

---

RADU M. MEZA\* & ANDREEA MOGOS\*\*

## Fear and Loathing in Eastern Europe. Framing and Agenda Setting of Foreign Affairs in Czech, Polish, and Romanian Sputnik News (2017–2022) – An Analysis of Headlines

Intersections. EEJSP

11(1): 63–85.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i1.1229>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

---

\* [radu.meza@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:radu.meza@ubbcluj.ro) (Babes-Bolyai University)

\*\* [andreea.mogos@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:andreea.mogos@ubbcluj.ro) (Babes-Bolyai University)

### Abstract

The Sputnik News network of websites has been the subject of scholarly attention since its 2014 launch in the context of the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. In March 2022, Sputnik News websites were blocked by EU countries, thus acknowledging the network's potential influence. Some researchers claim that Sputnik news follows the model of Soviet propaganda, while others claim its discursive patterns point towards new communication strategies. There is scarce literature on Eastern European Sputnik editions and no comparative approaches to date. This research article aims to fill that gap by employing mixed methods to study a large dataset (N=118,198) of Sputnik News headlines from the foreign news sections of three language editions – Czech, Polish, and Romanian, from January 2017 to January 2022. The main findings indicate a conflict-oriented, war journalism approach that mostly focuses on USA-Russia and the individual actors Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the coverage leans towards fear as the dominant affective framing, and the most frequently represented organization, NATO, is framed as a failing alliance, actively pursuing the consolidation of power or even as an aggressor.

**Keywords:** Sputnik News, affective framing, agenda setting, war journalism, computational analysis, mixed methods.

## 1 Introduction

In the aftermath of the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea, the Rossiya Segodnya state agency reformed Voice of Russia radio broadcasting and RIA Novosti news agency into Sputnik – a Russian-government-owned multiplatform news agency, multilingual news website network and radio broadcast service. Sputnik had worldwide editions in English and Spanish, European editions in German, French, Greek, Italian, Czech, Polish, Serbian, Latvian, Lithuanian, 'Moldavian' (sic), and Belarusian and Transcaucasian (Armenian, Abkhaz, Ossetian, Georgian, Azerbaijani) and Middle Eastern (Arabic, Turkish, Persian). In March 2022, Sputnik content was banned across the European Union.

---

Since Sputnik first appeared in the context of the onset of the Crimea crisis, it is worthwhile investigating how official Russian geopolitical narratives framed the rising tensions in the region. This research analyzes the three editions published in the languages of the countries directly bordering Ukraine – Poland (Polish), Slovakia (Czech), Romania, and Moldova (Romanian).<sup>1</sup>

The news reporting of Sputnik News and Russia Today (RT) often faced scrutiny due to ownership by the Russian state. Their funding has attracted international attention, with sources claiming annual budget allocations of over 300 million euros for RT and over 100 million euros for Rossiya Segodnya, which runs Sputnik News (EUvsDisinfo, 2019; US Department of State Global Engagement Center, 2022). RT can be considered a foreign policy tool of the Russian government, and it has played a significant role in spreading conspiracy theories in past years (Yablokov, 2015). Sputnik News' role manifests in shaping the news, constructing strategic narratives to advance Russia's public diplomacy efforts, and using crisis situations as a geopolitical instrument (Deverell et al., 2021; Demjanski, 2020; Mogoş et al., 2022). As compared to RT, which gained notoriety as an instrument of Russian propaganda, Sputnik News is considered to use gentler methods of persuasion (Furman et al., 2023). According to Stefan (2020), Sputnik News is a key channel used by the Kremlin to spread disinformation campaigns beyond Russia's borders, impacting the European Union, its Member States, and neighboring countries until the beginning of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, when EU banned Sputnik websites and RT operations in Europe to address concerns about disinformation about Ukraine.

Recent geopolitical events and the global health crisis of 2020–2021 have sparked interest in researching the narratives put forward by sources such as Sputnik News. The representation of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine technologies have been the focus of research (Furman et al., 2023; Mogoş et al., 2022) associated with the Turkish and Romanian language editions, respectively. Research on Sputnik News coverage was also included in comparative framing and news slant research of specific topics such as the Israel and Palestine conflict (Shahzad, 2023). Other research looks at intermedia agenda setting between the English Sputnik News and US news sources and blogs (Wilbur, 2021) and finds that the criticism employed is often subtle. Watanabe (2017) analyzed conspiracy frames in the English-language Sputnik articles and found conspiracy frames, particularly in stories about the US and the UK, as primary targets of the respective language edition. Analysis of the general discursive patterns in Sputnik news editions other than English is scarce. In an analysis of the Swedish-language Sputnik News, Kragh and Åsberg (2017) found that the EU, NATO, and the US are the most frequent targets of criticism, with the EU 'depicted

<sup>1</sup> The 'Moldovan' / 'Moldavian' glossonym has been a subject of political debate since the break-up of the USSR. The 1991 Declaration of Independence of Moldova refers to its national language as Romanian, while the 1994 Constitution declared 'Moldovan' / 'Moldavian' as the official language of the Republic of Moldova. Later, a Constitutional Court ruling in 2013 interpreted the Declaration of Independence as superseding the Constitutional provision, thus acknowledging the official language glossonym as 'Romanian', with only the region of Transnistria still using 'Moldovan' as the name of the official language. The 'Moldovan' Sputnik edition hosts a considerable amount of news content targeting Romanian audiences (ro.sputnik.md), but there is no separate 'Romanian' edition. Czech and Slovak languages form a dialect continuum and are generally considered mutually intelligible. There is no Hungarian edition.

as an organization in terminal decline, beset by major crises' and NATO as 'a US instrument of war and the chief architect of Western policy towards Russia.' The analysis of the Swedish-language Sputnik identifies metanarratives such as (1) the failures and setbacks of Western policy, (2) negative representations of countries in the Western sphere of influence, (3) international cooperation and business ties with Russia, (4) Russian successes and a positive image of Russia, (5) dividedness between NATO allies, (6) Western/NATO aggressiveness/militarism, and (7) the West in crisis, aside from human interest stories or other news.

Although Eastern European countries of the former Eastern bloc are targeted through the respective language editions of Sputnik News, there has been no attempt at a comparative or integrated analysis of Sputnik News representations in Polish, Czech, and Romanian languages. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this research aims to explore the discursive patterns of coverage through the textual analysis of headlines published in the international news section of the Polish, Czech, and Romanian editions over five years (2017 to 2022). Poland, Czechia, and Romania have all been NATO members since the post-Cold War enlargement. Furthermore, since Sputnik News was created in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the three countries are the closest NATO member countries in the region for which a Sputnik language edition exists.

## 2 Literature review

Officially a source of Russian public diplomacy, Sputnik has been used in previous research to provide 'a vision of the dominant Russian metanarratives' (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017) and a subsequent content analysis of the Swedish edition of Sputnik (removed from the Web in 2016 alongside all Nordic language editions) shows several consistent narratives that provide evidence of a blurring distinction between public diplomacy and what some authors call 'active measures' (a Soviet-era designator) – 'framing NATO as an aggressor and military threat, the EU as in terminal decline, and Russia as under siege from hostile Western governments' (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). In recent scholarship, Sputnik has also been classified as 'alternative media with an affinity to populism' (Müller & Schulz, 2021). The populist angle may be explored in relation to the coverage of international leaders such as Donald Trump in the US or pro-Brexit campaign leaders and Viktor Orbán (Hungary) in Europe. Literature of the past decade has hardly been in agreement about Russia's propaganda and to what extent the associated messages and techniques differ from the Soviet era – with some authors (Jaitner & Mattson, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Yablokov, 2015) finding novelty in either the Russian approach or the contexts created by online media, while others arguing that the Soviet era dismiss-distort-distract-dismay approach to misrepresenting events (Snegovaya, 2015) still holds power. Based on a large-scale analysis of English-language Sputnik news, Watanabe (2018) claims that, in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Sputnik has employed techniques different from those of Soviet-era propaganda: 'Russia is aiming to promote anti-establishment sentiment by publishing tailored conspiracy theories on Sputnik News websites' (Watanabe, 2018).

Recent literature on Russian propaganda proposes the concept of 'propaganda on demand,' defined as 'a kind of cynical political marketing in which narratives that trigger

or comfort certain social groups are purposefully used to manipulate public opinion' (Litvinenko, 2022). This concept, derived from the digital 'on-demand culture,' is characterized by the Russian government's use of digital media in conjunction with traditional media (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019), resulting in a communication strategy characterized by '(1) the multichannel distribution of propagandistic content, (2) large volumes of information or flooding, (3) an eclectic set of messages' (Litvinenko, 2022). Toepfl (2020) and Litvinenko (2022) argue that the proliferation of different, sometimes contradictory narratives that co-exist on digital platforms creates opportunities for members of the networked publics to select the narratives that best suit them. As opposed to coherent propaganda narratives, the emergent 'propaganda on demand' strategy is fluid and inconsistent, flooding multiple digital platforms with eclectic messages that are hard to counter and encouraging 'post-truth' stances that support the claim that 'everything is not so clear-cut' (Litvinenko, 2022). We examine the representation of foreign events by Sputnik News to Eastern European audiences in an attempt to identify the features of propaganda directed at foreign audiences.

