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THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES AND MYTHS IN SHAPING POLITICAL DISCOURSE: EVOLUTIONS OF WAR STORIES IN ZELENSKYY'S DISCOURSE DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE 2022 RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

Abstract. *The leader's discourses are crucial in times of crisis. The war in Ukraine represents one such scenario: state representatives and political leaders were required to manage a communication process that provides information and builds trust among internal and external audiences. As the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, communicated with greater frequency at the beginning of the war and focused on multiple myths, narratives, and themes, the goal of this research is to analyze the strategic use and evolution of narratives and myths in the public speeches of Ukrainian President during the first year of the war, as this period was the most crucial in terms of establishing the Ukraine position and gaining international recognition and help. Thus, the research aims to identify narrative patterns and mythical structures that align with key moments of the military conflict. We propose a mixed methodology for text analysis supported by computational linguistics software programs [KH Coder; Sketch Engine]. The results suggest that the Ukrainian President's speeches have changed in terms of narratives and themes, length, frequency, or target audience directly depending on the progress of the war; each speech (structure, themes, references) and the way it was constructed is strategically aligned with the military evolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.*

Keywords: political discourse; Ukrainian war; strategic communication.

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1. Introduction

In 2022, nothing attracted the media attention more than the war Russia started in Ukraine, becoming a significant headline for news outlets worldwide (Pavlik, 2022). Once the armed conflict was mediatized, communication digital channels became an integral part of the battle on the frontline (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023; Ardan, 2024), affecting how the war crisis was perceived by the global public, eliminating distances of time and space, and allowing shifts of perspective that, consequently, have enabled new ways of engaging with war as well as new ways of waging it (O'Loughlin, 2020). On 25 February 2022, as the war erupted in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy turned to video addresses and discourses to garner worldwide support (Cooper, 2022). No sitting president had ever relied so extensively on social media to connect with both domestic and international audiences, shape the global image of their nation, and promote a wartime message in a way that other world leaders are now likely to follow (Seigmund, 2023; Einarsson & Larsson, 2023; Serafin, 2022). His political discourses emphasized national unity and resilience, framing Ukraine as a defender of democracy, freedom, and, extensively, of the entire Europe, appealing to global solidarity, help, and democratic values (Rikkonen & Isotalus, 2024). On the other hand, the worldwide press attributed different perspectives on the war in Ukraine, such as conflict, human impact, and economic repercussions, profoundly affecting how the international public interprets and sees the war (Akinboade, Heske, & Molobi, 2023).

In special crises, political discourse serves as a critical tool for constructing power, ideology, and influence within society, and, in times of war, it becomes a strategic instrument for rallying support (Crespo-Fernández, 2013), promoting unity, and, simultaneously, contributing "to public opinion, which is thereby managed in such a way as to provide the necessary legitimation to political decisions that might be legally and morally dubious while violating international law and human rights principles" (Van Dijk, 1997, pp. 39-40). Consequently, the application of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) has provided methodologies to uncover how language interacts with sociopolitical structures, revealing how political language legitimizes authority, naturalizes power relations, and, eventually, "construct a large *national*

family through discourse" (Wodak, 2009, p. 24), also attributing roles to people (e.g., *the citizens; the immigrants*) and using language to reallocate roles or rearrange the social relations between the participants (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 32). While political discourse is described as a "special case of political action, and as a functional or strategic part of the political process" (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 18), wartime political speeches typically involve themes of heroism, sacrifice, and existential threat, shaping public perception and influencing social behavior on a large scale, as "only through language tied into social and political institutions can one declare war, declare guilty or not guilty" (Chilton, 2003, p. 30), in this way, exercising authority, and shaping the course of domestic stability and international relations. Thus, strategic political narratives provide coherent storylines that explain events and justify actions, while myths serve as symbolic stories that reflect collective beliefs and cultural archetypes (Jung, 1981; Lule, 2001). The discourse is not limited to traditional media. However, it extends into the digital age, where platforms amplify strategic narratives and weaponize information to sculpt and guide perceptions on a global scale (Polyakova & Fried, 2019). By intertwining historical references with universal archetypes such as *the hero, the antagonist, the victim, or the saviour*, political leaders have crafted compelling stories that resonate deeply with domestic and international audiences (Booker, 2004; Hall, 2005).

This study examines how narratives and myths were strategically deployed in the Ukrainian crisis by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to legitimize actions, stir public opinion, and shape global perceptions in the first year of the war, as some researchers showed that even highly significant and impactful events, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, tend to receive diminishing attention over time (Chernov, 2023, pp. 309-316). This pattern occurs regardless of whether the media system operates under free influence or coercive control. "The war between Russia and Ukraine is not just a conflict between two neighboring countries" but "a conflict between a system of values, a security issue between Russia and the Western Bloc, and a cognitive warfare involving narrative strategies" (Aydemir, 2022, p. 362), integrating historical, cultural, and digital dimensions, the Ukrainian leader highlights, through his online communication during war, the potential of strategic storytelling in crafting and establishing contemporary political discourse and constructing ideologies and realities.

2. Political discourse analysis and the characteristics of political discourse in wartime

Political discourse represents a cornerstone of societal interaction, mediating the relationship between language, power, and ideology. At its core, it operates as a vehicle for ideology and authority. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach frames political language as a tool for shaping public perception through the interaction of social structures and individual cognition, as its power derives both from its scope and various degrees of legitimacy (Van Dijk, 2017). The roots of political discourse can be traced to classical rhetoric, with Aristotle's emphasis on *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotion), and *logos* (logic) as pillars of persuasion (Kraut, 2002), while by its nature, "political deliberation deals with differences of opinion over varying senses of the good in uncertain circumstances" (Triadafilopoulos, 1999, p. 746). Michel Foucault (1995) extends this approach by examining discourse as a form that produces and regulates knowledge and societal norms in an "economy of power," while Pierre Bourdieu (1991) introduced the concept of "symbolic power," where political language operates as a mechanism for social control. Consequently, *CDA* (*Critical Discourse Analysis*) emerges as a vital tool for uncovering the dynamics embedded in political discourse, examining how language constructs social realities and legitimizes authority. Ultimately, Fairclough's *three-dimensional model* (2013, p. 109-168), analyzing *texts* (text production), *discourse* (consumption and distribution), and *practice* (sociocultural practices), refers to different levels of social organization – the context of the situation, the institutional context, and the broader societal context.

