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## How direct discourse shapes war news coverage

Liudmila Arcimavičienė 

Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, Lithuania

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the discursive features of direct quotations in war news coverage by the national Lithuanian broadcaster LRT during 2022 and 2023, focusing on three discourse strategies: identification, polarisation and legitimisation. The content analysis was conducted using NVivo 12.0, whereby the cited actors in war news reports were initially coded based on their direct citations. A total of 352 instances of direct discourse revealed that the identification strategy (225 instances) establishes a clear ideological boundary between the warring sides, contributing to both a polarising (105 instances) and legitimising (130 instances) tone. The findings of this research highlight that direct discourse serves an ideological function in news reporting, enabling journalists to add moral and emotional dimensions to the reported war narrative. The explored discourse strategies – identification, polarisation and legitimisation – illustrate how the ideological divide between the perpetrator and the victim acquires moral and emotional weight. The thematic content of direct discourse is reinforced by the broader context of war news, which systematically highlights four themes: 'the Other', 'military equipment', 'quantification' and 'attack'. The analysis reveals a discourse of resilience, which frames exposure to adversity as an opportunity for adaptation, collective sentiment and a unified sense of self-esteem.

## 1. Introduction

In Critical Discourse Studies, analysing direct quotes has been viewed as a significant measure (Fairclough, 1995; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen, 2008) for a better understanding of power dynamics and ideological meaning construction in media and political discourse (Van Dijk, 2022; Wodak, 2018, 2022). In media political discourse, critical discourse analysts relate direct quotes with the voice of the powerful (Fairclough, 1992h; Angermuller, 2020), whose opinion matters and is given legitimate space for expression (Tyler, 2006). Additionally, it is observed how the journalists' selection of direct quotes is ideologically motivated at the level of political and social power of the news actors (Bromley, 2004; Gervasi, 2014).

An important aspect of analysing direct discourse is its representational nature. Direct quotes convey speech that constructs a narrative of representation, often referred to as a 'discourse matrix' (Fairclough 1995). In the semantic construction of a media narrative, the discourse matrix is guided by social identity (Schudson 2001), power relations (Huan, 2016; Mesikämmen, 2016), public perceptions (Harry, 2014; White, 2006) and created representational value (Fairclough, 1995/2013, p.64). The representational value of direct quotes is influenced by social and pragmatic factors, including who is quoted, the order in which quotes appear, and the content in which journalists

embed them. This is particularly evident in news reporting, where direct quotes serve as indicators of a system of values (Roeh & Nir, 1990), reinforced by the illusion of a dialogic text (Waugh, 1995). In this sense, the direct quote functions as a metonymy for the voice of the reported speaker, granting them a legitimate platform through which knowledge and beliefs systems are constructed.

Recent developments in social, political, and economic circumstances have significantly impacted the framework of public discourse. Scholars have observed how decreasing public trust in institutions (Zahariadis et al., 2023), the mainstream media (Andersen et al., 2023), and political leadership (Seijts et al., 2023) is reshaping power dynamics. The erosion of trust is compounded increasingly divisive and aggressive forms of public dialogue (De León et al., 2023), which at times verge on hate speech (Uyheng et al., 2022) and are often influenced by conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). Specific events, such as Donald Trump's presidency in 2016 (Béland, 2020), the Brexit campaign (Browning, 2019) and on-going migration challenges, have deepened polarisation and public anxieties about the future. Moreover, the war on European soil following 70 years of peace has emerged as a major catalyst for widespread insecurity and diminishing trust in the status quo.

Within this fragmented space of public discourse, news reporting continues to serve as a primary source of information about the ongoing

E-mail address: [liudmila.arcimaviciene@flf.vu.lt](mailto:liudmila.arcimaviciene@flf.vu.lt).

direct military conflict. Despite the inherently contradictory nature of war reporting (Bromley, 2004) – marked by tensions between the need for objectivity and the emotional realities of conflict (Ibrahim et al., 2011) – journalists are expected to maintain a detached and neutral stance (Allan & Zelizer, 2004). As the war persists, the significance of the war reporting grows, with the discursive authority of journalists playing a crucial role in determining what is perceived as truth within the war zone (Allan & Zelizer, 2004). Hypothetically, direct discourse in war news reporting could bridge that emotional gap between journalists and the public. The content of embedded citations would indirectly reflect journalists' perceptions of the on-going war and their role in shaping its narrative. This study aims to analyse the use of direct discourse (i.e., direct quotes) in the war reporting of the Lithuanian national broadcaster LRT and their impact on the narrative construction. To achieve the above aim, the following research questions were raised.

