NATI5014 - Discourse Analysis

Final Paper

Leadership change and diplomatic discourse: a critical analysis of US statements at the OSCE

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Introduction

"We stand with Ukraine" became a commonly recognised phrase of solidarity with Ukraine in response to the Russian full-scale invasion. This was especially relevant within the US-led Western bloc, which has provided sizable military, economic and diplomatic support to Ukraine, while attempting to isolate Russia on the global stage. However, following Donald Trump's second election and inauguration in early 2025, the US administration initiated a significant and dramatic change in course, including mainly the adoption of a more critical stance of the aid provided to Ukraine and a reevaluation of the US relationship with its European allies and with Russia. This new approach, characterised by a return to realpolitik and a renouncement of multilateralism, not only altered the US foreign policy decisions but also the way the country engages within international forums, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Founded through the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, OSCE had for a long time served as a key platform for dialogue on military, economic/environmental and human dimensions of security. After February 2022, the OSCE remained as one of the last points of contact between Russia and the West, and as a result was a place where the Western states continuously condemned the Russian aggression and reaffirmed their commitment to providing support for Ukraine. The use of OSCE channels might, however, change yet again as the US diplomatic rhetoric undergoes a significant shift.

Despite being a relatively recent situation, significant research has been conducted on media representations and political rhetoric surrounding the war in Ukraine. However, multilateral diplomatic communication has, in comparison, received less attention from scholars. Therefore, this paper analyses US diplomatic discourse on the war in Ukraine following

Trump's return to the White House. Specifically, it investigates whether (and what) changes in the framing of the conflict can be identified before and after Trump's inauguration.

Besides addressing a research gap, the relevance of this study lies in its focus on the diplomatic language, which is not merely symbolic, but rather a powerful tool that states use to signal policy positions, justify their actions and modify perceptions around issues. Examining diplomats' statements and how they assign responsibility, construct narratives and position their country in the contemporary rapidly shifting geopolitical environment therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between discourse and international relations.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section provides a literature review, focusing mainly on the discourse about the war in Ukraine by Western elites and diplomatic discourse, followed by a methodological section which outlines the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically *nomination*, *attribution* and *Social Actor Analysis* (SAA). The analysis section will present a comparative examination of 6 diplomatic statements, highlighting changes before and after Trump's inauguration. Finally, the conclusion summarises and reflects on the findings and broader implications in understanding the shifting US foreign policy.

Literature review

Right after the beginning of the war, Ukraine started building its own discursive 'brand', through which it sought to portray itself as bravely and fearlessly defending against the Russian aggressor (Kaneva 2023). Using Critical Discourse Analysis, Kaneva (2023) claims that this campaign fits into the discursive construction of the war in Ukraine as a conflict between the liberal and democratic Western world against an authoritarian and cruel 'villain' exemplified by Russia, which is the continuation of the soviet project. Through this, Ukraine

asserts itself as a defender of Western humanitarian values, but also at the same time asserts its agency vis-à-vis the collective West (Kaneva 2023).

Similarly, Shao et al. (2025), building on legitimation theory, demonstrated that leading German newspapers justified unwavering military support to Ukraine by embedding it within a collective "we", set against a cruel and destructive Russia. The war was constructed as a one-sided responsibility of Russia, who is the sole aggressor, and in turn demands solidarity and strong action from both Germany and the broader West (Shao et al. 2025). This media framing aligned with the strategies of the political parties and elites, and legitimised Germany's support despite historical sensitivities (Shao et al. 2025).