Wodak et al. (2009) situate political discourse within its socio-political and historical contexts, emphasizing how narratives draw from collective memories and cultural norms. Furthermore, Wodak stated that language reflects and constructs social power, identity, and ideology, with an emphasis on politics, nationalism, racism, and populism, seeing political discourse historically situated in the public sphere, always depending on the socio-political and historical contexts (Wodak, 2019).

Wartime contexts amplify the strategic importance of political discourse as leaders create narratives to justify military actions, rally public support, and construct national unity. Wartime rhetoric often employs binary

moral frames, positioning one side as virtuous and the other as evil. For instance, George W. Bush's post-9/11 speeches framed the *War on Terror* as a defense of freedom and democracy against existential threats (Azpíroz, 2013). Wartime political discourse also constructs collective identities by emphasizing shared values and sacrifices. Leaders invoke historical narratives and metaphors to foster unity, align individual actions with national goals, and intertwine religion with national ideology (Rzepecka, 2017). At the same time, even societies construct images of enemies through psychological, cultural, and political mechanisms, as these images serve to justify conflict, violence, and war, often by dehumanizing and vilifying *the other*. Beyond *hostile imagination* and *dehumanization* (Steuter & Wills, 2009), it is highlighted how enemy images often rely on portraying adversaries as less than human – monsters, animals, or objects, as this makes it easier to justify violence against them. Thus, creating enemy images is a universal phenomenon, appearing in different forms across cultures and throughout history (Elgee, 1987). These identities are strategically crafted to serve political and military goals, relying on symbolic language, selective narratives, and emotional appeals (Hodges, 2007). The use of symbolic language and selective narratives simplifies complex war and geopolitical realities, making them accessible and emotionally resonant for diverse audiences.

Nowadays, the rise of digital media has transformed political discourse, introducing both opportunities and challenges. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook enabled rapid dissemination of political messages, democratizing access to public discourse, creating immediate and unpredictable connections between the trinity, government, and public, forcing each to find new ways to manage information about conflicts, leading to an "information revolution" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010, p. 155). During wars, discourses about political causes are characterized by personal opinions, emotions, and affect, especially on new media channels, as they create a free space – *public sphere* – where individuals come together to discuss and deliberate matters of common interest, free from coercion and domination (Habermas, 1991). However, these platforms also exacerbate polarization, as "social media driving political polarization and the prevalence of disinformation, both of which are also accentuating each other" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 4), or algorithmic bias (Velkova & Kaun, 2019), creating *echo chambers* where users are exposed primarily to information

that reinforces their beliefs. Consequently, "social media's algorithm-driven environments prioritize engagement over accuracy" (Zahra, 2023, p. 117), amplifying emotional appeals and sensationalist rhetoric. This shift undermines traditional norms of rational-critical debate, as political actors increasingly adopt performative and polarizing communication styles. Additionally, spreading fake news diminishes the public's ability to discern credible information, eroding trust in media institutions. Farkas and Schou (2018) warn that disinformation strategies manipulate public perception, often for political gain, and, eventually "fake news serve to produce and articulate political battlegrounds over social reality" (p. 300). Nevertheless, political discourse remains powerful in shaping societal narratives, legitimizing authority, and influencing public opinion. While it has historically played a central role in constructing national identities and justifying policy decisions, the advent of digital media has redefined its scope and impact.

3. Rhetorical strategies in political discourse: myths, archetypes, and strategic narratives

Narratives and myths occupy a central role in political discourse, serving as tools for constructing shared identities and ideologies (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012), legitimizing policies, and galvanizing emotions (Reyes, 2011; Koschut et al., 2017), and influencing public perception relying on symbolic language, and selective narratives (Hodges, 2007; Schmitt, 2018). Defined broadly, political narratives are coherent storylines that explain events and justify actions, resonating on a personal level, making them more likely to be believed and acted upon (Jankowicz, 2020), as the language of emotions and judgments, and not of facts, remains one of the main tools of constructing powerful messages and propaganda, especially during war (Darczewska, 2014). Also, Krieg (2023) explores how both governments and independent groups use information and media to advance their goals without engaging in open warfare. He explains that *subversion* in the modern era is a "strategic exploitation of sociopsychological, infrastructural, and physical vulnerabilities in the information environment by an external adversary to alter or erode a

sociopolitical consensus or status quo" (Krieg, 2023, p. 72). By doing so, these actors can influence events and achieve their strategic aims while staying below the level of direct military conflict.

On the other hand, political myths are a core component of political narratives, acting as symbolic stories that express collective beliefs and aspirations. These myths can provide legitimacy to a political system or leader, justify actions, and mobilize citizens around a cause, as political archetypes are an ideologically marked narrative that purports to give an accurate account of past, present, or predicted political events (Flood, 2002). The Ukrainian crisis, a conflict rooted in contested identities and geopolitical rivalries, provides a compelling case for examining how narratives and myths direct and guide political discourse, as "conflicts provide fertile territory for controversy and suspicion to appear, and the Internet provides ample opportunities for debunking falsehoods and producing counter-narratives" (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 14) and how the deployment and strategic themes are used to legitimize actions, stimulate public opinion, and shape global perceptions.

One of the first who made significant contributions to the study of narratives was Vladimir Propp (1968, pp. 25-65), who laid the foundation for structuralist approaches to the study of narrative by analyzing the common patterns and structures within folktales. He identified seven broad character types, each associated with specific functions: *The Hero* (the protagonist who seeks something and faces challenges), *The Villain* (the antagonist who opposes the hero), *The Donor* (a character who provides the hero with a magical item or assistance), *The Helper* (character who assists the hero in their quest), *The Princess* (sought-for person and sometimes the hero's reward), *The Dispatcher* (character who sends the hero on their quest), and *The False Hero* (character who claims to be the hero but is revealed to be a pretender).