This exploratory research is grounded in agenda-setting and framing theories. From the initial formulation of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) to the model put forward in the Network Agenda-Setting Framework (Guo & McCombs, 2011), this media effects theory proposes that news media coverage patterns may transfer the salience of objects, attributes, and relationships among them from the media agenda to the public. Frames in a media text refer to the deliberate selection of certain aspects of reality, emphasized to convey a dominant interpretation. Media frames are employed to define issues, diagnose causes, induce moral judgments, or propose solutions for the issue being addressed (Entman, 1993). Analyzing news media frames through content analysis can be pursued using one of two distinct approaches: the inductive method, which involves an open exploration of dominant meanings found in media texts, and the deductive approach, which relies on pre-established variables (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The past decades of research in communication science have seen the convergence of agenda-setting and framing models (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001), considering the conceptualization of news media frames as being 'manifested by the presence or absence of certain key-words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments' (Entman, 1993) that allow for text-based analytical approaches such as content analysis and discourse analysis, but also the network analysis of message content (Danowski, 1993) to be employed on news content.

We thus formulate the first research question: *RQ1: What are the most prominent actors (nations and public figures) and relations represented in Sputnik News headlines?*

According to Teun van Dijk (1993), (news) stories can be looked at as expressions of situation models, embodying the interpretation of an event and organized by a schema that features categories such as (1) Setting, (2) Participants, and (3) Actions. Narrative analysis applied in literary criticism and structuralist discourse analysis is of course much more complex (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019), but this research only endeavors to identify prominent actors and their attributed roles. Robertson (2017) proposes a coding scheme that allows distinctions to be made among narrative participants: (1) 'real' people; (2) abstractions like states or collective actors; (3) character types. Furthermore, micro-level narratives may be related to accumulated macro-level recurrent narrative themes: (1) 'public

narratives'—such as 'the working-class hero' or 'the enemy within'—or (2) 'master narratives'—'Progress', 'the triumph of Democracy' (Robertson, 2017). ). It is this type of macro-level narratives that Jack Lule (2001) puts forward through 'the seven master myths in the news': (1) 'the victim'; (2) 'the scapegoat'; (3) 'the hero'; (4) 'the good mother'/benefactor; (5) 'the trickster'; (6) 'the other world'; (7) 'the flood'. Similarly, Hayden White's four types of emplotment (White, 1973) inspired by Northrop Frye's (1957) theory of myths (mythoi) are also recognizable macro-structures that can be used to characterize the discursive patterns employed by historians: (1) comedy; (2) romance; (3) tragedy; and (4) satire/irony. Such categories have been applied in recent research in international relations (Kuusisto, 2018; 2019) as 'basic plots,' using the features associated with each of the four myths to classify stories about world politics. Using a discourse-mythological approach, Kelsey et al. (2023) employed the archetypal roles of mature masculinity proposed by Moore and Gillette (1991) to theorize archetypal blending in the modern representation of the army hero – from 'magician,' 'warrior,' and 'king' to 'the "global" hero-magician,' 'the "national" hero-warrior," and 'the "domestic" hero-king.' We employ the concept of archetypal blending to analyze the framing of collective global actors such as NATO by Sputnik News. In the original conceptualization of roles, the main roles are each characterized by an apex and also by an active and a passive shadow role: the King, the Tyrant, and the Weakling; the Warrior, the Sadist, and the Masochist; the Magician, the Detached Manipulator, and the Denying 'Innocent' One. Recent research on Russian and Chinese media representations of NATO found two pairs of opposing frames: namely, NATO as an (1. a) aggressive or (1. b) defensive organization and as a (2. a) divided thus weak or (2. b) united thus strong organization. We formulate an additional research question to examine the most prominent actor that is identified: *RQ1a: What are the dominant frames used to represent NATO, the most prominent actor identified in the sampled editions of Sputnik News?*

Bednarek and Caple (Bednarek & Caple, 2014; Caple & Bednarek, 2016) look at linguistic indicators of news values that emphasize specific aspects of newsworthiness and function as framing devices. In the context of technological developments in the area of machine learning, methodological opportunities for using linguistic indicators in both inductive and deductive frame analyses have recently opened up, such as the computational framing analysis approach proposed by Guo et al. (2023). The 'war and peace' journalism framework was used by Maslog and Lee (2005) and subsequently (Nelson, 2019) to analyze the framing of conflict. Our research endeavors to detect linguistic indicators of the generic news frames proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and the indicators of war and peace journalism employed by Nelson (2019) and Maslog and Lee (2005). Our second research question is thus: *RQ2: What textual indicators of generic frames and conflict coverage are employed?*

According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2020), a growing body of research in journalism studies is engaging with the concept of emotion, signaling 'an emotional turn.' Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of 'affective publics' to describe the context created by digital platforms, where the use of various digital means of aggregation and shared emotional expressions, opinions, and subjective experiences facilitate the construction of social movements and mobilization. News coverage is increasingly shaped by engagement with emotion, and '[a]udiences are more likely to be emotionally engaged, recall information and take action when news stories are relatable' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). From the

researcher's perspective, the digital media landscape allows for data-driven sentiment analysis and emotion detection methods, the use of which rely on the assumption that 'emotions are inseparable from opinion, evaluation and decision-making' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Many news stories are simply re-packaged public statements or social media posts. News sources often rely on the colorful, emotional language selected from significant quotes by individual political actors to headline and elicit emotional engagement from the audience without any accountability for including value judgments.

The last research question is thus formulated as follows: *RQ3: What types of affective framing are employed in the Sputnik News representation of global events for Eastern European audiences?*

### 3 Methods

The research employs a large dataset (N=118,198) of Sputnik news headlines from three editions of Sputnik news targeted at audiences in EU, NATO member countries neighboring Ukraine: Czech/Slovak (NCZ= 46873), Polish (NPL= 54129), and Romanian/Moldavian (NRO= 16136). The data (news headlines, URL, and publishing date) were collected from the international news sections of each website: Czech (CZ: <https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/>), Polish (PL: <https://pl.sputniknews.com/swiat/>), and respectively Romanian (RO: <https://ro.sputnik.md/International/>) for a period of five years – from January 2017 to January 2022, using Helium Scraper software.

The study focuses on headlines after a thorough examination of the structure and characteristics of Sputnik articles, which in most cases propose narrative headlines that reveal the actor/target, the action taken and/or the effect/outcome, in many cases accompanied by the moral judgement – these elements being sufficient for a reliable coding process.

For some parts of the analysis, headlines were translated into English using automated translation tools such as Google Translate API and Reverso ([reverso.net](https://reverso.net)). Pinpoint (<https://journaliststudio.google.com/pinpoint/>) was used to identify named entities – persons, organizations, and locations – as a preliminary step in developing lexicons for each of the languages, in order to perform the co-occurrence analysis.

This mixed methods research combines the use of machine-based learning tools with quantitative content analysis tools and qualitative analysis approaches on a limited subsample of the dataset.

#### 3.1 Computational Approach & Quantitative Content Analysis

The data was analyzed using KH Coder (Higuchi, 2016), Orange (Demšar, 2013) with an add-on for emotion and mood state categorization of short text trained on English-language tweets (Colnerič & Demšar, 2016) and WordStat 9. The emotion categorization model that was used was the six basic emotions associated with facial expressions identified by Eckman (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Eckman, 1992).

To answer the first research question, codes were defined in each of the respective languages based on Named Entity Recognition (NER) provided by Google Pinpoint. Coding was automated through KH Coder and co-occurrence analysis was performed on the

three distinct language subsets. For the Czech and Polish datasets, a threshold of a minimum of 50 occurrences was used as a relevance criterion, while for the Romanian the threshold was set at 20 occurrences, proportionate to the smaller dataset size.

For the second research question, a translated version of the full dataset was used, and categories were defined deductively and inductively based on frequent words and phrases (bigrams and trigrams) occurring in more than 50 headlines from the dataset (N=118,198). Terms and key phrases were categorized into (1) the five generic frames defined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), (2. a) war journalism framing, and (2. b) peace journalism framing with a set of categories constructed based on previous literature (Nelson, 2019; Maslog and Lee, 2005), and (3) geopolitical actors and events which were defined inductively from the data. The coding categories are described in Table 1.

