The Role of National Media in the Framing of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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Abstract

Despite the vast research on the role of media in conflicts, the way in which media narratives change over different conflict phases remains understudied. It primarily concerns the frames embedded in publications of national and local media in case of the interstate conflict. Frequently, the role of the media is described in a rather one-sided and generalized way either as a propaganda tool in the hands of the government or the militaries, or as an instrument of influence that is able to compel the authorities to take a particular decision, for instance, to intervene during humanitarian crises. On the other hand, when the research involves the analysis of media narratives on conflicts, they are often generalized to 5-6 predetermined frames.

By conducting automated content analysis performed in R open-source platform, this study analyzes over 1400 conflict related news stories published by the three most popular Ukrainian online media outlets, namely "Obozrevatel", "Korrespondent" and "Fakty", during weekly periods in three different phases of the conflict in the eastern part of the country: in March 2014 (pre-conflict period), in August 2014 (the period of greatest escalation of the conflict) and in February 2019 (phase of de-escalation of the conflict). Despite the fact that the analysis confirmed some general conclusions of previous studies – such as the media's tendency to ignore developments during the onset of the conflict and at the time of its de-escalation as well as to refer primarily to official sources of information and use the dichotomous framework thus drawing a clear line between enemies and friends – it also revealed that there were certain similarities in the dominant media frames in pre-conflict and conflict de-escalation periods, in general there were no traceable trends in the narrative development over time. The analysis also demonstrated that media coverage of the conflict is much more nuanced and cannot be narrowed down to several common media frames.

Introduction

The conflict brings about inevitable changes not only in the life of the population, which is directly affected by the ongoing fighting, but also the society in general. These changes can also be positive and inspire, for instance, the internal mobilization of society, the growth of patriotism, and sense of belonging to the country. However, when the conflict involves different groups of the same society, it inevitably creates conditions for the internal social, political and cultural tensions.

In such an instance, the direct task of the media is to weaken the internal tension in society, to dispel myths and combat established stereotypes. This specifically applies to the situation in Ukraine, where the population of the eastern regions has been affected by the armed conflict for more than five years already.

The extremely important role of national media in this conflict is also underpinned by the conditions in which it developed, in particular, the information war launched by the Russian Federation, which accompanied all the phases of the conflict in the Donbas, and even preceded it. This information policy had serious and direct consequences. The trust of the population on both sides of the line of contact to the media outlets on the other side was undermined, but at the same time their attention to the information that the media publishes had increased several fold.

In the conditions of increased distrust of the society, lack of access to the conflict zone, as well as propaganda actively spread by Russian media as well as media in areas which are not controlled by the Ukrainian government, the Ukrainian mass media have been assigned a special role in dismantling fake information as well as objective and balanced coverage of events in the East of the country, which would potentially lead to de-escalation and reduce tension in Ukrainian society.

This role is also particularly relevant given the rapid development of information technologies, and, accordingly, the increasing role of social networks in disseminating information and informing society about the current events. Indeed, the conflict unfolded more intensively in the information space than in the real world. A lot of Ukrainians, for instance, learned about the main statements and activities of the armed formations in Donetsk and Luhansk region only from the social and traditional media, not from personal communication. Armed conflict, transformed into information wars, ceased to be purely real events and became partly virtual.

Besides, the conflict in eastern Ukraine does not have a clear definition and is depersonalized. Not everyone agrees with the Ukrainian government's definition of the anti-terrorist operation (ATO): it is regularly called (both by experts, politicians and journalists) a war with Russia and its supporters, a civil war, or even a war between United States and Russian Federation, and so on (citation?). The international community does not recognize the "militants" as "terrorists" at the legal level. The local residents of Donbas, for the most part, categorically disagree with this wording. Therefore, it becomes a component of uncertainty and provides endless debate. Such depersonalization of the conflict is also stemming from the lack of frequent direct contact (human to human) both in the conflict zone, and in the everyday life in other regions of the country. Thus, the conflict also moves into the information space and turns into a war of symbols.

In this circumstance, given the difficulty of controlling and verifying the veracity of the facts, especially in times of crisis – when any information become more influential and more sensitive, and the speculation, aggression and hatred are multiplying faster than the developments in the conflict zone – the role of national media, in particular those that have the maximum reach, is difficult to overestimate.

Nevertheless, this role of traditional media in Ukraine during a conflict which has been ongoing for more than five years is still being neglected by

scholars. If we analyse the existing studies, we will see that most of them are mainly focused on the dissemination of fake news and the psychological manipulations by pro-Kremlin media, as well as sophisticated technology that Russian Federation applies to spread the disinformation, such as trolls factories and semi-automated botnets, hacking, spear-phishing attacks etc. (Pomerantsev, 2015; Reston, 2017; Golovchenko and Hartmann, 2018). At the same time, the way in which Ukrainian national media cover the conflict in the eastern regions of the country and how it affects the perceptions of society does not receive the due attention of scholars.

This study aims to close the existing gap in research and analyze the media narratives of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that most popular Ukrainian national online media outlets have spread over the past 5 years, as well as to see how the media frames embedded in news, analytical articles or interviews, have changed depending on each individual phase of the conflict - before its beginning, during the period of its greatest escalation and de-escalation.

1. Theoretical Background

Media Functions in Society

The significance of mass media in our lives may seem obvious, and the question of their role can be considered even rhetorical, especially in the era of globalization, when we are able to access both national and international media every second in almost every part of the world from our laptops or smartphones. The most evident answer to the question regarding the main function of media will be that it is the source of information. Indeed, the media informs us about political and social news, job announcements, and advertisements. At the same time, these messages we receive from press potentially can affect our perception of the world, our attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, the mass media as an

information source can play much more important roles in our lives. So how linear is the link between the media and society, does the media merely reflect reality, or also interpret and even construct it? These issues are particularly relevant in the current period of convergence of communication technologies when the boundaries between personal and public communication networks become barely noticeable.

The impact of mass media on society has been studied since the middle of the last century by proponents of the functionalist approach. Lasswell (1948) distinguished three main functions of communication in society, namely surveillance of the environment, or sharing knowledge regarding existing opportunities and dangers; correlation of parts of the society in responding to the environment, which relates to the interpretation of information; and transmission of social heritage from one generation to the next. This list was supplemented by Wright (1975) who specified the fourth function of media, namely, entertainment and McQuail (1987) who added the mobilization function, that is, promoting certain values, especially during times of crisis. In addition, Wright (1986) expanded the analysis by distinguishing media dysfunctions, and dividing its functions into manifest, or those that were intended and could be easily observed, and latent (i.e. unintended consequences).

The application of such a functionalist approach to the study of media gave rise to a number of theories, which also emphasized the role of media in agenda setting and framing public opinion. One of the most prominent of these is Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory. According to this theory, individuals' position and his or her willingness to express it publicly mainly depend on how specific issues and the trend of opinions are presented in mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Murdock (1974) supported this view by noting that society uses information published in media in order to shape its overall understanding of social structures and processes. Entman proceeded even further in his analysis and developed a cascade activation model that

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demonstrates how information passes through certain levels or cascades, from administration through media to society, eventually becoming limited to the "selected highlights proceeded through schemas" (Entman, 2004, p. 12). In this way, the mass media, which, according to Entman, have their own professional motivations, can frame political events, issues or actors (p. 23). According to the theory, framing is at its most successful and, correspondingly, can influence the society's attitudes to the greatest extent, when "the event or issue is ambiguous" (p. 18).

Even though the application of functionalism to mass communications provided a solid contribution to the understanding of how media can affect the functioning of society, it also raised a number of criticisms, especially as the principles of media functioning have been changing and were affected by modern technological developments. The most common critique of the approach is that it does not distinguish between the various types of media and the roles they play in different political systems, as well as ignores the changes that have taken place simultaneously with the media and audiences over the past decades and ultimately envisage mostly a passive role of society as a consumer of media content (Anderson and Meyer, 1975).

Such criticism has given an impetus to a new wave of communication research and led scholars to explore in more detail how the role of the media can vary depending on the political regime in which they operate. For instance, McQuail (2005) came to the conclusion that even in democratic societies, the influence of the media can be different. In particular, according to his study, in Europe, in spite of the prevailing principles of freedom of speech, in most of the countries, the press has a significant linking to the state, which is rather unusual and even undesirable for the American system. In addition, having analysed communication policy-making over the past centuries, McQuail (1997) distinguished three main phases and came to the conclusion that the modern period or phase of new communication policy paradigm is driven by economic and technological logics and marked by the "increasing significance of media

that gained in their centrality and potential influence" and " declining capacity to control them" as a result of the rapid development of new technologies and technological and economic convergence in the media sector (p. 512).

In general, despite the different views on the degree to which media can shape public perceptions and ongoing academic debate, there is a consensus among the scholars that media has a certain impact on public opinion. This influence can vary in different periods and potentially increases during crisis situations, such as violent conflicts, when the society's interest in, and attention to, information multiplies.

The Impact of Traditional Media Coverage on Conflict

Media as a Propaganda Tool. The news coverage during the crises and conflicts heightened scholars' interest in communication research and prompted them to reconsider the ways media can shape public perceptions. One of the first types of media influence which had become the subject of numerous studies was the spread of war propaganda that can be defined as "any message (proximate to the conflict in question) that directly or deliberately attempts to ring about violence against another group as such, regardless of outcome" (Kearney, 2012, p.235). In particular, a significant portion of communication scholarship is devoted to the examination of media effects and techniques of the reciprocal propaganda campaigns during the Second World War, such as British black and white propaganda campaigns in France (Brooks, 2007), and US propaganda toward neutral Spain (Leon-Aguinaga, 2014). Besides, Lasswell (1942) and Jenks (2006) analysed practices of cooperation between the United States and Britain's governments and national media and spread of propaganda on their own territory during the World War II by silencing certain information for the sake of security and national interests, and using "more prosaic and effective forms of propaganda - explanation, instruction, interpretation" (Jenks, 2006, p. 15). Even though such case studies provide some significant insights

into the role that mass media played during the War, most of them assumed a rather passive role for the press, which they mainly portrayed as a government tool in the conduct of military information operations and covert actions.

At the same time, studies of modern conflicts demonstrate the more nuanced perception of the media's contribution in conflict, in particular, it's role as an active disseminator of propaganda that can fuel violence and nationalism and spread mistrust in societies. For instance, Oberschall (2000) analysed how media manipulation and publication of fabricated stories about war crimes during the conflict in former Yugoslavia activated the crisis frame in Serbian and Croatian societies and spread the fear of extinction, thus, contributing to rising of extremism and ethnic violence. Vukasovich & Dejanovic-Vukasovich (2016) examined how selective media coverage during the wars in Kosovo and Syria, and, most notably, the trend towards sensationalism--"deadline hunger for updates" - and competition for audience, led to over-reliance on the official line and weaponization of media "in support of military agendas" (p.313). Baisley (2014) in her research demonstrated how Radio Rwanda and *Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines* broadcasts amplified mass violence and contributed to the genocide in Rwanda by othering the "target group" through exploiting "identity constructions from many periods in Rwanda's history" (p. 52). Savarese (2000) moved forward in her research and analysed the Western media's use of persuasive communication techniques before and during the NATO military operation in Kosovo. According to the study, European media first prepared the public opinion for NATO military intervention and then approved or justified it by employing such persuasion techniques as simplification, using mainly dichotomous frameworks (e. g. friend/enemy), and dramatizing events by using both verbal and non-verbal components, such as images and layouts (p. 369). Savarese comes to the conclusion that one of the reasons for such widespread use of persuasive techniques, in particular, the non-verbal components, is the development of the media itself, the emergence of television that affects viewers not only on a cognitive level but also on an

emotional one, and accordingly the need for the print press to compete for audience. An example of this is that during the study, there were no differences observed between the conservative and the liberal press' news coverage (p.380).

These numerous examples of media being either dependent on political and military influences or manipulation, and utilising extensive propaganda campaigns on their behalf, or providing rather selective and biased coverage of conflict, has led many practitioners and researchers to believe that the media plays an exclusively negative role in times of crisis. For instance, former Director for Strategic Communications and Information on the U.S. National Security Council Colonel Jeffrey Jones stated that "traditional dividing lines between public affairs, public diplomacy, and military information operations are blurred because of immediate access to information" (Jones, 2005, p.109). At the same time, several scholars provided confirmation of this statement based on media coverage of specific conflicts. In particular, Jakobsen (2000) analysed news coverage of several conflicts (in Somalia, Kosovo, American intervention in Haiti) during three main phases (i.e. pre-violence, violence and post-violence) and concluded that journalists tend to ignore the pre- and post-conflict developments, are mostly interested in a small number of violent conflicts that can make a sensational headline, and, therefore, contribute to the "irrational allocation" of humanitarian aid, which only brings "short-term emergency relief", and, in general, have very limited influence on the conflict management process. Hoskins and O′Loughlin (2015) in their research focused on the ways in which media can challenge and change perceptions during conflict by re-contextualizing events, using ambiguous language or setting "us" against "them". In combination with the above-mentioned case-studies, these studies formed rather an unappealing view of the role of mass media in promoting both interstate and intrastate violence.

Yet critical scholars have encouraged study of the factors that actually affect the ways media in different countries frame the conflict, as well as analyse how direct is the media influence on the society and how individuals use the

information they receive from the press. In particular, Meyer et al. (2018) in their analysis provided qualitative findings that demonstrated that media coverage of conflict and its effect on society can differ based on such factors as the development of media system and availability of other information sources, level of press dependence on the political and military administrations, and the specific phase of the conflict cycle (p. 14). For instance, their research contrasted how the framing of conflict varied from Macedonia, where media were "playing-up inter-ethnic differences", to Albania, where the press had "a calming effect during the incidents" (p. 12). In addition, scholars emphasized that conflict news today is not exclusively produced by mass media, but also involves international organizations, NGOs and bloggers. Moreover, in some conflicts where media has difficulties with access (e.g. in Syria) these actors may play a decisive role in constructing the main narratives.

