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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

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Master's Thesis

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**Shaping IR discourse: the case of Telegram in Slovakia in
the light of Russia-Ukraine war**

Master's Thesis

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Study programme: International Relations

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Abstract

Social media, such as Telegram, have been playing an increasingly important role in shaping the public discourse in Slovakia and abroad, including the issue of the perception of the main actors and practice of International Relations. This thesis explores the process of construction of identities of such actors in the most popular Telegram channels in Slovakia, which have been labelled as spreading disinformation or misinformation narratives, in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Theoretical approaches entailing post-structuralist perception of IR, Mental Models, Social Identity Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism are employed to understand the role of the examined narratives in shaping the foreign policy perception in Slovak society. When it comes to methodology, Qualitative Content Analysis is employed to identify the narratives portraying individual actors and their occurrence. Secondly, features of the Discourse-Historical Approach, complemented by van Dijk's classification of analytical categories of discourse structures, are used to examine the discursive strategies the posts used to convey the message to the audience. The outcomes of the analysis show a rather high degree of occurrence of the war in Ukraine as a topic and pinpoint Russia and Ukraine as the most frequently occurring actors. The portrayal of Russia presents the country as a positively powerful actor which is, however, in danger from the West. On the other hand, the narratives about Ukraine and western countries predominantly include predications of misuse of power, hypocrisy, but also weakness. Narratives connected to Slovakia advocate against helping Ukraine, criticise the governments before September 2023, and often search for an internal enemy. In the end, the summary is accompanied by proposals for further possible research.

Abstrakt

Sociální média, jako je Telegram, hrají stále důležitější roli při utváření veřejného diskurzu na Slovensku i v zahraničí, včetně otázky vnímání hlavních aktérů a praxe mezinárodních vztahů. Tato práce zkoumá proces konstrukce identit těchto aktérů na nejpopulárnějších kanálech Telegramu na Slovensku, které byly označeny za šířitele dezinformací či dezinformačních narativů, ve světle ruské invaze na Ukrajinu. K pochopení role zkoumaných narativů při utváření zahraničněpolitického vnímání slovenské společnosti jsou využity teoretické přístupy zahrnující poststrukturalistické vnímání IR, mentální modely, teorii sociální identity a symbolický interakcionismus. Co se týče metodologie, k identifikaci narativů zobrazujících jednotlivé aktéry a jejich výskyt je použita kvalitativní obsahová analýza. Za druhé, prvky diskurzivně-historického přístupu, doplněné van Dijkovou

klasifikací analytických kategorií diskurzních struktur, jsou použity ke zkoumání diskurzních strategií, které příspěvky použily k předání narativů publiku. Výsledky analýzy ukazují poměrně vysokou míru výskytu války na Ukrajině jako tématu a jako nejčastěji se vyskytující aktéry identifikují Rusko a Ukrajinu. Zobrazení Ruska představuje tuto zemi jako pozitivně silného aktéra, který je však ohrožen ze strany Západu. Na druhou stranu narativy o Ukrajině a západních zemích převážně obsahují predikce zneužití moci, pokrytectví, ale i slabosti. Narativy spojené se Slovenskem se vyslovují proti pomoci Ukrajině, kritizují vlády před zářím 2023 a často hledají vnitřního nepřítele. V závěru je shrnutí doplněno návrhy na další možný výzkum.

Keywords

Telegram, identity construction, Slovakia, war in Ukraine, disinformation, post-structuralism, Mental Models, Social identity, Qualitative Content Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach

Klíčová slova

Telegram, konstrukce identity, Slovensko, válka na Ukrajině, dezinformace, poststrukturalismus, mentální modely, sociální identita, kvalitativní obsahová analýza, diskurzivně-historický přístup

Název práce

Formování diskurzu v mezinárodních vztazích: případ Telegramu na Slovensku ve světle války mezi Ruskem a Ukrajinou

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Introduction

In February 2024, the Russian invasion of Ukraine entered its third year. Arguably, it has dealt a substantial blow to the European security architecture and instigated a discussion about the future of international relations and security issues in the region. As a neighbouring country of Ukraine, the war has played a substantial role in public discourse in Slovak society.

It was the relatively sudden realisation of European countries, often members of both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), that the old certainties of Europe as a peaceful continent were gone, which led to questioning of positions and even identities of societies and states in this new reality. In Slovakia, the ‘foreign policy consensus’, characterised by orientation towards the European Union and NATO, predominantly accepted by every government no matter the position on the left-right or conservative-liberal scale, has been under pressure, and the question of where Slovakia belongs in the game of geopolitics was re-opened. (Nemečková, 2023)

So, what makes a country understand its place in the system of International Relations? The answer to this question has been striven for by identity theorists and poststructuralist scholars for decades. One of the approaches employs the *us* versus *them* dichotomy, as described by Hansen and Wæver (2002), and the constant process of *othering*. Through this procedure, the *self* identity of a society can be shaped by exposure to *other* identity of different actors. Thus, to grasp the role of Slovakia in the International Relations system as seen from the point of view of its population, the perceived identities of other actors and the understanding of this system as such by the Slovak population must be examined. Furthermore, according to several constructivist and post-structuralist scholars, shared understandings and interpretations arguably play a more important role in the formation of the practice of International Relations than material factors or rigid international structures, increasing the cruciality of studying identity formation in societies.

Naturally, various vital factors shape the identities of actors of International Relations. One must keep in mind the role of mental models among individuals or the shared socio-cultural knowledge of the society. In addition to that, the interactions that are a building block of creating identities for any actor or group are largely being co-created by exposure to news, media coverage, and other sources of narratives on the topic. The media platforms these narratives can be shared on have been enjoying different levels of popularity in Slovakia. For

37% of the population, social media serve as the primary source of political information. (Aktuality.sk, 2023) Among those, Telegram plays a substantial role, with the most popular channels reaching almost 60,000 subscribers as of April 2024.

Therefore, this thesis aims to supplement the already existing knowledge on the identity creation and portrayal of actors of International Relations by examining the most popular Telegram channels in Slovakia, employing Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to identify the prevalent narratives in individual posts, complemented by features of Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to uncover the discourse strategies used to convey the messages to the audience.

The main research question aims to examine the ways in which the identities of major actors of International Relations, as well as Slovakia, are constructed on chosen Telegram channels. Furthermore, the prevalence of these narratives will be analysed to enhance the understanding of their translation to the perceptions and mental models of the audience. The importance of this approach is magnified by the role Telegram has been playing in Slovakia since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The platform has been attracting actors spreading disinformation and misinformation narratives due to its almost non-existing moderation (Zmudri.sk, 2023), and during the first months of the invasion, characterised by the effort of the Slovak authorities to block webpages publishing pro-Russian propaganda narratives, Telegram became a haven for such activity. The service has become relatively popular among political players as well, adding importance to it in case of analysis of public discourse in Slovakia, no matter the analysed topic.

Overall, the thesis is divided into five main parts. Firstly, the review of the existing literature on the role of identity in IR, its effect on foreign policy of state actors, and the disinformation issue together with the theoretical background of the research are tackled. The second part consists of elucidation of the methodological backbone used in this thesis, as well as providing the context for the study. In the third part, the results of the QCA are presented, focusing on identified narratives and their prevalence. Subsequently, the discursive strategies used in the examined textual dataset are presented. Finally, discussion and interpretation of the outcomes of the analysis using the theoretical background concludes the thesis.

The title of the thesis has been slightly altered in comparison to the Master's Thesis project to better reflect the goals of the research.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Current Status of Research

For the purpose of this master's thesis, three main sectors of research need to be tackled. First of them, undoubtedly, is the study of the construction of reality via narratives and perceptions from the constructivist and post-structuralist points of view, with the subsequent effect on the foreign policy of a state. Secondly, the studies of how these theories were put into practice in foreign policy actions are examined. Thirdly, the issue of disinformation and misinformation in the Slovak environment must be included. The overview of all these areas provides a suitable starting point for the research on the narratives spread by Telegram disinformation channels in Slovakia in the framework of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

1.1.1. Constructivist and Post-structuralist approach towards foreign policy

There are claims that the study of International Relations has been an ever-changing process rather than a rigid scientific discipline. It has arguably experienced 3 or 4 Great Debates (as there are various approaches to what should and should not be counted as a Great Debate), which gradually shifted and expanded the tools of research and theoretical background for studying International Politics and Security. Whether it was the realist/liberalist debate, the 1960s debate on methodological approaches and scientific methods, different understanding of anarchy by neorealists and neoliberals or the epistemological debate at the end of the previous century, the substance of the disputes was to adjust the study of International Relations and try to explain in the best possible way the events happening in the real world. (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith, 2020)

Especially the debate of the late 1980s and 1990s, which focused not so much on the ontological nature of the field but rather on the perception and reflection of the substance, thus also labelled rationalism/reflectivism debate, is crucial for the theoretical concepts of this thesis. From an ontological point of view, the debate on International Relations focused on, if possible, rather objective research on what exists and what can be observed. However, the last great debate helped epistemological disputes gain prominence and pushed IR scholars towards the question of *perception* of reality.

The results were several theoretical approaches, including post-positivism and reflectivism. However, the momentum was gained, among others, by constructivist thinking, which is one of the theoretical roots of this thesis. Even though constructivism is a key part of the

approach, it cannot stand on its own as the basis of research for this thesis. Post-structuralist theories, with a focus on identity questions and how identities are constructed, might be used to support it.

Constructivist works were some of the first steps towards all the theories concerning identity in International Relations and therefore are one of the building blocks of the theoretical background of this thesis. According to some scholars, it is hard to generalise and define constructivism as an approach in social sciences and International Relations, and the label is often attributed by different authors to various situations. (Palan, 2000)

While the first use of such a term is connected to the Soviet environment of the 1920s and the field of art, the term itself as a part of International Relations was coined by Nicolas Onuf (1989) in his piece *World of Our Making*. Of course, Onuf was not the first author to engage in the field of International Relations with epistemological dilemmas and points of view that could be considered constructivist. The arrival of constructivist approaches to the International Relations studies can be traced back to the beginnings of the Cold War and is often regarded as one of the outcomes of a fruitless debate between intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism. Decades later, the post-Cold War developments were considered a catalyst for constructivist thinking, trying to explain the developments realist and liberal theories failed to. (Reisigl and Wodak, 2017)

The primary difference between constructivism and other approaches, mainly realism and liberalism, lies in the claim of constructivist scholars that the reality cannot be objectively researched and, therefore, is socially constructed. Thus, the 'material structures' are arguably not as important as the 'ideational structures' attributed to the material ones - a concept explained by Alexander Wendt on a case of US perception of nuclear threat: the nuclear missiles owned by the United Kingdom are perceived as much less threatening to US interests than the same amount of North Korean missiles. (Wendt, 1995) While the material gist of the missiles varies very little, the US society and the government has undergone a process of identity construction, in which the North Korean regime has emerged as the enemy, making its weapons perceivably more dangerous.

However, some scholars did not consider the importance of narratives and identity in IR as a competition against realism or liberalism in the early years of their rise - they were rather seen as the grounds for ontological dispute. According to Risse (2019), who applied constructivist theories to the European integration process, social constructivism as such can be described as

a *'meta-theory or an ontology, not one more substantive theory ...'* and its main contribution is pointing out *'mutual constitution of agency and structure.'* The latter is especially crucial for understanding the role of identity construction, as it states that the observer cannot and should not be separated from the object observed, as both have a mutual impact on one another by helping each other evolve. (Risse, 2019)

An attempt to classify constructivist approach was made by Chernoff (2007), who claimed there were three main levels of research in IR field, namely the level of political decision-making, theoretical level, and the level of metatheory (also labelled philosophical or methodological). While in his views some scholars stated constructivism was part of the second level of research, the theoretical one, which was trying to find the best approach to explain what is happening in the field of International Relations and included other main theories such as realism and liberalism, he claimed that constructivism *'...was initially developed in social sciences and in IR as a meta-theory.'* Chernoff then adds that since mid-1990s, scholars have been more eager to apply constructivism as *'a substantive theory of behaviour.'* (Chernoff, 2007)

The inspirations for 'basis of action', which would reveal incentives for certain actions of individual actors of International Relations, but also human behaviour as such, could be explained in several ways, including the dichotomy of the Logic of expected consequences and Logic of appropriateness. The former incentivizes human actions and the choice between alternatives by comparing expected outcomes of the actions in question and evaluating their compatibility with personal or collective objectives, and sees the dynamics of global politics as a set of negotiations between players with specific goals, where the bargaining position plays a crucial role. On the other hand, the Logic of appropriateness works more with identity construction, perceived social norms, and the sense of "the right thing to do". Actors of International Relations are understood as acquiring specific roles in situations, and these roles then shape expected behaviour of such a player. Here, the rational explanation plays a smaller role and importance is attributed to identity and 'selection of rules.' (March and Olsen, 1998)

Not to dwell further in this dichotomy, the Logic of appropriateness could provide one of the theoretical building blocks for this thesis. Through its application on the topic of the research, the main idea is to see the process of shaping identities of IR players in minds of people consuming information from Telegram accounts in Slovak environment in light of the Russia-Ukraine war. We will therefore assume that Logic of appropriateness plays an important role

in shaping decision-making of democratic state actors via shaping the identity of individual actors, the voters, as well as societies.

Nicolas Onuf, already mentioned as the author popularising the term ‘constructivism’ itself, claimed that as our thinking has direct consequences for our actions, a substantial change in perception of International Relations would inevitably lead to an alteration of the phenomenon itself. (Willard, 1992) Therefore, Onuf explains, the World is not a fixed entity but is rather created and altered by human interactions, especially with the use of established norms and rules. It can be explained through shared understandings and interpretations, which have a stronger impact than material grounds or rigid structures. This is a crucial point for this thesis, as it can be applied to the pieces of information users of Telegram in Slovakia are consuming. If shared understandings and interpretations are pivotal in shaping International Relations, it is of utmost importance to study the narratives prevailing in these channels, as they directly co-create and co-shape these shared perceptions. In addition to that, democratic societies have their foreign policy shaped through regular elections, in which the electorate projects their perception of foreign policy on the candidates for policymakers. (Onuf, 1989)

This arguably brings about a chicken-and-egg problem, which is based on the idea of mutual effect of structures and actors on each other (thus also labelled agent-structure problem). The idea behind this is that if the structures are shaping actors via shared meanings, common interpretations, and social norms, while at the same time, these structures are directly shaped and created by the actors through their interests, attributed identities, and behaviour, it is difficult to find a starting point in this perpetually repeating cycle. (Wendt, 1987)

However, some criticism of this understanding has appeared since. Ole Wæver (Wæver, 2002), in his search for a general foreign policy theory based on identity, criticised Alexander Wendt’s approach and application of constructivist theories for being too focused on international systemic theory and ‘*general meanings of state, sovereignty, or anarchy.*’ Wæver claims that this approach neglects the internal generation of identity from within the state actors, namely ‘*how each state, nation or other unit has to create its own terms and rationales, its identity and foreign policy.*’ (Wæver, 2002) This criticism was supplemented by Ringmar (2009), who claimed that Wendt’s theory is ‘fundamentally one-sided’, does not consider identity formation as something states and politicians must tackle, and favours the point of view of the whole system.

Other points of criticism highlighted, that certain studies, for example the one from Katzenstein (1996a), concentrated predominantly on specific cases (Japan in Katzenstein's case) and could not provide an overall theory for state interactions, which was explained by Wæver (2002) as '*accepting a division between ideational and material explanations.*' He then added that constructivist scholars often fall into the trap of self-perpetuating predictions, which justify the existence of the current state but offer little explanation or space for change, labelled 'strong theory of non-change.' A concrete example can be the difficulty to explain different foreign policies pursued by societies with very similar historical and cultural roots.

Some authors doubted the outcomes of the whole philosophical and methodological debate in International Relations, which was dubbed '*not always [...] particularly encouraging.*' (Palan, 2000) It was Palan who also claimed that the theories proposed by constructivist IR scholars are often incompatible or even contradictory. Furthermore, he added that constructivist theories had been unable to prove the primacy of norms and rules over material grounds while trying to assert it anyway. (Palan, 2000)

While in certain aspects, constructivism as a stream in IR provided the theoretical backbone of the research in this thesis, constructivist thinking alone is not as suitable for the role of the theoretical backbone of this thesis as the theories of post-structuralism, identity studies, and identity formation might be. There arguably are several reasons for this. In general, post-structuralist IR theories aim to bridge the gap and, by that, overcome the dichotomy between 'ideational and material explanations' of international politics, as described by Wæver (2002).

Of course, one could argue that the constructivist stream itself has different versions, labelled as soft and hard by Palan (2000) or thin and thick by Katzenstein (1996b). These differ mostly in the way that soft/thin constructivists are scholars who might focus predominantly on the role of material grounds in international politics with a bit of an interest in culture and identity building. Hard/thick constructivists, on the other hand, attribute a much bigger role to questioning existing structures and the overall social construction of reality. The latter, also labelled 'critical constructivism', shows some continuum with post-structuralism, and sometimes the distinction is difficult to notice. The main differences are valid predominantly when comparing conventional constructivism with post-structuralism, and the critical spectrum of constructivist theories can sometimes serve as a bridge between the two sides. (Aiolfi, 2015)

Firstly, it is indeed the approach to identity that distinguishes post-structuralism from not only constructivism but also liberalist thinking. While the last two predominantly claim that the identity of actors of International Relations is a ‘variable in foreign policy analysis’ which is rather independent of all the narratives and practices in the international field, post-structuralist scholars claim it is virtually impossible to separate the identity and perceived role of the state from its actions and narratives in international arena. In addition to that, they stress the impossibility of distinguishing the material factors from the identity aspects. (Hansen, 2006) The method in this thesis employs the latter, focusing on the research of the construction of identity as one of the predominant driving forces of the foreign policy of the given state, which arguably possesses more importance than the material grounds alone.

Secondly, conventional constructivism could be described as more positivist or ‘closer to science’, which is indeed how Wendt (1999) put it himself, while the more critical approaches, such as post-structuralism, were labelled reflectivist (Aiolfi 2015, Keohane 1988) or post-positivist. This is undoubtedly interconnected with the difference in willingness to accept material structures together with the existing order and their role in forging foreign policy of states.

Thirdly, the difference can be found in the method of question asking, as described by Cox (2018). He described conventional constructivism as a ‘problem-solving theory’, which concentrates on asking the questions with ‘*why*’, taking the existing framework of institutions together with the power structures as given and trying to explain developments under the umbrella of current order. On the other hand, the gist of ‘critical’ theories such as post-structuralism is asking the ‘*how*’ questions, trying to explain how the standing order was constructed in the first place and how the identities were attributed to it and different state actors. The ‘*how*’ questions are especially important for this thesis and are an indivisible part of the hypothesis and sub-hypotheses, as the goal is to analyse how the main actors of IR as well as Slovakia are portrayed amid the Russo-Ukrainian war in chosen Telegram channels.

Fourthly, as Smith (2001) pointed out, and Aiolfi (2015) elaborated on it, the critical approaches, in this case also the critical wing of constructivism, have a different approach of the division between internal and external matters of state. While conventional constructivism draws a rather clear boundary between the two, post-structuralism declines the separation the two spheres of global politics and stresses the influence and simultaneous co-creation of one another. Connecting this claim with the research aim in this thesis, the creation of narratives

and identities inside the Slovak society then continuously translates into the foreign policy of the state and the two become indistinguishable.

Despite some claims, post-structuralism cannot be labelled as ‘just another version’ of constructivist thinking, because it was arguably present in the IR discourse in certain ways even before constructivism (Aiolfi, 2015; Reus-Smit, 2005). In addition, Price and Reus-Smit (1998) claimed that constructivism’s roots could be found in post-structuralist thinking.

Sometimes the critics of post-structuralist theories in IR claim that the building block of the theories, namely the inherent interconnectivity of material factors in foreign policy and identities attributed to the state actors by themselves, which leads to impossibility to distinguish between them, could pave the way towards chaos and absence of rules in terms of theory, methodology and overall political reality. However, Hansen (2006) shows that post-structuralism is able to produce a coherent foreign policy theory and, furthermore, employs typical and time-proof questions in the field of IR, namely the one analysing how the states shape their response to foreign policy issues, while also stressing the importance of domestic discourse involving the political parties from the opposition and media. This narrative is supplemented by the claim that while the ability to produce foreign policy theories are present among post-structuralist scholars, their appearance differs much from the image produced by conventional constructivist scholars and rationalists. (Hansen, 2006; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998)

According to Michel Foucault (1970), whose work *Les Mots et les Choses* (The Order of Things) is often labelled as the flagship of post-structuralism, one can identify two ground rules of post-structuralist thinking, namely the idea of *episteme* and the role of language, including its paradoxes. The former is described by Foucault as a set of common norms and rules, which determine what ideas can be considered as ‘the truth’ and shape the public discourse on every subject. The latter plays a key role in how reality is viewed by the observer, but not only that, the observer is shaped by the language and vice versa. The attribution of its own meaning to language is a defining trait of post-structuralism. (Wæver, 2002)

In general, critical theorists and scholars aim to challenge what is widely accepted as ‘the truth’ or ‘knowledge’. The concept of power is therefore one of the main variables in the IR narrative research, and the scholars in this stream have always been questioning how the current norms, beliefs, and accepted facts (whose acceptance also depends on shared norms

and beliefs) help the actors in possession of control over the power dynamics and vice versa. In addition, many claim that it is virtually impossible to maintain, let alone observe, universal truths and rules in International Relations, and a different explanation is offered, based on the premise that no objective reality exists outside of our own World of interpretation and this interpretation is constantly being shaped by the ones in power. (McGlinchey, 2017)

The assertion of power is thus understood as achieved by the ability to manipulate the discourse, therefore, the actors possessing the means to set the agenda in discourse can shape what will be then accepted as the 'universal truth'. (McGlinchey, 2017) In the Slovak environment, but not exclusively, sociologists and political scientists have been observing an increasing degree of polarisation of society (Aktuality.sk, 2021) which could be attributed to different sources of news used by the population. If the owners of these channels have the power to set the agenda when it comes to narrative creation (as understood by McGlinchey or Wæver), they possess the power to create perceptions of identity among their readers. This translates via electoral process into power to shape the country's foreign policy, which makes the study of narratives in these channels essential.

While constructivist and post-structuralist works have paved the way for the identity studies and foreign policy construction by perceptions and narratives, they shall not be viewed individually, separated from other areas studying societies' and individuals' identities, such as psychology and sociology. Crucial concepts stressed by post-structuralist scholars, such as the *self vs other* (us vs them) principle were vital for this thesis when complemented with mental model theories, or symbolic interactionism and social identity streams, and are further tackled in the theoretical part of the thesis.

1.1.2. Examples of identity shaping foreign policy

The second area of research that was examined for the purpose of this thesis entails studies on the role of identity in shaping concrete foreign policy actions and identities of societies or nations.

The role of identity construction in foreign policy shaping was used by David Campbell (1992) in his research on the security policy of the United States. He used an example of the US invasion of Iraq as a proof of how construction of identities might lead to a perception of threat and subsequent need for action, such as military invasion. The concept of securitization of foreign policy issues using constructivist and identity theories was also tackled by Buzan,

Wæver, and Wilde (1998), who aimed to question the primacy of military and material factors in national security and propose a new type of approach to the study of this field.

To facilitate the construction of identities of different states and actors of International Relations, a *self versus other* dichotomy is often used as a tool to distinguish our own identity from other agents, individuals, or societies. This approach, often dubbed ‘us versus them’, was described by Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (2002) in their work on the role of national identities vis-à-vis the European identity and EU integration. Wæver (2002) further examined the role of Discourse Analysis as the IR theory and tackled the post-structuralist stream in foreign policy analysis. Besides that, he claimed three layers of concepts of a nation can be identified: the state level, the relation of the state towards Europe, and the European level itself represented by specific groups of agents working for the common European good.

As a result of the War in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, where the identity questions seemed to play a crucial role in determining who might be the enemy, Hansen (2006) examined the role of Discourse Analysis as a method and *self vs other* dichotomy as a theoretical approach to understand the actions of different actors of foreign policy. Using these tools Hansen identified the most prevalent narratives in connection to the Bosnian war and studied how these narratives directly shaped the practices of states involved in the conflict. She further claims that the understanding of security in International Relations must be based on a practical approach consisting of two main pillars, namely the actions of different actors and the discourse in the form of language and narratives. The importance of the latter is proved by the study of materials such as media coverage outcomes, political speeches, or documents of international law. It is therefore suggested that the practice embodied in these means of discourse and actions can lead to securitisation of certain issues, a process already described by the scholars from Copenhagen school of thought (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998). Through this process, the foreign policy of a state is shaped, having an appropriate influence on the actions in the field. As the framework of this thesis entails the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the concepts of security policy are vital to be included in shaping the identity of different IR actors, especially in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. (Hansen, 2006)

This thesis works with the conceptualisation of ‘the West’ as an actor. The use of such a label in the discourse implies the existence of a similar geographical concept, namely ‘the East’, the perception of which was studied by Iver Neumann (1999) by applying the *self vs other* dichotomy. The author tackles the use of *other* in several cases, namely the Turkish, Russian, and Central European societies. The sole case of Central Europe itself shows how the desire

to portray ‘the East’ as the *other* in countries of the region implies the rejection of this label becoming part of the *self* in countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, but also Slovakia and other. This then presents a profound influence on the idea of ‘friends’ and ‘relatives’, explained later in this thesis, and thus co-creates the foreign policy of a state.