**Table 1** Framing indicators and Actor and Events Categories

|                          | <b>Selected example of terms and phrases categorized:</b>                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Conflict                 | <i>attack, combat, army, fighter, kill, military, missile, fleet, war, tank</i>                                                                                                                    |
| Human Interest           | <i>boy, girl, woman, man, family, cat, dog, sex, victim, Prince Harry, Meghan Markle</i>                                                                                                           |
| Morality                 | <i>corrupt, humanitarian, Orthodox Church, Pope Francis, Patriarch, Muslim, Islamic</i>                                                                                                            |
| Responsibility           | <i>accuse, alleged, accountable, provocation, responsible, denial, Kremlin comment</i>                                                                                                             |
| Consequences             | <i>sanction, dollar, euro, ruble, gas prices, bank, Turkish Stream, Nord Stream</i>                                                                                                                |
| Crises                   | <i>Pandemic, Brexit, Migration, Protests, Activists, Apocalypse, Asteroid, Corruption, Climate Change, Natural Disasters, Hackers, Terrorism, Aircraft Disasters, Causes of Cancer, Conspiracy</i> |
| Invisible aspects of war | Peace Journalism – emotional trauma & economic loss:<br><i>trauma, humanitarian, white helmets</i>                                                                                                 |
| Win-Win solutions        | Peace Journalism – peace initiatives:<br><i>peace talks, accord, agreement, deal, cooperation, discussed the situation</i>                                                                         |
| Common people as sources | Peace Journalism – statements from ordinary people:<br><i>man said, woman said</i>                                                                                                                 |
| Visible aspects of war   | War Journalism – casualty counts and physical damage:<br><i>casualties, people died, injure, destroy</i>                                                                                           |
| Win-Loss scenarios       | War Journalism – victory/defeat as end of conflict:<br><i>defeat, collapse, conquer, victory, win</i>                                                                                              |
| Vilification             | War Journalism – demonizing language:<br><i>aggressor, invader, threat, attacker</i>                                                                                                               |
| Victimization            | War Journalism – victimizing language:<br><i>discriminated, defeated, unfair</i>                                                                                                                   |
| Emotive language         | War Journalism – emotive language: <i>fear, suffer, terrible</i>                                                                                                                                   |

For the third research question, each of the three datasets were coded with the dominant emotion label based on Eckman's categorization (Anger, Disgust, Fear, Joy, Sadness, Surprise) using the model trained by Colnerić and Demšar (2016) on Twitter data.

### 3.2 Qualitative Approach

In the preliminary exploration of the dataset, by applying NER with Google Pinpoint, NATO was identified as the most prominent organization. For the Czech and Polish corpora, NATO was the most frequently mentioned entity ( $n_{CZ}=951$  and  $n_{PL}=1076$ ), while in the Romanian corpus, NATO was the second most named entity ( $n_{RO}=433$ , after the European Union with  $n_{EU}=1034$ ). The subcorpus for qualitative analysis was constructed by filtering the headlines containing the word "NATO" from the entire dataset (2504 headlines), out of which we selected for qualitative analysis the headlines published in 2017, 2021, and 2022 ( $n_Q=1101$ ).

The NATO subcorpus was manually coded by two coders in three steps. First, any particular definitions of the Alliance or moral evaluations pertaining to the roles, relations, and actions of NATO identified in the headlines were coded as frames by the main coder. During the second stage, the identified frames were further refined into several categories, with a discourse-mythological approach partially drawing on Moore and Gillette (1991) and Kelsey et al. (2023): NATO the Tyrant (the alliance is described as a military force, in control) and NATO the Weakling (the Alliance is described as being obsolete, weak, with negative impact); conflictual relations – building on the Cold War narrative (NATO Warrior versus Russia – where NATO is prevalent; Russia Warrior versus NATO, where Russia is prevalent); Cooperation (meetings, talks, potential joint activities between NATO and Russia); and in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, a frame associated with the Ukraine accession to NATO was separately coded. In the third phase, the two coders independently coded the subset of 1101 headings, and the resulting intercoder agreement score was 81.1 percent.

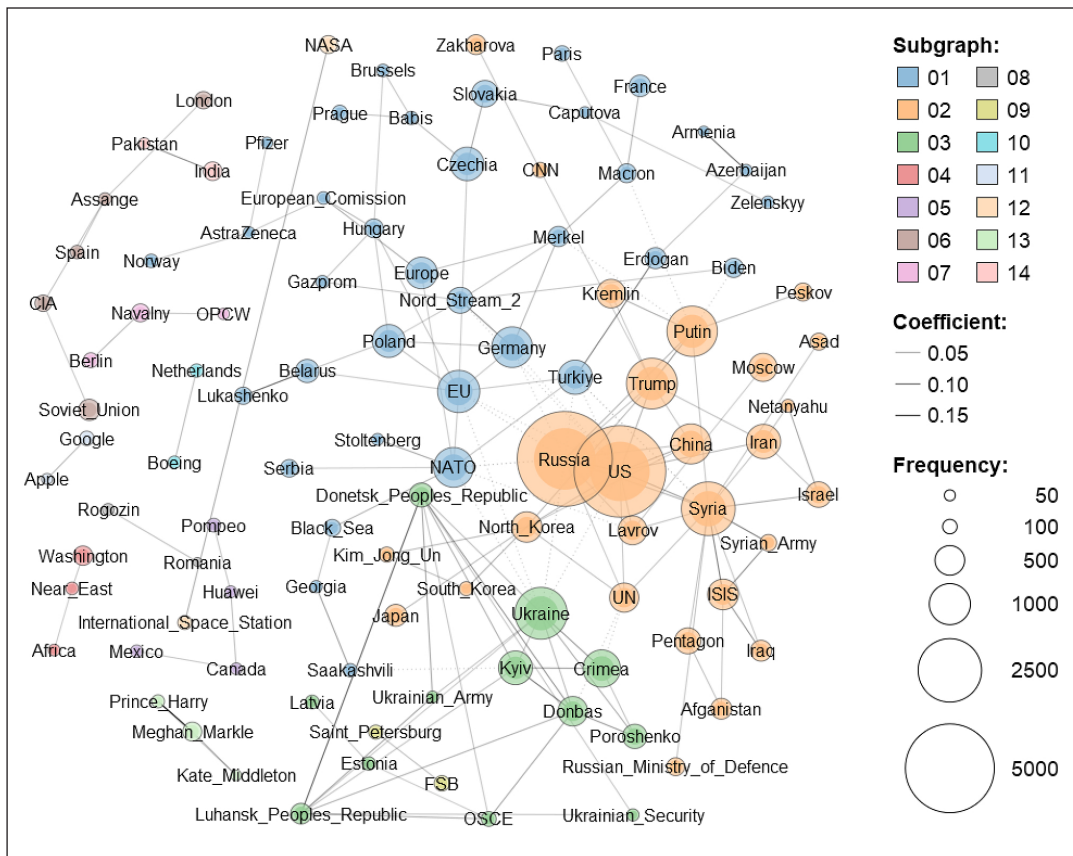
## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Prominent Actors and Relations

The co-occurrence analysis reveals similarities between the clustering of co-occurring actors (individual and collective). In all three cases, the two largest clusters reveal an agenda constructed around (1) US-Russia relations and conflicts with global implications in the Middle East and East Asia and (2) European issues. The clustering in the Czech and Polish corpora are more similar, but it is interesting to note that NATO clusters with the European issues nodes in the Czech case (Fig. 1) and with the US-Russia/Global Conflicts cluster in the Polish case (Fig. 2). Furthermore, in the Czech case, the Ukraine conflict clusters separately from the European issues cluster, whereas in the Polish case, it is part of it. In the Romanian case (Fig. 3), the US-Russia/Global conflict cluster is still the largest, but the European issues cluster also includes prominent occurrences of various souverainist



national leaders (Salvini and Orbán), relatively more domestic figures, as well as the traditional conspiracy theorists’ scapegoat (Soros), suggesting a slightly different agenda. NATO, in the Romanian edition, appears as part of the Ukraine conflict case. Both the Czech and the Polish editions feature the Nord Stream 2 issue prominently, whereas in the Romanian case, it is not featured. However, the Romanian edition features mentions of the Schengen Area. The Czech edition also includes several clusters of human-interest topics – the British Royal Family/Meghan Markle/Prince Harry issue, the Game of Thrones TV show, and NASA/International Space Station warnings about potential threats from space. Overall, the issues covered are, as expected for this publication, primarily connected to global or European issues in which Russia has a stake. Russia and the US are by far the most prominent collective actors in all three cases, doubled by individual actors Donald Trump (POTUS 2016-2020) and Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation between 2000 and 2008, and since 2012). The contested areas of Donetsk and Luhansk feature prominently in the Czech and Polish coverage of the Ukraine conflict, whereas in the Romanian coverage, the focus is solely on Crimea and the Black Sea.



