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### Abstract

This article investigates the use of social media for visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Using a large set of visual data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte, the authors employ content analysis to examine how the conflict was represented and interpreted in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities during the peak of violence in summer 2014. The findings point to the existence of profound differences in framing the conflict among pro- Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities. The former tended to interpret the conflict as a limited military action against local insurgents, whereas the latter presented it as an all-out war against the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine. The article suggests that framing the conflict through social media facilitated the propagation of mutually exclusive views on the conflict and led to the formation of divergent expectations in Ukraine and Russia concerning the outcome of the war in Donbas.

### Keywords

conflict, Russia, social media, Ukraine, visual framing, Vkontakte, war

An unshaven man with a machine gun waves a toy monkey from the downed Malaysia Airlines plane in front of photographers. A column of armoured personnel carriers flying Ukrainian flags speeds through a dusty country road. An elderly woman cries near a ruined house somewhere on the outskirts of Donetsk. A group of armed insurgents with an Eastern Orthodox icon and a Russian imperial flag sit around a military truck. A small company of smiling Ukrainian soldiers with new automatic rifles stand in a sunflower field under the blue sky. These are just some among thousands of images that flooded Ukrainian and Russian social networking sites in summer 2014 and influenced how internet users from both countries perceived and interpreted the conflict between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine.

In our article, we investigate the role of social media in visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, also known as the war in Donbas. Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2010) argue that, in the current age of mediatized war, the media become an integral part of warfare, affecting the ways in which the conflict is perceived by the general public, what decisions are made by policy-makers, and how the history of the conflict is written by historians. While a number of studies examine the use of media for framing recent con- flicts, including the 2003 Iraq war (Griffin, 2004), the 2008 war in Georgia (Basilaia et al., 2013), and the ongoing war in Syria (Greenwood and Jenkins, 2015), the majority of existing analyses tend to focus on mainstream media, in particular news agencies. Consequently, many of the existing studies do not account for the increasing dissemina- tion of digital technology and the growing popularity of social media, which according to Kuntsman (2010: 2) challenge the monopoly of news media by fundamentally trans- forming ‘modes of witnessing, feeling and remembering violent and traumatic events’. The recognition of this transformation is particularly urgent in the case of post-socialist countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, where digital media ‘form a pivotal discursive territory’ (Rutten and Zvereva, 2013: 2) for framing past and present conflict alike, and influence how these conflicts are represented and interpreted by the general public.

In order to contribute to the conflict framing research in the post-socialist context, we examined the emergence of visual frames related to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in social media, using data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte. In order to explore differences in framing the conflict among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities, we examined visual images published in two public Vkontakte groups – Anti-terrorist operation (*Antiterroristicheskaja operacija*) and Reports from the Novorossiyan Militia (*Svodki ot opolchenija Novorossii*) – in the second half of summer 2014. Using content analysis, we tried to answer the following questions: How did the dynamics of frame production change in the course of the conflict? What differences in framing the conflict can be detected between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online com- munities? How did internet users interact with different categories of visual content and which categories attracted the most attention? And, finally, what was the impact of the use of social media for visual framing of the events in Eastern Ukraine on the develop- ment of the conflict?

# Background to the conflict

The origins of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be traced back to a series of pro-Rus- sian rallies, which took place in March 2014 in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. These rallies were directed against the new pro-Western Ukrainian government, which was installed after the overthrow of President Yanukovich in February 2014, following a

countrywide protest campaign known as the Euromaidan protests. The crisis of legiti- macy of the post-Yanukovich government, together with the fear of disruption of cultural and economic relations with Russia, which were historically strong in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, served as a starting point for the wave of anti-government protests.1 While initially insignificant, these rallies intensified during the Crimean crisis, reaching their peak after the referendum that resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia on 18 March.

The starting point of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be related to 6 April, when groups of pro-Russian activists stormed government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and declared the formation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively). The next day, the Ukrainian government led by Oleksand Turchinov announced that ‘anti-terrorist measures’ (Turchinov objavil …, 2014) would be taken against armed insurgents in Eastern Ukraine. Despite the measures, however, the pro- Russian militant groups, which included both local citizens and Russian volunteers, con- tinued to expand their control over the Donbas region by capturing administrative buildings and police stations in Kramatorsk, Horlivka and Mariupol. The city of Sloviansk, which was captured by the pro-Russian insurgents led by Igor Girkin2 on 12 April, became the centre of rebellion as well as a place of major confrontation between the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces in the following weeks.

