

# Visual framings of the war in Ukraine

## Evoking emotions and mobilization

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The influence of the war against  
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## About the Special Issue: Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

*Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak,  
Elena Psyllakou, Gerardo Nicoletta & David Adler*

The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

# Visual framings of the war in Ukraine

## Evoking emotions and mobilization

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Conflicts and parties to them are typically also portrayed with the aid of visuals, which can be media photos, cartoons, or today also computer-crafted images, including deepfakes. While photos give an image of the reality on the ground, they present only a selection of it. Cartoons or deepfakes are expressly created to depict a certain understanding of an issue. In the Russian war against Ukraine, traditional and social media have flooded the public-political space with images of the war and its main conflict parties Russia and Ukraine. Visuals transport emotions, and – in this war – are used to evoke emotions, and thereby mobilize into action. These visuals and their emotional framings, however, also represent the conflict parties in simplified ways, with overly positive representations of the Self and overly negative representations of the Other, strengthening the dichotomous relationship and our view of the Self-versus-Other hierarchy. This short working paper focusses on the nexus of visuals and emotions, and emotions' impact on behaviour and policy, to explore visual framings in (social) media of the war in Ukraine. It discusses how visuals by Ukrainians and their Western supporters shape a particular understanding of the war, evoke emotions, and mobilize. Furthermore, the paper delves into the phenomenon of volunteer IT experts, hackers and even private citizens – as new actor in conflict – being motivated to support a conflict party, mostly Ukraine, in cyberspace. The paper closes with implications of this new actor group for future conflicts.

*Keywords:* Visuals, framing, emotions, cyberspace, Russia, Ukraine

In responses to Russia's war against Ukraine we can see a notable example of how visuals evoke emotions and mobilize an unprecedented level of support. The intensity of coverage in (social) media of this war is striking. Visuals show this war also being a wider, systemic conflict between democracy and authoritarian rule. These representations come with emotions – applied to frame content about the war and involved actors, and to create attention, arouse, and mobilize. Emotional framings in conflicts often lead to greatly simplified views of the conflict parties. Framings tend to include exaggerated positive representations of the Self and exaggerated negative representations of the Other, leading to Self and Other being emotionalized and essentialized into good versus bad (see also Reinke de Buitrago, 2018). The Other becomes the threatening Other which the Self must fight.

(Social) media are an important space for framing the war. Focusing on the visual-emotional nexus (see Hansen, 2015, Dodds, 2010; Bleiker, 2009) and the impact of emotions on behaviour and policy (see Bially Mattern, 2014; Mercer, 2014, Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008), this short working paper explores visual framings in (social) media of the war in Ukraine. It discusses how visuals by Ukrainians and Western supporters lead to particular understandings of the war, and thus mobilize. Visuals discussed here are among those frequently shown in social and news media, including photos and cartoons. From the vast amount of images in media, the paper is based on a selection of images from right before the war and the first few months into the war,

with a focus on particularly poignant, illustrative images. It includes key Ukrainian sources and key Western sources. The paper does not discuss Russian-distributed visuals, as it would go well beyond its scope. This paper builds on a presentation at the DiscourseNet Workshop “Discourses of War and Peace, a virtual conference in response to the ongoing war in Ukraine”, on 14 April 2022. Furthermore, the war has motivated volunteer IT experts, hackers and even private citizens to support a conflict party, often with cyber tools. The paper discusses these as new actor in conflict and closes with implications regarding future conflicts.

## Visual framings and the war in Ukraine

### How framings present the war and the key conflict parties of Russia and Ukraine

#### *At the war’s beginning and in the build-up to it*

As Fig. 1 shows, illustrative for many at the beginning of the war, Ukraine is represented as small country vis-à-vis a Russia so large that it can simply swallow Ukraine. President Putin is depicted as Russia (the Russian bear) and as claiming to legitimately incorporate Ukraine, reminding of Putin’s narratives leading up to the war. The ‘Russian bear’ idea and depiction has a long history, frequently used by the West, but also in Russia itself to represent size and power. This image here is a clear expression of the apparent Russia-Ukraine power ratio, and a warning that Putin’s regime might just swallow Ukraine, no matter any internationally established norms. The war is framed and understood as war of aggression, unprovoked and unjust. Russia is portrayed as aggressor, misusing its power to overtake smaller states in disregard of international law. Putin and his regime become the rule breaker, the ones who do not care for established rules for peaceful international or neighbourly relations, and by extension the regime that the international community must rein in.



