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NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF PRESIDENT V. ZELENSKYI'S DAILY VIDEO ADDRESSES

Abstract

The Russo-Ukrainian war has been receiving a lot of attention from communication scholars worldwide since it is the first big military conflict of the epoch of social media. Despite Ukraine is fighting the enemy with unprecedentedly strong information warfare capabilities, it has managed to achieve wide international acceptance for its variant of the war narrative. This success is, in large part, due to the great efforts by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose outstanding communication skills made him a highly effective rhetorical leader of our time. The article investigates the contribution of presidential daily video addresses delivered throughout the first two years of the conflict to the development of the Ukrainian narrative of war. It studies major strands of narrative featured in the addresses and analyses their functions in relation to the local, global and enemy audiences. Our research found that the narrative structure of presidential video addresses comprises three strands of the war narrative (narratives of resistance, suffering and resilience) and three associated narratives (narrative of reform and development, national identity narrative and World War II memory narrative). These narratives are intended to provide accurate information about the current situation, dismiss propagandistic fakes created by the enemy, promote interpretation of the events favourable to Ukraine, boost morale and encourage involvement in the country's war, resilience and rebuilding efforts, create discord within the enemy ranks and discourage further aggression. The study also traces the dynamics of changes in the narratives over time and puts them in context of the internal political processes in Ukraine.

Keywords: presidential address, rhetorical leadership, war narrative, social media, information war, propaganda.

Анотація

Російсько-українська війна привертає велику увагу експертів у галузі комунікації в усьому світі, оскільки вона є першим великим збройним конфліктом епохи соціальних медіа. Незважаючи на те, що Україна бореться з ворогом, який має безпрецедентно потужні можливості для ведення інформаційної війни, їй вдалося досягти широкого міжнародного визнання своєї версії воєнного наративу. Цей успіх значною мірою завдячує великим зусиллям Президента України Володимира Зеленського, чий видатні навички спілкування зробили його надзвичайно ефективним лідером-комунікатором нашого часу. У статті досліджено внесок щоденних відеозвернень Президента, записаних протягом перших двох років конфлікту, у формування українського наративу війни. Розглянуто основні напрями наративу, представлені у зверненнях Президента, і проаналізовано їхні функції щодо внутрішньої та міжнародної аудиторії, а також аудиторії країни-агресора. Наше дослідження виявило, що наративна структура президентських відеозвернень складається з трьох ліній наративу війни (наративів опору, страждань і стійкості) і трьох пов'язаних із ними додаткових наративів (наративу реформ і розвитку, наративу національної ідентичності й наративу пам'яті про Другу світову війну). Ці наративи покликані надавати достовірну інформацію про поточну ситуацію, спростовувати фейки ворожої пропаганди, створювати сприятливу для України інтерпретацію подій, підвищувати моральний дух і заохочувати до участі у військових зусиллях країни, її підтримці та відбудові, вносити розбрат у ряди ворога та зменшувати підтримку агресії. Дослідження простежує динаміку змін у наративах у контексті внутрішньополітичних процесів в Україні.

Ключові слова: звернення Президента України, комунікативне лідерство, наратив війни, соціальні медіа, інформаційна війна, пропаганда.

Russia's information campaigns against democracies in the second decade of the 21st century have led to the surge of interest in the studies of information warfare and propaganda (Giles, 2016; Jankowicz, 2020; Patrikarakos, 2017; Seib, 2021; Stanley, 2015). The case of Ukraine has received a special attention because the country is the testing ground for all tools in the Russian arsenal, from bots and trolls flooding the web with lies to election meddling and hybrid warfare (DeBenedictis, 2022; Snegovaya, 2015; Zhdanova & Orlova, 2016). After the full-scale invasion the focus has been on attempts of Ukraine to protect the information space of the country and shape domestic and international public opinion about the war under the effective rhetorical leadership of President Zelenskyy (Adams, 2022; Bajor, 2022; Genauer, 2022; Segal, 2022; Søderberg, 2022; Perez & Nair, 2022; Handler, 2023).

The purpose of our research is to study how Volodymyr Zelenskyy contributes to the creation of the narrative of war through his daily addresses to the nation. Our objective is threefold:

- 1) to identify the main strands of narrative developed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy;
- 2) to reveal the structure and content of each narrative;
- 3) to determine the functions performed by these narratives for different audiences.

We study the texts of presidential addresses applying the method of qualitative content analysis and following the inductive approach, organizing the data into more abstract units – narrative structures and their components. The concept of narrative is central for research in political communication, information warfare, propaganda and crisis communication (see, for example, Jankowicz, 2020; Lewis & DeFaria, 2021; O'Hair & O'Hair, 2023; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Stanley, 2015). Narratives are viewed as a fundamental way in which people organize information, thus playing a crucial role in shaping thought and action (Fludernik, 2006; Lakoff, 2008; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016).

Generally, narratives are complex structures that comprise smaller frames or scripts made up of roles, relations between the roles and scenarios enacted by their performers (Lakoff, 2008). Even the basic narratives have similar time structure with such stages as the Buildup, the Main Event, the Purpose, the Result and the Later Consequences (see Lakoff, 2008; Fludernik, 2006). Like stories that often combine several plot lines and have connections to other texts, narratives of complex events contain multiple parts and use other established narratives to give a fuller account of the situation (Fludernik, 2006).

To carry out a comprehensive narrative analysis of President Zelenskyy's addresses, we perform the following tasks:

- identify and show connections between main strands of the narrative of war that focus on different aspects of Ukraine's wartime experience, and major supporting narratives that provide context to improve understanding of the war narrative;
- determine the cast of chief characters, their features and actions within each narrative;
- analyse the progression of the narratives, studying how they reflect the development of the situation, describe its past and make future predictions.