1.1.3. Disinformation and misinformation in social media

The third crucial sphere to examine for this thesis is the disinformation issue, foreign influence through social media (especially Telegram), Russian propaganda, or analysis of narratives spread by disinformation accounts on social media platforms in Slovakia. This part of the literature review is important since the research was conducted on Telegram channels labelled by the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic as containing disinformation or misinformation.

As the list of channels was provided by the Ministry, no normative evaluation of what being a ‘disinformation/misinformation/propaganda spreading channel’ means was needed from the side of the author of this thesis. However, a misconception about the actual meaning of the terms *disinformation*, *misinformation*, *hoax*, and *fake news* is prevalent in society, and shall therefore be tackled.

The terms ‘disinformation’ and ‘misinformation’ are often used interchangeably in public discourse, despite not having the same meaning. In both variants, the content of the narrative is factually wrong, incorrect, or contains a lie. However, in the case of a disinformation, the author is fully aware of this fact and shares the narrative nonetheless, while by sharing a misinformation, the person spreading the content is not aware of the factual incorrectness or another issue with it. (Taylor & Francis, 2024) In this thesis, the distinctions between these two terms are irrelevant due to the reasons already mentioned (the already provided list of channels with both groups), but also since the main aim is to identify the narratives themselves, and not to delve into the intentions behind and fact-checking of the content.

A ‘hoax’ is a related term often used in a similar context with the previous two. It labels an unsolicited, alarming, altered, or partially wrong message, often warning about some alleged danger, and predominantly calling to action by either spreading the message or trying to scam the user of their money. It might make use of a celebrity person, a politician, or other famous individuals or groups. (Elv.ai, 2024) In contrast to that, ‘fake news’, which is a term predominantly used in media studies and media environment, includes all sorts of false

stories, whose primary aim is to hurt the reputation of the person involved, using fabricated or unverifiable stories, or ones which cannot be proven. (University of Michigan, 2024)

The use of social media to spread disinformation has been, among others, tackled by the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats, which is a department at the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. Especially in 2023, the Centre has published several studies, including a study named *TikTok: Analysis of the Slovak disinformation environment*, which has identified main narratives on Slovak TikTok disinformation accounts and tried to map the whole disinformation environment on the platform. (Ministry of Interior of Slovakia, 2023c) The study mentions narratives including labelling Ukrainian regime as fascist, describing the West, EU, and NATO as threats, or generally supporting narratives spread by official Russian representatives and media. It might be expected that similar narratives can be found in Telegram disinformation channels as well, especially since the study showed interconnectedness between the two platforms, predominantly in the form of sharing Telegram narratives on TikTok, but also TikTok videos in Telegram chats.

Other studies published by the Centre have mapped the main disinformation narratives preceding the 2023 Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia (Ministry of Interior of Slovakia, 2023a) and described the *'life of a piece of disinformation'*, which focused on the inter-platform links, reach and duration of chosen narratives (Ministry of Interior of Slovakia, 2023b), or analysed disinformation on other platforms, such as Discord or Youtube.

In the Slovak context, the analysis by the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak in cooperation with *investigace.cz* and *Firehose of Falsehood* was published in March 2023. The team has found out that *'the ecosystem of radicalisation of public opinion'* has moved from other social media to Telegram. (ICJK, 2023a) This further stresses the need to analyse this platform as well. In addition to that, the role of Telegram in spreading disinformation and pro-Russian narratives was strengthened after the start of Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 and subsequent actions of the Slovak government aimed to block several disinformation and pro-Russian platforms. (ICJK, 2022) The analysis also tackled some of the narratives present on the platform, such as *'continuous genocide of the white race'* or *'planned invasion of Africans to Europe.'*

The issue of hoaxes and fake news has often been interconnected with extremist political groups and thus the piece by Anton Hruboň (2021) from the University of Matej Bel on the communication strategies of neo-fascists in Slovakia with the use of disinformation helps

paint the picture of this issue in the Slovak political sphere. Hruboň claims that these groups try to construct ‘*an alternative world and truth*’. The important outcome of this study is the claim that while these neo-fascist groups are not strong enough to overthrow standing democratic order, their narratives may be continually picked up by mainstream political parties, leading to ‘normalisation’ of these narratives in society and ‘*cultural fascistisation*’. A study focused on the examination of recurring signs of fake news and phishing scams in Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, was conducted by Kenyeres and Weigand (2023) with a focus on social media. The research found that the main common denominator was the issue of emotion-provoking, aiming to ‘*turn off the critical thinking capabilities*’, which is a rather common strategy among agents spreading disinformation and hoaxes.

These results focusing on social media platforms were supplemented by Tkáčová (2021) who studied the effects of Coronavirus pandemic on disinformation narratives. According to the results, an event such as the pandemic can cause a substantial shift in disinformation narratives, which Tkáčová showed by comparing the pre-pandemic disinformation content with the one obtained after March 2020. According to her, the topics with rather high prevalence in the period before the pandemic, as the migration question, suddenly gave way to disinformation connected directly with the Corona crisis, and their frequency considerably dropped. If we consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an event of similar magnitude of importance for the Slovak environment as the pandemic, we can presuppose that it reshaped the disinformation narrative map in the country as well.

Another point of view aiming to address the issue of change in the form of disinformation and fake news was examined by Rosůlek (2019), although his work focused on the idea of a “post-truth” age and its definition, which is considered important for the framework of this thesis as well. The study claims that Russia had continuously been trying to influence the Central European area and its public discourse through spreading its narratives. However, this is complemented by the claim that it is indeed rather difficult to distinguish between news and fake news, making the ‘post-truth’ era blend in with the previous one.

Steering away from content solely connected to Slovakia, a piece by Herasimenka et al. called *Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: the case of Telegram* focuses on Telegram social platform itself. The authors have analysed around 200 000 Telegram posts and have concluded that while the spreading of misinformation and disinformation links in Telegram groups is more common than sharing links to professional

media content, the former is conducted in a limited number of groups and target rather smaller but active audience. (Herasimenka et al., 2022)

A similar concept to the one used in this thesis was presented by Chen and Ferrara (2023), who examined the Twitter environment after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. Around 500 million tweets were analysed and showed that Russian authorities and state-sponsored media intensified their activity on Twitter on the day of the Russian invasion, while the intensity of posts from other channels connected with official Russian narratives gradually peaked during the first month of the war.

Elaborating on the framework of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the dissemination of Russian propaganda and the use of disinformation were tackled by several studies. Pierri et al. (2023) examined the spread of propaganda and misinformation in the first months after the Russian invasion in 2022. The results claim that only about 8-15% of posts containing Russian propaganda or misinformation narratives were removed and that Facebook and Twitter are vulnerable to be misused as a tool for spreading such narratives without efficient control. A similar approach was chosen by Treyger et al. (2022) in their study on Russian use of disinformation on social media. The main findings include a spike in social media use by Russian authorities since 2014 in European countries, most probably a response to 2014 events in Ukraine. However, according to the authors, Russian strategy is in this case 'neither well organised nor especially well-resourced'. This kind of strategy was among others examined and theorised by Meijas and Vokuev (2017), focusing on the transition from old forms of broadcast media to social media use.

The aforementioned pieces of research tackled several different areas relevant to this thesis. However, whether it was the role of identity of foreign policy co-creation, analysis of disinformation strategies, or examination of social media and their role in propaganda, disinformation and misinformation dissemination, a coherent study of the role of Telegram in shaping the identities and perceptions of actors in International Relations in Slovakia has not been conducted yet, despite the rather substantial reach of disinformation Telegram channels in the country. Building on the previous research, the latter is the primary focus of this thesis.

1.2. Conceptual framework

1.2.1. Identity and ‘self versus other’ (othering)

Overall, the role of identity and construction of narratives in foreign policy, which has emerged in the 1990s and has been gaining prominence among many International Relations scholars since, is one of the main shaping forces behind this thesis and the formation of hypotheses. The idea that the actions of players in International Relations, predominantly states, are not only formed by their fixed interests or possible material gains, but a certain perception of the state by itself pressures it to acquire a specific role in global interactions, lends a substantial amount of importance to the way these perceptions are formed inside the societies and states themselves. Keeping this in mind, social media, which have been gaining popularity as a source of news for a certain part of population, help co-create not only foreign policy of the state by shaping the perception of the society itself, but also other actors of International Relations, namely foreign countries, and international institutions.

The process of constructing and creating identity for state actors could be approached in different ways and is fundamentally interconnected with their actions and practices. The chicken-and-egg problem described by Alexander Wendt, causing difficulties in recognising whether it is the agents that shape the structure or the structure that create the identities, leads to claims that both influence each other simultaneously and there is no point in distinguishing between them. (Wendt, 1987) There could be, however, ways out of this dichotomy, and one of them could be the approach dubbed *self vs other*. The principle of this approach is based on the possible formation of one’s own perception, different from shared and structural identities, but not necessarily in exclusive way. This is arguably valid in the case of individuals, but also larger societal bodies, including nation states. (Wæver, 2002)

One of the ways to look at the self vs other approach is the idea of self-identity in relation to the widely accepted order. The forms of order can vary, including examples such as language, which is always a set of norms accepted by the society as a mirror of itself. (Chow & Rooney, 2006) Some argue that these ideas of the *self* in relation to an order could be traced to the beginnings of human civilisation, whether it is the Eastern Mediterranean community already around year 1000 BC and era of Greek philosophy (Strong, 1992; Neumann, 1999) or even India. (Mauss, 1985; Neumann, 1999) In this case one must keep in mind two potential perks. While in the later stages of history of human civilisation the relationship between the self and the order could be perceived in rather political sense, meaning the position and behaviour of

an individual vis-à-vis the state with its institutions or a larger society often in a form of a nation, the earliest ways of realisation of the role of *self* were most probably present in a form of individuals evaluating their place in smaller communities and groups, such as tribes, or even early agricultural societies. Furthermore, it would be counterproductive to stick to the Western narrative only, which often stresses the role of ideas concerning *persona* rooted in the Roman society. (Neumann, 1999)

Contrary to the identification of a *self* of an individual pertaining order, which is a rather vertical approach by the understanding of power relations, a state or a society can define its own identity in more horizontal way, however, with some power relations still exhibiting features of vertical character. The horizontal concept of *self/other* identification can be observed when a society builds its own identity by setting itself apart from other actors of geopolitics and IR, namely if a state's building brick of *self* comes from the realisation that its citizens are not part of another state or societal body with different values, features, and norms. This does not mean that both states and societies cannot be part of another *self* in form of an umbrella identity on a higher level, entailing societies themselves rather than individuals. While this path towards self-identification plays a vital role, the definition of a society's *self* cannot be based exclusively on distancing from other identities, as the dichotomy created by such approach could be labelled '*not very information-rich*'. (Wæver, 2002)

Therefore, other factors come into play to overcome the circular characteristics of the us vs them approach in *self/other* identification, as this circularity ends in a loop of characterising us (self) as the opposite of them (other) and vice versa. Especially in the case of smaller states, an identity framework of 'friends' or 'relatives' can be found, as shown by the case of Nordic countries and their approaches towards European integration. (Hansen & Wæver, 2002; Ruggie 1998)

If we consider the construction of identity of Slovakia and its society in relation to actors of International Relations, several premises can be made and then examined in the research. From one perspective, Slovakia (*self/us*) can be distinguished from any other state in the World (*other*). However, as already foreshadowed, this dichotomy would barely paint the whole picture and therefore, the *other* can be represented by larger entities, such as the European Union. The use of the European Union and its institutions as the *other* can arguably be found relatively easily in Slovak political discourse, however, can become a part of the 'relatives' or 'family' group and transform into another form of *self/us* for the members of the

Slovak society. This might distinguish comparatively smaller states of Slovakia's size from states with the great/global power label, like the United States, where this additional layer of *self* does not tend to come in form of regional identities, and if it is present at all, it takes the form of (almost) global entity, such as 'the West'. (Wæver, 2002; Ruggie 1998)

In case of Slovakia, the 'relatives' and 'friends' identities can be represented by the Central European identity or the identity of Visegrad countries, although it is arguable to which extent this is rooted among the population of the country. Considering the war in Ukraine, the *others* one can examine in relation to Slovakia could be identified at several levels. Firstly, the relatively difficult to characterise concept of 'the West', embodied in USA and the European Union, comes into play. Since the war in Ukraine started, the narrative of Slovakia as a bridge between the West and the East has gained some level of prominence, actively aiming to separate the *self* of the Slovak society from these two identities. (RTVS, 2023)

In contrast to that, two additional relevant narratives in the Slovak public discourse have been aiming to portray the identity of Slovakia either as more or less firm part of 'the West' and its structures (EU, NATO), or using the concept of 'relatives' and 'friends' in connection to Russia, often using the sentiment of Slavic unity. The former is also inclined to construct the identity of actors such as Russia or Belarus as a threat to Slovak interests, while the latter aims to do so with actors such as USA, European Union, or NATO. In a competition of narratives such as this, the prevailing one helps to shape the perception of identity or security threats towards the country's society and thus plays a crucial role in shaping a country's security and foreign policy. (Campbell, 1992)

Due to the focus on Telegram channels in Slovakia and in accordance with the research question, the construction of *self* and *other* identities facilitated by the narratives spread by the channels is examined from the point of view of the Slovak society, encompassing the consumers of the information present there. Post-structuralist approach to foreign policy will therefore help translate the narratives into identity-based approach towards foreign policy and show the construction of identity of the main actors of International Relations in the light of Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, as mentioned, post-structuralism alone can be understood by some as a more methodological concept (Chernoff, 2007; Risse, 2019) than a full-fledged and established theory of International Relations, and for this thesis, it is crucial to supplement it with other perceptions of the role of identity and its formation.

The constant formation of perception of individuals about *other*, meaning different actors of IR, more general identities, or other bodies, known as ‘othering’, is shaped, and influenced by several factors, which are tackled in the following sub-chapters, both on individual and group level.

1.2.2. Bottom-up approach in International Relations

Keeping in mind the role of a *self* in form of an individual’s perception, throughout the whole research, the bottom-up approach is one of the theoretical pillars of the research. To study the construction of identities of actors in International Relations in minds of people consuming information from Telegram disinformation channels, focusing on the perception, which is created in minds of individuals, and translation of thousands and millions of these perceptions into a *self*-identification and identity construction on the level of a state and society are crucial.

Overall, scholars in the field of International Relations have long been engaged in a debate on the nature of creation of foreign policy and the identification of agents and factors behind it. While taking state as a unit and an actor in IR is arguably a prevailing model in the whole field, there are different approaches as to how the behaviour of such units is created and influenced. Thus, predominantly in democratic societies, the question of bottom-up and top-down approach has been largely debated.

The proponents of the latter stress the role of elites in the society, whether those are political parties, government, or high-ranking officials and civil servants. This has inherently produced a research scheme, which is initially engaged in the decisions of elites and their implications, and follows by examination of how they shape the society and its order together with to what extent they are legally, politically, and sociologically implemented. (Sabatier, 1986) In this case, several ‘*sufficient and generally necessary conditions*’ were identified, which include clear objectives, working causal theory, compliance friendly implementation process, qualified implementing officials, support from stakeholders, and immunity to socio-political changes. (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981)

Some of these points could be implemented in the foreign policy sector – namely in form of the shared understanding at the elites’ level of what the foreign policy priorities of the state are; committed officials in form of diplomats and state representatives, but also authorities able to explain the policy to the internal audience; support of stakeholders in form of businesses, representatives of cultural life, politicians, and intellectual elites; and the ability to

withstand threats to existing order, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but also shifts in the public opinion caused by them.

However, top-down approach has been challenged especially since the 1980s and several weaknesses were pointed out. Firstly, due to its concentration on how elites shape the policies, other actors of the process tend to be neglected. (Hjern, 1982) Critics claim that policy shaping and implementation are often pioneered by strategic initiatives, business sector, or lower levels of public administration, which are not taken into account when applying top-down approaches. (Sabatier, 1986) In foreign policy, this flaw is arguably observable predominantly in case of democratic societies with regular election cycles and functioning civil society.

Furthermore, in the case of an absence of dominant policy approach among the elites, exclusion of research on the processes leading to the eventual decision hides a substantial part of the whole picture. This is especially crucial in divided or fragmented societies with no consensus on the foreign policy overall, not just among the elites, which Slovakia arguably has been in the recent years. (Nemečková, 2023; GLOBSEC 2023; Sabatier 1986) In case the government of Slovakia accepts a foreign policy approach, there is no proof that the whole society and elites agree with it – sometimes its supporters might constitute only a slight majority among the voters, or it could even be a minority approach pushed through political will of the most powerful key stakeholders.

To overcome the flaws of top-down research design, an opposite approach can be nurtured in the research in form of bottom-up structure. Proponents of this approach focus on the role of society, lower levels of public administration ladder, citizens' initiatives, and individuals. Despite the relatively popular narratives of the foreign policy being dominated by strong and powerful in every society, public interest in the topic and relatively frequent disagreements of substantial parts of the society with official foreign policies show that it might not be such an “elite-driven process”, as often presented. (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017)

Public opinion has been arguably playing more and more crucial role in the foreign policy shaping. This has been tackled by several studies, among which pieces about the role of individual's perception on foreign affairs and its shaping could be found. Some of these examined ‘microfoundations of realism’ and claimed that the theories of IR can actually be rooted in the people's belief system and are often fuelled by emotions such as fear (Kertzer & McGraw, 2012), others focused predominantly on so-called audience costs in internal public

opinion following developments in foreign policy, showing that people are more than able to comprehend foreign policy issues, and especially groups that are politically engaged exhibited higher sensitivity to disobeying of international commitments by their leaders. (Tomz, 2007)

Research has also shown that international legal agreements provide a framework for understanding the foreign policy measures by the public and have a '*discernible effect*' on public support for various controversial foreign policy actions, such as the use of torture for the sake of national security. (Wallace, 2013)

Another point of view towards the role of public in shaping the foreign policy of a state, besides the one focusing on individuals' perception, could be the research of the influence of various pressure groups, lobbyists, and civil initiatives in times of increased foreign policy engagement, or in other words, the '*theories of crisis bargaining.*' (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017) Similarly to Tomz's (2017) work on audience costs, Fearon (1994) worked with the concept of domestic political response to foreign policy measures and found out that engaging the public in a dispute or a crisis can actually be a deliberate strategy of a state to increase the stakes. In case the escalation reaches a certain point and public is engaged enough, the domestic political costs of backing down are at such level that '*attack becomes a rational choice*', using game theory terminology.

Furthermore, the state of democracy allegedly plays a role in this sphere, and democratic regimes usually tend to have a more difficult time de-escalating a conflict which has already brewed beyond a certain point than non-democratic regimes. (Fearon, 1994) On the other hand, these claims have been criticised for being difficult to prove, and often the measurements which they are based on borrowed from econometrics or game theory can be taken only in cases when the political/audience costs were actually materialised. (Schultz, 2001)

The scholars promoting bottom-up approach disregarding their specific focus used similar building bricks in their research. The stress should not be placed on the decision-making process of elites as the initial point of case-studies, on the contrary, this might be one of the last steps of shaping foreign policy measures succeeding grassroots initiatives, lobbyist groups pressure, shift in public opinion, or public demand for measures. Hand in hand with it comes the identification of actors, however, this brings about complications as to who to include as a relevant agent, what should the evaluation criteria be, and where the line of such relevancy to

the research is. Overall, the desired outcome of this kind of study is not to identify the effects of foreign policy decisions, but rather examine how it is shaped and created. (Sabatier, 1986)

In this thesis, the concept of public pressure is one of the drivers behind the research of Telegram channels, as by consuming information from such sources, the individuals create their own perception of International Relations reality and identity of its actors, inevitably leading to forming desires, expectations and wishes which are then driving factors in the voting behaviour. The public pressure on the government is then, as shown, one of the crucial factors co-creating foreign policy of state actors.

1.2.3. Macrostructures and Microstructures

Elaborating on the bottom-up approach towards research of foreign policy creation, two different levels of analysis can also be found in construction of identities of societies – the first one being the macro level, which concentrates on the society, and the micro level, which focuses on individuals and smaller groups of people. Individual people are consuming information from social media channels on Telegram, however, thousands and millions of these people then form a society, which mirrors the different narratives rooted in people's minds. In states with functioning democratic system and regular elections, the individuals shape the foreign policy of the country by casting their votes and having a decisive say in government forming. Therefore, the research will employ a combination of post-structuralist approaches on micro and macro level.

This dichotomy was tackled by Teun van Dijk in the form of macrostructures and microstructures. This approach is one of the building blocks in understanding the role of language in larger societies and the part small groups and individuals play in it. While the microstructures are predominantly small segments of text, speeches, or other forms of language, and their examination can provide us with an overview of choices the author made to convey a specific message, (Pratiwi and Refnaldi, 2018) macrostructures can be described as larger and more general discourse frameworks that make use of power dynamics by attributing meanings and perceptions to individual words and phrases. One can liken macrostructures to terms like topic, gist, or theme, usually used when assessing a conversation or a monologue. (van Dijk, 1980)

A pivotal idea of the concept is that discourse cannot be understood adequately by analysing only the microstructures, as we would be unable to count with 'global meanings' of discourse, which macrostructures bring about. (van Dijk, 1980) In the case of this research, a substantial

number of words, phrases, metaphors, and other figures of speech was encountered. During the analysis, it was crucial to keep in mind the macrostructures including political ideologies, perception of cultural values, and the context of the war in Ukraine. Integration of both levels of structures helped code the narratives in the texts more precisely.

1.2.4. Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism

The role of individual and the personalised version of *self* as an embodiment of an individual identity is a concept exclusive neither for study of international politics nor research of relations between a person and a state. Sociological and psychological disciplines have tackled the issue from their own point of view and therefore undoubtedly paved the way in identity studies. Since the 1970s, the relationship between an identity of and individual and the group they are part of has been examined thoroughly and studies concluded that self-identification of a person is strongly connected to the ‘social groups’ they belong to. Being part of such a group can provide the individual with several factors of identity construction, whether it is the sense of purpose, leading the person to accept the goals of a group as their own and the idea of contributing to the common goal; the sense of belonging, which shows the individual that they are not alone with their experiences and are able to provide feelings of unity and togetherness; the feeling of self-worth, as the individuals can take pride in successes of the group and feel their contribution towards it; and the sense of identity itself, where the group can help the person understand themselves by shared perceptions and definitions. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; McLeod, 2023)

The process of derivation of one’s identity from the social group could be described in several major steps. Firstly, the social categorisation phase takes place, leading one’s decision as to which social group they aspire to be part of based on criteria such as age, ethnicity, race, but also political views. Secondly, the social identification step is taken – if the individual already feels as a member of one or more social groups, it can be expected that they will start accepting the shared notions, perceptions, and norms of the group and these will become part of their own identity. The third phase, named social comparison, then leads a person to recognise different social groups and identify the differences in their narratives from one’s own group. This directly results in dichotomy of ‘in-groups’, which an individual is member of and feels the need to adhere to, and ‘out-groups’, which tend to be viewed with doubts and suspicion. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; McLeod, 2023) Circling back to Wæver (2002), these dynamics can be compared to *self* vs *other* theory of identity formation.

However, Tajfel and Turner's approach has seen some criticism based on the difficulty of translating social identity theories to political reality. One of the main issues is arguably the claim that social identities are rather acquired than ascribed, which leads to increased importance in individual notions and differences, a narrative which tends to be overlooked by social identity scholars. Furthermore, they focus more on the social group boundaries rather than on the meanings of membership; they often disregard the different strengths of group identities and have not been able to plug the hole in the question of the stability of such group identities. (Huddy, 2001)

Overall, taking into account the main points of social identity theorists, Telegram channels could be viewed as types of a 'social group', as described by Tajfel & Turner. If we consider a Telegram channel a social group, the individual can then choose to become a member of one of these channels based on criteria such as values, political views, or another form of sympathy. By being part of the channel, they can start applying the predominant narratives of the channel to their own self-definition and, therefore, their own perception of foreign policy. If one then considers themselves a member of such a group, the narratives presented in the channel can be viewed more favourably and thus be accepted without substantial doubts, while narratives shared by other channels, or in broader spectre, other media sources, could be disregarded as untrustworthy simply due to their origin. This aspect would then be one of the factors in distrust in other types of media by many Telegram channel users. The channel ultimately becomes one's in-group, or in other words, part of the *self*.

