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## MEDIA FRAMING OF POLITICAL CONFLICT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE UK: A CASE STUDY OF SKRIPALS’ POISONING

Since 2014 the political conflict between the Russian government and the EU including the UK has been gradually unfolding. One of the highest degrees of this conflict has been reached on March 4 (2018), when the Skripal family was poisoned in the territory of the UK. This has provided legitimacy to the UK government to publicise the political conflict between the two states via the mainstream media, whereby the political war was discursively displayed in all detail. This study aims at analysing how this conflict is represented linguistically, especially via metaphor use and micro-discourse strategies. For that purpose, sixty media publications were collected, thirty from the British media sources (i.e. BBC News, The Guardian, The Daily Mail) and thirty from the Russian media outlets (i.e. Ria-Novosti, Itar-tass, Interfax) by following the selection criteria of topicality (i.e. keywords Skripal/s, Skripals’ poisoning) and the time line (between March 4, 2018 and October 10, 2018). Procedurally, the collected data was analysed by combining critical discourse approach with a bottom-up approach to analysing metaphor, i.e. the linguistic instances of metaphor use were deconstructed into conceptual patterns

or frames (Lakoff, Chilton, 1995; Lakoff, Johnson, 1999) that emerge in discourse through specific source domains and made narratively coherent by them (Musolff, 2016). The findings have demonstrated that despite the fact that both sides evoke different conflict scenarios, their narrative structure is based on such binary oppositions as Evil vs. Good, Oppressor vs. Victim, Enemy vs. Hero etc. This research has also shown how the political conflict between two governments can discursively develop into the ideological conflict between two nations by thus standardising the language of violence and aggression.

## 1. Introduction

This paper was inspired by the latest political tensions between the UK and Russia. One of the highest degrees of conflict between the two countries was reached in 2018 over Skripals' case. This was one of the many political issues which caused tensions across the world lately. The refugee crisis, the U.S. isolationist foreign policy, the war in Syria, the Ukraine conflict, and many others were the reason for political turmoil and uneasiness. The public domain has become very negative and conflict oriented. Most of these events resulted in paranoia expressed in the media and politics (Hofstadter, 2008; Hodges, 2015). There was a rise of negative populism in party politics across Europe and the USA. Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral (2013) observe the right-wing populism in discourses of mainstream and radical parties across Europe through a critical discourse analysis of different national contexts and point out its affective and discursive power.

Moreover, the rise of populist leaders has led to more divisive discourse in different kinds of political representation. It has been observed how various social groups such as migrants, refugees, sexual and ethnic minorities can be antagonised to extremes. For instance, critical discourse studies have pointed out the rising levels of hate speech in various contexts of use (Baider and Kopytowska 2018, Kopytowska and Chilton 2018). Hate speech and radicalism are specifically noted down online representations among Internet users in the context of refugee crisis in the EU (Assimakopoulos, Baider and Millar 2017) or even the use of discriminatory language against minorities and their rights in British

Parliamentary argumentation (Love and Baker 2015). The discursive analysis of Othering across genres is investigated in different social and cultural contexts of Poland and Cyprus (Kopytowska, Grabowski and Woźniak 2017, Baiden and Kopytowska 2018), Malta (Assimakopoulos and Muskat 2017); the UK (Musolff 2018), Germany (Klapp 2018) etc. Such studies have clearly demonstrated that public discourses are becoming more polarized and emotionally overloaded.

This paper, however, focuses on how the UK and Russian media representatives discursively enact the political conflict between the UK and Russian governments over Skripals' poisoning. The political conflict was ignited by the poisoning with a Novichok nerve agent of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military officer and double agent for the UK's intelligence services, and his daughter Yulia Skripal occurred on March 4 of 2018 in Salisbury (England). The conflict intensified when the British authorities identified two Russian nationals, using the names Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, as suspected of the Skripals' poisoning on 5 September 2018. This is when the political conflict between the UK and Russian-state media sources started to unfold. On January 6 of 2019, *The Telegraph* reported that the British authorities had established all the essential details of the assassination attempt, including the chain of command that leads up to the Russian president Vladimir Putin. It has been hypothesized that the analysis of the media articles can help to identify discursive mechanisms of the on-going political conflict. To test this hypothesis, a corpus of 60 newspaper articles, 30 from Russian and 30 from British newspapers, was collected and the following research questions raised:

- 1) How is the Skripals' poisoning represented in the UK and Russian media sources?
- 2) What are the ideological features of the political conflict between the UK and Russian media sources?
- 3) How are these features linguistically (i.e. metaphorically) represented?
- 4) How is the ideological violence discursively enacted in the collected data?