Kiper (2015) highlighted the difference between hate speech and propaganda, as well as studied in more detail the causation between war propaganda and war crimes. He interviewed Serbian veterans who participated in the most violent military campaigns in Vukovar, Sarajevo and Kosovo, and concluded that their motivation to engage in collective violence was not caused by news stories or political speeches published by Serbian media, but rather by their historical experience and stories heard from other soldiers. Moreover, Kiper (2015) came to the conclusion that war propaganda can spread in the opposite direction, from the combatants to the media, especially when the press has limited information about the course of events and is forced to rely on direct witnesses (e.g. soldiers). Mironko (2007) reached the same conclusion after interviewing hundreds of perpetrators of the genocide in Rwanda. Based on interviews, he concluded that there were two main groups of perpetrators - urban and rural. Whereas the former denied that they were motivated by the propaganda spread by *Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines*, the latter claimed that they rarely or never listened to it. Like Kiper, Mironko noted that

the main motivating factor that prompted perpetrators to commit the violence was stories heard from other soldiers and peer pressure.

CNN Effect. The alternative to this role of media as a propaganda tool that does not contribute to conflict resolution and rather amplifies mass violence is the theory that sympathetic news coverage of interstate conflicts can influence elite opinion and force Western governments' to intervene during humanitarian crises. This phenomenon, also known as the "CNN Effect" (it encapsulates the idea of 24/7 real-time television reporting impact on foreign policy decision-making) emerged into political, journalistic and academic debate after U.S. interventions in northern Iraq in 1991 and Somalia in 1992.

The first to acknowledge the influence of media coverage on policy formulation were Western senior officials. For instance, the New York Times (1991) writing about the first Gulf War reflected on the effect of CNN broadcasting on American public opinion, which was "intensely interested in the first real-time war in history and … just planting themselves in front of the TV." Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer (1994) criticized the U.S. decision to intervene in Somalia and Bosnia as being made on the basis of TV pictures of "the massacre at the market". Former British Foreign Secretary David Owen admitted that live TV streaming of the military operations in Sarajevo "conveys an immediacy" and had a much bigger effect on politicians that any newspaper ever had (Owen, 1996, p. 308). UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali even referred to CNN as the "sixteenth member of the Security Council", stating that media coverage of the humanitarian crises in Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia played a decisive role in UN Member states' decision to take an action (Reuters, 2002).

The 'CNN effect' theory also quickly moved into the academic arena where it caused a lively debate. On the one hand, a number of scholars undeniably supported the idea that the media had a strong influence on the decision of Western, particularly American, politicians to intervene in internal conflicts. For instance, Mandelbaum (1994) in his research stated that sympathy

was a decisive motive lying behind the U.S. administration's decision to intervene in northern Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia. According to Mandelbaum, the "televised pictures of starving people" in these countries was the factor that caused this "powerful human emotion" (p. 16). This position was supported by other scholars, such as Cohen (1994, p. 10) who argues that a "pictorial story tailor-made for television" from Somalia compelled U.S. officials into a policy of "intervention for humanitarian reasons". Moreover, despite the technological development and the increasing role of other actors, such as NGOs, some scholars still highlight the main role of TV and new media in foreign policy decision-making. In particular, Doucet (2018) comes to the conclusion that media, both traditional and new, played a pivotal role in U.S. decision-making during the crisis in Syria.

At the same time, other scholars took a more nuanced approach to the "CNN effect". In particular, Freedman (2000) studies the mass media coverage impact during the war in Kosovo and distinguished three different effects the press had on governments decision-making. By providing the example of NATO countries intervention in Kosovo, Freedman argues that the "CNN effect" is "the most pronounced when uncertainty has crept into the heart of government over the proper direction of policy" (p. 339). Besides, according to him, the "CNN effect" can be double-edged as the military intervention, especially air campaigns may "cause more suffering than it relieves" (p. 338). The two other effects which Freedman distinguished were the "bodybags effect", when the cost of the intervention, i.e. military casualties, may convince politicians to pull away, and the "bullying effect", when the excessive use of military force can "drain away public support for interventions (p. 335). In the opinion of Freedman, all three effects were reflected during the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and all of them suggest the "manipulation of images of victimhood" (p. 341).

Livingston (1997) too differentiated three different types of the "CNN effect" and, accordingly, three different impacts the media coverage can play in

foreign policy formulation. In particular, he argues that media can be an accelerant, which means that real-time media coverage of the events shortens the time for the decision-making, as "intelligence agencies now must compete with news organizations, thus speeding up their assessment" (p. 3). The second role of media is the impediment to the achievement of the desired policy goals, which both means that emotional news coverage may undermine public support for the operation, especially when it includes military casualties, as well as can present a threat to operational security by exposing specific operations. The last media role, according to Livingston, is the agenda-setting agency, which is most accurately reflects the traditional meaning of "CNN effect" and suggests that media content can prompt the government to reorder its priorities, in particular, to intervene in a humanitarian emergency. At the same time, Livingston calls for not overestimating this media effect, as "the majority of humanitarian operations are conducted without media attention", and in some cases, like in Somalia, the media coverage "followed rather than preceded official action" (pp. 7-8).

Robinson (2002) – after studying the role of news coverage in humanitarian interventions in northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda – came to the conclusion that the "CNN effect" has the biggest influence in low-cost responses to humanitarian crises, for instance, in non-coercive interventions in non-hostile environments, such as crisis in Goma in summer 1994 (p. 125). The other example he provides is the case of Bosnia where Western governments' decision to use air power was mostly prompted by media coverage of the conflict. Robinson argues, that in case of potentially costly and risky operations, such as troops deployment in Iraq and Somalia, the media influence over the governments' policy-making, or the so-called "CNN effect" is less visible. In general, according to Robinson, in all the cases he studied, media "reflected policy preferences of parts of the U.S. elite" (p. 129).

A number of scholars also generally denied the decisive effect of the media on foreign policy decisions. In particular, Mermin (1997) studied the

publication of news stories on American TV about the factional violence and famine in Somalia which preceded the U.S. intervention in the country. The study demonstrated that media coverage of the dire humanitarian situation rather followed demands for intervention in Washington. Therefore, Mermin concludes that it is not television that "has the power to move governments", but rather governments that "also have power to move the television" (p. 403) According to Mermin, the case of Somalia proves that media can play a role in decision-making only in cooperation with the political actors.

Jakobsen (1996) took a different approach and examined the role of international and domestic support, state interests, prospects of the military and political success and media influence in five post-Cold War United Nations peace enforcement operations in Kuwait, Northern Iraq, Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti. The scholar concludes that in interventions driven by state interests, as in case of Kuwait, the CNN effect plays no role, as "intervention is perceived as desirable or necessary by decision-makers" (p. 213). Moreover, according to Jakobsen's analysis, even when the enforcement operation is based on humanitarian purposes, as in other four case studies, the key determinant of the military engagement is not the CNN effect, but the perceived chances of future success.

Despite the fact that scholars differed in their views on the potential impact of the so-called "CNN effect" on humanitarian interventions and the course of conflicts in general, the discussion itself drew attention to the role that may and should be played by media in framing the both governments' and societies' perceptions of conflicts, as well as grasped the importance of the latest technological developments.

Media in a New Era: Between Conflict and Peace

The emergence of new technologies as well as social media has forced scholars to move away from a one-sided view of the press as a tool for either propaganda or influence, and apply multidisciplinary approaches to studying media

discourses in times of conflict. One of the first to reflect changes in the relationship between society, the media and authorities over the past decades were Hoskins and O'Loughlin. Based on the changes in media ecology, they developed three phases or paradigms of war and media. The basis of their concept is the process of mediatization, by which war and conflict are "reliant or dependent upon media and, consequently, have been transformed to increasingly follow media logic" (p. 1323). The first phase, or the Broadcast War, which was observed in the 1990s, can be characterized by the domination of the national and satellite television, and the Western news organizations and agencies, whose relationships with military and power structures were tightly managed. Therefore, the representation of conflicts was rather mono-directional, and the elites did not face any challenges in "planning, waging, and representing war" (p. 1325). The second phase, or the Diffused War, which started in the 2000s, is marked by the increase in the role of digital content and, consequently, the loss of mainstream media monopoly on the representation of conflicts. According to Hoskins and O'Loughlin, a new media ecology was formed and could be characterized by the fragmentation of news providers and intense competition for the provision of news (p. 1325). As a result of such unprecedented chaos and flux, the policy-makers faced "a greater uncertainty in conduct of war" (p. 1322). The distinctive feature of the most recent phase, or the Arrested War, is the convergence and intersection of the mainstream media and social media logics. Based on the analysis of the British military's use of media in Afghanistan war and the news coverage of the conflict in Ukraine, Hoskins and O'Loughlin conclude that mainstream media has adapted to the "chaotic social media dynamics" and flux of the second phase and re-asserted their role as "primary channel of the world's affairs" and entered "into closer relationships" with policy-makers and militaries which "made war more controllable by those fighting it" (p. 1323). At the same time, Hoskins and O'Loughlin note that appropriation of digital content by news agencies has widened the understanding of the mainstream media which, in turn, led to the

"imaginary of the always-provisional and heterogeneously constructed nature of both news and information" (p. 1333).

While Hoskins and O'Loughlin focused on the way the digital age rewrote the traditional roles of journalism and how it affected the relationships between authorities, military and media and, consequently, the representation of conflicts, several scholars turn attention to journalists as active agents or actors in conflicts and the role they can play in conflict prevention, management, or reconciliation.

In particular, Bell (1998), the war reporter for the BBC who covered the Bosnian war, criticized Western mainstream conflict reporting, which is considered to be dispassionate, objective and in line with "good taste" and called for an alternative "journalism of attachment". According to Bell, in the age of satellite television, when conflicts are "transmitted almost live", journalists can play the role of "third non-combatant force" and actually change the way wars are waged, and, for instance, prevent some major escalations or atrocities (p. 105). At the same time, Bell argued that journalists with such potential power cannot neglect it by presenting only dry facts and figures, using the arguments of objectivity and impartiality as a cover, and "stand neutrally between good and evil" (p. 103). In Bell's opinion, traditional conflict reporting should be replaced by principled journalism that "cares as much as knows" and get "the feelings right as well as the facts" (p. 103).

Whereas Bell calls journalists to portray war as they find it, without self-censorship, Galtung (2003) insists that it is not enough for the war reporter only to be truthful. According to Galtung, there are two main competing frames in news coverage of conflict - peace journalism and war journalism. Galtung notes that the latter represents the dominant style of war reporting during the last decades and is dictated by authorities, namely ministries of defence and foreign affairs. The main feature of war or conflict journalism is its conformity to military logic and focus on the combat aspects of war. Therefore, journalists that use this frame mainly provide facts and images describing the numbers of

military and civilian casualties, damages to infrastructure, as well as the course of negotiations. Furthermore, war journalists tend to concentrate on elites rather than ordinary people suffering from the fighting, as well as to play off "us" against "them", where "they" are always dehumanized and portrayed as the main source of the problem and evil-doers (p. 178). At the same time, peace journalism which is more uncommon is the first and utmost solution- and people-oriented. According to Galtung, journalists that use this frame are mostly focused on the humanitarian impacts of war; they do not blame one specific party to the conflict but analyse and expose all the untruths and give voice to all sides (p. 178). Moreover, rather than reacting to the spike in violence, such journalists explore the deep structural root causes of violent conflict and are primarily focused on perspectives for peaceful resolution and reconciliation. Galtung emphasizes that peace journalism helps to de-escalate the situation and bring the parties, as well as the population that they represent, closer to the solution of the conflict, in contrast to war journalism, which assigns blame and is focused only on the military victory of "our" side. In his opinion, these two frames are opposing each other, and while war journalism reflects the traditional media approach to war reporting, peace journalism represents a shift in paradigm. It is also worth noting that Galtung draws the parallel between his concept of peace journalism and Bell's "journalism of attachment" indicating that they both "stand for truth" and turn attention to "all actual and potential victims" (p. 179).

It is worth remarking that even though the concepts of both Bell and Galtung made a significant contribution to analysing the role of media in the framing of conflicts and were repeatedly used in empirical studies, they were criticized also by several academics as ones that are rather unbalanced, naïve, and do not reflect reality. For instance, Ward (1998) argues that Bell's understanding of objective and neutral war reporting as that which demands "the absence of judgement or feeling" is rather narrow (p. 122). He highlights that in the era of live-streaming from war zones it is not necessary for war reporters to

express their feelings regarding the genocide or oppression, as the images can "speak for themselves" (p. 124). At the same time, when applied by unprofessional media the "journalism of attachment" can become more unethical and put forward not so much moral principles as personal biases (p. 124). Equally, Galtung's concept of "peace journalism" was criticised by Hanitzsch (2007) as impractical and ignoring many of the nuances and structural constraints in media work. In particular, he notes that portraying mainstream war reporting as "war journalism" is rather simplistic and too generalised, as different types of media outlets have different approaches, and some of them, such as public broadcasting or documentaries implement values of so-called "peace journalism" more than others (e.g. yellow press). Moreover, according to Hanitzsch, Galtung underestimates the role of the audience which is quite fragmented, and its expectations and demands, as well as overestimating the role of media and its influence on political leaders and decision makers. Finally, Hanitzsch argues that when Galtung expects media to change public discourse and deconstruct the conflict frame, he ignores that most journalists are limited in time, resources and space, as well as the fact that they have to compete for public attention and follow the economic imperatives of the media industry.

