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Constructing Heroes and Villains

Identifying Narratives in the Ukrainian Defence's Social Media Presence

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Abstract
This paper examines the narratives that Ukraine is telling through their official Defence of Ukraine account on X, and what the implications of those narratives are. At the time of this study, a conflict is taking place in Ukraine after the invasion of Russia on Ukrainian territory. Both sides have communicated stories that aim to explain the conflict, but it is especially Ukraine that has succeeded in capturing the interest and approval of the rest of the world with its employment of well-crafted storytelling strategies through social media. Through an interpretative analysis of the content of the DefenceU account using a visual narrative analysis method, the study finds that the account presents an overarching narrative of moral judgments where Russia is portrayed as 'evil', and Ukraine as 'good' and destined to be victorious. The premise of the message as presented by the DefenceU account is found to essentially be an ideological and moral statement that is used to increase sentiments of approval in the public. Ukraine is enhancing its soft power through the persuasive power of the narrative that is constructed.

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"We hold a rifle in our hands instead of a morning cup of coffee. We are guarding freedom and liberty."

- Taken from the Official X page of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine

1. Introduction

We learn how to view the world around us through the stories that we tell. It is through stories that we learn the values and norms that shape our culture and society, and how to live our lives according to those rules.

Stories may therefore function within the realm of communication as a tool for promoting opinions and ideologies; shaped, whether intentionally or not, in such a way as to convince the audience of a certain worldview. Thus, the agenda of the storyteller may be furthered when the persuasive power of the story is strategically used. This is, of course, not a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the concepts and ideas of communication in a war context; in a great deal of conflicts, emotionally resonant persuasive messaging has been strategically used to influence the public mind's imagination, with the goal of forming coordinated public thought and action. Creating a narrative for the war that is seen by individuals at the Home Front is not an unfamiliar phenomenon, but a new aspect of this strategy has been introduced through the development of social media: the narrative may be spread in new and more far-reaching ways.

1.1 Aim and Research Question

At the moment of writing this text, a conflict is taking place in Ukraine after the invasion of Russia on Ukrainian territory. Both sides have communicated stories that aim to explain the conflict, but it is especially Ukraine that has succeeded in capturing the interest and approval of the rest of the world with its employment of well-crafted storytelling strategies through social media.

With new resources available in the modern age because of the development of social media, Ukraine is able to deploy new communicative measures of defence; how does Ukraine tell the story of this conflict through their social media accounts? The textual feature of posts on X is a natural medium for telling a story, but the layout of the posts is in large part characterised by the visual feature which is the more eye catching of the two. It is said that a single image can tell a thousand words, and the images of social media content may therefore serve as an effective tool for the emotionally driven narrative.

The aim of this study is therefore to research: what are the narratives that Ukraine is telling through their official Defence of Ukraine account on X, and what are the implications of these narratives? The primary findings of the study will identify the different narratives present, while secondary findings may cast a light on the normative principles that form what we see as 'legitimate force', and how moral judgments are used in the frame of a story.

1.2 Outline

After this introduction, a short background will be given on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, up to the date of the writing of this text. A review of the relevant literature for this study will then be presented, including previous research on topics such as soft power, digital diplomacy, and nation- and security branding. The theoretical framework will then be presented in a discussion around narrative theory, which will be followed by a description of the method, sample, and material chosen for the study. The results of the analysis will then be outlined as structured by themes and discussed in relation to the previous research and theory, followed by a conclusion of the study.

2. Background

It should be noted that the following retelling of events leading up to the invasion and the effects thereof is highly simplified and cannot be stated to be a fully accurate summary of all the relevant factors that have contributed to Ukraine's behaviour on social media.

Before its independence in 1991, Ukraine was one of the most important parts of the Soviet Union. After breaking free of the Union, Ukraine has progressively aligned itself more closely with western countries and institutions such as the EU and NATO, while distancing itself from Russia. From the 1990s and onwards, there had been ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine regarding the status of Crimea, which officially belonged to Ukraine. In November of 2013, a wave of protests known as Euromaidan took place in Kyiv in reaction to the Ukrainian President Yanukovych's progressively more pro-Kremlin regime. The protests were violently suppressed in a bloody culmination when snipers began to execute protesters, and a day later, Yanukovych fled. In response to these developments, Russia annexed the territory of Crimea in 2014. Armed Crimean men, supported by Russia, took control of the Crimean parliament and barricaded it, and by early March Russia organised a referendum concerning Crimea's status as a part of Ukraine. The results were highly contested, with 97 percent allegedly voting to join Russia, amid reports of voter intimidation and the presence of armed guards. Western allies called the takeover of Crimea illegal, and the event triggered a conflict that resulted in a high death toll between 2014 and 2021 (Ormiston, 2023).

Throughout 2021, Russia mobilised troops and military equipment along the border with Ukraine under the guise of military exercises. The conflict dramatically escalated in February of 2022 when Russia crossed the border with a large force in an attempt to seize major territories, among them the capital Kyiv, thus marking a full-scale invasion. The leader of Russia, President Vladimir Putin, claimed that the goal of the invasion was to "de-Nazify" Ukraine, but the actual goal, as theorised by experts, was to stop the rapprochement between Ukraine and the West, by overthrowing the EU- and NATO-positive government of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Kirby, 2023). Things did not, however, go according to Putin's plan. Ukraine quickly responded to the threat by gathering its forces and creating a strong resistance that succeeded in pushing back Russian invasive forces in many different areas, and what was intended to be a fast and easy repression by the Russians, has instead become a long-trudging and devastating war. Many analysts have stated that the invasion was a strategic mistake on the part of Putin (Peterson, 2023; Solchanyk, 2023). The war has only served to bring Ukraine even closer to the EU and NATO, as the west has provided Ukraine with billions of dollars in military aid since the beginning of the invasion (Masters, 2023).

3. Previous Research

This section will present previous research that is relevant for this study. This includes some key concepts, such as soft power, as well as research on digital diplomacy, how this has evolved from traditional diplomacy and literature concerned with nation- and security-branding.