- RQ1: Who are the most frequently cited actors in the direct discourse of LRT war news reporting?
- RQ2: What discourse topics are foregrounded?
- RQ3: What power dynamic is displayed in the embedded quotes?
- RQ4: How does the power dynamic of the embedded quotes correlate with the surrounding text?

To address these issues, the paper is structured as follows. The subsequent sections provide an overview of relevant literature on the role of direct discourse in mainstream media, the war narrative and discursive strategies of legitimisation. Then, the data and methods employed in this study are outlined, and the findings are discussed. Finally, conclusions regarding the research questions and hypothesis are drawn.

### 1.1. Direct quotes in news media discourse

There are many reasons why direct quotes are embedded in news media stories. Journalists often choose direct quotations to aim for impartiality (Harry, 2014), providing readers with the exact words of the source instead of a paraphrase. Along these lines, direct quotes are typically categorised as exemplifications, employed to offer a first-hand perspective and enhance the credibility of the story (Arpan, 2009; Harry, 2014). At the same time, direct quotations possess rhetorical unboundlessness, free from the restrictions of objective balance (Harry, 2014) and add dramatic effects to a storyline (Wierzbicka, 1974). For instance, Arpan's (2009) study of negative quotations clarified their effect on lower credibility and more inaccurate perceptions. Similarly, the study of the qualitative quotes in U.S. news coverage of politics showed how selected quotes reinforce public biases found in other sources (Gaskins et al., 2020).

In Critical Discourse Studies, direct quotes are often linked to the ideological nature and pragmatic functions of embedded narratives. Critical Discourse Analysis views discourse as a form of social practice, characterised by its dialectical nature (Angermuller, 2020), which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by social and political realities (Fairclough, 1992, 1995/2013). Furthermore, direct discourse adds complexity to narratives due to its inherent ambiguity, especially when the boundary between direct quotation and indirect citation is unclear (Fairclough, 1995/2013). For example, direct quotes are sometimes featured in headlines without quotation marks or are closely paraphrased in the main body of the text. The lack of clarity in reported speech has contributed to the 'conversationalisation' of public discourse in the media (Fairclough, 1995/2013; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Despite the ambiguous role of direct speech, its analysis is highly valued for revealing the ideological dynamics of media hegemony (Altheide, 1984). Recent studies demonstrate how the selection of direct quotes is often used to deliberately delegitimise competing narratives. At the same time, the frequent embedding of reported speech can reinforce and validate such narratives. This is evident in examples such as the portrayal of the Chinese Dream in the New York Times by Mei

(2025), where implicit negative biases emerge, as well as the portrayal of Syrian refugees (Ghazal Aswad, 2019) and expert citations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bunnag et al., 2024). In this study, the use of direct quotes in war news reporting is analysed through the lens of discursive strategies of legitimisation (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) and their tendency to uphold the status quo (Altheide, 1984).

### 1.2. War narrative and war news reporting

The ideological significance of direct discourse grows exponentially during times of war, when the need for upholding the status quo becomes critical both militarily and politically. War narratives are not only ideological by nature but also symbolically archetypal. They revolve around the binary opposition of Good and Evil, portraying an ongoing struggle for survival that is invariably resolved in favour of the Good. Which conflict side is assigned the role of the Good with its predetermined victory can change together with the shifting political context. This is well illustrated by the dramatic change in focus from the ideological clash between the anti-communist West and communist East to the divide between the anti-terrorist West and the evil terrorism (Van Dijk, 2009, pp. 191–204, (Lakoff, 1992) 2. The image-schema of anti-communism has been gradually replaced by the anti-terrorist narrative underpinned with the patriotic sentiment over "homeland security" and "fight against evil" (Lakoff, 1992; Lakoff, 1996). New frames add complexity to the representation of war in discourse, especially when accompanied by other ideological oppositions.

