Doctoral thesis summary

The war in Ukraine. Frames and strategic narratives in Russian press

Recent events emphasized that a war represents not only military operations, but also media operations, where both framing and narratives provide a major framework for interpretations. In this sense, the power of media institutions remains essential in the non-military segment of the war, namely in its virtual "battles". The main objective of this paper was to identify and analyze media frames and strategic narratives of the recent war in Ukraine in the Russian media. The interest in exploring these two research directions was based on several motivations, both assessing the messages that reach a wide audience, as well as understanding how one of the main actors of the war framed the events that took place in Ukraine. Thus, the paper aimed to highlight an actor's efforts to shape public perceptions of events in ways that might legitimize or justify his actions and role in the war.

In addition, the paper aimed to explore the ways in which global powers are involved in this "battle of narratives" through which they try to give their own meanings to the international political system, current events or, even, certain past events. Building on recent research and reports that have indicated that the Russian authorities have concentrated their resources in the fight to win this battle, mobilizing a veritable "information front", this paper has attempted to provide insight into the narratives promoted by Russia through *mainstream* media sources. Thus, in order to carry out the research, the most popular newspapers in Russia were taken into account, considering their power to reach a wide audience that position them as essential in providing a framework for conflicts.

The work is structured in four chapters. The first chapter of the work, entitled *"Ukraine: Euromaidan, the conflict in Donbas and the war from February 2022"*, includes a series of approaches on the events in Ukraine since 2014, the evolution of relations between Moscow and Kiev, the chronology of the current war, as well as the perspectives of some authors regarding the elements of information warfare and the "battles" in virtual space carried out by Russia targeting Ukraine. For this subchapter, it

was considered relevant to analyze the relations between Moscow and Kiev, starting from 1991, in order to understand the geopolitical, social or cultural roots of the current war. Moreover, some aspects regarding the current digital ecosystem were also highlighted, from the battles in cyberspace, disinformation campaigns, information operations, to the concept of "*weaponization of information*" given the rise of new means of communication. Thus, the chapter presents some theoretical approaches regarding the conflict in Ukraine, in particular, from the perspective of the role through which media can create connections between the actions and results of a war and end up being considered weapons of war (Kofman & Rojanski, 2015; Hoskins & O'Loughin, 2015; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). This chapter defined the characteristics and objectives of Russia's information operations, both in Ukraine and in the space outside Russia or Ukraine, as well as the elements of hybrid warfare (Giles, 2016) in the context of the new information environment that is changing the nature of classical warfare.

The second chapter, *"Strategic Narratives. The battle of interpretations in a military conflict ",* defines, first of all, the concept of "strategic narratives", both as a component of information warfare or a communication tool through which a certain representation of political events or processes is offered, and as a tool of legitimization or justification of a state's actions by mass media institutions. In this chapter, the approaches developed by some authors regarding "narratives" and "strategic narratives" (Freedman, 2006; De Graaf et al., 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2020) were included, also making a distinction between system narratives, identity narratives and issue narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Also, in this chapter were included the results of some research that explored the role of mass media in building the image of the enemy for public support during a conflict (De Graaf et al., 2015; Bahador, 2015), as well as the way in which the discourse is shaped and adapted to political myths and strategic narratives (Khaldarova, 2016; Livingston & Nassetta, 2019). Moreover, an important section of this chapter is dedicated to the narratives promoted by the Kremlin regarding the events in Ukraine, starting from 2014. Among these narratives, anchored historically and politically, there are also the narratives about "the Nazi-fascist atrocities of Ukraine", "Western geopolitical expansion in Russia's sphere of influence", "the 2013 coup and the neo-Nazi and illegitimate nature of the current government in Kiev", "the legitimate

nature of the annexation of the Crimean peninsula", as well as the identity narrative that encompasses the "we" vs. "they" dimension. In this chapter, an analysis of the recent history of mass media institutions in Russia was also included, which can be characterized by three important moments: a period of complete state control during the Soviet period, a period of relative openness after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the current hybrid model in which mass media, although privatized, act in accordance with the interests of the government, while a minority of independent media sources in Russia are marginalized.