In the US, discourse under President Biden employed similar strategies. In his first speech at the onset of Russia's invasion, Biden reinforced an *us vs. them* dichotomy, presenting Russia as an existential threat to the collective West and the modern world in general (Mahfoud and Khaldaoui 2023). By siding with Ukraine against the aggressor exemplified by Putin, America is framed as defending liberalism, humanism, and democracy against an actor that endangers them (Mahfoud and Khaldaoui 2023). From the perspective of legitimation, Biden framed Russia as a moral threat, characterising it as brutal, tyrannical, and shameless, and the US and Ukraine as upholding the international order based on freedom and universal rules (Ahmed 2023). Russia and Putin were additionally framed as illiberal and undemocratic, wishing to impose similar values on a neighbouring country, and embody intimidation, violence and authoritarianism (Mahfoud and Khaldaoui 2023). These constructions were widely echoed by other NATO allies, including the United Kingdom's Boris Johnson (Adeeb and Vieira 2024).

More recently, however, research has begun to highlight the discursive divergence represented by Donald Trump, who has been expressing affinity towards the Russian regime, praising Vladimir Putin on numerous occasions and breaking with the bipartisan consensus of opposition towards Russia (Rieger 2024). Analyzing discourse in proposed laws and discussions of members of the Congress, Rieger (2024) claimed that the Russian invasion strengthened the commitment of Republicans to a joint stance opposing Russian aggression and supporting Ukraine and other NATO countries. However, as the war progressed, some Republicans started deviating from this consensus, with Trump's inclination towards Russia serving as a push (Rieger 2024). Prior to the 2024 election, Trump's narratives on Ukraine largely mirrored those of Putin, particularly in his calls for a peace in Ukraine that would compromise on its territorial integrity (Oates 2024). Despite different motivations, Russian and Trump's final aims were mirrored in discourse that largely overlapped, making scholars and journalists question his willingness to continue supporting Ukraine after his election (Oates 2024). These discursive shifts have indeed materialised in US policy under his new administration, as he has taken a more critical stance towards support for Ukraine and its leadership, and engaged with Russia to negotiate an end to the conflict (CNN 2025). This is part of a push to normalize relations with Russia, which also entails decreasing support for Ukraine (Politico 2025). However, due to the novelty of this situation, these shifts in the approach of the United States to the war in Ukraine have not received academic attention so far.

Diplomacy has been characterized as "the master-institution" or, more prosaically, as "the engine room" of international relations (Jönsson and Hall 2005, 1). At the same time, diplomacy is guided by a set of norms and rules, which stem from the necessity of reciprocal acknowledgement and coexistence and regulate the possible discourse, as it requires a more

respectful expression of ideas (Jönsson and Hall 2005, 28). Diplomatic language is often considered more correct and elegant, but still clearly expresses the wishes of governments that it represents (Litvak and Pomozova 2021). Diplomatic discourse as a genre provides "excellent data to study how ideologies are discussed and negotiated, how power relations are asserted, and especially how political differences on difficult issues are discussed and communicated positively" (Afzaal et al. 2022, 685). Faizullaev and Cornut (2017) show how analysing discourse and narratives used by diplomats in their speeches is conducive to understanding the strategies and background assumptions of geopolitical actors. In arenas such as bodies of international organizations, these practices are used as tools of persuasion and political reasoning (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017).

Overall, it is clear that prior work has focused on elite speeches, media and national rhetoric, yet has underexamined the language used in institutional, multilateral settings such as the OSCE, where states communicate and signal foreign policy. By analysing how the US discourse at the OSCE changed after Trump's return, this study fills a key gap at the junction between the literatures on discourse analysis and international relations.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative analytical approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, using nomination, attribution and SAA. *Nomination* refers to the way that things or persons are named and represented in discourse, while *attribution* deals with how and which characteristics, actions, or intentions are ascribed to these nominations, shaping how they are perceived by the audience. Together, these analytical strategies reveal how actors and events are constructed in order to (de)legitimise certain claims.

The analysis also draws on SAA, based on the framework of van Leeuwen (2008). This method focuses on the different ways in which social actors can be represented in discourse by examining linguistic choices that include or exclude actors, assign agency or passivity, and portray them through roles, attributes, or generalizations. This reveals how discourse constructs power relations, responsibilities, and ideologies. Of particular importance are the categories of activation and passivation, which help determine who is represented as an agent of action and who is constructed as a recipient or victim. As noted by van Leeuwen, those discursive choices "can reallocate roles, rearrange the social relations between the participants" (2008, 43). In the context of an international conflict, these categories can be especially important in analysing how war and peace are framed and who is distinguished as an aggressor (the agent perpetrating the conflict) and a victim (the 'recipient' of the violence).