In war reporting, the narrative is often ideologically divisive and complex, posing significant challenges for journalists. They are frequently confronted with the moral dilemma (Matheson & Allan, 2009; Ibrahim et al., 2011) of balancing the professional ethics of factual reporting against the imperative to minimise potential harm to readers. At the same time, journalists are influenced by the biases of the media organisations they represent as well as the political agendas those organisations navigate. Numerous studies have highlighted a tendency in media to systematically underreport or overreport certain aspects of armed conflicts (Broomley 2004; Baum & Zhukov, 2015) due to cultural differences (Palmer, 2018), biases, and mythical representations (Lee & Maslog, 2005).

Another layer of complexity is reflected in the use of war narratives as ideological tools for various forms of justification. This can be traced in media references to the national policies justifying militarisation in the name of national unity and a patriotic sentiment (Fowler, 2013). The justification narrative focusing on the national unity and a transactional approach between countries can successfully operate to justify the war and "devalue the qualitative reality of pain and death" (Lakoff, 1992, 32). In this regard, war reporting is one of the best reflections of how language is used to shift focus from the factual evidence of violence and aggression to the responsibility of others for the deadly nature of war (Lakoff, 2000).

The research approach undertaken in this study is a critical discourse analysis of direct discourse in the war reporting provided by the national Lithuanian broadcaster LRT. Since the start of war in Ukraine on February 23, 2022, the leaders of the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have advocated an unwavering support to the Ukrainian leadership (Kuczyńska-Zonik & Sierputowska, 2023). The overarching message to the global community and the Ukrainian people has focused on their ongoing concern over the insufficient understanding of how far-reaching the aggression of the Russian state can be (Hartwell et al., 2022). Given the ideological and historical significance of this war to the political identity of the Baltic States, it is expected that the analysis of direct discourse in Lithuanian war reporting will shed more light on how war narrative is mediated within a more ideologically polarised context. The study will examine the hypothesis of the emotional impact of direct quotes in the war reporting and its construction of legitimisation in the war narrative.

### 1.3. Discourse strategies of legitimisation

In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), *legitimisation* is understood as a set of discourse strategies (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009) adopted to achieve social, political, psychological, or linguistic objectives. This study focuses on three specific legitimisation strategies: 1) how countries and groups are labelled (identification), 1) how their authority is established (legitimisation), and 3) how conflicts between the established groups are expressed (polarisation). Three strategies are deeply interconnected, working together to construct social and ideological meanings. Such meanings are often authorised through direct citations (Van Dijk, 1988; Ali, Christopher, & Nordin, 2016). In the context of war narratives, the collective identity of a state or nation plays a vital role in sustaining a narrative of collective emotion (Bouchat & Rimé, 2018). The discursive representation of such collective emotion contributes to group legitimisation by shaping how group members position themselves within the spectrum of their shared identity.

The concept of *identification* is examined here as the discursive construction of “the collective self-representation of a group through its speakers” (Pohl & Heydemann, 2013, p. 3). The intricate relationship between discourse participants is explored through the textual analysis of “identification strategies” that are routinised in discourse (Pohl & Heydemann, 2013, p. 3) and influence the formation of collective constructs. Within this study, identification is recognised as shaping the context, defining the main participants, and influencing the dynamics of their relationships (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024). As a categorisation strategy, identification can manifest explicitly through direct references to names, titles, and ranks, and implicitly through references to the actions and behaviours of social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

Within the critical approach to analysing discourse, collective identity is understood as dynamic and shaped by *legitimisation*. As Reyes (2011) notes, legitimisation discursively justifies the mental or physical behaviour of social actors. Enacted by argumentation (Wodak, 2009), legitimisation explains the nature of social actions and ideas, justifying a specific goal while seeking the support and approval of the ingroup. The search for approval is often motivated by attempts to obtain or maintain power, achieve social acceptance, improve community relationships or reaching popularity (Reyes, 2011, p. 782). This discursive strategy helps build credibility and represent ingroups members in a more favourable light. When analysing news media texts, it is important to consider the type of arguments presented, whom they justify, and who is portrayed as legitimate.