The third chapter, *"Theory of media frames. Approaches, typologies and key concepts",* articulated the most important notions regarding the theory of media framing, starting from the roots of the theory anchored in social and psychological sciences (*"frames"/"framing"*), listing the approaches of some authors regarding the functions of frames, including Robert Entman (1993), Murray Edelman (1993) or James Tankard (2001). The chapter also approached the typologies of media frames (Iyengar, 1991; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, De Vreese, 2005) and a included a definition of the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames (*frame-building)* , and the interaction between media frames and the individual predispositions of the audience (*frame-setting).* Also, in this chapter, a section is dedicated to research on media framing in the context of recent military conflicts.

The fourth chapter entitled *"The war in Ukraine. Media Frames and Narratives in the Russian press'* includes some analysis of media frames and narratives through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research tools. To carry out this research, five research questions were established designed to understand what media frames and narratives can be identified in the Russian press, what tone of voice journalists have in relation to three important actors of the war (Ukraine, Russia and the Western states), what techniques journalists use and whether an evolution of frames or narratives can be observed in the context of the five analyzed periods. The research started from a content analysis of articles related to the war in Ukraine, collected between February 7 and May 17, 2022, based on some key events of the war in Ukraine, including a pre-conflict period, namely: 7-12 February 2022, 21-28 February 2022, 6-12 March 2022, 2-6 April 2022 and

16-22 May 2022. In total, 370 articles from the most widely read newspapers in Russia were selected and analyzed: *Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia* and *Argumenty i Fakti.*

The current war and the events in Ukraine since 2014 are part of a "series of tense moments" in the relations between the Russian Federation and neighboring post-Soviet states (Lavric, 2016, p.34). Some interpretations of the crisis that broke out in 2014 invoke the internal roots of the conflict (Gessen, 2014; Sakwa, 2015) which would be responsible for the radicalization of anti-Maidan groups in the Donbas region, subsequently encouraged by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the organization of a war of insurgency against the new regime in Kiev. Other approaches explain the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of the actions and interests of the Russian government, in terms of political and economic pressures from the Kremlin that would have forced former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to reject the EU agreement (Haukkala, 2015; Wilson, 2016). Also, some perspectives can be identified according to which the roots of the violent protests of 2013-2014 and later of the armed conflict in Donbas are related to the dimension of "contested national identity"; according to these interpretations, different visions of society and the political system would have contributed to the deepening of the rift within Ukrainian society (Ishchenko, 2015). There are also approaches that have referred to the events in Ukraine as a long-running "dispute" between Russia and the West, both from an economic and military perspective (Sakwa, 2015).

Ukraine has experienced several political, social, cultural or economic changes, becoming today "a conglomeration of territories, people and languages" (Sakwa, 2015, pp. 10-11) and bringing together people who part of distinct cultures, share different religions, customs and views. In this sense, Robert Sakwa (2015, p.15) appreciates that after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the concept of a state or nation for Ukraine was still questioned; the events evolved with the expansion of the European Union to the east, when more and more states that were part of the Eastern bloc joined the European space, and Ukraine became the border or intersection area between two worlds.

Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojanski (2015) believe that the events in Ukraine are a hybrid war, and the timing of the annexation of Crimea represented a combination of "disinformation, ambiguity, information warfare, the element of surprise, and military

operations" (p.2). In addition, the new information ecosystem has changed the nature of warfare, and the events in Ukraine have highlighted the fact that some key battles may take place primarily in the cyber or information domain and secondarily in the military domain. The Internet, social networks and their ability to quickly spread various forms of content at low cost have become important weapons of information warfare and disinformation campaigns. Thus, as the events in Ukraine evolved, Russia continued to exploit the opportunities offered by new technologies and the new information environment. These disinformation operations were conducted not only with the goal of influencing the target audiences, but attempted to "mobilize supporters, demonize the enemy, demoralize foreign governments or enemy armed forces, and lend legitimacy to one's own actions fighting to undermine Ukraine (Lange & Svetoka, 2018, p.104).

