references Russian officials when using the phrase to report on the conflict. Search results for 'special military operation' always led to relevant results. Not once was the phrase replaced by a different phrase, portraying *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s dedication to following the Kremlin-initiated term.

Russia as a Non-Aggressive Peacekeeper

Moreover, close analysis of the use of the terms 'special military operation', 'war', 'nazist' and 'fascist' indicates that *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* seeks to frame the events in a way that diminishes Russia's role as an aggressor.

Search results for the phrase 'war' often included articles that did not contain the word 'war' but a euphemism like a 'special operation', 'conflict in Ukraine' or 'peacekeeping operation [...] to prevent [...] a full-scale war' (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2022b; Petrova 2023). Russia as a peacekeeping actor is a common theme in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s reporting on the conflict. It often references Russian officials, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, former President and prime minister and current deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia Dmitry Medvedev and Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, claiming that Russia only conducts a special military operation to prevent further escalation of the conflict (Egorova 2022a; Zamakhina 2022; *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2023).

By describing the event as a 'special military operation' or a 'peacekeeping operation' instead of a 'war', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* frames the conflict as a unique mission of Russia rather than an illegitimate war. The strong focus on the phrase 'special military operation' thus frames Russia not as an invasive power but as a liberator or saviour, improving Russia's image. Moreover, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* seeks to normalise the phrase by paraphrasing foreign officials and media referring to the conflict as a 'special military operation'. Examples include the European Union (EU), the United States Treasury Department and the British newspaper The Guardian (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2022a; Samozhnev 2022; Shestakov 2022). By making it seem as if foreign officials and media have adopted the Kremlin jargon, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* insinuates that foreign audiences also perceive the conflict as a special mission rather than a

war. This, in turn, normalises the phrase and adds to the framing of Russia as a non-aggressive actor in the conflict.

Moreover, articles using the phrase ‘war’ often included ‘special military operation’. The articles frequently presented the phrase ‘special military operation’ more prominently than the phrase ‘war’, for example, by placing it in the title of an article, using it more often than ‘war’ or referencing an authoritative figure (Petrov 2022; Stepanov 2022). Additionally, search results for ‘war’ tend to shift the blame away from Russia. To illustrate, Russian officials and citizens claim that the Ukrainians have already waged war for eight years, victimising the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas and legitimising Russia’s actions (Blokha 2022; Egorova 2022c; Gavrilov 2022a). The strong preference for the phrase ‘special military operation’ and strategic avoidance of the phrase ‘war’ add to the framing discussed before.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta thus primarily uses and promotes the phrase ‘special military operation’, framing Russia as a non-aggressive actor and peacekeeper in the conflict. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* only refers to the events as a war when it frames Russia as either a victim or a saviour.

Anti-Ukraine, Anti-NATO

While positively framing Russia, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* negatively frames Ukraine and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). For example, referencing foreign officials, it frames Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as uncooperative and quotes foreign experts predicting a negative outcome of the war for Ukraine (Egorova 2022b; Shablovsky 2023). Moreover, it negatively frames NATO, reporting on protests against Western arms supplies and claiming that NATO benefits from the war (Kosachev 2023; Ryabinina 2023a). By negatively framing Ukraine and NATO, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* seeks to improve Russia’s image and possibly gain support for Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

Moreover, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* references both Russian and foreign officials who support the nazist and fascist framing of Ukraine, such as Vladimir Putin, now former Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and an American politician (Gavrilov 2022b*; Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2022c; Ryabinina 2023b). By reiterating officials framing the Ukrainian leadership as fascist, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* provides space for the justification of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Particularly among Russians, memories of WW2 are vivid, and claims about defeating nazism could win support for the ‘special operation’ among the Russian population. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* thus negatively frames Ukraine and NATO to improve Russia’s image and possibly provide room for understanding the Russian invasion.