The study is guided by a number of analytical questions: how are Russia, Ukraine and the United States discursively represented within the conflict? What traits, actions and intentions are attributed to them? How are war and peace represented, how are they characterised and how is the responsibility assigned? What strategies of inclusion and exclusion are used to strengthen broader diplomatic claims?

For the purposes of this paper, we analyse six official US statements delivered at the Permanent Council (PC) of the OSCE. The PC is the organisation's key decision-making body for day-to-day political work. It convenes on a weekly basis and consists of diplomatic delegations or high-ranking guests who present their country's stance on the most pressing international issues. Since 24th February 2022, a recurring agenda item called "The Russian Federation's ongoing aggression against Ukraine" has provided a regular opportunity for

participating states to express their positions on the war and reaffirm their commitments. The PC meetings are, therefore, highly relevant for the purposes of this paper not only due to their consistency, but also because they directly reflect the evolving diplomatic discourse on the conflict.

The analysis is structured as a qualitative discourse analysis comparison between two distinct periods: the final phase of the Biden administration (December 2024) and the early months of the Trump administration (February-March 2025). Through relying on close textual analysis, it will be possible to trace the direct ruptures in the US diplomatic discourse surrounding the war in Ukraine.

The sampling strategy consists of picking three pre-inauguration and three post-inauguration statements while accounting for the specificities of leadership change. For the pre-inauguration period, we selected the final three US statements delivered in 2024, so as to ensure that the data was as close as possible to the transition point, while avoiding the early weeks of January, which tend to be diplomatically inactive. The selected texts were released on 28th November, 12th and 19th December 2024. These statements were publicly available on the official website of the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (n.d.).

For the post-inauguration period, data collection was intentionally delayed by one month after the 20th of January, to account for the time required for diplomats to reorient themselves following political transitions and receive updated instructions from their capitals. The statements were additionally spaced out to ensure the accurate representation of the evolution in rhetorical strategy, while avoiding distortion caused by short-term recent developments

that do not necessarily reflect a foreign policy shift. To this end, we have selected the speeches on the 24th February, 13th March and 27th March 2025. As the US Mission informally ceased publishing statements online after the transition, the texts were obtained via the OSCE's internal document distribution system.

Analysis - Before Trump's inauguration

In this section, we will review the US diplomatic discourse within the OSCE before Donald Trump's inauguration, beginning with nomination and attribution and continuing with the SAA. Overall, the three documents were consistent in their rhetorical structure and framing, and emotionally charged language and narratives were meant to sensitise the reader to human suffering, vilify perpetrators and legitimise US foreign policy. Despite visual features not formally being part of the analysis, it is important to note the statements were published together with photo attachments that further depict destruction or civilian casualties, appealing to emotion.

Nomination and attribution served as critical rhetorical tools in the representation of the Russian actions. Russia had been consistently directly nominated across the documents in contexts such as "Russian Iskander missile", "a warplane in central Russia", "Russia's doctrine", "Russia's war". In some instances, the word Kremlin was used as a substitute of Russia, however it coincides with more negatively loaded attributions, such as "a Kremlin with imperial delusions", "Kremlin [...] is especially cruel", "Kremlin is facing the massive strategic failure of its war of conquest". Taken together, both Kremlin and Russia are associated with agency and intentionality. Attributions such as "atrocities and abuses", "aggression" and "needless infliction" of suffering all emphasize the Russian responsibility for the attacks, and the moral blame for the gross human rights violations. Additionally, the

usage of adjectives such as “brutal” and “imperial” frame the Russian role in the conflict as fundamentally incompatible with the values of the community the US represents.