Finally, *polarisation* in discourse divides social groups, leading to a prolonged social conflict, domination, and inequality. Polarisation is discursively realised through a general dichotomy of Us versus Them (Van Dijk, 1988), which provides evaluative strategies and selectively frames information in binary group representations. Similarly, Van Dijk (1988, 4) argues that polarised discourse is ideological, noting that “many group ideologies involve the representation of Self and Others, Us and Them. Many of them, therefore, seem to be polarised: We are Good and They are Bad, especially when conflicting interests are involved”. By analysing polarisation in discourse as a strategy, a specific narrative is uncovered that influences the public with *Our* truth and builds a favourable group identity (Van Dijk, 1988, 10). This ideological matrix of in-group and out-group relations is particularly evoked during times of public health crises (Stjernswärd & Glasdam, 2021), migration issues (De Rosa et al., 2021), political or economic crises (Lehtonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2024; Peterssen, 2024), and war (Isiaka, 2024; Kiper, 2015).

## 2. Data and methods

To analyse the ideological nature of direct quotes, one year of daily war news coverage was collected from the Lithuanian national broadcaster LRT ([www.lrt.lt](http://www.lrt.lt)). For consistency, the same date of the month has been chosen throughout the year, and the entire day's updates were sampled.

As shown in Table 1, the highest word coverage of the war is observed during the first two months of 2022, February and March 2022, with 7700 words on the first day of the war and a similar word coverage of 7366 in March. There is a noticeable decline in coverage from April to July, with a word range of 600–800. From August 2022, the number of words used in war news updates exponentially increases, reaching its peak in January and February of 2023, with a similar range of 8000 to 9000 words. This illustrates an agenda setting trend in media reporting (Weaver et al., 2004), where prominence of war reporting is particularly pursued at the beginning of the war and on its anniversary. In the collected data sample of 53,165 words, 352 instances of direct discourse were established, with their average coverage range at 20%. A similar agenda-setting trend is observed with the use of the direct quotes in the war news updates throughout the year from February 2022 to February 2023. The highest number of direct quotes is found during the first two months of the war, followed by a sharp decline from April to August, and a steady growth of direct citations from September 2022 to February 2023. Nonetheless, it should be noted that a sharper decrease in the number of quotes does not undermine their contextual importance. The coverage range of the number of words used in the quotes is proportionally consistent throughout the entire year, ranging of 13%–18%.

The content analysis was carried out within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Studies, complemented by the cognitive perspective on language use as thought-based (Fillmore, 1982; Gibbs, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Lakoff, 1996) and ideological perspective as discourse-based (Fairclough 1997/2013; van Dijk 2007; 2009, pp. 191–204). Both perspectives are closely intertwined and complement each other, as the discourse-based view is inspired by the cognitive view and emphasises the need for “the semiotic dimensions” of power, political and social changes in society (Wodak, 2015). Content analysis was conducted using NVivo 12.0, whereby the cited actors in war news reporting were primarily coded based on their direct citations. In the secondary coding process, three main discursive strategies of identification, polarisation and legitimisation in the direct quotes were established. Based on the existing literature, the following coding scheme was developed.

1. **Identification** refers to discourse categorisation through specific mentions of social actors, states, institutions and their representatives, including collective pronoun usage.