By primarily using the phrase ‘special military operation’ and strategically using (or avoiding) the phrase ‘war’, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* frames Russia as a non-aggressive actor and peacekeeper that seeks to prevent a full-scale war. At the same time, it frames the Ukrainian leadership as fascist and NATO as a wrongful supporter of Ukraine, possibly seeking to find more acceptance for Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

Meduza

The results indicate that *Meduza*’s reporting on the situation in Ukraine differs significantly from that of the other newspapers. *Meduza* prefers using the phrase ‘war’ over the phrase ‘special military operation’ and provides a broader range of narratives on the fascist or nazist claims.

Ignoring the Kremlin Jargon

In its articles, *Meduza* recognises the Kremlin’s wish to refer to the conflict in Ukraine as a ‘special operation’ yet states that it has decided to continue using the phrase ‘war’ (*Meduza* 2022n). *Meduza* frames the conflict by prominently using ‘war’ in search results for the phrase ‘special military operation’. *Meduza* places the phrase ‘war’ in titles and often uses the phrase more frequently than ‘special military operation’ (*Meduza* 2022b; 2022j; 2023d). Additionally, when it uses the phrase ‘special military operation’, it tends to either use the term ‘war’ in the same article or use the phrase sarcastically, for example, by referring to it as ‘the “special military operation” (as the Russian authorities call the war)’, stating that ‘authorities call the war in Ukraine a “liberation operation”’ and arguing that the authorities use ‘invented words, just to hide the truth’ (*Meduza* 2022b; 2022l; 2022r). Furthermore, at times, search results for the phrase ‘special military operation’ do not contain the phrase but do speak of a ‘war’, portraying *Meduza*’s strong favour for using the phrase ‘war’ (for example, *Meduza* 2022c). Moreover, it describes the conflict as ‘the war that Vladimir Putin started’, framing Russia as the aggressor (*Meduza* 2022q). In addition, *Meduza* references cultural figures, scientists, journalists, and known anti-Kremlin activists who call the situation a war, seeking to show its audience the true nature of the situation (*Meduza* 2022a; 2022f; 2022g; 2022i). Moreover, *Meduza* also often refers to foreign officials, such as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, United States President Joe Biden, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who describe the conflict as a ‘war’ (*Meduza* 2023c; 2022p; 2023e). *Meduza*’s consistent use of the phrase ‘war’ to describe the situation counters the Kremlin’s objectives of changing the nature of the conflict. Instead, *Meduza* frames the conflict as a war for which Russia is responsible.

By normalising the phrase 'war', *Meduza* frames the conflict as a Russia-initiated full-scale invasion rather than a 'special operation' or a 'peacekeeping mission'.

Overall, *Meduza* thus seeks to avoid Kremlin jargon and instead frames Russia as the primary aggressor in the conflict.

Countering Kremlin Propaganda

Meduza is critical of the Kremlin's narratives and framing of the events. *Meduza* criticizes the Kremlin's use of 'nazism' and 'fascism'. It only tends to use the phrases 'nazism' and 'fascism' when quoting Russian officials (*Meduza* 2022h; 2022o). Furthermore, it calls out the Kremlin for spreading pro-Russian propaganda and sarcastically quotes the Kremlin-instated phrases such as 'special military operation' and 'denazification' (*Meduza* 2022h; 2022m; 2023b). Next to this, *Meduza* quotes people denying the Kremlin's nazist and fascist narratives, such as Russian and Ukrainian citizens, but also a Russian EU representative (*Meduza* 2022d; 2022e; 2022k). Moreover, it criticises Putin for referring to events in the Donbas as a genocide, and it has published articles referring to the Russian leadership as nazist or fascist, further damaging the Russian leadership's image (for example, *Meduza* 2023a). By referring to the Kremlin's narratives as propaganda and spreading alternative opinions on the Kremlin's claims, *Meduza* seeks to diminish the Kremlin's status and the impact of the pro-Kremlin narratives. It frames the Kremlin as manipulative and untruthful, damaging its image.

By refraining from using Kremlin jargon, consistently referring to the conflict as a 'war' and exposing the Kremlin's propaganda tactics, *Meduza* thus frames Russia as an aggressive and manipulative power. In the broader context of the conflict, *Meduza*'s framing damages Russia's status and image as a 'peacekeeper'.