To provide answers to the above questions, the key concepts of conflict, ideological violence and conceptual metaphor are overviewed and defined (Section 2), which are further tested in the collected data sample (Section

3) and illustrated with specific examples (Section 4). As based on the research findings, the conclusions are drawn and some implications for further studies are raised (Section 4).

## 2. The key concepts: conflict, ideological violence and conceptual metaphor

The concept of conflict can be investigated from different scholarly perspectives. In psychology, conflict is generally considered to be a sub-category of group identity, whereby individuals are viewed as agents, whose make attempts to reverse or oppose the collective group identity, leads to Othering (Fromm, 1963; 1975; Freud, 1975; Brewer, 2001). In discourse studies, conflict can be analysed through the linguistic representations of ingroup and out-group membership (Van Dijk 1998, 2008; 2011; Fairclough, 2001, 2013; Chilton, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In political science, conflict is seen as an ideological narrative that has features of hegemonic myth and power struggle with its manifestations of displacement, mobilization and elitism (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; Žižek, 2008).

Despite certain variation in how the concept of conflict is approached, all strands offer a similar method of analysing the nature of conflict and its development, which is its ideological representation. Ideological manifestations of conflict are traced in discourse and its linguistic and interactive features. Hence, in this study political conflict in the media is viewed as a discursive media-political performance whereby the participants of the conflicts are targeted in the context of *values-based identity*. To be more precise, it is aimed to identify of how the conflict between the UK and Russia media representatives in their semantic references to ingroup and outgroup identity, and how ideological violence is discursively realised. For that purpose, Maynard's (2015) ideological classification of violence categories is used. Each violence category is viewed here as a basic level concept with the following semantic references (in Arcimavičienė 2020):

- 1) *Targeting* as delegitimisation of the Other;
- 2) *Mobilization* as a call for collective action against the Other;

- 3) *Values* as normative codes of Self-representation;
- 4) *Obligation hierarchies* as moral and other kinds of responsibilities on behalf of the in-group allies and supporters;
- 5) *Victimhood* as a scenario of the oppressed.

Finally, semantic representation of the above categories is analysed via the use of linguistic metaphor. Critical metaphor analysis in media discourse was carried out within framework of two empirically grounded theories: Critical Metaphor Theory in discourse (Cameron 2003, Goatly 2007, Charteris-Black 2004 2006 2011, Musolff 2006, 2015) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Fillmore 1982, Gibbs 1992, Johnson 1994, Lakoff 1991 1996, Lakoff & Johnson 1980 1991, Kövecses 2003 2004). Within both of these approaches to metaphor analysis, it is attempted to trace how political violence is construed metaphorically in the context of polarised identities (Self vs. Other), and how metaphor analysis can help make sense of the political conflict between the UK and Russia in the context of Skripals' poisoning. The following section discusses in more detail of how research data was collected and analysed.

### 3. Research data and methodology

The data of 58, 599 tokens was extracted from the online UK (i.e. *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, *The Dailymail*) and Russian (i.e. *Interfax*, *Ria-Novosti* and *Itar-Tass*) media sources, which were collected on the timeline from March, 2018 to September 2018 (i.e. from the time the Skripals were poisoned (March 4, 2018) to the time when the UK identified the two Russian nationals using the names Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov as suspected of the Skripals' poisoning and alleged that they were active officers in the Russian military intelligence). The selection criteria for the articles was that of topicality, when the articles were selected by using the keywords as follows: Skripal, Skriplas, Skripals' poisoning.

The collected data was analysed by combining critical discourse approach with a bottom-up approach to analysing metaphor, i.e. the linguistic instances of metaphor use were deconstructed into conceptual patterns or frames (Lakoff, Chilton, 1995; Lakoff, Johnson, 1999) that emerge in discourse through specific source domains and made narratively

coherent by them (Musolff, 2016). More precisely, the texts were analysed for metaphorical language which evoked specific violence categories used by media representatives for ingroup and outgroup membership in this political conflict. As mentioned before, Maynard's (2015) classification of violence categories was adopted for the analysis of discursive features of Othering that was realized by linguistic metaphor.