To add explanatory value to our study, we determine functions of each narrative developed in presidential addresses that reflect the goals the speaker wants to achieve with their audiences.

For our research, we have studied the addresses delivered by Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the first two years of the war. We focused exclusively on the daily addresses to the nation, excluding presidential addresses on holiday occasions and those delivered to specific groups within Ukraine and foreign audiences. In total, 709 addresses were analysed. We studied the texts in Ukrainian, the original language of the addresses, and here provide the quotes from the official English translations published on the website of the president.

An overview of the narrative structure and functions. The overarching narrative of war created in the daily video addresses by Volodymyr Zelenskyy is the narrative of self-defence: the nation defending itself against an unprovoked aggressor that is trying to annex its territory. This narrative is both factually correct and strategically effective, since it is most likely to find broad international acceptance (Martin, 2023). Ukraine, the protagonist of the narrative, is portrayed as a hero and a victim, the antagonist, Russia, – as a villain, and most of the world is cast as a helper to Ukraine. The dual role of Ukraine generates two parallel narrative strands: the narratives of resistance and suffering. Closely connected with them is the third narrative of resilience that focuses on the country's ability to recover from attacks and function despite aggression. The war narrative is enhanced by three supporting narratives: narrative of reform and development, national identity narrative and World War II memory narrative. The first one focuses on the ongoing work to achieve country's long-term development goals, while the second and the third ones provide a broader context for understanding the scale and underlying causes of the war.

Presidential daily addresses target three wide audiences: the population of Ukraine, the global audience and the people of the enemy country. The primacy of the domestic public is manifested by multiple markers: Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses the audience "dear Ukrainians" or "fellow Ukrainians", invariably closes with the national salute "Glory to Ukraine", speaks Ukrainian almost exclusively and solidarizes with the citizens of the country through first person plural pronouns.

Comments targeted at Russians are sometimes made in their native language. The first such instance of language switching occurs in the address posted in the afternoon of the first day the war. This practice is most frequent in the first months of the conflict: 22 of 69 addresses delivered during the first fifty days after the launch of the invasion contain passages in the Russian language.

Presidential address at the end of the first month of the war (that has the title "Address to Ukrainians and the nations of the world") is the only instance when he switches to English. In some cases when the president addresses world leaders and international publics, such comments may appear to be just rhetorical devices, expressions of emotions and follow-up remarks after his direct communication with them. Yet, availability of official English language translations of the addresses and their broad coverage in world media ensure that these messages can reach their intended audience.

While the use of direct addresses or code switching can point to the intended addressee of the message, each part of presidential speech can provide meaningful information to various audiences. Thus, the entire texts are created with different audiences in mind, and the analysis of their functions can require multiple parallel interpretations.

Relative to these three audiences, the functions of the narratives in presidential daily addresses can broadly defined as follows:

- to inform about the ongoing situation, dispelling fakes of enemy propaganda and providing favourable framing of the war;
- to maintain morale and encourage domestic and international contribution to the country's sustainability and war effort;
- to drive a wedge between the people and leadership of the enemy state and discourage aggression.

Narrative of resistance. The chief characters of the narrative of resistance are the Ukrainian Armed Forces and other security agencies often collectively named Defence Forces or just "defenders". During the first days of the war the president urges the military to stand firm against Russian attacks and appeals to its feeling of responsibility calling it

the only guarantor of the survival of the nation. He also extends social guarantees to the territorial defence fighters, promising to treat them as combat veterans.

Every presidential account of Ukrainian military actions is a combination of praise and gratitude. Volodymyr Zelenskyy honours courage, wisdom, motivation and sacrifice of the troops that protect the country's independence, the lives, dignity and freedom of its citizens. Stressing high standards showed by the army that effectively disrupted the plans of the invaders, president Zelenskyy on many occasions calls it "one of the world's best militaries".

Discussing the situation on the frontlines, he mourns combat losses and acknowledges difficulties, but never talks about retreats or setbacks, maintaining a consistently positive image of the army. During the first days after the invasion, the president assures the nation that the Ukrainian soldiers are holding their positions and repelling attacks. When after the failed blitzkrieg Russian troops start to retreat, he regularly celebrates the liberation of the occupied cities and villages. In the second half of 2023, after the much-anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive fails to achieve any breakthroughs and the Russian forces seize the initiative, Volodymyr Zelenskyy keeps the mood positive, focusing on the continued heroic efforts to protect the country, saving lives of the soldiers and broad international support for the Ukrainian cause. To maintain morale of the troops and the nation, he never gives combat loss figures. For the first time he does it publicly at the press conference at the end of the war's second year, and the tally is met with broad scepticism because it is considerably lower than estimates by many experts.

Throughout the two-year period of war, covered in our research, the president has kept a positive image of his military leadership, casting major changes as a search for new opportunities, even while the dismissals of Minister of Defence Reznikov and the Commander-in-Chief Zaluzhnyi occur after corruption scandals and military failures. The notable exception is the unsympathetic attitude to top military commissars, whose collective dismissal are accompanied by corruption charges.

Alongside collective heroism of Ukraine's defenders, Volodymyr Zelenskyy recognizes accomplishments of particular individuals and military units. During the first seven months of the conflict there is an announcement of military awards almost in every address, which sometimes accounted for half of the speech. Since then, the practice has become less frequent, yet the president has been turning to it at least once a week.