Kommersant

Kommersant published a large number of sources on the 'special military operation' and 'war'. The results indicate that *Kommersant's* reporting of the conflict is similar to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta's*, as both newspapers primarily refer to the situation as a 'special military operation' while avoiding the phrase 'war'. Additionally, like *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Kommersant* primarily builds its argument off of quotes from Russian officials or stating phrases as facts. This analysis, however, uncovers the context behind the use of the phrases and indicates that *Kommersant*'s reporting of the conflict is distinct from that of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

Normalising the 'Special Military Operation'

The results indicate that *Kommersant* follows the Kremlin's guidelines by primarily using the phrase 'special military operation' when discussing the event. It mainly uses the phrase as a

fact or as the opinion of Russian officials. By using 'special military operation' as a fact, *Kommersant* contends that the phrase describes a true reflection of the situation in Ukraine, framing the situation as unique military involvement to help ethnic Russians rather than a war. However, it must be noted that as a business newspaper, *Kommersant* often uses the phrase 'special military operation' as a fact when providing context in articles on economic developments (for example, *Kommersant* 2022k; 2022n). Still, in some articles, *Kommersant* evidently avoids using the phrase 'war'. For example, it states that protestors want to end the 'special military operation' while protestors themselves evidently speak of a 'war' (*Kommersant* 2022a). Moreover, it changes quotes from Western and Ukrainian officials or paraphrases them, making it seem like the phrase 'special military operation' is part of their vocabulary (*Kommersant* 2022m; 2022q; 2023c). By shifting the protestor's statements and making it seem as if opponents of the Russian regime also use Kremlin jargon, *Kommersant* normalises the phrase and furthers the framing of the events as a defensive operation rather than an illegitimate Russian invasion. Additionally, search results for the phrase 'war' often did not refer to the situation in Ukraine. Instead, *Kommersant* discussed previous or potential wars while referring to the current situation as a 'military operation', reinstating the frame that the conflict in Ukraine is different from a war (*Kommersant* 2022e; 2022o). Furthermore, it argues that while Russia is conducting a 'military operation' in Ukraine, the West is 'waging [an information, sanctions or general] war' (*Kommersant* 2022i; 2023a; 2023d). *Kommersant* thus frames the situation as if the West is provoking a Russian reaction, while Russia merely seeks to de-escalate the situation, improving Russia's image.

Changing the Narrative and Facilitating the Opposition

However, *Kommersant* seems to move away from the Kremlin narratives in other instances. For example, *Kommersant* only uses the phrase 'nazist' or 'fascist' by quoting Russian officials, implying that it refrains from using the phrase under its own name. *Kommersant* sometimes diverts from the Kremlin narratives and uses different phrases to discuss the 'special military operation'. For instance, it refers to the situation as 'Russian military aggression in Ukraine' and 'Russia's special military operation on the territory of Ukraine' and states that 'by order of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Russian military entered the territory of Ukraine' (*Kommersant* 2022l; 2022j; 2022p). By highlighting that the operation is on Ukrainian territory and referring to Russia's actions as aggressive, *Kommersant* questions the legitimacy of the operation, framing Russia as a violent actor rather than a peacekeeper.

Moreover, while it often uses the phrase ‘special military operation’, *Kommersant* is not scared of using the phrase ‘war’, as it titled an article: ‘And the next morning there was war’ (*Kommersant* 2022b). It also uses the phrase ‘war’ as a fact when providing context in articles, framing the true nature of the event as a Russia-initiated conflict rather than a special operation to restore peace (*Kommersant* 2022f). Furthermore, it references foreign officials, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, United States President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, as well as foreign media describing the events as a ‘war’ (*Kommersant* 2022b; 2023b; 2023e). Furthermore, next to the foreign opponents of the war, *Kommersant* gives the Russian opposition a voice. For instance, *Kommersant* quoted statements of the opposition referring to the events as a ‘war’ and anti-war statements by artists, scientists and journalists (*Kommersant* 2022d; 2022h). *Kommersant* even titled an article: ‘No war!’ (*Kommersant* 2022g). *Kommersant*’s use of the phrase ‘war’ instead of a ‘special operation’ frames the conflict as an illegitimate invasion by an aggressive power. Moreover, *Kommersant* facilitates critical narratives to enter Russian society by providing a stage for the opposition.