3.1 Defining Soft Power and its Instruments.

In the arena of international politics, power is usually regarded as the ability to influence another to act in ways in which that unit would not have acted otherwise (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). In the traditional lens, this power is the capacity of coercion; now often termed as hard power, with strategies focusing on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions to enforce national interests (Wilson, 2008, p. 114). Set against this conventional definition of power, Joseph Nye first established his concept of 'soft power'. The traditional use of power exerted by a state is usually seen as being the use of force to exert one's will - however, Nye makes the argument that the state is also able to exert influence by employing means that have the goal of persuading, rather than forcing. Soft power means that one shapes politics by co-opting, rather than coercing (Nye, 2011). Nye explains that these co-optive means may include framing the agenda, positive attraction, and simply persuasion, as can often be seen in information campaigns (Nye, 1990). An important feature to this kind of power is that the audience it is targeted towards tends to view it as legitimate, as opposed to how the use of force may be seen as illegitimate and invalid. The effects of devastating wars tend to lead to the perspective of seeing the military use of force as an inherently illegitimate instrument of world politics, and enforcement measures are therefore frowned upon unless employed in self-defence. There is a general non-intervention norm in the international legal order, but soft power has proved to be a useful way to bypass it (Armstrong & Farrell, 2005). Rather than manipulating events and politics through the use of hard power methods, the different aspects of soft power allow the state to exert influence over other countries without a method of enforcement.

Soft power has been discussed primarily in relation to its uses in the realm of foreign policy, as persuasion is achieved through discourse expressed by state representatives, and it is this aspect of soft power that will be central to an analysis of Ukrainian presence on X (formerly known as Twitter). The subtler potential of soft power has led to the term being increasingly popularised in the digital age as it is intended to describe a spectrum of behaviour which primarily can be recognised by

it not being ‘hard power’. Diplomacy as it is utilised through the digital medium may be seen as an expression of soft power.

3.2 The Development of Digital Diplomacy

The traditional perspective on foreign policy is that it is carried out by representatives of sovereign states through interactions in customary channels - ambassadors and other state representatives carrying out diplomacy by communicating their governments’ positions and implementing policies toward other actors (Gilboa, 2002). This is a perspective that has been upended by the continued development of an information age (Adesina, 2017). With the onset of the digital era, one can observe that social media has been a powerful new tool used in foreign policy. This development has led to what is now described as digital diplomacy; the use of digital technology and new information communication techniques (e.g. public social media platforms) in the field of public diplomacy (Cassidy et al, 2019).

Foreign policy can be summarised as the national and international objectives that a state designs, as well as the means it employs in the purpose of achieving them (Gilboa, 2002). It is a basic assumption at the heart of our understanding of international politics that every state’s leader will strive to shape the larger social forces in the international political arena to the advantage of one’s own nation, whether that means carrying out their will by force, or through persuasion. Whatever the objectives may be in a foreign policy, diplomacy will be the foremost tool in achieving them. The forming of diplomacy may be seen as the result of a constant interaction between national goals and the resources for attaining them (Szondi, 2008, p. 6-7), and it is the evolution of such available resources that has given birth to the new era of digital diplomacy.

The Internet revolution has dramatically changed many aspects of international relations, including among them diplomacy. The Internet has created new means of communication, and therefore enhanced the connectivity between all the peoples of the world, as well as between citizens and states; it is now possible to maintain a constant and direct dialogue with people from all around the globe, every hour and every day. This is mainly done by using social media platforms such as Facebook or X (formerly known as Twitter), which are resources that allow countries to proactively manage their images and reputations in a non-costly and highly efficient manner, speaking and engaging directly with their targeted audiences. This phenomenon is what has come to be called digital diplomacy (Adesina, 2017).

This new category of diplomacy means that the art of diplomacy has been facilitated through social media, by greatly enhancing the communicative outreach of different states. This new and more direct scope has the effect of also amplifying

the ability of states to manage their own nation brands, by creating a new space where they are able to project or contest national narratives as well as promote new global policy initiatives (Duncombe, 2019). An example of this strategy was explored by Bjola and Manor, in their paper on @TheIranDeal X channel, where they examined the effects of a social media account launched by the Obama White House in order to gather domestic support for the ratification of the Iran Nuclear Agreement; the use of social media was an important factor in the Congressional endorsement of the Agreement (2018).

It should be noted that discussions and research around digital diplomacy has mainly been aimed at the social media presence initiated by institutions such as foreign ministries and embassies. Such digital diplomacy constitutes attempts by diplomats of countries to engage the broader public and influence general opinion, through channels such as Facebook or X (Collins & Bekenova, 2019; Sharma, 2019; Strauß et al, 2015). This text, however, will focus on the branded messages emitted not by a foreign ministry or embassy, but instead by the ministry of defence of a state, in a war-time context. Digital diplomacy allows for a more interactive approach with the public through social media that allows for real-time responses to events and opinion (Harris, 2013). Rather than such an event merely being a temporary crisis, or an opinion that may harm the nation's tourist industry, the case of Ukraine takes the possibilities of digital diplomacy to a new arena, in a conflict that at the time of writing this text constitutes the most violent attack on a country in Europe in the post-WW2 era (D'Anieri, 2023).

3.3 Nation Branding

Messages emitted by entities such as foreign ministries or embassies are usually carefully designed to enhance the reputation of the state through the strategy of nation branding, by appealing to a large audience with content that is characterised by the state's own unique history, culture, and values. Nation branding has traditionally been associated with place or destination branding, but its potential as a strategy for public diplomacy is more recently being further explored by states. To understand the subject, it is important to understand that a brand is not a simplistic creation, but rather a complex assortment of images, meanings, and associations in the public mind, collectively generated by functional, emotional, relational and strategic elements. (Szondi, 2008, p. 4-6) A nation's brand exists at all times, whether consciously constructed or not, and is the sum of perceptions that the international audience has towards the country in question, or that the local population has towards its own country. When it is consciously constructed or affected, it can be used as a tool, as an outcome of enhancing or maintaining the soft power of the state may occur. A successful nation branding campaign is one that improves the

image of a state among international stakeholders, thus creating reputational capital. To create a successful nation branding it needs to be connected to the national identity, rooted in the essence of the nation, rather than formed out of thin air with no connection to what it represents - but it is not identical to a national identity. National brand identity is inherently strategic, while a national identity is, at its core, an irrational psychological bond; a socially constructed perception of the collective self, based on an imagined community (Fan, 2010).