**Table 1**  
Data characteristics.

|       | War news coverage by date | Article word length | No. of direct quotes | Word coverage of direct quotes by % |
|-------|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1     | February 23, 2022         | 7700                | 48                   | 11%                                 |
| 2     | March 23, 2022            | 7366                | 65                   | 27%                                 |
| 3     | April 23, 2022            | 718                 | 4                    | 13%                                 |
| 4     | May 23, 2022              | 1178                | 10                   | 23%                                 |
| 5     | June 23, 2022             | 658                 | 2                    | 8%                                  |
| 6     | July 23, 2022             | 821                 | 6                    | 22%                                 |
| 7     | August 23, 2022           | 1011                | 8                    | 15%                                 |
| 8     | September 23, 2022        | 4382                | 27                   | 18%                                 |
| 9     | October 23, 2022          | 3045                | 25                   | 27%                                 |
| 10    | November 23, 2022         | 6445                | 46                   | 25%                                 |
| 11    | December 23, 2022         | 2661                | 11                   | 20%                                 |
| 12    | January 23, 2022          | 8115                | 54                   | 26%                                 |
| 13    | February 23, 2023         | 9036                | 46                   | 25%                                 |
| Total |                           | 53,165              | 352                  |                                     |

2. **Legitimisation** involves positive portrayals of the 'self' in collective terms.
3. **Polarisation** highlights conflict representations between social actors or states, characterised by negative depictions of the 'Other'.

The NVivo coding process provides parameters for raw frequency counts and coverage range within the sampled data, which were used to compare the discourse strategies of the cited actors. In the final stage of the analysis, the broader context of war news was coded to identify recurring themes in which the direct discourse was embedded. A summary of the applied procedure is given in [Fig. 1](#) below.

The coding procedure followed these steps. First, the direct quotes were identified (Step 1) along with their recurrent themes articulated by the cited speaker (Step 2). Next, these themes were analysed in terms of the discursive strategies of identification, polarisation and legitimisation (Step 3), with an emphasis on their political meaning (i.e., collective identity, collective emotion). Finally, the legitimacy of direct discourse was evaluated in the broader context of the recurrent themes in war reporting, where the direct discourse was situated.

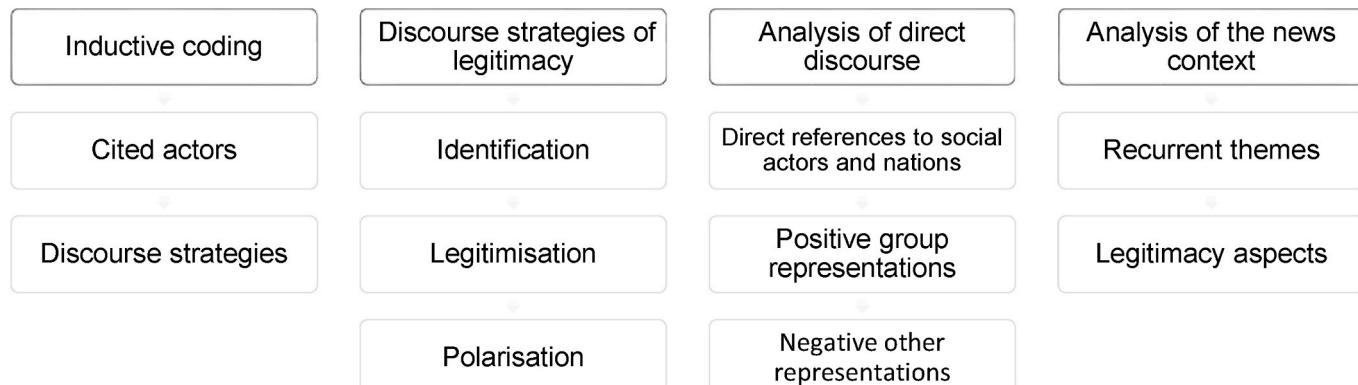
### 3. Research findings

The analysis of the extracted quotes clarified that the projected agency is consistently allocated to two major state actors and two international organisations (see [Table 1](#) below) throughout the year. The raw frequency is complemented by the coverage range from the lowest to the highest (see [Table 2](#)).

The most cited state actors represent Ukraine, with a raw frequency of 170, the EU with 61 cases, the US with 44 and NATO with 32. The raw frequency is accompanied by the word coverage range, estimated by NVivo 12.0, which indicates the percentage of words in proportion to the entire data sample from the lowest coverage to the highest within the same citation group. The most prominently cited political leader is the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with the highest coverage at almost 11%, followed by Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany Annalena Baerbock at 7%, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at 3%. By comparison, various U.S officials were more frequently cited and at a higher coverage range than President Joe Biden. The following subsection will consider how the combined use of identification, legitimisation and polarisation discourse strategies create legitimacy in the war narrative and normalise aggression.