In general, even though the aforementioned concepts moved away from the traditional binary thinking of media as either an instrument in the hands of decision-makers or an actor able to change the course of events, particularly during an armed conflict, they still could not cover the large-scale changes that took place during the last decades both in the nature of conflict itself and in the media industry. Gilboa (2007, 2009) came closer to reducing the existing gaps in research and integrated theories from both international relations and communications studies and developed the multidisciplinary and multidimensional framework for the analysis of the media's role in framing conflicts. First of all, Gilboa (2009) analysed the trends in violent conflicts that had been developing during the last decades and argued that the role of media in conflict framing should be reassessed as the low-intensity conflicts that were

prevailing in the modern era envisaged, in particular, the use of information warfare, as well as pursue not so much military as political goals, which, on the one hand, give the press more opportunities for influence, and on the other, "present different challenges" (p. 92). The scholar also suggested that the analysis of media narratives in conflicts should distinguish between different types of media, such as local, national, regional, international and global, as all of them have different resources, interests, and approaches to war reporting, and, consequently, different impacts on the conflict resolution process. Besides, Gilboa analysed the ways five main media functions (i.e. new coverage, interpretation, cultural transmission, entertainment and mobilization) that can be manifested in conflict reporting and came to the conclusion that each of them could occur as either functional or dysfunctional during different conflict phases - onset, escalation, de-escalation and termination (p. 93). Thus, Gilboa suggested that in order to examine and interpret positive or negative contributions of media to conflict resolution processes it is necessary to apply the analysis at least to three different dimensions - the type of media, the type of conflict and the phase of the conflict. Such a multidimensional approach allows for the tailoring of research to the specific conflict scenario, as well as taking into account the multiple roles traditional and new media can play in quickly shifting conditions. In particular, the developed framework can be applied to compare the impacts that different types of media (i.e. international and local) play during specific conflict stages, or the way specific media's coverage changes as conflict unfolds.

Notwithstanding the fact that each of the above concepts has been in one way or another applied in the numerous empirical studies on the role of media in the coverage of conflicts, none of them can be considered dominant, and academic debates are still ongoing. The lack of consensus epitomizes the complexity and heterogeneity of conflicts, as well as the multi-level nature of contemporary media environments - the economic, social and geopolitical contexts in which wars occur are diverse, the different stages of conflicts and

levels of violence envisage different objectives and challenges, the media landscape are affected by the emergence of new media and news-gathering technology, and are rather fragmented, as well as the audiences. All these developments complicate comparative research of the media's role in conflicts across time and in different kinds of societies. At the same time, there is consensus in academia that the media has an undeniable power to set agendas and define or frame the meaning of security issues. Besides, there is a growing understanding of the importance of local and national media and the potential impact they can have while covering the conflicts on the ground. The future research of local media-power institutions-audience dynamics can enrich the academic debate on the media roles in conflict resolution and move it beyond the prevailing communications models based on the Western journalistic approaches to conflict reporting.

Taking into account all the previous research in this area and the above-mentioned concepts, and, most of all, the framework developed by Gilboa, this study intends to analyse how media narratives have been over a long period, during which one single conflict has passed several phases - from its outbreak to de-escalation. In this case, the objective is to study, first and foremost, the role of national media, which is often underestimated or even ignored by scholars. This is especially important when analysing the law-intensity conflicts, which often do not receive due attention not only from the international media, but also from the academic community. Another distinguishing feature of this study is that the main media frames present in the national online media will not be generated by the qualitative analysis, which has been dominating this area of research for years, but by the quantitative content analysis, which allows to define latent narratives that are not obvious at first sight, as well as to avoid the most common biases.

Research Objectives

Research Objectives

The proposed research will examine the role of national (Internet) media in framing or reinforcing citizens' perceptions about the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The research has the following objectives:

- To compare media narratives in pre-conflict (March 2014), conflict escalation (August 2014) and conflict de-escalation phases (February 2019);
- To analyze news coverage and mobilization functions and dysfunctions of the national media during the above-mentioned periods;
- To examine if the media's role and its positive and negative contributions, in general, were different during each specific conflict phase;
- To analyze if there are any traceable trends in the development of media narratives over the mentioned periods of time;
- To understand if the media contributes to the dialogue between the warring parties or, vice versa, builds new barriers in society and deepens the internal contradictions generated by the conflict;
- To explore in what way, the media can shift public opinion and perceptions.

This paper aims to expand the existing research of the media's role in conflict management and resolution, its escalation and de-escalation, and, in particular, to analyze the direct and indirect effects which local and national media has for the evolution of the conflict, as well as explore if and in what way these effects differ during the different conflict phases. The main purpose of the study is to encourage more constructive and de-escalating coverage of the

conflict itself, as well as conflict-sensitive issues that would potentially contribute to the reconciliation process.

The Scope of Research

As the paper is focused on the specific asymmetrical conflict which unfolded in the certain geopolitical and social conditions, it does not aim to provide the general framework for the research of media's impact in conflicts. Also, the study focuses mainly on the news media framing and does not examine the potential role of the elites, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, opinion formers and other political communicators in the interpretations of different conflict aspects, as well as it does not analyse the media-government-military nexus. Besides, although all the data will be carefully collected and analysed, there will be some unavoidable limitations originating from the research design. First of all, even though the media frames will be derived inductively and coded in the automatic content analysis, which is generally considered more objective, it does not completely eliminate the risk of bias since all the word co-occurrence clusters (frames) will still have to be interpreted by the researcher. Besides, the research does not aim to determine any causal relationships between the media frames and the conflict developments as it would require consideration and analysis of many other influential geopolitical, political, socio-cultural and economic factors. It also will not analyse the impact that the media frames had on the perceptions of Ukrainian populations, as such an analysis is not feasible because of the resources and time constraints.

Methodology

Framing

Frame analysis or framing, which traces its roots back to linguistics and sociology, has been gaining its authority and actively applied in media studies and communication research during the last decades. Despite the fact that this approach is increasingly used to detect manipulation of public opinion in the media, there is no common consensus and common definition of framing.

Goffman (1974) was the first to draw attention to the fact that the reaction of individuals to a certain event is determined by the frameworks of its interpretation (primary framework). According to the researcher, frames "help audiences locate, perceive, identify, and label the flow of information around them" (p. 21). The concept was then developed by Tuchman (1976) who argued that reporters "do more than make an event public" by using specific news frame, but "they define what an event is and which amorphous happenings are part of the event" (p. 94). Therefore, "news stories offer definitions of social reality" (p. 94).

In the 1990s, frame analysis got a powerful impetus to development after Entman (1993) its definition and methodology. In particular, he defined the main elements of framing, namely the selection and salience. According to Entman, to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). He also distinguished four main functions that frames perform, which is defining problems, diagnosing the causes, making moral judgments and suggesting remedies. Besides, one of the major Entman's contributions to the development of frame analysis methodology was the identifications of a key role of certain words, sources of information, images and phrases. His summary of the essence of the framing processes and

clarification of how the frames work has become one of the most cited works on the subject and provided an impetus to the new wave of news media frames research.

Methodological Approaches to Frame Analysis

Although the communication researches during the last several decades have been applying a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, manual and computer-assisted, in general, we can divide the methodological approaches to the frame analysis into deductive and inductive.

The deductive approach involves preliminary empirical and theoretical analysis and knowledge on the basis of which the researcher identifies a set of frames, develop the code schemes or codebook, which are applied to the texts. One of the most well-known illustrations of the application of this approach is the research of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who developed Neuman, Just and Crigler's study (1992) and generated five common frames which are used by media: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. Such frames are general and, according to researchers, can be traced in any news, article or media report regardless of their topic. The other example of the general frames, which have been utilized by many scholars in their researches of media coverage, is the Iyengar's (1991) distinction between thematic and episodic frames. In addition, many scholars developed the coding schemes for specific topics. For instance, Carpenter (2007) while comparing the U.S. elite and non-elite newspapers' portrayal of Iraq war determined seven frames (the military conflict, anti-war, violence of war, diagnostic, human interest, self-referential, responsibility) that can be used by other researches to analyse the conflict reporting. Political communication researches Boydstun and Glazier (2013) suggested applying both issue-specific frames and the generalizable ones (self/other referential and gain/loss). In their opinion, it will

help to more clearly follow the trends in the media coverage of certain events over a long period of time.

In spite of the fact that in general, the deductive approach allows analysing the media frames systematically and in particular to take into account the context in which the texts were written, it has a number of shortcomings. In particular, there is a great risk that a researcher's bias may occur when defining an initial set of frames. Moreover, such an approach is not always flexible and can be missing some latent or newly-emerging frames (Touri and Koteyko, 2015). In addition, it can also be quite a resource and time-consuming since the development of the coding schemes presupposes the existence of a team of trained coders.

The inductive approach envisages the analysis of certain properties of the text sample and the corresponding generalization of possible categories (frames). Miller's frame mapping has become one of the first system inductive methods in the media frames' analysis. The method relies on computerized algorithms to find keywords that occur together in texts and "used exclusively by one or another stakeholder… to articulate their frames" (Miller, 1997, p.368). Other commonly used inductive approaches which can also be distinguished are linguistic approach, when the data matrix is constructed specifically for each text based on its elements; hermeneutic approach which suggests the extraction and deconstruction of media frames from the texts and linking them up with the broader cultural context; and manual holistic approach based on the qualitative manual content analysis of the sample of news texts and generation of the media frames which are then tested on a larger datasets and refined (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). Despite the fact that the qualitative content analysis remains fairly widespread in media framing analyses, the development of the software has given rise to the emergence of new quantitative automated methods. Grimmer and Stewart (2013) broadly divide them into those classifying texts into the categories and scaling political actors into policy space (p. 294).

The greatest strength of the inductive approach is that it creates significantly less risk for manifestations of researches' biases, and also makes it possible to identify the frames that are invisible from the first glance. In addition, in particular, automated methods allow for a systematic analysis of rather big datasets and, for example, to follow the trends in the application of the media frames over a long period of time. The biggest weakness of this approach, according to scholars, is the inability to place the specific context in a framing analysis (Touri and Koteyko, 2015).

Taking into account the research objectives, namely the identification of trends in media coverage of the conflict over a long period of time, as well as the limited time frame, this study applies the inductive automatic content analysis.

The automated content analysis will be used to explore the Ukrainian news media frameworks during three specific conflict phases. In order to avoid too specific frameworks and to be able to follow trends in media coverage of the conflict over a long period of time, a combination of two automated clustering approaches will be applied (Van der Meer et al., 2018).

The new stories will be downloaded and converted into the text files. The textual data then will be imported into open-source R statistical software. Then such pre-processing techniques, as lowercasing, stemming and removing punctuation and stop words will be applied. The following step will be to convert the processed term into the document-term matrix, or a data frame which represents the frequency of each word for each document in the dataset (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). The matrix is then used as an input for the latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) algorithm analysis, which is one of the most frequently used in the text mining, and assumes that each text is a "mixture of topics" (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013, p. 284). The output of the LDA analysis, which will be performed using R statistical software, will be the most frequent combination of words which can be interpreted as topics or frames. Besides, each text in the dataset will automatically get the score for each frame (Van der

Meer, 2016). These scores will be used as an input for the following k-means cluster analysis which will allow generating more generalizable frames in order to track the trends in media coverage of conflict over the five-year period. As a result of k-means cluster analysis, each document will be assigned to the cluster (which represent the combination of topics or the text frames) which center is the closest. Each cluster will be also labelled based on the words that formed the frame (Van der Meer et al., 2018).

The multistep automated content analysis will be conducted separately for every three one-week periods. The topics that form each cluster, as well as the articles assigned to them, will then be analyzed and interpreted by the researcher.

Sample and Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the new story published on the three national mainstream online websites ("Fakty", "Korrespondent", "Obozrevatel") during the three weekly periods in March 2014 (conflict prevention phase), August 2014 (conflict escalation phase) and February 2019 (conflict de-escalation phase). The choice of Internet media as a source of analysis can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, during the last years, the level of Ukrainian use of the Internet, the level of the online media consumption, as well as the trust in them has increased significantly in Ukraine. For example, according to a recent study conducted by Internews-Ukraine (2018), 92% of Ukrainians used online news websites as sources of information about the events in the country in 2018, while only 58% read newspapers for the same purpose.

Despite the fact that television is still the most popular means of mass media in every region of Ukraine (Internews, 2018), there are a number of factors that complicate the analysis of TV content in the framework of this study. First of all, main Ukrainian TV channels are not profitable and depend on sponsors and owners; so the latter enjoy very strong influence on the editorial

policy. For instance, four key national TV channels belong to oligarch groups and are used as political and economic levers (Detector Media, 2017). Thus, the way these TV channels cover the unfolding events and, in particular, the conflict in the eastern part of the country depends to a large extent on the position of the oligarchic group they represent. In addition, two of the key national TV channels ("Inter" and "Ukraine") broadcast in Russian, while others in Ukrainian, which also significantly complicates the systematic content analysis. And finally, another key factor is that the population living in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions does not have access to most of the national Ukrainian TV channels since their broadcast was stopped by the self-proclaimed authorities. Therefore, frames used by the national Ukrainian TV channels when covering the conflict are not followed by 2-3 millions of Ukrainians and does not have an implication for their understanding and evaluation of the unfolding events.

Unlike television channels, most Ukrainian Internet media do not belong to oligarchic structures, they publish information simultaneously in Ukrainian and Russian languages and are accessible to the population living behind the contact line.

Despite the fact that compared to printed newspapers and magazines, online media tend to have a shorter life cycle, the news websites selected for analysis are over 10 years old and have been in great demand with the Ukrainian population. In particular, over the past 5 years, during which the conflict continues, they, according to research, were among the 7 most popular national online media (Internews, 2018).

As it is rather unlikely that the readers are familiar with the analysed media outlets, I will provide a brief description.

Background Information about Media Outlets

"Obozrevatel" is a Ukrainian online media outlet of socio-political orientation, created in 2001. According to the Ukrainian Internet Association monthly researches, during the last five years, its audience coverage ranged from 15% to 20% on average. Most of the articles posted on the website are of a political, social or economic nature. In addition to news and editorial articles, the website also publishes a series of opinion pieces and commentaries written by independent journalists, politicians and decision-makers. In 2010 the website combined a number of resources that previously worked separately, which increased the amount of entertainment content. One of the peculiarities of this online media outlet, which is reflected in the headlines, in particular, is the tendency towards sensationalism. Notwithstanding the fact that the website was repeatedly featured among the leaders in the publication of pre-paid commercial materials, the overall content is fairly balanced and does not reflect the positions of a particular political or business group (Institute of Mass Information, 2019).