The conflict escalated in May 2014 after a referendum was held in DNR and LNR calling for two independent People’s Republics, followed by the presidential elections in Ukraine, which were won by Petro Poroshenko. Following Poroshenko’s promise to end the anti-terrorist operation in ‘a matter of hours’ (Macdonald and Behrakis, 2014), the Ukrainian army started advancing to the insurgent-controlled territory at the end of May. A number of skirmishes took place both in and around Donetsk and Luhansk, resulting in dozens of deaths on both the government and insurgent sides. Despite active resistance from the People’s Republics, which presumably received military support from Russia (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5), pro-government forces managed to re-capture a number of cities in Eastern Ukraine, including Krasnyi Liman and Mariupol.

After a massive battle near Yampil on 19 June, where both sides used armoured vehi- cles and tanks, the Ukrainian government declared a week-long ceasefire in an attempt to implement Poroshenko’s peace plan. The compromise, however, was not reached, and the fighting continued with a new government offensive that started on 1 July. Besides capturing a number of villages in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, on 5 July the Ukrainian army seized Sloviansk, which for three months remained a major insurgent stronghold. The army’s offensive continued in the following days, resulting in the cap- ture of Kramatorsk and Artemivsk and the retreat of insurgent troops under the command of Girkin to the Donetsk city.

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July brought a brief break to the fighting, as both the Ukrainian government and insurgents blamed each other for the destruction of the passenger plane. In a matter of days, however, the confrontation resumed as government forces continued to capture small towns across Donbas in order to surround and isolate insurgent forces; at the same time, the Ukrainian troops under- took another attempt to secure a border between Ukraine and Russia. As the Ukrainian army moved to the suburbs of Donetks and Luhansk, both cities came under artillery fire,

resulting in a number of losses among the civilian population and significant damage to the local infrastructure. Similarly, the city of Horlivka, one of the major industrial hubs in the Donbas region, also came under heavy shelling, resulting in dozens of deaths and the flight of the civilian population.

Despite the quick advancement at the end of July, government forces were not able to secure the Ukrainian state border. Instead, at the beginning of August, a number of army units were surrounded in the south of Luhansk region and forced to either surrender or move to Russia; according to several reports, insurgent units were supported by the Russian artillery, which was shelling Ukrainian forces across the Ukrainian–Russian border (Demirjian and Birnbaum, 2014). Similarly, attempts to surround Donetsk and isolate the territory of DNR failed after a series of meeting engagements around Shakhtarsk and Miusinsk at the end of July and the beginning of August.

Yet, the decisive breakthrough in the course of the conflict occurred in the second half of August when, during the battle of Ilovaisk, pro-Russian insurgents started their coun- teroffensive, which resulted in the encirclement of a significant number of Ukrainian troops, including several volunteer battalions. According to the Ukrainian side, the insur- gent counteroffensive was supported by regular Russian army troops, including attack helicopters and tanks (MoDoU, 2015); some reports (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5) suggest that up to 4,000 Russian soldiers participated in the insurgent counteroffensive. The sub- sequent advancement of insurgent forces resulted in the expansion of the territories of the People’s Republics and the signing of the first Minsk agreements on 5 September, which were intended to ensure a ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and insurgents.3

# Literature review

In recent decades, the concept of framing has become extensively used in social sciences and the humanities,4 and is often viewed as ‘the most utilized mass communication theory of the present era’ (Bryant and Miron, 2004: 695). According to Entman (1993: 52), fram- ing is a process of selection of some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient to ‘promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evalua- tion, and/or treatment recommendation’. Frames themselves, as Reese (2001: 5) argues, can be understood as organizing principles that are both socially shared and persistent over time; by revealing those principles through symbolic forms of expressions, individu- als and societies can meaningfully structure the social world around them. Much research on framing focuses on political communication – i.e. how public actors use media to com- municate certain views on events and issues; however, as D’Angelo and Kuypers (2009: 1) note, framing research expands far beyond ‘quintessentially political sites and topics’ and encompasses a variety of areas, including religion, sport and healthcare.

Because frames influence not only the ways in which information is presented, but also how it is comprehended, Scheufele (1999) points to the importance of differentiat- ing between two types of frames: media or news frames (D’Angelo, 2002) and individual frames. Media frames can be defined as central ideas or story lines that provide meaning to certain sequences of events (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 143). In contrast, indi- vidual frames are clusters of ideas that guide processing of information on the individual level; according to Scheufele (1999: 107), these clusters can take the form of long-term

political views or short-term issue-related frames of reference. D’Angelo (2002: 873) notes that in the process of frame building both types of frames interact with each other as the prior knowledge that individuals have is essential for the processing of informa- tion conveyed in media frames; however, the differentiation between different types of frames is helpful for operationalization of the concept of framing in the context of spe- cific case studies.