Overall, *Kommersant* seems torn between following the Kremlin’s guidelines and reporting on the events as they are. Some articles represent *Kommersant*’s dilemma; they use ‘war’ in the title but ‘special operation’ throughout the text or vice versa (for example, *Kommersant* 2022c; 2022g). Still, *Kommersant*’s reporting differs distinctly from the Kremlin narratives, providing the audience an alternative way to interpret the conflict.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta

While *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has published significantly fewer articles than *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the numbers in the tables suggest that the two newspapers’ reporting of the situation in Ukraine is similar. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* primarily uses the phrase ‘special military operation’ to describe the issue and has not published any articles denying the fascist narrative. Moreover, it rarely uses the phrase ‘war’, which the three results in the second timeframe exemplify.

Following the Kremlin

Nezavisimaya Gazeta primarily refers to the conflict in Ukraine as a ‘special military operation’. It often quotes Russian officials and departments using the phrase, such as President Vladimir Putin, Press Secretary for Russian President Dimitry Peskov and the official state media watch-dog Roskomnadzor (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022g; 2022j; 2023b). Moreover, search results for the phrase ‘war’ often did not lead to results referring to the current conflict

as a ‘war’ but to results discussing previous or future wars while referring to the current issue as a ‘special military operation’ (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022i; 2023d). By using the phrase ‘special military operation’ and avoiding the phrase ‘war’ to discuss the situation in Ukraine, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* frames the situation as a unique operation distinct from war. As discussed before, framing the event as a unique Russian mission rather than a war, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* improves Russia’s image by reinstating that Russia did not provoke the conflict and is merely seeking to do what is right. Additionally, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* often paraphrases foreign officials and media that describe the conflict as a ‘special military operation’. For example, it paraphrases quotes from the European Union and the United States leadership, as well as the British newspaper The Sunday Times, making it seem like they use the phrase ‘special military operation’ rather than ‘war’ (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022a; 2022e; 2022f). By implying that foreign opposition’s discussion of the event aligns with the Kremlin’s narratives, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* facilitates the normalisation of the phrase ‘special military operation’ and furthers the framing of Russia as a non-provoking actor. Interestingly, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* does refer to a ‘war’ when the Russian leadership criticises the West. For example, Putin criticises the West for funding the ‘war’ and contends that the West had started the ‘war’ (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2023e; 2023f). Moreover, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* does speak of a ‘sanctions war’, a conflict in which the West arguably struck first (Roks 2022). While *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* thus seeks to diminish Russia’s role in starting the conflict, it frames the West as a provoking actor and a war starter.

Small Resistance

However, at times, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* diverts from describing the situation in Ukraine as a ‘special military operation’ and instead uses phrases such as ‘crisis’, ‘conflict’, or ‘the situation caused by the armed conflict’ or publishes articles under the tag ‘war’ (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022k; 2023a; 2023g). Moreover, despite its consistent use of the phrase ‘special military operation’, it publishes articles that criticise the Russian involvement in the conflict (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022d; 2022h). *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* thus does not solely frame the event as a Russian peacekeeping mission but also shares slightly critical frames.