"Korrespondent" was launched in 2000. It belongs to the United Media Holding Group which also owns the financial magazine of the same name. Financial and political news, as well as articles and interviews published in the magazine, comprise the main part of the website content. The online media is widely read by business people, politicians and other decision-makers. According to the Ukrainian Internet Association monthly researches, during the last five years, its audience coverage ranged from 8% to 14% on average. According to the recent research of the Institute of Mass Information (2019), most of the news stories published on the website are balanced, written without violating professional journalistic standards, and do not reflect the interests of individual business or political actors.

"Fakty" is the website of the "Fact and Comments" newspaper which has been one of the most popular print media in Ukraine during the last two decades. The website has an updated round-the-clock news feed as well as a number of sections such as "World", "Health", "Society", where readers can find comments, interviews and opinion editorials published in the newspaper. In

2014-2019 the website' readership ranged from 7% to 10% of the Ukrainian population (Ukrainian Internet Association). Since the website and newspaper pays great attention to different social issues, it is mostly aimed at the middle-class population. The online media was recognized by the experts like the one providing information in a balanced way and adhering to journalistic standards (Institute of Mass Information, 2019).

Data

The news stories were collected from three different conflict phases - conflict prevention phase (March 2014), conflict escalation phase (August 2014) and conflict de-escalation phase (February 2019). Periods were selected in accordance with the analytical framework developed by Gilboa (2009) as the ones representing the most important milestones in the development of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. In particular, in March 2014, anti-government protests in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast began, during which a number of administrative buildings were seized into Luhansk and Donetsk. In August 2014, an anti-terrorist operation, launched on April 13 in the eastern part of the country (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014), reached the largest escalation and turned into full-scale hostilities. February 2019 represents the phase of conflict de-escalation when the level of violence was reduced to a relatively tolerant level, but a stable ceasefire and, moreover, a positive peace has not yet been achieved.

The one-week sample was extracted from each of the abovementioned periods. In the analysis of the daily news media, the one-week sample is considered to be efficient and representative of the six-month period (Riffe, Figo, and Lacy, 2005).

The articles including news stories, reports, editorials and opinion pieces were retrieved from the archive pages of each website. All articles that mentioned "Donbas" (the general name of the area in which the hostilities take

place), "war", "conflict" and "anti-terrorist operation" (this term is relevant only for the second and third periods). The selected texts were scanned to ascertain their topic.

2. Media representation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine

a) *Media narratives in the pre-conflict period*

The first period that was selected for analysis is March 24-30, 2014. In general, this period can be characterized as the one that immediately preceded the unfolding of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. There are several reasons why this week has been chosen for analysis. On the one hand, the commotion in the Ukrainian media, related to the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the illegal referendum on the peninsula, has already diminished (BBC, 2014). Thus, the risk of a distorted image of reality due to the concentration on the events mentioned above and lack of interest in all other topics in the Ukrainian press was avoided. On the other hand, at this moment the violent protests with the consequent seizure of the administrative buildings have already been actively developing in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, wherein less than two weeks an anti-terrorist operation will be launched against supporters of separatism (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014).

All the news stories, as well as reports, op-eds and interviews related to the events unfolding in eastern Ukraine and published during 24-30 March in three most popular Ukrainian online media outlets were collected and imported into open-source R statistical software. After the text data was pre-processed (not only the punctuation, numbers and general stop words, such as "he", "she", "be", "and" were removed, but also the developed customized list of words that are often used and do not have any substantial meaning, such as "media", "press", "source", "briefing", "news", most common first names, etc.). Then the

latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) algorithm analysis was conducted to distinguish 20 specific frames that were dominant in these three online media during the above-mentioned period.

Further, the received data was used as an input for the k-means clustering analysis to obtain 6 more generic frames (see Table 1a) which can be potentially compared over different time periods. In order to determine the optimal number of clusters that represented different media frames the Elbow method was used (see Table 1b). In particular, this method defines the number of clusters for which the total intra-cluster variation is minimized (Bertin and Atanassova, 2017).

It is worth noting that the period overall is characterized by a rather low level of media interest in the events that have been unfolding in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine. Thus, in general, the share of news and other materials related to these regions is 6.5 %. Among the three media outlets "Fakty" paid the greatest attention to the emerging conflict in eastern Ukraine and dedicated 10,6% of its content to the related topics. However, this indicator does not significantly affect the overall picture, as this media traditionally produces the least news stories.
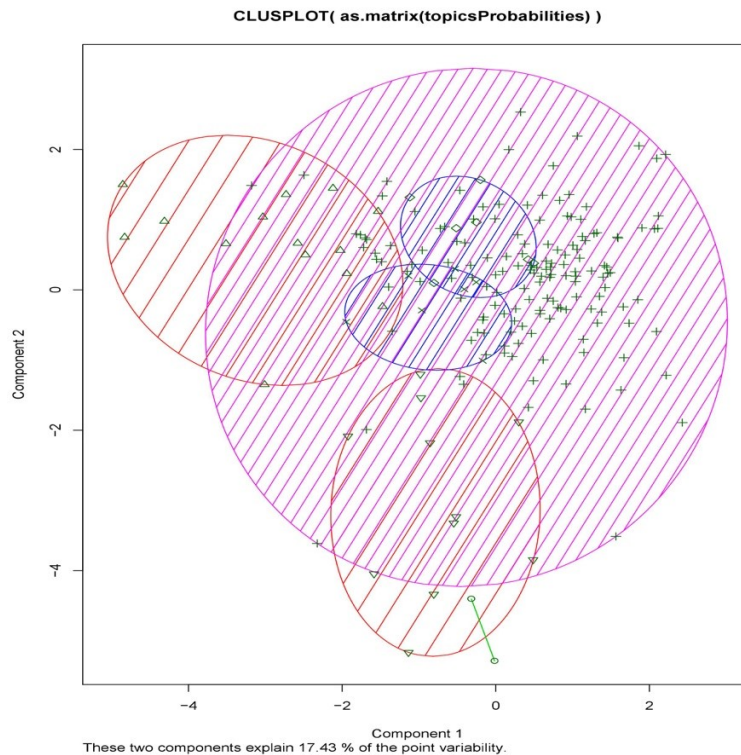
CLUSPLOT(as.matrix(topicsProbabilities))

Component 2

Component 1
These two components explain 17.43 % of the point variability.

Table 1a. Six main media frames (clusters)

Even though "Fakty", "Korrespondent" and "Obozrevatel" have different content styles and target audiences, no significant differences in their representation of the unfolding conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk region were revealed during this period, as all six media frames were evenly distributed between the three media outlets.

By contrast, the distribution of the news stories between the six clusters (or media frames) was uneven, with 78% of them representing the dominant one. Based on these analysis findings, it can be argued that the unfolding conflict was predominantly covered in the context of external threats and influences. Thus, the corresponding dominant cluster, which includes 152 of the 194 relevant news stories discovered during this period, is formed by two subtopics which can be broadly named as: (1) "movements of the Russian forces" and (2) "military hardware" consisting of such words, as "Russian",

"army", "according to the data", "located" "division unit", "intelligence", "area", "exercises", "unit of equipment".
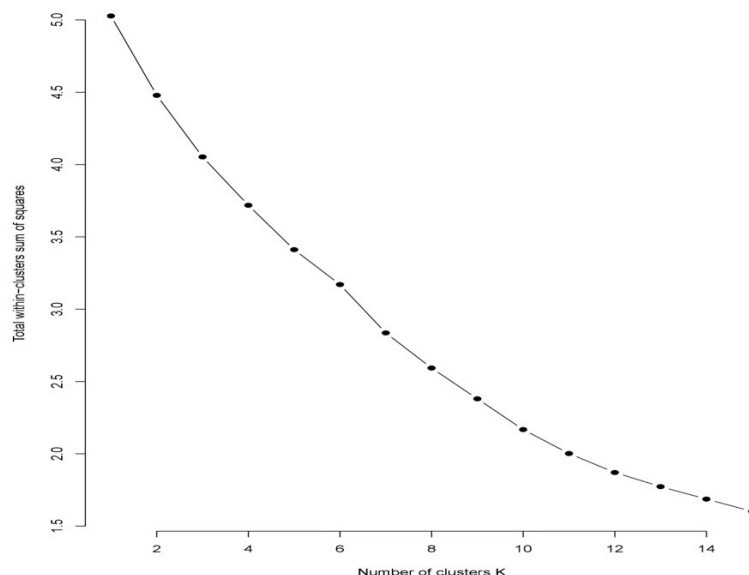

Table 1b. Optimal number of clusters (determined by Elbow method)

If we look at the news stories which K-means algorithm identified as those representing this cluster (or media frame) and choose some of them we can see, for instance, the report published on "Fakty" website on 24th of March which cites the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Andriy Parubiy, as well as the military expert Dmytro Tymchuk who inform about "almost hundred thousands of (Russian) troops" which are "concentrated not far from Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk regions" and "have been on alert for several weeks", as well as present the testimony of local residents who "saw two (Russian) echelons with tanks" not far from the Ukrainian border (Fakty.ua, 2014). Another example is the editorial published on the "Obozrevatel" website on March 27, 2014, referring to information from the group of activists and analysts, "Information Resistance," as well as reports from the American intelligence about "the concentration of Russian troops in

the Kursk and Bryansk oblasts" and "hidden military mobilization in the Russian Federation since the end of February" which, according to authors, implies "a high risk of Russia's invasion of mainland Ukraine with a major attack on Lugansk and Donetsk", and also analyzes possible options for Ukrainian government action under this developments (Obozrevatel, 2014).

The second most common cluster includes 7.2% of news stories and can be described as "Ukrainian government capabilities and policy". The cluster is formed by such words as "police", "doing", "regions", "protecting", "buildings". If we analyse the news that was identified by the K-means algorithm as the ones belonging to this cluster, we can note that all of them are focused on the actions of Ukrainian law enforcement and judicial officials, aimed at preventing the spread of ideas of separatism and punishing those who participated in separatist rallies in eastern Ukraine. For instance, the news story published on the "Fakty" website on March 25, 2014 quoted the governor of Luhansk oblast Mikhail Bolotskyi, who reported on the success of the detention of sabotage groups that planned protests in the region, and also indicated that "the socio-political situation in the region was stabilized … all protests passed calmly ", and "enterprises worked in a regular mode" (Fakty.ua, 2014). Other news related to this cluster inform about the institution of criminal proceedings and sentences handed down by the courts to those who took an active part in unauthorized rallies near administrative buildings in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (Korrespondent.net, 2014). It is worth noting that this cluster does not contain any analytical materials or author's columns, and consists, in general, of short and factual news, with reference mainly to official agencies and without providing the opinions of experts or other third parties.

The next cluster is represented by 5.6% of the news stories and can be defined as "West's reaction to the Ukraine crisis". It consists of two subgroups, namely "shift in EU-Russia relations" (formed by words "EU", "West", "cold", "war", "Russian") and "impact of EU sanctions (e.g. "Europe", "sanctions", "companies", "Moscow"). An analysis of the documents assigned by the

algorithm to this cluster indicates that, unlike the previous one, it includes a large part of the analytical articles and reports that make reference to several sources and provide the expert opinion. Thus, in particular, the editorial, published on March 25, 2014 on the "Korrespondent" website, based on the data from credit rating agencies, and the experts' view analyses the scale of capital outflow from Russia as a result of EU and US sanctions, and also predicts possible steps of Western countries in the case of a potential military offensive of the Kremlin (Korrespondent.net, 2014). At the same time, the analytical report on the "Fakty" website reveals the details of the suspension of the issuance of US licenses for the export and re-export of military goods to Russia, and also assess the possible consequences of such a step for the Russian economy in the future (Fakty.ua, 2014).

It is rather remarkable that the cluster, which in general can be defined as "political negotiations between Ukraine and Russia" (formed by words "MFA" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), "foreign", "Hague", "Lavrov" (Russian minister of foreign affairs)), is one of the smallest and includes only 3.6% of relevant materials for this period. The cluster mostly consists of short news stories and can be structurally divided into two subgroups. The first concerns the comments of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on the need for a meeting with the Russian side and the "explosive situation in the east of the country", which arose as a result of "the position of the presidential administration of Russia and personally President Putin." (Obozrevatel, 2014). The second contains comments by the Ukrainian and Russian ministers on the progress of the negotiations and the results of the meeting in The Hague, in particular, the agreement to resolve the crisis in the east of the country by peaceful means (Korrespondent.net, 2014). Most of the news appearing in this cluster contain a minimal number of quotes by the Russian Foreign Ministry officials, whose position is largely transmitted by the words of the Ukrainian minister Andrii Deshchitsia. In general, the content of this cluster, despite the fact that it focuses not on military aspects but on political negotiations, is rather close to the first

one and complements the general conclusion that the situation in the east of the country prior to the conflict was predominantly portrayed by the Ukrainian national media in the context of intentions and threats coming from Russian Federation.

It is noticeable that the last two clusters, which are represented by the smallest number of the collected news articles, reflect the internal political and social processes in the context of the conflict that has been unfolding in the east of Ukraine. Thus, in particular, the fifth cluster, which includes 3.5% of news stories, can be conventionally referred to as "the mobilization of Ukrainian society and the army" (formed by words "Ministry of Defence", "service", "hryvnias" (Ukrainian currency), "state"). The cluster can also be divided into two subgroups, where the first one is represented by short news about partial mobilization to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as the decision of the Ministry of Defence to increase the financing of the army and carry out extraordinary military exercises (Korrespondent.net, 2014). The second subgroup contains more long-form pieces on the mobilization of Ukrainian society, the development of volunteering, charitable events and the collection of funds and other assistance in support of the Ukrainian Army. It should be noted that while the news in the first subgroup is evenly distributed among all three online media, the second subgroup mainly includes interviews and reports published on the "Fakty" website, which can generally be explained by the specific character of this media outlet, namely its focus on social issues.