However, the formation of *self* in the case of an individual and its impact on society can be described in a different way using psychological and sociological frameworks. According to some scholars, the perceptions of reality and, therefore, its construction in the minds of people are predominantly shaped by interactions with their surroundings and, most crucially, through communication. (Carter and Fuller, 2015; McLeod, 2023; Nickerson, 2023) This approach is often labelled 'symbolic interactionism' and was arguably coined by Herbert Blumer in the late 1930s, although, interestingly enough, Blumer himself called it '*[a] somehow barbaric neologism*', which he '*coined in an offhand way*'. (Blumer, 1969) While the term itself might have been popularised around the Second World War period, the basics of this approach have been appearing since the early 1900s. According to one of its proponents, George Herbert Mead, the self-image of an individual is directly being shaped by their relation to and interaction with outside factors, with language playing the most crucial role. (Mead, 1934)

This interaction can be described in three main principles. Firstly, every interaction of an individual must be viewed in its social and cultural context and the perception of every situation must adhere to the viewpoint of the individual. Secondly, every action of such individual directly depends on the views they have constructed through their interactions with the surroundings, ascribing different degrees of importance to various objects and situations. Thirdly, none of the meanings are fixed in time, and by further interaction, they are being constantly co-created and reshaped. (Blumer, 1969)

By taking all these main principles, which have been described at the level of an individual and their relation to the surroundings (the micro-level), and applying them on the level of the whole society and the nation (the macro-level), one unavoidably comes to a conclusion that social interactionist ideas, rooted in the field of sociology and psychology, are a necessary precondition and integral part of both constructivist and post-structuralist approaches. This analogy then further confirms the methodological background of this thesis in several ways. If a consumer of news and information from a Telegram channel uses the interactions inside the channel as a framework for identity co-creation and a blueprint for approaches in specific situations, the society consisting of millions of such perceptions then merges these individual perceptions together and forms a common expected approach. If social media platforms shape the perception of whole societies, they thus have a substantial impact on the practices of the society and the actions taken by its representatives, including the field of foreign policy.

Furthermore, as claimed by Blumer (1969) or Carter and Fuller (2015), the perceptions cannot be understood as fixed, making social media such as Telegram channels important in shaping perceptions of foreign policy and its actors in eyes of the voters and thus possible tools in both the hands of politicians for their own gains and goals, but also foreign powers trying to intervene or shape the foreign policy of a state from inside according to its own liking.

1.2.5. Mental models and Sociocultural Knowledge

Besides the social groups that individuals consider themselves to be part of, a slightly different factor having an impact on the process of ‘othering’ (as described by the *self* vs *other* principle) can be found in the cognitive perceptions of the World around us, which Teun van Dijk named ‘Mental models’. These models, which have a profound effect on the evaluation of inputs flooding human minds, are rooted in the day-to-day events or phenomena all of us experience, making them predominantly subjective. Furthermore, newer Mental models are profoundly influenced by the older ones shaped by previous encounters.

Therefore, they could be likened to what we call ‘opinions’ in general English. (van Dijk, 2012)

If we translate this into the real case of Telegram channels tackling war in Ukraine, consuming content from the channels forms the Mental model, which then plays a crucial role in how one views and perceives further pieces of information on the topic. If the predominant narrative in pieces of news presented to a person portrays one of the IR actors as an aggressor, this might then become part of the person’s Mental model, which will then cause that other, albeit neutral pieces of news, will be perceived with distrust and prejudices. In another case, if one’s political ideology is consistent with the casus belli and reasoning presented by the aggressor, they are then not inclined to denounce the actions of such an IR agent.

If every individual has a Mental Model that they employ to evaluate situations they get into and phenomena they experience, the perception of otherness among individuals can be explained and the variety of this perception in the population is understood. However, how can the translation towards the level of the whole societies and nations, that was already partially tackled in this thesis, be then explained? The answer proposed by van Dijk encompassed a concept called ‘Sociocultural knowledge’. This entity is ‘socially shared by the members of the epistemic community’ and can be understood as a version of ‘common sense’ in the population. (van Dijk, 2012). It is constantly shaped by the process of othering and the perception of otherness and co-exists with individually tailored Mental Models in a person’s consciousness. The Sociocultural Knowledge might be specific to a certain group of people, bearing resemblance to the concepts of in-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; McLeod, 2023), and can vary and change in time.

Overall, using the framework of Mental Models and Sociocultural Knowledge, a perception of otherness in the shared consciousness of a nation, for example, the Slovak society, is shaped by individual perceptions based on their experiences, as also described by symbolic interactionists, which then have their substantial influence on the common shared norms, as understood by van Dijk, but also by Social identity theorists in case of groups. (van Dijk 1980, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; McLeod, 2023; Huddy, 2001)

1.2.6. Legitimation process

Finally, when working with content with presence of disinformation and misinformation, it is crucial to keep in mind that the intention of the authors of such narratives is often to present them as valid for a specific group or a society and to alter the perception of certain agents,

events, or phenomena. This goal is closely connected with the concept of legitimation, a process thoroughly described in social sciences. Legitimation processes aim to attach narratives with already existing and widely accepted norms and order, and thus lending these narratives the façade of truthfulness and credibility. (van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011)

This approach entails 4 key aspects. The first step, authorisation, tries attaching desired narratives to already existing and recognised authorities, such as the tradition, law, or cultural customs. Secondly, the moral dimension is included, appealing on what is considered right. Thirdly, rationalisation is applied, trying to make use of convincing arguments to support a desired narrative. In the end, the whole process is sealed by ‘mythopoesis’, a step which works with the (in the previous steps) established legitimation of the narrative and uses it to punish actions which are considered non-legitimate by this narrative, while supporting practices obeying it. (van Leeuwen, 2007)

Other approaches towards justification of narratives and by that their legitimation were proposed by Reyes (2011). In his view, the main factors in play were emotions (especially fear), hypothetical future scenarios, appeal to rationality, expert’s voices and recommendations, and altruistic tendencies. In both cases, the analysis of narratives in chosen Telegram channels exhibited many of these features.

1.3. Research design and research questions

The main aim of this thesis is to analyse and evaluate how the most influential Telegram channels in Slovakia help construct and co-create the identities and perceptions of key players and dynamics of International Relations through the main narratives presented in the channels. Rooting from constructivist and post-structuralist approaches in International Relations, which consider language, narratives, and practices as crucial factors in determining foreign policy of a state, the popularity of these channels undoubtedly affects the perception of International Relations and its actors in eyes of individuals and the groups, for which Telegram is the main or a substantial source of information on World politics.

The research in this thesis is built on the claim that through constant and repeated exposure to specific narratives concerning events and agents of foreign policy, a perception of them can be constructed in eyes of consumers of these pieces of information, social groups, the society, the governments, and the respective actors of International Relations. As shown by several scholars including Hjern, Sabatier, and others, the role of an individual in shaping the foreign

policy of a state is crucial and should by no means be underestimated. This is arguably valid especially for the democratic societies around the world. In this type of society, which Slovakia undoubtedly is, despite some flaws to the functioning of the system, it is the electorate which decides on the political stream, ideology, party, or coalition which takes charge of the country and runs the government. According to the Slovak constitution (Law 460/1992 Zb.), the President has the main say in the foreign policy, but in practice, it is arguably mainly the ruling coalition and the Foreign Minister in charge of relations with the partners at the international stage. Nevertheless, the principle in both cases (the government and the president) stands – it is the electorate, which decides and helps to shape the foreign policy in the long run by voting in representatives they perceive suitable to defend their interests in regular elections.

For 37% of Slovaks, social media serve as one of the main news outlets when it comes to politics. (Aktuality.sk, 2023) For the same percentage of citizens of the European Union, social media are the primary source of such pieces of news. (European Parliament, 2023) Showing that more than third of the population in both cases is exposed to political narratives spread on social media platforms, these channels inherently have a substantial influence on the public opinion and its co-creation. The biggest Telegram channels in Slovakia have tens of thousands of followers. This reach, together with the issue of disinformation, misinformation, hoaxes, propaganda spreading, and even accusations of foreign influence on the platform, make the most influential disinformation Telegram channels in Slovakia ideal candidates for research.

The choice of channels for the research has been influenced by two main factors – the popularity of the channels (measured in number of followers) and the list of disinformation/misinformation channels in the Slovak Telegram environment, consulted with the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. The first criterion is based on the outcomes of a project conducted by Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK), investigace.cz, and the project team of Firehose of Falsehood, which analysed the flow of disinformation and misinformation narratives in central and eastern Europe. (ICJK, 2023a) One of the outcomes of the project was a list of Slovak Telegram channels with the biggest number of followers, thus, with arguably the widest reach, as of March 2023. While the exact number of followers may have changed to some limited extent since, the popularity of the channels is still valid, being a crucial factor for inclusion in the research.

However, as this thesis aims to examine the narratives spread by the most popular disinformation and misinformation channels, the single criterion of popularity of the channel did not suffice. Therefore, the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic was consulted in December 2023, as this institution encompasses units designed to tackle the issue of hybrid threats, disinformation, and foreign influence. Thanks to the Ministry, a list of Slovak Telegram channels containing disinformation or misinformation narratives, Russian propaganda, or other content assessed as potentially threatening to the national security, was obtained.

The list of 4 channels to be examined in this thesis were therefore selected by comparing the list of most popular Slovak Telegram channels provided by ICJK with the list provided by the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. The main condition for including a certain channel was therefore presence in both lists, taking into account the most popular groups. As the list of channels was provided by a public administration and government institution, any channels of active politicians (namely the candidates for 2023 Parliamentary elections) were omitted.

It shall be noted that according to the criteria mentioned, the channel *Slovensko NEWS-FRONT.INFO* should have been included in the research as well, however, it had received a ban due to ‘violating local laws’ in 2023 and, therefore, could not be examined. (ICJK, 2023b)

It is crucial to clarify that no normative examination of whether the channel should be considered as one containing disinformation, misinformation or Russian propaganda was conducted by the author of this thesis, these labels were already given to the channels by the Ministry of Interior and its units. This comes hand in hand with the aim of the thesis, which is not to normatively evaluate or fact-check the content in the channels, on the contrary, this study shall serve as a probe to the environment of these channels and examine, how they shape the public opinion or alter the narratives when it comes to actors and events of International Relations and by that in what way they help co-create the foreign policy of the state.

The main research question shall therefore be:

How is the identity and perception of major actors of IR constructed in Slovak disinformation environment on Telegram in the era of Russia-Ukraine war?

By asking this research question, another part of puzzle can be added to the already existing literature on narratives creation, papers based on poststructuralist approach towards IR and its actors, or other disinformation research projects in the Slovak environment. Furthermore, the answer complements studies on Slovak public opinion and stance towards the war in Ukraine, while also supplementing content analyses and research on Slovak media space. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to obtain the answer.

The main research question is supplemented by sub-questions, such as:

a) How and by which narratives is the Russian Federation/the United States of America/European Union/Ukraine/the West/People's Republic of China/NATO portrayed?

This sub-question tackles the issue how the *other/them* identity of several actors of IR is constructed in the examined channels from the Slovak point of view.

b) What is the prevalence of these narratives?

To answer this question, a Qualitative Content Analysis approach is employed. This is a crucial part of this master's thesis, as the collective identities are being co-shaped not only by occurrence of some narratives, but also by their prevalence.

c) How is Slovakia portrayed as an actor of IR?

The last sub-question thoroughly examines the construction of *self/us* of Slovakia from the point of view of the researched channels.

The boundaries of research have been set both timewise and content wise according to several criteria. Firstly, this thesis aims to examine the narratives both concerning and connected with the war in Ukraine, or those which might not necessarily tackle the situation in Ukraine, however, have been appearing since the start of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. Therefore, the first boundary is set by this date as the starting point of any content analysed in this thesis. Secondly, the examined narratives must have been published before or around the war's second anniversary in February 2024. This cut-off date is meant to increase the uniformity of the research and was set due to time constraints of the thesis delivery, however, trying to keep the highest level of recentness.

Thirdly, due to the immense number of posts in the channels (in some of them, the number of posts published in one day can reach up to 50), timeframes for analysis must have been set.

These timeframes copied 5 main points in time, characterised by a high-level importance event or development connected to the war in Ukraine. The sample of posts was then chosen from the day of the event to up to 2 weeks following the date in case the channel was not particularly active in posting.

The events and dates selected were:

a) February 24, 2022

This date was chosen as it represents the beginning of the war. In the following days, the Russian military seemingly achieved several successes, which should have been reflected in the occurrence and prevalence of several narratives in the channels.

b) September 30, 2022

This day marks the official annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the relatively successful Ukrainian Kharkiv offensive bore its fruit in the preceding days.

c) March 17, 2023

On March 17, the Slovak government agreed on and announced sending MiG-29 jet fighters to Ukraine, a step which was taken with a large degree of controversy in Slovakia. (Denník N, 2022a) Therefore, a substantial number of narratives could have tackled the perception of *self* of the Slovak society and its position in the geopolitical landscape.

d) June 24, 2023

This day marks the unexpected rebellion of the so-called Wagner group led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. (SME.sk, 2022a) This was a breakthrough in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as it pointed to internal disunity of Russian military and political elites and forced the advocates of the invasion to reconsider their perception of either Vladimir Putin and his close circle, or Wagner Group and Prigozhin as such, who was considered a vital asset of Russia at the frontline.

e) February 24, 2024

February 24, 2024, marked the two-year anniversary of the start of the invasion, therefore providing ideal grounds for evaluation of the conflict, future perspectives, and big picture narratives. This is also the only timeframe from all the examined ones which includes the

period after the assumption of power of the new government of Robert Fico and his coalition partners.

Altogether, these 5 timeframes provided an overview of narratives, their gradual development and change in prevalence, and reflected political and frontline developments. Therefore, a more complete picture of the narratives and news consumed by the subscribers of the channel could be painted and examined.

1.4. Context of the Research

1.4.1. Ongoing war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 plays the major role in this research due to two main reasons. Firstly, it served as a framework for all the identities of actors in International Relations that are researched in this thesis. Secondly, it established timeframe boundaries for the data gathering. Furthermore, the spike in Telegram's popularity can be attributed to the invasion itself (as later explained), partially thanks to the Slovak authorities imposing bans on several media outlets considered Russian propaganda spreaders. (Denník N, 2022b) This led to the creation of new Telegram channels or an influx of followers into the existing ones. On platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, some accounts directly called upon followers to switch to Telegram, as the level of moderation there was much lower. (Republika, 2022)

While one of the narratives states that the war itself started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and subsequent developments in the east of Ukraine, the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 arguably altered the decades-long constructed security architecture of Europe. (EESC, 2022) After the initial Russian partial successes, namely military convoys reaching Kyiv¹ and the advance in the south, the Russian army was halted. Throughout 2022, Ukrainian troops managed to push the aggressor away from Kyiv and Kharkiv, while Russia annexed eastern regions of Ukraine (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk) – a step criticised by Ukraine as well as a substantial part of international community in form of UN General Assembly Resolution. (United Nations, 2022) The next year saw developments in Kherson region, as well as the unfulfillment of expectations from the summer Ukrainian offensive. Not to delve further into the battlefield developments, the full-scale invasion has

¹ According to several publications, both 'Kiev' and 'Kyiv' word forms are acceptable in English language. For the purpose of this thesis, the 'Kyiv' form of the name is used.

been ongoing since February 2022 and has reached its 2nd anniversary at the time of this thesis being written. The choice of the main milestones of the war used for the data gathering timeframes and their more detailed context is then presented in the research design section.

1.4.2. Telegram

This thesis works with the content of channels of a social media platform named Telegram. This platform was launched in 2013 by brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov, both originally from Russia. Interestingly enough, the duo was behind another social media platform popular in post-Soviet space, VKontakte (VK). Since its beginnings, Telegram has been downloaded over 1 billion times globally with the biggest popularity in Russia, India, and Indonesia. (Feedough, 2023) Overall, it can be found among the 10 most-used social networks in the World and has around 800 million monthly users. (Backlinko, 2024) It has been both praised and criticised for its free speech dedication, anonymity, and no moderation. In any case, this approach towards the content on the platform have brought about several problems in recent years. (Zmudri.sk, 2023) From 2015 on, several experts pointed out that the platform has become a haven for extremist groups, and even the Islamic State has used it as a crucial tool in their social media strategy, after Twitter had shut the ISIS accounts down. (BBC, 2017)

In the Slovak environment, the popularity of Telegram increased in the recent years and is being attributed to the fact that due to virtually non-existent moderation (the only strictly forbidden content is an open call for violence) the platform became a tool for disinformation and propaganda spreading. The migration of Slovak virtual content towards Telegram has experienced three main waves, with the first one being caused by the attempts of other popular networks, such as Facebook, to tackle the disinformation problem and moderate their content, followed by the migration of accounts during Coronavirus pandemic and a wave caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Zmudri.sk, 2023)

Telegram has been repeatedly labelled as a platform for disinformation and propaganda spreading activities. (RTVS, 2022; Euractiv.sk, 2023b) In addition to that, various sources reported hoaxes and fake news occurrences on the platform before the 2023 election (Euractiv.sk, 2023a) without any response or moderation despite the appeals by the Slovak Media Services Council. According to an AFP fact-checker, it is possible that the Russian secret service FSB operates a channel in the Slovak Telegram environment with around 35 000 followers. (Refresher.sk, 2023) The biggest channels in Slovakia, which this thesis works with, can reach up to more than 59,000 followers. (ICJK, 2023a)

2. Methodology

2.1. Research methods

To identify the prevailing narratives in the chosen Telegram channels and provide answers to the research question and sub-questions, a mixed-method approach of analysis was employed. This mix consists of Qualitative Content Analysis and Discourse Analysis. The inclusion of both methodological tools contributes to the preciseness of the answers to the research questions.

2.1.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

Firstly, the Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) approach helps to identify recurrent narratives about the war in Ukraine, actors of International Relations, their prominence, and the ratio of posts in which they appear. Furthermore, this step is necessary to help categorise the written language into topics.

Arguably, there are various ways of conducting a Qualitative Content Analysis, depending on whether the research question already works with some level of gained knowledge. A conventional QCA works with the text as such, strictly employing inductive approaches deriving coding categories from the text data. In contrast to that, a directed QCA approach presents research with pre-existing knowledge, theories, and research outcomes on the matter. (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) In this study, predominantly the conventional QCA was chosen as the most suitable tool, deriving codes and categories from the text itself. However, as the examined Telegram channels tend to have a wider scope of topics to tackle, a filter in which narratives to code had to be applied, borrowing certain characteristics of the directed version of QCA. Namely, these characteristics were the pre-existing definition of which international actors should be considered, and the scope of which narratives and contents are to be included in the establishment of the inductive coding categories.

2.1.2. Discourse-Historical Approach and Analytical Categories

Second step of the research employs Discourse Analysis (DA) with features of Discourse-Historical approach (DHA) as a tool to further investigate portrayal of actors, how this portrayal is then translated to the perception of followers of the channels, and which rhetorical strategies are used to convey the messages. In general, DA aims to examine the role of language in the human interactions in the context of the existing social reality. Language in

the broader sense is not necessarily limited to words or speech, it includes visual elements, posters, films, videos, or other forms of communication. In the Discourse Analysis framework, inter-human communication is an inseparable part of social relations and therefore a crucial part of Social Sciences research. (Beneš, 2008; Fairclough, 2003) While grasping the whole concept of the language with all its forms is one of the ways how to conduct Discourse Analysis, especially in case of Critical Multimodel DA, due to the limitations of scope and the nature of this thesis, only textual data in Telegram channels was examined.

The term Discourse Analysis itself is rather broad and does not represent a single united approach towards content analysis. Despite that, the common feature of all the streams is the rejection of the notion that language is just a neutral tool to observe and describe reality; on the contrary, it is understood as a tool of shaping the reality itself. (Gill, 2000) This is a feature which connects DA theory with identity theories in IR, such as post-structuralism.

Other ground rules for a Discourse Analysis should include a critical approach towards already existing knowledge; rejection of general objectivity expressed by the claim that every way of perception is shaped by social and cultural biases; notion that social interactions shape our understanding of the World; the belief that individual actions/practices play a crucial role in this understanding. (Gill, 2000; Burr, 1995) The analysis of language is, therefore, not meant to understand the phenomenon that the text describes but rather focuses on the text itself, its aim and nuances.

When employing Discourse Analysis or DHA, several vital steps need to be taken. (Gill, 2000; Reisigl & Wodak, 2017) Firstly, the ‘spirit of sceptical analysis’ needs to be included, which aims to disregard the already existing knowledge on the topic due to its vulnerability to social, cultural, and political biases. Secondly, the text or more pieces of text need to be examined thoroughly. If one elects to employ an inductive approach towards narrative analysis, this will provide background for the coding. In the case of this thesis, the obtained content of Telegram channels was reviewed before the analysis. Thirdly, the coding itself entails identifying pieces of text (or other forms of language as described in the broader sense) which represent a certain narrative or rhetorical approach and labelling the corresponding text or other piece of language. In the end, the analysis itself follows when the process of coding is over.

Furthermore, Reisigl and Wodak (2017), in their work on DHA, claim that every piece of text was written with the use of 5 strategies, by which the content aims to achieve social, political, psychological, or linguistic goals. These strategies include:

1. Nomination strategies
 - How are objects, phenomena or agents referred to linguistically?
2. Predication strategies
 - What characteristics are attributed to them?
3. Argumentation strategies
 - Which arguments are applied in the discourse?
4. Perspectivisation strategies
 - What is the perspective from which the phenomena are described?
5. Mitigation and intensification strategies
 - Are the narratives direct, intensified, or mitigated?

These 5 strategies are therefore crucial in formulating a coherent analysis of how different actors of International Relations are portrayed in Slovak Telegram channels.

To elaborate on the work of Reisigl and Wodak, van Dijk (2012) in his work *Ideology and Discourse*, which could be labelled as a crucial part of Discourse Studies, proposed a list of analytical categories of discourse structures with over 40 items. While the scope and the nature of the examined texts do not provide suitable conditions for the occurrence of all of them, the most prevalent ones were identified, as their role in sending a message and helping in mental image portrayal is indisputable.

2.2. Other factors

For the research, two software programmes were used. For data scraping and obtaining, an OSINT toolkit Telepathy² was used, arguably the most popular tool for working with Telegram channels' content. Besides that, the Telegram app itself, in its desktop form,

² Telepathy is an open-source app, which enables investigation of Telegram chats. It was developed by Jordan Wildon and is able to extract textual data, as well as several other variables, such as the date, time, number of likes, shares, or comments.

supplemented data gathering through Telepathy. To identify the narratives and examine the results, the MAXQDA programme was employed. This software helps the identification by usage of ‘codes’, which mark the occurrence of a certain narrative. Therefore, in the rest of the thesis, the word ‘code’ is used to represent coded segments in MAXQDA app.

As mentioned, a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches towards the content analysis was used. To explain this, both points of view and their use in this research need to be tackled. The deductivity of the approach is based on the fact that only certain actors and topics were taken into account. While the actors were predefined in the research question, the extent of topics chosen for examination is rather broader, however, still falling into the general scope of International Relations and Politics. There were no limits to which narratives were to be tackled and the categories of those would inductively step out of the text via analysis. Naturally, some narratives could be predicted thanks to other works and research in the field, but this had no effect on the code structure system used in this thesis.

The unit of research in this thesis is one post. This means that if a certain code was found in the post, the whole post was coded as entertaining a certain narrative. This is arguably the most logical approach towards analysis of Telegram channels, as the content on the platforms is structured into individual posts shared by admins, which then the subscribers can interact with.

Tackling the question of reliability in this research, one of the issues might be the dependence on human coding during the analysis of the textual data. As opposed to quantitative approaches, such as ‘bag of words’, the labels in this study had to be assigned manually due to the qualitative nature of the research, and no help from an AI or machine learning software was used. The coding had to be conducted by the author alone, as the rules of Master’s thesis preparation do not allow any other person to be part of the research.

The author is aware of a possible bias from his side. He is a student from Slovakia, the country in which the examined channels are based. He worked in the public sector in Slovakia, as well as on the United Nations level, and in his work experience he tackled the issue of hybrid threats, disinformation, and propaganda narratives, especially in the Slovak context. The author was not an active user of Telegram before the preparation of this thesis.

When it comes to validity, one of the questions might be pointed towards the extent of the dataset used to analyse the actors, narratives, and discursive strategies. Naturally, the scope of this thesis did not allow the author to study the whole two-year period of the Russian invasion

of Ukraine, and neither could he examine all Telegram channels in the list provided by the Ministry of Interior of Slovakia, as an immense amount of data would have to be analysed. However, by choosing the most popular Telegram channels in terms of number of subscribers, and by establishment of timeframes throughout the whole two-year period, an overview could be produced, as more than 3000 posts were scanned in one of the first steps of the research, providing a rather substantial dataset.

2.3. Overview of the examined channels

For the purpose of the research, 4 channels (as shown in Fig. 1 below) were chosen as suitable subjects. While their common features include being labelled as disinformation spreading channels by the Ministry of Interior of Slovakia and their popularity among Slovak Telegram users, there are certain differences between them, which should be taken into account when presenting research outcomes.