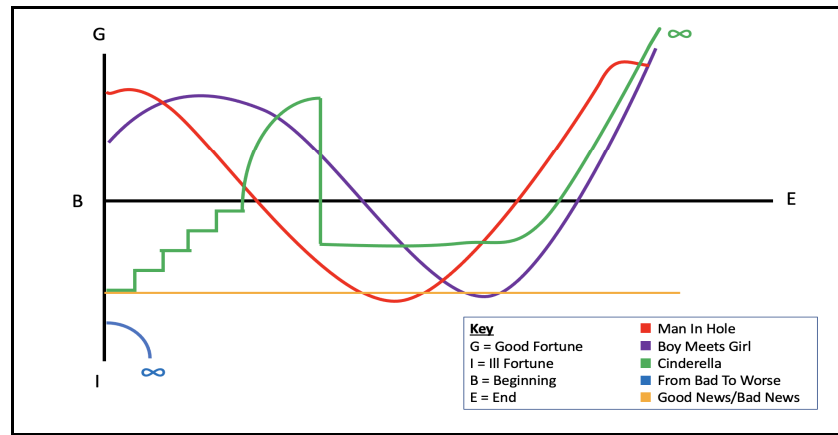


Figure 1. Five Basic Story-structures by Kurt Vonnegut
(Source: Troilo, S. (2021). Basic plots by Kurt Vonnegut)

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut suggested that all stories have the same basic form, which can even be sketched on a sheet of graph paper. Vonnegut's story-structure chart (as shown in figure 1) consisted of the vertical axis GOOD FORTUNE – ILL FORTUNE, which reveals the fate of the hero, and the horizontal axis BEGIN – END, which creates the timeline of the unfolding action (Vonnegut, 2005, pp. 23-27). Vonnegut presents main five archetypal forms of the hero: *Man in a Hole* (the protagonist starts off in a good place, encounters some trouble and then manages to get out of it), *Boy Meets Girl* (the protagonist meets someone special or encounter a significant event and their life improves significantly), *Cinderella* (the protagonist's situation starts off poorly and improves through some magical or fortunate event), *From Bad to Worse* (the protagonist starts off in a bad situation, which only continues to get worse), and *Good News/Bad News* (mirroring real life, where the good and bad are intertwined).

Although, Christopher Booker (2004) argues that all stories, regardless of their cultural origins, can be boiled down to seven fundamental narrative structures: *Overcoming the Monster* – where the protagonist sets out to defeat an antagonistic force, *Rags to Riches* – where the protagonists begin in a lowly state, but through virtue, they rise to success, *The Quest* – where main character embarks on a journey to obtain a significant

object or reach an important destination, *Voyage and Return* – a story in which the protagonist ventures into a dangerous world, experiences a series of adventures, *Comedy* – a light-hearted story where the protagonist faces obstacles, usually of a romantic or social nature, *Tragedy* – which presents the protagonist's downfall, often due to a fatal flaw or mistake, and *Rebirth* – where the protagonist experiences a significant transformation or awakening.

In the same tone, Jack Lule (2001) is critically exploring how news stories often follow timeless archetypes, similar to ancient myths and legends. As Lule's work uncovers the deep connection between modern news reporting and traditional narrative forms, his theory suggests that journalism does more than relay facts – it perpetuates universal human experiences through recurring themes and characters. Having the core premise that journalism is a modern mythology, Lule argues that "archetypal myths can be found every day within national reports, international correspondence, sports columns, human interest features, editorials, and obituaries" (Lule, 2001, p. 3). Thus, news stories mirror the same archetypes that myths have used for centuries, stating that journalists write the world's latest tales but also tell some of its oldest. The stories that appear daily in the world's newspapers bear remarkable resemblance to the myths of ancient cultures. Also, the male figure is represented by four archetypes of masculine psychology – *King, Warrior, Magician, and Lover* – which represent different aspects of a mature male identity (Moore & Gillette, 1990), as they are linked to myths, legends, and narratives, which reflect the various roles men play in universal stories. As a whole, heroism is used in marketing, as well as in representations of the army hero, blending traits of the *magician, warrior, and king*. Thus, *archetypal blending*, as used in advertising, "enables hero narratives to remain meaningful to diverse audiences who may simultaneously expect familiar and conventional representations and might also demand transformations that reflect emerging cultural values" (Kelsey et al., 2022, p. 156).

Historical narratives provide a powerful foundation for political discourse, offering a lens through which past events are reinterpreted to influence present actions; as by mythologizing historical events and figures, strategic narratives construct a national identity that resonates emotionally with the audience, thereby reinforcing political actions as a

natural extension of a well-established historical narrative, "the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present" (Bell, 2003, p. 66). In the Ukrainian crisis, both Russia and Ukraine have employed strategic narratives to frame the conflict in ways that align with their agendas. Russia's narrative emphasizes historical ties between the two nations, portraying Ukraine as integral to Russian identity and heritage (Plokhyy, 2006). In analysing myth representations, Aydemir (2022) describes human figures (strong women, brave men), fictional characters (*the Kyiv Ghost*), or objects (the Ukrainian flag, tanks, tractors, Molotov cocktails) as the main symbols or legends used by Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his discourses. Thereby, "the Ukrainian authorities created a warrior society that fits the micro-mythology, and the narrative of the liberation of the Ukrainian people" (Aydemir, 2022, p. 366). This perspective underpins claims of cultural and historical unity, which are used to justify territorial ambitions and policies, such as the annexation of Crimea.

On the other hand, the Russian government frequently invokes the narrative of *denazification*, framing its actions as a moral crusade against a Western-backed threat, thereby drawing on memories of World War II to resonate with domestic audiences (Faulconbridge & Soldatkin, 2023). Conversely, in response, Ukraine has constructed a narrative of resistance and sovereignty, positioning itself as a defender of democracy against authoritarian aggression. For example, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speeches highlight Ukraine's struggle as a heroic quest for freedom and independence, casting the nation as a vanguard of democratic values (Official Website of the President of Ukraine, n.d.). This narrative appeals not only to domestic audiences but also to the international community, framing the conflict as a broader ideological struggle between freedom and tyranny (Plokhyy, 2018; Snyder, 2018). Nevertheless, Russia brings its narratives to the online battlefield, creating journalistic or mass media stories that "can be seen aiming, in the first place, to appeal to emotions and to blur the border between what is real and what is not" (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 9), and often taking the shape of fake news or propaganda materials (*ibidem*). Strategic narratives and myths thus demonstrate how political actors use history to create compelling storylines that legitimize their actions and mobilize support. The use of myths and archetypes in

political discourse fill the narratives with emotional resonance and cultural significance, thus archetypes such as the *hero*, *antagonist*, or *victim*, have been instrumental in shaping public perception of crisis.