Procedurally, metaphor analysis in the collected speeches was carried out at three levels: (1) metaphor identification by procedurally applying Pragglejaz group's Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP, Pragglejaz Group 2007); (2) deconstruction of source domains; (3) coding of metaphorical expressions into subcategories of violence (i.e. targeting, mobilization, values, obligation hierarchies and victimhood). During the first step, contextual and basic meanings were compared by using as a point of reference three dictionaries for the English data set (Macmillan, Oxford and Online Dictionary of Etymology) and the online database of Russian dictionaries Slovar.cc (where the first three in the list were accessed to establish the basic meanings). Subsequently, the identified metaphorical expressions were tagged according to their representative source domains derived from basic meanings (e.g. War, Nature, Person, Structure, Object). Finally, the source domains were assigned a violence category by using Maynard's classification (2015). More specific representation of the research model is provided in Figure 1 below:

### Figure 1. Research model

First, the prevalent metaphorical expressions were identified in both samples of articles (British and Russian). Procedurally, metaphor analysis in the collected speeches was carried out at three levels: (1) metaphor identification by procedurally applying Pragglejaz group's Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP, Pragglejaz Group 2007); (2) deconstruction of source domains; (3) coding of metaphorical expressions into subcategories of violence (i.e. targeting, mobilization, values, obligation hierarchies and victimhood). During the first step, contextual and basic meanings were compared by using as a point of reference three dictionaries for the English data set (Macmillan, Oxford and Online Dictionary of Etymology) and the online database of Russian dictionaries

Slovar.cc (where the first three in the list were accessed to establish the basic meanings). Subsequently, the identified metaphorical expressions were tagged according to their representative source domains derived from basic meanings (e.g. War, Nature, Person, Structure, Object). Finally, the source domains were assigned a violence category by using Maynard's classification (2015). The research findings and media conflict models are discussed and illustrated in the section below.

#### 4. Research findings: media conflict models

The analysis of the collected data has clearly shown that the most frequent violence category portrayed in the British media is the one of *targeting*. In most cases, the political conflict between the UK and Russia is developed by combining two sets of metaphors: Personification and War. Ideologically, such combined metaphor use creates an incentive to use defensive narrative against the oppressor or ideological enemy. For instance, in (1) the use of the War metaphor illustrates that Russia is perceived as an instigator of war and an aggressor. In (2) this metaphor is even more intensified by evoking a criminal sense of an aggressive act, e.g. "assault".

1) *Far from hiding away until the embarrassing dust settles, **Russia has decided to fight** an attacking propaganda and disinformation war on all fronts.* (The Guardian, 2018/04/05)

2) *International pressure on Russia following the Salisbury nerve agent attack has been strongly ratcheted up, with Britain, the US, France and Germany jointly condemning an "**assault on UK sovereignty**".* (The Guardian, 2018/03/15)

Another violence category identified in the British data was that of *values*. By semantically evoking this category, the UK is personified and represented via the values of liberalism and democratic human rights. Within the same frame, Russia is juxtaposed to the values of liberalism with its uncivilized and barbaric identity being foregrounded. This use of metaphor provides legitimacy grounds to oppose Russia at any costs for the sake of protecting liberal values, e.g.:



3) *It may be tempting for the UK to hit back with the same kind of intemperate contempt that Russia is displaying. But that temptation must be resisted at all costs. This is not just a conflict of state against state, but one of **liberal values** against their negation.* (The Guardian, 2018/04/05)

Personification is furthermore developed by the Relationship metaphor, by which the semantic category of *obligation hierarchies* is evoked. In (4), the former Prime Minister of the UK Theresa May's statement makes a clear distinction between the ingroup, i.e. four countries which support the UK and the outgroup, Russia. This is done by attributing human characteristics to the British allies and emphasising the importance of their good political relationship. This is another way of how the credibility and legitimacy of the UK are discursively highlighted.

4) *May said the four countries were "very clear in attributing this act to Russia". The statement showed that "allies are **standing alongside** us and saying this is part of a pattern of activity that we have seen from Russia," she said.* (The Guardian, 2018/03/15)

Thus, it can be argued that political conflict in the selected UK media sources is developed by inciting discursive violence via two semantic categories: (1) targeting an opponent (i.e. Russia) and mobilizing ingroup values (i.e. Britain and its Western allies) in the name of liberalism.