Additionally, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* sometimes refers to the situation as a ‘war’. However, it explicitly does so when quoting statements by others. It primarily quotes foreign citizens and officials, as the choice of words of foreign people is not affected by Russian law or the Russian government (for example, Todua 2022; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022c; 2023c). By quoting foreign people using the phrase ‘war’ to describe the issue, it seems that

Nezavisimaya Gazeta attempts to play by the Kremlin's rules while also shedding light on the true nature of the events. Additionally, at times, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* adds footnotes to its articles, disclaiming that the Russian Ministry of Defense uses the phrase 'special military operation' or that Roskomnadzor refrains from using the phrase 'war' or 'invasion' (Melnikov 2022; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2022b). By adding these footnotes, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* elucidates the Kremlin jargon, explaining its word choice and shifting the frame from the Kremlin as a non-provoking actor to the Kremlin as a calculated and possibly deceiving actor. While it still primarily follows the Kremlin's guidelines, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* frames the events more vaguely, possibly sparking doubt about the true nature of the events among its audience.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta closely follows the Kremlin's rules when reporting on the conflict in Ukraine. It actively uses the Kremlin's jargon, framing Russia's involvement in the event as reactionary and good in nature. Still, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*'s occasional use of the phrase 'war' when quoting foreign people and its criticism towards Russia's involvement could be a minor form of resistance.

Vedomosti

Similar to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the results suggest that while *Vedomosti* has published significantly fewer articles than *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Vedomosti's* reporting of Ukraine's conflict seems similar to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s. The results indicate that *Vedomosti* follows the Kremlin's example of referring to the situation as a 'special military operation' rather than a 'war'. Moreover, in its articles, it follows the Kremlin's example of arguing that the Ukrainian leadership is fascist or nazist.

Copying the Kremlin's Narrative

Vedomosti primarily uses the phrase 'special military operation' to describe the situation in Ukraine. As discussed before, the strong emphasis on the phrase 'special military operation' frames Russia's involvement in the war as a reactionary response and frames Russia as a peacekeeper rather than a provoking actor. However, it must be noted that with its focus on business, *Vedomosti* often uses the phrase 'special military operation' to add context to its articles. For example, it contends that countries imposed sanctions because of 'the special military operation' or that Shell abandoned the Nord Stream 2 project due to the 'special military operation' (*Vedomosti* 2022f; 2022g; 2022i). Moreover, while still referring to the event as a 'special military operation', at times, *Vedomosti* holds Russia or President Putin accountable for initiating the operation, for example, describing the event as 'a special military

operation that Russia launched on Putin's instructions' (*Vedomosti* 2022m). Still, while *Vedomosti* is thus not assertively spreading Kremlin propaganda, its use of the phrase 'special military operation' adds to the normalisation of the phrase, promoting the frame of Russia as a non-aggressive actor in the conflict.

Additionally, *Vedomosti* often quotes the Russian leadership directly when describing the Russian involvement as a 'special military operation', highlighting that it is the opinion of Russian officials, not the newspaper's (*Vedomosti* 2022f). However, this is not always the case, as *Vedomosti* also discusses the 'denazification, demilitarisation of Ukraine and the liberation of the LPR and DPR' without referencing Russian officials, which facilitates the further normalisation of the phrases and framing of Russia as a liberator and peacekeeper (*Vedomosti* 2022h; 2022j).

Furthermore, *Vedomosti* seems to actively avoid using the phrase 'war' to discuss the situation in Ukraine. Search results for the phrase 'war' often do not refer to the current issue but to previous or future wars. Moreover, many of these articles also contain the phrase 'special military operation', indicating that *Vedomosti* follows the Kremlin in framing the situation as a unique Russian mission distinct from a war (for example, *Vedomosti* 2022c; 2022e). Furthermore, it references foreign officials and departments, such as United States President Joe Biden, the United States Treasury and institutions, such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), using the phrase 'special military operation' in their statements critically discussing the conflict (for example, *Vedomosti* 2022a; 2022k; 2022l 2022n). By making it seem as if the phrase 'special military operation' is part of the vocabulary of foreign officials and institutions, *Vedomosti* furthers the Kremlin's goal of normalising the phrase and framing Russia as a less aggressive actor in the conflict.