From the very start of the war President Zelenskyy reminds the nation that successful defence against the invaders is impossible without collective efforts of the whole population. "We are all at war. We all contribute to our victory," "Each of us is a warrior. The warrior in his or her own place," proclaims V. Zelenskyy and makes a call to build a "fortress of national unity" on the foundation of Ukraine's Armed Forces. Thus, he extends the narrative of resistance to cover a broad scope of issues from volunteer work to military draft to diplomatic initiatives, and makes every citizen feel welcome and important in the new role.

In addition to armed defence, the president praises various forms of unarmed resistance to the invasion. He treats popular protests on the Russia-occupied territories as a sign of sure Ukrainian victory and the end of the imperial myth of the "historical unity" of Ukrainians and Russians. Volodymyr Zelenskyy calls for intensification of the resistance movement and asks Ukrainians from different parts of the country to keep contacts with people under occupation, inform them about the real situation in the country and assure they are not left behind. Noting that with the exception of "some outcasts" Ukrainians are reluctant to cooperate with the invaders, the president still warns against any form of collaboration with the occupiers, promising swift punishment.

Other important actors of the Ukrainian resistance mentioned in the addresses (and whose contribution President Zelenskyy also honours with awards) are rescue workers, doctors, volunteers, civil servants, journalists, members of central and local government, community leaders, entrepreneurs and diplomats. Recognizing the crucial role of country's leadership in time of war, in the address to the nation at the end of the first day of the invasion President Zelenskyy disproves fakes that he fled Ukraine together with his family and other top government officials (see discussion in Patraeus & Roberts (2023)). He repeatedly assures the nation that he and his team are in Kyiv and records a group video outside his office building. Daily messages from the president about his domestic and international efforts aimed at strengthening country's defence, as well as about his actions in the capacity of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief (visiting the frontlines and the liberated territories, holding meetings of the Staff, signing orders, meeting released captives, wounded soldiers, war heroes and their families) make him an important actor of the Ukrainian resistance narrative. A distinctive characteristic of this narrative is strategic incompleteness of information, acknowledged by the president and demanded from other commentators in order to withhold military secrets from the enemy.

The antagonist of the narrative, the Russian armed forces are presented as a violent aggressor executing the evil will of their president. The president consistently contrasts their qualities and behaviour with the virtuousness of the Ukrainian defenders. Though Volodymyr Zelenskyy issues repeated warnings not to underestimate the enemy, his messages are framed so as to show limits of its strength and highlight its fundamental weaknesses. On multiple occasions he turns to outright mockery of the invaders to create a sense of superiority in Ukrainians.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy notes that the power of the Russian army is undermined by glaring incompetence of its commanders, their complete disregard for the lives of the soldiers, as well as courage and ingenuity of the Ukrainian warriors. One of the famous examples he gives to illustrate this point is the case of Chornobaivka airbase in the south of Ukraine, whose name turned into a popular meme after multiple attempts of the Russian troops to get there led to ever-increasing losses, yet did not produce a change in tactic.

Regular reports of the numbers of enemy losses (which the other side makes secret) and the "meat wave" strategy are intended to provoke frustration among Russian soldiers and population and to create distrust to their leaders, undermining war effort. The president also notes deep demoralization of the invading forces who feel unwelcome in Ukraine and realize they cannot win the war. Zelenskyy calls them "cowards" who are unable to admit defeat and quickly retreat in the face of civil resistance. He often mocks propagandistic delusions and falsehoods that led Russian soldiers to Ukraine, where they attempted to "take Kyiv and Ukraine in three days" but eventually "lost their way".

Volodymyr Zelenskyy emphasizes universal contempt for the aggressor by invoking phrases that became popular war memes, such as "Russian warship, go f*k yourself", immortalized by the defenders of the Snake Island, and "tractor troops", a nickname for farmers who use their tractors to pull tanks and other Russian weaponry from the battlefield.

The president often ridicules "the world's second best" status of the Russian army. In the address marking 100 days of the conflict, he highlights the attitude change – from fear to grim scorn – that occurred within a short period of time:

And one more phrase is worth mentioning: "the second army of the world". At first it looked threatening. Then it was dangerous. After Bucha – It caused disgust. And now – only a bitter smile. Because what's left of it? Of the army, which was called the second army in the world... War crimes, disgrace and hatred (June 3, 2022).

In the two years of the war President Zelenskyy calls the enemy various names (weirdoes, non-humans, people without humanity) with connotations spanning from fear to contempt depending on the context of the address and war dynamics. While the president strongly condemns many war crimes committed by the invading army, he repeatedly emphasizes that the Ukrainian side adheres to the international humanitarian law and urges the Russian fighters to surrender. With the second year of the conflict nearing the end and prospects of the long war looming large, the warnings of evil intentions and strength of the enemy grow more intense: “The enemy is insane. And it is powerful. And it wants to destroy Ukraine, just as it has always wanted to (November 6, 2023).

Another important group of characters in the resistance narrative are international partners of Ukraine – organizations, countries and individuals who provide military aid and mount sanctions on Russia to stop its war machine. The assistance of partners is presented by the president as essential for Ukraine’s survival and he regularly informs the public about his foreign contacts and the support the world gives to Ukraine. This line of narrative begins from the first short address to the nation made hours after the war broke out, in which the president mentions his recent telephone call with President Biden and US-led efforts to form an alliance of countries to support Ukraine. Later on the same day he assures the people that Russia is facing sanctions that are “the most powerful in world history” and prospects of “complete isolation” on the global arena.