The creation of a branding is therefore done by the act of framing, with the national culture and identity functioning as a stock of commonly invoked frames (Entmann, 1993, p. 53). The act of framing messages in order to brand one's nation, and thereby affect perceptions of and attitudes towards the country, can be assumed to chiefly be for the purpose of bettering the perception of the country. Simply put, the receiver of a message tends to hold a rather simplistic view of the nation - applying branding strategies can affect that view by highlighting the positive and often overlooked qualities of a nation. The end goal, then, is not that the image of the nation should be a shallow picture presented merely to boost tourism, but rather that the most efficient branding strategies alter the image of the country in such a way that people will hold a permanently more positive view of it (Anholt, 2010).

3.3.1 Security Branding

The majority of research around a nation's branding focuses on the strategic self-representation in the purpose of achieving beneficial economic goals, but the instrument of nation branding can also be specialised to create what has been termed as security branding. This process has its origin in the interest of a state to maintain its national self-presentation, through the tool of an online presence; by more specifically highlighting security attributes of the state, security branding is shaped as a form of nation branding (Anzera et al, 2019). When branding the security of a state, it is often done by providing assurances that the country has a strong 'societal security'; the confident ability to maintain a national identity as expressed by culture, religion, language, etc (Mihăilă, 2015). The intended message is that the audience should feel 'safe', usually by emphasising that the nation is at peace and will remain so, but also by providing assurances that should war befall the nation it will be prepared to defend itself efficiently (Anzera et al, 2019).

Security branding has largely been investigated in peacetime contexts (van Ham, 2008), not in war time, as will be done in this text. The carefully calculated communication of a country defending itself in a war can reasonably be assumed to differ from the usual content one associates with nation and traditional security branding; formed in the interests of enhancing a reputation in order to spur a growth in tourism, investments and trade. Mihăilă defines security branding when

employed by a nation as creating "a place in the mind of the global audience as a 'secure' destination/country to be visited, to invest/study or do businesses in" (2015, p. 427), but if applied to Ukraine it can be surmised that the branding would need to also function as a mechanism to portray a place capable of legitimately defending itself in an ongoing invasion.

Security branding may operate on many different levels, but just like the mechanisms of the more general concept of nation branding, it functions by appealing to intuitive and emotional reactions in the receiver. The theorised response of the receiver is integral in the formation of the branded message, as highlighted by Kangaspuro and Lassila's article where they studied how security branding may function through framing: they found that Russia, in response to its perceived need to establish a new state identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union, had attempted to affect the public's perception of its past by renaming the second world war in Russian media to "The Great Patriotic War" (2018). War histories form a decisive influence for the identity of nations - indicating that such a rephrasing carries major symbolic importance, and the designation is quite deliberate in how it appeals to the receiver.

3.3.2 Operationalizing Security Branding

Mihăilă presents three ways in which a state can use security topics to promote its international image, thereby operationalising the principles of security branding: it may portray itself as a 'secure destination' in order to entice investors and workers, or as a 'security provider' that attracts other countries under its influence, or, thirdly, it may use security branding in an attempt to repair international reputational damage caused by conflicts or violent events (2015).

A strategy of branding intended to affect the perception of a country's state security, as employed by Ukraine at the time of writing this study, can be utilised through the means of digital media, thus following the approach of digital diplomacy. The content produced by Ukraine and found on its social media platforms can be assumed to be intentionally formed to shape the image of Ukraine as a state in the pursuit of security.

It is, however, a very challenging task to convey carefully calculated nation and security branding in a single image or text. The nature of social media is such that it is the single image and the accompanying caption, appearing on the screen, that must grab the attention and imagination of the audience; but because social media is available to all, the audiences in question may be vastly different. In the case of nation branding, this means that the strategy needs to be shaped in such a way that it will appeal to vastly different audiences, both domestic and international. It is above all the image that captures the attention of the viewer, but to summarise the

complexity of a nation in an image, and to convey a sense of strength and security, seems a daunting task.

To communicate the strength of a nation, images associated with strength and security may be used on social media platforms, such as images of the military. The behaviour of militaries as media actors has been observed to focus overwhelmingly on the visual, with the produced content being photographs and videos (Crilley, 2016). Images of advanced weaponry and scenic views of helicopters are shared, along with an overarching limelight on the aesthetics of a 'soldier persona': characterised as healthy, relaxed, and confident. Security branding as expressed by a military is primarily recognised as "fusing hard-power imagery with a positive message" (Hedling et al, 2022, p. 4). There are different ways of conveying a positive message concerning the role of the soldier (a necessary strategy for Ukraine in 2023, as they need the world to sympathise with the defensive mission of the Ukrainian military), but one way to achieve this was a strategy discussed in Mathers' text from 2020. Mathers' text, which was published before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, discusses how the country used images of cats and dogs to garner domestic support for the military. The intent was to encourage civilian audiences to view soldiers, militaries, and the aims of war with sympathy and approval, and therefore to prepare civilians to accept the notion of war. The digital militarisation was then carried out through what Mathers describes as "affective depictions of soldiers with domesticated animals" (2020, p. 159), most commonly cats and dogs, being rescued, looked after, or otherwise placed in the care of soldiers. The effect of this strategy was that the boundaries between the realm of war and the realm of the domestic were blurred, in the goal of creating the intended narrative that soldiers are humans with traits commonly perceived as positive: affectionate caretakers. The Ukrainian military would then be branded as protectors, fitting with their security branding objectives.

There was a distinct political significance to the animals in the images, as they were used as instruments to operationalize the security branding strategy. Russia also employed this strategy, but with less international success. Ukraine's military was much more sophisticated and systemic in the digital sphere as it used the more widely understood English language and popular hashtags as forms of communication to spread the message much further, thus creating an advantageous story through their social media campaigns. Since the invasion of 2022, the strategic social media presence of Ukraine has only grown more astute, which makes it a worthwhile subject to study.

4. Theoretical Framework

This section will introduce the theoretical framework of security narratives.