#### 3.1. Identification in the direct discourse of news reporting

Throughout the data sample, the cited actors mainly construct their war narrative through the identification strategy focusing on two key actors: Ukraine and Russia, with occasional references to the EU, NATO, China and others. The consistent embedding of both Ukraine and Russia



[Fig. 1.](#) NVivo assisted coding procedure.

Table 3

Discursive strategies of identification, polarisation and legitimisation.

| Direct quotes   | Discursive strategies |                       |                               |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
|   | Identification        | Polarisation          | Legitimisation                |
| Ukraine (Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine officials)                | Ukraine (64)          | Vice: harm (69)       | Collective action (15)        |
|   | Russia (57)           | Vice: degradation (8) | Virtue: right to defence (24) |
|   | EU (2)                |                       | Victimhood (20)               |
| NATO (NATO officials, Jens Stoltenberg)                         | NATO (1)              |                       | Obligation hierarchy (6)      |
|   |                       |                       | Competitiveness (5)           |
|   |                       |                       |                               |
| The USA (US officials, Joe Biden, Antony Blinken, Lloyd Austin) | Ukraine (22)          | Vice: harm (12)       | Virtue: fairness (14)         |
|   | Russia (22)           |                       | Virtue care: (7)              |
|   |                       |                       | Collective action: (3)        |
| The EU (EU officials, Annalena Baerbock, Olaf Scholz)           | Ukraine (16)          | Vice: harm (11)       | Collective action (7)         |
|   | Russia (12)           | Vice: cheating (2)    | Obligation hierarchy (6)      |
|   | NATO (6)              |                       | Virtue: right to defence (4)  |
| Raw frequency   |                       | Vice: harm (3)        | Virtue: care (9)              |
|   |                       |                       | Virtue: fairness (4)          |
|   |                       |                       | Collective action: (3)        |
| Total   |                       |                       | Obligation hierarchy (3)      |
|   | 225                   | 105                   | 130                           |
|   | 460                   |                       |                               |

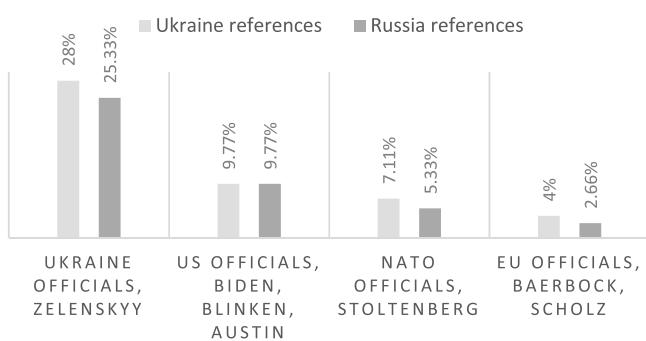


Fig. 2. Identification strategy in direct discourse.

categorising Ukraine as 'a people' and 'victims.' These references strengthen the emotional appeal and moral righteousness in the response to reactive aggression in the war narrative. The concept of 'the people' is persuasive due to its morally righteous appeal to the security of life, while the subcategory of Ukraine-as-victims highlights the inhumane atrocities and suffering caused by the perpetrator. This emotional aspect is further reinforced by referencing Ukraine as both a heartland and a homeland being protected against the enemy.

Notably, the category of Ukraine-as-a-people is more frequent than Ukraine-as-a-state and its representatives. The identification marker of Ukraine-as-an-army in various ways that legitimise their cause and actions ('defence forces') and create a positive emotional appeal ('our army', 'Ukrainian fighters'). The use of 'Ukrainian fighters' implicitly evokes the mythical narrative of the 'fight against evil' and 'the fight for freedom', further enhancing the emotional appeal to basic human rights of justice and life. In contrast, the identification strategy for referencing Russia can be grouped into the following subcategories.