In the early weeks of the war Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes emphasis on the large number of his foreign contacts and multiple forms of international assistance coming to Ukraine: “Every day and every night I talk to the leaders of many countries, to the leaders of the business community. During all the days of the war, there is almost no hour when Ukraine does not hear what help it will receive” (March 6, 2022). He celebrates first diplomatic victories, such as the demand by the UN General Assembly that Russian military should be withdrawn from Ukraine. Gradually the focus shifts to deepening relations between Ukraine and major global powers and organizations and to cooperation within the new Rammstein Group. The president also constantly stresses that in the conflict with Russia, Ukraine has historically unprecedented level of international support which guarantees its victory.

Alongside expressing gratitude to the partners, Volodymyr Zelenskyy repeatedly pleads for speedier and more substantial assistance. At the saddest moments, he does not hide bitter irritation with the hesitation of the allies who, in his words, “have intimidated themselves” into inaction which only emboldens Russia. Appealing for help, he uses a mix of idealistic and pragmatic arguments. He portrays the invasion of Ukraine as the opening act of Russia’s war against Europe and attack on global security, which makes assistance to Ukraine’s war efforts an investment in long-term world peace and European security. He also stresses that the people in Ukraine are defending not just their land, but democracy and freedom, whose protection requires collective efforts of the free nations against tyranny.

Several times he mentions the legal argument for international assistance to the defence of Ukraine – the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which the UK, the USA and Russia provided Ukraine with security assurances. The president always fills these comments with bitter sarcasm over the procrastination of the partners, as the following example demonstrates:

All the Alliance has managed to do so far is to carry fifty tons of diesel fuel for Ukraine through its procurement system. Probably so that we can burn the Budapest Memorandum. To make it burn better. But it is already burnt for us. In the fire of Russian troops (March 4, 2022).

The discussion of relations with partners often resembles an emotional rollercoaster, with phrases like “we don’t feel alone” and “we are left alone in the defence of our state” occurring in video addresses delivered only days apart.

Although the president admits not everyone in the world supports the Ukrainian cause, he always portrays Putin’s Russia as a marginalized country without serious allies. He points that only a handful of outcasts like Belarus, Syria and North Korea openly support Russia in the UN and avoids mentioning the economic assistance to Russia from such powerful states as China and India, as well as generally sympathetic attitude to Ukraine’s enemy in the Global South. Instead, he talks about Kyiv’s active diplomatic efforts to win support of these states.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes appeals to the people of Belarus, Iran, and other pro-Russian countries, urging them not to get involved in the conflict and to demand that their governments stop cooperation with the Russian regime. He also directly asks Hungarian President Viktor Orban about the motives behind his support of Putin that runs against the popular sentiment in his country, and calls on the international business community to cut all relations with Russia and stop subsidizing its war machine. The president makes these rhetorical moves to further weaken Russia’s standing in the world.

Focus on the build-up to the war, the president notes that Putin’s Russia has been preparing for decades to destroy Ukraine and Europe. He reminds that the war started in 2014, and it was the weakness of Ukraine and inadequate reaction of the global community that emboldened Russia’s full-scale invasion. Volodymyr Zelenskyy also regrets Ukraine lost the chance to pull out of Eastern Europe “grey zone” at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest and condemns “absurd fear of some politicians towards Russia” that left the country one-on-one with the aggressor. Reflecting on the events immediately predating the invasion, he reminds that many world leaders did not share his concerns about the Nord Stream pipeline and did not respond to his request of meaningful preventive sanctions against Russia. These comments by the president sound not as a blame for not averting the war but as a plea to heed his new warning that the defeat of Ukraine will result in a direct clash between Russia and the Alliance, which should boost support for the Ukrainian defence.

Presidential addresses relatively little attention to the lead-up to the war, which can be explained by V. Zelenskyy’s past views. Although in 2014 he condemned the annexation of the Crimea, he won the presidency promising to bring “senseless war” with Russia to an end (Shuster, 2024). In his first years as President, he attempted to make a peace deal with Moscow and dismissed warnings of possible invasion as panic-mongering (*ibid.*). This also explains why he never talks about Ukraine’s readiness for the attack in 2022 and only notes that his country “did not choose the path of war” but was forced to defend itself.

The discussion of the end of the war in presidential addresses is very optimistic and filled with absolute confidence in Ukraine’s victory. Volodymyr Zelenskyy bases his predictions on the unity of the nation, strength of the defence forces, the existential nature of the conflict that leaves Ukrainians no choice but drive out the invaders, and the justice of the Ukrainian cause that energizes the country’s war effort, attracts wide international support and sets in motion the moral law of history that in the long run, evil always loses. “History is written by people, never by savages,” says the president after visiting the de-occupied Kharkiv region, devastated by the invading army.

For the first time the president makes the promise of Ukraine’s victory over Russia on the third day of the war, and two weeks later starts talking about the conflict reaching “a strategic turning point” and Ukrainians “moving towards our victory”. Closer to the end of 2023 his statements change modality from “we will definitely win” to “we can win this

fight”, and the president starts talking about a very difficult year ahead. Yet, no matter the circumstances, the president invariably ends his addresses with a vow of victory.

It is noteworthy that even in the early days of the invasion President Zelenskyy never promises a fast and easy victory and never makes predictions about the duration of the war. He repeatedly emphasizes that the end of the conflict depends on the scale of Russia’s military and economic losses, and that every new day and every new effort of the Ukrainians bring them closer to peace. Characteristically, his address on the second anniversary of the invasion has the title “We are 730 days closer to victory”. Thus, during all stages of the war Volodymyr Zelenskyy intends the words of future victory not just to console the nation, but to maximally mobilize its resistance to the enemy.