Name of the channel	Number of subscribers³	Date of the first post
Danny Kollar DKX	59,082	January 11, 2021
InfoVojna	48,770	February 24, 2022
Cassus Belli Live	35,961	October 29, 2019
ZEM&VEK	29,119	March 3, 2022

Fig.1: Table of channels examined in the analysis. (source: Telegram, Author)

2.3.1. Danny Kollar DKX

This channel is the most popular among the selected ones, having more than 58,000 subscribers in April 2024. The first post in the channel was published in January 2021 amid Coronavirus pandemic, which ignited one of the first waves of migration of Slovak social media engagement towards Telegram. The channel itself was founded by Danny Kollar (Daniel Bombic being the official name), a Slovak citizen currently residing in the United Kingdom to avoid arrest warrants from the Slovak police issued on the grounds of extremism and cyberbullying. (Startitup, 2022) The author has been spreading various anti-establishment narratives in the recent years, talking about ‘non-existing and fake pandemic, used for the genocide of the white race’, disrespect for pandemic measures, praise of Russia and Vladimir

³ as of April 26, 2024, 7 PM CEST

Putin, but also used methods of doxxing⁴, and was engaging in far right and extremist activities such as making the Nazi salute on camera. (Infosecurity.sk, 2022; Interez.sk, 2024)

Besides Telegram, Danny Kollar is active on YouTube, where the number of subscribers of his channel reached more than 76,000. He was added to the Meta ‘blacklist’ in 2023, which has in practical terms disallowed any posts on Facebook or Instagram that contain praise of Danny Kollar or even feature him. Furthermore, a 20,000 members large group on Facebook spreading his messages, narratives, videos, or other content, was banned. (Živé.sk, 2023)

2.3.2. InfoVojna

InfoVojna (which can be translated to ‘infowar’) channel is predominantly connected with the webpage bearing the same name. While the latter was created in 2015, the first post on the Telegram channel was published on February 24, 2022, the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. InfoVojna webpage, which uses a .bz domain typical for Belize, has been labelled as pro-Russian and disinformation spreading. (Aktuality.sk, 2022; SME.sk, 2022b) It was blocked soon after the start of the war in Ukraine by the National Security Authority, however, in summer 2022 resumed its activity. (SME.sk, 2022b) The threat of a ban by the Slovak authorities might have also been the reason for the domain change.

The Telegram channel is therefore strongly interconnected with the main webpage. This has been shown by relatively large number of links to the domain. By April 2024, the number of subscribers has reached more than 48,000.

2.3.3. Casus Belli Live

This channel was founded in 2019 with the first post published on October 29, 2019. According to its own bio, the channel is focused on ‘wars, conflicts, weapons, and geopolitics.’ The admins claim that the channel contains pieces of news, which are not shown by ‘presstitutes’. This word form is a portmanteau of the words *press* and *prostitute*, evoking the narrative of bribery or corruption in the media world, mostly associated with the claim that journalists are interconnected with the establishment or the ruling power.

Casus Belli network contains a YouTube channel with around 3,000 subscribers, but also a Twitch group for live streaming, and various additional Telegram groups. The number of subscribers as of April 2024 in the main Telegram channel reached more than 35,000.

⁴ Doxxing is characterised by publication of private and personal information about specific individuals to harm them or their reputation. Examples include uncovering of phone numbers or the home address.

The analysis has shown that this channel is focused on military matters rather than geopolitical narratives, however, still contains a number of posts with the latter.

2.3.4. ZEM&VEK

This Telegram channel is strongly associated with a magazine bearing the same name, which has been published regularly since May 2013. This medium was one of the pioneers in the conspiracy narratives in Slovak environment and was accused of spreading disinformation, antisemitism, medicinal conspiracies, and was even labelled ‘dangerous for society.’ (Denník N, 2018) The founder of Zem&Vek magazine was heard asking for funds from the Russian ambassador to Slovakia in 2014. (Neovlivní.cz, 2016)

Telegram channel of Zem&Vek became active in March 2022, therefore, the posts from this medium are not available in the first timeframe focused on the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As of April 2024, the number of subscribers of this Telegram channel reached 28,000.

3. Research outcomes

By applying aforementioned methodological approaches and research design, the examination of the chosen channels identified more than 3000 posts, which were obtained by scraping the content of the channels and could be subsequently investigated. However, not all of them were suitable for textual analysis due to several reasons, mainly the absence of any textual data with the main message of the post being entailed in a photographic or video content. As this analysis did not focus on Multimodal Content / Discourse Analysis, this type of data was not considered in the research. Furthermore, if the text could be identified in the post, however, it pointed directly to a photographic or video content without a meaning on its own, the post was not considered in the research of narratives and discursive strategies.

Another aspect which needed to be taken into account was the different frequency and length of the posts, which varied among the researched channels. For example, the channel *Danny Kollar DKX* predominantly exhibited a relatively lower frequency of posting compared to the other channels, a feature rather interesting in light of the number of subscribers, which was the highest among all the examined groups. However, the content of the posts was richer and included a variety of narratives, stories, or actors. On the other hand, the channel *Casus Belli Live* used a different strategy based on high-frequency posting with a smaller amount of text.

This strategy could be labelled as *Firehose of Falsehood*, and its main features include providing a high number of channels and posts together with the willingness to spread only partially true narratives, total lies, or fictive stories to overwhelm, confuse, and entertain the consumers. (Paul and Matthews, 2016) In other words, the frequency of posts aims to overwhelm the audience to such an extent that the individual is no longer cognitively capable of distinguishing a truth from a lie.

In all the examined channels, the posts often included links to different groups, webpages, articles, or videos. It is self-evident that the audience of these channels has not been consuming only the news present inside the channels and is prone to access the links with other content as well, however, the scope of this thesis did not allow analysis of the content accessible by the links.

Overall, from the total amount of more than 300 posts obtained by scraping the data from given Telegram channels, $n=1167$ posts were examined and therefore included in the analysis. The total number includes 258 posts from the February 24, 2022 timeframe, 300 posts around September 30, 2022, 204 posts around March 17, 2023, 202 posts around June 24, 2023, and 203 posts around February 24, 2024. The question of proportion of number of posts from each channel had to be tackled as well, and two approaches were considered. Using the same number of posts from all 4 channels would be helpful in analysing what number of them include specific narratives, and the channels could be compared thereafter. However, this approach was not chosen due to two main reasons – firstly, the frequency of posting as well as the quality and amount of content in the posts varied significantly (as shown on the example of *Danny Kollár DKX* and *Casus Belli Live*). Secondly, as the main aim of the research was to examine the narratives and subsequent perceptions in minds of the audience of these channels, the fact that individuals consume tens of posts from one frequently posting channel and only couple of them from another channel in the same period needed to be considered as well.

The proportion of posts was thus determined as follows: 69 posts from *Danny Kollár DKX* channel, 377 posts from *ZEM&VEK* channel, 230 posts from *InfoVojna* channel, and 491 posts from *Casus Belli Live* channel.

3.1. War in Ukraine as a topic

The first tangible result of the research was the number of posts which could be examined in given time periods and at the same time contained narratives about or relating to the Russian

invasion of Ukraine. The post was coded as entailing such narrative if the war was directly mentioned; if military developments on the battlefield were tackled; if events, phenomena, or people directly connected to the war were discussed; if direct consequences of the fighting or the war were included; or if actors such as Russia or Ukraine with at least implied inclusion of the war narrative were present. Overall, from n=1167 examined posts, 702 were coded as including the narrative about the war in Ukraine, making up 60,2% of all the posts in 4 chosen channels. This relatively high proportion could be explained by several factors. Firstly, the choice of timeframes to obtain the posts was based on important developments regarding the war itself, making stories about it more prominent in all kinds of media. Secondly, the channels themselves contained a substantial amount of coverage of Russia (as later shown by figures), which naturally brings about the topic of the war Russia is involved in.

When it comes to individual channels, the proportion of posts containing narratives about the war in Ukraine was 71,9% (353 out of 491) for *Casus Belli Live*, 34,8% (24 out of 69) for *Danny Kollár DKX*, 59,6% (137 out of 230) for *InfoVojna*, and 49,9% (188/377) for *ZEM&VEK*. It is, therefore, clearly visible that *Casus Belli Live* was the channel with the biggest proportion of coverage of the war in Ukraine. This could be explained by the channel's overall focus on the military agenda and warfare, as also stated in the bio ('*wars, conflicts, weapons, and geopolitics.*').

3.2. Narratives portraying actors of IR

While the prevalence of the war in Ukraine narratives in the total amount of examined posts could paint a partial picture, the portrayal of the main actors of International Relations was not limited to posts including this code. During the analysis, the occurrence of some actors was predictable, however, the prevalence of mentions of these actors was uncertain and the narratives by which their identities were being constructed had to be identified. As a very long list of countries or other IR actors could be created from such research, only the IR actors considered as the most influential were included in the statistics. These entailed Russia and Ukraine as the direct participants of the conflict, Slovakia as the base country of the examined Telegram channels, USA, Europe/European Union, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, China, India, and Italy. Furthermore, organisations such as United Nations, NATO, or BRICS were included as well. Apart from these concrete actors, the idea of a 'collective West' which has been present in public discourse in Slovakia and abroad made it vital to include this entity in the research too. A post was coded as including respective actors if the country,

organisation, or the label (the West) were directly mentioned, or if people, representatives, or politicians from these countries were included. When it comes to the West, the meaning of the word as in the cardinal directions was not considered, in contrast, the idea of the collective identity of this actor had to be present if it was to be coded.

The research identified several interesting results, as shown in Fig. 2 (below). The most prominent social actor present in the examined posts was Russia, which was present in 484 posts out of 1167 overall (41,4%). One crucial comment needs to be mentioned when tackling the occurrence of the Russia narrative – the dataset obtained from the Prigozhin rebellion in June 2023 played an important role in boosting these numbers, as shown in Appendix no. 1.

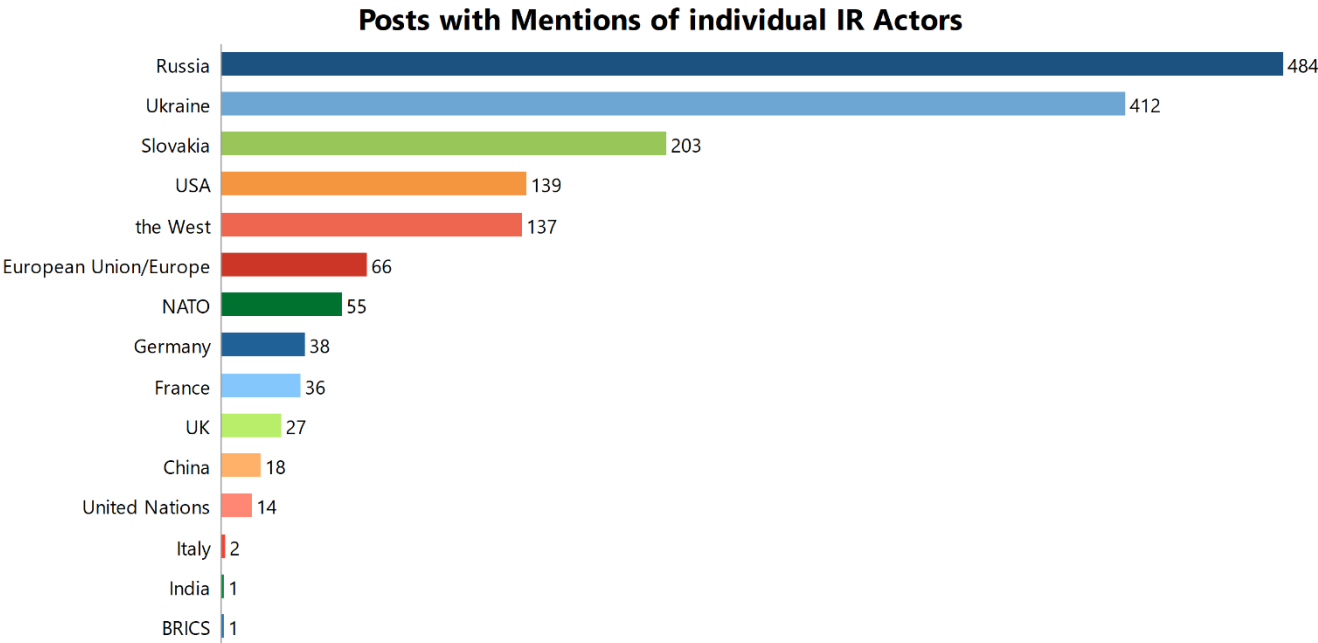


Fig. 2: The number of examined posts which contained mentions about one of the main IR actors. (source: MAXQDA, Author)

Ukraine was mentioned in 412 posts (35,3%), often together with Russia, but not exclusively. Slovakia as an actor appeared in 203 posts (17,4%). This fact shows that despite all the channels being based in Slovakia, using Slovak language, and having predominantly Slovak audience, their focus on Russia and Ukraine prevailed, especially due to the war narratives. A slight increase in the prevalence of narratives mentioning Slovakia were identified in March 2023 and February 2024 timeframe. The former can be explained by the topic the timeframe was chosen for – Slovakia sending its fighter jets to Ukraine, making it natural that the channels were more interested in the Slovak aspect. The latter is more difficult to explain, and it might relate to the new Slovak government being more inclined to follow similar

narratives as the ones being presented in the channels, making it a suitable choice for legitimization by the channels, although this is hard to prove.

Narratives tackling the United States of America were identified in 139 posts (11,9%) achieving only slightly higher prevalence than narratives portraying ‘the West’ (137 posts, 11,7%). Other examined actors appeared in rather lower number of posts; however, this was no obstacle to the occurrence of narratives about them which helped portray them and construct their identities in the perception of the channels’ audience. European Union or Europe appeared in 66 posts (5,7%), NATO in around 4,7% of the total number of posts and other actors as shown in Fig. 2 achieved even lower prevalence in the examined dataset.

In the next sub-chapter, the mentioned actors of International Relations will be tackled individually with focus on the narratives they were portrayed by in the channels, starting with the most prevalent codes. To remind the reader, the codes were obtained by inductive analysis, stemming from the text itself. The complete list of identified codes for every country can be found in the List of Appendices of this thesis.

3.2.1. Foreign IR actors

3.2.1.1. Russia

As the most prevalent actor in all the posts, Russia plays a crucial role in understanding of geopolitics and International Relations by the audience of chosen Telegram channels. The importance of this actor is enhanced by its role in the war in Ukraine.

The main narrative Russia was presented by, occurring in 484 identified posts, is the *Dominance of Russian military* code. Overall, this narrative operates with the message that Russia is in possession of strong, modern, and disciplined armed forces, which are capable of crucial military victories not only in the war against Ukraine, but in a possible confrontation with other great powers, mainly the West. One way to spread this narrative was by describing modern Russian weapons, such as ‘...the new Zirkon hypersonic missiles. The Americans themselves claim that these missiles cannot be intercepted even by the best Western anti-missile systems, such as the Patriot air defence system. The Russian Federation has already put its invincible superweapon, the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile, on combat alert in early September 2023.’ (InfoVojna, February 2024) These weapons were often ascribed the ability to intimidate the West, USA, or NATO, shown by claims about ‘...fears [about] tests of "weapon of the apocalypse" - Russian Poseidon nuclear torpedo capable of hitting all US

coastal areas...'. (InfoVojna, September 2022) In periods characterised by supplies of military equipment to Ukraine from the West of EU, these narratives were complemented by threats of destruction of all this equipment and weapons, including the case of Slovak MiG-29 fighter jets – the most prevalent response to that in the channels was the claim that the Russian army would simply destroy them.

In other cases, the successful Russian military activities in Ukraine were used to send a message of satisfactory achievement of military goals, for example '*a long-range weapon attack [...] launched against [...] the Ukrainian Air Force at Kanatovo and Dnipro airfields, hitting all designated facilities.*' (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) A combination of both approaches was prevalent as well, showing almost miraculously efficient Russian military equipment used to defeat Ukrainian forces, even using phrases such as '*resetting Ukrainian air defence*' in the case of Kinzhal hypersonic rockets. (InfoVojna, June 2023)

Of course, the beginning of the war presented more opportunities to stress early Russian victories, often overestimating the strength of Russian forces and their advances or claiming the destruction of Ukrainian defences. However, even in the later periods, claims about '*perfection of Russian military art*' (InfoVojna, September 2022) were present, sometimes showing alleged heroic acts of members of Russian military forces, such as in the case of '*[a] Russian soldier himself alone [who] occupied the Ukrainian position. The soldier secretly approached the enemy, crawled into a trench, and with a single shot killed three Ukrainian soldiers and then took two more prisoners.*' (Casus Belli Live, March 2023).

In connection to its dominance in military matters, Russia was often portrayed as a *great power* in other aspects, including economy, politics, or culture. In the case of the first of these aspects, two types of narratives were identified. Firstly, Russia was being shown as economically strong despite the Western sanctions or the need to finance the army and other military expenditures; in other words, '*not on its knees either politically or economically*'. (InfoVojna, February 2024) Secondly, either the current or future economic prosperity of the country was stressed on the global scale, showing the development of the Russian economy '*according to a new model*' (Zem&Vek, March 2023), or the importance of the country for global trade, which would be on the brink of collapse in case of Russian exclusion.

The international power of Russia was also being shown with a degree of disrespect for denouncements from international institutions, such as the United Nations. In other words, Russia was often portrayed as too strong to obey such institutions, sometimes stressing their

hypocrisy or blind obedience to the West. One of the cases was the arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin from the International Court of Justice. The reactions included claims that *'Russia is not a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and is not bound by it. Russia is not cooperating with this body and any 'prescriptions' for arrest coming from the International Court of Justice will be legally invalid for us...'*, even reversing the power dynamics and stating that *'Russia must immediately issue arrest warrants for all ICC "judges".'* (Zem&Vek, March 2023) This perception was clearly visible in narratives, which deemed international actions invalid or even useless provided they did not include Russia, as shown in the case of Nord Stream damaging, where *'only an open international investigation into the state of emergency with the mandatory participation of the Russian Federation can provide objective data...'* (Zem&Vek, March 2023)

Furthermore, the perceived 'greatness' of Russia was communicated to the audience of the channels by either peeking into history, stressing the struggle of the Second World War and Russian victory (while actively downplaying the role of the Western allies), or showing that *'external challenges and threats have cemented our [Russian] society. Together we are able to overcome all difficulties.'* (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) This 'greatness' was then viewed as threatening in the eyes of the West, which would be actively looking to weaken Russia according to the examined Telegram channels.

Strongly connected with the narrative about *Russia as a great power* was the code *Russia as a country with strong leadership*, which often could be found in the same post as the former narrative. In the case of the latter, however, the role of the Russian authorities was more stressed in assuring the wellbeing of the country, despite all the internal or external threats. One of the peaks of this narrative could be found during the rebellion of 'Wagner Group' led by Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023, where the posts contained a substantial amount of claims about strong Russian leadership crushing the rebellion, sometimes even using it for its own advantage, as in the claim that *'...the weekend "special military putsch" is said to have served as a psychological operation against the traitors in the General Staff, thanks to which Putin can launch a purge against the Vlasovs in the leadership of the Russian army.'* (InfoVojna, June 2023).

In other cases, the strong leadership narrative was connected to the personal popularity of Vladimir Putin, portraying him as a leader with the support of over *'80% of Russians'* (Zem&Vek, September 2022), or as a failsafe against the plans of outside forces, predominantly the West. The image of the leadership was also being improved in the case of

the unilateral annexation of regions of eastern Ukraine to Russia in September 2022, a move denounced by the General Assembly of the United Nations. (United Nations, 2022) The posts in this case showed the vision, strength and courage of the Russian government and Putin himself. This point is especially interesting, as it contrasts with the relatively frequent claim about either Western or Slovak authorities/government being rather incompetent.

The fourth and fifth most prevalent codes, *Russia as a liberator* and *Russia as a peacemaker*, surely have a lot in common and are often related to similar developments and actions of Russia as an actor. Both codes were relatively frequently used in connection to the occupied territories of Ukraine, especially with their population, and occurred hand in hand with the *Denying Russian guilt* narrative. *Russia as a liberator* narrative was often communicated by sharing the statements of Russian officials, labelling the conquered and annexed territories as ‘liberated’, as in the case of ‘*Victory Ride [...] held in Donetsk to mark the region's annexation to Russia. Rallies are held in all cities of the republic and in the liberated territories.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) This was often supported by the alleged desire of people in the regions to live under Russian rule and its public expression, such as ‘*Rossiya! Rossiya! Huge chants and joined hands to symbolise unity sealed the accession of 4 Ukrainian regions to the Russian Federation at a historic ceremony in the Kremlin!*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022)

The voice of the people was then used as an argument for further expansion and attacks against Ukrainian forces, hand in hand with the ‘eternal Russian rule’ in the already controlled regions, which could be justified as ‘*the will of millions of people.*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) The need to continue in expansion was justified by actions such as ‘*People [trying] to leave for Russian-controlled territory...*’ from other parts of Ukraine (Casus Belli Live, September 2022)

In posts portraying Russia as a *peacemaker*, the annexation of eastern Ukrainian territories was paradoxically one of the topics used by the channels to show Russia’s willingness to maintain peace in the region. However, this perception was not consistent with the Ukrainian and Western calls for a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, in contrast, it called for peace in the region by withdrawal of the Ukrainian forces and global acknowledgement of the annexations, stressing that ‘*the people living in Lugansk and Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhya have become our [Russian] citizens - forever.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) This new state of power was considered permanent and any actor

trying to turn it around would be labelled as the aggressor, while the Russian authorities would be the peacemakers and defenders.

Another vital event for the construction of Russian *other* as the peacemaker was the ‘Wagner Group’ rebellion, in which after initial uncertainty about the outcome especially Vladimir Putin emerged (according to the channels) as a generous actor willing to compromise with Prigozhin, guaranteeing that ‘*Prigozhin being able to go to Belarus is the word of the Russian president, the Kremlin said. The authorities will not prosecute those Wagner Group fighters who took part in the mutiny, given their merits on the front line.*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023) The ability to forgive the leader of the mutiny was celebrated by the channels, however, in hindsight, the mysterious death of Prigozhin in August 2023 in a plane crash might have indicated that the grudges had not disappeared completely.

The peace-making ability of Russia was communicated in the posts also through the role of the country in the global conflicts, where it could serve as a mediator. A special case was the dataset from February 2022, where despite being the attacking actor, Russia was, in some cases, portrayed as the one trying to prevent the bloodshed. One of the posts shared Vladimir Putin’s speech about ‘*a special military operation to protect the Donbas*’ in which he ‘*called on the Ukrainian army to lay down its arms and return home.*’ (Casus Belli Live, February 2022) Therefore, Russian forces were considered as peacekeepers and any resistance to them would be labelled as initiating a war.

Coming back to the *Denying the Russian guilt* narratives, there were several strategies aiming to either get Russia rid of any claims of warmongering, aggressiveness, or expansionism. Besides the *liberator* and *peacemaker* positions, one of these strategies was the *denial of the existence of a full-scale war or invasion*, often in the version of *special military operation*, a narrative pushed by Russian authorities and official propaganda. This approach could arguably be more easily usable at the beginning of the invasion, and some of the channels were rather open in such claims, as in the case of Danny Kollár: ‘*Putin did not invade Ukraine. Once again, for safety, without sarcasm. PUTIN. DID NOT ATTACK. UKRAINE.*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022) As in later stages, the fighting could not be denied or overlooked, the *special military operation* narrative gained prominence, often trying to spread the impression that the military actions of the Russian army are limited in scope and aims, which could then be used as an argument trying to excuse Russian military failures (using claims such as ‘Russia has not used all its military power yet’).

When the narratives in the channels neither denied the existence of a (full-scale) war, nor tried to portray Russia as a *liberator* or a *peacemaker*, but still aimed to erase or minimise the perception of guilt of Russia by the audience, posts with codes such as *Russia as a victim*, *Russia had no choice*, or *Russian invasion as prevention of a worse outcome* were identified. In the first case, Russia was considered in need of defence either against Western expansionism, as an actor which has to fight a ‘*sanctions blitzkrieg against Russia*’ conducted by actors who ‘*believed they could build their own world*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022), or as a defender of its traditional culture against outside threats.

With *Russia had no choice* narrative, the existence of the war was ascribed to developments due to which ‘*Russia was forced to launch the ŠVO [special military operation]*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023). These included the presence of Western actors in Ukraine, who were ‘*...going to use it as a battering ram against Russia...*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023), therefore requiring precautionary measures. The invasion as such together with the annexation of eastern Ukrainian territories were justified by claims that ‘*basic human rights have not been respected in Ukraine, especially after 2014, and more than 14,000 civilians (women, children and the elderly) have been murdered in the Donbas just because they did not recognize the putschist unconstitutional coup d'état in 2014...*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022) The people of eastern Ukraine in need of rescue were therefore often used as *casus belli* for Russian intervention and these narratives tried to paint the picture of Russia in such a position, in which every sensible IR actor would react in a similar way (protecting ‘innocent civilians’).

This was partially the claim entailed in the *Russian invasion as prevention of a worse outcome* coded posts. Whether it was the suffering of civilians, the need to stop ‘*neo-Nazi Russophobic regime in Ukraine*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023), prevention of global nuclear war, or response to the deception of Russia by the West and NATO especially relating to NATO expansion in the post-soviet space allegedly leading to Third World War, the invasion of Ukraine was presented as the lesser evil and a necessary precaution.

Given that the war in Ukraine could be justified by several claims and narratives and Russia was being portrayed as a *Dominant military power*, the military developments themselves and the Role of Russia in them were tackled in various ways in the examined posts. In accordance with the overall domination, Russia was presented as *the winning side of the conflict* by either big-picture posts, or stories from rather insignificant skirmishes five times more frequently than being *the losing side*. This proportion could lead to the audience firmly believing in Russian advance and lower the possible willingness to view Ukraine as an actor in need of

help, as this aid would be deemed redundant or useless. Even if the narratives in posts mentioned Russian losses or missteps, they were often complemented by *Russia as a strategically thinking actor* claims, clearly visible in the Prigozhin rebellion narratives, claiming that the coup was an orchestrated game, which enabled Putin to have ‘*a free hand to liquidate Western agents, especially in the state apparatus.*’ (InfoVojna, June 2023)

The ‘Wagner Group’ mutiny itself was an interesting case study inside the whole research in analysing how chosen Telegram channels approached the rather fast developments between actors (Russian authorities and Wagner Group), who have been considered as allies fighting for the same cause. While in the beginning, the most prevalent narratives showed *Wagner Group as traitors*, and even tried connecting their mutiny to Western or Ukrainian efforts, some stories pictured Prigozhin as a victim of the regime, and after Lukashenko’s mediating followed by an agreement between Putin and Prigozhin, the whole group was being portrayed as a *reasonable actor*.