**Figure 1** The Czech subset (NCZ= 46,873) co-occurrence network (edges filtered by Jaccard coefficient  $\geq 0.015$ )

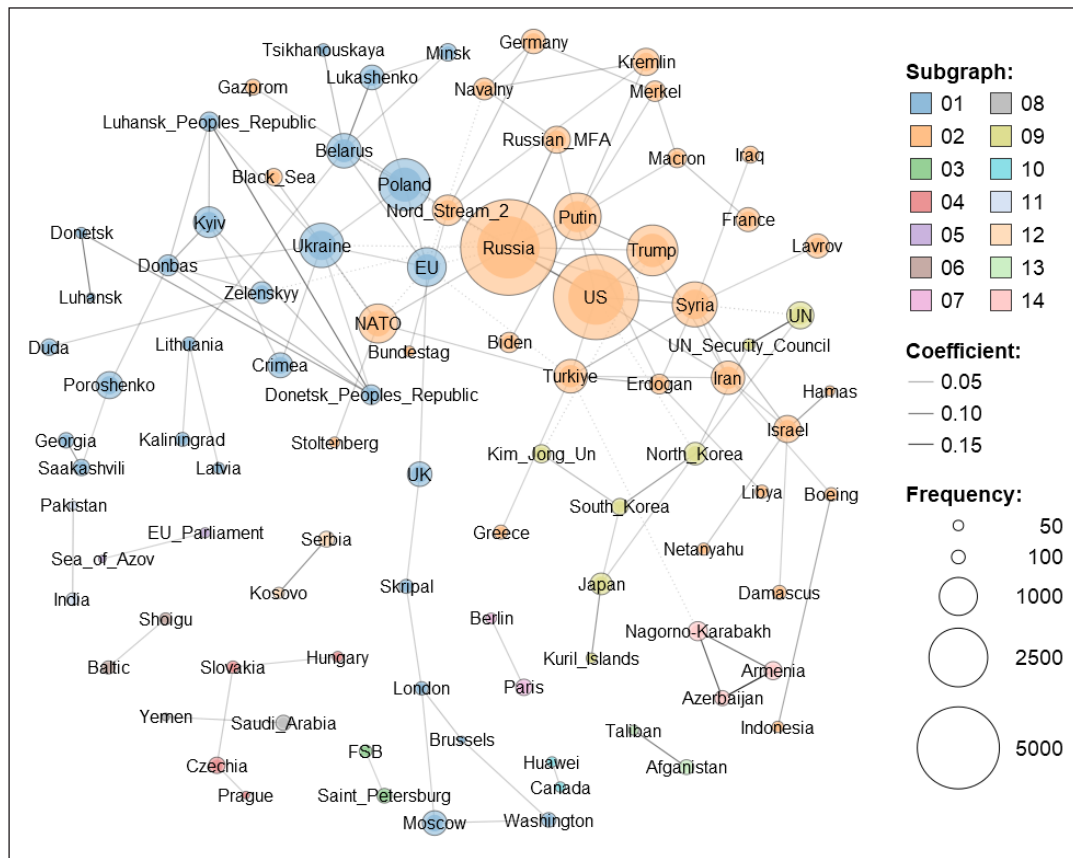


Figure 2 The Polish subset (NPL= 54,129) co-occurrence network (edges filtered by Jaccard coefficient  $\geq 0.015$ )

#### 4.2 A Qualitative Analysis of Framing NATO in Sputnik News

The qualitative analysis of frames focused on the representation of NATO by Sputnik News in 2017 and 2021-2022. The frames draw on Moore and Gillette (1991) and Kelsey et al. (2023)

The most frequent frame is NATO the Weakling: According to this frame, NATO could have started WW3 with the USSR and is even rarely associated with Nazis (Germans during WWII); politicians from NATO member countries talk about withdrawal from NATO/or military exercises; various pundits comments about the end of NATO ('Turkey's defense minister accused NATO of failing to meet its commitments,' Sputnik CZ, 18/02/2017); The NATO-Serbia relation is presented as tense, with Serbia being against joining NATO, the enemy who bombed their country in the 1990s ('Serbs do not forgive NATO - 18 years since the attack on Belgrade,' Sputnik RO, 25/03/2017); and human interest stories about citizens of the Baltic states having negative reactions towards NATO soldiers were also associated with this frame ('Lavrov: The SS Legionnaires' March in Riga is a disgrace to Europe and NATO,' Sputnik PL, 17/03/2017).

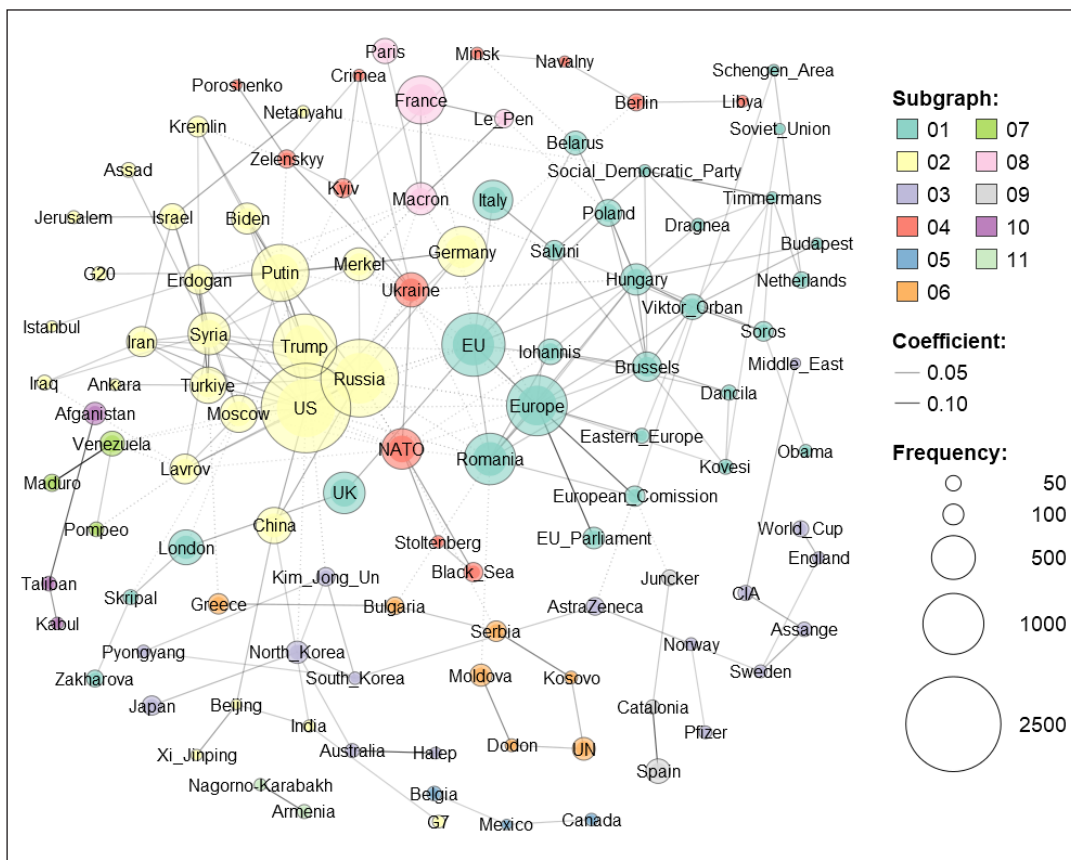


Figure 3 The Romanian subset (NRO= 16,136) co-occurrence network (edges filtered by Jaccard coefficient  $\geq 0.015$ )

The second and third most frequent frames represent NATO in a more active role, either as having aggressive tendencies in relation to Russia or as a ruler who seeks absolute control.

**NATO Warrior vs. Russia:** The headlines mention NATO forces at the Russian border or how NATO interacts with Russian aircraft or ships ('A member of the State Duma admitted the possibility of a 'credible attack' by NATO forces on Russia,' Sputnik CZ, 20/02/2017; 'NATO should fight terrorism, and not accumulate strength at the Russian border,' Sputnik PL, 18/05/2017; 'NATO again performs exercises in the Black Sea near Russian borders,' Sputnik Ro, 23/03/2021).

**NATO the Tyrant** frame focuses on the size of military exercises, NATO ships in the Black Sea/Odesa port, NATO acting in Afghanistan and Syria ('NATO will increase its presence on the Black Sea,' Sputnik PL, 31/01/2017; 'NATO aircraft in the sky over the EU,' Sputnik PL, 04/03/2021; 'NATO tripled the number of emergency forces,' Sputnik CZ, 17/12/2017; 'Stoltenberg: The EU cannot work without NATO,' Sputnik PL, 28/08/2017,' We will show who is the master in the house': NATO sends troops to Ukraine, Sputnik RO, 17/06/2021).

A significant number of headlines focus on Ukraine joining NATO, covering ongoing debate from both sides: NATO and Russia, and the Ukrainian army being trained and equipped by NATO and also receiving military equipment ('NATO instructors arrived at Donbas, announced in LLR,' Sputnik CZ, 15/09/2017). Ukraine in NATO is negatively framed as the headlines emphasize that joining NATO will not solve the problem in Donbas ('Ukraine in NATO? This is the worst decision,' Sputnik PL, 10/07/2017; 'German expert: Why Ukraine and Georgia will not be able to join NATO,' Sputnik RO, 24/03/2021).

A frame less frequently found attributes a more active role to Russia with respect to NATO, mainly through the use of key quotes from belligerent Russian sources. Russia Warrior vs. NATO relies on Putin's, Zakhárova's, Shoigu's, and Lavrov's statements about NATO and official statements attributed to The Kremlin, Russian Federation, and Ministry of Defense ('Putin: Russia will not be 'passively looking' for NATO expansion,' Sputnik PL, 1/06/2017; 'Diplomat: Russian Navy is a real threat to NATO,' Sputnik CZ, 13/02/2021; 'Russian hunting plane intercepts a new NATO plane close to Russia's borders,' Sputnik RO, 26/05/2021).

The least prominent frame is that of Cooperation NATO – Russia. This focuses on dialogue, councils, meetings, or statements about Russia joining NATO ('Stoltenberg: NATO needs a dialogue with Russia, not a new Cold War,' Sputnik PL, 25/05/2017; 'Russia and NATO at the shared table,' Sputnik PL, 13/07/2017; 'The Russian and NATO army participate in common exercises for the first time in 10 years,' Sputnik Ro, 11/02/2021, 'The Russian-NATO Council started in Brussels,' Sputnik CZ, 12/01/2021).