Narrative of suffering. The narrative of suffering is the strand of the narrative of war that describes the heavy toll of the invasion for Ukraine. The president always focuses on deadly attacks against Ukrainian civilian targets, mourning the killed and often mentioning the people whose lives were lost. The first climax of this narrative is the story of the siege of Mariupol, which left thousands of people dead and injured, followed by the stories of mass torture, execution and rape of civilians that broke out after Russian forces retreated in many parts of the country. President Zelenskyy personally visits the sites of mass massacre and condemns the brutality of the invaders.

Information about the atrocities is always followed by promises to identify and punish those involved in these crimes. Expressing firm belief in the restoration of justice, Volodymyr Zelenskyy seeks to soothe the pain of the nation and demoralize enemy soldiers. He shames Russian citizens into protesting against the war and at times extends the blame for the lost lives to Ukraine’s allies, making emotional pleas for decisive strong actions to stop the aggressor. Their brutality pushes Zelenskyy to call the invading troops “pure and concentrated evil” and cast the war in stark moral terms.

The president uses the evidence of massive violations of the rules of war to support demands for legal actions against Russia. As early as on the fourth day of the conflict, he calls for the international tribunal on Russia for indiscriminate shelling of Ukrainian cities and, pointing to the genocidal character of the war, makes an appeal to remove the aggressor from the UN Security Council.

After a particularly deadly attack on Kharkiv on the next day, Volodymyr Zelenskyy starts the campaign to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism, and calls for a total ban on transport connection and export from the country-aggressor, declaring that “buying Russian goods now is to pay money for murdering people” (February 28, 2022). As the war goes on, incessant brutality of Russian forces allows the Ukrainian president to expand these claims and some of them enjoy success with the international community.

The president regularly talks about the tragedy of millions of internally displaced persons and those who had to leave the country, and especially – about the plight of people on the occupied territories, kidnapped or held hostages by the invaders. Volodymyr Zelenskyy mentions thousands of recorded cases of forced deportation of Ukrainian children and applauds the International Criminal Court for the issuance of an arrest warrant for Putin.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy acknowledges those who contribute to alleviation of suffering of the Ukrainian people. He thanks doctors and rescuers who save lives after enemy attacks; acknowledges assistance of many volunteers, common people and celebrities, foreign governments, businesses and international organizations that provide humanitarian aid; appreciates Ukrainian citizens and international intermediaries for the organization of POW exchanges. The president also announces awards of the honorary title of “City Savior” to four Polish cities, along with capitals of Lithuania, the Czech Republic and France “for the

extremely significant contribution of the city authorities, volunteers and residents to help our people and our defence”.

President Zelenskyy contributes to life-saving efforts by constantly warning people against returning too early to the liberated areas and ignoring air raid alerts, and assures Ukrainian citizens under occupation or deported to Russia, as well as prisoners of war and that they are not left behind and the country is doing its utmost to end their plight.

Alongside human suffering, the Volodymyr Zelenskyy extensively comments damage to the civilian infrastructure of Ukraine. He directs a lot of attention to the risk of technogenic catastrophes, primarily at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The President raises alarm after its first shelling, calling the incident “the night that could have stopped the history of Ukraine and Europe”, and repeatedly demands international actions to guarantee security at the nuclear site. He also warns about the enemy’s intentions to destroy the Kakhovka Dam, asking the world leaders to “make Russia understand that the terrorist attack on the Kakhovka HPP will be equated to the use of weapons of mass destruction”. When the dam is blown up seven months later, he calls it an act of ecocide and steps up attention to environmental damage suffered by Ukraine and the Black Sea region.

Discussion of infrastructural and ecological damage is accompanied by optimistic promises to rebuild the country and get compensation from the aggressor, with the words “contributions” and “reparations” becoming part of President Zelenskyy’s vocabulary as early as one week into the war: “We will restore every house, every street, every city. And we say to Russia: learn the words “reparations” and “contributions”. You will repay everything you did against Ukraine. In full.” (March 3, 2022). He also projects a reversal of the role of victim, with Russia facing economic collapse and international contempt, and Ukraine enjoying growing prosperity and respect of the world.

On many occasions Zelenskyy notes that Russia refuses to admit its multiple war crimes on the Ukrainian territory, calling them “staged” or shifting the blame to the Ukrainian troops. Thus, the attention to this strand of the war narrative is, in part, an attempt to publicize the information to sceptical audiences. He calls Russia’s attempts to hide the truth a proof of cowardice and escalates the charges with reference to the testimonies and documents of captured Russian servicemen, that indicate the atrocities were not improvised but planned as part of the war tactics.

Narrative of resilience. The narrative of resilience deals with the ability of the country to keep functioning in the face of aggression. It proves efficiency and strength of the leadership of the country, its institutions and citizens, and raises hopes of victory. There is a certain overlap between this and other strands of the narrative of war: keeping the state operational is indispensable for the support of the armed struggle and requires efforts to repair the damage after the attacks. Yet, unlike the narratives of suffering and resistance, the resilience narrative focuses on the support of civilian life.

On day one of the war Volodymyr Zelenskyy calls on politicians, government officials and community leaders to “ensure normal life on the ground as much as possible” and in the following weeks assures the population that government institutions and agencies continue to function (“We are all on the ground, we are all working; everyone is where they should be” (March 7, 2022)). He also warns those who are “working for a split” or “looking for threads to Russia” to stay united and focused.