Cautiously Referencing War

Vedomosti only refers to the situation in Ukraine as a 'war' by quoting others. For example, it quotes former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg referring to the situation as a 'war' (*Vedomosti* 2022d; 2022o; 2023). Moreover, *Vedomosti* sometimes explicitly states where it acquired its quotes. For example, in an article, *Vedomosti* explicitly states that it copied citations containing the phrase 'war' from RIA Novosti and TASS, two Kremlin-aligned broadcasters (*Vedomosti* 2022b). *Vedomosti* most likely states the origin of its citations to prevent issues with using non-approved phrases like 'war'. While slight differences exist between *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s and

Vedomosti's reporting of the conflict, *Vedomosti* primarily follows the Kremlin guidelines and refrains from providing alternative framing of the conflict.

While *Vedomosti*'s articles sometimes contain the phrase 'war' and do not seem to assertively spread Kremlin propaganda, it firmly sticks to the Kremlin's rules. By referring to the situation as a 'special military operation' and quoting or paraphrasing Russian and foreign officials and institutions using the phrase, *Vedomosti* facilitates the normalisation of the phrase that frames the event as distinct from war and Russia as a non-provoking actor. Compared to the Kremlin media, it does not provide any alternative frames or interpretations of the situation in Ukraine.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The literature review has indicated that despite the increasing relevance of understanding the domestic Russian media landscape, the literature on Russia's domestic media frames is limited. While a significant amount of literature analyses Russia's means of yielding influence through media abroad, the domestic media realm remains understudied. Moreover, the literature analysing the domestic media realm primarily characterises Russian news outlets as either controlled by the Kremlin or independent outlets that have moved abroad due to repressive measures. The literature thus contends that there is no space for narratives that diverge from the Kremlin's standpoints within Russia. Overall, the literature illustrates the Russian media realm as a binary landscape; news outlets either repeat Kremlin narratives and refrain from broadcasting alternative views, or news outlets move abroad to allow themselves to produce more critical frames of the Kremlin.

When merely looking at *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Meduza*, this research confirms the binary understanding of the Russian media realm presented in the existing literature. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Meduza* report on the situation in Ukraine in two opposing ways, which seems to align with the argument in the existing literature. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* loyally repeats Kremlin narratives, primarily referring to the conflict as a 'special military operation' and restating Kremlin claims that Russia is conducting a peacekeeping operation to liberate Ukraine from nazism. On the other hand, *Meduza* seeks to challenge the Kremlin's narratives by sarcastically using the phrases 'special military operation' and 'peacekeeping mission' and instead neutrally referring to the situation as a 'war'. The newspaper's opposing framing of the events thus seems to align with the literature's argument on the binary divide in the Russian media landscape. Moreover, this strong divide between the two newspapers formed a valuable basis for analysing the other newspapers, as newspapers could be categorised as either leaning more towards the pro- or the anti-Kremlin side.

The analysis of the three other newspapers challenges the literature's understanding of the Russian media landscape. While the literature has contended that Russian news outlets either repeat Kremlin narratives or have moved abroad to broadcast more critical narratives, tables 2.1 and 2.2 indicate that *Kommersant*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti* all report differently on the event. The numbers in the tables suggest that *Vedomosti's* reporting closely resembles *Rossiyskaya Gazeta's*. While still similar to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and in no way near *Meduza*'s critical way of framing the event, *Kommersant* does indicate a distinct way of reporting on the event compared to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti*. *Kommersant* refers to the situation as a 'war' more frequently and references foreign officials more often, indicating that it does not merely repeat the Kremlin's framing of the event. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* lies somewhere in between *Vedomosti* and *Kommersant*. The numbers in tables 2.3 and 2.4 indicate no significant differences between the newspapers' use of the phrases 'fascist' and 'nazist'. The only noteworthy aspect is that *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* was the only newspaper that used the phrases as facts rather than opinions. However, as discussed before, the context in which newspapers use phrases is vital to understanding how they frame the event. While the numbers in tables 2.1 through 2.4 provide a useful base for understanding that differences in using specific phrases exist, the analysis of the context in which newspapers use phrases is far more useful for exploring how different newspapers frame the event.