Table 7 Distribution of coded frames by edition

| FRAME                     | CZECH | POLISH | ROMANIAN | Total |
|---------------------------|-------|--------|----------|-------|
| NATO Weakling             | 118   | 122    | 72       | 312   |
| NATO Warrior vs Russia    | 108   | 67     | 26       | 201   |
| NATO Tyrant               | 67    | 91     | 35       | 193   |
| Ukraine in NATO           | 73    | 87     | 15       | 175   |
| Russia Warrior vs NATO    | 55    | 53     | 28       | 136   |
| Cooperation NATO – Russia | 34    | 31     | 19       | 84    |

As Table 7 and Fig. 6 show, although NATO the Weakling frame is dominant in all editions and both timeframes analyzed, the two frames that attribute an aggressive or controlling role are also significantly present in all editions. The decrease between 2017 and 2021 is due to a gradual decline in the number of articles published by Sputnik in the international sections to almost a third. Of the two frames that attribute an active role to NATO, in the Czech edition, NATO Warrior vs Russia is more frequently employed, whereas in the Polish edition, NATO the Tyrant is more frequently employed. In the Romanian edition, NATO the Tyrant emerges as the more dominant of the two frames in 2021.

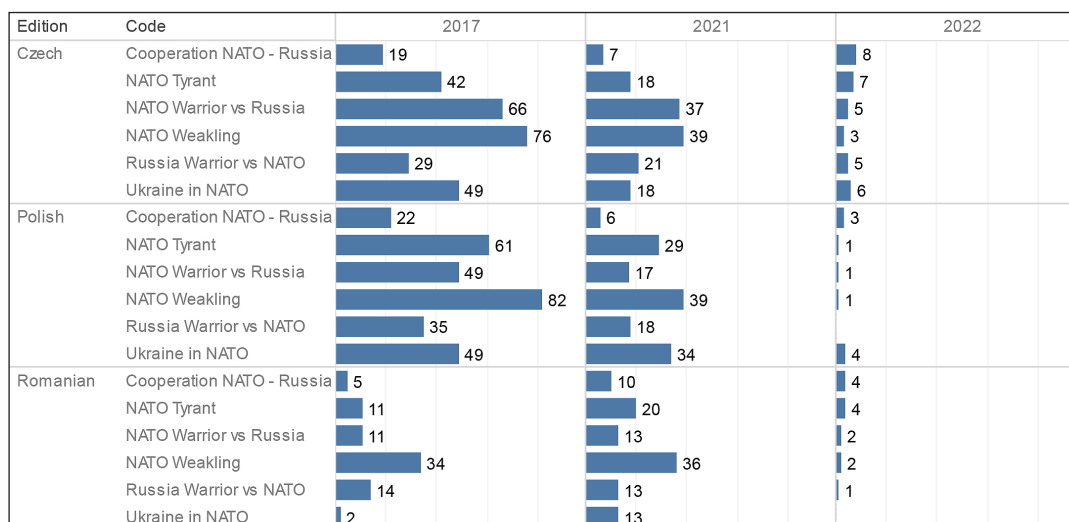


Figure 6 Overview of manually coded framings of headlines mentioning NATO by year

### 4.3 Framing and Peace-War Journalism Coverage Indicators

The coding of generic frame indicators reveals an overwhelming focus on conflict, with almost a quarter of total headlines featuring indicators of the frame. Human interest is the second most prominent, but it is worth noting that the Czech edition features significantly more headlines coded as human interest (news about the British Royal Family – particularly focusing on Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, Game of Thrones TV show news, and clickbait articles focused on sex, which do not appear in the other two editions). The third most prominent group of framing indicators are (economic) consequences, where references to Nord Stream 2 and other gas pipeline projects were coded besides references to costs, millions or billions of euros or dollars. The Czech edition seems to be the only one that slightly differs in terms of the distribution of framing indicators, with a greater focus on human interest and slightly more occurrences of indicators of attribution of responsibility.

Table 2 Overview of generic framing indicators coded on English translated full dataset (N=118,198)

| Framing indicators | No. Cases | % Total cases | % Polish cases | % Czech cases | % Romanian cases |
|--------------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|------------------|
| Conflict           | 28740     | 24.54%        | 23.32%         | 27.15%        | 20.97%           |
| Human interest     | 9748      | 8.32%         | 6.93%          | 10.14%        | 7.66%            |
| Consequences       | 9627      | 8.22%         | 7.44%          | 8.96%         | 8.67%            |
| Morality           | 3995      | 3.41%         | 3.13%          | 3.78%         | 3.24%            |
| Responsibility     | 4400      | 3.76%         | 3.28%          | 4.36%         | 3.57%            |

Over time, the overall number of articles published in the international news section steadily declined throughout the timeframe, from 30,315 in 2017 to 15,133 in 2021. The January 2022 data only amounts to 694 headlines. However, as Fig. 4 shows, according to the proportion of cases with respect to total headlines published, there was a decrease in conflict frame indicators during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a steep increase in 2021. The (economic) consequences and attribution of responsibility framing indicators also seem to register an increase in 2021, especially in the first month of 2022.

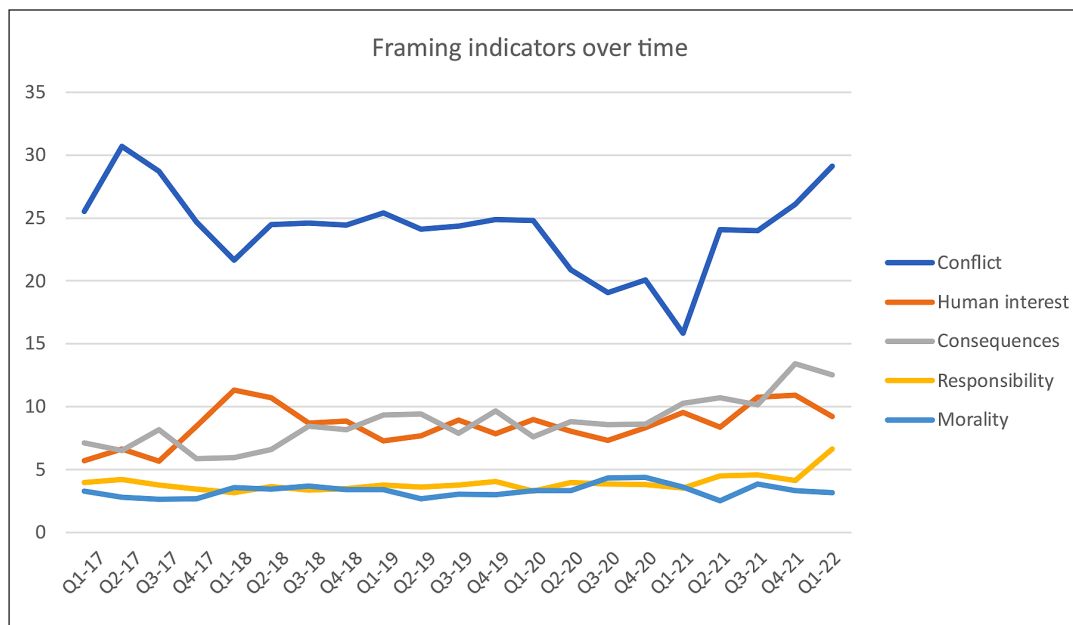


Figure 4 Framing indicators (as percentage of total headlines) change over time (N=118,198)

The most prominent indicators for War Journalism / Peace Journalism coverage use the elites as sources, with frequent reporting on statements made by Putin and Trump, as well as various ministries and Russian public figures (such as Maria Zakharova). Mentions of win-win finalities (peace talks, accords, discussions) and win-loss scenarios (defeat, victory) also appear relatively frequently. It is interesting to note that win-win peace journalism coverage clusters with the economic consequences and attribution of responsibility frame indicators (Fig. 5), while the win-loss war journalism coverage clusters with the morality frame indicators, and both also cluster with indicators of emotive language. The conflict frame indicators cluster with indicators of war journalism coverage, such as the vilification of the enemy and the prominent use of elite sources. The cluster analysis of codes in Figure 5 suggests several discursive strategies, listed here in order of their prominence: (1) the vilification-oriented use of statements and key quotes in conflict-focused news

coverage of US-Russia and global conflict; (2) crisis- (Western Europe) and dissent- (Eastern Europe) oriented news with respect to Europe and the EU; (3) the negotiation-oriented use of economic consequences and attribution of responsibility frames in the context of peace journalism coverage mentioning win-win solutions; (4) moral-positioning-oriented emotive coverage of win-loss scenarios.