President Zelenskyy continuously praises professionals – from doctors and teachers to police officers and entrepreneurs – who continue to perform their duties and calls on all people to contribute to the life of their communities. He discusses initiatives to rebuild the country, focusing on the programme of compensation for damaged housing and efforts to restore the damaged energy infrastructure and prepare it for the winter.

He celebrates “the return of normal life” to the freed territories, restoration of transport network and demining efforts. The president gladly welcomes signs of life in Ukraine settling in the pre-war rhythm, like the return of foreign embassies to Kyiv, which he calls “one of the important indicators of the strength of our state, the Ukrainian ability to fight and win” (August 17, 2022).

The narrative focuses a lot of attention on the maintenance of the economy of the country. In the first month of the war President Zelenskyy announces tax breaks and suspension of inspections to help businesses survive the war. He discusses efforts to resume and boost export, celebrating the decision of the EU to expand the potential of transport corridors and liberalize trade with Ukraine. When in late 2023 Polish farmers, in protest against EU agricultural imports, start blocking the Ukrainian border, President Zelenskyy calls it “the erosion of solidarity on a daily basis” (February 19, 2024), reminds of heroic work of Ukrainian farmers and changes focus calling for tighter restrictions on the export of Russian agricultural products to Europe. The president often points to the fact that Ukraine successfully resumed grain shipments through its Black Sea ports and did not stop even after Russia pulled out of the deal. Thus, he demonstrates the country’s ability to fulfil its commitments as a major global food security provider in the face of Russian attempts to provoke the world food price crisis.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy acknowledges that in addition to the country’s potential, key factors that ensure its resilience are foreign financial aid that keeps Ukrainian economy afloat, international assistance in rebuilding and maintaining energy systems, and different forms of contribution from global business whose solutions help the country in difficult times.

With the conflict evolving into the war of attrition, the resilience narrative assumes a more important role in the addresses. Volodymyr Zelenskyy starts to emphasize commitment of allies to helping Ukraine in the long term, and talks about increased urgency that all citizens contribute to sustainability of their country.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s rhetoric can also be seen as contributing to the nation’s resilience, boosting morale through optimistic vision of the future and display of genuine care for the people. It also aims at undermining Russian resilience with repeated demands for tough sanctions against its export-import operations, transport, energy and banking sectors, with shaming companies that continue to work in Russia, and warning the people of the enemy country of the inevitable economic collapse.

Narrative of reform and development. The reform and development narrative focuses on the current work by the government to improve life in the country and achieve its long-term goals. It is closely associated with the resilience narrative because it shows that the war does not halt the country’s progress. Yet, it focuses not on daily routine and tactical tasks of state management but on the strategic goals.

The two major long-term goals discussed by the president are the Ukraine’s accession to the EU and NATO. The issue of Ukraine’s joining the European Union comes up on the third day of the invasion when the Volodymyr Zelenskyy states that “the people of Ukraine have already earned the right” to become part of the EU and that such a decision will become “the key evidence of our country’s support”. Two days later he announces filing application for the EU membership under a special accelerated procedure. After that, this issue becomes one of the nation’s biggest success stories, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy regularly turns to it as a source of optimism and inspiration, elaborating on the major steps in the process.

The high point of the narrative comes in June 2022, when the president raises expectations of the favourable decision and celebrates the status of a candidate for accession Ukraine

receives on June 23, 2022. He calls it as a massively-deserved achievement and proposes to value the status as “gained by” and not “granted to” Ukraine. Although Volodymyr Zelenskyy talks about this success as a result of efforts of all Ukrainians, he never acknowledges the work of the previous administrations in taking the country closer to European standards. Only two of the many reforms he discusses (setting up administrative service centres and decentralization) can be attributed to his predecessor, and a big success of securing a visa-free regime with the EU in 2017 receives just a cursory mention.

Discussing the road towards membership in NATO, the president focuses on the readiness of the Ukrainian military and on the diplomatic efforts to overcome resistance of some countries. On September 30, 2022, in a special address Volodymyr Zelenskyy reports about filing the official request for accelerated accession to NATO. Explaining this move, he says “we must de jure record everything we have already achieved de facto” and notes the unprecedented degree of trust and assistance to Ukraine from the Alliance.

In the first half of 2023 President Zelenskyy focuses attention on the Vilnius NATO summit. For months he demonstrates optimism expecting that the country will be invited to join the organization and discusses support of Ukrainian candidacy among member states. These upbeat projections also put pressure on NATO leadership who are sceptical about accepting the warring country into the Alliance. The president builds up the pressure with the comments that the Ukrainian military is making an invaluable contribution to Euro-Atlantic security, that the majority of citizens of Ukraine and NATO states will be frustrated if the leaders of the Alliance don't extend an invitation at the summit, and that European security and peace are impossible without secure and peaceful Ukraine.

Though the summit doesn't fulfil the expectations of Ukraine, the president presents its outcomes in a positive light, noting the unprecedented level of respect and support for Ukraine and the fact that the summit erased all doubts concerning Ukraine's future in NATO. The next day after the event, he announces the government starts preparation for the 2024 Washington NATO summit, expecting further progress. Soon the focus of attention in long-term security discussions turns to bilateral agreements between Ukraine and its allies intended to formalize their commitments to sustained peace and stability in the country. Volodymyr Zelenskyy celebrates the growing number of countries that support the G7 Declaration on Security Assurances and the signing of the agreements with individual countries.

President Zelenskyy constructs the reform and development narrative in a manner typical of the political incumbent (see Denton et al., 2020), giving a maximally positive account of the situation, focusing on his accomplishments while minimizing attention to deep problems of the country and scandals entangling top officials. This is particularly obvious in his cursory treatment of corruption, the issue which remains the main concern of the Ukrainian population (SOCIS, 2024).