During the whole studied timeframe, the narrative about *Russia in war with the West* was relatively prevalent with 25 occurrences. This claim was communicated either by connecting Ukraine to the West by showing that ‘*...Kyiv has become one of Washington's most important intelligence partners in the fight against Russia...*’ (InfoVojna, February 2024), implying that the real power struggle is happening between Russia and the West with Ukraine just being used as a tool, or by Slovak public figures claiming among other things that ‘*...now the Anglo-Saxons want to drag us into the[ir] war against Russia.*’ (InfoVojna, February 2024) Furthermore, open claims that ‘*...the collective West is in a global confrontation with the Russian Federation and set itself the task of destroying Russia...*’ (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) were present. At the same time, the perceived aggression of the West or Europe against Russia was portrayed as an adventure harming the strategic interests of these actors due to the *Russian power over them*. In other words, the conflict between Russia and the West was communicated as very real and mostly the fault of the West, however, it was supposed to be a delusional act due to the power of Russia to shape the inner developments of these actors. One of the examples showed that ‘*...[in one year] the EU has paid Russia more money for oil and gas than it has given Ukraine in two years*’ (Zem&Vek, February 2024), playing on alleged European dependence on fossil fuels from Russia. The gas supplies were a recurring topic in the posts, supplemented by the question of food exports or fertilisers needed by EU countries.

In addition to the justification of Russian steps in terms of military developments or trying to paint a picture of the West as a Russian enemy, the efforts to portray *Russia as a normal IR*

partner were present in the analysed data. This was either communicated by examples of Russian interaction with other IR partners, its trade with them (including Slovakia), or whataboutism strategies like ‘...when Americans murdered in [...] Yugoslavia, [...] Iraq, Syria, they were silent. [...]. And suddenly Russia is conducting a military operation in Ukraine, and they are screaming...’. (InfoVojna, February 2022) Often, the narratives downplayed the importance of war in Ukraine and advocated for a ‘business as usual’ position towards Russia. Complementing the normalcy of Russia as an IR actor, a set of specific attributes was ascribed to it based on cultural and ethnic background of Slovakia, Ukraine, and Russia. As all these countries share their Slavic roots, a narrative showing Russia as *the leader of Slavs* was identified, potentially evoking sentiments of pan Slavic unity among the audience. A similar narrative playing the *Russia as the older brother of Ukraine* card was found as well, although in only two cases.

Finally, not only narratives and claims painting the picture of Russia in a positive light were present. Codes such as *Russia as an aggressor*, *Russia as a threat to security architecture*, or the narratives of *corruption* could be found in the posts. However, these claims were often directly cited from either Slovak or Western authorities, which could be considered very untrustworthy among the audience of the channels, leading to automatic denial of their claims. Furthermore, the frequency of such claims was rather low.

3.2.1.2. Ukraine

Ukraine was the second most mentioned actor in the dataset, appearing in 412 posts. A country often positioned outside the scope of interest of the Slovak public before the 2014 events, the Russian invasion has inevitably increased the media coverage of Ukraine and the contested areas. Considering previous research on narratives and the general portrayal of Russia by the examined channels, a rather negative image of Ukraine in the eyes of the audience could be expected.

The most prominent recurring narrative in the case of posts with mentions of Ukraine was the code *Ukraine as a delusional actor*, which appeared in 28 posts. While this code might be slightly problematic to grasp for the reader, the general message of these narratives portrayed Ukraine or Ukrainian authorities and their actions as inappropriate, overestimating their own power, underestimating problematic issues, placing too much hope into their allies, or generally behaving in a hard-to-explain way from the point of view of the channels. Overall, this code could be divided into 5 sub-categories. Firstly, the posts often painted a picture of

Ukraine vastly overestimating its own military strength, underestimating the Russian capabilities, and believing in unrealistic military scenarios. Examples of such narratives included quotes allegedly coming from Ukrainian authorities, claiming that ‘...*the war will end [in Ukrainian victory] before Ukraine completes all the necessary procedures to join NATO...*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) or sharing statements of Ukrainian military commanders about ‘*returning to Crimea in winter.*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022) In addition to that, the posts included messages about ‘failed’ Ukrainian counteroffensives, even labelling them as ‘*worse than counterproductive*’ or ‘*suicidal*’ (InfoVojna, June 2023), shedding light of delusion and incompetence on Ukrainian general staff.

Secondly, the narratives about Ukraine either blindly believing its own allies or being disproportionally demanding towards them (which is also connected with the code *Ukraine as being too needy*) were being posted. One of the examples could be a reshared statement of the Ukrainian defence minister claiming that ‘...*The West fails to deliver weapons to Kyiv on time*’, accompanied by the emoji of a clown added by the channel admin. (Zem&Vek, February 2024) In these cases, the main aim of the post was to show Ukrainian leadership as unable to grasp the reality and adjust its expectations accordingly.

The third category of posts falling under the *delusional actor* narrative was focusing on potential Ukrainian entry into NATO. While the process is vastly complicated and the time horizon of the entry is questionable, the posts painted a picture of Ukraine aiming to enter as soon as possible without the sense of reality and of intentions of the western countries. A typical example was the narrative about ‘*signing the NATO application [of Ukraine] under the simplified procedure*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022) preceded or followed by statements from US or NATO officials (in this case General Secretary Stoltenberg) that ‘*despite Zelensky's declaration, NATO cannot accept Ukraine.*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

Fourthly, Ukraine was pictured as a country underestimating the abilities of Vladimir Putin and the Russian leadership or downplaying them intentionally. The examples included resharing Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s statements claiming that Putin was hiding in the shelter during Prigozhin mutiny, or the declarations that Ukraine would be ready to enter talks with Russia, but not with Vladimir Putin. These posts were in clear contrast with the ones portraying Russia as a country with strong leadership while also being vastly outnumbered by them, therefore painting the picture of unrealistic Ukrainian opinions.

Finally, the *delusional* aspect of Ukraine as an actor was disseminated among the audience also by stories from Ukrainian ‘home front’, including examples such as allegedly official advice to Ukrainian citizens ‘*to stock up on blankets and warm clothes for "independent heating".*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022).

Second most prevalent narrative concerning Ukraine was portraying the country as a *weak military actor*. This was done in several ways, with one being frequently posting news about Ukrainian military defeats in skirmishes against Russia. In this case, the code *Ukraine losing the war* was often identified as well, but not exclusively. Some examples from the beginning of the invasion claimed that ‘*Ukrainian border guards offer no resistance to Russian troops*’ (Casus Belli Live, February 2022) or that the whole air defence system and Ukrainian navy were immediately destroyed, effectively downplaying any sort of Ukrainian defence struggle. Naturally, these narratives had to be altered in the light of battlefield developments, however, other claims about the doubtful performance of Ukrainian military forces were posted. In some cases, narratives about the insufficient strength of the Ukrainian military to hold against Russia were presented, talking about ‘*the idea that Ukraine will defeat a nuclear power [being]misguided. The Russians have not yet deployed the most brutal force.*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) Overall, the posts with messages about Ukrainian defeats were being constantly posted through all the examined timeframes.

Another relatively often occurring narrative was the one coded *Ukraine as a fascist/nationalist country*. This narrative goes hand in hand with the claims of official Kremlin propaganda (TASS, 2023) and its appearance in the data could be well predicted. The posts with this code were spreading the message in several different ways. One of these was the nomination of Ukraine as an actor, using constructions such as ‘*neo-Nazi Bandera regime in Kyiv*’ or ‘*Ucronazis*’. (InfoVojna, June 2023) In other cases, the actors from the Slovak environment refused any help to Ukraine due to the presence of a ‘*neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv.*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023) Volodymyr Zelenskyy played a role in this narrative in several posts, being labelled as the ‘*leader of the criminal neo-Nazi regime.*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) These labels were often directly connected to claims of ‘*genocide*’ in eastern Ukraine with ‘*basic human rights not respected [...], especially after 2014*’, or accusations that ‘*more than 14 000 civilians (women, children, and elderly) have been killed in the Donbas*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022), a story regularly repeated and promoted by the official Russian authorities.

If the posts did not contain direct accusations of fascist or nazi presence in Ukraine or among its leadership, they might have included accusations of nationalism instead. These could either relate to the whole country, or only a part of the society, including claims occurring in the initial days of the war stating that '*[it is] mainly the armed nationalists [who] are resisting in Ukraine.*' (InfoVojna, February 2022)

With 18 occurrences, the narrative *Ukraine dominated by the West / USA* was identified in the posts. There were several layers to this narrative. Firstly, some posts operated with the claim that the '*American CIA has been helping Ukraine for years*', even stating that '*it has 12 secret bases there.*' (InfoVojna, February 2024) Secondly, there were posts offering stories with an even firmer grasp of the USA on Ukraine, claiming, for example, that '*CIA has been controlling Ukrainian intelligence since Maidan*' (Zem&Vek, February 2024), supplemented by narratives explaining control of the West/USA over several segments of the Ukrainian economy, predominantly the land ownership. Thirdly, posts containing claims of total Western control of Ukraine were identified, and often this alleged fact was proposed by the Russian authorities, as in the case of Vladimir Putin, who addressed Kyiv government as follows: '*I want the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West to hear me.*' (Causus Belli Live, September 2022)

As shown in the previous chapter on narratives relating to Russia, the examined channels often tried to *shift the blame for the war* to another actor, including Ukraine. This narrative was interconnected with the claims of genocide in Donbass, oppression of Ukrainian citizens (predominantly the Russian-speaking population), or fascist tendencies in Ukrainian government. Some posts entailed direct statements that '*the guilty ones are sitting in Kyiv.*' (InfoVojna, February 2022) The narratives about the *oppressive nature* of the Ukrainian regime were identified in 11 posts, including totalitarian tendencies of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his cabinet exhibited by disallowing free elections in the country until the end of the war.

While in case of Russia, some posts portrayed the country as a normally behaving IR actor despite the invasion or EU sanctions imposed on it, Ukraine was considered a rather *untrustworthy actor* by the examined Telegram channels. This was shown either by stories of Ukrainian officials disobeying the law or agreements with third countries, or claims of Ukrainian sabotage, as in the case of '*one of the members of the Ukrainian terrorist group involved in the destruction of Nord Stream [who] was arrested in Rivne*' (Causus Belli Live, March 2023).

This untrustworthiness was reinforced by appearance of narratives such as *Ukrainian media manipulating*, *Ukraine as corrupt country/society*, or *Ukrainians misusing Slovak/European hospitality*. The last one was thus present in the context involving Slovakia and entailed stories about ‘*The quality of cereals imported into the EU from Ukraine [which] does not meet European standards*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023), where Ukraine allegedly misused openness of the EU economy to export low quality products. Other form of posts calling Ukrainians out for misusing European hospitality focused on the refugees taking advantage of the social systems or committing serious offences.

It was not only the Ukrainians fleeing the war who were portrayed in a negative light, several narratives of such nature targeted Ukrainian leadership as such. The cases of *Ukraine as a country with incompetent leadership* were identified, adding to the narratives of delusion. These posts made use of the alleged division between the authorities and the population, sparing the latter from negative labels. If negative qualities were attributed to the Ukrainian government, in 2 cases it was explained by the fact that the leadership is *liberal*, and 2 posts considered Zelenskyy *a drug user*.

Circling back to the war and military engagement, the untrustworthiness of Ukraine as a state was complemented by the narratives about Ukrainian forces *disrespecting the rules of war*. Claims that ‘*Ukrainian formations continue terrorising civilians in Donetsk*’ (Casus Belli Live, February 2024) were found, complemented by statements that ‘*Ukrainian army [...] uses civilians and social infrastructure as cover.*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023) If the content in the channels showed some sympathies for the suffering of the Ukrainian people, it was almost exclusively accompanied by the narrative of *Ukraine as a victim of Russia - West conflict*. Interconnected with the purported dominance of the West over the country, such narratives viewed Ukraine as a tool in Western aggression against Russia.

Finally, the least occurring but nevertheless present narratives identified in the posts involving Ukraine tackled the country’s *Russophobia*, which could be used to excuse any hostilities aimed at the Russian forces or denouncements towards the policies of Russian authorities, the *artificial nature* of the Ukrainian state, a storyline popularised among others by Vladimir Putin himself (TASS, 2024), Ukraine as a *collapsing entity* or as a state losing its allies. While the narratives attributing positive features to Ukraine were present in the form of *Ukraine as a capable military actor* and portraying the country as an *ally of Slovakia* in one post, their prevalence was minimal compared to narratives predicating negative characteristics to the country.

3.2.1.3. United States of America

Being the 4th most mentioned actor in the research and often considered a global superpower, the narratives identified which related to USA aimed to convey a broad range of messages to the audience. The most prevalent code identified in the posts was *USA present in or dominating Ukraine*, which appeared 23 times. The main idea of this narrative is rooted in the belief that American authorities either actively dominate Ukraine as a whole, control at least the state's most crucial sectors, or their presence in the country helps to achieve their aims and strategic goals. The narrative of American dominance of the Ukrainian state was being spread among other ways also by posting statements of several Slovak politicians claiming that *'Ukraine is [...] totally controlled by the USA.'* (InfoVojna, September 2022) Another aspect of alleged American dominance or presence in the country was the economic viewpoint, with narratives such as *'checking on the investments of Western bankers'* being the primary goal of a trip of western leaders to Ukraine (Casus Belli Live, February 2024). In the area of military and security, CIA has allegedly been *'controlling Ukrainian intelligence service since Maidan'* (Zem&Vek, February 2024) or the narratives about presence of American bases in the territory of Ukraine could be found. A certain number of posts, however, simply stated and observed the presence of US made weapons in the battlefield or the US military activities in the region of the Black Sea. Elaborating on the Maidan narrative, claims about the US role in this revolution in 2014 could also be found, complemented by news about a potential *'new Maidan'* with the authors of the posts wondering *'if it would work [this time] without American money.'* (Casus Belli Live, March 2023)

Second most prevalent code identified in the USA narratives was that the country is *a threat or an enemy to Russia* (in 16 posts). This narrative made use of several concrete examples showing the factors making USA dangerous for Russia or its interests. One of them was the idea that US policies aim to support Russia's enemies globally, including Ukraine as a belligerent in the war against Russia. In addition to that, USA was portrayed as a force endangering the well-being of Vladimir Putin as the leader of the Russian nation, using the example of ICJ's ruling, and sending messages such as *'Yankees, hands off Putin!'* (Zem&Vek, March 2023) Another example of US danger was the threat of possible military attack against Russia, as shown is alleged statement of a *'former CIA official'* *'addressing threats to Russia: If Putin uses nuclear weapons [in Ukraine], the US will destroy Russian troops and sink the Russian Black Sea Fleet.'* (InfoVojna, September 2022) Finally, a way of presenting USA as an enemy or a threat was the perceived attack on the values and traditions

of the Russian society by ‘*the current ideology of gender, LGBTI and all pseudo-liberal ideological perversions*’ which were then ‘*labelled by Vladimir Putin as satanistic*’. (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

Borrowing the method of predication from the DHA methodological framework, several qualities were ascribed by the posts to USA as a country resulting in several identified codes. With 15 occurrences, the code *USA as imperialist* was identified, elaborating on the decades-old propaganda narrative of cold war era popularised by Soviet authorities. The examples included countries such as North Korea ready to ‘*root out American imperialists*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023) or activities aiming to ‘*deamericanise the Middle East.*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023) In some posts, Vladimir Putin’s statements about ‘*Western countries [...] saying for centuries that they are bringing democracy to other countries*’ were shown in clear contrast with the ‘*[US] occupation of Germany, Japan, South Korea.*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022) The code *USA as a warmonger* was also present in 15 posts, painting the picture of bloodlust among American authorities.

Addressing mostly the US government, the narrative about *hypocrisy* of USA was found in 14 examined posts. The prevalent idea was to show double standards of the representatives and one of the examples entailed ‘*US officially recognising the militarily annexed territory as part of the aggressor state*’ in relation to Golan Heights territory controlled by Israel (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) which was shown in clear contrast with the US denouncement of Russian annexation in eastern Ukraine.

While the code portraying USA as a threat to Russia was already tackled, a narrative presenting the actor as *dangerous for Europe* (14 posts) and *to Slovakia* (5 posts) could be found too. One of the posts stated that: ‘*The aim of American foreign policy and position in the Ukrainian conflict is not only to weaken Russia, but also to carry out the complete impoverishment of European states in order to further their complete submission to its will.*’ (Casus Belli Live, March 2023) A slightly different version of these codes more focused on *American dominance of Europe* and *Slovakia* were found in 4 and 7 posts respectively.

Possibly trying to evoke residues of the old propaganda narratives about the capitalist West, the code *USA as prioritising business* (6 posts) tried to paint a picture of financial gains being the primary motive of US activities, using statements such as ‘*...by the way, we must not forget that most of the money [given to Ukraine] goes back into the US economy to produce these weapons.*’ (Casus Belli Live, February 2024)

While the United States of America often play the role of one of the largest democracies in the World, several codes evoked authoritarian practices happening in the country. Among those was the portrayal of *US media as manipulating, propaganda spreading, or censoring*, accompanied by the claims of *political repressions* present in the country. In an extreme case, one post cited Donald Trump in his alleged claim that *'[president] Biden doesn't know what's going on, but he's surrounded by very bad fascists.'* (Casus Belli Live, February 2024)

While the previous few codes described USA with negative connotations from the position evoking strength or danger, the weakness of the actor was an object of several narratives as well. Firstly, a code *USA as a declining power* was identified in 11 posts usually tackling decreasing US influence globally, shown by examples such as *'Latin America gripped by the idea of dedollarisation'* (InfoVojna, June 2023), talks about *'De-Americanization of the Middle East'* (Infovojna, March 2023), or stories of *'the end of US hegemony and the ongoing transformation of the world.'* (InfoVojna, September 2022)

Together with several other western countries, USA was portrayed as *spoiled or degenerated*, for example using claims that *'the Biden administration has earmarked a million dollars for "gender research" to prove that God created not only male and female, but also many different other genders.'* (Zem&Vek, February 2024). The persona of President Biden himself was used to paint a picture of *incompetent American leadership*, in some cases citing political actors from the States, such as the Governor of North Carolina Mark Robinson, who allegedly said that *'Vladimir Putin has Russia first. The Chinese president has China first. The leader of Brazil has Brazil first. And ours has ice cream first.'* (Zem&Vek, June 2023)

Finally, the examined posts exhibited the ability to use the division in internal American political situation to convey their messages, either by portraying the country as *hopelessly divided and polarised*, or directly spreading narratives evoking *support for the Republican party* or Donald Trump.

3.2.1.4. The West

In contrast to other actors of International Relations examined in this thesis, the West is not a single, objectively existing entity, but rather a concept which is dependent on specific perceptions and mental models of every individual. On the other hand, using the socio-cultural knowledge shared by the authors of the posts and their target audience, the actual meaning of the West as an entity could be rather similar among these two groups. Furthermore, the phrase *'the West'* itself was rather explicitly mentioned in a substantial

number of posts. Overall, the code for presence of this entity in the text was attributed to 137 posts.

The most prevalent narrative concerning the West as an actor of International Relations was painting the picture of it being *a threat to Russia or Russophobic*, identified in 42 posts. Firstly, narratives about the West posing a military threat to Russia were present. This was either communicated as a general problem with a long history, or a concrete issue connected to the war in Ukraine, which could be ‘escalated’ by the western countries. Secondly, the West was being accused of undercover malicious or subversive actions both in Russia and abroad. The former included examples such as ‘*FSB detain[ing] mastermind of arson attacks on military recruitment centres in Novosibirsk region. The unemployed man was looking for potential arsonists of military buildings on the instructions of Western clients.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022). In the case of the latter, the western actions supposedly threatened or directly endangered Russian interest outside of the country, as shown by Russia ‘*having materials pointing to the role of the West in organizing and carrying out the Nord Stream blasts.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) A specific case were the accusations of the West trying to ignite a civil war in Russia during ‘Wagner Group’ mutiny. Thirdly, the narrative of allegedly desired ‘defeat’ of Russia was identified, accompanied by claims that ‘*the entire Western military and information machine is against Russia*’ and that ‘*the West has set itself the task of destroying Russia.*’ (Casus Belli Live, June 2023). Fourthly, a degree of ‘*Western Russophobia*’ was pointed out (Casus Belli Live, September 2022), shown by examples such as the one of Czech former ice hockey player, Dominik Hašek, meeting with EU politicians to advocate for ‘*not allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete in Europe.*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023)

Besides the threat of the West to Russia, the actor was portrayed as *aiming for dominance* (31 posts) in general and globally, especially in the issues of economy and cultural values. The former can be relatively well summed up by a quote of Vladimir Putin used in one of the examined posts, stating: ‘*The West is prepared to go beyond everything in order to preserve the neo-colonial system that allows it to parasitise, in fact to plunder the world at the expense of the power of the dollar and technological dictates, to extract the real tribute from humanity, to obtain the main source of undeserved prosperity, the rent of the hegemon.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) The latter used examples such as the aim of the West to spread ‘gender’ or LGBTQI+ ideology to Russia with the aim to root out ‘traditional Russian

values'. In addition to that, narratives about a '*New World Order*' advocated for by the West were identified in 5 posts.

When it comes to the western elites, their portrayal included codes such as being *hypocritical* (25 cases) or *untrustworthy* (9 cases). As in other examined cases, the reason for hypocrisy labels included accusations of using double standards, for example when the West '*only monitored the humanitarian crimes committed by Israel in Gaza*' while pointing out Russian actions causing civilian casualties in Ukraine. (Casus Belli Live, February 2024). The untrustworthiness narrative pointed out to alleged story manipulation, but also misusing situations such as the case of grain shipments from Ukraine, which had to be mediated by the UN and the passage of the cargo had to be approved by Russia, by sharing statements from Russian officials such as '*we will not cover commercial grain shipments from Ukraine to rich Western countries under the slogan of protecting the interests of those in need.*' (Zem&Vek, June 2023)

A set of codes tackled the role of the West in the Russia-Ukraine war. With 16 occurrences, the code labelling *The West as responsible for the war, genocide, or fighting* was identified. These posts related to the narratives getting Russia rid of the blame when it comes to the invasion of Ukraine. Some cases mentioned '*the interest of the globalists is to trigger a major global war conflict*' (InfoVojna, February 2024) or were asking questions such as '*is the West an accomplice in the genocide of the people of Donbass?*' (InfoVojna, February 2022) Another code portrayed the West as *profiting from the war or prolonging the war intentionally*, using examples such as: '*The West was left speechless after Putin published a document proving that Ukraine had agreed to a peace deal over a year ago, but after a visit to Kyiv by then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, suddenly everything was different.*' (InfoVojna, June 2023) However, some narratives tackled the West-Ukraine relationship from a different point of view and in order to paint the picture of Ukraine as losing its allies and being alone in the fight against Russia, several posts included codes about *the West abandoning Ukraine*. The examples used were the protests of Polish farmers, blockades of Ukrainian grain, and subsequent claims of Denys Smyhal, the prime minister of Ukraine, that '*it's "regrettable" that no one from the Polish side came to meet [him]*' (Zem&Vek, February 2024), as well as Ukrainian 'frustration' with insufficient aid from the West, or general 'exhaustion' of the Western public from providing support to Ukrainian defenders. In one case, the posts conveyed a message about the *western public being sympathetic to Russia* in contrast to its authorities.

Similar to the codes about the United States of America, the West was being attributed predications such as being *spoiled or degenerated* (13 cases), usually with connection to ‘gender’ ideology, however, in 3 posts, even the labels of *neomarxism* were used. Hand in hand with this narrative the code of *authoritarian or totalitarian* tendencies of the West came, connected with censorship and political repressions. The topic of immigration or ‘Great replacement theories’ were used, with the narratives sending a message of the West being *a victim* of such ‘diabolical’ plans of hidden elites or their own governments. In 4 cases, the West was portrayed as *a weak or declining actor*, stating that ‘*two years after the beginning of the Special military operation, the West is completely paralyzed.*’ (Casus Belli Live, February 2024).

The narratives of a *disunity of the West*, using disagreements between USA and European Union or other European States as an example, were present in 5 posts, connected with the perceived *inefficiency of western sanctions* against Russia contributing to these rifts.

Finally, when it comes to the relationship between the West and Slovakia, several narratives were identified. In 5 posts, the West was considered a *threat to Slovakia*, and another interesting narrative about *the West trying to separate Slovakia and Russia* was accompanied by claims such as ‘*we [Slovaks] see the efforts of our Western "allies", who are doing everything they can to make our relations with Russia worse.*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023) In addition to that, 2 cases talked about Slovakia being seen as *an unequal partner* for the West, namely in the inferior position.

