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ABSTRACT Previous research on the ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine has largely provided structural explanations for the outbreak of violence in Donbas. In contrast to previous studies, this article takes an interpretive approach and investigates how the Ukrainian political leadership makes sense of the events in Donbas by drawing an analogy between the Donbas War and World War II.

Such an approach sheds light on the Ukrainian ruling elites standpoint on the Donbas conflict and contributes to the scholarly literature on conflict resolution in the region.

Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in the Eastern Ukrainian Donbas region has been a complex phenomenon. In March and April 2014, following the political regime change in Kyiv in the wake of the Euromaidan Revolution, proRussian activists in Donbas started seizing

government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and soon proclaimed two selfgoverning republics: the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR). In response, the Ukrainian government launched an antiterror operation, and the conflict soon escalated into war. The fight between the Ukrainian armed forces and proRussian separatists in Donbas has been influenced by a third party the Russian Federation. The public, the media and scholars alike have been intensively involved in inves

tigating Russias direct and nondirect military involvement in Donbas since Russias annexation of Crimea, although the Russian government keeps denying the deployment of its troops in the region. Neither the Minsk I peace agreement signed by representatives

of Ukraine, Russia and the selfproclaimed DNR and LNR in September 2014, nor the Minsk II peace agreement signed by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany in February 2015 led to a ceasefire. Moreover, neither the Ukrainian armed forces nor the

separatist forces have withdrawn heavy weapons from the contact line, and each continues to accuse the other of violating the truce. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated that from midApril 2014 to midNovember 2015 (the most intense conflict phase) more than 9,000 people (Ukrainian armed forces, civilians and members of the armed groups) were killed and more than 20,000 injured. Added to this, in November 2015, the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy registered more than 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the country (OHCHR, [2015](#_bookmark11), p. 2, p. 17).

The events in Donbas have sparked an academic and public discussion on the nature of the armed conflict in the region. Several previous works have engaged in studying internal and external structural factors that led to the outbreak of violence in the region (Katchanovski, [2016](#_bookmark10); Kudelia, [2014](#_bookmark10); Malyarenko & Wolff, [2018](#_bookmark11); Portnov, [2016](#_bookmark11); Wilson, [2016](#_bookmark12)). Scholars have pointed to the role of both the political elites in Kyiv and the local elite

and the population in Donbas, as well as to Russias role in sparking and sustaining the con

flict. But how does the Ukrainian political leadership make sense of the war in Eastern

Ukraine?

In May 2015, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko stated the following in regard to the conflict in Donbas: History teaches us a good lesson. The significance of the occupation of the Czechoslovak Sudetenland is not lost on us because two of our regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, are partly occupied (TSN, [2015](#_bookmark12)). The presidents comparison between the Russian intervention in Ukrainian Donbas and Nazi Germanys occupation of the Czecho

slovak Sudetenland might provoke different emotions and raise eyebrows. One might argue that Putins Russia in 2014 was nothing like Hitlers Germany in 1938. Indeed, it was not, but the argument that I intend to make in this article is different it is not about the historical event itself, but about its meaning as constructed by political decisionmakers. As

Halvard Leira argues, historical analogies might be understood in terms of first and second order constructs. For example, the current American president, Donald Trump, is sometimes compared to former American president Andrew Jackson. As the first order construct, one might think in terms of whether and to what extent Trump is similar to Jackson, yet the second order construct involves understanding the meaning of such an analogy and the labelling of event X as event Y. In other words, it is about the connection between the signified (current event) and the signifier (previous event, or the concept) (Leira, [2017](#_bookmark10)).

In contrast to previous works offering structural explanations of the conflict in Donbas, this article takes an interpretive approach, investigating which concepts the Ukrainian political leadership employs when describing the war in Donbas. I argue that the historical analogy drawn by the Ukrainian president in one of his speeches is essential for understanding how the Ukrainian ruling elites conceptualize the Donbas conflict. Following the logic of interpretive research, I therefore contend that *the Donbas War is WWII* metaphor applied by the Ukrainian president should be taken seriously as it helps us to explore how the political actors in Ukraine conceptualize and act in regard to the events in Donbas.

In terms of data, I draw on four speeches delivered in 20152018 by the Ukrainian president to the Ukrainian nation and the international guests that attended the WWII commem

oration ceremonies in Kyiv on 8 May (the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation) or 9 May (Victory Day).Studying the presidents standpoint on the Donbas War is important due to the fact that given the parliamentarypresidential political system in the country the president is one of the key political institutions in Ukraine and currently exercises great power

in Ukrainian politics. Some observers have noted that despite the initial liberalization of the political regime in Ukraine following the Euromaidan Revolution, President Poroshenko has meanwhile accumulated excessive formal and informal power. In addition to his formal function of controlling the foreign and defence policy of the country, the security services and the prosecutor general, the incumbent Ukrainian president has also played a decisive role in appointing his ally as prime minister and securing an alliance with the parliamentary speaker (Minakov, [2017](#_bookmark11); see also Kudelia, [2018](#_bookmark10)).