Reform and development projections for Ukraine are contrasted sharply with Volodymyr Zelenskyy's vision of Russia's future. Since day one of the war, he warns the citizens of the enemy country that they are going to lose all gains of the previous decades and face the same turbulence they experienced immediately after the disintegration of the soviet empire.

National identity narrative. Symbolic role of the presidency makes the behaviour and the personality of the head of state important factors in forming national identity (Edelman, 1964/1985). Presidents often use their rhetorical power to promote or manipulate national self-awareness, viewing it as part of their duties as leaders or as an opportunity to achieve political goals. The national identity narrative in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's addresses serves to mobilize the people of the country and promote favourable narrative of war globally. During the conflict with the neighbour, it also becomes an important instrument

of drawing contrasts between the warring sides to prove an interstate, not civil, character of war and to counter Russian propaganda claiming that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people”. This explains why extolling Ukrainian national virtues, the president contrasts the people of two countries.

The most highlighted trait of the Ukrainian national character in presidential addresses is love for freedom. Volodymyr Zelenskyy often capitalizes on this feature to claim that his country belongs to the family of democratic nations and its struggle is a common cause of the free world. On multiple occasions Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes a sharp distinction between the freedom-loving nature of the Ukrainian people and slavish obedience of Russians to the whims of their rulers and their imperial propaganda.

Another key national trait the president focuses on is a sense of value of human life and the resulting feelings of dignity and compassion. These features are starkly contrasted with the Russians’ lack of sense of self-worth and contempt of human life. Importantly, President Zelenskyy emphasizes historically high readiness of Ukrainians to defend their values with great bravery, calling resistance “a feature of the soul” of the nation. This characteristic is offered as the main explanation of the unexpectedly united and strong response of Ukraine to the invasion. Recalling multiple tragedies the country has lived through, the president proves its resilience and strength, supports hopes for the future victory and reminds of the centuries-long history of oppression at the hands of Russians:

We have survived in our history and on our land two world wars, three Holodomors, the Holocaust, Babyn Yar, the Great Terror, the Chornobyl explosion, the occupation of the Crimea and the war in the east... They wanted to destroy us so many times. They failed. They wanted to wipe us off the face of the earth. They failed. They backstabbed us. And we are on our feet. They wanted us to be silent. But the whole world heard us. We’ve been through so much! And if someone thinks that, having overcome all this, Ukrainians – all of us – are scared, broken or will surrender, he knows nothing about Ukraine (March 3, 2022).

Alongside courage and strength, the president points to the peaceful character of the Ukrainian people who have never been a threat to others, thus emphasizing the unprovoked nature of the invasion. Volodymyr Zelenskyy also sharply contrasts Ukrainians’ love for peace with their ongoing experience of invasion. With an oxymoronic effect, he sometimes uses the word “peaceful” to refer to war-torn Ukrainian towns and population (e.g., “Peaceful people of a belligerent state!”, “Peaceful, proud, strong Kharkiv!”).

An important part of this narrative is the emphasis on the unity displayed by the Ukrainian people after the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion. For the first time the president celebrates country’s unity after the nation withstood the first week of attacks, and talks at length about how the shared tragic experience brought people closer to each other. When it becomes obvious that the country would not fall, the president casts effective united resistance an irrefutable proof of the existence of the Ukrainian nation, the fact that has been ignored by the enemy and doubted by many in the world:

A month has passed. We withstood six times longer than the enemy had planned, than the Russian command had reported to the Russian president. They were convinced that Ukraine is not a state. They were convinced that Ukrainians are not a nation. They deceived themselves (March 24, 2022).

While the discussion of national character is most active in the first year, the call to preserve unity as an essential precondition of victory is reiterated by Volodymyr Zelenskyy throughout all stages of the conflict.

In his addresses the Ukrainian national identity comes across as a dynamic complex phenomenon many of whose essential features are rediscovered and shaped during the war. The very rhetoric of President Zelenskyy – filled with indomitable will, energy and

compassion – is itself a display of those very features of the Ukrainian national character he extolls in his addresses. This explains why for many people President Zelenskyy became a symbol of his country's resistance to the Russian invasion.

This narrative shows personal evolution of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who before the start of the full-scale war spoke about Russia and Ukraine as brotherly nations who can understand each other well (Shuster, 2024). The storyline of the nation that rediscovers its strength and soul also protects the president from accusations of leaving the country ill prepared for war, which many people in Ukraine consider one of the worst mistakes of the government (SOCIS, 2024).

World War II memory narrative. President Zelenskyy often makes parallels between the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and World War II, the most recent major military conflict that brought great suffering to millions of Ukrainians in the past century. Waving elements of that historical memory narrative into the addresses reinforces all strands of the narrative of the Russo-Ukrainian war as well the national identity narrative.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy makes the first references to the events of World War II on the second day of the Russian invasion: in the morning address he compares the strike on Kyiv with the first bombing of the city in 1941 and in the afternoon address he comments the words of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that the events in Ukraine are “something Europe has not seen for 75 years”.