The analysis confirms that differences exist in how newspapers frame the conflict in Ukraine. As discussed before, it confirms that *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Meduza* represent two opposites in the Russian media realm, as *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* closely follows the Kremlin's frames while *Meduza* promotes more critical frames. Moreover, it indicates that rather than being strongly pro- or anti-Kremlin, the three other newspapers present different gradations of following the Kremlin-instated narratives surrounding the conflict. *Vedomosti* strictly follows the Kremlin's rules, almost always referring to the event as a 'special military operation' and referencing Russian and foreign officials, framing Russia as a non-provoking and peacekeeping actor in the conflict and refraining from providing a platform for alternative interpretations. Likewise, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* follows the Kremlin's rules and jargon, framing Russia's actions as reactionary and intended as a peacekeeping mission. Still, while *Vedomosti* seems to actively avoid using the phrase 'war' to discuss the issue, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* occasionally refers to the conflict as a 'war', primarily when quoting foreign officials. While *Vedomosti* thus rules out any possibility of alternative interpretations of the conflict, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* provides minor resistance towards the Kremlin's framing of the situation in Ukraine. *Kommersant* takes its resistance a step further, often referring to the conflict as a 'war' and

providing a voice to the Russian opposition. Other times, however, *Kommersant* strictly follows the Kremlin's rules and adds to the normalisation of phrases like 'special military operation'. *Kommersant* seems torn between following Kremlin rules and providing alternative frames on the situation in Ukraine, yet clearly frames the events differently from *Vedomosti* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. Rather than the Russian media landscape being black or white, different gradations of following the Kremlin's frames thus exist across the different newspapers.

The analysis thus confirms that *Meduza* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* are examples of extremes in the Russian media realm and help understand the position of the other newspapers in the Russian media landscape. Moreover, the analysis of the other three newspapers indicates that although the literature depicts Russia's media landscape as a binary divide between state-aligned and foreign independent news outlets, Russian newspapers follow the Kremlin-instated narratives in different gradations. Rather than a binary divide, the Russian media realm is thus more like a spectrum where some newspapers closely follow the Kremlin's rules and broadcast Kremlin-instated frames while other newspapers provide fertile ground for alternative interpretations of the situation.

Uncovering that Russia's media landscape is more complex than previously thought has relevant implications for the existing literature, as well as future research and policymakers engaging with Russia. The existing academic literature has portrayed the Russian media landscape as a binary divide, but this research has indicated that this notion needs more nuance. While the existing literature still provides valuable insights into the Kremlin's strategies to silence opposition, one must remember that different gradations of following the Kremlin's rules exist. Moreover, researchers, as well as policymakers engaging with Russia should not oversimplify Russia's domestic media realm; instead, they need a thorough understanding of Russia's complex media landscape when researching or dealing with Russia. This research has also indicated that although highly complex, the literature on Russia's domestic media landscape is limited. The results of this research have indicated the growing importance and relevance of understanding Russia's domestic media realm, providing fertile ground for future research.

Limitations and Future Research

Still, the research contains some limitations. First, although using the anniversary of the conflict as a timeframe was useful as much content was published around those times, the three timeframes studied represent a small fraction of all content published on the conflict. Future research could, therefore, include more timeframes. Moreover, as analysing the use of specific

words is labour- and time-intensive, future research could look into the possibilities of building a tool to analyse the use of words across many articles. As a result, research could build on a significantly larger number of sources. Second, based on the literature, this research focused on four main search words. While these search words encompassed some of the main debatable narratives in Russian media, other differences between different broadcasters might exist. Consequently, future research could examine other search words to find more similarities or differences between broadcasting outlets. Lastly, this research examined five online newspapers. While the analysis of these newspapers has provided useful insights into the diversity of the Russian media landscape, it does not analyse the different newspapers' effects on society. Moreover, this research merely focused on traditional newspapers, even though television or social media also strongly affect public opinion. Future research could thus examine a more diverse range of media, as well as the effect narratives have on the audience.

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