At the same time, Russia is recurrently violating international norms, and is depicted as directed against “our shared values, threatens our allies and European security, and prevents the world from being free, open, and at peace”. In this sense, the Russian challenge goes beyond the narrative of war and reaches the levels of an ideological confrontation. As Russia could “end its war”, “reunite these children” and “engage in good-faith conversations”, but does not, this is framed as evidence of its entrenched disregard for peace and international cooperation.

Ukraine, on the other hand, was predominantly nominated in the context of receiving either violence (“... continuing to relentlessly attack Ukraine’s sector”), or overwhelming support (from “over 50 nations”, “the vast majority of OSCE participating states). In some instances, Ukraine was positioned as an actor of resistance, particularly framed as defending principles beyond self-defense, such as the “defense of the foundational principles of the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris”. Ukraine is constructed as a legitimate actor engaged in a struggle for democracy, sovereignty, peace and law, representing a broader sense of morality.

The war itself is also treated in contrasting ways. When referring to Russia, war was constructed through possessive terms which attributed full agency and responsibility. In contrast, when war is linked to Ukraine, we find a recurrent collocation across two documents: “just war of self-defense”. Here, war is legitimised, or morally justified, since it is framed as a response to an external actor encroaching upon Ukraine. These contrasting war attributions serve to frame the conflict as a manichean clash between war and resistance.

In singular instances, the Russian soldiers, and also Russian citizens were constructed as victims, but in a nuanced manner. While the soldiers’ suffering in the face of the Kremlin’s

“no regard for human life” was acknowledged, it had the role of extending Kremlin’s culpability rather than evoking empathy. Russian citizens were similarly attributed unmet needs due to the morally wrong reprioritisation of the economy towards the military-industrial complex.

Interestingly, the United States self-nominates in two distinct ways, either in national or supranational terms. The representation of the self changes between representing the United States or the collectivised international community, often encompassing allies, OSCE member states or democracies. When the sentence is framed as the United States, the nomination focuses on its role as a supporter of Ukraine, in solidarity not only with the beneficiary, but also with the other supporters. On the other hand, the pronoun “we” tended to refer to the international community, defined by freedom, openness and pacifism, and under direct threat from Russian aggression.

Beyond nomination and attribution, a SAA of the discourse further clarifies how agency and responsibility were distributed. Russia was virtually activated in every instance, as an actor with unambiguous and clear agency over its actions. Dualism characterises the Russian representation. On the one hand, it is the perpetrator of “relentless attacks” and endangering the entire world through dangerous military escalations and risking a nuclear disaster. On the other hand, it is constructed as “desperate”, “weakened” and strategically incompetent. In other words, Russia is a geopolitical threat, a pariah state and a self-destructive actor at the same time. While the US is discursively associated with the overall international community, Russia is dissociated (“Putin has no friends”) and relegated to rely on the “world’s most unsavory regimes”, such as the DPRK, Iran and, by implication, China.

Conversely, Ukraine is only occasionally activated, when it is in a defender or a moral actor role. In many instances, Ukraine is passivated as the object of aggression (“Ukraine’s energy

sector was attacked", "Russia launched missiles at Ukraine"). These constructions are not meant to minimise Ukraine, but rather to legitimise its cause without portraying it as aggressive or militarised. For maintaining this image, the Ukrainian army is left undescribed, or backgrounded; their presence is implied in references about self-defense, but never made visible.

The Ukrainian population is represented through a combination of individualised and collectivised nomination strategies. The usage of names ("Yuliya", "Yevheniya") and functionalizations ("children", "civilians", "victims") are used to humanise the rhetoric and always placed in contexts of human loss, drone attacks, missile strikes or kidnappings. This has an additional effect of further casting the Russian actions in a moralistic framing, intensifying their illegitimacy.