The president regularly evokes this narrative on the memorable dates of World War II and in the wake of the reports about war crimes committed by the Russian army. He compares the practices of torture chambers, filtration camps, summary executions, city blockades and destruction by the Nazi and Russian invaders to emphasize the extraordinary degree of cruelty and suffering often masked by the local character of the war whose violence is lacking the industrial scale of the Nazi death conveyors. The president delivers one of the most eloquent passages after the successful Kharkiv counteroffensive by the Ukrainian army that exposed mass executions and tortures of civilians, as well as almost complete devastation of residences and infrastructure on the freed territories:

They don't make soap out of people, they don't make lampshades out of leather... The scale is not the whole of Europe... But the principle is the same. Camps where people are gathered to kill. Deportations. Burnt cities and villages, completely destroyed – nothing remains alive after ruscism. Missile terror. Mass burials. Executioners. The cruelest torture of people still alive. And the boundless, undisguised hatred with which they justify this war that they started (September 11, 2022).

To further reinforce the comparison, President Zelenskyy notes that sometimes brutality of Russian troops eclipses the acts of the Nazis. In the similar way he condemns Russian propagandists as surpassing the cynicism of Nazi precursors when they put the blame for the bombing and shelling of the Ukrainian civilian targets on their defenders.

The president also notes similarities between ideological roots of aggression in modern Russia and Nazi Germany, calling Russia “the ideological successors of the Nazis” and referring to its chauvinism and imperialism as “ruscism” and to its adherents – as “ruscists.” In this way he emphasized the level of threat represented by Russian expansionism and the moral duty to resist it. Exposing the violent nature of Russian ideology, honouring those who fought with Nazism alongside present-day defenders of the nation, the president refutes accusations of Russian propaganda that Ukraine is governed by the fascist regime and must be “denazified.” For the same very reason, he evokes memories of Holocaust remembering Nazi death camps survivors killed during recent Russian attacks on Ukraine and accusing the Russians of “killing Holocaust victims for the second time” after they strike memorial sites of the mass execution of Jews in Kharkiv and in Kyiv.

While the central focus of this narrative is on the aggressor, at times the president turns to it to mark the heroism of Ukrainian defenders and collective war effort of the nation. For instance, in an important symbolic move in March 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy revived the Soviet tradition of honouring heroism of residents of cities during the Great Patriotic War, and awarded the honorary title “Hero City” to ten Ukrainian cities for outstanding resolve and courage in the face of Russian invasion. His announcement of the decision makes clear parallels between the two periods in the history of the country: “I decided to mark our Hero Cities with a special title that already existed. When another invasion was defeated. But a similar invasion. Another invasion. But no less cruel invasion” (March 6, 2022).

President Zelenskyy also evokes memories of World War II discussing international aid to Ukraine. He compares partnership between Ukraine and allies with Anti-Hitler coalition, stressing that collective effort is essential for victory, and celebrates the American Lend-Lease Act of 2022 as “the revival of the historic Lend-Lease program, which once helped protect freedom in Europe and can certainly do so a second time” (May 1, 2022). Critical of Europeans who failed to preserve peace on the continent and urging for more determination in helping Ukraine, the president recalls the slogan “Never again” which expresses anti-fascist sentiment and is associated with the lessons of World War II. He notes that Ukrainians are putting these words into practice and contrasts this with the passive act of remembering the tragedies of the past and valuing life, thus issuing a reproach to toothless pacifism.

World War II memory narrative helps the president express confidence in victory in the war with Russia and punishment of the aggressor. These ideas are always forcefully articulated on historical liberation dates. Discussing setting up a tribunal dedicated to prosecuting Russian aggression against Ukraine, Zelenskyy compares it with the Nuremberg trials held against the defeated Nazi Germany, and reminds that the hunt against Nazi war criminals eventually brought many of them to justice. Adding optimism to these historical analogies, he promises that this time victory and retribution will come much faster.

In addition to the references to Nazi invasion, presidential World War II memory narrative mentions the 1944 genocide of Crimean Tatars committed by the Soviet regime. He connects the genocide with the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014, calling it “the second wave of destruction of everything free on the peninsula,” and promises “not to leave anyone behind and return what belongs to Ukraine by right” (May 18, 2023). Projecting the situation into the distant and recent past, as well as into the future creates a powerful strand of narrative for the topic that is highly important for a large number of Ukrainians.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy adopts a similar approach to the discussion of the situation in Mariupol, the city that has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and Russian disregard for human lives. It was under Nazi occupation in 1941–1943, and was briefly captured by Russia-backed separatists in 2014. Ukraine’s president promises to “liberate the city for the third time” (June 13, 2022), using the double historical reference to stress the plight of the city and raise hopes for its return under Ukrainian control.

Conclusions. The conducted analysis shows that the narrative structure of President Zelenskyy’s video addresses consists of six distinct strands that cover a broad range of issues. All these components effectively connect with and enhance each other. They create a detailed picture of the situation on the frontlines and in the country in the general, and provide contexts that are essential for understanding and solidarizing with Ukrainian war efforts. Major examples of leadership rhetoric, these addresses also share some features associated with the discourse of political incumbents, such as masking negative aspects of reality and focusing on one’s own record. Addressed primarily to the citizens of Ukraine, this form of presidential communication is often used to target global and enemy audiences, which helps promoting Ukrainian war narrative beyond its borders.

The continuing war between Russia and Ukraine leaves the project open to further research. The study of narratives developed by the president can be extended to new video addresses that Volodymyr Zelenskyy keeps delivering on a daily basis and show whether and how the changing circumstances impact his rhetoric. Similar analysis can be conducted on different sets of texts to provide a more comprehensive view of the Ukrainian war narratives. Since the war in Ukraine commands a lot of attention all over the world, it can be interesting to compare war narratives in Ukraine and other countries. Such studies can provide an important measure of effectiveness of communication efforts of the Ukrainian president and offer important insights into interaction of public discourses of different countries.

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