During the first year of war, major news outlets and political analysts have examined the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war, segmenting it into distinct phases to understand its progression. For instance, *BBC News* (2024) and Breteau (2023) created an interactive map detailing the ebb and flow of territorial control throughout the first year, while The New York Times (n.d.) provided in-depth coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, highlighting key phases and emphasizing significant events and shifts in the conflict's dynamics. Some divided the war into key moments, focusing on specific days and weeks (Ellison et al., 2023), or months (Askew, 2023). Following these interpretations and divisions, we created a simplified three-stage evolution of war.

Table 1

**The War in Ukraine – A Contextual Overview over the First Year,
Divided into Three Stages**

Stage of the War	Timeframe	Key Events and Characteristics
1. Initial Invasion and Defensive Efforts	February 24, 2022 – April 24, 2022	– Russia launches a full-scale invasion with advances toward Kyiv. – Vigorous Ukrainian resistance; Battle of Kyiv as a defining early conflict. – Heavy shelling in Mariupol and Kharkiv, causing civilian casualties. – President Zelenskyy appeals to international parliaments for aid. – Russian retreat reveals atrocities in Bucha, leading to global outrage and intensified sanctions. – Ukraine's resistance and international unity define this stage.
2. Shifting Frontline and the Fight for Donbas	April 25, 2022 – August 24, 2022	– Russia focuses on eastern regions, particularly Donbas. – Brutal battles in Sievierodonetsk and Mariupol. – Key Ukrainian victories: sinking of Moskva, liberation of Snake Island. – Ukraine gains EU candidate status and symbolic victories (e.g., Eurovision).

		– War crimes trials begin. – Heavy civilian toll from Russian missile and artillery strikes in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.
3. Ukrainian Counteroffensives and Renewed Russian Aggression	August 25, 2022 – February 24, 2023	– Ukraine launches counteroffensives in Kherson and Kharkiv regions. – Rapid advances in Kharkiv disrupt Russian supply lines; Kherson liberated in November. – Russia escalates missile strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. – Russia announces partial mobilization to sustain war efforts. – Allies provide advanced weaponry (e.g., Leopard, Abrams tanks). – President Zelenskyy calls for global unity; Ukraine's resilience remains steadfast.

Source: The Author

4. Research design

The study explores how rhetorical strategies foster national unity, shape international perceptions, and influence support for Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression. In doing so, we will focus on identifying dominant themes and myths such as *Hero*, *Antagonist*, or *Helper*, and governing narratives like *Resistance*, *Overcoming the Monster*, *Sacred Land*, or *Sacrifice* in the discourses of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, published on the Official website of the President of Ukraine between February 24, 2022 and February 24, 2023. Firstly, we created an HTML code for scraping speeches uploaded on the website, resulting in a sample of $N = 580$ discourses in English. Regarding the form and structure of the discourses, Zelenskyy often begins his speeches with a direct salutation, such as "Dear people!" or "Great People of Great Ukraine!". This helps in establishing a personal connection with his audience. He continues with updates on recent events, reinforcing national unity and the collective strength of Ukrainians, encouraging specific actions or attitudes among citizens, and he often concludes with motivational statements or

expressions of gratitude. The length varies, as the discourses could be concise or more emotional, depending on the occasion. Many speeches are accompanied by video recordings, which are available in the video collection section of the official website. The duration of these videos varies from 9 or 10 minutes to 13 minutes. Zelenskyy primarily delivers his speeches in Ukrainian. However, depending on the audience, he has also used Russian and English to reach a broader international community. As for visual elements, the videos often feature Zelenskyy in settings that convey resilience, such as his office or significant national landmarks, like the capital city Kyiv, or important areas such as Kharkiv, Mariupol, or Bucha.

4.1. Methods

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the recurrent narratives and myths in the speeches of the Ukrainian President and their strategic use.

In the *first phase* of our research, we used the text-mining software KH Coder to conduct an automated content analysis of Zelenskyy's speeches. This step allowed us to analyse the frequency of words and their co-occurrence networks systematically. We computed the frequency of specific words and phrases to identify dominant terms in the discourse. Using KH Coder's co-occurrence analysis feature, we visualized the relationships between keywords as a network graph. This allowed us to identify clusters of associated terms and analyze how frequently these terms co-occurred within the same contexts. These networks provided insight into the underlying narratives and how certain concepts were linked to broader mythological structures.

Following the automated analysis, we conducted a content and discourse analysis to examine the dominant themes and roles that emerged from the speeches. This step involved qualitative coding of the texts to uncover deeper layers of meaning and rhetoric. We coded the speeches for dominant themes, and, additionally, we identified recurring roles attributed to various entities. This phase also included analysing the use of rhetorical devices, symbolic language, and mythological structures. In

doing so, we used Sketch Engine, a corpus analysis tool, to refine our textual data. This tool allowed us to examine word contexts, create concordance lines, and compare the frequency and usage of specific terms in a more granular manner: using the function N-grams we identified the most frequent 3-4 words expressions and with Concordance and Wordlist, we investigated the context keywords are used and their frequency in the text. Sketch Engine was particularly useful for validating the findings from KH Coder and enriching the qualitative analysis.

In the final phase, we synthesized our findings to trace the evolution of dominant themes and narratives across the three key phases of the war, as illustrated in Table 1: the *initial invasion*, the *counteroffensive period*, and the *prolonged conflict phase*. Using the results, we identified how narratives and myths adapted to match the military and political realities of the war. This multistep process ensures both depth and precision, allowing us to see how these speeches served as a vital tool in Ukraine's wartime communication strategy.

4.2. Research questions

- RQ.1.** Which are the recurrent narratives and myths present in the speeches of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the first year of war?
- RQ.2.** How are specific myths and mythical structures strategically used in the speeches?
- RQ.3.** How have narratives evolved during the war, and how have they mirrored the military actions on the front?

5. Findings

According to the three-stage division of the war, the analysis followed the investigation of the discourses of each of these three phases: *First stage*: N = 114 discourses, *Second stage*: N = 190 discourses, and *Third stage*: N = 276 discourses, as illustrated below in Table 2.