The most noticeable observation of the content analysis of the Ukrainian national online media coverage during this pre-conflict period is that the cluster (or media frame), which reflects the essence of the unfolding conflict, and, in particular, reflects the events that at that time were taking place in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and the demands of those participating in the rallies, is the smallest one and contains only 2 % of relevant news stories. The cluster can be labelled as "demonstrations and destabilization in Eastern Ukraine" (formed by words "rally", "federalization", "separatist", "squares", "referendum"). The

qualitative analysis of the four news articles that represent this media frame demonstrates that two of them are short news stories, the first of which reports about the plan of pro-Russian and separatist groups and parties to hold a protest in Donetsk, and the other quotes the head of the Donetsk regional administration, who demands from the Government of Ukraine to hold a referendum in the region on a number of issues, in particular, the status of the Russian language and allocation of taxes (Korrespondent.net, 2014). Two more news articles included in the cluster are more detailed reports on rallies held in the eastern regions of Ukraine, their main participants, their actions, as well as their main statements and demands (Obozrevatel, 2014). None of the above-mentioned news stories contain comments from representatives of Ukrainian authorities, civil society or experts, as well as an analysis of possible further actions or risks.

b) Media coverage during the conflict escalation phase

The second period chosen for analysis can be defined as the period of the greatest escalation of the conflict in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Despite the fact that an anti-terrorist operation in the region lasted for almost four months at that moment and a major offensive by the Ukrainian army during which the government of Ukraine gained back control over a number of important cities (such as Lysychansk, Mariupol, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk) during June and July, there are a number of reasons why August 4-10, 2014 is selected for content analysis (BBC, 2017). First of all, at the beginning of the active hostilities the Ukrainian media in general had very limited information about what was happening in the eastern part of the country, as well as the ability to send correspondents in order to inform about the main developments themselves from the combat zone, since both regions were almost completely controlled by the separatist forces, who were ordered to deny admission for the Ukrainian

media. In addition, on July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777-200 was shot down near Donetsk, which, predictably, relished the attention of not only Ukrainian but also world media. At the same time, during the analysed period, the overall media strong focus on the investigation of the causes of the Malaysian Airlines plane crash has declined. Meanwhile, active hostilities in the area had resumed and subsequently led to a series of serious defeats of the Ukrainian Army and the signing of the first package of peace agreements in Minsk (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014).

The first general observation is the noticeable increase in the number of news stories that were covering the events in eastern Ukraine. In general, among all the news, editorials, reports and op-eds published during this period on three websites, 39.3% were focused on one or another aspect of the conflict. In percentage terms, the "Fakty" website contained the largest share of news articles, namely 58%, to the conflict in Donbass, the proportion of the conflict-related news on the "Obozrevatel" website was the smallest – less than a third of a total number (28,2%), whereas the "Korrespondent" website focused the attention on the developments in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 34.6% of published news stories. Another substantial difference is a significant decrease in the percentage of analytical articles compared to the first period. While during the pre-conflict period reports, op-eds and interviews accounted for 14.4% of the total number of conflict-related news stories, then during the period of escalation of the conflict their share decreased to 7.8%. One more difference compared with the previous period of the analysis is that the revealed media frames are unevenly distributed between the three websites. At the same time, the biggest common feature is that one cluster is dominating over all the others and is represented by more than 50% of collected news articles.
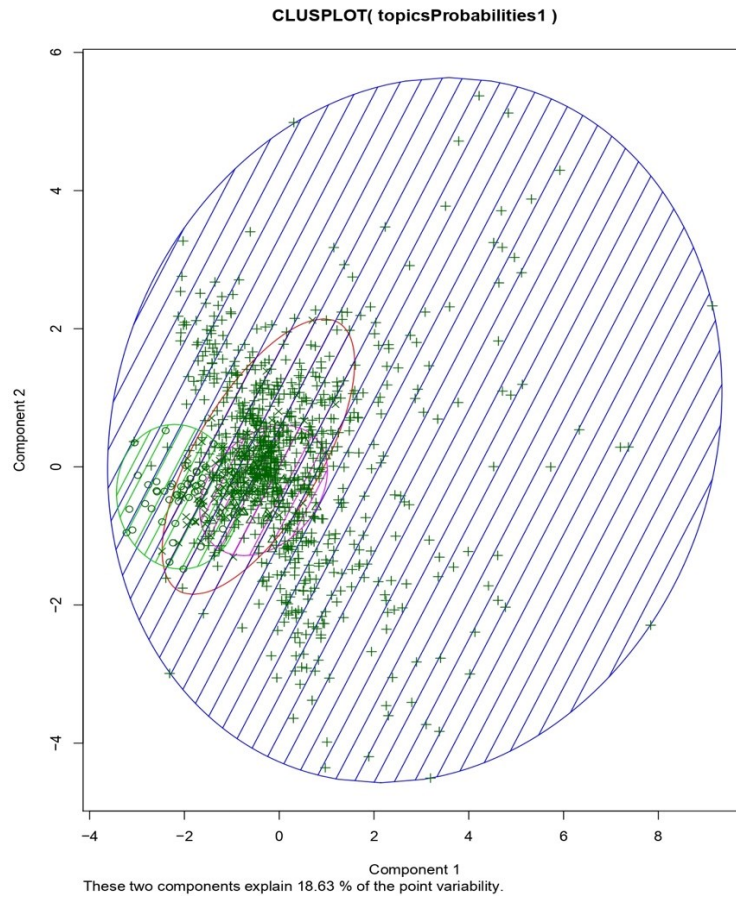
CLUSPLOT(topicsProbabilities1)

Table 2a. Four main media frames (clusters)

In total, during this period, four main media frames were identified (see Table 2a). First, 1015 conflict-related news articles published on three websites were imported into the open-source R statistical software and divided by the latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) algorithm into 20 specific topics formed by words combinations. Then, using the K-means algorithm, 4 general clusters were identified, and each article was assigned to one of them. In this case, 4 clusters (which can be interpreted as media frames) were determined as an optimal number by the "Elbow" clustering validation method (see Table 2b).
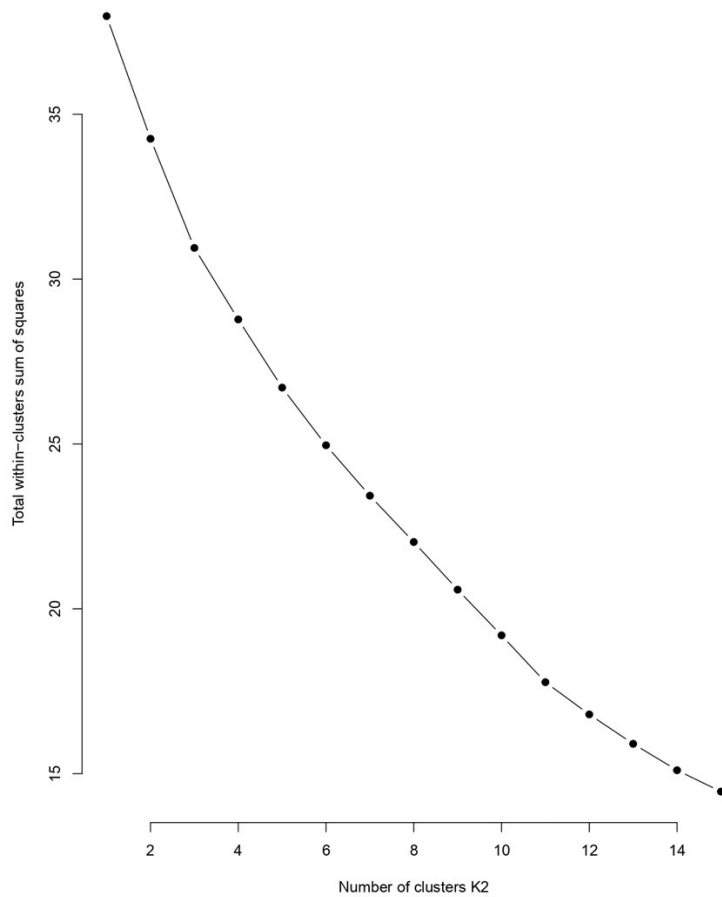
Table 2b. Optimal number of clusters (determined by Elbow method)

The first general conclusion of the analysis of four distinguished media frames is that Ukrainian online media covered the events in the eastern part of the country during the escalation of the conflict, primarily in the context of its humanitarian consequences, in particular military and civilian casualties and infrastructure destruction in the region. For instance, the largest cluster which includes 83,4% of all conflict-related news stories over this period can be generally labelled as a "humanitarian situation in the conflict zone". The cluster can be divided into two subgroups – "consequences of armed conflict on civilians and civilian infrastructure" (formed by words "citizens", "suffer", "buildings", "shelling", "areas") and "humanitarian response" (formed by

words "UN", "humanitarian", "aid", "red cross", "organizations"). If we analyse the distribution of the news stories assigned to this media frame by the algorithm among the three online media, then the smallest share was published on the "Fakty" website, in particular about 20%, while "Obozrevatel" and "Korrespondent" posted about 40% each. In percentage terms, the "Korrespondent" demonstrated the biggest share with 82% of all conflict-related news stories during this period dedicated to the "humanitarian situation" topics, followed by "Fakty" (73.5%) and "Obozrevatel" (72%). A qualitative analysis of the documents belonging to this cluster indicates that the absolute majority of them are short news reports. The key sources of information are the representatives of city administrations or other administrative bodies in the Donetsk and Luhansk region, as well as the press service of the headquarters of the anti-terrorist operation. Only a small part of the news refers to bloggers or information from social networks. The analysis of the news that constitutes the first subgroup indicates that the focus was mainly on civilian casualties, while the loss of the parties, both the Ukrainian army and the separatist armed groups, was practically not mentioned. With regard to the destruction of the critical infrastructure, the main emphasis in media reports was on the main consequences for the local population. In particular, "Korrespondent" and "Obozrevatel" published a number of news stories about the difficult humanitarian situation in Luhansk city, where as a result of the ongoing shelling there was no electricity, no access to potable water, stationary and mobile communications, insufficient medications, and four hospitals were closed (Korrespondent.net, 2014; Obozrevatel, 2014). Regarding the news on the civilian casualties, it is worth noting that all three online media mentioned victims both on the government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas. At the same time, these news stories differ significantly in the context of assigning responsibility. Thus, in particular, articles describing victims on government-controlled areas clearly indicated that civilians were killed as a result of the shelling by the separatist armed groups. For example, in the news

published on the "Fakty" website on August 4, 2014, it is noted that "the penitentiary in Torez, Donetsk region, last night came under the mortar shelling by militants, as a result of which two people were injured" (Fakty.ua, 2014). By contrast, the news story published on the website on August 7, 2014 reported that "Budennovsky and Petrovsky districts of Donetsk (not controlled by the Ukrainian government) were attacked, and as a result several residential buildings were destructed, a school was damaged, three people were killed and five more wounded", without indicating in any way those who carried out the shelling (Fakty.ua, 2014). The same situation is observed on two other websites. As concerns the second subgroup of the cluster dedicated to the issue of humanitarian assistance, the majority of news articles assigned to it contain comments by Ukrainian authorities, Western leaders and representatives of international organizations on the initiative of Russia "to deploy a humanitarian mission in eastern Ukraine in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in the area (Korrespondent.net, 2014). Only a few news stories provide information on the activities of the International Committee of Red Cross in the Donbas and also contain advice from volunteers and activists for those who stayed in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and came under fire. It should also be noted that none of the news articles covers the situation of the internally displaced persons who fled the Donbas and moved to other regions.

The second-largest cluster contains 9% out of the total number of the conflict-related news articles published during this period and can be broadly characterized as the "OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) operations in the conflict zone" (formed by words "places", "operations", "OSCE", "mission"). The largest number of news articles assigned to this media frame was published on the "Korrespondent" web site (46%), followed by the "Fakty" (30%) and "Obozrevatel" (24%). As in the previous case, most of the stories belonging to this cluster are short news items; at the same time, analytical articles or reports are practically absent. In terms of content, this cluster can be divided into three subgroups. All three of them are directly related to the

activities of the OSCE SMM's activities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The first largest subgroup, contains articles that inform about the Mission's operations in the context of deployment of the investigation team to inspect the crash site of Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777-200. In particular, online media informed about the inability of the OSCE SMM to use its unmanned aerial vehicle and ensure the security in the area because of the shelling by the separatist armed formations (Korrespondent.net, 2014). The second subgroup includes news articles that inform about the OSCE mission's assistance in the transfer of a group of Ukrainian troops stationed on the transit territory between the Ukrainian and Russian borders after their clash with militants (Obozrevatel, 2014). Finally, the third smallest subgroup contains news stories quoting the observation of the OSCE SMM's representatives on the situation in the Donbas - both humanitarian and military (Obozrevatel, 2014). It is worth noting that none of the articles refers to the reports of the SMM - the main official source of information about the Mission's activities.

It is noteworthy that the third cluster, which is actually dedicated to the course of military operations in the Donbas, contains only 5% of the total number of the conflict-related news published during the analysed period. In general, the cluster or media frame can be labelled as "military engagement and violence of the conflict" (formed by words "terrorists", "separatists", "shelling", "militants", "military hardware"). In contrast to the previous two, the articles that belong to this cluster are evenly distributed among the three online media. At the same time, this cluster contains the largest number of editorials and analytical reports - 31 out of 80 published during the given period. Most of these articles are daily analytical reports - so-called "maps of antiterrorist operation", describing the main events in the area of hostilities during the previous day. The qualitative analysis of articles relating to this cluster indicates that it can be divided into two subgroups - "tactical actions of the opposing parties" and "movement of military hardware". The news stories of the first subgroup are mainly focused on the offensive actions of the Ukrainian Army and its successes

on the battlefield. An absolute majority of such news refers to representatives of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense as the main source of information. In particular, the most widespread reports are that "the aviation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces launched destructive airstrikes on the positions of militants", "the terrorists were pushed to the Russian border", as a result of which "the fighting spirit of the terrorists was undermined." (Fakty.ua, 2014; Korrespondent.net, 2014). At the same time, the articles of the second subgroup focused on the movement of military equipment of separatist armed groups and referred to data from Western intelligence services (Obozrevatel, 2014).