The US is never passivated, excluded or impersonated, and is always aligned with international law and values. When it is collectivised, the group from which the US is part of tends to be passivated: "we stand united", "we support", suggesting solidarity rather than intervention, which completely suppresses the Western military aid towards Ukraine. Rather interestingly, there is a double beneficialisation process: while Ukraine benefits from the abstract "support", the international community is also a beneficiary of Ukraine's resistance, as the country is fighting for "our shared values". However, while acknowledging support for Ukraine, the OSCE Permanent Council is framed not as an actor that intervenes in any way, but as a passive observer, an archivist: "We thank this Council for continuing its critical role of documenting Russia's atrocities and abuses".

Analysis - After Trump's inauguration

The US statements post 20 January 2025 represent highly personalised and strategically symmetrical representations in discourse. It is important to reiterate that after Trump's inauguration, the statements of the US at the Permanent Council stopped being released publicly on their webpage, and that they no longer exhibit pictures that evoke emotional responses.

Nomination and attribution play a clearly different rhetorical function in the US diplomatic discourse after the inauguration. One of the most striking discursive features in all three statements is the frequent and highly personalised nomination of President Trump. Besides representing a departure from the genre norms of diplomatic discourse in terms of mentioning leaders, Trump has been consistently linked to explicitly positive attributions, such as "strong leadership", "only President Trump could bring peace". These attributions go further than reinforcing his status as head of state; they construct him as an indispensable actor.

The United States is nominated both as an actor, and through "we". In all instances, they are nominated close to procedural terms, such as "held", "will communicate" or "is committed". The attributes, such as "playing a meaningful and constructive role", "speaking with both sides", and "consulting with our European allies", are creating a positive self-image of a capable and influential power. Other actors, such as "European Allies", OSCE and "Technical teams" are indeed nominated, yet their role is of secondary importance, or lagging as compared to the US, with vague attributions such as "engage constructively", "met" and "continue discussions".

Russia and Ukraine are mentioned in all texts; however, they are usually mentioned in collocations, such as "Russia and Ukraine", "President Zelensky and President Putin", "both sides". These structures are equalising the two actors and attributing them obligations to heed

the US calls and “come to the table”, “make compromises”. Attributions therefore are strictly procedural and refer to agreeing to ceasefires, engaging in diplomacy and in compromises.

Social Actor Analysis-wise, Trump is activated across all statements and positioned as the primary agent. Verbs such as “has been clear”, “knows that what leaders do matters more than what they say”, “[Zelensky, Trump, many other European leaders] said only President Trump could bring peace” build a nearly messianic image, as the sole person who can end the conflict. Trump is overdetermined in his representation: seen as a visionary, an executor, and charismatic. Phrases such as “neither statements of support for Ukraine nor denunciations of Russia stop attacks” position Trump’s mission as one of correcting the previous administration’s delegitimised past, effectively rewriting diplomatic history through the personalisation of the entire United States’ foreign policy.

The US is also consistently activated, yet strictly limited to diplomatic acts while omitting any controversial involvement. While Trump is shown as charismatic, the institutional US is procedural, speaking “daily with European partners” and also offering backhanded formulations towards allies: “we call on them to engage constructively as well”. This type of formulation insinuates the US is more constructively engaged than others, framing it as the leader setting the standard.

Russia and Ukraine are frequently activated, but in constrained ways. Besides being assimilated through aggregation, they are also expected to “implement”, “engage constructively” and “make compromises” suggested by the US guidance, which do not reflect true agency but rather discursive subordination. At the same time, the discourse is marked by a total suppression of the broader political and military context. There is no mention of Ukrainian or Russian militaries or civilians, no reference to battlefield realities or the human suffering. In addition, there is noticeable backgrounding of the rift between the US and its

European allies, particularly following the Trump-Zelensky-Vance episode, and the only indication of tensions is indirect and backhanded, through the implication that the US is more constructive than its allies, when asking them to "engage constructively as well".