Table 2

The Three Stages of War in Ukraine and the Number of Discourses per Stage

War Stage	Number of discourses
First Stage: Initial Invasion and Defensive Efforts (February 24, 2022 – April 24, 2022)	114
Second Stage: Shifting Frontline and the Fight for Donbas (April 25, 2022 – August 24, 2022)	190
Third Stage: Ukrainian Counteroffensives and Renewed Russian Aggression (August 25, 2022 – February 24, 2023)	276

Source: The Author

With the help of KH Coder, we created the word co-occurrence networks and using Sketch Engine, we provided insights into the strategic construction of narratives and the recurrence of myths during each of the three stages in the first year of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

5.1. First stage analysis: initial invasion and defensive efforts (February 24, 2022 – April 24, 2022)

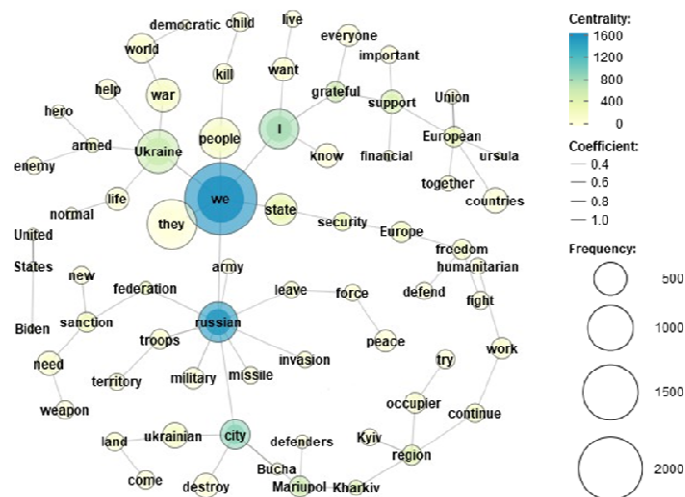


Figure 2. First stage of the war: words co-occurrence network

The frequent use of expressions conveys gratitude, national pride, and the heroic struggle of the Ukrainian people and Armed Forces. After the analysis, we found that key phrases include "I am grateful to" (N = 263, first mentioned on 25 February 2022), "Glory to Ukraine" (N = 105, first mentioned on 24 February 2022), and "Armed Forces of Ukraine" (N = 58, first mentioned on 24 February 2022). These expressions illustrate a narrative of resilience and collective strength in the face of adversity that invaded the sovereign land. According to Vladimir Propp's (1968) structuralist theory of narratives, stories often follow a sequence of functions, where a hero faces trials set by a villain, aided by helpers, to restore balance. This narrative structure is evident here, as the repeated emphasis on unity ("we", "together", "fight", or "defend") underscores the heroic struggle and reflects Propp's notion of collective action against evil forces.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is positioned as both a *hero* and a *victim*. Terms like "Ukraine", "people", "war", and "freedom" evoke heroism, highlighting the narrative of courageous resistance against aggression, broadly fitting Ukraine's story in the *Overcoming the Monster* plot, as stated by Christopher Booker (2004). The frequent use of "city" (including references to specific locations tied to identity and history like Kyiv, Bucha, and Mariupol) underscores suffering as cities became symbolic battlegrounds of resilience, constructing what Jack Lule (2001) calls a *Tragic Victim* myth. Simultaneously, the myth of sacred land depicts the homeland as something worth fighting for and/or dying for. The term "territory" emphasizes national integrity, while "city" personalizes the stakes by referencing places. The communicated story portrays the people of Ukraine as fighting for survival and freedom against overwhelming odds. Ukraine is also framed as a victim of Russia's aggression ("troops", "invasion", "missile", "destroy"). The terms "kill" and "child", connected in many of the contexts, emphasize innocent suffering, a hallmark of tragedy and, again, a key element in Lule's (2001) *Tragic Victim* storyline. This narrative aims to inspire moral outrage, which is often used to justify humanitarian and political intervention. This narrative seeks to inspire moral outrage, which is often used to emphasize humanitarian and political intervention.

On the other hand, Russia is unequivocally depicted as the antagonist in Zelenskyy's speeches, with Sketch Engine identifying frequent mentions such as "the Russian military" (N = 77, first mentioned on 3 March 2022),

"the Russian Federation" (N = 76, first mentioned on 24 February 2022), and "sanctions against Russia" (N = 57, first mentioned on 25 February 2022). Additionally, the term "Russia" and its adjective form "Russian" appear in contexts emphasizing aggression and destruction, including "Russia brought death" (mentioned on 22 April 2022), and "Russia wants to destroy..." (mentioned on 11 April 2022). These constructions reinforce Russia's role as a perpetrator of violence and a threat to Ukraine's sovereignty and existence. Terms like "Russian", "troops", and "military" reinforce aggression, while "invasion" and "occupier" portray illegal and violent action. Ukraine is depicted as enduring violence and destruction from an unprovoked war. Hence, Ukraine's narrative follows a sharp descent into suffering due to the unprovoked invasion (the fall) but maintains moments of hope and resilience through unity and support from allies (small rises), reflecting the *Man in Hole* or *From Bad to Worse* narrative arcs, as illustrated by Kurt Vonnegut (2005), underscoring the emotional engagement with audiences. The European Union, the United States, and other allied nations are positioned as indispensable helpers in the Ukrainian struggle, corresponding to Propp's *Donor* and *Helper* roles. We identified recurring themes of justice, solidarity, and international support. For instance, phrases such as "Europe can bring Russia to justice" and "Europe can force Russia into peace" (both mentioned on 13 April 2022) emphasize the role of Europe in countering Russian aggression. The inclusion of diverse nationalities further reinforces the narrative of global unity, as seen in references to different nationalities, such as "citizens of European countries, USA, and Canada" (first mentioned on 5 April 2022), aligning with mythic structures where a hero's cause becomes a universal battle between good and evil, as both Booker (2004) and Lule (2001) outline in their works. These portrayals highlight the international community's moral and practical support in Ukraine's fight.

of narrative theory, this reflects Propp's functions of helpers and donors who provide essential aid to the hero on their quest. The phrase "Glory to Ukraine" remains a constant rhetorical device in this stage, appearing 185 times, continuing its role as a patriotic invocation.