In the case of the analysed Russian media, the categories of *targeting* and *victimhood* are metaphorically enacted by the use of such metaphors as "Russia Is a Victim" metaphor, "Politics Is a Journey", "Politics Is War" and "Politics Is Competition" metaphors. In (5), in President Putin's statement, Russia is victimized in the context of War and Competition metaphors. Such combined metaphorical use intensifies an idea that Russia is unfairly delegitimised due to its competitive capabilities, e.g.:

5) *"Скрипаль, слава богу, жив, тем не менее в отношении России куча санкций ... Это политизированный **русофобский подход**, это повод, чтобы организовать **очередную атаку** на Россию. Не было бы Скрипалей, что-нибудь другое придумали бы. А цель только одна - сдержать развитие России как возможного **конкурента**. Других целей я не вижу», - заявил Путин на пресс-конференции в Москве* (RiaNovosti, 2018/12/20)



[“Skripal, thanks God is alive, though towards Russia there are a lot of sanctions ... this is a politicised Russiaphobic approach, this is a pre-text to organize another attack on Russia. If not Skripals, they would create something else. The aim is one and only – to stop the development of Russia as a possible competitor. I don’t see other aims”]

In addition to victimization, targeting is frequently evoked as a violence category in the collected Russian articles. In (6), for instance, the UK media is delegitimised and blamed for its consumerist approach to selling the news. Thus, Skripals’ poisoning is viewed as another commodity exploited by the UK media to sell their story.

6) *И в СМИ, наверное, понимают, что дело Скрипалей вышло в тираж. Поэтому все, что им остается, **продать этот тираж подороже**.* (Ria Novosti, 2019/02/08)

[The media probably understands that Skripal’s case came into circulation. That’s why, what is left is only to sell circulation as expensive as they can.]

Targeting the outgroup is also carried out through the use of the “UK Is a Criminal”, which does not only criminalizes the UK but raises Russia’s profile on the matter, e.g.:

7) *Более того, британская сторона всячески **мешает** объективному расследованию инцидента, **уничтожает улики** и отказывает российским дипломатам в консульском доступе к Сергею и Юлии Скрипаль.* (Ria Novosti, 2018/03/05)

8) [Even more, the British side continuously disturbs objective investigation of the incident, destroys evidence and bans Russian diplomats from consular access to Sergei and Yulia Skripal.]

The examples presented above clearly point to the intensity of the political conflict displayed in the media. The Russian media sources tend to victimize their role in this conflict, by thus weakening the position of the UK and downplaying Skripals’ poisoning as a matter of political intrigue, competitiveness or UK media consumerism. Finally, some concluding remarks of the discussed findings will be drawn.

## 5. Conclusion

By the current study it has been attempted to demonstrate of how political conflict can be discursively enacted in the mainstream media of the UK and the Russian Federation. It has also been shown how the combined analysis of the semantic violence categories and their metaphorical representation can shed more light on how political conflict is evolving and reaching a stage of high levels of animosity. The analysis of the specific case of Skripals' poisoning in the media discourse of Britain and Russia has resulted in two different conflict frames. To be more precise, it has been clarified how the metaphorical content of identities, including such specific categories as values, obligation hierarchies, targeting and victimhood, can be variant and context dependent.

The UK media sources discursively seem to construe this conflict from the perspective of values-oriented targeting. In most cases, Russia was targeted as an uncivilized and brutal force, as being opposed to the Western values of liberalism, and law and order. By contrast, in the Russian data set, Britain is targeted as a competitive bully who is oppressing its competitors, and mainly Russia for both economic and political interests.

Finally, the analysis of our data has confirmed that ingroup legitimisation and outgroup delegitimization are discursively constructed through the use of metaphorical language. The deployment of such collective identities results in the polarisation of power relations between the East and the West. The findings have shown that despite the fact that both sides evoke different conflict scenarios, their narrative structure is based on similar binary oppositions such as Evil vs. Good, Oppressor vs. Victim, Enemy vs. Hero etc. This paper has also shown how a political conflict can be approached by implementing semantic categories of ideological violence, which in their turn create a totalising narrative about political identity with all its contextual complexity.

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