4.1 Narrative Theory

Narratives are stories that are used to make sense of one's reality by building an identity and agency (Andrews, Kinnvall, Monroe, 2015, p. 141). In addition to being representations of a series of events or facts, it is important to understand that narratives are also socially constructed retellings that serve the purpose of 'sense-making'. This 'sense-making' effect means that it is through narratives that one produces meaning and knowledge about the world, and expresses one's intentions and politics. Thus, our conception of the world is shaped through narratives (Wibben, 2011). This means that a narrative can never be fully understood when it is studied detached from any context, as they always exist in relation to other narratives; either alongside, in support of, or in contrast to. Since narratives are defined as being so closely bound to identity, important narratives that stand in relation to any newly created one are narratives of national belonging, religion, culture and gender. Such categories of identity signifiers inevitably stand at the centre of any narrative (Andrews et al, p. 143-144, 2015). Narratives are therefore deeply entwined with the claimed social and political identities that can be found in human societies, and are constructed through a collective memory and history (Wibben, 2011). The constructed narrative ascribes meaning; this is accomplished by stating what is happening, how, where, when and why, as well as who the central figures of the narrative are. Meaning is furthermore constructed through inclusion and exclusion, or manipulation of how to ascribe identities, as well as through the lexical choices made in the descriptions, whether intentional or not (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Narratives are not only transmitted through text but may also be conveyed through images. A narrative image can be said to be transferring information by either narrating, or merely illustrating a story. Visual narration is, however, largely dependent on the receiver's visual literacy and capacity to infer from visual clues, as its function is to refer to the real world by using the conventions of the visual language (Fasnacht, 2023).

The nature of narratives is such that it can be a site where power is exercised; they can be used through their impact on the identity of actors, or to shape future policy courses. Narratives matter in the arena of international politics because of how they influence discourse and rhetoric, and enable certain foreign policies (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Strategic narratives may be formed as a tool within the

international political arena in order to shift communication dynamics between political actors and "extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Zaharna, 2016, p. 4409). The observed trend by analysts in recent years is that political actors seem to have become more and more aware of the power of narratives in international politics; competitive storytelling has been designated as 'narrative battles' that may produce shifts in public perceptions, and therefore shifts in soft power (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Previously the narrative concept has often merely been seen as a synonym for the rhetorical discourse that is implicated in international politics, but the perception of it as a tool for successfully enhancing one's power in the international realm has been discussed. The success of a narrative is measured by how well it resonates with the audiences that receive it (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019).

Using narrative theory as a perspective on international politics, presents a way of studying the creation of meanings and policies. It is a mode of analysis that highlights different interpretations of events and actions, thereby clarifying how value judgements are employed within the politics of storytelling (Wibben & Mehta, 2018).

4.1.2 Security Narratives

Applying narrative analysis to security studies lays the focus on how events can be understood (more specifically: events that can be described as conflicts). A security narrative is expressed through perceptions of how the world in its past, present and future relates to the conflict and the post-conflict effects (McLeod, 2013). Just as all other narratives, security narratives are intimately bound to identity, as identifying factors such as gender, nationality, etc. are mythologised to construct a conception of the self (Andrews et al, 2015). The identity of the self is inherently connected to security in the everyday existence of a person (Wibben & Mehta, 2018), and is integral in the understanding of security as it determines how 'the others' are constructed. The construction of 'the others' is linked with the phenomenon of focalization; the point of view from which the story is presented affects the relation between who perceives and what is perceived. The perspective of the story therefore affects the content (Wibben & Mehta, 2018).

The narrative perspective is important for the understanding of the Defence of Ukraine X page as it highlights how Ukraine constructs its cause, and its experiences throughout the invasion. Storytelling in the wake of a conflict has been found to be fundamental to catharsis, healing, and reconciliation on an individual and national level (Moon, 2006); it can thereby be concluded that storytelling may also be fundamental in generating emotional strength in an ongoing conflict. The need for Ukraine to reinforce their confidence in their ability to repel the invader may be

expressed through narrative images of strong military figures with determined expressions, accompanied by captions such as “nation of indomitable people” (15.10.2023), or “Ukraine’s victory is inevitable” (27.09.2023), as seen on the @DefenceU account. Constructing a narrative also allows the storyteller to justify their actions (Wibben & Mehta, 2018). The narrative serves as a conceptual framework for a war, justifying and legitimising the actions taking place during it. A forceful response from the side of Ukraine will then always be referred to as a counterattack towards the aggressor, a useful and necessary action that will prevent an evil enemy from wreaking havoc; an image of a tank firing against the invader will be accompanied by the caption “with each shot we make the world a better place” (20.09.2023). Such a justification helps to shift the understanding of actions and is important for explaining policies and motivating support for the narrator (Martin, 2011). Gaining the support of both a domestic and a foreign audience by dominating the information narratives can be seen as essentially controlling, or even winning, the narrative battle, that is inherently an identity battle (Zaharna, 2016).

4.1.3 Operationalisation of the Narrative

The construction of a narrative is then, at its core, the construction of the deeper meaning of a message. Conveying the messages, and thereby the narrative, is achieved by Ukraine through digital diplomacy as utilised in their social media presence. To understand how the content on their social media platforms is built, it is fundamental to understand the process of framing. The process of framing is essentially the process of message construction in order to affect the interpretation of the receiver. By shaping the nature of the receiver’s cognitive response, framing is an instrument that exercises the influence of communication. This is done by strategically selecting and highlighting certain parts of reality, while simultaneously omitting or obscuring other elements, thus only calling attention to some particular aspects of the issue (Entman, 1993).