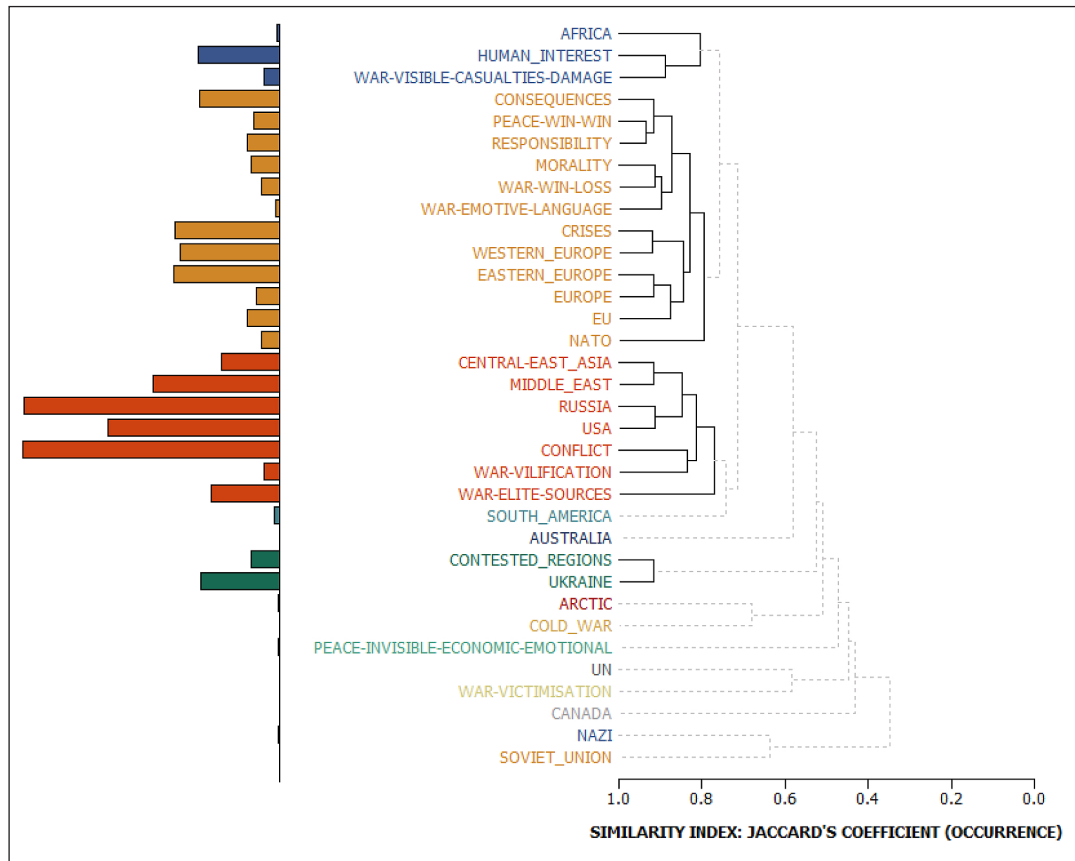


Figure 5 Clustering of framing indicators, war-peace coverage orientation indicators and prominent issues and actors by co-occurrence

#### 4.4 Affective framing and prominent individual actors

As affective framing seems prominently employed, especially in the context of elite actors/sources, the categorization of emotion provides insight into the most frequent dominant emotion. Table 3 reveals that the most likely dominant emotion in the Czech and Polish cases is Fear, followed by Surprise and Joy. The same three emotions were categorized as the most prominent in the Romanian case as well, but Surprise is more prominent than

Fear. In the Czech case, Fear and Surprise are present in almost the same overall proportions. The emphasis on news values such as negativity and novelty probably plays a role in the two most frequently categorized emotions. Anger and Disgust are the least frequent categories identified.

In the analysis of the mentions of the most prominent individual actors with respect to emotional categorization we found that, in the three editions, Trump is the individual most associated with detected negative emotions such as with Anger and Disgust out of the small number of such cases. Putin and Trump are the two figures who are most frequently mentioned in all three editions. In all three editions, the two appear in a significant number of cases where Fear was detected as the dominant emotion. Both in terms of the most prominent individuals and in terms of emotional patterns, the Czech and Polish editions are similar, while the Romanian edition also includes Western European actors such as Merkel and Macron, but also souverainists such as Le Pen, Salvini and Orbán, and conspiracy theory scapegoats such as Soros.

**Table 3** Categorization by dominant emotion of headlines  
(machine translated into English)

| Emotion Categorized | CZECH<br>Headlines (%) | POLISH<br>Headlines (%) | ROMANIAN<br>Headlines (%) |
|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Anger               | 746 (1.59%)            | 715 (1.32%)             | 199 (1.23%)               |
| Disgust             | 314 (0.67%)            | 192 (0.35%)             | 68 (0.42%)                |
| Fear                | 17251 (36.80%)         | 18553 (34.28%)          | 5136 (31.83%)             |
| Joy                 | 9652 (20.59%)          | 15010 (27.73%)          | 4295 (26.62%)             |
| Sadness             | 1897 (4.05%)           | 2931 (5.41%)            | 834 (5.17%)               |
| Surprise            | 17013 (36.30%)         | 16728 (30.90%)          | 5604 (34.73%)             |
| Total               | 46873                  | 54129                   | 16136                     |



Table 4 Emotional categorization (automated) with respect to mentions of most prominent individuals<sup>2</sup>

| CZECH<br>(N <sub>CZ</sub> = 46873)<br>Actor/Emotion | Anger      | Disgust    | Fear        | Joy         | Sadness    | Surprise    | Total        | chi-square |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| Trump                                               | 71 (9.52%) | 15 (4.78%) | 561 (3.25%) | 333 (3.45%) | 55 (2.90%) | 541 (3.18%) | 1576 (3.36%) | 92.785**   |
| Putin                                               | 15 (2.01%) | 5 (1.59%)  | 501 (2.90%) | 377 (3.91%) | 29 (1.53%) | 617 (3.63%) | 1544 (3.29%) | 50.753**   |
| Lavrov                                              | 8 (1.07%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 182 (1.06%) | 170 (1.76%) | 14 (0.74%) | 102 (0.60%) | 476 (1.02%)  | 87.658**   |
| Poroshenko                                          | 3 (0.40%)  | 1 (0.32%)  | 117 (0.68%) | 72 (0.75%)  | 14 (0.74%) | 118 (0.69%) | 325 (0.69%)  | 2.06       |
| Erdogan                                             | 3 (0.40%)  | 5 (1.59%)  | 90 (0.52%)  | 24 (0.25%)  | 11 (0.58%) | 104 (0.61%) | 237 (0.51%)  | 24.273**   |
| Merkel                                              | 3 (0.40%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 63 (0.37%)  | 60 (0.62%)  | 8 (0.42%)  | 83 (0.49%)  | 217 (0.46%)  | 10.671     |
| Zakharova                                           | 1 (0.13%)  | 2 (0.64%)  | 82 (0.48%)  | 21 (0.22%)  | 2 (0.11%)  | 100 (0.59%) | 208 (0.44%)  | 26.355**   |
| Biden                                               | 3 (0.40%)  | 2 (0.64%)  | 48 (0.28%)  | 28 (0.29%)  | 4 (0.21%)  | 109 (0.64%) | 194 (0.41%)  | 34.800**   |
| M. Markle                                           | 9 (1.21%)  | 4 (1.27%)  | 31 (0.18%)  | 29 (0.30%)  | 15 (0.79%) | 98 (0.58%)  | 186 (0.40%)  | 62.598**   |
| Macron                                              | 3 (0.40%)  | 1 (0.32%)  | 48 (0.28%)  | 38 (0.39%)  | 7 (0.37%)  | 87 (0.51%)  | 184 (0.39%)  | 11.981*    |
| Peskov                                              | 1 (0.13%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 54 (0.31%)  | 39 (0.40%)  | 6 (0.32%)  | 65 (0.38%)  | 165 (0.35%)  | 4.119      |
| Navalny                                             | 9 (1.21%)  | 1 (0.32%)  | 55 (0.32%)  | 31 (0.32%)  | 4 (0.21%)  | 64 (0.38%)  | 164 (0.35%)  | 17.802**   |
| Lukashenko                                          | 3 (0.40%)  | 1 (0.32%)  | 56 (0.32%)  | 18 (0.19%)  | 4 (0.21%)  | 69 (0.41%)  | 151 (0.32%)  | 10.103     |
| Assad                                               | 5 (0.67%)  | 1 (0.32%)  | 75 (0.43%)  | 13 (0.13%)  | 34 (1.79%) | 18 (0.11%)  | 146 (0.31%)  | 178.397**  |
| Kim Jong Un                                         | 1 (0.13%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 17 (0.10%)  | 27 (0.28%)  | 6 (0.32%)  | 60 (0.35%)  | 111 (0.24%)  | 25.965**   |

<sup>2</sup> In Tables 4, 5, and 6, percentages in parentheses indicate the proportion of headlines categorized with each emotion which contain references to the respective actor. Totals for each categorized emotion by subset are shown in Table 3. Two asterisks indicate an alpha level of 0.01 (i.e.,  $p < 0.01$ ), while one asterisk indicates an alpha level of 0.05. The chi-squared test is used to assess the association between the mentioned actor and categorized emotion. For each actor, values exceeding 1 percent (of headlines categorized with the respective emotion) are highlighted in the tables.