3.2.1.5. European Union and NATO

The portrayal of European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in the examined dataset exhibited several specifics. Both are international organisations, which Slovakia is part of, but often become a victim of a dichotomy *us vs them* in Slovak perception, and arguably only part of the Slovak population considers EU and NATO as integral part of the Slovak *self*.

The narratives entailing EU (including ‘Europe’ as a name for the whole abstract society consisting mostly of EU countries) could be identified in 66 posts. European Union as an actor which is *failing or collapsing* was the most frequently occurring code entailing this actor with appearance in 11 posts. Claims that ‘*the European Union is on the verge of disintegration because of Ukraine*’ (InfoVojna, February 2024) were found, complemented by statements such as ‘*if the arming of Ukraine does not stop, the whole of Europe will plunge into barbarism and pan-European conflict.*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023) These narratives were

supported by stories about *economic crisis* in EU (2 posts), but also by portrayal of *EU authorities as failing to represent* the will of their own citizens.

As the examined channels are based in Slovakia, a member state of the European Union, the interaction of these two bodies was naturally reflected in the analysed posts. The narrative showing *EU as an enemy of Slovakia* was present in 5 texts, for example by showing the maliciousness of EU norms to the country. In 3 cases, EU was portrayed as a force *dominating Slovakia*, and 2 posts painted the picture of EU as *not understanding Slovakia*, one of them in connection to the ‘peaceful intentions of Slovak government’ contrasting with ‘*EU's plan to encourage the mutual killing of Slavs.*’ (InfoVojna, February 2024)

The last narrative could also be used as an example for codes such as *EU as a warmongering actor* (5 posts) or as an *enemy of Russia* (5 posts). These hostile stances were ascribed to the EU authorities together with *hypocrisy* and *incompetence*, however, sometimes were explained by the *US dominance of EU*. Claims that ‘*the European Union is subject to the US empire, even though this is clearly contrary to our interests...*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023) coming from certain members of the European Parliament were reshared. A different balance of power was portrayed under the code *EU dominating Ukraine*, which was to be achieved predominantly by economic means.

While accusing EU of Russophobia, the posts contained narratives about *cowardice of EU authorities* in relation to Russia or other actors (3 occurrences), which prevents them from carrying out actions damaging Russian interests. The examples included ‘*EU [being] afraid to punish countries that help Russia*’ (Zem&Vek, March 2023) or ‘*the EU probably won't find the courage to cut Russia off from SWIFT system.*’ (InfoVojna, February 2022)

Finally, several conspiratory narratives were mentioned in the examined dataset, showing *EU as a victim of genocide*, ‘*great replacement*’ or *immigrants*, the EU authorities aiming to achieve *ensorship* (by imposing bans on Russian mass media outlets), or having *fascist* tendencies. However, all these rather negatively sounding predications of EU did not prevent an occurrence of one post actually showing EU and its members as a positive benchmark in ‘*helping industries in overcoming current energy crisis*’, comparing it to an allegedly worse situation in Slovakia. (InfoVojna, September 2022)

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was mentioned in 55 posts from the examined dataset. A similar case to the European Union, NATO is an intergovernmental military alliance, which Slovakia is part of, and not a state actor as such. Taking into account the

mental models of Slovak relationship with NATO, the target audience of the examined channel arguably leans towards considering the NATO as part of the *other*, rejecting its inclusion in the Slovak *self*.

With a rather considerable lead, the most frequently occurring code in connection to NATO was the *aggressor* narrative, identified in 11 posts. Among the examples was the perceived dissatisfaction with enlargement of NATO either in the past or in recent years using the case of Finland or Sweden, talking about ‘*the expansion of the criminal, aggressive NATO military alliance*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) The narrative of *hypocrisy*, present among many other actors as well, was identified 3 times in connection to NATO, in one case connected to the possible Ukrainian entry to the alliance, which would make it ‘*violate its own clause that a country joining NATO must have settled matters with its neighbours.*’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022) The relationship between Ukraine and NATO was further portrayed by alleged *presence of NATO forces in Ukraine*. (2 posts)

Overall, several other negative qualities were ascribed to NATO. Firstly, narrative portraying NATO as a *weak actor* was identified in 3 posts, sometimes stressing achievements of Russian military technology. Furthermore, the claims of ‘*disunity of NATO*’ were present in 2 posts, especially because of ‘*the situation in Ukraine.*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022) In one of the posts, a ‘*Former advisor to the US Secretary of Defence predicted NATO's disintegration.*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) These narratives were complemented by single posts about *inefficiency* of the alliance and its *cowardice*, portraying the fear of the alliance face-to-face with Russian military might.

3.2.1.6. Western European countries

Besides European Union as such, several western European state actors were identified in the posts accompanied by various narratives.

Firstly, Germany as an actor was mentioned in 38 posts and 7 different narratives were identified in connection to the country. Interestingly enough, the most prevalent one of them with occurrence in 9 posts was the narrative *Germany as a voice of reason*. In such cases, the example of Germany was shown to highlight Russophobia among other actors or tackle other positions which were to be portrayed as extreme or incomprehensible. Between the examples one could identify the story about ‘*German Chancellor Scholz who, fearing that Germany would be drawn into a direct military confrontation with Russia, again ruled out the delivery of Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine.*’ (InfoVojna, February 2024) In other cases, Germany

was presented as a country doubting sanctions on Russia, or an actor willing to make business arrangements with Russia.

On the other hand, the remaining codes shed negative light on the country. In 6 posts, Germany was presented as a country *in economic or energy crisis*, partially in connection to the failure of Nord Stream project. Other narratives included the country being *hypocritical*, using an example of Germany's foreign intelligence service (the BND), which has allegedly *'been sending satellite imagery, radio and phone-tapping data to Kyiv, aiding the Ukrainian war effort, while Berlin officially claimed it was not a party to the conflict'* (Casus Belli Live, September 2022), or the narratives of still present *nazi heritage, media manipulation, degeneration* of German society and the *aggressiveness* of German authorities.

Secondly, in the examined dataset, 36 posts were found to include narratives relating to France. The prevailing narrative the country was being portrayed with was the *French people against the authorities* code. Main idea of this code was rooted in the perceived disobedience of French citizens in relation to the government, using the examples of farmers' protests, riots caused by disagreements with the pension reforms, strike of the employees of Paris communal services or marches for the liberty of Julian Assange. In the last case, the post mentioned that *'the demonstrators are also calling for the resignation of French President Emmanuel Macron, for France to leave NATO, the EU and the eurozone, and for an end to the supply of arms to Ukraine.'* (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

Besides that, in 7 cases the narrative portraying *France as an aggressor* was identified. One of the posts claimed that *'The meeting of warmongers in Paris is over. Macron, in his sick and unrealistic vision of victory over Russia, has not ruled out sending French troops to Ukraine.'* (InfoVojna, February 2024) In addition to that, the dominance of France (and Germany) towards other countries, such as Serbia, was tackled.

The other codes connected to France were ones occurring in cases of other western actors as well, portraying France as *spoiled or degenerated, Russophobic*, or mentioning the issue of media manipulation of the discourse in the country. In one case, the perceived *hypocrisy* of President Macron was mentioned, using his response to the popular protest (labelling it as 'useless') as an argument.

Thirdly, the United Kingdom was referred to or mentioned in 27 posts from the examined dataset. Overall, 4 narratives tackling this actor were identified, with the most prevalent one being the portrayal of the UK as a *warmonger* or a *supporter of war*. In one case, the message

was conveyed by using historical events, stressing that *'the United States of America, together with the British, turned German cities into ruins, defiantly, without any need to do so, in order to intimidate our country [Russia] as well as the whole world.'* (Zem&Vek, September 2022) However, the already mentioned alleged role of Boris Johnson as the Prime Minister of the UK in talking Ukraine out of the peace plan was worked with and used as an example of bloodlust from the British authorities.

From the other three narratives, each one appeared in 2 posts, portraying the United Kingdom as a country with substantial *economic problems*, as a *spoiled or degenerated* actor, using the case of a British airline 'Virgin Atlantic', which allegedly *'has allowed male pilots to wear skirts and stewardesses to wear male uniforms'* (Zem&Vek, September 2022), or as an actor with a degree of *media manipulation*.

3.2.1.7. China

China as an actor of International Relations plays a special role, often being presented as an intermediary between the West and Russia. (Duchesne, 2022) However, the results of the analysis of the chosen dataset confirmed the assumption that the occurrence of narratives portraying this actor would not be as high as in the case of Russia, Ukraine, or the West. In total, narratives tackling China appeared in 18 posts.

Firstly, in 10 cases, China was being portrayed as an *ally or a partner* of Russia, shown by news about mutual talks, during which *'the two sides planned to discuss the development of the partnership between the countries and their strategic interaction.'* (Casus Belli Live, March 2023) This was supplemented by narratives about *building the new order*, where both China and Russia should play an important role, in two cases also showing Chinese *peace-making*. Thirdly, the relatively high or even rising importance of China was shown by the occurrence of codes such as *China as a mighty power* (6 posts) and *China as a modern power* (1 post). The former could be found in examples such as the stories claiming that *'Joint exercises by three countries south of Iran demonstrate China's growing influence in the Middle East.'* (Casus Belli Live, March 2023)

Finally, in one post, the act of entering Taiwan's territorial waters by the Chinese military was labelled as *'negatively bold.'* (Casus Belli Live, February 2022)

3.2.1.8. Other actors

While the number of all state actors mentioned in the whole dataset would be rather high and the list relatively long, many of these actors were not considered due to the scope of the research, or because mentions of some of them were characterised by no graspable narratives at all. Still, several global actors appeared in the posts, namely the United Nations, an international institution playing its role in the Russo-Ukrainian war (14 posts), BRICS (1 post), and individual state actors such as Italy (2 posts) and India (1 post).

In the case of the UN, in 2 posts, a narrative about its *incompetence* and *inefficiency* was identified, in one case connected to the Israel-Gaza war. Secondly, BRICS as an intergovernmental organisation was referred to as a group of ‘*rising states*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022). Finally, while the mentions of Italy did not give out a specific narrative, the post including India informed that ‘*India, China, Brazil and Gabon refused to vote in the UN Security Council on a resolution condemning referendums in liberated territories [in eastern Ukraine]*’ complemented by the claim that ‘*in the Western media, this has been described as alarming because the world's largest economies have in fact refused to condemn Russia's actions*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022), ascribing the quality of power to India while highlighting a potential partnership with Russia.

3.2.2. Slovakia as an IR actor

In contrast to the previous country chapters, this part of the thesis tackles the last two research sub-questions, which aim to analyse the portrayal of Slovakia as an actor of International Relations and the prevalence of individual narratives in connection to the country.

Given the fact that all examined channels have been based in Slovak online environment and their main language of content is Slovak, the audience of these channels is presumed to consist predominantly of Slovak citizens as well. This makes the appearance of the country code and its relatively high frequency (compared to other actors besides Russia and Ukraine) very well predictable. Overall, the code *Slovakia* appeared in 203 posts. Before digging deeper into identified narratives in connection with it, one must keep in mind that a change in government occurred in Slovakia after September 2023 parliamentary election, influencing the portrayal of actors such as Slovak authorities or the government itself.

The code with the biggest number of occurrences portrayed Slovakia as an actor with *hypocritical authorities* and was identified in 32 posts. Being a code which could be ascribed to a wide variety of narratives, 3 main aspects were identified under the umbrella of

hypocritical governance. Firstly, the issue of double standards was often brought up. These claims either included narratives stating that Slovak citizens were unfairly treated in comparison to Ukrainian refugees, a different approach was chosen when ruling over criminal offenses of the sympathisers of coalition and opposition, or that political missteps were swept under the rug in the case of coalition politicians, as in the post talking about ‘*hypocrisy around [Boris] Kollár*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023), the Chairman of the National Council at that time, in which ‘*the hypocritical "liberals" [in the government] are now pretending as if this is the only thing that is objectionable about Kollár, while all this time they have tolerated the fact that a man with real ties to the Bratislava mafia has become Speaker of Parliament.*’ (Zem&Vek, June 2023)

Secondly, narratives about ‘*State pour[ing] millions of euros into NGOs*’ (InfoVojna, June 2023) to support various ‘political’ campaigns in times of ‘record high inflation’ and ‘more and more people falling into the trap of poverty’ were present. Besides the NGOs, this alleged hypocrisy was shown on the examples of support for units designed to tackle disinformation or hybrid threats.

Thirdly, connecting to previous point, the narrative of hoaxes, disinformation spreading, and misleading the public was used to paint a picture of hypocritical officials and authorities. This could be either achieved by making use of statements of officials, such as the one claiming that ‘*according to the Ministry of Investment and Regional Development, hoaxes are one of the biggest problems in Slovakia*’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022), while instantly accusing the authorities themselves of spreading the mentioned hoaxes and disinformation. In other posts, the government or the coalition were accused of covering their own scandals, such as ‘*drugs, US treaty*’⁵ by ‘*eras[ing] the past [by] a distraction*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022). Overall, it is crucial to mention that none of these identified narratives occurred in the February 2024 data frame, which was marked by the new government in power.

A code interconnected with the previous one, *Slovak media lying/manipulating*, was the second most prevalent with 26 occurrences. In contrast to the previous code, it focused mostly on media and journalists, not authorities or the government per se. Narratives talking about general manipulation in Slovak media were found, however, individual media houses or even journalists were also called out, as was the case of Zlatica Puškárová from TV Markíza, labelled ‘*a professional liar*’, who allegedly ‘*consciously and deliberately dramatizes the*

⁵ In this case, the ‘US treaty’ refers to the Defence Cooperation Agreement between USA and Slovakia, which was met with a degree of controversy among the Slovak public.

situation by publishing a year-old photo in connection with today's situation in Ukraine.' This message was accompanied by a question *'Who is the hoaxer here then?'* (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022) In some cases, the posts even tried to identify the alleged strategy which media used to manipulate the public, talking about *'Mass media trick speed course.'* (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022) Other examined posts talked for example about *'hypocrisy of Slovak journalists.'* (InfoVojna, September 2022) When identifying the problem, some posts tried to go the extra mile and identify the reason for such 'media manipulation', claiming that some of them might *'be paid by foreign intelligence.'* (Danny Kollár DKX, March 2023)

Narratives painting the picture of *Slovakia as dominated by liberals* were found in 22 posts. There were several ways how this narrative could be presented in the examined posts, in some cases talking about the presence of 'liberal mafia' in the government, in extreme cases mentioning *'liberal cancer.'* (Danny Kollár DKX, September 2022) When spreading this message, different attributes were ascribed to the 'liberals', often with a very negative connotation. Interestingly, in some cases the 'liberals' were not portrayed as dominating the whole country, but only parts of it, talking about *'shocking (in)working methods of progressive liberals in the capital of Slovakia revealed as a warning finger of what would happen if this bunch from Progressive Slovakia worked in the government.'* (InfoVojna, June 2023). In such cases, the 'liberals' were thought to control only the capital city and the narrative of the need to actively prevent their domination of the whole country was stressed. Another approach included comparing the 'liberals' to totalitarian or authoritarian actors, who were being helped by the government, stating that *'today's mainstream liberal propagandist is no different in mentality from the propagandists who served the authoritarian regimes of the past.'* (InfoVojna, June 2023) In all of these cases, the 'liberals' were portrayed as possessing power over either the whole country or at least some segment of the society and calls for a resistance to such dominance were present.

Building on the comparisons to authoritarian regimes, codes *Slovakia as a country with censorship* and *Slovakia as a country with political repressions* were identified in 17 and 12 cases respectively. In the first case, the examined channels tended to stress the importance of their role as 'independent and trustworthy media' in *'corporate pro-regime propaganda'* (Zem&Vek, February 2024), which then led to claims that the 'regime' is trying to *'do its best to keep you from getting information and is pushing Zem&Vek away from everywhere it can.'* (Zem&Vek, September 2022) In the weeks after the beginning of the invasion, several web domains in Slovakia were blocked due to fears of Russian propaganda spreading, which was

described by some of the posts as approval of ‘*censorship. The state has the power to block patriotic websites.*’ (InfoVojna, February 2022)

Other posts stated that ‘*Censorship, lynching of the opposition, is still functioning and increasing.*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022) This concrete example shows that both codes (for censorship and political repressions) were often found together. The specifics of *political repressions* narrative could be for example found in narratives about ‘*a man who is in custody for his opinion*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

Circling back to the Slovak governments before September 2023, they were being criticised for several reasons. Firstly, with 17 occurrences, narratives about *Ukraine being the priority of the Slovak government* were identified. The posts falling in this category often stressed the willingness of the authorities to provide large degree of material help to Ukrainian refugees or the government while unable to ‘take care of its own citizens.’ One example talked about ‘*destroying Slovakia in the name of Ukraine!*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, September 2022).

Secondly, the *incompetence of the Slovak government* was stressed (which can be compared to the portrayal of governments of Ukraine or the western countries), using examples such as the inability to solve the strike of doctors or help the Slovak population overcome energy crisis and inflationary effects, often complemented with claims of ‘*record low popularity rate*’ of the government. (InfoVojna, March 2023)

Thirdly, especially with the context of sending MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, the government was being accused of *breaking the law or international agreements* in 13 posts. The inconsistency of this act with Slovak law was being mentioned especially due to the preceding vote of no confidence for the government (in December 2022), limiting its power in the eyes of the constitution, while in the case of international agreements, Russian authorities were cited claiming that ‘*the Russian-Slovak agreements clearly exclude the transfer of weapons and military equipment to third countries without the permission of the country of manufacture.*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023) In 6 cases, the government was even accused of *treason*.

Fourthly, in the light of prevalent criticism of the authorities, the *us versus them* approach was detected by claiming that the government (*them*) is *not representing ordinary people (us)*. This was often complemented by the polls showing low popularity of the government.

One of the big categories of narratives tackled the overall position of Slovakia in the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 12 posts, the idea that *Slovakia should not send weapons/military equipment to Ukraine* was present, often accompanied by the code *Slovakia in danger due to its actions against Russia* (10 cases). The latter was communicated by statements such as ‘*Slovakia’s involvement in the war is an extremely serious threat to the security of our state.*’ (InfoVojna, March 2023) When involvements of Slovakia on the side of Ukraine were presented to the audience, the narrative claiming that it was the *pro-western liberals* in Slovakia, who want war and escalation, could be found, or the authorities were accused of *being dominated by the West*, as in the case of ‘*Slovakia/Caputova/US embassy/liberal mafia/Zelensky/Soros/American NGOs connection.*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

When the rejection of Slovakia’s military involvement on the side of Ukraine was not justified by the threat it could pose to the country or by the need to stand up to the West, other codes were identified. One of them portrayed Slovakia *as a harbour of peace*, conveying a message to the audience that Slovakia should stay out of the conflict and strive for peaceful resolution of the conflict. Another one played on the pan Slavic sentiment portraying Slovakia, Russia, but also Ukraine as part of one *Slavic family*, where the wars or other conflicts have their roots in a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of the West. The rejection to stand up to Russia and openly support Ukraine was portrayed also in 4 posts with *Slovakia as a friend of Russia* narrative.

After the elections in September 2023, a new government formed by Robert Fico came to power and in terms of the role of Slovakia in International Relations the officials started using the narrative of a *sovereign foreign policy*. (TERAZ.sk, 2024) Slovakia as an actor conducting such policy was present in 4 posts. One of the main ideas of this policy is the narrative that *Slovakia should look to all sides of the World*, present in 2 posts. This is often shown in contrast to Slovakia previously being *an unequal partner to the West*, as shown by statements such as: ‘*[prime minister] Heger played the role of toilet paper when they wiped their bottom with him in Brussels.*’ (InfoVojna, September 2022) The new government was portrayed in contrast to that as being able to stand up to Europe, while also willing to cooperate with Russia in various matters, unlike the previous *Russophobic government*.

Finally, several conspiracy theories involving Slovakia could be identified in the posts. In 8 cases, Slovakia was being portrayed as a victim of *genocide, population replacement, or immigrants*. In more extreme cases, the posts were containing messages such as ‘*Return of terror and silent genocide of Slovaks.*’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2024) Narratives like

Slovakia dominated by the Jews, secret societies, or Illuminati could be seen and this often led to calls for *saving Slovakia*, in one case connected with the public protests: *'Baránek calls on people to take part in the "Slovakia in 1st place" protest in the name of saving the state and its economy.'* (InfoVojna, September 2022)

3.3. Examples of used Discursive Strategies

Using the theoretical network proposed by Teun van Dijk (2012) in his work on interconnection between ideology and discourse, several analytical categories were identified in the dataset, which help shaping the message sent to the audience of the examined channels. The examples of them are included in this chapter.

3.3.1. Authority

In the case of this category of ideological analysis, the author of the narrative resorts to the use of either a generally accepted authority, or at least one approved by the target audience of the post, to support the presented argument. (van Dijk, 2012)

'David Kubrt, a car transporter from Germany, a man who has nothing to do with politics, is not on anyone's side, is not orchestrated by anyone, decided to go to the border crossing to help Ukrainian refugees. But he found none.' (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- In this case, the main message conveyed to the audience by the channel was the perceived manipulation by media and authorities about the need to support Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, which was debunked by alleged witness at the spot. The perceived authority used here is an ordinary person, who the reader can easily relate to, and the author stresses several times, that the witness is 'independent', implying no ideology and no reason to lie or manipulate should be present in his observations.

'Source from the western intelligence declared that Russians have full supremacy over Ukraine' (InfoVojna, February 2022)

- In this case, the narratives about Russia controlling strategic military sectors soon after launching its attacks on Ukraine were widespread but coming mostly from Russian officials and authorities. However, this post used a 'source from the western intelligence' as an authority, which should portray the narrative as accepted by both possible sides of the conflict and therefore as a potentially widely acknowledged fact.

'Pope Francis: "There's a war going on, and I think it's a mistake to think this is a cowboy movie with good guys and bad guys. It's also a mistake to think that it's just a war between Russia and Ukraine. No, this is a world war. Ukraine has become a victim of this conflict.' (Zem&Vek 30.9.2022, Pos. 45)

- A substantial amount of examined posts aimed to portray the war in Ukraine as a bigger conflict between the West and Russia. The motivations for this could be various, from more easily excusing potential Russian defeats on the battlefield to the intended portrayal of Russia as a victim of an aggression. In this case, a widely accepted religious actor (the Pope) whose credibility is very difficult to disregard, is used as an authority supporting this narrative, making it arguably more believable.

3.3.2. Disclaimers

A disclaimer is often used as a figure of speech to predominantly stress *our* positive values, while highlighting negative values of *others*. (van Dijk, 2012)

'Do I approve of war and sacrifice? No! Do I condone Putin? No, absolutely not! BUT - who would be comfortable with a manufactured crisis? [...] Well, the crisis in Europe is something the US government has wanted for a long time, right?' (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- The author is trying to stress his positive values, such as support for peace, and even denies having an affinity for at that time and place (February 2022 in Europe) very unpopular Vladimir Putin, which is complemented with implying the negative features of the US authorities, namely desire to 'manufacture a crisis'.

3.3.3. Distancing

In distancing narratives, the dynamics of referring to *us* versus labelling another group as *them* is often used. Another way to explain distancing could be through the framework of ingroups (our group, which we are part of) and outgroups (different groups with other features). (van Dijk, 2012)

"For decades they have been trying to eradicate the historical consciousness of these people, to destroy their traditions and to forbid them to speak their native language. Nothing worked! These people carried the love of their historic homeland in their hearts and passed it on to their children. And that is why we say - Russia not only opens the doors of our native home to

our brothers and sisters, but also opens its heart to them. Welcome home!" (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

- This was one of the narratives used in connection to the annexation of eastern Ukraine territories, which tried to separate Russian people (now including people from the annexed territories) and a *them* actor, implied to be the West.

3.3.4. Dramatisation

Using the dramatization strategy, the author can exaggerate or hyperbolise facts to support own narratives. (van Dijk, 2012)

'This is an invasion. Gradual, silent, unobtrusive. UNAVOIDABLE' (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- This excerpt from a post was interconnected with the narratives about entry of African students into Slovakia among Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. While only a limited amount of them actually entered the country and many were quickly repatriated to their home countries, the author uses adjectives such as 'unobtrusive' or 'unavoidable' to induce an atmosphere of large-scale invasion being part of some diabolic plan.

3.3.5. Generalisation

'US sources write that the entire Ukrainian navy has already been destroyed' (Casus Belli Live, February 2022)

- In this case, the early Russian successes made some observers generalise about destruction of 'entire' Ukrainian navy, even though the chance of 100% of Ukrainian battle power being destroyed at that moment was very low. The generalisation was used to send a message of 'a vast majority' of the military potential being destroyed.

3.3.6. Implications

When using this strategy, the author of the text or a statement aims to abstain from sharing all the ideas, beliefs, or knowledge they possess, relying on the shared knowledge of them and the audience to get the gist of the intended message. (van Dijk, 2012)

'Where does humanitarian aid end? Food, clothing, money?' (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- In this case, the issue of humanitarian aid is tackled by the author of this post, who uses a question to convey their message without providing an answer. Relying on mental models of humanitarian aid use among the audience and the shared socio-cultural knowledge, the author aims to make the audience provide an answer for themselves, most probably using narratives such as ‘the aid is not used efficiently’, ‘the aid is divided amongst corrupt actors’, ‘the aid goes to wealthy and powerful individuals’, or overall ‘the aid does not go where it is intended to’.