Figure 1: The Print & Charlotte Observer, 2022



Figure 2: Darkow, 2022

Around the time of the war’s beginning, another image, Fig. 2 exemplifies the strong reaction of Ukrainians, the will to fight for their country and sovereignty. While Ukraine may be small in size compared to Russia, they will make it very hard and painful to be swallowed. This image again uses the idea of the Russian bear, a much bigger and stronger animal, and contrasts it with a small animal but one that has its defences, too. The cartoonist depicts Ukraine as able to fight back and defend itself. The hedgehog idea may additionally refer to tank traps used by Ukraine. Russia/the Russian regime is depicted as realizing the mistake of assuming an easy takeover. The image expresses that size alone does not matter. As much as a hedgehog can motivate the often larger animal to give up in the end, the smaller Ukraine, when defiant, has a chance to fight back Russia, and perhaps win.

#### *After several weeks of war*

Fig. 3 (and very similar images frequently shown in media) is almost iconic in depicting Russian aggression in Ukraine. It shows an apartment building destroyed by a Russian



Figure 3: Myroniuk, 2022





Figure 4: Chernichkin, 2022

rocket in the town of Borodyanka in Kyiv Oblast (Myroniuk, 2022). It is illustrative of the scale of destruction and the Russian arbitrary, pointless wrecking of civilian buildings, expressing shock and a sense of helplessness. It expresses how little the Russian army and regime heed certain norms in war, such as sparing civilians, directly attacking civilians to sow fear. While such attacks are likely meant to show that no one in Ukraine is safe, not even families or children sleeping at night, the image represents Russia as aggressive Other and, from a rules-of-war view, as unlawful and even uncivilized Other. It furthermore links up with a common understanding that such actions must be sanctioned by the international community.

Fig. 4 shows a Ukrainian serviceman passing by another destroyed apartment building in Borodyanka (Chernichkin, 2022). While it shows the enormous scale of destruction by Russia, it also expresses Ukrainians prevailing, still standing and undefeated. It represents the continuing ability and will to keep fighting despite the enormous losses and damages, with the Ukrainian serviceman shown as determinedly walking on. A sense of defiance and pride is expressed by the camera's angle pointing up to the serviceman: despite Russian-inflicted destruction, Ukraine will fight on and endure.

In Bucha, in April 2022, the entire world could see the atrocities of the Russian army and regime. Images (Fig. 5, 6



Figure 5: Gensing & Reveland, 2022



Figure 6: Tagesschau, 2022, April 4



Figure 7: Musch-Borowska, 2022

and 7) show the utter destruction of cities and civilian places, and many civilians dead.

Aside from the Russian army's destruction, images (Fig. 5, 6 and 7) also show the banality of death – human victims simply ending up in body bags, unceremoniously needing to be collected, as there are so many, with no time for mourning. Images express shock, sadness, and grief. Investigations turned up proof for Russian human rights violations, including torture and civilians rounded up and shot without reason. The Russian regime is shown as flagrantly violating basic human rights and norms: as clear aggressor to be reined in.

But regardless of how atrocious the Russian behaviour, images show a Ukraine that is strong, that stands tall and continues to fight back.



Figure 8: Ponomarenko, 2022

Fig. 8 shows a Ukrainian servicemen on top of a destroyed Russian tank near Kyiv, April 3, 2022 (Ponomarenko, 2022). It represents the ability and potential of Ukrainians being victorious over Russian forces – the small Ukraine fighting back big Russia. It shows self-determination and empowerment, expressing the hope and possibility of Russia's defeat.

Fig. 9 shows a Ukrainian multiple rocket launcher during an attack on Russian troops in the Donbas region in April 2022 (Kyiv Post, 2022, April 11). It represents the Ukrainian ability and will to fight back, and that Ukraine is not helpless and can, with Western arms, attack Russian forces and defend themselves with military might. It depicts a strong and determined Ukraine that can actively defend itself.