Additionally, expressions such as "Eternal memory to..." (N = 72, first mentioned on 28 February 2022) and "Eternal glory to..." (N = 68, first mentioned on 28 February 2022) accompany references to fallen heroes and defenders, underscoring the mythic sacrifice required for national survival. Lule's (2001) theory of media myths, particularly the *Hero* and *Tragic Victim* archetypes, is highly relevant here: Ukraine is depicted as a courageous defender and an innocent sufferer, inviting global sympathy and moral endorsement. At the same time, Ukraine's victimhood is consistently highlighted through terms such as "war against Ukraine" (N = 54, first mentioned on 10 March 2022), reinforcing the narrative of an unjustly attacked nation. This dual portrayal aligns with and strengthens Christopher Booker's (2004) *Overcoming the Monster* plot structure, wherein the protagonist must confront and ultimately defeat the oppressive force. Zelenskyy employs the language of heroism to frame Ukrainians as defenders of their sacred homeland against a much larger and oppressive enemy, echoing traditional mythic narratives of righteous resistance. Russia's portrayal as the antagonist intensifies over time, with a notable increase in the use of terms like "The Russian Army" (N = 118, first mentioned on 10 March 2022), compared to the earlier phase of the conflict. Russia's actions are framed in negative terms, as seen in recurring expressions such as "Russia must be stopped" (mentioned on 15 March 2022), "Russia must leave the occupied territory of Ukraine", "Russia must leave our land", and "Russia must be held accountable for the crime of aggression" (all three phrases mentioned on 24 August 2022). These statements emphasize not only Russia's culpability but also the necessity of decisive international action to address its aggression and restore Ukraine's sovereignty. In mythic terms, Russia represents the evil oppressor that must be resisted. Russia's characterization as the occupier and a source of terror aligns with historical narratives of totalitarian regimes that conquer and subjugate, this depiction strongly corresponding to Propp's *Villain* archetype. The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) are increasingly positioned as essential helpers within Zelenskyy's narrative. Mentions of the "European Union" rise to 115

occurrences, and are frequently tied to aspirations of integration and shared democratic values, as in "Ukraine is a future member of the European Union" and "Ukraine membership in the European Union" (both mentioned on 24 August 2022). Although references to the "United States" are less frequent at this stage, the country's role remains significant, highlighted through phrases such as "provided by the United States" (mentioned on 11 August 2022). This emphasis on international solidarity supports Propp's *Donor/Helper* roles and underlines the collective struggle against oppression, consistent with Lule's (2001) concept of mythic storytelling in public discourse.

Finally, Zelenskyy's narrative adapts dynamically to evolving wartime realities, incorporating both military developments (e.g., battles in Sievierodonetsk, Donbas, and Mariupol) and symbolic victories (e.g., the liberation of Snake Island, Ukraine's gaining of EU candidate status, and cultural successes like winning Eurovision on May 14, 2023). This evolving narrative strategy exemplifies Vonnegut's (2005) model of fluctuating fortunes within stories. It demonstrates a sophisticated use of language to mobilize both domestic and international audiences, ensuring continued support for Ukraine's cause.

5.3. Third stage analysis: Ukrainian counteroffensives and renewed Russian aggression (August 25, 2022 – February 24, 2023)

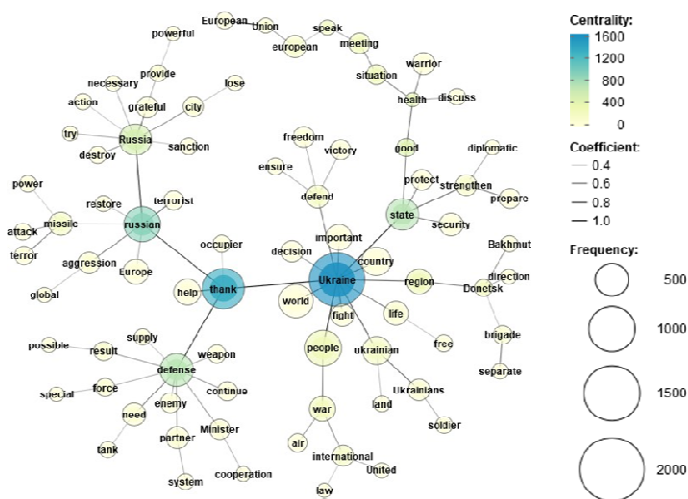


Figure 4. Third stage of the war: words co-occurrence network

In the final phase of the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war, the linguistic patterns in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speeches reveal a narrative architecture that foregrounds Ukraine's heroism and the solidification of Russia as the antagonist (Figure 4). The phrase "I am grateful" appears 776 times during this period, further emphasizing Zelenskyy's persistent acknowledgment of international aid and underscoring Ukraine's portrayal as a resilient hero fortified by a coalition of allies. This frequent expression of gratitude strengthens the archetype of the *Hero with Helpers*, central to Vladimir Propp's (1968) narrative functions, where external supporters (donors and helpers) assist the hero in overcoming adversity. Expressions such as "thank to", "thank for", and "thank all" (N = 679, first mentioned on 26 February 2022), often together with "everyone who helps" (N = 89, first mentioned on 14 March 2022), deepen this framework, creating a narrative of interconnected solidarity. In this mythic structure, Ukraine emerges as the virtuous protagonist, whose resilience is continually renewed through collective support, echoing Joseph Campbell's (2004) motif of the *community aid* found in the *Hero's* journey. Also, there is an increased focus on the strengthening ties between Ukraine and its allies, particularly the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). Phrases such as "Ukraine and the EU" (mentioned on 17 March 2022) or "Ukraine and the United States" (mentioned on 14 March 2022) illustrate the country's growing integration with democratic partners, situating Ukraine within a larger ideological struggle that aligns with the *Democratic Values versus Evil Empire* narrative, rooted in the ideological dichotomy between democratic systems and authoritarian regimes. Specialized literature often frames it as a broader continuation of Cold War rhetoric, where the *Evil Empire* (a term popularized by U.S. President Ronald Reagan) represents a threat to global democratic values (Goodnight, 1986; Hidalgo, 2022). This narrative characterizes democratic states as defenders of freedom, human rights, and self-determination, standing against oppressive regimes. In Zelenskyy's speeches, this narrative manifests through phrases like "Ukraine is and will be democratic" (mentioned on 25 November 2022), and "our entire democratic world" (mentioned on 11 October 2022). By framing Ukraine as a bulwark of democracy, Zelenskyy situates his country within a global alliance of democratic nations, contrasting it with "Russian tyranny" and its attempts to "force the democratic world to surrender with a terrorist

rush" (both mentioned on 11 October 2022). Statements such as "When freedom wins and tyranny collapses, people are smiling the same way all over the globe" (mentioned on 9 December 2022) articulate a vision of Ukraine's struggle as part of a broader ideological battle.