Research on strategic narratives has its beginnings in the field of international relations, strategic communication, national security, and in the context of military conflicts. Schmitt (2018, p.3) believes that the analysis of strategic narratives is based on the interest to examine the importance of persuasion in contemporary conflicts, the way in which contemporary military campaigns are presented to international or national audiences and the way in which a political community debates strategic issues. If a particular strategic narrative fails to provide a concrete explanation of the overall objective of the use of military force, the public may remain confused as long as the "conceptual framework" to rationalize and interpret events is lacking credibility (Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011, p. 513). Thus, strategic narratives articulate a clear and compelling mission purpose, and research on narratives in the context of military conflicts has shown that "people are more likely to approve the deployment of national military force if they perceive the objective as clear" (Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011; Bahador , 2015). In this context, narratives constitute "compelling stories" about the use of armed force in military interventions that are distinguished by a clear and coherent answer to the essential question "why this mission is needed."

Strategic narratives create a series of connections between events and trends within a society to provide an overall organization by which war is understood and answers to fundamental questions such as "who", "what" and "how" (De Graaf et al. , 2015, p.8). Thus, a narrative becomes strategic when it is deliberately used by political

elites as a communication tool with which they "try to construct a shared sense of the past, present and future of international politics in order to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon & O 'Loughlin, 2017, p.112). To be effective, the strategic narrative must resonate with national values, culture, interests, and biases at a particular moment in a nation's history (Freedman, 2006; Riessman, 2008).

In addition, great powers can use these strategic narratives to establish and define their role in the international political system, to maintain their influence in this system, or to shape the system. Some authors believe that strategic narratives are a tool through which great powers can articulate their interests, values and aspirations in ways that give them the opportunity to transfer power so that violent struggles between supporters of the status quo and actors who challenge it are avoided (Antoniades et al., 2010, p.1). It is also worth noting that these narratives become prominent in the transition periods of the international system, especially when actors who challenge the hegemonic powers emmerge (Antoniades et al., 2010, p.1).

Authors James Gow and Ben Wilkinson (2017) argue that a key mechanism by which a strategic narrative becomes effective is to appeal to the "values, interest and prejudices of a target audience", including through a society's political myths (p.377). The relationship between these tools is essential to understand how a narrative is received and accepted within a society (Schmitt, 2018, p.3). It is also worth noting that strategic narratives are not necessarily very detailed and, when not based on evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion or strange metaphors and questionable historical analogies (Freedman, 2006, p.23). Thus, the accuracy of such analogies is not important: what matters is the "appeal" they can have for the intended audience and the specific form they can give to the representation of certain political events or processes (Schmitt, 2018, p.3).

Also, an effective narrative must contain information that captures an audience's attention and is clearly perceived as compelling (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p.110). Understanding how strategic narratives were formed also involves understanding the strategic goals of the actors and the communication patterns they adopt. Strategic narratives can be designed with short- and/or long-term goals in mind, and beyond goals, political actors can use various communication modalities in constructing strategic

narratives, including persuasion or argumentation. To communicate these messages and project these narratives, states can also use traditional diplomacy or public diplomacy (Natarajan, 2014; Miskimmon et al., 2013).

According to Freedman (2006), a successful narrative connects certain events while distancing others, distinguishes good news from bad news, and explains who wins and who loses. The purpose of using these narratives reflects the fact that they play an extremely important role in communication, and opinions are shaped not so much by the information received, but by how it is constructed to be later interpreted and understood (Freedman, 2006, p.23). Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013) provide a comprehensive theoretical framework on the analysis and interpretation of strategic narratives. First of all, they establish several categories by which they distinguish between systemic narratives *"system narratives"* (refers to particularities regarding international relations or international/global political organization), identity *narratives "identity narratives"* (refers to the identity of the actor) and the narratives about public policies *"issue narratives"*.