Figure 9: Kyiv Post, 2022, April 11

This visual (Fig. 10) was shared on several platforms (also discussed in Harwell & Lerman, 2022). Ukrainians citizens as well as supporters elsewhere are highly active in cyber space and social media to boost Ukrainians' morale, humiliate Putin and Russian soldiers, address (and scare) Russian soldiers and families directly, and mobilize support for Ukraine (Harwell & Lerman, 2022). Regular citizens, but also others such as IT experts have become engaged in platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, and



Figure 10: Lapatina 2022

Twitter to counter and take down Russian propaganda, flood Russian sites with spam, hack Russian websites and display anti-Russian / pro-Ukrainian messages, document Russian brutality, spread defence tactics, and share intelligence on Russian troop locations. Visuals ridicule Russian soldiers (for being left with a tank without fuel or being sent into combat without training). Aside from Ukrainians showing their will and ability to fight back, they have displayed the lacking tactical and logistical preparation of the Russian offensive and thereby broken the Kremlin's message of Russian military superiority (ibid). Hackers and social media outlets are also working to get information to Russians around Russian state control (Harwell, 2022).

Ukrainians are also circulating deepfakes about Russia. A Kremlin-released video from a national address on February 21, 2022 by Putin was manipulated (and circulated on Twitter in March 2022) to show Putin addressing Russian soldiers to stop fighting, talking of building peace with Ukraine and restoring Crimean independence (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

The overall representation of the war is one of Russian aggression, against all international norms and human rights. Russia, or at times specifically the Putin regime, is depicted as the aggressor, as reckless, breaking the most basic rules and norms in indiscriminately killing civilians. Russia becomes the aggressive, imperial, dangerous, negative Other, and the essential Other from the Ukrainian and Western view. But Russia is also portrayed as weak, with weak spots that can be attacked, and thus as defeatable. Russia is particularly defeatable by a defiant and brave Ukraine aided by Western weapons. Furthermore, and in part due to the opposition to Russia, Ukraine is shown as brave people that fight for their sovereignty – becoming the freedom-loving and belonging-to-the-West Other.

### How images evoke emotions, and mobilize

The well-known image of the Russian bear (Fig. 1) is utilized, here the Russian bear as Putin, to show the gross injustice of swallowing the small Ukraine. The image represents the Russian aggression, the abuse of size and power, and the disregard for established norms for state behaviour, invoking feelings of injustice and of needing to help the smaller Ukraine (in part also Fig. 10). Such aggression cannot go unanswered – such severe breaking of international rules cannot be tolerated. Those with the means to help must step in to aid Ukraine in its fight for independence and freedom, and to furthermore discourage such aggression towards other states.

The big Russian bear is not so strong after all vis-à-vis the small but defiant Ukrainian hedgehog (Fig. 2). Ukraine is shown to use its weapons, however small they may be, and to make it painful to be swallowed, ready to die for freedom. It expresses Ukrainian pride and self-determination, and evokes a sense of wanting to help. It also expresses the utility of supporting Ukraine by aiding its defence. Instead of being in vain, military support would both be of



use and justified, adding to a felt need to help Ukrainians also militarily.

The images of utter destruction and attacking of civilians (Fig. 3–7) shock and gravely upset. Shelled schools, kindergartens or civilian buildings show a Russian regime unconcerned with basic rules of conduct in war. Such disregard of lives has created outrage and even shocked supporters of Russia. Such images mobilize: to act to rein in the Russian regime, fight for international norms, and help Ukraine in its fight for freedom. Doing nothing, or too little, could encourage Russia to swallow other (smaller) states; not helping Ukraine risks freedom in Europe.

Images of small victories on the battlefield (Fig. 8 and 9) evidence the Ukrainian ability to fight the Russian army and even re-conquer territory. It evokes feelings of justice, of rectifying the gross violations, and being on the right side of history in supporting Ukraine. Military support is shown as justified and, to some degree, effective. Together with portrayals of Ukrainians' enormous will to defend their country, Western (military) support is shown as rightfully needing to continue and be increased – for Ukraine could in the end and together with its partners stop the Russian aggression.

Furthermore, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's President (and former TV actor), is highly active and seemingly effective in using (social) media to directly counter Russian portrayals of the war and address Ukrainians as well as the international community for support. The emotional framing of messages is high and includes strong moral appeals, particularly to European audiences.

### **How representations affect feelings of (in)security**

With the images showing the extent and ruthlessness of Russian aggression so close to the European Union, not responding seems a non-option. Acting against Russian aggression to uphold international norms is naturally right from a perspective of rule-of-law, sovereignty and national self-determination. Involvement of additional states can, however, intensify the war and present an escalation. Thus, while Ukrainians and other smaller states are reassured and aided in feelings of security for not being left alone in the face of such aggression, potential escalation can strengthen feelings of insecurity. Additionally, representations of Russia add to feelings of insecurity regarding anything Russian.