The rhetorical shift during this phase, particularly the increasing use of the term "the terrorist state" (N = 97, first mentioned on 8 March 2022) instead of "Russia" or "Russian people" – represents a deliberate intensification of the moral framing of the conflict. Phrases such as "consequences for the terrorist state" (mentioned on 18 February 2023) elevate Russia's depiction to that of a mythic embodiment of *evil*, as we have seen in Propp's (1968) *villain* archetype and aligning with Jack Lule's (2001) notion of the *Evil Other* in mythic storytelling. In doing so, Zelenskyy not only casts Ukraine's resistance as heroic but frames it within a universal moral dichotomy: justice against terror. Central motifs such as "Glory to Ukraine" (N = 264, first mentioned on 24 February 2022) and "Good Health to you" (N = 160, first mentioned on 2 March 2022) persist as linguistic symbols of unity and resilience. "Glory to Ukraine" functions as a nationalistic rallying cry, aligning with *The Quest* archetype (Propp, 1968), where defending the homeland becomes a transcendent mission, while "Good Health to you" extends empathetic solidarity to both citizens and international allies, fostering communal belonging.

Beyond these immediate rhetorical patterns, broader narrative structures emerge across the total corpus of 580 speeches. One key narrative is the *David vs. Goliath* archetype (Campbell, 2004; Goldschmied & Naghi, 2024), wherein Ukraine, the smaller but morally superior entity, confronts a vastly more powerful oppressor. This underdog framework creates deep emotional resonance by emphasizing Ukraine's courage and moral righteousness against overwhelming odds, a strategy consistent with Christopher Booker's (2004) *Overcoming the Monster* plot structure. The *Rebirth* narrative also permeates Zelenskyy's rhetoric, reflecting the notion of renewal following profound suffering (Eliade, 2018; Turner, 1974). Statements such as "we will liberate all our lands" and "repair work will continue without pause" (both mentioned on 24 February 2023) convey not only a desire for restoration but also a vision of national transformation and revival. This theme aligns with Campbell's (2004) *Return with the elixir* myth, where the hero, having faced adversity, brings renewal to the community.

Furthermore, Zelenskyy repeatedly invokes the *Sacred Land* myth (Sheridan & Pineault, 2016), framing Ukrainian territory as a hallowed space imbued with spiritual and historical significance. Phrases such as "we are fighting so hard to drive Russia out of our land" (mentioned on 17 February 2023) and "everything to protect our country" (mentioned on 7 August 2022) sacralize the nation's territory, turning its defence into a moral imperative and a unifying national duty. Thus, Zelenskyy's evolving wartime discourse integrates multiple narrative and mythic structures. Ukraine is framed not only as a heroic underdog but also as a symbol of democratic resilience, a sacred land under threat, and a nation destined for rebirth through collective struggle. This narrative strategy mobilizes emotional, political, and ethical support domestically and internationally, sustaining Ukraine's moral high ground amid an ongoing and existential conflict.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's 580 speeches during the first year of the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates the use of myths and narratives to sustain morale, garner international support, and reinforce Ukraine's identity as a heroic nation. Answering the first question – *Which are the recurrent narratives and myths present in the speeches of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the first year of war?* (RQ1), we noticed that, between 24th of February 2022 and 24th of February 2023, recurrent narratives in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speeches consistently framed Ukraine through the myths of *heroism*, *victimhood*, *sacred land*, *rebirth*, and the *democratic struggle against evil*, archetypal structures identified by scholars such as Vladimir Propp (1968), Joseph Campbell (2004), and Christopher Booker (2004). One dominant narrative is that of *heroism and collective resistance*. Ukraine is portrayed as the heroic protagonist defending its sovereignty against a larger oppressor, aligning with *Hero's Journey* and *Overcoming the Monster* plots (Campbell, 2004; Booker, 2004). Zelenskyy's frequent use of phrases such as "Glory to Ukraine" and references to "fallen heroes" exemplify this heroic frame. As the Ukrainian President frequently employs the hero's journey, portraying Ukrainians as resilient figures

who endure trials and tribulations in their pursuit of sovereignty, this archetype fosters a sense of shared purpose and inspires both national and international solidarity. Secondly, the *victimhood* narrative is recurrent, portraying Ukraine as an unjustly attacked nation. Terms like "war against Ukraine", "missile terror", "kill" and "child" highlight innocent suffering, aligning with the tragic narrative structures noted by Kurt Vonnegut, where stories fall into a *man in hole* shape, depicting a descent into hardship and subsequent struggle for redemption (Vonnegut, 2005). Similarly, the *martyr* archetype is prominently featured in Zelenskyy's rhetoric, with tributes to soldiers and civilians who have sacrificed their lives for Ukraine's cause. These narratives evoke empathy and moral urgency, galvanizing support for Ukraine globally (Zelizer, 2010; Goodwin & Spittle, 2002).

Additionally, the *sacred land myth* emerges, with frequent invocations of Ukraine's territory as something worth fighting and dying for – a powerful mobilizing myth that ties sovereignty to spiritual identity. The *narrative of rebirth* also appears, especially toward the latter stages of the first year, with Zelenskyy emphasizing Ukraine's future reconstruction and transformation after suffering, through phrases such as "we will rebuild..." (mentioned on 6 March 2022) or "new heroes, defenders of Kyiv" (mentioned on 24 February 2023), reflecting Eliade's (2018) and Turner's (1974) theories of *cyclical renewal after crisis*. Another recurring theme is the *saviour archetype*, where Ukraine is depicted as not only defending itself but also safeguarding democratic values for the broader international community (Snyder, 2018). Finally, the *Democratic World vs. Evil Empire* frame is recurrent, casting Ukraine as a defender of democratic values against authoritarian aggression. This narrative mirrors Cold War ideological structures and positions Ukraine within a broader global struggle for freedom.

Secondly, investigating *how specific myths and mythical structures are strategically used in the speeches* (RQ2), we noted that, by aligning Ukraine's struggle with universal ideals, these narratives transcend national boundaries and resonate deeply with diverse audiences, Zelenskyy employing specific myths and narrative structures strategically to mobilize emotional support, legitimize political actions, and foster international solidarity. First, by using the *Hero's Journey* structure (Campbell, 2004), Zelenskyy casts Ukraine as the righteous hero undergoing trials and seeking allies. For instance,

his repeated gratitude towards the EU and the US allies ("thank to" or "everyone who helps") positions these external actors as the *helpers* in Propp's typology (1968), aiding the hero in the quest. Second, the *David vs. Goliath archetype* is tactically deployed to highlight moral superiority against overwhelming odds. Phrases like "defending ourselves against Russian aggression" (mentioned on 19 February 2023) and references to Ukraine's smaller size versus Russia's military might frame Ukraine as the underdog, appealing to global sympathies.