As we showed in the previous chapter, today, military actions frequently include an information warfare component. Thus, combat tactics can be combined with large-scale "information operations", including attempts to manipulate and cultivate fear by promoting strategic narratives in the mass media (Ventsel et al., 2021, p.21). As some authors show, in the case of a war, the main discursive objectives of the adversaries are the "demonization of a concrete enemy" and the mobilization of the public for the fight (Gudkov, 2005, p. 14). In this sense, strategic narratives can be used to mislead adversaries, amplify a sense of threat about a potential "enemy," or sow fear and confusion.

War is a complex phenomenon that requires "an interpretive framework", "an interpretive construct" or organization to understand what battles represent and how they fit into the set of international events (Ventsel et al., 2021, pp.25- 26). Moreover, war becomes intelligible to the one who interprets it when narratives appeal to pre-existing knowledge or beliefs, whether based on true or misleading facts (De Graaf et al., 2015, p.7). In this sense, strategic narratives can be used to legitimize political or military involvement in conflicts (De Graaf et al., 2015).

During the military battles of a war, governments have powerful tools to build public support or legitimize their actions. Numerous studies have explored the role of mass media in building the image of the enemy for public mobilization during a conflict (Bahador, 2015; De Graaf et al., 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2020). Thus, portrayals of the enemy can be based on "dehumanization" or "demonization" techniques, while they can include negative representations of the adversary whose destruction "is necessary and beneficial" (Bahador, 2015, p.120).

Within a war, actors who project certain strategic narratives try to take into account the "stories existing in the collective memory" of target audiences or groups, as well as other factors such as shared ideological beliefs or fears (Ventsel et al., 2021, p. 26). Fear is an essential discursive device for legitimizing political decisions, where actors, actions and certain events can be presented as a "threat" to society, and certain fears can be constructed in public communication to distract people from other fears or conflicts (Ventsel et al., 2021, p.22). Thus, narratives that appeal to a group's fears are powerful tools, especially when the element of "threat" or "source of threat" is clearly described and explained, as well as the ways in which it can be reduced or avoided.

Strategic narratives promoted in the Russian public sphere regarding the Ukrainian crisis are based on a geopolitical and historical approach. These narratives focused, on the one hand, on the "hostility and self-interest" of Western states behind the regime change in Kiev and, on the other hand, on the idea of a "fascist threat" spreading in Ukraine (Khaldarova, 2016, p.127). Thus, all federal television and radio stations, newspapers and a multitude of online resources have been engaged in a disinformation campaign about the situation in Ukraine. This information front has been in preparation for several years, being supported and amplified by numerous diplomats, politicians, political analysts, experts or representatives of academic and cultural elite. In addition, in 2014, disinformation mechanisms adapted to the events in Ukraine and tried to give credibility to the intentions of the Russian government by promoting certain narratives: "Bandera's descendants could storm Crimea", "the Black Sea Fleet bases could be taken over by NATO", "Ukrainian citizens could be de-Russified" (Darczewska et al., 2014, p.5).

Thus, the news reflects, expresses and sometimes actively serves *the "national interest"* determined by other more imposing actors and institutions (McQuail, 1994, p. 121). In this way, the mass media can choose to capture the destructive principle of war or that of liberation from tyranny, as they can frame the event as an "invasion" or as an "attack" and, last but not least, they can manifest and highlight the attitude own negative or positive attitude towards the conflict (Dimitrova & Stromback, 2005, p.402). In fact, the authors showed that national and international mass media are closely involved in the reproduction and normalization of geopolitical narratives, and the relevance of media constructions of geopolitical relations are accentuated in periods of international conflict (Ojala & Panti, 2017, pp.42-43).