‘These people [immigrants] will be in government. They will be your Prime Minister, your President. They will be the judges. Police officers. Who do you think they're gonna favor then?’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- This excerpt involves the narrative about Slovakia being the victim of immigration. The author shows examples of areas of the society that would be controlled by the immigrants if allowed to freely migrate into the country, and in the end he asks ‘who they would favour’, expecting the audience to answer in their minds ‘themselves’ or ‘not us’.

‘People... do you still think that some Fico, Uhrik, Kočner, Putin is to blame here? Are there still Nazis, extremists and disinformationists to blame for everything in the world?’ (Danny Kollár DKX, September 2022)

- A similar case as the previous ones, this time with no open answer. The author makes use of the socio-cultural knowledge and expects the audience to answer ‘no’, probably trying to think through what the real actors to blame are.

‘Referenda for independence sometimes suit, sometimes not!’ (Casus Belli Live, September 2022)

- This post does not make use of a question, but still uses the implication strategy. The author is arguably trying to communicate a message of hypocrisy after denouncement of Russian annexation of eastern Ukraine regions by several actors from the West.

3.3.7. Interaction and context

While many other discursive strategies examine how the subject is talked about, interaction and context often focus on where the debate is happening, who is leading it, or what narratives were presented before the examined one. (van Dijk, 2012)

a) These posts were published in a very short time span in one channel:

‘At Markíza⁶, they are already clear about that. Even the world's experts do not know how to comment on the sabotage of the [Nord Stream] pipeline, but our media already know for sure that anyone who would accidentally link the incident to the US is a disinformation spreader. So far, they are cautiously suggesting that the usual suspect, Russia, is of course behind it. (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

And right afterwards:

‘Independent media is a public watchdog and a key pillar of democracy. The right to information is a fundamental right and freedom. An independent and free media is a guardian and a key pillar of democracy. The European Union is a strong supporter of a free and independent media, which is a guarantor of the rule of law, said the European Commission Representation in Slovakia.’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

- In this case, the channel posted a narrative, which was identified in several posts in the dataset, claiming that Slovak ‘mainstream media’ are manipulating the facts, are Russophobic, pro-American, or try to ‘censor’ other opinions. After such narratives, the channel reshares a statement from European Commission Representation in Slovakia about the importance of the same type of media, which was right before very negatively labelled. The message the audience gets is then arguably that EC Representation in Slovakia is manipulative as well.

b) A similar case:

‘Eduard Heger: "Sanctions are necessary, we must continue to insist on them because they bring results," says the Slovak Prime Minister and explains how sanctions actually work.’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

- As already shown in the country chapters describing identified narratives, if sanctions were mentioned, they were often labelled as ‘not working.’ After such claims, resharing a single statement from the prime minister about the importance of sanctions probably results in lower credibility of such actor and does not improve the image of the mechanism in eyes of the consumers. In other words, if the mental model of sanctions

⁶ Markíza is a privately owned Slovak TV station, which has played an important role in shaping Slovak political landscape, especially in times of Vladimír Mečiar’s government in 1990s.

among the audience inherently labels sanctions as not working, inserting seemingly positive narrative can be counterproductive and lower the used authority's credibility.

c) Another relatively straightforward example can be:

'US capitalizes on Nord Stream leaks with increased LNG prices.' (InfoVojna, September 2022)

Complemented by another post after a rather short period:

'In the case of the sabotage of the Nord stream pipeline, "cui bono" applies, and Russia is not it.' (InfoVojna, September 2022)

- By posting the first piece of news, the author claims that it is the United States that take advantage of the situation with damaged Nord Stream pipeline. They do not clearly state though who might be the culprit. However, a message follows very soon which claims that the right approach towards finding the actor responsible for the act damaging would be the one actually benefiting from it, and not Russia, which had been accused before. By this the author does not explicitly name the culprit, but the context makes it rather clear.

3.3.8. Irony

According to van Dijk (2012), an accusation can be made 'more effective' when not communicated directly, but rather with the use of irony.

'But it's us - the "evil Nazis"; who want war and violence, right?' (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- A case using a combination of irony and a question with implication. The author uses a perceived label he had been ascribed to show its unsuitability (from his point of view), as well as gets rid of the warmongering accusations by irony and shifts it to a perceived "other side" by the implication.

'An extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council opens at NATO headquarters. (The speed of NATO's response is as incredible as ever)' (Casus Belli Live, February 2022)

- In this segment, the author tries to portray NATO as inefficient and slowly responding and achieves spreading such message by irony.

'The UN sensitively and very sadly perceives and thus shows its strength.' (Casus Belli Live, February 2022)

- A similar case to the previous one, showing alleged helplessness and weakness of United Nations, using irony.

3.3.9. Metaphor

Metaphors are a useful tool when it comes to making abstract, unfamiliar, or difficult to grasp concepts more concrete and easier to understand. (van Dijk, 2012)

‘All those aforementioned rats thought they were going to endlessly keep hiding.’ (Danny Kollár DKX, February 2022)

- The author of this post targets public servants who oversaw fight against disinformation as well as were allegedly responsible for blocking Russian media outlets in Slovakia. He made steps to strip them of their anonymity and compared them to ‘hiding rats’.

‘NATO is barking at the gates of Russia’ (Zem&Vek, September 2022)

- This metaphor was used for conveying the message of aggressiveness and expansionism of NATO towards Russia.

3.4. Use of Heuristic Strategies

According to Reisigl and Wodak (2017), and as already mentioned in the methodological part of the thesis, every text can be examined using 5 main heuristic strategies. This is a vital third step when using a framework of Discourse-Historical Approach, features of which have helped to answer the research questions in this thesis. The preceding two steps included identifying contents and topics of a specific discourse, which was done in the country chapters, and identification of discourse strategies, which has been partially fulfilled in the previous chapter. In the end, the questions of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification/mitigation should be tackled to help paint the picture of the discourse in the examined channels.

Due to the scope of the research, the immense amount of textual data, as well as limitations of the extent of the thesis, examples are used to paint the picture of how the text and the authors work with language, and not every occurrence of a given strategy is shown.

3.4.1. Nomination

When portraying the actors and phenomena of International Relations, nomination might seem as having only limited space to alter the meaning of conveyed messages, as the actors already have official names accepted by the international community. However, several examples were identified in which nominations played a role in how the actor might be perceived.

The issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine itself is one of the biggest examples. While it might be called as such by the Western media and authorities, including actors in Slovakia, the examined posts often used a different language. This could possibly aim to either get rid of the Russian blame for the invasion or downplay the severity of the invasion and its effects.

In almost 21 posts, the label *Special military operation* was used. This narrative propagated by the official Kremlin authorities and propaganda outlets therefore found its way into Slovak Telegram channels as well. Again, the motivation behind the use of this specific nomination of the conflict could vary, however, one might claim that the goals might have been to reject the idea of Russia being in official war with Ukraine due to international consideration, prestige, and image of Russia globally. Furthermore, as shown in the narratives chapter, the claims of ‘Russia not using its entire military capability’ might have been easier to justify if the invasion was presented just as an action limited in its military scope. Besides that, other nominations of the war included labels such as ‘military escalation in Ukraine’, ‘situation in Ukraine’, sometimes using rather sentimental phrases such as ‘tragedy in Ukraine’.

When it comes to the state actors, various nomination strategies were identified. Firstly, the Russian case often worked with the perceived power of this actor, using nominations such as ‘Great Russia’ or referring to it as ‘such great country.’ In addition to that, the portrayal of the military forces of Russia was often shaped by phrasing such as the soldiers being labelled ‘heroes of (Great) Russia’, and the new equipment of the military were presented to the audience as ‘invincible superweapons.’ In case of Russian advances on the battlefield, the occupation of Ukrainian territory was nominated as ‘liberation’ or ‘saving the citizens from Ukrainian oppression’.

During the rebellion of the ‘Wagner Group’, the channels used nomination strategies to convey their view of this insurgency. Prigozhin and his forces were labelled as ‘people who have embarked on the path of betrayal’, ‘mercenaries’, ‘traitors’, and the whole rebellion was referred to as a ‘putsch’ or ‘struggle for power’.

In case of Ukraine, two prevalent nomination strategies could be identified. First of them was the attempted distancing of Ukrainian authorities and the government from the people of Ukraine by referring to ‘Kyiv regime’, ‘warmongers from Kyiv’, or even ‘neo-Nazi Russophobic regime in Ukraine.’ The last one is interconnected with the second identified strategy, which used labels to convey the message of a fascist, nationalist, or Russophobic government and armed forces, sometimes employing nominations such as ‘shelling by Ukrainian nazis’ when informing about activities of Ukrainian artillery.

The West, or as referred to throughout the posts, the ‘collective West’, was often given labels such as ‘globalists’, referring to alleged desire to dominate the World and pursue globalisation instead of promoting national interests and ‘traditional values.’ Nominations of this actor were often presented in form of bloodlust and desire for war, talking about ‘meeting of western warmongers in Paris’, or even referring to western officials as ‘militant warmongers’. In addition to that, several posts talked about ‘satanic ideologies’ of the West. An interesting case was the approval of western sanctions against Russia, an act labelled as ‘sanctions blitzkrieg’, referring to the military strategy used by Nazi Germany in the Second World War, probably aiming to evoke resentment using negative experience from the past.

While many of the nominations for the West as an actor were present in the case of United States as well, some nomination strategies were used for the latter only. Examples of that entail a post talking about US involvement in the conflict in Ukraine while using a label ‘SŠA = united warmongers of America.’⁷ When talking about events in which both USA and the United Kingdom took part, a label ‘Anglo-Saxons’ was often used, already bearing a slightly negative connotation in the channels, usually due to its contrast with the ‘Slavic’ world.

Finally, Slovakia as an actor was also being portrayed using various nomination strategies. One of them was an approach using *us vs them* dichotomy, labelling the country as ‘our Slovakia’, a term which can also be found in the lyrics of the Slovak anthem, and a one which could be used to portray a degree of danger to the country by outside forces, or in general, *them*. In addition to that, a part of Slovak society, most prevalently the one which could be described as pro-EU and supportive of Ukrainian defensive struggle, was repeatedly given the label of ‘progressive’ and ‘liberal’. While these nominations could be viewed as relatively neutral from the point of view of Political science, the context of the channels and the mental

⁷ SŠA is the Slovak transliteration of США, an abbreviation for ‘Soedinennyye Shtaty Ameriki’ (in latinised version), which is the official name for United States of America in the Russian language. The ‘SŠA’ label is not the correct Slovak version of the abbreviation, which should be ‘USA’. The examined post used phrase ‘spojení štváci Ameriky’ in Slovak.

models of the target audience had attributed rather negative implications to them. In extreme cases, labels such as ‘liberal cancer’ were identified in the text, occurrence of which could be used as an example of *dehumanisation* of opponents.

3.4.2. Predication

Reisigl and Wodak (2017) viewed the act of predication as attributing ‘discursive qualifications’ to social actors. In other words, this process is crucial for the narrative construction and therefore played a central role in the chapter analysing prevalent narratives in the examined dataset. While it would be counterproductive to repeat all the findings included in the country chapters, it might be useful to come back to the main predication strategies identified among the actors.

On one hand, several actors such as USA, the West, European Union, but also NATO, were portrayed using rather negative predications. These negative connotations of the attributed qualities could have either been rooted in the broad socio-cultural knowledge of the whole society, such as accusations of ‘warmongerism’, or in the presupposed nature of mental models on the side of the audience, as could be the labels about ‘progressiveness’ or ‘gender’. Furthermore, negative predications of the mentioned actors could be divided in two categories based on the level of power the actors were ascribed. One group of predications portrayed them as possessing a degree of power which could be used in a negative sense, using examples such as ‘aiming for dominance’, ‘being a threat to Russia or Slovakia’, ‘controlling or dominating Ukraine’ and similar narratives. On the other hand, second category of predications painted a picture of ‘weak’, ‘failing’, or ‘disunited’ actors, which might be rather contrasting.

A similar dichotomy might be observed in the case of Russia. Several narratives portrayed Russia as a great power, a relevant actor of International Relations, and often attributed a relatively high degree of military capabilities to Russia, especially in comparison with the western actors. In contrast to that, predications such as the ‘defending’ position of Russia or the characteristics of a victim painted a relatively different picture of the power relations in International Relations.

3.4.3. Argumentation

Identifying fallacies in argumentation is one of the building blocks of every DHA analysis. (Reisigl and Wodak, 2017) In the analysed dataset, three prevalent types of such fallacies were identified.

Firstly, one of the fallacies identified in the posts was the use of metaphors and comparisons to prove a point despite drawing these figures of speech from completely different contexts. One of the examples could be a statement comparing the war in Ukraine to interpersonal relationships, which claimed that *'when conflict arises, two people are always to blame. There is no way that just one person is to blame for a crisis.'* (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) By this argument, the author most probably wanted to shift the blame and reject the argument of Russia being the sole culprit of the war by invading Ukraine, and rather wanted to stress that the latter also contributed to the conflict, as is 'always' the case in a relationship. The narratives shifting the blame for the war from Russia to other actors were rather prevalent in the examined dataset and such argumentation fallacies were often present as well.

Secondly, a fallacy often referred to as a *false dilemma* was identified several times in the examined posts. An example could be found in from of a statement of a Russian military commander who *'said one golden thing: there are only two sides now - Russia and its enemy.'* (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) This narrative was used in connection to the Wagner Group mutiny and alleged western role in this insurrection, most probably with the aim of presenting only two sides of the conflict (or a 'black-and-white' vision), which would then force part of the audience with a degree of sympathies to Russia or with aversion to Ukraine and the West to identify with the actions of Russian authorities and reject any level of support for the rebels. A similar fallacy was used when portraying the conflict as a 'Russia versus the West' dichotomy.

Thirdly, fallacies characterised by argumentation using alleged proofs unrelated to the narrative which the author wanted to support were found. These could for example be stories about finding a 'couple of dead bodies of civilians' in eastern Ukraine (as a result of fighting in the region) and using it as a proof of a 'genocide in the east, in which 14,000 people died.' Another case might be the discovery of *'boxes full of money [...] in the courtyard of the Hotel Trezzini near Prigozhin's office.'* (Casus Belli Live, June 2023) This was used as a proof of alleged 'western influence' in the insurgency and bribery of its main representatives. In the

end, even the channels themselves shared news about the cash ‘being used for salary reasons’ and its occurrence in that specific context as ‘a usual thing.’

3.4.4. Perspectivisation

When analysing textual data, speeches, or social media posts, one must keep in mind the question of perspective. This includes deictics (pointing to the time, situation, or place of the statement), quotations, or citations use in the analysed extracts.

Taking into account the immense amount of textual data examined in this research, a number of various perspectives could be identified in the text. Differences could be seen between the individual channels as well. While the channel *Danny Kollár DKX* posted almost exclusively from the first-person view of the author, other channels often reshared opinions and quotations of other authorities which the audience could perceive as trustworthy or used excerpts from external sources.

Overall, the analysis of the dataset showed that the point of view of the Russian authorities might have been among the most represented in the posts. This could be partially exacerbated from the outcomes of the analysis. Firstly, the narratives and their prevalence identified and described in the countries’ chapters arguably exhibit a rather substantial degree of similarity with the narratives presented by the Russian authorities in the recent years and during the invasion. Naturally, the degree of similarity would have to be analysed in separate research, but the examination conducted in this study allows us to cautiously state presuppositions, nevertheless. This argument could be also supported by a relatively frequent use of quotations and statements from Russian government, authorities, or military officials.

In connection to these claims, perspectives of actors with similar opinion on objects and phenomena of International Relations as the aforementioned Russian official positions were relatively frequently represented as well. On the other hand, this does not rule out the occurrence of perspectives of the West, US or Ukrainian officials, or Slovak pro-European politicians, media, or citizens in favour of helping Ukraine. However, these were limited in frequency and often accompanied with contrasting narratives, portrayed in negative light, or taken out of context to evoke negative sentiment.

3.4.5. Intensification/mitigation

Last, but not least, the power of the narratives presented in textual data and therefore its effect on the audience can be largely modified by the use of intensification or mitigation strategies,

or, as Reisigl and Wodak (2017) described it, these means have the power to alter ‘epistemic and deontic status of utterances.’

In the dataset, both intensifiers as well as mitigation strategies were identified. In the case of the former, the intensification could be both of positive as well as negative phenomena. In cases such as claiming that ‘Russian soldiers are fighting heroically’, the intensifier increases the positive image of the Russian soldier among the audience. Another example could be a post narrating a story about Russian annexation of eastern Ukraine territories, which used labels such as ‘*great, historical day*’, intensifying the importance of the occasion. Several cases such as these were identified in the dataset, providing Russian military and authorities with higher degree of credibility and positive attributions.

In contrast to that, actions of western, Ukrainian and in some cases Slovak authorities were often not only labelled as missteps, but also accompanied by labels such as ‘*absolute madness*’. The West was portrayed as ‘*totally paralysed*’, several actors such as French President Macron were attributed having a ‘*sick and unrealistic vision*’ and western countries were allegedly instituting ‘*complete*’ or ‘*total*’ censorship.

The intensifiers did not always come from the authors of posts. In several cases, they were just present in the statements made by the authorities, who were quoted afterwards. Such case occurred when one of the channels reshared alleged statement of Petr Pavel, the President of the Czech Republic, saying that ‘*Ukraine will have only one shot at a major counter-offensive. If it fails, it will be extremely difficult to raise funds for another attack.*’ (Infovojna, March 2023)

Cases of mitigation were arguably not that frequent. This might relate to the observations made by experts on disinformation spreading, who tend to connect such actors and channels with making use of human emotions. (Euractiv.sk, 2021) While intensifiers play on the emotional sentiments, mitigation strategies often pave way to a bigger role for reasoning.

Nevertheless, several examples of mitigation were identified, with some including stories about the ‘Wagner Group’ insurrection, where the first news often painted a picture of a substantial problem for Russian military forces, even implying dangers of a ‘civil war.’ However, especially after talks between Prigozhin, Lukashenko, and Putin, the danger was being downplayed and the whole narrative mitigated.

4. Implications and Discussion

In the previous chapters, the results of the research of four Slovak Telegram channels using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) were tackled and the main outcomes presented. In order to fully answer the research questions, these results need to be interpreted in light of the theoretical approaches which constituted the backbone of this thesis.

Throughout the theoretical chapter, but also in the overview of the current status of research in the beginning of this thesis, the idea of foreign policy being shaped by two main factors, individual citizens of the country and the identity construction of actors in International Relations, was predominant. Applying the results obtained by QCA and DHA research in this study can therefore show possible effects of Telegram channels on shaping the foreign policy of Slovakia.

The content of the Telegram channel reflects socio-cultural knowledge, revealing the macro-discourses that state actors employ to understand themselves and others, including both state and non-state actors. The results of the content analysis of the chosen Telegram channels have produced several main outcomes. Firstly, it was found that the coverage of the war in Ukraine is rather frequent in these channels and in the given timeframes, with the topic being present in 702 posts out of total $n=1167$ examined posts (60%). While these numbers were surely affected by the choice of timeframes marked by important developments in the war in Ukraine, the occurrence of narratives about the conflict allows us to label it as arguably the main topic discussed in the given channels through the examined period. It might be interesting to compare the results to the outcomes of the research of Tkáčová (2021), who claimed that a topic of as high magnitude as the Coronavirus pandemic can ‘*shape the disinformation map*’, overshadowing all the other topics, such as immigration. In this case, the war in Ukraine might have been the subject, which gradually gained prominence over other topics, including the pandemic itself.

In connection to that, the relatively high occurrence of the war in Ukraine narratives in the examined posts might point towards the power of the channels to set the agenda in narrative creation and to create perception, as described by Wæver (2002) and McGlinchey (2017). Through their reach to tens of thousands of subscribers, the narratives entailing the war might become a primary topic in the minds of the audience of the channels and, thus, a substantial part of the society.

Secondly, the analysis of the portrayal of different actors of International Relations showed that Russia and Ukraine are the most common state actors in the examined posts, identified in almost 3 to 4 times more cases than actors such as the USA or the West. This attributes a rather high degree of importance to these actors in International Relations arena from the point of view of the chosen channels.

Thirdly, the described narratives and their occurrence show that the attributes ascribed to Russia were labelling it as strong, powerful country, ruled by strategically thinking and firm leadership with Vladimir Putin on the top. The country was portrayed as a peacemaker and liberator of oppressed peoples in the east of Ukraine and as the main actor of the alleged war or, in milder cases, a confrontation with the West or USA. On the other hand, the perception of Ukraine was built on predications such as having delusional elites with severely limited understanding of real geopolitical implications, a weak country with a weak army, government and elites with fascist tendencies, being an untrustworthy actor and a puppet of the West, oppressing its own population, drowning in the sea of corruption, being hostile to Russia and Russian speakers, and even committing genocide of these communities in the east of the country.

The audience of the examined channels, for which the subscribers can be counted in tens of thousands (not counting single visits from other users of Telegram or reposts to other channels), is systematically exposed to all these narratives, together with the predominantly negative framing of the West, USA, European Union, and NATO and the constant process of *othering* of these actors. The messages conveyed by the content of the channel are then directly translated into the perception of International Relations by an individual, a subscriber of the channel, most probably a Slovak citizen and part of the Slovak society. Here, the microstructures, as explained by van Dijk (1980), play a crucial role in communicating the message.

On a platform such as Telegram, it is not only the administrators of the channels that are able to communicate their own perceptions, also the subscribers have a way of interacting with the content and are the consumers of the bits of information. This is an important observation for several reasons. Firstly, every single actor (an individual) has their own understanding of *otherness*, in which the mental models, as proposed by van Dijk (2012), play a vital role. In case of this study, mental models of International Relations or those of the war in Ukraine and its actors, are the crucial aspect in the process of translating narratives shared by the posts in the channels to individual perceptions and beliefs. As already pointed out several times in this

thesis, the authors of the posts in the examined channels often produce the textual data with certain expectations about the mental models in the minds of their audience. Of course, this is a two-way street, as the channels work with certain presuppositions of the mental models of their audience, however, at the same time help to shape it.

Applying the analysis of the data on this train of thought, the mental models of the individuals of International Relations in the minds of the audience are being formed (among many other factors) by receiving news portraying Russia with rather positive predications about morality, power, and strategic thinking of the country, and at the same time negative narratives about the untrustworthiness, oppressiveness, hypocrisy, and corruptness of Ukraine as an actor. This inherently creates situations in which even a post with a rather neutral message can be understood by the audience in a way that further reinforces the mental models already present in their minds. The same can be applied to the perception of domestic or foreign authorities producing statements on the topic. When a mental model of an individual, shaped by constant exposure to negative narratives about a given authority, is used to evaluate a statement from such an actor, there is a risk that the statement might be rejected and ridiculed without even considering the information value or the element of truth in the message, sometimes resorting to *ad hominem* fallacies.

This constant and repeated exposure to narratives and interactions on Telegram channels might shape the overall world views of the audience, as explained by the framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), and the mental model of the audience can be used by the authors to share statements of certain authorities or persons, such as ‘Ukraine needs to be supported’, with the aim not to strengthen the support for Ukraine, but rather to show the delusion or detachment of given authority from perceived reality.

Now we have established that the mentioned narratives are shaping the perception of International Relations, its actors, and the war in Ukraine among its audience, and at the same time use existing mental models in it. Another factor shaping the process of creating *self* of Slovakia and *othering* actors of International Relations is the social identity aspect as described by Tajfel and Turner (1979). A group of subscribers of the channel, individuals, form a special kind of a social body, which could be labelled as an *in-group*. If narratives portraying Russia positively, the West and Ukraine in a negative light, and Slovakia as an actor for which partnership with the West and Ukraine brings almost exclusively negative effects, are prevalent in the community, the group mentality might persuade members which would in some case individually disagree with some narratives to accept the dominant

ideology in the *ingroup*. This becomes especially visible when the process of forming *ingroups* makes use of demarcating oneself from another actor, an *outgroup*. In the case of the research, the portrayal of outgroups often included labels about ‘progressives’ and ‘liberals’. If an opinion is considered predominant in the *outgroup* of progressives and liberals, it might be rather difficult for such a narrative to gain prominence in the *ingroup* of ‘us’, subscribers of Telegram channels.

The process of forming *ingroups* from individuals is a crucial step between perceptions from the point of view of the person and the point of view of the whole society. *Othering* of actors of International Relations therefore happens on a level of a community and is translated to the macro level of identity construction. The predications about Russia, Ukraine, the West, and Slovakia shared by the Telegram channels thus through their reach to (at least) tens of thousands of citizens of Slovakia help co-create and set topics when it comes to the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic.

At the societal and national level, socio-cultural knowledge considerations come into play. While the channels surely have their effect in shaping this knowledge, its societal extent makes the balance different from the previous ‘two-way streets’. The channels are then forced to adjust their messaging. An example of such socio-cultural knowledge might be the general aversion to war. Even though Russia undoubtedly invaded Ukraine, the channels rarely, or rather never, celebrate the war as such or the suffering of Ukrainian population. A probable dominant strategy is getting Russia rid of the blame or pointing fingers at other actors, but the war as such is not celebrated. Other examples of such values might be the dignity and value of a human life, or attribution of negative qualities to fascism and Nazi regimes. The latter is especially interesting, as the narratives of fascist tendencies in Ukraine and the West could be observed, while in other media sources, Russia has repeatedly been labelled fascist as well, (New York Times, 2022) in both cases with severely negative connotations.