The last and the smallest cluster represented in media during the conflict escalation period contains 4% of the total number of published conflict-related news stories and can be defined as "national security and defence policy" (formed by words "ministry of internal affairs", "police", "internal", "control). The largest number of articles from this cluster was published on the "Korrespondent" web site (about 40%), while the rest was evenly distributed between "Fakty" and "Obozrevatel". Most of the articles assigned to this cluster are short news stories, which, according to qualitative analysis, can be divided into two subgroups - information on the decisions of the President of Ukraine or the Ukrainian government on strengthening the Ukrainian army (such as announcing a new wave of mobilization or increasing funding, etc.) and the actions of Ukrainian law enforcers regarding the investigations and detention of separatists in Southern and Eastern regions of the country. All news appearing in this cluster refer to representatives of the Ukrainian government as the main source of information.

c) Media coverage during the conflict de-escalation phase

Within the framework of the typology proposed by Gilboa, the period of February 4-10, 2019 corresponds to the phase of de-escalation of the conflict, which is mainly characterized by the presence of relative negative peace, that

is, the absence of violence (Gilboa, 2009). This phase was preceded by almost 5 years of active military conflict, two packages of signed peace agreements (the so-called "Minsk-1" and "Minsk-2") through the mediation of the EU countries (France and Germany) and international organizations (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), as well as dozens of rounds of negotiations within the framework of Trilateral Contact Group (Peters and Shapkina, 2019). In spite of the fact that the conflict in eastern Ukraine, like most conflicts, is nonlinear, and over the past five years was constantly moving backwards and forwards, from one phase to another, the given timeframe was preceded one of the largest periods of relative ceasefire, and the last significant military escalation in the area occurred 8 months before that - in late May - early June 2018 (BBC, 2018). The analyzed period in the context of events on the Donbas can be characterized as rather typical and thus not distinguished by any special developments that would potentially prompt the media to increase their focus on the conflict-related issues. Another reason why this period was chosen for analysis is that it did not coincide with the active phase of the presidential campaign in Ukraine, which began in late February 2019 and was recognized as the most uncompromising in terms of media involvement in its coverage, the spread of language of hostility and manipulation in the press (Souspilnist Foundation, 2019). As such, the risk that the presidential elections will distract the national media attention from all other events, including the ongoing conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of the country, was avoided.

The first general observation is the decreased media attention to issues related to the conflict in the Donbas to the level of the pre-conflict phase. In particular, the conflict-related news accounted for 7% out of the total number of news stories published during the given period. While "Obozrevatel" and "Fakty" websites demonstrated roughly the same figures of 7.5% and 7.4%, respectively, the proportion of the conflict-related news on the "Korrespondent" website was somewhat lower - 5.8%. It should be noted that the total number of news published during February 4-10, 2019 did not decrease, but on the contrary

increased compared with the previous period – while during the escalation phase (4-10 August 2014) 2584 news, reports, interviews and op-eds were published on three websites, their number during the de-escalation phase increased to 3566. With regard to published analytical materials, their share, albeit somewhat increased compared to the previous period, remains rather low - only 8.8%. At the same time as the previous period, different media frames are unevenly distributed among the three websites. Another common feature for all three periods was the significant dominance of one cluster (media frame) compared to others.
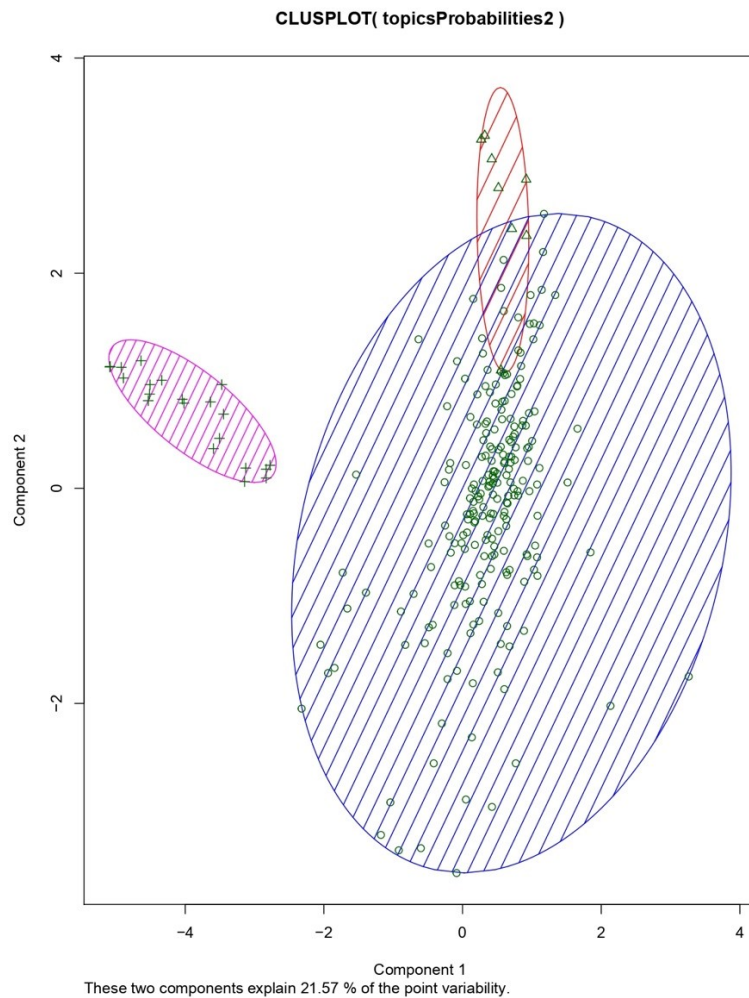
CLUSPLOT(topicsProbabilities2)

These two components explain 21.57 % of the point variability.

Table 3a. Three main media frames (clusters)

As with the previous two analysed periods, the media frames were detected using a two-stage cluster analysis performed in the R open-source platform. After the news stories were collected, they were pre-processed in order to reduce the size of data and improve the accuracy of the analysis. For instance, the punctuation and the lists of "stop words" that are often used but are not informative were removed. For this period, as for the previous two, a special list of such words, which included common general expressions, as well as first names, was created. In general, the automated content analysis identified three main clusters (or media frames – see Table 3a), each of which can also be divided into several subgroups. The optimal number of clusters was determined, as in the previous two periods, by the "Elbow" method (see Table 3b).
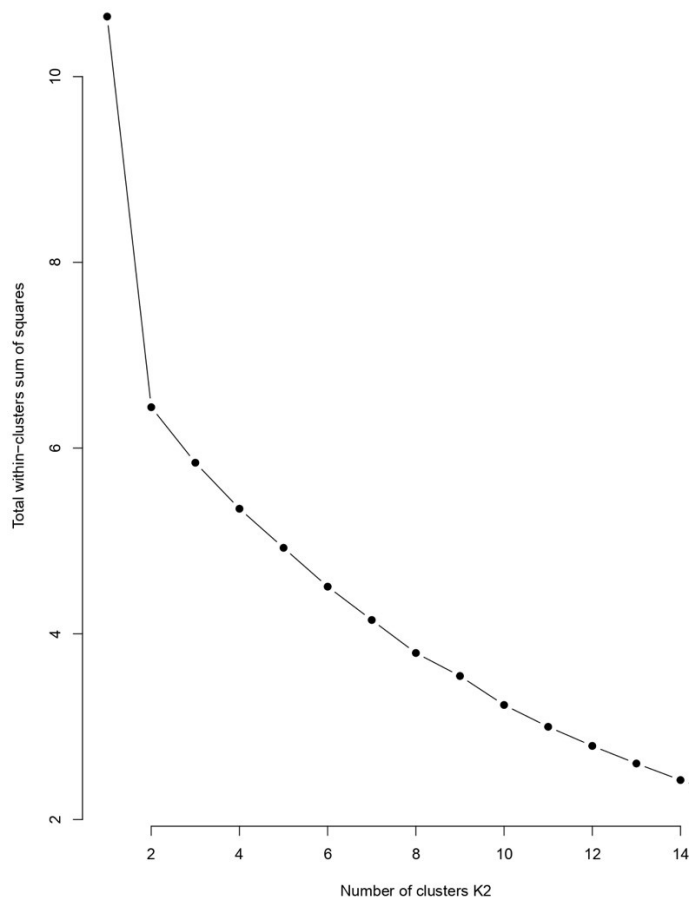
Table 3b. Optimal number of clusters (determined by Elbow method)

A general analysis of the three media frames embedded in news stories published during the de-escalation phase suggests that the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was covered by Ukrainian national online media in the context of external influences and threats and obstacles to the process of negotiation and resolution of the conflict by a third party. First of all, it concerns the Kremlin's policy and the potential influence of the presidential administration of the Russian Federation on the future of the Donbas. In this case, we can draw a direct parallel with the pre-conflict period, where the

corresponding cluster was also dominant, which will be analysed in the next section.

The largest cluster represented by 88.4% of the total number of conflict-related news stories published during this period can be defined as "Russia's intervention in conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk regions" (formed by words "SSU" (Security Service of Ukraine), "Russian", "activities", "Putin").

The cluster can be divided into three subgroups. The first one can be labelled as "cooperation between Ukrainian politicians and presidential administration of Russian Federation", which includes the biggest number of news stories assigned to this cluster (formed by words "president", "Putin", "Kremlin", "Medvedchuk" (refers to the influential Ukrainian politician, who is a personal friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin and is considered to be the main advocate for the positions of the Russian government in the Ukrainian political arena). The majority of articles presenting this subgroup are focused on the statements of the leader of the political movement "Ukrainian Choice" Viktor Medvedchuk who, at the beginning of the conflict in May 2014, traveled to Donetsk to negotiate with leaders of armed separatist groups, and called for the granting of autonomy status to two unrecognized republics of the so-called "DPR" ("Donetsk People's Republic ") and "LPR" ("Luhansk People's Republic"). In particular, the media outlets cite allegations of other Ukrainian politicians on Medvedchuk's cooperation with the presidential administration of Russia, as well as comments by representatives of the General Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine, which opened a criminal case under the articles "state betrayal" and "separatism" (Korrespondent.net, 2019). Another key theme of the articles of this subgroup is the opening of a criminal case against the deputy of the "Radical Party" Sergei Rybalko on allegations of business relations with the representatives of "LPR" and "DPR" and cooperation with Russian special services (Fakty.ua, 2019).

The second subgroup of this cluster is mostly presented by the opinions and comments of Ukrainian and foreign experts and may be named "Russia's

geopolitical intentions towards eastern Ukraine" (formed by words "peace", "Putin", "administration", "conflict", "situation"). This subgroup includes both short news stories and long-form pieces (e.g. interviews, editorials) dedicated to the 4th anniversary of the signing of the Minsk Agreements and assessment of the progress made in resolving the conflict in Donbas with a key focus on Russia's role in this process, its intentions, and possible further steps to maintain control over the situation (Fakty.ua, 2019). The third subgroup which is represented by the least number of news articles can be defined as "Russia's funding of separatist armed groups in the Donbas" (formed by words "SSU" (Security Service of Ukraine), "activities", "hryvnias" (Ukrainian national currency), "collaborators"). News articles assigned to this subgroup mainly contain information on the detention of persons who joined the separatist armed groups took part in the hostilities in eastern Ukraine and received funding from the Russian Federation (Korrespondent.net, 2019).

The news stories assigned to this cluster were unevenly distributed between three online media outlets. The biggest number – 52.5% - were published on "Obozrevatel" website, followed by "Fakty" (26.5%) and "Korrespondent" (21%). In percentage terms, "Fakty" demonstrated the biggest share with 99% of all conflict-related news stories during this period dedicated to the "Russia's intervention in conflict" topics, followed by "Obozrevatel" (90%) and "Korrespondent" (75.4%).

A qualitative analysis of the articles assigned to this cluster indicates that the majority of them are short news stories, which is, in particular, a general characteristic for the content published during this period. Another general conclusion is that most news stories belonging to this cluster quoted representatives of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, government agencies or local and regional administrations as sources of information, with the exception of 32 articles (14.5% of the total number) containing comments from civil society representatives or experts.

The second cluster contains 9.5% of the total number of news articles published during this period. It is consistent with one of the media frames embedded in news stories from the conflict escalation phase and can be defined as "military engagement and violence of the conflict" (formed by words "separatists", "artillery", "mortar", "fire", "settlement"). The largest number of articles assigned to this cluster was published on the "Korrespondent" web site (62%), followed by the "Obozrevatel" (32%) and "Fakty" (6%). The qualitative analysis demonstrates that all the documents assigned to this cluster are short news items. Unlike during the previous period, this cluster does not contain analytical reports regarding the main developments and the positions of the parties fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but rather the sporadic news of individual attacks or the redeployment of military hardware.

Another difference is that news stories focus on the military rather than civilian casualties. For instance, out of the 20 news articles assigned to this cluster, only one reports about the civilian who died waiting in line at the checkpoint (Fakty.ua, 2019). It should be noted that the total number of civilian casualties, according to the reports of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, was higher during this period (OSCE.org, 2019). It is also worth noting that most news stories focus on shelling and other violations of the cease-fire regime by separatist armed groups, as well as their losses. In particular, 15 out of 20 news starts with the phrase "over the past day, the occupation forces have been using the weapons banned under the Minsk agreements and have violated the cease-fire regime" one or another number of times (Korrespondent.net, 2019). At the same time, in 5 cases when information on losses from the Ukrainian Army is published, it is supplemented by data on the greater losses from the other side. In particular, the news published on the website "Obozrevatel" on February 4, 2019, reports that "one Ukrainian soldier was injured," while noting that "on the same day six militants were destroyed, and four others were seriously injured" (Obozrevatel, 2019). At the same time, the main common feature of this cluster with others is that articles it includes mostly refer to

Ukrainian official structures as a source of information. In this case, they mainly cite the press service of the Headquarters of Joint Forces Operation (the new format of the anti-terrorist operation that was launched on April 30, 2018) and representatives of the Ministry of Defence. In general, out of all the news stories, only two refer to the representatives of the so-called republics, who inform about the Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle being shot down (Korrespondent.net, 2019).