Table 5 Emotional categorization (automated) with respect to mentions of most prominent individuals<sup>3</sup>

| POLISH<br>(N <sub>PL</sub> = 54129)<br>Actor/Emotion | Anger      | Disgust    | Fear        | Joy         | Sadness     | Surprise    | Total        | chi-square |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| Trump                                                | 45 (6.29%) | 12 (6.25%) | 600 (3.23%) | 561 (3.74%) | 127 (4.33%) | 504 (3.01%) | 1849 (3.42%) | 44.895**   |
| Putin                                                | 11 (1.54%) | 1 (0.52%)  | 457 (2.46%) | 553 (3.68%) | 56 (1.91%)  | 506 (3.02%) | 1584 (2.93%) | 64.333**   |
| Poroshenko                                           | 6 (0.84%)  | 1 (0.52%)  | 93 (0.50%)  | 169 (1.13%) | 16 (0.55%)  | 195 (1.17%) | 480 (0.89%)  | 60.133**   |
| Lukashenko                                           | 3 (0.42%)  | 2 (1.04%)  | 141 (0.76%) | 65 (0.43%)  | 18 (0.61%)  | 164 (0.98%) | 393 (0.73%)  | 34.895**   |
| Lavrov                                               | 11 (1.54%) | 3 (1.56%)  | 146 (0.79%) | 91 (0.61%)  | 26 (0.89%)  | 99 (0.59%)  | 376 (0.69%)  | 17.604**   |
| Navalny                                              | 3 (0.42%)  | 2 (1.04%)  | 124 (0.67%) | 78 (0.52%)  | 10 (0.34%)  | 83 (0.50%)  | 300 (0.55%)  | 9.21       |
| Zelenskyy                                            | 3 (0.42%)  | 1 (0.52%)  | 94 (0.51%)  | 80 (0.53%)  | 14 (0.48%)  | 102 (0.61%) | 294 (0.54%)  | 2.297      |
| Merkel                                               | 6 (0.84%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 60 (0.32%)  | 101 (0.67%) | 16 (0.55%)  | 78 (0.47%)  | 261 (0.48%)  | 24.289**   |
| Biden                                                | 4 (0.56%)  | 2 (1.04%)  | 74 (0.40%)  | 32 (0.21%)  | 8 (0.27%)   | 134 (0.80%) | 254 (0.47%)  | 66.361**   |
| Erdogan                                              | 3 (0.42%)  | 1 (0.52%)  | 79 (0.43%)  | 41 (0.27%)  | 28 (0.96%)  | 89 (0.53%)  | 241 (0.45%)  | 30.269**   |
| Macron                                               | 5 (0.70%)  | 1 (0.52%)  | 63 (0.34%)  | 63 (0.42%)  | 11 (0.38%)  | 82 (0.49%)  | 225 (0.42%)  | 6.402      |
| Kim Jong Un                                          | 1 (0.14%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 40 (0.22%)  | 45 (0.30%)  | 7 (0.24%)   | 105 (0.63%) | 198 (0.37%)  | 47.762**   |
| Duda                                                 | 1 (0.14%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 49 (0.26%)  | 37 (0.25%)  | 13 (0.44%)  | 60 (0.36%)  | 160 (0.30%)  | 7.445      |
| Saakashvili                                          | 0 (0.00%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 29 (0.16%)  | 67 (0.45%)  | 8 (0.27%)   | 52 (0.31%)  | 156 (0.29%)  | 27.242**   |
| Zakharova                                            | 2 (0.28%)  | 4 (2.08%)  | 44 (0.24%)  | 14 (0.09%)  | 8 (0.27%)   | 76 (0.45%)  | 148 (0.27%)  | 61.905**   |

<sup>3</sup> In Tables 4, 5, and 6, percentages in parentheses indicate the proportion of headlines categorized with each emotion which contain references to the respective actor. Totals for each categorized emotion by subset are shown in Table 3. Two asterisks indicate an alpha level of 0.01 (i.e.,  $p < 0.01$ ), while one asterisk indicates an alpha level of 0.05. The chi-squared test is used to assess the association between the mentioned actor and categorized emotion. For each actor, values exceeding 1 percent (of headlines categorized with the respective emotion) are highlighted in the tables.

Table 6 Emotional categorization (automated) with respect to mentions of most prominent individuals<sup>4</sup>

| ROMANIAN<br>(N <sub>RO</sub> = 16136)<br>Actor/Emotion | Anger       | Disgust   | Fear        | Joy         | Sadness    | Surprise    | Total        | chi-square |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| Trump                                                  | 30 (15.08%) | 5 (7.35%) | 352 (6.85%) | 314 (7.31%) | 58 (6.95%) | 348 (6.21%) | 1107 (6.86%) | 26.131**   |
| Putin                                                  | 12 (6.03%)  | 4 (5.88%) | 231 (4.50%) | 298 (6.94%) | 30 (3.60%) | 302 (5.39%) | 877 (5.44%)  | 33.333**   |
| Merkel                                                 | 4 (2.01%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 51 (0.99%)  | 94 (2.19%)  | 11 (1.32%) | 113 (2.02%) | 273 (1.69%)  | 26.992**   |
| Macron                                                 | 3 (1.51%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 63 (1.23%)  | 61 (1.42%)  | 21 (2.52%) | 111 (1.98%) | 259 (1.61%)  | 16.116**   |
| Biden                                                  | 3 (1.51%)   | 1 (1.47%) | 61 (1.19%)  | 62 (1.44%)  | 3 (0.36%)  | 111 (1.98%) | 241 (1.49%)  | 19.667**   |
| Lavrov                                                 | 2 (1.01%)   | 1 (1.47%) | 84 (1.64%)  | 78 (1.82%)  | 8 (0.96%)  | 48 (0.86%)  | 221 (1.37%)  | 21.187**   |
| Erdogan                                                | 8 (4.02%)   | 3 (4.41%) | 92 (1.79%)  | 29 (0.68%)  | 9 (1.08%)  | 73 (1.30%)  | 214 (1.33%)  | 38.794**   |
| Iohannis                                               | 2 (1.01%)   | 1 (1.47%) | 44 (0.86%)  | 54 (1.26%)  | 5 (0.60%)  | 52 (0.93%)  | 158 (0.98%)  | 5.783      |
| Viktor Orbán                                           | 4 (2.01%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 48 (0.93%)  | 40 (0.93%)  | 4 (0.48%)  | 59 (1.05%)  | 155 (0.96%)  | 5.568      |
| Salvini                                                | 0 (0.00%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 30 (0.58%)  | 32 (0.75%)  | 4 (0.48%)  | 25 (0.45%)  | 91 (0.56%)   | 5.557      |
| Soros                                                  | 1 (0.50%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 35 (0.68%)  | 21 (0.49%)  | 3 (0.36%)  | 27 (0.48%)  | 87 (0.54%)   | 3.36       |
| Le Pen                                                 | 0 (0.00%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 19 (0.37%)  | 17 (0.40%)  | 4 (0.48%)  | 36 (0.64%)  | 76 (0.47%)   | 6.414      |
| Kim Jong Un                                            | 1 (0.50%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 10 (0.19%)  | 23 (0.54%)  | 0 (0.00%)  | 41 (0.73%)  | 75 (0.46%)   | 21.405**   |
| Zelenskyy                                              | 2 (1.01%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 19 (0.37%)  | 30 (0.70%)  | 2 (0.24%)  | 21 (0.37%)  | 74 (0.46%)   | 9.652      |
| Maduro                                                 | 2 (1.01%)   | 0 (0.00%) | 14 (0.27%)  | 20 (0.47%)  | 1 (0.12%)  | 27 (0.48%)  | 64 (0.40%)   | 7.299      |

<sup>4</sup> In Tables 4, 5, and 6, percentages in parentheses indicate the proportion of headlines categorized with each emotion which contain references to the respective actor. Totals for each categorized emotion by subset are shown in Table 3. Two asterisks indicate an alpha level of 0.01 (i.e.,  $p < 0.01$ ), while one asterisk indicates an alpha level of 0.05. The chi-squared test is used to assess the association between the mentioned actor and categorized emotion. For each actor, values exceeding 1 percent (of headlines categorized with the respective emotion) are highlighted in the tables.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This mixed methods analysis of a large dataset of Sputnik News headlines from three different language editions reveals both overarching discursive patterns and edition-level particularities. Sputnik's coverage of international news is dominated by indicators of conflict framing. Reflecting the role of Sputnik as an instrument of Russian foreign policy, the media propose that the United States and Russia are the main actors in the conflict, a discursive pattern that builds on and is consistent with the Cold War narratives that have defined the main poles of global power for decades. However, other prominent actors emerge in the Kremlin's more recent strategic communication, NATO and the EU, and thus the antagonism between good and evil is developed within a multidimensional ideological construction. NATO is the most frequently mentioned organization in the headlines. Considering that the Sputnik News network was created in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and has been constantly preoccupied with the situation of Ukraine and the Western orientation, emphasized by the country's intention to join NATO, it is not surprising that the representation of Ukraine in the sampled headlines of the Sputnik versions from the three EU and NATO member countries (Poland, Czech Republic, and Romania) is so prominent. The Czech and Polish emerging international news coverage patterns are relatively similar, with the Czech Sputnik News including a significant human-interest component not found in the other editions. The Romanian edition differs as it is more focused on the EU than on international politics and includes references to European politicians that are associated with souveranist discourses (Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini). Furthermore, international news includes more references to national politics than in the other two cases.

By far the most frequently mentioned individual actors are (former) POTUS Donald Trump and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin. Different patterns are found with the most frequently mentioned individuals in Czech and Polish coverage in relation to the Romanian coverage. The former two include more occurrences of regional, Eastern-European actors, while the latter includes more Western European actors.