Although it is considered that mass media have the role of supervising and accurately informing the citizens, having the mission of being critical and objective towards the political elites, national issues, state decisions at the internal and external level, they also stands out through the important function of interpreter of events (Baum & Groeling, 2010, p. 18). Jean Baudrillard (1970, p.164) mentioned that a real event, happened today, once it is not interpreted will not represent interest for an informational media exchange. Information becomes accessible for consumption only after it has been filtered and processed (Baudrillard, 1970, p.164), and news messages are most often "interpretations" accompanied by comments, observations, opinions and even appreciations of events or problems in the journalists' side. In this context, we note that journalists are not only reporters, but also interpreters, being the ones who give color to political, economic or social representations through the way they present events in the textual or visual content of the news.

Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) believe that in the last two decades, we have gone through three phases of media ecology and three phases of mediatization, each of which shaped a different way in which mass media became part of the operations of war. For example, the 1990s saw the final stage of broadcast-era warfare, in which national and satellite television and the press had control over what the public watched, and governments could exercise control over access to information and how journalists presented the events.

Approaches to framing theory range from definitions that claim they are "organizing principles" (Goffman, 1974, p. 10), "principles of selection, highlighting, and presentation" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6), to definitions that presents framings as "structured understandings of how aspects of the world work" (Sweetser & Fauconnier, 1996, p. 5). For example, Gitlin (1980) considers the theory of framings to refer to "the persistent patterns of knowledge, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which certain actors organize discourse" (p. 7). Gitlin (1980) also highlights the fact that this organization goes beyond a given event and is persistent over time, as in the case of journalists using frames to assign them to some "cognitive categories" (p.21). This assignment of cognitive categories gives frames a unique power, thus, framing is more than "the inclusion or exclusion of information—frames are active, generating information as well as projection devices" (Gitlin, 1980, p.22).

Authors Gamson and Modigliani (1987) described the framing process as "the packages that elites and the media use to characterize an issue" (p.143). These packages comprise arguments, information, symbols, metaphors, and images (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Frame can further be seen as a "central organizing idea or story that gives meaning" to events related to a story or problem (1987, p. 143). Arguably, packages can affect how people understand, interpret and react to a issue or problem. Essentially, problem packages have a frame, "a central organizing idea or story that gives meaning to an unfolding sequence of events" (1987, p. 143).

According to Entman (1993, p.56), framings draw attention to some aspects of reality while overshadowing other elements, which could cause the audience to show different reactions depending on the interpretation they are exposed to. When organizing news and its content, journalists use expressions, phrases, mental images, metaphors to define and construct perceptions and representations of topics and events. Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009, p.19) believe that framings unify information into a package that can influence audiences.

Therefore, the research showed that journalists attached importance to reports about the actions of the Ukrainian army and Ukrainian soldiers, the actions and position of Western countries towards the war in Ukraine, the situation of victims, as well as the arming of Ukraine or threats to the Donbas region. The analysis outlined a series of

identity narratives about the Ukrainian people or Ukrainian soldiers, about "Ukrainian Nazis", "Ukrainian nationalists", "terrorists" or "nationalist battalions", while the actions of the Ukrainian army were called acts of "terrorism", "terrorist attacks", actions of "invasion" or "occupation". It was also possible to observe the emphasis on the dimension "we vs. them" that appealed to identity narratives, especially in the case of Russia, through the image of a "peace-loving" country, "victim of the actions of other countries or global powers", "liberators" and "fighters against injustice". In a similar way, frames and identity narratives about the West were constructed. Thus, the actions of Western countries have been described in terms of an "information war", a "propaganda" or "psychological war" waged against Russia or Ukraine. In fact, a frequently invoked identity element focused on presenting Western countries as supporters of the "fascist/Nazi/neo-Nazi/anti-Semitic/criminal regime" from Kiev. Last but not least, the comparisons between the actors involved in the war were also noted, by calling on certain key words: "Ukraine invades - Russia liberates", "Ukrainian Nazis vs. Russian soldiers", "crimes committed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces - Russian soldiers defend civilians", "it's not war, just a military operation", "we build - they destroy".

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