Moreover, the views of the main conflict parties, Russia and Ukraine, have become highly simplified. Russia and the Russian regime are seen as only bad. Much of the Russian population (still) seems unconcerned by what their government is doing in a country far away, influenced by years of state propaganda and repression – certainly until the partial mobilization in September 2022. Ukraine, on the other side, becomes only good – despite the many problems of its political system, sidelined since the war's start. These overly simplified, strongly dichotomous views are risky: at

some point, we will need to raise again the problems in Ukraine (influence of oligarchs, significant corruption, reform backlog, a.o.). Regarding Russia as essential Western Other, many of its immediate neighbours have their fears seen confirmed, and feelings of insecurity have only grown. Future efforts to engage with Russia in dialogue will face even more difficulty. Russia's atrocities in Ukraine will also need to be sanctioned, further hindering any re-building of trust and peaceful relations.

### **Implications of the involvement of IT experts, hackers, and private citizens: A new actor in conflict**

The discussion aimed to show how visuals from the Ukrainian (and Western) perspective represent the war, shape the understanding of it, and evoke and mobilize. Media images show (a part of) reality on the ground. Crafted visuals such as cartoons, or deepfakes, offer a more pointed and intended framing. All of these images transport emotions or are emotionally framed; together, they present an emotionalization to mobilize into action.

In addition, the war in Ukraine has shown a surprising rise in involvement of IT experts, hackers, and even private citizens to support either conflict side – mostly though Ukraine. Russia already has a history of employing hackers for cyberattacks against other states. Since the start of the war, Ukraine and its critical infrastructures have increasingly been a target (Cybersecurity Newsletter, The Washington Post, 2022, February 24, 28, March 23, September 27). Those supporting Ukraine seemingly were motivated by the Russian aggression, among them a whole army of IT experts, as well as hackers and private citizens. Support also comes from abroad, including as response to the Ukrainian government's call for anyone to support the Ukrainian cause. Actions are aimed at protecting Ukrainian cyberspace from Russian hacks, disabling Russian state blocking of the Internet and information access, and attacking Russian cyberspace, such as ministry websites, with some success (Soesanto, 2022; Cybersecurity Newsletter, 2022, March 17). As not only hackers working for a state were mobilized, but also entire hacker communities, civilian IT experts with regular jobs, and private citizens, we can speak of a new actor in conflict – a development with implications.

Civilians – from IT experts, and (ethical) hackers to private citizens – getting involved in cyberspace of state conflicts has implications. Some see such involvement critical, as it circumvents and makes obsolete existing norms of digital behaviour (Soesanto, 2022). Effects can be overly destructive and mistaken for state-backed actions; accountability is usually impossible (Cybersecurity Newsletter, 2022, February 28, March 17). In the war in Ukraine, cyber space is not only used to express support for an attacked people, but also for harmful and potentially escalatory action.

While the hacking of Russian websites that spread disinformation may seem noble and helpful, lack of accountability remains a problem. Ukrainian cyberattacks against the Russian aggressor also impede international attempts of governing norms for digital behaviour overall, and can potentially promote an escalation. At the same time, Russia's use of hybrid war and cyber war as tool presents a great dilemma and problem – how to react appropriately in defence of the attacked Ukraine, its (critical) infrastructures, and its people, without (overly) escalating further. The Russian propaganda, disinformation and hybrid warfare against Ukraine cannot be ignored. Responding to these in a constructive manner though seems highly difficult.

Implications of this new actor for future conflicts are not all clear yet, but potentially manifold. Hacking – to protect or to destroy, by actual hackers and others – has become a new arena in conflict, and hackers of various kind a new actor. Even ethical hacking could at some point initiate a vicious cycle of hacking and counter-hacking. Accidental, unintended consequences also for other institutions (including critical infrastructures) are likely. Furthermore, regular citizens getting involved in conflicts via cyberspace presents a potential escalation, for regular citizens have less expertise on such matters and likely calibrate responses less. Escalation can involve further states (by accident or on purpose). An increase in ransomware attacks against a host of institutions (companies, critical infrastructures, government institutions) is also likely. When a war ends, some hackers may move to criminal hacking; and hacktivism can easily develop into misuse. Additional challenges exist for issues related to freedom of expression – as measures to deal with cyber activists will likely involve acts of restriction. These issues are among those to be dealt with in the future.



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