The last and the smallest cluster of the conflict de-escalation phase includes 3.2% of all conflict-related news stories and can be defined as "the role of international organizations in the the conflict resolution process" (formed by words "mission", "NATO", "UN", "OSCE", "Minsk"). The largest number of news articles assigned to this cluster - 75% - were published on "Obozrevatel" website, followed by "Korrespondent" – 25%, while "Fakty" did not cover this topic in general. It is worth noting that all the news stories of this cluster, with the exception of one analytical article that examines the experience of the introduction of peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, and possible alternatives and their risks for the Donbas, are short news stories. At the same time, a qualitative analysis concludes that the main focus of most news is the activities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, both in the context of its observations and obstacles to its operations in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as participation in political negotiations. In particular, 50% of cluster articles cover the new "peace plan" for Ukraine developed by the Special Representative of the OSCE, Martin Sajdik. Meanwhile, other international organizations, such as the EU, NATO and the UN are mentioned indirectly. In particular, the news contains comments on the format of their possible participation in the future peacekeeping mission in the Donbas, as envisaged by this plan (Obozrevatel, 2019).

3. Main findings and their impact on the future of conflict

a) *Main trends and dynamics in media portrayal of conflict in Eastern Ukraine*

The study provides important insights on how the national online media portray the protracted conflict over its different stages – pre-conflict, conflict escalation and conflict de-escalation phases. Certainly, it is difficult to argue that the results of the study provide a complete picture for understanding such a complex process as media framing of the conflict. To do this, it would be necessary to analyse the coverage of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in other types of media - in particular, on television and social networks, to explore the peculiarities of different formats of information, for instance, the visual framing, and in general, to explore how one or another coverage of the main developments and the opposing parties affects the position of a society (and whether it affects in general). Nevertheless, the study adds to the framing theory by demonstrating how media outlets focus on different aspects of war in different periods and lead to a number of important conclusions.

The first general conclusion, which reflects the results of previous studies (Jakobsen, 2000), is that media mostly focus little attention on the conflict at its initial and final stages. If we look at the results of the analysis, we will see that the difference in the number of conflict-related news stories in the mentioned periods and during the time of the escalation of the conflict was striking: in the first case, they accounted for about 7% of the total number of published news articles, while in the latter case, about 40% in average. It is quite important that, despite the fact that the three analyzed media outlets are quite different in the style of information and in their target audiences, this tendency is common to all of them (the difference in the percentage of articles dedicated to various

aspects of the conflict in eastern Ukraine during the first and third period published in three media is 3-4%). It is obvious that such a conclusion may seem quite logical and anticipated, given that during the period of the conflict escalation, there are more events that potentially can attract media attention - more military activities, statements, negotiations etc. Nevertheless, if we draw attention to the main media frames of the conflict escalation period, then we will see that the cluster which is associated with the hostilities itself, is one of the two smallest and includes only 5% of the news stories. Thus, it can be argued that the increased interest of the media during this period cannot be linked directly with more news topics. It should also be noted that the timeframes in the other two phases (pre-conflict and conflict de-escalation) have been chosen in such a way that there were no other extremely important domestic and international developments that take over all media attention, so it is possible that during other periods (such as a Ukrainian presidential election campaign or voting on a series of Brexit alternatives in British Parliament), the percentage of news stories dedicated to the situation in Donbas would be even lower.

At the same time, this study revealed a number of general characteristics that are inherent in the media coverage of all three phases of the conflict. The first such feature is the media reliance mostly on official sources of information, such as the representatives of the Ukrainian government, law enforcement agencies, or the Ukrainian armed forces. It is worth noting that, in general, the question of the use of certain sources in news stories plays an important role in media frames analysis. There is a general consensus among academics that sources of information play an important role in shaping the media frames, especially during crisis times (Van der Meer, 2016). On the one hand, the fact that Ukrainian online media referred mostly to the official sources is in line with the previous researches, as, for instance, Carpenter (2007) in her study highlighted a number of reasons why journalists which cover wars or other crises usually give preference to the representatives of the state agencies, including "time constraints, ease of access" (p.765).

At the same time, such an explanation makes sense during the phase of the conflict escalation, when events indeed unfold rather quickly, and journalists have little time to look for additional sources of information and are constantly under pressure to inform the society as soon as possible. However, the overreliance on the official sources of information during the pre-conflict period and the de-escalation phase is rather unexpected and is unlikely to fall under the same arguments. In addition, the use of official statements is understandable when the conflict (or any other development) is covered by international media, which do not always have the opportunity to send their correspondents to the certain area. However, in this case, we analysed the coverage by three nationwide online media outlets, which are some of the most popular in the country and have rather large staffs. In this case, it is also important to note that the Ukrainian media in general, and in particular the three online media outlets analysed in this paper, do not have access to the areas that are not under the control of the Government of Ukraine due to the impediments by militants. Thus, it would have to be expected that covering the developments on the other side of the contact line, they would rely on information posted by ordinary citizens and bloggers.

However, according to the results of the analysis, neither bloggers, nor social networks in general, or civil society organizations appear to be the key source of information during any of the periods and in any of the clusters, even those that describe the social and humanitarian consequences of the hostilities in Eastern Ukraine (the largest cluster of the second period). The same applies to international organizations. In particular, despite the presence of a number of UN agencies and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in the Donbas, the information they provide is not an important source for the media outlets, as the analysis demonstrates. Thus, in particular, none of the articles of the second cluster of the period of conflict escalation dedicated to operations of the OSCE Mission in Eastern Ukraine cite its official reports. Thus, the results of the analysis contradict previous studies, which note that in the conflicts where

media cannot access the area, other actors, such as NGOs, international organizations and bloggers play an important role in constructing the narratives (Meyer et al., 2018). On the other hand, such findings fully reflect the new phase of the Arrested War in relationship between the media and the authorities as described by Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2013), when the press overcame the chaos generated by the domination of social media and defended its key role as a source of information as well as established closer interconnections with policy-makers and militaries.

Another remarkable feature common to all three periods revealed in the analysis was the concentration of media outlets on short descriptive news, while the proportion of published long-form pieces (analytical articles, reports, editorials, interviews) was quite small. Moreover, this tendency can be traced in the coverage of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine by all three online media, despite the fact that at least one of them - the "Korrespondent" - is considered to be a website that creates analytical content. In particular, if we look at the analysis of the media frames derived during the automated content analysis of the coverage of three different phases of the conflict, then we will see that, with the exception of individual clusters (such as "shift in EU-Russia relations" (24-30 March 2014), and "military engagement and violence of the conflict" (4-10 August 2014)), most of them include mainly short news items. The fluctuations in the number of analytical materials published by the three websites over three periods are also rather noticeable. If during the pre-conflict period long-form pieces accounted for 14.4% of the total number of conflict-related news stories, during the phase of the conflict escalation their number decreased to 7.8%, while during the period of the conflict de-escalation they made up 8.8%. The decline in the number of analytical articles during the most acute period of the conflict is quite expected and is broadly in line with the conclusions reached by previous studies, in particular, that during the crisis media outlets are not so focused on the contextual factors or the causes of what is happening, but rather on the developments itself, personalities and facts (Singer and Endreny, 1993).

At the same time, the low percentage of long-form pieces during the period of de-escalation after five years of the protracted conflict is somewhat unexpected and requires further research.

One more feature of the media coverage of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions during the all three analysed periods is the general lack of information on the developments in the areas which are not controlled by the Ukrainian government. In particular, if we look at the results of the content analysis of the media coverage in March 2014, then we note that events that had been unfolding at that time in the cities captured by militants generated the least interest among the media outlets (the corresponding cluster contains only 2% of conflict-related news stories). The same conclusion applies to the conflict de-escalation period (4-10 February 2019), where only a tenth of published conflict-related news articles are dedicated to the actual situation in the Donbas. And most of these news stories focus on sporadic combat activities of the opposing parties, while the non-military aspects of the life of civilians living behind the contact line are practically not covered. The period of the conflict escalation, during which most of the published news stories were describing the humanitarian consequences of hostilities was somewhat different in this context. At the same time, it should be noted that even though in these case three online media outlets cover the development on the non-government-controlled areas, such information is rather statistical, and focused on the number of the civilian casualties, damaged administrative buildings, etc. In addition, most of this kind of news stories are referring to official local or government Ukrainian sources, which, like the media themselves, did not have access to these areas, which, in turn, put the credibility of such data into question. Certainly, the lack of physical access to these areas can be considered as the main reason for the actual absence of this topic in the media. Nevertheless, the presence of two international missions (UN and OSCE) on the other side of the contact line, a large amount of factual and analytical information these organizations publish in their reports, as well as numerous stories and visuals revealed by ordinary

citizens and bloggers living in non-controlled areas in the social networks, at least undermine the validity and soundness of such argument.

The last common feature that has been clearly observable during all three periods studied is the use of one of the most widespread persuasion techniques, namely, the dichotomous frameworks, that is, a clear distinction between friends and enemies in media narratives (Savarese, 2011). One of the key arguments in support of such a conclusion is, in particular, the vocabulary used by Ukrainian online media to identify individuals who joined the armed groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. So if we look at all three analysed periods, then we will see that each of them has at least one media frame (or cluster), where the "separatist" is one of the formative words. It is worth noting that the word "separatist" from the very beginning of the crisis in Ukraine became a label for those who had been seizing the administrative buildings in the east of Ukraine and demanded a reconsideration of the government's foreign policy for the purpose of closer cooperation with the Russian Federation, as well as referenda in their regions on a number of sensitive issues, in particular, the status of the Russian language. Thus, from the beginning of the conflict, this word has become extremely negative, unlike more neutral "rebels" or "militants" often used by Western media and international organizations (Zoria, 2019). In addition, as the automated content analysis demonstrates, the Ukrainian media actively used another emotionally coloured vocabulary for the labelling of armed groups, namely, the "terrorists", which also is formative for one of the clusters of the period of conflict escalation.

Another method of forming a clear enemy image is the actual emphasis on their "atrocities" and its consequences, which is clearly observable within the cluster "humanitarian situation in the conflict zone" (the period of escalation), where much of the news articles focus on casualties among the civilian population as a result of shelling by militants, as well as within the cluster "military engagement and violence of the conflict" (period of de-escalation), where emphasis is placed on violations of the ceasefire regime by the armed

groups. At the same time, the image of the enemy is opposed by the image of a friend, whose evolution is clearly visible over the three analysed periods. Thus, before the beginning of an active conflict, this role is taken on by the Ukrainian police, which protects the government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk regions from the militants (as described in cluster "demonstrations and destabilization in Eastern Ukraine"). Subsequently, this function is taken over by volunteer battalions and the armed forces of Ukraine, which successfully attack and push back the militants (cluster "military engagement and violence of the conflict", escalation phase), who sustain more losses (cluster "military engagement and violence of the conflict", de-escalation phase).

With regards to the actual development of the media frames over the different conflict periods, some trends have also been identified during the analysis. One of the most visible and significant trend is the domination of external influences and risks frame (primarily the role of the Russian Federation in the developments in eastern Ukraine), both during the pre-conflict and post-conflict phases. And although during both periods this media frame is presented from different angles (before the conflict media outlets focused mainly on Russia's possible intentions and the risks of its invasion of the Donbas, while during the de-escalation period, the main emphasis is placed on the intentions of the Russian Federation to control the situation in the region through the cooperation with certain Ukrainian politicians and financing of militants), in both cases it is represented by the largest number of news articles.
It is interesting that this topic is practically absent in media publications during the second period. One possible reason for this may be that during an escalation of the situation, the flow of information is much larger, and the media primarily concentrates on the main events and developments, rather than looking for the responsible ones.

Another trend identified by the automatic content analysis is the presence of the topic of mobilization and the strengthening of the Ukrainian armed forces during the first two studied periods. This media frame is

represented by roughly the same number of news stories in both the pre-conflict and conflict escalation phases escalation. The only difference is that in the first case, the emphasis is on strengthening the army through the mobilization and support of society (volunteers), and in the second case - as a consequence of well-considered government policy, which is primarily explained by internal processes in the country.

At the same time, the visibility of the "violence of conflict" media frame, which is traditionally considered one of the keys to media coverage of crises and conflicts, is rather predictable. However, it is unexpected that this topic is represented by an equally insignificant number of news articles both during the periods of conflict escalation and de-escalation, despite the fact that the intensity of hostilities and the level of violence in these two phases differed considerably. It is also remarkable that, despite the fact that the situation on the ground was different within the specified time frames (in August 2014, the Ukrainian armed forces actively attacked and defeated the militants of the territory, and in February 2019 a significant part of these territories was lost again, and in as a whole, there was a stalemate), this topic was covered with the same emphasis on the success of the Ukrainian troops.

The "humanitarian consequences of the conflict" media frame, which according to the narrative logic should play a key role during the de-escalation phase, when the press can estimate the price incurred by the region's population as a result of five years of hostilities, is the central one during the period of greatest escalation. Meanwhile, no news articles on this topic have been published during the de-escalation phase. Another noticeable result of the automated content analysis was the lack of media focus on the actual political negotiations during the de-escalation phase, while the main features of this period of the conflict cycle are the active search for ways and mechanisms to achieve a stable ceasefire between opposing parties. However, in this case, this topic was covered through the rather small number of news articles on the

initiatives of international organizations, namely OSCE, and represents the smallest media frame of this phase.

Another quite unexpected result of this analysis was the almost complete lack of media attention to the social, economic and environmental consequences of the conflict for the population of both government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. If the issue of human casualties and damage to the critical infrastructure was highlighted during the escalation period, then these topics were not actually covered by media during all three periods of the conflict.

Another topic that is usually present in media narratives on war or conflict is the social, economic and legal conditions for internally displaced persons. In this case, the automated content analysis did not reveal the presence of this specific frame in online media during all three periods of the conflict in the east of Ukraine. And while it is rather understandable for the pre-conflict period (when the population only started to leave Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and to a certain extent for the period of the escalation of the conflict (since, as it was emphasized earlier, the flow of information is too intense and the press is only able to focus on major events and individuals), then the lack of media interest to the internally displaced persons during the phase of de-escalation is rather unexpected, especially considering that almost 1.4 million people moved to the other regions of Ukraine because of the conflict in Donbas (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2019). One of the possible reasons may be that the aforementioned topics require detailed analysis, while the media coverage was mainly dominated by short news items.