A special case of *othering* encountered in this thesis was the case of Slovakia versus the European Union or NATO. As Slovakia is a member of both of these international organisations, both could be a part of the Slovak *self*, or in return, Slovak society could be part of European Union’s and NATO’s *self*. Despite that, in the examined dataset, both EU and NATO were repeatedly portrayed as *other*, or one could say, as an *outgroup*.

Another example of theoretical presuppositions observed in the outcomes of the analysis might be the relatively high level of intensifier use observed in the examined dataset. As

Kenyeres and Weigand (2023) pointed out in their study on the recurring signs of fake news, the use of such discourse strategies aims to activate emotions among the audience and ‘*turn of critical thinking*’, thus, making it easier for disinformation or misinformation narratives to fall on fertile ground.

The role of emotions evoking was not only limited to, metaphorically speaking, disarming the defence of an individual’s mind against a disinformation narrative, but was used as a crucial building block for legitimisation of such narratives. A narrative portraying Ukrainian forces as disobeying the rules of war and harming or killing civilians, intensified by adjectives such as ‘horrible’ or ‘barbaric’, provides moral ground for narratives about Russian attacks against such military units. Other legitimisation strategies included authorisation (van Leeuwen 2007) as described in the previous chapter. A statement or a quote from an actor, either perceived as an accepted authority in the whole society (the Pope, for example) or in Mental Models among the audience, was used to increase the credibility of the intended narrative.

Furthermore, the appeals to moral dimensions were observed. This is interconnected with the overall portrayal of the actors, ascribing immoral features to the Western countries and Ukraine, while portraying Russia as a moral actor. Finally, in van Leeuwen’s understanding, the process of *mythopoesis* ensured that while some narratives, presented by the channels, gained their legitimacy in the eyes of the audience by the previous steps and appeals to morality, actors or narratives conveying other messages (often in contrast with the former) were ‘punished’ by ‘*cautionary tales*’. The examples of the latter entailed stories about Slovak authorities losing support of their voters over military aid to Ukraine, or narratives of misuse of western financial support by Ukrainian authorities, inherently spreading the message ‘Helping them causes negative outcomes.’

Overall, keeping in mind one of the fundamental ideas of post-structuralists scholars, namely the ‘absence of the universal truth’, a process of ‘*creating an alternative World and Truth*’ as described by Hruboň (2021) comes into play. As shown, for more than a third of Slovaks, the social media serve as the primary source of political news, and Telegram plays a substantial role in this regard. For audience of such channels, the constant exposure to narratives about dangerous or spoiled West, corrupt, fascist and oppressive Ukraine, which is on the brink of collapse, powerful Russia acting in accordance with moral rules, and Slovakia, which has to fight its own internal ‘liberal’ enemies, and should rather restrain from helping Ukraine (at least with the military equipment), creates a completely different perception of reality in comparison with a Slovak citizen, who follows other media outlets.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine the portrayal of the main actors of International Relations and Slovakia in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the most popular Slovak Telegram channels, which are considered disinformation spreading.

To achieve that, textual data was obtained from the channels focusing on posts from five timeframes marked by events exhibiting a high degree of importance for the course of the war and subsequently analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to identify the narratives the actors are being attributed with, as well as features of Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to detect which discursive strategies were present to convey the message to the audience. The last part of the thesis examined several analytical categories as described by van Dijk (2012) that were used to convey the message to the audience, together with the use of heuristic discursive strategies proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2017).

Several outcomes were obtained from the research. The results exhibited a rather high prominence of narratives about the war in Ukraine in the channels, as the topic appeared in more than 60% of the total number of analysed posts (n=1167). This could be explained by a high degree of interest of the channels in the subject, but also by the choice of examined timeframes. In addition to that, Russia was the most mentioned actor in the posts with 484 occurrences, followed by Ukraine (in 412 posts), Slovakia (203), USA (139) and the rest of the actors.

Answering the research question, Russia as the most frequently occurring actor was portrayed predominantly as a positively powerful actor in possession of a strong military, a liberator and a peacemaker, but also as a country defending traditional values threatened by or at war with the West. Its invasion of Ukraine was often narrated as a limited-scale war, which Russia has been winning despite not using its full capabilities. These narratives were conveyed to the public using several discourse strategies, entailing nominations of Russia as ‘Great Russia’ or ‘such a great country’, prioritising Russian and pro-Russian perspectives, using the question of morality to legitimise Russian actions, and referencing accepted authorities.

On the other hand, the majority of the narratives entailing Ukraine painted the picture of the country as a relatively weak actor of IR with an incompetent or delusional government and authorities, however, the labels of fascism, oppressiveness, untrustworthiness, and submission to the West were present as well. Nominations of Ukraine included phrases such as

‘warmongers from Kyiv’, stressing the alleged bloodlust of the government and aiming to distance the authorities from the population, or accusations of nationalism and fascism. The narratives and stories from the Ukrainian perspective were posted very occasionally.

In case of ‘the West’ and western European countries (the United Kingdom, France, Germany), two main categories of narratives were present. The first one employed portrayals of actors using their perceived power for global dominance, posing a threat or imminent danger to Russia or even Slovakia, and having a warmongering nature. In contrast to that, the spoiled or even degenerated nature of their societies, weakness and disunity, and failure to deliver to their own citizens accounted for a substantial part of the identified codes as well. Positive labels could be occasionally found in narratives about a country (Germany) being a voice of reason or in stories about citizens being separated from the authorities and presented as a positive power (France).

The portrayal of the United States of America proceeded in a similar fashion to ‘the West’, with the most prominent narratives disseminating the message of US dominance of Ukraine, its threatening nature to Russia, Slovakia, and even the European Union, imperialist and warmongering tendencies, and hypocrisy of its authorities. Furthermore, the actor was portrayed as spoiled or degenerated, a declining power, but also as a politically divided country. Among the nominations of the USA, narratives of warmongering were identified. Narratives including the US perspective were rare, and if occurring, often entailed authorities coming from the environment of the Republicans.

When it comes to the portrayal of Slovakia, the country all analysed channels are based in, certain differences could be found between the last timeframe (February 2024) and the rest of the data, which could be explained by the change of government after the 2023 Parliamentary Election. Before this shift, Slovak authorities were often labelled as hypocritical, employing censorship, incompetent, or preferring the help of Ukraine to alleged ‘Slovak interests’. These claims were complemented by narratives occurring in all timeframes, such as the manipulation from the media, or domination of ‘liberals’ and ‘progressives’ who need to be stopped. Regarding the Slovak role in IR and especially in the war in Ukraine, as understood by the posts, the military aid to Ukraine was perceived as an act putting Slovakia in danger, and some degree of a partnership with Russia was advocated for.

The outcomes of this thesis shall supplement the already existing knowledge on the process of shaping identity among actors in International Relations, especially in the Slovak context, and

the role social media play in it. Furthermore, the results might contribute to the debate on mental models of the war in Ukraine in Slovak society as well as elaborate on already existing literature on *othering*, especially in the post-structuralist understanding of IR. Thirdly, this thesis might have broadened the horizons of theories of social identity, predominantly the issue of formation of *ingroups*, represented by the channels and their subscribers, by studying dissemination of narratives about the war in Ukraine prevailing in the channels.

Last, but not least, this thesis can serve as a metaphorical probe into the most popular Telegram channels in Slovakia, offering a unique opportunity to understand the role of the war in Ukraine as a topic in these channels as well as the main narratives it is accompanied by.

In the future, the analysis entailed in this thesis can serve as a stepping stone towards further research in the field, especially with the possibility to expand the scope of the dataset. Various other options would be viable as well, such as focusing on the Critical Discourse Analysis of the ideology behind the content of the channels, further inquiry into discursive strategies used in the textual data of the channels, elaboration on the individual narratives identified in this thesis, analysis of intertextuality with other social media platforms, or comparative study of several countries in the region.

Summary

Cílem této práce bylo prozkoumat vytváření obrazu hlavních aktérů mezinárodních vztahů a Slovenska ve světle ruské invaze na Ukrajinu na nejpoblárnějších slovenských Telegramových kanálech, které jsou považovány za dezinformační.

Za tímto účelem byla z kanálů získána textová data se zaměřením na příspěvky z pěti časových úseků, které se vyznačovaly událostmi vykazujícími vysokou míru důležitosti pro průběh války, a následně analyzována pomocí kvalitativní obsahové analýzy (QCA) s cílem identifikovat narativy, které jsou aktérům připisovány, a také pomocí prvků diskurzivně-historického přístupu (DHA) s cílem zjistit, které diskurzivní strategie byly přítomny při předávání sdělení publiku. V poslední části práce bylo zkoumáno několik analytických kategorií, jak je popsal van Dijk (2012), které byly použity k předání narativů publiku, spolu s využitím heuristických diskurzivních strategií podle přístupu Reisigla a Wodak (2017).

Výzkum přinesl několik výsledků. Výsledky ukázaly poměrně vysokou prominenci narativů o válce na Ukrajině v kanálech, neboť toto téma se objevilo ve více než 60 % z celkového počtu analyzovaných příspěvků (n=1167). To lze vysvětlit vysokou mírou zájmu kanálů o toto téma, ale také výběrem zkoumaných časových úseků. Kromě toho bylo v příspěvcích nejčastěji zmiňovaným aktérem Rusko (484 výskytů), následované Ukrajinou (ve 412 příspěvcích), Slovenskem (203), USA (139) a ostatními aktéry.

Abychom odpověděli na výzkumnou otázku, Rusko jako nejčastěji se vyskytující aktér bylo vykreslováno převážně jako pozitivně silný aktér disponující silnou armádou, osvoboditel a mírotvorce, ale také jako země bránící tradiční hodnoty ohrožené Západem nebo s ním válčící. Jeho invaze na Ukrajinu byla často vyprávěna jako válka omezeného rozsahu, kterou Rusko vyhrává, přestože nevyužívá všech svých schopností. Tato vyprávění byla veřejnosti zprostředkována s využitím několika diskurzivních strategií, které zahrnovaly nominace Ruska jako „velkého Ruska“ nebo „takové skvělé země“, upřednostňování ruské a proruské perspektivy, využívání otázky morálky k legitimizaci ruských akcí a odkazování na uznávané autority.

Na druhou stranu většina narativů týkajících se Ukrajiny vykreslovala obraz země jako relativně slabého aktéra IR s nekompetentní vládou a úřady žijícími v klamu, nicméně nechyběly ani nálepky fašismu, utlačovatelství, nebo nedůvěryhodnosti a podřízenosti Západu. Nominace Ukrajiny obsahovaly výrazy jako „váleční štváči z Kyjeva“, zdůrazňující údajnou krvelačnost vlády a mající za cíl distancovat úřady od obyvatelstva, nebo obvinění z nacionalismu a fašismu. Vyprávění a příběhy z ukrajinské perspektivy byly zveřejňovány velmi sporadicky.

V případě „Západu“ a západoevropských zemí (Velká Británie, Francie, Německo) byly přítomny dvě hlavní kategorie narativů. První z nich využívala portréty aktérů, kteří využívají svou domnělou moc ke globální dominanci, představují hrozbu nebo bezprostřední nebezpečí pro Rusko nebo dokonce Slovensko a mají válečnický charakter. V kontrastu s tím tvořily podstatnou část identifikovaných kódů také zkažená či dokonce zdegenerovaná povaha jejich společností, slabost a nejednotnost, nebo neschopnost plnit závazky vůči vlastním občanům. Pozitivní označení bylo možné občas nalézt v narativech o zemi (Německo), která je hlasem rozumu, nebo v příbězích o občanech oddělených od úřadů a prezentovaných jako pozitivní síla (Francie).

Vytváření obrazu Spojených států amerických probíhalo podobně jako u „Západu“, přičemž nejvýznamnější narativy šířily poselství o dominanci USA na Ukrajině, jejich ohrožování Ruska, Slovenska, a dokonce i Evropské unie, imperialistických a válečných tendencích, nebo pokrytectví jejich orgánů. Dále byl aktér vykreslován jako zkažená či zdegenerovaná, upadající mocnost, ale také jako politicky rozdělená země. Mezi nominacemi USA byly identifikovány narativy válečného štváčství. Narativy zahrnující perspektivu USA byly vzácné, a pokud se vyskytovaly, často zahrnovaly autority pocházející z prostředí republikánů.

Pokud jde o zobrazení Slovenska, země, která je domovem všech analyzovaných kanálů, lze nalézt určité rozdíly mezi posledním časovým rámcem (únor 2024) a zbytkem údajů, což lze vysvětlit změnou vlády po parlamentních volbách v roce 2023. Před touto změnou byly slovenské orgány často označovány za pokrytecké, používající cenzuru, nekompetentní nebo preferující pomoc Ukrajině před údajnými „slovenskými zájmy“. Tato tvrzení byla doplněna narativy vyskytujícími se ve všech časových obdobích, jako je manipulace ze strany médií nebo nadvláda „liberálů“ a „progresivců“, kterou je třeba zastavit. Co se týče slovenské role v mezinárodních vztazích a zejména ve válce na Ukrajině, v chápání příspěvků byla vojenská pomoc Ukrajině vnímána jako akt ohrožující Slovensko a byla obhajována určitá míra partnerství s Ruskem.

Výsledky této práce doplní již existující poznatky o procesu utváření identity aktérů mezinárodních vztahů, zejména ve slovenském kontextu, a o roli, kterou v něm hrají sociální média. Dále mohly výsledky této práce přispět k debatě o mentálních modelech války na Ukrajině ve slovenské společnosti a také rozpracovat již existující literaturu o *otheringu*, zejména v poststrukturalistickém chápání mezinárodních vztahů. Zatřetí mohla tato práce rozšířit obzory teorií sociální identity, převážně problematiky utváření *ingroups*, reprezentovaných kanálů a jejich odběrateli, a to studiem šíření narativů o válce na Ukrajině převládajících v kanálech.

V neposlední řadě může tato práce sloužit jako metaforická sonda do nejoblíbenějších kanálů na Telegramu na Slovensku, která nabízí jedinečnou příležitost pochopit roli války na Ukrajině jako tématu v těchto kanálech, stejně jako hlavní narativy, které ji provázejí.

Analýza provedená v této práci může v budoucnu sloužit jako odrazový můstek pro další výzkum v této oblasti, zejména s možností rozšíření rozsahu souboru dat. Reálné by byly i různé další možnosti, například zaměření se na kritickou diskurzní analýzu ideologie stojící za

obsahem kanálů, další zkoumání diskurzivních strategií používaných v textových datech kanálů, rozpracování jednotlivých narativů identifikovaných v této práci, analýza intertextuality s jinými platformami sociálních médií nebo komparativní studie několika zemí v regionu.

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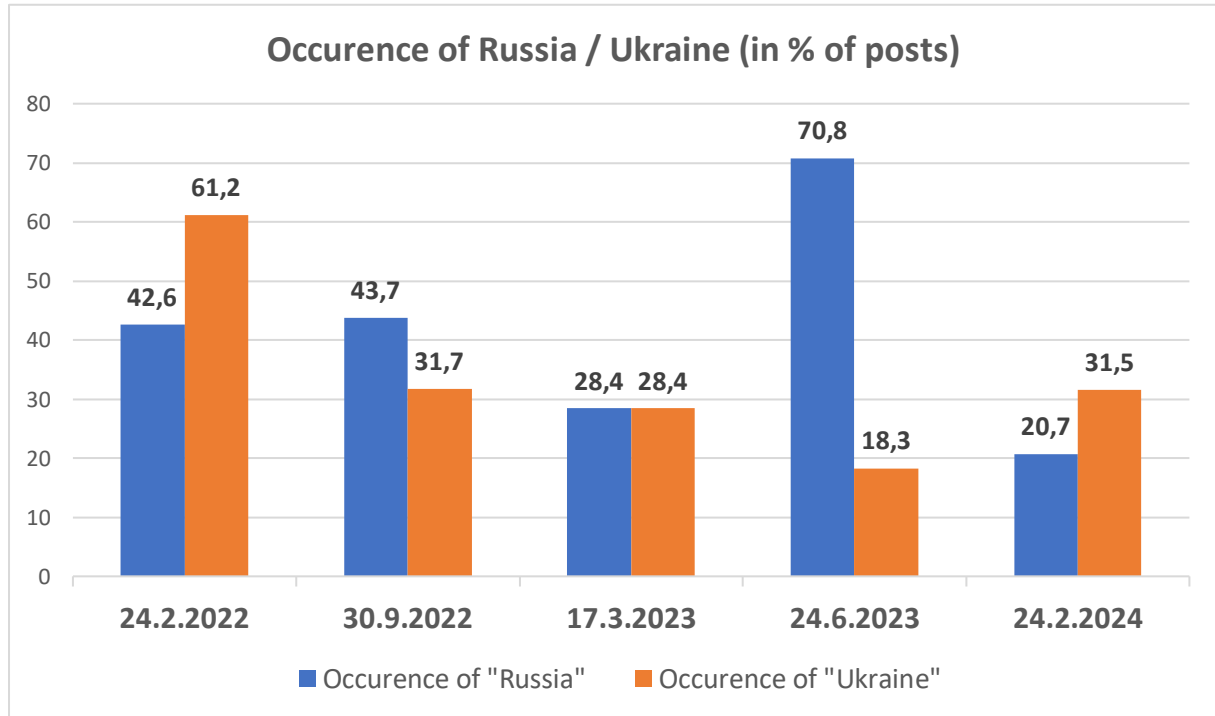
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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: The occurrence of codes for Russia and Ukraine in % of the examined posts (graph)



Appendix no. 2: Codes with narratives identified in connection to Russia (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 484 'Russia' posts)
Dominance of Russian military	48
Russia as a great power	39
Russia as a liberator	35
Russia as a country with strong leadership	35
Russia as the peacemaker	29
Russia in war with the West	25
Wagner group as traitors	25
Russia as the winning side of the conflict	25
Denying Russian guilt	24

Special military operation	21
Russia as an aggressor	16
Prigozhin as a reasonable actor	16
Russia as a strategically thinking actor	12
Russia distancing from Wagner Group	12
Russia as a normal IR partner	10
Denying the war/invasion narrative	9
Russia as a victim	9
Russia had no choice	8
Russia having power over EU/the West/Slovakia	7
Russian invasion as prevention of a worse outcome	6
Russia as the losing side	5
Russia as a threat to security architecture	4
Russia as an oppressor	3
Wagner group as connected to the West	3
Wagner as a victim of the regime	2
Russia as an older brother to Ukraine	2
Russia as the leader of Slavs	1
Russia as a corrupt actor	1

Appendix no. 3: Codes with narratives identified in connection to Ukraine (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 412 ‘Ukraine‘ posts)
Ukraine as a delusional actor	28
Ukraine as a weak military actor	24
Ukraine as a fascist/nationalist country	22
Ukraine losing the war	18
Ukraine dominated by the West/the USA	18
Ukraine as the cause for the War	18
Ukraine as disrespecting the rules of war	18
Ukraine as an untrustworthy actor	16
Ukraine as an oppressive country	11
Ukraine as a country with incompetent leadership	9
Ukraine as a corrupt country/society	8
Ukraine as a victim of Russia - West conflict	7
Ukraine as a capable military actor	7
Ukraine standing alone	6
Ukrainian media manipulating	6
Ukrainian Russophobia	5
Ukrainians misusing Slovak/European hospitality	5
Ukraine as too needy	4
Ukraine as an artificial state	3
Ukraine collapsing	2
Ukraine as ruled by the liberals	2
Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a drug user/addict	2
Ukraine as an ally of Slovakia	1

Appendix no. 4: Codes with narratives identified in connection to the United States of America (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 139 'USA' posts)
USA present in/dominating Ukraine	23
USA as a threat/enemy to Russia	16
USA as imperialist	15
USA as a warmonger	15
USA as hypocritical	14
USA as a threat to Europe	14
USA as a declining power	11
USA as spoiled/degenerated	9
USA as having incompetent leadership	8
USA dominating Slovakia	7
USA as prioritising business/economic interests	6
US media as manipulating/propaganda spreading/censoring	6
USA having political repressions	5
USA as a threat to Slovakia	5
USA as a divided/polarised society	5
USA dominating Europe	4
Support for Republicans	4
USA as disrespecting the rules	4
USA responsible for the war in Ukraine	3
USA as ruled by military industrial complex	2
US as a weak military actor	2
USA as fascist	1

Appendix no. 5: Codes with narratives identified in connection to the West (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 137 ‘the West‘ posts)
The West as the threat to Russia / Russophobic	42
The West as aiming for dominance	31
The West as hypocritical	25
The West as responsible for the war/genocide	16
The West as spoiled/degenerated	13
The West as profiting from the war / prolonging it	12
The West as abandoning Ukraine	12
Western media/authorities as untrustworthy	9
The West as disunited	5
The West as a victim of genocide/immigration	5
The West as pushing for NWO	5
The West as a threat to Slovakia	5
The West as weak/ declining power	4
The West trying to divide Slovakia and Russia	3
The West labelled neomarxist/neoliberal	3
The West as authoritarian/totalitarian	3
The West not taking Slovakia seriously	2
The West is cowardly	2
Western sanctions are inefficient	2
The West as fascist/Nazi	1
The West rejecting peace talks	1
Western society as pro-russian (despite authorities)	1

Appendix no. 6: Codes with narratives identified in connection to the EU (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 66 ‘the EU‘ posts)
EU as failing/collapsing	11
EU as an enemy of Slovakia	5
EU as warmongering	5
EU as enemy of Russia	5
EU as dominated by USA	4
EU is cowardly	3
EU as a victim of genocide/great replacement/immigrants	3
EU dominating Slovakia	3
EU as hypocritical	3
EU as not understanding Slovakia	2
EU elites failing its citizens	2
EU as incompetent	2
EU in economic crisis	2
EU dominating Ukraine	2
EU having censorship	1
EU as fascist/nazi	1
EU as a benchmark for Slovakia	1

Appendix no. 7: Codes with narratives identified in connection to NATO (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 55 ‘NATO‘ posts)
NATO as an aggressor	11
NATO as hypocritical	3
NATO as weak	3
NATO as disunited	2
NATO present in Ukraine	2
NATO as inefficient	2
NATO as cowardly	1
NATO as doomed to fail	1

Appendix no. 8: Codes with narratives identified in connection to Germany (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 38 ‘Germany‘ posts)
Germany as a voice of reason	9
Germany in economic/energy crisis	6
Germany as hypocritical	2
Germany with nazi heritage	2
German media manipulating	1
Germany as degenerating	1
Germany as an aggressor	1

Appendix no. 9: Codes with narratives identified in connection to France (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 36 ‘France‘ posts)
French people against authorities	17
France as an aggressor	7
France as spoiled/degenerated	3
France as Russophobic	3
French media as manipulating	1
French authorities as hypocritical	1

Appendix no. 10: Codes with narratives identified in connection to the United Kingdom (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 27 ‘the UK‘ posts)
UK as warmongers	5
UK media/authorities as manipulating	2
UK as spoiled/degenerated	2
UK economy failing	2

Appendix no. 11: Codes with narratives identified in connection to China (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 18 ‘China‘ posts)
China as Russian ally/friend	10
China as a mighty power	6
China as a building block of the new order	3
China as a peacemaker	2
China as a modern power	1
China as an expansionist actor	1

Appendix no. 12: Codes with narratives identified in connection to the United Nations (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 14 ‘UN‘ posts)
The United Nations as incompetent/inefficient	2

Appendix no. 13: Codes with narratives identified in connection to BRICS (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 1 ‘BRICS‘ post)
BRICS as rising powers	1

Appendix no. 14: Codes with narratives identified in connection to India (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 1 ‘India‘ post)
India as Russian ally/friend	1
India as a great power	1

Appendix no. 15: Codes with narratives identified in connection to Slovakia (table)

Name of the code	Frequency (from 203 ‘Slovakia‘ posts)
Hypocrisy of Slovak authorities	32
Slovak media lying/manipulating	26
Slovakia dominated by the liberals	22
Slovakia as a country with censorship	17
Ukraine as a priority of Slovak government	17
Slovakia ruled by an incompetent government	16
Slovak authorities breaking the law/agreements	13
Slovakia as a country with political repressions	12
Slovakia should not send weapons/military equipment to Ukraine	12
Slovakia dominated by the West	11

Slovak authorities not representing the "real" Slovakia	10
Slovakia in danger due to its actions against Russia	10
Slovakia as a victim of "genocide"/replacement/immigrants	8
Slovakia as a harbour of peace	8
Slovak pro-western liberals wanting war	8
Slovakia as a member of the Slavic family	7
Slovak authorities committing treason	6
Slovak authorities trying to manipulate the youth	5
Slovakia as an unequal partner for the West	5
Slovak authorities as Russophobic	5
Slovakia as a friend of Russia	4
Slovakia dominated by the Jews/secret societies/Illuminati	4
Slovakia conducting "sovereign foreign policy"	4
Slovakia in need of saving	3
Slovakia as a "sleeping" society	2
Slovakia should look to all sides of the World	2
Slovakia in opposition to Europe	2
Slovakia with a fascist government	1
Slovak authorities never against Russia	1