In the same way, the *sacred land* myth is used to sacralize territorial integrity, turning battles over cities like Kyiv, Bucha, and Mariupol into spiritual struggles. The personalization of suffering via city names and references to the Ukrainian territory reinforces a mythic duty to defend the homeland at any cost. Moreover, Zelenskyy strategically amplifies the *villain archetype* by escalating Russia's portrayal from "occupier" to "terrorist state" (both first mentioned between 1-4 March 2022). This linguistic approach intensifies the emotional and moral justification for continued resistance and international action, aligning with Lule's (2001) *Evil Other* in myth-based journalism and political discourse. Finally, through the Rebirth narrative, Zelenskyy consistently links present suffering to future regeneration – "repair work will continue without pause" (mentioned on 24 February 2023) or "liberate all our lands" (mentioned on 24 February 2023) – invoking hope and resilience as political tools to maintain morale.

Last but not least, the analysis points out that *Zelenskyy's narratives have evolved during the war, the military actions on the front* (RQ3), in response to the conflict's progression and strategic political needs, based on the three-stage evolution of war.

1. **First Stage – Initial Invasion and Defensive Efforts (February 24, 2022 – April 24, 2022):** In the first months, the focus was on pure survival and establishing Ukraine as both hero and victim. Expressions like "Glory to Ukraine" and references to "missile terror" or "invasion" emphasized the existential threat and rallied both domestic and international support.
2. **Second Stage – Shifting Frontline and the Fight for Donbas (April 25, 2022 – August 24, 2022):** As the war progressed and

Ukraine achieved symbolic victories (e.g., liberation of Snake Island, European Union candidate status), the narrative shifted towards resilience and alliance-building. The growing number of expressions of gratitude ("I am grateful" appearing 653 times) highlights this shift, where the hero is not alone but actively supported by a network of allies.

3. **Third Stage – Ukrainian Counteroffensives and Renewed Russian Aggression (August 25, 2022 – February 24, 2023):** Toward the end of the first year, the narrative matured into a vision of rebirth and future reconstruction. Simultaneously, Russia's framing intensified from "occupier" to "terrorist state", showing the need for stronger moral polarization. Expressions such as "protect from the terrorist state" and "sanctions against the terrorist state" emerged in parallel with Ukraine's military counteroffensives in regions like Donbas and Sievierodonetsk.

Thus, narrative evolution mirrored military reality: initial defence (heroic survival), mid-war resilience or alliance building (hero plus helpers), and finally moral escalation and future rebuilding (rebirth). These shifts helped Zelenskyy maintain internal morale and external political support, adapting rhetorical strategies to changing circumstances while adhering to familiar, emotionally resonant mythic structures.

Nevertheless, throughout the whole Ukrainian crisis, digital media have been pivotal in shaping public perception. Ukrainian political leaders, including Zelenskyy, have used media channels to share personal stories, images of resilience, and appeals for international solidarity. These narratives often incorporate familiar myths and archetypes, creating emotionally compelling content that fosters engagement. Digital platforms also intensify the weaponization of information, as competing narratives vie for dominance in the global information space. Russia's sophisticated disinformation campaigns, which disseminate misleading or fabricated stories, exemplify how digital media can manipulate perceptions and undermine opponents (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). In response, Ukraine has countered with strategic narratives that emphasize transparency, resilience, and moral clarity. The interplay between these narratives underscores the role of digital media as both a battleground and a tool for shaping contemporary

political discourse (Tankard, 2001; Kimble, 2006). Hence, narratives and myths have proven indispensable in political discourse, providing a framework for interpreting events, legitimizing actions, and mobilizing public opinion. The Ukrainian crisis illustrates the strategic deployment of narratives and myths to influence perceptions and garner support, both domestically and internationally. Political actors craft compelling stories that resonate deeply with audiences by leveraging historical narratives, archetypes, and digital media. As the digital age continues to reshape the landscape of political communication, understanding the power of narratives and myths remains crucial for navigating complex geopolitical conflicts and fostering informed public discourse (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014). The speeches of Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the first year of the war illustrate the power of narrative and myth in shaping public perception, mobilizing support, and defining national identity. Zelenskyy crafts a compelling discourse that resonates across domestic and international audiences by intertwining universal archetypes with Ukraine's specific context. His rhetoric not only sustains the morale of a nation under siege but also positions Ukraine as a central actor in the global fight for democratic values. Moreover, President Zelenskyy's rhetoric reflects a strategic alignment with Western partners, particularly the United States. Nevertheless, this discourse takes on new meaning in the context of the evolving diplomatic landscape following the 2025 election of President Donald Trump. Their recent meeting, alongside new agreements such as the U.S.-Ukraine minerals deal, signals a shift in tone and priorities within bilateral relations (Glebova, 2025).

A key limitation of the study is its reliance on publicly available transcripts of President Zelenskyy's speeches, excluding informal statements, social media content, and non-verbal communication such as tone or body language, which can significantly influence how messages are received. Furthermore, the analysis is based on English translations, which may not fully reflect the original meanings or rhetorical nuances of the Ukrainian language, potentially affecting the accuracy of keyword and narrative identification. Another limitation is the temporal dimension, as the study focuses only on the first year of the war; future research could expand the analysis to subsequent periods to examine how narratives continue to evolve in response to changing military and political conditions.

As a follow-up direction, particular attention should be paid to how Zelenskyy's discourse at the beginning of 2025, coinciding with Trump's re-emergence in the international arena, reflects adaptive rhetorical strategies shaped by a changing global order. His recent addresses demonstrate a balancing act between asserting national resilience and aligning with evolving Western expectations, highlighting the flexible nature of political discourse in times of diplomatic uncertainty. Future research could also expand the dataset to include other media formats, such as video interviews, social media posts, and third-party analyses of Zelenskyy's discourse. Additionally, a comparative analysis of Zelenskyy's rhetoric with other world leaders in times of crisis could shed light on shared patterns and unique approaches to framing national struggles.

As the war continues, Zelenskyy's narratives are likely to adapt further, reflecting the shifting realities on the ground and the ongoing need to sustain global solidarity with Ukraine.

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