Framing is a strategy that is employed in order to persuade an audience of the accuracy of a presented narrative by very carefully constructing it, in a process defined as followed by Robert Entmann: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (1993). This means that by framing the message, the receiver will adopt the viewpoint that the messenger intended, as to what the causal agent is doing, who is creating the problem, and how to then evaluate the causal agents and their effects. In the case of Ukraine, such a viewpoint may take the form of depicting Russia as the aggressive invader creating destruction in its wake, and the Ukrainian forces fighting to restore peace and freedom with the help of their allies. Frames therefore function as tools to further the narrative, and it is through the finding of frames that we are able to identify an

overarching narrative. However, when opposing positions of the issue's debate both present competing frames, it has been found that the frames tend to cancel each other out (Shah et al, 2009). While Ukraine is presenting the narrative of defending itself from a tyrannical oppressor, Russia, on its own side of the narrative battle, is attempting to portray their invasion as a "denazification" of Ukraine. To counteract this, the frequency by which a receiver is exposed to the frames does not have any significant effect, but the potency of the frames does; the greater strength of a framed message may overpower the opposing position's framing (Shah et al, 2009, p. 89). It can thus be concluded that the material gathered from the Ukraine Defence X account will be potently emotionally framed so that Ukraine's narrative becomes the dominant one in social media. Frames may take the forms of different words, phrases, and images, but discussion around framing and narrative theory has mostly centred the text as a communication device. Framing has nonetheless been found to be at its most effective when using text and images simultaneously (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The simultaneous exchange between image and text is a basic feature of the layout of a post on X, which shows a text that is sometimes followed by a visual – yet, the visual is often more likely to catch the immediate attention of the audience as it tends to take up a larger amount of space on the screen when it is viewed. The interplay between text and significant images thus enables for effective and potent framing in the message construction of the Ukrainian Defence account.

5. Research Design

In this section, the sample and material collected for the study will be presented, as well as the chosen methodology and the analytical framework. Lastly, a critical discussion of the research design will be presented.

5.1 Sample and Material

The conflict in Ukraine's territory has been ongoing since the escalation that occurred in February of 2022, during which time the official X page of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine has posted regularly. Due to the nature of social media, the material of the page is publicly available and accessible to the world, thus forming an example of digital diplomacy manifested. The content of the feed consists of a mix of posts that include informative updates of the happenings at the frontlines, light-hearted posts of Ukrainian soldiers, emotionally stirring images and videos of war-affected civilian life in Ukraine, appeals to international allies, etc.

However, as the Ministry posts a great amount, with an example being 10 posts in one day on the 28th of November, analysing the entire material available is beyond the scale and scope of this study. Therefore, I have chosen to limit the scope of the material for the analysis to a time frame of three months; the timeline spans three months in the autumn of 2023, to collect a large enough sample of posts to make clear the trends within the content and to keep it as closely contemporary to the study as possible. The length of three months and the amount posted will ensure that the sample will be sufficiently expansive to identify and reveal patterns and overarching narratives within it. As the captions connected to the posts have shifted from being occasionally in Ukrainian at the beginning of 2022 to entirely in English by the end of 2023, it will also facilitate the implementation of the analysis by the author to collect a sample from a later point in the time of the account's posting.

The study's sample was gathered by collecting all posts on the @DefenceU feed that were published from the 1st of September until the 30th of November, by way of screenshotting them. This sample that will form the basis for the analysis consists of a total of 551 screenshotted posts made in the months of September, October and November in 2023. These posts may consist of either short form videos, images that present artwork, or images that present photos; all of which have an accompanying text (known as a 'caption'). There are also audio recordings of phone conversations, with accompanying photos of the participants; Rustem Umerov, the Defence Minister of Ukraine, speaking with his 'colleagues', representatives of other countries' defence sections, about the possibilities of aid for

Ukraine from its allies. The sample furthermore includes posts that are simply a text in the average length of a paragraph. All the content is related to the ongoing war.

5.2 Choice of Methodology

The purpose of the study is to examine how Ukraine portrays itself in a war context through its presence on social media. This will be done by analysing the Ukraine defence X page's images and the accompanying captions to consider the more complex underlying narratives. A suitable methodological tool for this project is visual narrative analysis, as it does not study images in isolation but within a broader context of narratives, and in this case politically aligned narratives. The study will be inspired by how this form of analysis is used in Freistein and Gadinger's text from 2020 on political storytelling through campaign posters. In the article, analysing visual representations in relation to their texts is described as a layered interpretation process: "a reconstruction of narratives that starts by contextualising metaphors and images can add layer upon layer of interpretation, since symbolism used in text and images can mean different things in different contexts" (2020, p. 226). This process is essentially an interplay between images, narratives and what Freistein and Gadinger call "their fantasmatic dimension"; a heightened, intuitive logic that is intertwined with the emotional responses of the audience.

The visual narrative analysis will be executed by first describing the content of the material, and then analysing it in three steps:

1. Examining the visual techniques employed in the images, e.g. identifying aspects such as close-ups or long shots, and the overall style of aesthetics used.

2. Examining the featured ideas and concepts, e.g. emotions such as anger or love expressed or evoked by the picture.

3. Examining the larger ideological meaning, e.g. the implied connections to moral judgments.

The interpretation of the textual captions will be added after an interpretation of the images. The study will only generalise to the extent to which the material for the analysis allows it.

5.3 Analytical framework

In the utilisation of the method of visual narrative analysis, the analytical framework is based primarily on the principles of narrative theory as it relates to the visual

medium, which means that any analytical questions must pertain to the key concept of framing; how the material's content is presented (Freistein & Gadinger, 2022). This thesis will draw on Rodriguez' and Dimitrova's study, where four different levels of visual framing were proposed as a basis for the identification and analysis of frames (2011). The purpose of the study was essentially to create a typology of visual framing, where the levels progressively became more sensitive to the assignment of meanings.

The first level was labelled as denotative systems, meaning that frames were identified by describing the objects and elements actually shown in the image - the deeper meanings are not analysed at this level. Questions for analysis at this level are essentially, "what is pictured?".

The second level of analysis was classified as stylistic-semiotic systems, where the stylistic conventions and technical transformations involved in the representation are examined; e.g. close-ups as a technique to indicate intimacy and long shots to signify context, scope and public distance. Analysing the picture at this level would entail an examination of the composition of images; as to what is at the centre, and is it isolated, or are there multiple aspects of the pictured elements and in what relation are they placed to each other? What aspects are included, and which are obscured?

Thirdly, framing through connotative systems meant that the analysis focused on how persons and objects shown in the visual denoted not only a particular individual, thing, or place, but also the ideas or concepts associated with them. Does the content hint at cultural allusions, and in what larger context? An example may be the depiction of a soldier singing a Ukrainian folk song in the midst of the deafening sounds of explosions (26.11.2023); an allusion to the survival of Ukrainian national identity in the face of an invasion.