Discussion

After Trump's inauguration, the construction of certain concepts became significantly altered, as *war* was passivated while *peace* became agentive. In a stark contrast to the period before the inauguration, *war* is dissociated from the actions of particular agents and not associated with Russia's agency and Ukraine's passive defense anymore. In statements such as "The war has cost innumerable lives", "All participating States should commit themselves to achieving a peaceful and lasting resolution to the war", or "Refusal to negotiate yields more war", the discourse hides away agency while presenting war as a passive process which causes negative effects ("the war has cost lives").

In contrast, *peace* is not only mentioned more frequently, but also represented as something that can be actively brought about, only by specific agents ("only President Trump could bring peace"). In this framing, in which *peace* is nominated liberally, the term becomes the central outcome of the diplomatic process, which requires direct action. Against this backdrop, the United States and, specifically, Donald Trump, are framed as being the primary agents of peace.

The pre- and post-inauguration US statements are structurally contrasting. Broadly speaking, the shift reflects a transformation from an emotionally charged discourse to one that is managerial, procedural and personalistic. Mentions of victims, civilians and human suffering disappear entirely, discursively reframing the war not as a humanitarian crisis, but rather as a

diplomatic process that needs to be negotiated. Similarly, the US is no longer explicitly aligned with international norms and laws in the discourse and, as a result, no longer draws legitimacy from these areas. Instead, the US discourse now roots its legitimacy in Trump's charismatic persona and in performance-based pragmatism, devoid of moral constraints.

In the post-Trump statements, Ukraine is stripped of its earlier qualities; it is no longer described as courageous or a defender of liberal values. Most notably, the discourse of support for Ukraine (which was central in previous statements) is entirely suppressed: Ukraine is no longer shown as receiving aid, solidarity or any protection. Rather, Ukraine is a party to the negotiations, with obligations: show goodwill, make compromises and engage constructively.

The other party to the negotiations is Russia, which is no longer moralised or dissociated from the international community. Russia is no longer framed as a pariah, aggressor or an ideological threat. Instead, Russia is rehabilitated through *normalisation*, and put on an equal footing with Ukraine. This is also evident through the frequency of terms: before Trump's inauguration, the three speeches included 15 mentions of the term *war*, whereas after his inauguration, the term was only mentioned 6 times, mostly in connection to ending the conflict and, notably, not with assigning blame on Russia. Conversely, while the documents from the Biden era rarely invoke peace (only three times), the term becomes central in later discourse, with 11 mentions despite their shorter overall length. This change underscores a strategic shift from naming and confronting aggression to managing conflict, rehabilitating Russia and adopting a more critical stance of Ukraine. Essentially, this creates a total flattening of the relationship: the conflict is not necessarily between a victim and a perpetrator, but rather two parties who must engage in order to achieve – not accountability or justice, but peace.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how US diplomatic discourse at the OSCE transformed following Donald Trump's return to office. Through analysing six statements with nomination, attribution and SAA, it becomes clear that a significant rhetorical shift has taken place. While pre-inauguration statements were emotionally charged, rooted in international norms and centered on support for Ukraine, the post-inauguration discourse has instead become more personalised, procedural, distant and ambiguous.

The repeated nomination of peace and the consistent absence of war attribution to Russia underscore a shift in the strategic orientation of the United States. This transformation has deeper implications: rather than legitimising Ukraine's struggle through moral appeals, the discourse now reflects a realpolitik logic in which Ukraine is stripped of its moral status and rather plays a secondary role in facilitating a potential rapprochement with Russia, on terms favourable to US interests, rather than Ukraine's. At the same time, the negative portrayal of Russia's actions succumbs to the need for strategic appeasement, leading to ambiguity regarding the causes and responsibilities for the conflict.

Strikingly, this shift has direct consequences on legitimation strategies. If morality no longer structures US foreign policy discourse, then continued support for Ukraine can no longer be justified on moral grounds. Instead, the void is filled with discourse aligned with unilateralism and transactional diplomacy, consistent with the broader "America First" movement that distances the US from multilateralism and the rule-based international order.

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