In discussing the role of language in political discourse, I draw on the insights of metaphor analysis employed in the social sciences and humanities. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, political scientists have increasingly engaged in developing various techniques for examining the role of metaphors in politics. There is a growing body of scholarly literature on the use of metaphors in various public policy settings focusing on social issues, the integration of migrants, and rebuilding public space or organizational practices ( [1993](#_bookmark11); Stone, [2002](#_bookmark12); Van Hulst, [2008](#_bookmark12); Yanow, [1996](#_bookmark12); Yanow, [2008](#_bookmark12); Yanow & Van der Haar, [2013](#_bookmark12)).Scholars of international relations and foreign policy analysis have also increasingly engaged with metaphors used in foreign policymaking, for example in the US policy towards China in the early twentieth century, or US foreign policy under President Carter in the late 1970s. Attention has also been paid to the British public discourse on the

war on terror in the 2000s (Blanchard, [2013](#_bookmark10); Campbell, [2015](#_bookmark10); Oppermann & Spencer, [2013](#_bookmark11)). In addition, some scholars have specifically investigated how historical analogies were used by governments to legitimize their contemporary foreign policies, such as the

US policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War and towards the Balkans in the 1990s, as well as the US and UK policies towards Iraq in the 2000s (Angstrom, [2011](#_bookmark10); Mutimer, [2008](#_bookmark11); Shimko, [1994](#_bookmark12); Steinweis, [2005](#_bookmark12)).

Structuring Experience Through the Use of Metaphor

Some of the policy studies mentioned above draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* ([1980](#_bookmark10)). In their groundbreaking work on conceptual metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson explained how we root our actions in our conceptual thinking. They defined a metaphor as [] understanding and experien

cing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), p. 5). The authors

argued that metaphors should not be understood in terms of rhetorical language devices in ones speech, but rather in terms of ones conceptual system of thinking. They went on to explain what the metaphors used by a person tell us about his or her actions and argued that the way we think and act is often expressed through our metaphorical language as the source of everyday communication (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 36).

To illustrate their train of thought, Lakoff and Johnson cited a number of metaphors used

in everyday language, one of them being the *Argument is War* metaphor. They suggested that the use of this metaphor reflects how we structure our actions while engaged in an argument we lose or win, develop strategies, attack the opponent and defend our own position. Understanding an argument in terms of war is different from understanding an argument in

terms of dance, for instance (as it might be conceptualized in another culture). The latter implies that people perform and experience arguing differently, and we would probably not regard them as having an argument at all. Hence, to use the *Argument is War* metaphor is to describe our activity in a very specific way (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 45).

Lakoff and Johnson further claimed that metaphorical concepts arise when we are

engaged in conceptualizing our experience. By referring to the *Argument is War* metaphor, they pointed out that the meaning of this expression derives from the experience of having a conversation that is structured in a similar way to a battle. By structuring a conversation in this way and paying attention to the perceptions of the other interlocutor, one acts according to this structure. The way in which our experiences are structured, however, is multidimensional. We bring coherence to the structure of our experiences by recognizing various kinds of participants, the parts and stages of the conversation, and the linear sequence, causation and purpose of the action. In other words, while conceptualizing our experience, we select

certain aspects of it those that we find important and abandon others. Metaphorical thinking emerges when we classify particular experiences, firstly by structuring them and then by employing a concept in structuring them (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 7783).

Lakoff and Johnson also explained how we create new metaphors to give new meaning to

our experiences. To illustrate this, they brought up the metaphor *Love is a Collaborative Work of Art*. This metaphor arose, they argued, from our view and experience of doing something that is reminiscent of a collaborative artistic work. This metaphor reflects a network of entailments that we employ to coherently structure our experience. First, Lakoff and Johnson explain, by using this metaphor we highlight certain features of our

experiences and mask others. The metaphor presupposes an active involvement work

and not passive observation. This is different, for example, from understanding the love relationship as madness that implies a lack of control. Second, it entails selecting

very specific aspects of our experience. It is not about just any type of work, but specific work that is performed to create a work of art. Third, by reflecting on a new love experience, we give the notion of love new meaning and therefore we start acting accordingly. Fourth, the metaphor sanctions our deeds, justifies them and requires certain actions from us. The metaphor dictates that we have to be actively involved in our relationship and, more precisely, it implies an involvement in collaboration with somebody else. Fifth, the meaning of the metaphor is culturally specific. The way we understand metaphors depends partly

on the culture in which we live and partly on our experience. If somebody has a different understanding of art, this metaphor will be inappropriate for describing ones experiences of love. The understanding of certain things and processes varies greatly from culture to culture, and metaphors that are easy to understand in one culture can be difficult to compre

hend in another (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 139143).

Ultimately, Lakoff and Johnson argued that a new metaphor can create a new reality

when we start acting in terms of it. In this way, cultural change comes about to a large extent due to the introduction of new metaphors and the loss of old ones, and this goes against the traditional understanding of metaphor as a rhetorical device. As Lakoff and Johnson argued: It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone dont change

reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect

how we perceive the world and act upon these perceptions (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 145146). The traditional understanding of metaphor presupposes that the reality is objective. In this way, the human perception of the reality is negated. In contrast, as

Lakoff and Johnson summed up, we act in accordance with our conceptualization of the physical world with which we interact, and we often understand this world in metaphorical terms (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 145146).