The purpose of the last level was to deduce the ideological meaning of frames; discovering the underlying principles of a nation, an era, a class, or a religious/philosophical persuasion. Analysing the material at this level would require an examination of how the different posts may be related to each other in order to create a political narrative context. Do the different images make use of similar metaphors, e.g. posts depicting civilian structures such as schools or restaurants destroyed, in order to portray Russian forces as preying on the innocent, and therefore Russia as morally condemnable?

Finally, in the interpretation of the textual captions, the central question of analysis concerns the interplay between text and image; is the textual statement complementary to what is being imaged, or juxtaposed? The caption's purpose is mainly to enhance the affective response of the receiver - how is this executed? In a post from the 18th of October, an image of a sunrise over a landscape, with a tank charging through it in the distance, was accompanied by the caption "This is our land" and an emoji of the Ukrainian flag. The text served in a complementary fashion to

the image with the intent of alluding to the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

5.4 Critical Discussion of the Research Design

Interpreting all the nuances of a narrative about security is not an easy task. The purpose of the study is to grasp the constructed meanings of the Ukrainian defence ministry's messages concerning the conflict and Ukrainian security, but it is necessary to acknowledge that the execution of such an analysis hinges on the assumption that we are able to correctly identify and understand the emotional beats that the content creator is attempting to trigger in the receiver. It is in fact entirely possible that the execution of the analysis will inevitably be distorted, as the interpretation of the material is made from our perceptions and therefore inherently formed by our identity, and the limits thereof. An in-depth view of the material may require a more nuanced understanding of cultural context. However, because all of the material is in English, the author can be said to also be a part of the intended audience, and therefore qualified enough to look at the narrative patterns present in the @DefenceU account. The findings of the interpretative analysis can therefore be deemed valid.

6. Findings

The following section is a presentation of the interpretation of visual narratives found in the @DefenceU feed. Three different frames were recognised in the interpretation of the material. The first was the framing of Ukraine as acting in accord with what international human society deems to be morally right and justifiable; Ukraine on the side of 'good'. The second was the framing of Russia as a morally reprehensible entity culpable of crimes against human law; Russia on the side of 'evil'. Thirdly, a recurring frame in the material was that of Ukrainian victory being 'unavoidable' - but which nonetheless must be fought for at great cost. The overarching narrative of the account expressed through these frames is therefore simply that of a conflict between 'good' and 'evil', where 'good' will prevail.

The precise nature of the frames will be further outlined in the following subsections.

6.1 Ukrainians as Heroes

The larger amount of content that is posted by the Ministry of Defence is, naturally, focalised from the perspective of the Ukrainian military organisation. In depicting themselves, they are depicting the frontline fighters who are responsible for utilising the resources available against the invaders; the majority of shared images are of Ukrainian soldiers and/or advanced weaponry, attempting to repel their adversary. The style of such images can be compared to the traditionally used style of militaries on social media, where romantic aesthetics such as sunrises or broad blue skies are complemented with figures of soldiers or weaponry, creating an aesthetically pleasing composition that serves to depict the military effort as a pleasurable experience, and the Ukrainian counterattacks as enjoyable spectacles (Hedling et al, 2022). The images are occasionally set against long shots of sprawling backgrounds of fields and forests, evoking in the mind of the receiver a Ukrainian natural beauty, accompanied by captions with an emphasis on words like 'our country' and 'our land' (18.10.2023). The use of such words, as well as the recurring use of the Ukrainian flag emoji, alludes to Ukraine's stature as a sovereign state.

As previously stated, there is a norm in international law against the engagement in war with another sovereign state, and it can be observed that @DefenceU carefully reminds its audience of the country not having transgressed against this law by the strategic use of descriptors, where Russia is often referred to as the 'aggressor', the 'occupier', 'the invader' etc. By depicting itself as being in a defensive position, Ukraine's actions during the war may be deemed as entirely morally

justifiable by the audience, with its vital goal being to maintain its freedom; an established international legal right of people as expressed by the principle of self-determination. This goal is repeatedly stated by @DefenceU with, for example, images of memorial sites and the caption "We will always remember the price we pay for freedom" (01.10.2023), or the close-up image of a soldier's face with a grim, determined expression, and the caption "Being free means being ready to fight for and defend your freedom" (02.10.2023).

In addition to establishing its motive as freedom, Ukraine also repeatedly presents itself as an entity defined by its striving for all liberal values, aligned with Western countries and organisations such as NATO and the EU. This can be exemplified by @DefenceU sharing a tweet by NATO where the alliance described Ukraine's fight as being "our fight", with the Ukrainian account responding that "We have common values that we fight for" (11.10.2023). The framing of Ukraine as being on the side of 'good' in the eyes of the target audience is made clear by the depiction of Russia as a threat to the free world (as one caption reads: "Security is the main target for Russia across Ukraine, Europe, and the entire free world"; 25.10.2023) and the Ukrainian military as a guardian protecting its allies from a similar fate; images of soldiers fighting in the night is accompanied by the caption "The ones who guard your peaceful sleep" (22.10.2023). In another post, an image is featured of two soldiers in a trench, the one closest to the camera smoking a cigarette and holding an artillery shell with a defiant look in his eyes - the message is clear - he is not afraid of the enemy, and as the caption clarifies, he is "on the right side of history" (27.10.2023). The posted content is thus strategically framed to make the receiver sympathise with the messenger, and to view Ukraine's actions with approval and admiration.

The interpretative analysis also found that a large amount of the posted material could be said to function in the category of the human interest frame. This category promotes stories of individuals who have found themselves in the midst of war's sufferings, therefore making the audience feel personally touched and emotionally connected to the featured figures; especially by highlighting stories that feature aspects that are easily recognisable to the personal life of the viewer (Seo, 2014). Ukrainian soldiers were often shown through a humanising lens, by having their faces be clearly visible in camera close ups, often smiling in a relaxed manner while performing different tasks. The realm of war is effectively blended with the realm of the domestic through posts where soldiers are shown drinking their habitual morning coffee (caption: "How do you take your coffee?"; 28.09.2023), spending time on their phones (caption: "Keep in touch with your mom"; 05.10.2023), or in one memorable case, a soldier surprised by his comrades carrying a breakfast tray with a lit candle on it (caption: "A birthday celebration in the trenches";

31.10.2023). Ukrainian soldiers are shown as intrinsically human, engaging in normal, recognisable social behaviour.