Because in our study we were particularly interested in the ways in which different aspects of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine emerged as more salient in social media, we decided to focus on conflict-related media frames, which define both the information presented to the audience and the method of presentation (Iyengar, 1991). The role of media frames is important in any social context because their selection affects the way in which an audience perceives a particular issue. However, at a time of conflict, frames become particularly significant because they determine how the cause of strife is under- stood and what is thought to be the appropriate response (Hammond, 2007: 18). Because of its potency, however, the use of frames can have a profound impact on the course of conflict: in some cases, as Bratic (2008) argues, it can contribute to the peaceful transfor- mation of strife by promoting reconciliation and diminishing hostilities, whereas in oth- ers, as Hamelink (2008) points out, a particular selection of frames can motivate people to engage in more violence and impede de-escalating behaviour.

The development of communication technologies over the last two decades has brought profound changes in the ways conflict-related frames emerge by allowing indi- viduals and societies alike to ‘connect to war in a manner that was not possible before’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010: 1). The increased connectivity of today’s media ecol- ogy facilitates the dissemination of images and stories related to war and conflict across the globe; however, such an unprecedented visibility of modern conflicts has an ambiva- lent impact on their representation. The increased amount of data – both visual and tex- tual – from the conflict areas as well as a wider selection of information sources, which vary from mainstream to citizen media, has expedited the framing of today’s ‘mediatized conflicts’ (Cottle, 2006). However, the very same factors also make framing of contem- porary conflicts more chaotic and less predictable, as it becomes increasingly influenced by ‘prosumption and transmediation practices among hybrid producers’ (Cheong and Lundry, 2012: 502) which can offer alternative interpretations and/or challenge official narratives of conflicts.

These profound changes in representation of modern conflicts spawned a significant amount of studies5 dedicated to the investigation of how ‘selected visions of war are produced, circulated and viewed within specific historical, cultural and political circum- stances’ (Parry, 2010: 1186). However, a number of scholars (Brantner et al., 2011; Coleman, 2010; Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes, 2012) point out that up to now the major- ity of existing works have paid limited attention to the role of visual images in framing conflicts. While the situation is currently changing and an increasing number of studies are appearing on the use of visual images for framing wars and conflicts (Griffin, 2004; Neumann and Fahmy, 2012; Schwalbe et al., 2008), the analysis of verbal accounts still remains a prevalent trend in framing studies.

Despite the prevalence of analyses of verbal accounts of conflicts, the use of visual images has significant potential for the framing effort. Messaris and Abraham (2001:

220) argue that the special qualities of visuals (i.e. indexicality, iconicity and syntactic implicitness) make the use of images particularly effective for ‘framing and articulating ideological messages’; a similar point is made by Hansen (2011), who notes that imme- diacy, circulability and ambiguity of visual images turns them into powerful tools for social construction of security issues. These arguments are supported by Schwalbe and Dougherty (2015: 142), who in their study on the use of images for framing the 2006 Israel–Lebannon war point out that not only are visuals processed quicker than texts, but they also produce an immediate emotional response. Similarly, Parry (2010: 1189) in her study of visual framing of the 2003 Iraq war argues that visual frames have a higher degree of memorability, which makes their impact higher as compared with verbal ones. The majority of works dedicated to visual framing of conflicts (Fahmy and Kim, 2008; Neumann and Fahmy, 2012; Parry, 2010) rely upon data from news media, such as newspapers and information agencies. While images produced by professional journal- ists for mainstream media remain a major source of frames, the increasing role of social media should also be recognized. As Ritzer et al. (2012) argue, the rise of social media has lead to the expansion of prosumption practices by creating an environment in which internet users can simultaneously produce and consume digital content. This prosumer turn also affects conflict framing: for instance, in their study of the 2003 Iraq war, Schwalbe et al. (2008) demonstrate that digital technology opens new venues for visual framing of conflicts by allowing quick reproduction and dissemination of images across media platforms. Similarly, in their study of framing of the Sri Lankan civil war, Neumann and Fahmy (2012) note that social media reinforce the impact of visual images by facilitating and accelerating their distribution. Finally, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) in their study of 2011 civic unrest in Egypt found that social media were distinguished from other media platforms by their interactivity and participatory potential that turned them

into a significant means for framing civil strife.

The role of social media in conflict framing is particularly significant in post-socialist countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, where the local digital landscape is not only char- acterized by significant politicization, but is also regularly used to articulate past and present conflicts (Rutten and Zvereva, 2013). A number of studies examine the use of social media for framing public unrest and military conflict in the region, including the 2007 Moldova revolution (Lysenko and Desouza, 2012), the 2008 war in Georgia (Spörer-Wagner, 2013), the 2011–2013 protests in Russia (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013) and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine (Onuch, 2015). Yet, up to now, only a few works examine the use of social media for framing the post-Euromaidan Ukraine crisis, in particular the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.6 By investigating how the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was framed by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian social media users, this article strives to achieve better understanding of the ways digital visuals are used for framing contemporary conflicts and to assess the impact of social media on the development of the Ukraine crisis.