Regarding the difference in the coverage of the conflict by the three websites, in spite of the discrepancies in focus on various topics (for example, "Obozrevatel" more than other websites covered the topic of external influence on the situation in eastern Ukraine, while journalists of "Korrespondent" more than their colleagues from two other online media focused on their hostilities in

the Donbas), there were no significant differences that would have affected the redistribution of media frames in each separate period.

Overall, the results of the analysis did not reveal the clear development of media frames over different periods in its traditional sense, which assumes that the media, covering certain events or issues for a long period, first attempts to explain their essence, and then analyse and develop mechanisms for their solution (Entman, 1993).

At the same time, the fact that in this case online media mostly based their news articles on information from official sources poses the question whether the coverage of the conflict in the Donbas by Ukrainian online media reflects the objective process of constructing media narratives or is merely a reflection of the official position of the government. This question, as well as the role of the information sources in the development of the media frames requires further research.

b) *The complexities of media narratives in conflict*

The results of this study indicate that media narratives in conflict or war situations, and in particular the process of their development during different periods of the crisis, are much more complex issues than it may seem at first glance and cannot be brought to a certain standard. In fact, even the search for individual trends that can be traced in any conflict and in any social, economic, cultural and regional context would rather be a simplification. If we look at the results of automatic content analysis and those media frames which were acquired during the three different periods of the conflict cycle, then we can see that the general picture is somewhat different from the one described in previous similar studies. In particular, if we analyse the most well-known and cited in the academic world conceptualizations of media framing in wars, we can see that no one of them fully applies to this specific conflict.

In particular, if we analyse the media framing in the conflict in eastern Ukraine in terms of the Galtung's concept of conflict and peace journalism, then we note that it is rather difficult to detect such a clear division in media narratives. In addition, individual characteristics may occur to varying degrees in each separate conflict period. In particular, one of the main features of the war journalism, namely, the opposition of "us" and "them" and the dehumanization of one of the parties, is clearly visible in the conflict-related news stories of all three phases of the war, as noted in the preceding subsection. At the same time, one of the other characteristics, namely the focus on the arena of conflict and the visual effects of the war, such as the number of victims, infrastructure damage, etc., is not so obvious and does not prevail in the online media even during the escalation of the conflict. On the other hand, one of the key features of peace journalism, namely the coverage of the suffering of all groups of the population, is quite noticeable in Ukrainian online media during the phase of conflict escalation, when 83.4% of news stories were dedicated to the humanitarian situation in the area of hostilities – highlighting the consequences of the conflict both for the local population in the areas controlled and not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

At the same time, in the other two periods, this topic is practically absent in Ukrainian online media narratives. The same applies to one of the most important, according to Galtung (2003), characteristics of peace journalism, namely the analysis of peace initiatives. In particular, this topic is to some extent covered in the pre-conflict period (cluster "political negotiations between Ukraine and Russia") and the period of de-escalation of the conflict (cluster "the role of international organizations in the conflict resolution process") and is not highlighted at all during the phase of de-escalation. Other characteristics indicated by the author are generally not traceable, or rather quite difficult to be detected in media narratives (for example, considering conflict resolution as a problem, contributing to the conflict prevention, concealment of peaceful initiatives) in view of the subjectivity of the assessment.

The same conclusion is reached when we analyze the results of the research from the perspective of the media frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which are often used by scholars to study media framing in general, and, particularly, in conflict situations. For instance, if we consider the media frames that the authors define as key ones, then we will notice that some of them, namely economic consequences frame, are absent in the news stories published by three Ukrainian online media during all three periods of the conflict in the Donbas. The other two, such as conflict and human interest frames, appear to different extents at different periods; in particular, the human interest frame plays a key role in the phase of conflict escalation, while the conflict frame is represented in the other two periods, but does not have a decisive role. Another two frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), namely morality and responsibility frames, in general, are quite complex to be defined by the automatic content analysis and give place for speculation and subjective judgments when studied within the framework of qualitative analysis.

If we consider the results of this study on the basis of the media frames defined by the Carpenter (2007), then we note that the three new frames that the author has added to those already identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) are also either absent in the news stories published by Ukrainian online media during the studied periods (as in the case of anti-war and media-self-referential frames) or are quite complex to determine by the use of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis (as in the case of diagnostic frame which is supposed to make an emphasis on what has caused the problem).

Also, if we look at the results of the study in the context of the Iyengar's (1991) distinction between the episodic and thematic media frames, then this also does not allow us to follow any specific developments during different periods of the conflict and in general to come to some general conclusions, since the absolute majority of the conflict-related news stories received during the analysis directly refer to the conflict and are thematic. To sum up, one general

conclusion we can reach is that the coverage of the Ukrainian online media of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions cannot be described and explained using a standard set of media frames or a previously used sample or template.

The same applies to the development of media frames over different conflict periods.

Thus, if we analyse in detail the set of received media frames in three different periods - the pre-conflict, the phase of escalation and the de-escalation, then we can conclude that there are no traceable trends in their development over time. Yes, of course, there are certain similarities, especially in the first and third periods. For example, in the specified phases, the focus is on the topic of external influence and threats and the issue of peace talks and initiatives to resolve the conflict. However, despite their visible presence in media narratives during both periods, these topics are covered at different angles and with the emphasis on various aspects. If in the pre-conflict period, the main focus is on direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, during the period of de-escalation, the main consideration is the initiatives from third parties, in particular, the OSCE. The same applies to the topic of government policy, which in the pre-conflict period is described with an emphasis on measures in the area of law enforcement, and during the period of escalation - with the focus on strengthening the capabilities of the Ukrainian army. Can these shifts in the media coverage be explained only by the change of the situation on the ground? And can it then be argued that the Ukrainian media did not formulate the narratives regarding the conflict, but rather simply reflected the current situation? Such an assertion would be simplified, since this does not explain why certain issues, such as the consequences of the conflict for the country's economics, or the social problems of the internally displaced population, have not been clearly reflected in the news stories, since they were and still remain significant and problematic for the country.

Thus, online media somehow shaped the narratives about the conflict by not covering the mentioned topics and focusing on others. Another important issue in this context is the influence of sources used by journalists on the formation of certain media frames. This is especially important in the context of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, given that most of the conflict-related news stories, as the analysis shows, were based on information obtained from official sources - Ukrainian military, government representatives or officials from local and regional administrations. Therefore, can it be argued that in this case, the revealed media frames (or clusters) are rather a reflection of the agenda of the Ukrainian authorities? This issue will require further research, in particular, by analysing to what extent the journalists transmitted or interpreted information received from their sources.

Another important aspect for the future analysis is comparing the coverage of the conflict in the Donbas during these three periods by other types of media, such as television, radio and print press. Such an analysis would help to understand the extent to which the revealed media frames are common to the Ukrainian media and, if not, what is the fundamental difference. It is also important in this context to analyse how the conflict in eastern Ukraine was highlighted at different levels, in particular, local and international. It would be especially relevant to study the media narratives on the conflict in the Donbas in the international press in order to analyse the extent to which the frame of "external risks and influences", namely, Russia's interference in conflict, which is quite visible in national online media, is traced to international media as well. And if so, then can it be argued that this topic is what Entman (1993) calls a macro frame that defines individual events as international problems, as well as indicates their main causes and the ways of solving them.

Another element of the analysis that would allow building a more complete picture of the conflict framing in eastern Ukraine is the study of textual and visual frames dominating in the most popular social media in Ukraine (e.g. Vkontakte, Facebook, Twitter) and how they differ from the clusters spread in

mainstream media. Although some steps have already been taken in this direction (see Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017), this aspect requires a more methodological and integrated research. And ultimately, the most important issue to be studied is actually how the dominant frames influence or even shape the perceptions of the development of events in society, as well as how they are taken into account by the authorities when taking certain decisions. Only this kind of comprehensive study of visual and textual narratives on the conflict in different media types, at different levels and at different periods of conflict development, will allow us to answer the question of how crucial the role of the press is to the development of a conflict in one way or another, and indeed whether it is, as claimed by scholars, side-lined by freelancers, bloggers and NGOs (Meyer, 2018).

Conclusion

In spite of the rapid development of information technologies, and, accordingly, the social media, blogging, etc., traditional media still play an important role in informing society. It is particularly noticeable when it comes to major crises, such as, for example, armed conflict, when the society's need for the impartial and objective information is multiplying. The purpose of this study was to identify the key trends in the formation of traditional media narratives on the conflict, as well as analyse how these narratives change over a long period of time in line with the development of the conflict and its transition over different phases. In this case, the coverage by the three most popular Ukrainian national online media outlets of the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts was analysed during three key phases: pre-conflict, conflict escalation and de-escalation. As a result of automatic content analysis of conflict related news stories published on three websites in separate weekly periods of each phase, a number of general tendencies in the media portrayal of

conflict in the Donbas were revealed, some of which reflected the results of previous studies on the media framing.

In particular, the analysis demonstrated the general tendency of the online media to ignore main aspects of the conflict during its beginning and first weeks of development, as well as during the de-escalation phase, and to focus on the main events associated with the escalation of the conflict. This tendency is visible in the narratives of all three analysed online media outlets, despite the differences in their editorial policies and various target audiences, and cannot be explained solely by the increase in military engagements, and, accordingly, of coverage opportunities, since even during the period of conflict escalation the media frames related to the violence of the war did not play a key role.

Another revealed tendency is the media's overreliance on official sources of information, that is, news and events were mainly highlighted through the words of representatives of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, local administrations, government officials, police, etc. This tendency is also related to another one which is Ukrainian online media' focus on covering the major developments and various aspects of the conflict in the areas controlled by the Government of Ukraine, while the situation in non-government-controlled areas was ignored in general. It can be partly explained by the policy of militants who do not allow most of Ukrainian journalists to cross the contact line and cover the developments in non-government-controlled areas. However, such an explanation cannot be exhaustive considering the large amount of information published by international organizations, as well as by bloggers and journalists living in non-government-controlled areas. Thus, it leads us to the conclusion that the coverage of the developments only on one side of the contact line is a part of media's position in constructing narratives on the conflict. This conclusion is backed up by another common trend identified during the analysis - the use by all three Ukrainian online media outlets ("Obozrevatel", "Korrespondent" and "Fakty") one of the most widespread persuasion techniques which is a clear distinction between friends and enemies.

This distinction was primarily constructed through the vocabulary that Ukrainian online media used to describe the representatives of armed groups and formations operating in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine since March 2014, namely, "separatists" (the word received quite negative connotations from the outset of the conflict and was associated with people who seized administrative buildings in the east of Ukraine and advocated the closer cooperation with Russian Federation which itself was seen as "enemy" by Ukrainian public) and "terrorists". Another method of forming the enemy's image was the emphasis on violations of the ceasefire and the number of civilian casualties resulting from shelling by militants. The image of the enemy was opposed by the image of a friend or hero represented by volunteers and the Ukrainian army, which repulsed the attacks of militants and pushed them back to the border with Russian Federation. Finally, the last general trend identified during the analysis of media frames during the three phases of the conflict is Ukrainian online media focus, mostly on short, factual news items and generally ignoring other long-form pieces and analytical formats of the coverage of conflict-related events. One explanation for this approach may actually be another fact discovered by the analysis, namely lack of media interest in conflict developments during its outset and de-escalation phases, when it is actually possible to analyse the main causes, risks, challenges and future consequences of the unfolding crisis.

With regards to the development of media frames over three analyzed conflict periods, the overall conclusion is that the general trends that can be traced during each of the phases were not revealed. However, the analysis helped to reveal several key topics that were present in news stories at least in two of three analyzed periods. For instance, the media coverage during these both phases are mainly focused on the topic of external threats and risks. Another media frame that has been traced in the news published during both of these periods is the initiatives to hold peace talks and attempt to resolve the conflict. Finally, two more topics that can be traced over two different periods

is the government's policy to strengthen the capabilities of the Ukrainian Army and confront separatism in the country, and the violence of the conflict (even though any of them played a key role in any specific phase). At the same time, it should be noted that in each of the periods, these topics were covered from different angles and with various nuances. Besides the presence of certain media frames, and their absence may indicate a certain media approach to coverage of the conflict. In this case, the automatic content analysis revealed almost absolute absence of economic consequences and anti-war media frames.

It should be noted that the media frames revealed as a result of the analysis indicate the trends in the coverage of a particular conflict in a given period and by the specific type of media. To summarize these conclusions for all conflicts and all types of media would be too hasty. Similarly, the results of the analysis cause a number of issues that require further research. In particular, it is necessary to determine what exactly affected the focus of the media on a particular topic in each of the selected periods. For instance, what influenced the media outlets' decision to ignore the economic and social consequences topic, despite the fact that they were rather significant for Ukrainian population (as demonstrated by the government statistics and the opinion polls). Or why did online media, for the most part, refer to official sources by providing information on various aspects of the conflict? Were they inspired by their distrust to other sources, the desire to get as accurate information as soon as possible or, perhaps, self-censorship prompted by the sense of patriotism?

It is important to understand whether the media only transmitted the information received from sources or interpreted it, and if so, in what way? In order to answer all these questions and to get a more complete picture, it is necessary to investigate in particular the coverage of the conflict by other types of media, such as television, print media, and social networks. In addition, it is important to understand how the coverage of events in Donetsk and Lugansk regions by local and international media relates to narratives embedded in national media and whether in this case it is possible to talk about the presence

of so-called macro-frames (in particular, in the context of the influence and intervention of the Russian Federation in the conflict in the Donbas).

Only answering the aforementioned questions will allow us to proceed to the analysis of the main factor, namely, how the media frames influence the perception of the conflict in society in general and the formation of government policy in this context, and, in particular, to analyse how important the role of the media is for the development of conflicts and whether they can contribute to its resolution, or its escalation.

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