Another trend in the featured human interest stories is that of reunions: photos and videos of soldiers returning from the front lines to visit their children, parents, spouses and pets. The captured moment is usually that of a hug - a universal expression of affection between loved ones. The cultural concept of the importance of family is clearly prominent in such posts, but also the importance of the home: a staple theme in war histories, that both reinforces the soldier's will to defend their country, but also the outsider's sympathy with the cause (Kingsbury, 2010).

Other stories that are posted pertain to both soldiers and civilians who have been disabled because of the violence of the conflict, often pictured with a missing limb that has been replaced by a prosthetic. The images tend to depict them in the process of performing a task, such as a young girl learning how to ride a bike with a prosthetic leg, a man in a wheelchair learning how to be a drone operator, or multiple images of soldiers who have returned to service with a prosthetic leg. In September of 2023, a series of posts showed Ukrainian medal winners in the Invictus Games, an international sports event for injured servicemen and women. All of these individuals were depicted as having overcome great challenges, refusing to be "defeated" - and thereby initiating a process of recasting their wounded bodies as a source of pride and strength, thus becoming effective emotive signifiers for the viewer (Cree & Caddick, 2020).

Another method used for creating sympathy with the mission of Ukraine's military forces as expressed through the framing of Ukraine as 'good' is the pattern of posting images of soldiers together with animals such as cats and dogs. The natural sympathy most humans hold for pets is placed in association with the image of the Ukrainian soldier, through pictures of cats sleeping in army quarters, eating food with the soldiers, a cat laying in the lap of a soldier who's operating a drone, or a dog wearing the colours of Ukraine, sitting next to a soldier. The accompanying captions are often shaped to reinforce the image of the soldier as an affectionate caretaker, with phrases such as "Our mission is to defend everyone who is in need" (19.11.2023) and "Save the little friends" (24.11.2023). The result is that such images often elicit strong positive emotional reactions, with the posts featuring animals tending to be some of the most widely shared by other accounts.

6.2 Russians as Villains

The second frame that was found in the interpretative analysis was a primarily emotionally driven frame that covered images aimed at raising awareness and inspiring condemnation by eliciting the emotion of anger against Russia, and by extension, sympathy toward Ukraine.

@DefenceU depicts Russia as a fundamentally evil entity; the enemy is often referred to as being 'evil', with examples being sentences such as "Can we agree to evil?" (23.09.2023), or "Evil cannot be trusted" (19.09.2023). A repressive and malevolent nation is portrayed with posts that feature photos and videos of destruction and violence from Russia's previous wars, as well as one post of an image from a WW2 movie of a devastated city next to an image of a present-day Ukrainian city; thus drawing a parallel between Russia's actions in the invasion and the horrors committed during a conflict that has been imprinted on the collective human imagination as a battle between good and evil. Russia is described by the account as following a history of oppression towards Ukraine, with one post featuring artwork of a Holodomor monument, and another quoting the Ukrainian Minister of Defence Rustem Umjerov: "For my family and the Crimean Tatar people, the war with Russia began several centuries ago, when Moscow first occupied my native Crimea" (06.09.2023). Furthermore, posts featuring videos of Russian soldiers robbing a fallen comrade or a Russian tank running over Russian troops serve to enhance the image of Russians as morally reprehensible when juxtaposed with all of the featured material depicting Ukrainian forces as kind and united.

A large amount of the material portrays the destruction that has been inflicted upon Ukraine; a photo of a demolished town with the caption "Russia only brings devastation and death" (15.09.2023), or photos of civilian structures such as schools and hospitals, places associated with the innocent, wrecked by bombs, with the caption "this evil must be stopped" (21.10.2023). The pictures of empty classrooms in shelled schools evoke mental images of children being attacked - a particularly harrowing concept for the viewer. One video shows a young child crying at the sight of her old school and is entitled "A girl sees her kindergarten after it was destroyed by Russian terrorists" (17.09.2023). The labelling of Russians as terrorists is a recurring designation in posts showing destroyed infrastructure, with one caption reading: "Their only strategy is terrorism" (11.09.2023). The designation of Russian attacks as 'terrorist' attacks that are targeting non-combatants, serves to highlight Russia as performing illegitimate violence.

The sympathy that most humans hold for animals is weaponized by Ukraine against Russia in a further strategic element of portraying the state as 'morally wrong'. In what is conveyed as a direct opposite to Ukrainian soldiers' behaviour as caretakers of animals, images are shared of animals suffering as a result of Russian aggression. One post features two images placed side by side: a Ukrainian officer saving a wounded dog in the aftermath of a Russian missile attack, and an image of that dog subsequently dying in a veterinary hospital. The frame's comparison between Ukrainians as animal lovers and Russians as indifferent to the distress of animals is directly drawn in a post with a video containing a montage of

Ukrainians rescuing animals and the text #StopEcocideUkraine, with the caption "Each and every life matters to us" (04.10.2023), implying that this statement does not pertain to the adversary.

A visual technique employed by Ukraine to elicit the viewer's compassion towards the Ukrainians while creating a distance from the Russians is the strategic use of close-ups and longshots. Russian soldiers are rarely shown in the imagery, instead usually only referred to. When videos of counterattacks on Russian forces are shared, the individuals are filmed from a distance so that they merely appear as indistinct shapes. This stands in contrast to the Ukrainians, who are often shown with their faces clearly visible and their eyes in focus – windows to the soul. The effect is that the Russians hardly appear to the viewer as human, but instead as blurs, while the Ukrainian soldier is a distinct individual.

6.3. Ukraine Will Win

As defined by Seo, an analytical frame in war communication includes images that provide concrete facts about aspects of the conflict such as how the messenger is prepared to defeat the other side, and what the public should be ready to do (2014). @DefenceU shares a category of content that is aimed at building a narrative of strength, but also need, with the central message being that Ukraine will win, but only with the help of its allies.