The patterns of coverage correspond to the findings of previous literature on the topic. The niche dictionary-based analysis of framing and war/peace journalism coverage indicators reveals four overarching discourses: (1) vilification associated with global conflict (US and NATO); (2) crisis and dissent (in Europe and the EU); (3) the possibility of agreement; and (4) occupying the moral high-ground. Although these are not far removed from the dismiss-distort-distract-dismay Soviet propaganda model (Snegovaya, 2015), the focus on Trump, and also (in the Romanian case) Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini, on the one hand, and George Soros, on the other, seems to favor Watanabe's (2018) conclusion that Sputnik News might play a role in perpetuating and enforcing conspiracy theories and the souveranist ideology in Europe. From this reading, even the Czech focus on the Meghan Markle case can be seen as adding fuel to the fire of moral panic about the disintegration of national European cultural reference points (such as the British Royal Family). Within the 2020–2021 timeframe, the indicators of the conflict frame decrease in frequency, but the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent vaccination initiatives are covered and include significant conspiracy theory elements (Mogoş et al., 2022).

Furthermore, formulas that leverage human interest (death, sex, and popular TV shows or sports competitions) seem geared toward attracting readership from social media contexts, relying on 'spreadability.' The emotionalization of international coverage relies

on the voices of individual actors, most prominently Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, with key quotes included in the headlines, allowing for more colorful, emotive language and the vilification or disparaging of other actors – the USA, NATO, the EU or European leaders. Prominent Russian voices such as Lavrov, Zakharova, and Shoigu supplement this discursive approach. Mentions of Assad and Syria, Maduro and the Venezuelan situation, or Kim Jong Un and North Korea may serve as exemplars of the possible negative outcomes of international politics. The frame analysis of the coverage of NATO reveals a tendency to depict NATO as the more active (in Warrior or Tyrant roles) counterpart of Russia, which mostly reacts to shows of force or attempts to expand or consolidate control. However, NATO is typically framed as a failing alliance with dissenting members or as lacking the coordination necessary to take decisive, successful action.

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of Sputnik News headlines fit the characteristics of the emergent ‘propaganda on demand’ strategy model put forward by Litvinenko (2022), suggesting that, similarly to the internal Russian media landscape (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019), the Sputnik News network employs a content strategy that is not reliant on a coherent narrative, but rather on large volumes of emotionalized eclectic messages. This amounts to contradictory narratives that are difficult to counter and that can be replicated by other news sources or shared on digital platforms where audience members may select convenient messages to support ‘post-truth’ stances.

This research contributes to the scientific literature on the topic of instrumental international news coverage by government-funded agencies through a comparative analysis of three language editions. The methodological approach combines quantitative methodologies using a large multilingual dataset and Named Entity Recognition, niche dictionaries, the inductive and deductive coding of frame indicators, content analysis, and qualitative analysis on a filtered subset. A limitation of the research is the use of automated translations for some parts of the analysis. With the development of more natural language processing tools for languages such as Czech, Polish, and Romanian, this can be overcome in further analyses. Further research is also needed to explore the representation of other prominent actors like the EU, as well as the domestication strategies employed in each of the three editions.

## References

- Bednarek, M., & Caple, H. (2014). Why do news values matter? Towards a new methodological framework for analyzing news discourse in Critical Discourse Analysis and beyond. *Discourse & Society*, 25(2), 135–158.
- Caple, H., & Bednarek, M. (2016). Rethinking news values: What a discursive approach can tell us about the construction of news discourse and news photography. *Journalism*, 17(4), 435–455.
- Colnerič, N., & Demšar, J. (2018). Emotion recognition on Twitter: Comparative study and training a unison model. *IEEE transactions on affective computing*, 11(3), 433–446.
- Demšar, J., Curk, T., Erjavec, A., Gorup, Č., Hočevar, T., Milutinovič, M., ... & Zupan, B. (2013). Orange: data mining toolbox in Python. *the Journal of machine Learning research*, 14(1), 2349–2353.

- Demjanski, A. (2020). *Framing the news: Deutsche Welle, Sputnik News, and Macedonia's Colorful Revolution*. [Unpublished Master dissertation]. University of Texas at Austin. <https://bit.ly/3q5BPmR>
- Deverell, E., Wagnsson, C., & Olsson, E.K. (2021). Destruct, direct and suppress: Sputnik narratives on the Nordic countries. *Journal of International Communication*, 27(1), 15–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2020.1817122>
- Ekman, P. (1992). An argument for basic emotions. *Cognition & emotion*, 6(3-4), 169–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699939208411068>
- Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. V. (1971). Constants across cultures in the face and emotion. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 17(2), 124. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0030377>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- EUvsDisinfo. (2019). *Figure of the Week: 1.3 Billion – EUvsDisinfo*. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-1-3-billion> Accessed: 01.08.2023.
- Furman, I. O., Gürel, K. B., & Sivaslıoğlu, F. B. (2023). 'As Reliable as a Kalashnikov Rifle': How Sputnik News Promotes Russian Vaccine Technologies in the Turkish Twittersphere. *Social Media+ Society*, 9(1), 20563051221150418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150418>
- Guo, L., Su, C., Paik, S., Bhatia, V., Akavoor, V. P., Gao, G., ... & Wijaya, D. (2023). Proposing an open-sourced tool for computational framing analysis of multilingual data. *Digital journalism*, 11(2), 276–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2031241>
- Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. (2019). *Handbook of narrative analysis*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Higuchi, K. (2016). KH Coder (Version 3). Ritsumeikan University. URL: <https://kxcoder.net/en/>
- Jaitner, M., & Mattsson, P. A. (2015, May). Russian information warfare of 2014. In *2015 7th International Conference on Cyber Conflict: Architectures in Cyberspace* (pp. 39–52). IEEE.
- Kelsey, D., Yannopoulou, N., Whittle, A., Heath, T., Golossenko, A., & Soares, A. M. (2023). The (army) hero with a thousand faces: A discourse-mythological approach to theorising archetypal blending in contemporary advertising. *Marketing Theory*, 23(1), 141–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931221141732>
- Kragh, M., & Åsberg, S. (2017). Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40(6), 773–816. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1273830>
- Kuusisto, R. (2018). Comparing IR plots: dismal tragedies, exuberant romances, hopeful comedies and cynical satires. *International Politics*, 55, 160–176. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0076-2>
- Lams, L., De Smaele, H., De Coninck, F., Lippens, C., & Smeyers, L. (2023). Strategic Comrades? Russian and Chinese Media Representations of NATO. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 75(5), 842–864. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2152556>
- Litvinenko, A. (2022). Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 12(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.55518>
- Litvinenko, A., & Toepfl, F. (2019). The 'Gardening' of an authoritarian public at large: How Russia's ruling elites transformed the country's media landscape after the 2011/12 protests 'For Fair Elections'. *Publizistik*, 64, 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-019-00486-2>
- Maslog, C., & Lee, S. (2005). War or peace journalism? Asian newspaper coverage of conflicts. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 311–329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02674.x>

- Mogoş, A. A., Grapă, T. E., & Şandru, T. F. (2022). Russian disinformation in Eastern Europe. Vaccination media frames in ro.sputnik.md. *Comunicar*, 30(72), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C72-2022-03>
- Moore, R. & Gillette, D. (1991). *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, HarperOne.
- Müller, P., & Schulz, A. (2021). Alternative media for a populist audience? Exploring political and media use predictors of exposure to Breitbart, Sputnik, and Co. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(2), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1646778>
- Nelson, T. S. (2019). How RT frames conflict: A comparative analysis. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 11(2), 126–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2019.1608846>
- Robertson, A. (2017). Narrative analysis. In K. Boréus. & G. Bergström (Eds.), *Analyzing text and discourse: Eight approaches for the social sciences*, (pp. 122–145). Sage Publications.
- Semetko, H.A., & Valkenburg, P.M. (2000). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 93–109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02843.x>
- Shahzad, F., Qazi, T. A., & Shehzad, R. (2023). Framing of Israel and Palestine Conflict in RT news, Al-Jazeera, CNN & BBC News. *Global Digital & Print Media Review*, 6(2), 1–14. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gdpmr.2023\(VI-II\).01](https://doi.org/10.31703/gdpmr.2023(VI-II).01)
- Snegovaya, M. (2015). Putin's information warfare in Ukraine. *Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*, *Russia Report*, 1, 133-135.
- Ştefan, B. (2020). Understanding Sputnik news agency internet traffic analysis. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov*, 13(1), 113–124.
- US Department of State Global Engagement Center. (2022). *Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*. [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media\\_January\\_update-19.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf) Accessed: 01.08.2023.
- Toepfl, F. (2020). Comparing authoritarian publics: The benefits and risks of three types of publics for autocrats. *Communication Theory*, 30(2), 105–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz015>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Stories and Racism. In D. K. Mumby (Ed.) *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*, (pp. 121–142). Sage Publications.
- Watanabe, K. (2018, August). *Conspiracist propaganda: How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online*. In ECPR General Conference, Hamburg, Germany.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175–194.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). *Emotions, media and politics*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Wilbur, D. S. (2021). Propaganda or Not. *Journal of Information Warfare*, 20(3), 146–156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27125004>
- Wilson, J. L. (2015). Russia and China respond to soft power: Interpretation and readaptation of a Western construct. *Politics*, 35(3-4), pp. 287–300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12095>
- Yablokov, I. (2015). Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT). *Politics*, 35(3-4), 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12097>