This analytical frame portrays the Ukrainian military defence as highly efficient and powerful, sharing posts featuring hard power-imagery; images associated with strength and fortitude. Conveying the message that Russia will be defeated by Ukraine is achieved by showing destruction of Russian military forces and equipment, with videos of Russian tanks being hit by drones and missiles and subsequently exploding in fiery displays. There is a distinct element of spectacle in these videos, that are often presented with a wry sense of humour by the account: "Something that can be watched over and over is Russian tanks exploding", reads one caption (08.09.2023). The posts depicting Ukrainian firepower portray the artillery as symbolic of strength and defence of the country, and as displays of splendid power, with the phrasing of captions evoking fantastical imagery: "Ukrainian artillery sends a hellish greeting to the occupiers" (19.10.2023), or "The lords of steel and fire" (30.10.2023).

A large amount of the posts on the feed concerns the need for help from Ukraine's allies. In addition to sharing images of meetings and talks between Ukraine state representatives and allies' state representatives, the account provides constant reminders that every weapon that is sent to Ukraine as a result of those

diplomatic conversations, will be ‘put to good use’. Images of artillery from countries such as Poland, Lithuania, the United Kingdom, etc. are shared with a caption where Ukraine’s gratitude is expressed, usually accompanied with the Ukrainian and the allied nation’s flag emojis placed side by side in order to express a sentiment of cooperation.

7. Discussion

The research question of this study is to determine how Ukraine portrays itself in a war context through its presence on social media. The constructed narrative that was found in the @DefenseU feed ascribed Ukraine the identity of the heroic guardian defending itself from an unjust aggressor. Ukrainians, civilians and soldiers alike, were framed as indomitable in war and magnanimous in triumph. As the story is told from the point of view of the Ukrainians, Russia is portrayed as 'the other', and more concretely, as a direct adversary, the root cause of suffering in Ukraine. Other figures in the narrative are Western aligned institutions that were portrayed by @DefenseU as connected to the cause of Ukraine through common values, and recurrently described as allies against Russia.

The purpose of constructing such a narrative can be understood by examining the conditions for a Ukrainian victory: it has been stated by Ukraine on multiple occasions that a victory will only be made possible by western weapons. The purpose of the narrative is therefore to secure the help of allies by creating sympathy for the Defence of Ukraine, thereby justifying in the eyes of the outer world the forceful measures that are necessary to expel the invader. The use of social media is an effective tool in reaching out to the world with their message, and the methods of digital diplomacy are efficiently utilised as all of the examined content was in English, so as to be accessible for people outside Ukraine. The target audience of the material, as stated by those running the account, are international decision makers, influential journalists and ordinary pro-Ukrainian westerners; all of whom play a part in enabling the donation of weapons to Ukraine. In order to reach these people and persuade them of the justness of Ukraine's cause, a crossing of different cultures and countries must be accomplished to aptly deliver the message - a challenge that can be overcome by visual communication through photos, videos, and artwork. Expressions of strong emotion were carefully constructed through the visual content to capture the imagination of the receiver and convince them of the Ukrainian narrative.

The dependence on western weapons creates a strange balancing act for the execution of Ukraine's security branding: the military must be perceived as strong so as to reinforce trust in the ability of Ukraine to defend itself, but simultaneously it must be perceived as disadvantaged so as to encourage further donations. The solution to this dilemma as demonstrated by @DefenceU is to portray Russia as an evil force of reckless destruction that employs illegitimate forms of violence, while Ukraine is a tenacious underdog that proves its worth by playing by the rules; a guardian of values that it shares with the western world, and therefore deserving of

any help it can get from its allies. Thus, the politics of the narrative hinges on the tensions between the portrayal of Ukrainian valour, heroism, and strength on the one hand, and the narrative undercurrent of Ukrainian victimhood, despair, and ruin on the other.

The intent behind the construction of a story between 'good' and 'evil' may be understood as fulfilling the human need for a narrative that is romantic and easily understandable and relatable. The conflict between ascribed 'heroes' and 'villains' is a storytelling device that can be found as the basis for the majority of collected human stories (Fog et al, 2010). The premise of the message as presented by Ukraine's nation and security branding is essentially an ideological and moral statement. Through a fantasmatic logic of the concepts of good and evil, one cannot help but root for Ukraine. In crystalizing this sentiment of approval in the public, Ukraine is enhancing its soft power through the persuasive power of the narrative that is constructed. This objective was clearly stated by members of the team that operates the account of the defence ministry:

> "No one believed that Ukraine would win this war, but we were not surprised that we were tigers — so we need to show western audiences what we know about ourselves." "Ukraine gives the world a beautiful story, full of tragedy and pain, but also beauty and humour and compassion. We are brave on the battlefield, but we also save cats and dogs, have weddings on the frontline — we are fighting for these values." (Financial Times, 2022).

8. Conclusion

The study's main focus was the ways in which narrative modes of political storytelling may be utilised in the area of security branding. Drawing on theories surrounding soft power, digital diplomacy, nation- and security branding, as well as narratives, the study was conducted by gathering and analysing material from the official X page of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. The findings were reached through the approach of a visual narrative analysis.

An interpretative analysis of the @DefenceU account serves to enlighten how a fantasmatic and performative style of storytelling can create a highly sympathetic portrayal of the storyteller, and a deeply unsympathetic one of the 'other'. Furthermore, the identification of a strategic assortment of moral judgments in the material illuminates the ideas and concepts that lay at the heart of what the international arena considers to be legitimate force. The use of images combined with short phrases creates a simplicity that allows fundamental feelings to be tapped, and a more intuitive understanding of what may be complex - barely any explanation of cultural context is required for the receiver to understand the presented narrative.

A noteworthy aspect of the findings is the performative dimension and affective origins of the development of Ukraine's security branding. Narratives have been defined as tools for people to make sense of their lived experiences, and the understanding of the invasion that Ukraine builds provides insight into the nature of national identity of a country finding itself unwillingly thrust into a position of defending its existence. Further analysis could be useful in order to examine how the identity categories employed by Ukraine's narrative may be used in other narratives of war - how does Ukraine's experience and methods fit in the larger context of history?

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