- As a state: Russia, they/them, Russian Federation, Moscow, occupiers, Russians, Russian inspectors, Russian war, Russian leaders, Putin, he (Putin), Russian President, President Putin.
- As a people: Russian citizens.

- As an army: Wagner soldiers, Russian aggressors, enemy soldiers, Russian forces, Russian military leadership, Russian army, the enemy.

The sub-categories of Russia-as-a-state and Russia-as-an-army receive more emphasis Russia-as-a-people, which is only represented by the term "Russian citizens". Both state and army references contain clear expressions of negative other representation such as "they/them", "occupiers", "enemy soldiers", and "the enemy". Notably, the term "Russians" is not used to refer to the people but rather the government. Vladimir Putin is referenced as "Putin" and "him" mostly by Ukrainian officials and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, while other sources refer to him as "President Putin", "Russian President" or "V. Putin". The subcategory of 'a people' is significantly outnumbered by the references to the state and the army, whose identification is clearly expressed with negative valence and delegitimisation.

### 3.2. Legitimisation in the direct discourse of news reporting

The discursive strategy of identification is well-complemented by the strategy of legitimisation, which foregrounds the positive representation of the collective Self. The cited actors use legitimisation to highlight different aspects of the self-legitimacy narrative (Tyler, 2006), as shown in Fig. 4.

In the citations by the Ukrainian officials and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the legitimacy narrative is structured around the following four themes, in order of importance: the right to defence, victimhood, a call for collective action and obligation hierarchy. A similar thematic representation is found in the direct discourse of NATO officials and General Secretary Jen Stoltenberg, with an emphasis on three themes: a call for collective action, obligation hierarchy, and Ukraine's right to defence. By contrast, cited EU and U.S. officials and political leaders legitimise their role in the war from the moral perspectives of care and fairness. Additionally, they also mobilise the collective self in their call for action and express their moral obligation in providing support to Ukraine.

The analysis of the legitimisation narrative has revealed that ingroup identity is primarily represented through the reference to values. Freedom and peace serve as ideological triggers for restoring a sense of collective equilibrium in the opposition to the aggressor. This is mostly the case with the direct discourse of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's.

- 1) "The world must force Russia to keep the peace."

*Pasaulis privalo priversti Rusiją laikytis taikos.* (Zelenskyy 2022/02/24)

- 2) "However, I emphasise once again - the longer the war continues, the higher the price for preserving freedom will be paid by both Ukraine and the rest of the world."

*Tačiau pabrėžiu dar kartą – kuo ilgiau tėsis karas, tuo didesnę kainą už laisvęs išsaugojimą mokės tiek Ukraina, tiek likęs pasaulis.* (Zelenskyy 2022/05/24)

The representation of the collective identity through values is inevitably linked with victory, as any prototypical narrative of the fight against evil culminates in the triumph of the good, e.g.:

- 3) "Victory will be inevitable. I am confident that there will be victory. We have everything for that. We have motivation, certainty, friends, diplomacy. You all came together for this."

*Pergalė bus neišvengiama. Esu įsitikinęs, kad pergalė bus. Turime tam viską. Turime motyvacijos, tikrumo, draugų, diplomatijos. Jūs visi tam susibūrėte.* (Zelenskyy 2023/02/24)

In his references to 'inevitable victory,' the speaker mobilises the

ingroup for collective action through shared values, creating a sense of a naturalised outcome predetermined by its moral character. President Zelenskyy's identification with the ingroup is expressed through his psychological need for positive self-evaluation, as in (3) with "motivation, certainty, friends, diplomacy". The group perspective is further reinforced by other representatives of the collective West, whose citations highlight their obligations to support Ukraine, e.g.:

4) "We are one of the biggest arms suppliers to Ukraine as it stands now."

*Esame vieni didžiausių ginkluotės tiekėjių Ukrainai, esant dabartinei padėciai.* (Baerbock 2022/03/24)

5) "We will continue to impose unprecedented costs on Russia and **strengthen** allied deterrence, and defense leaders have approved four new battle groups for us in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia."

*Mes ir toliau dėsime Rusijai precedento neturinčias išlaidas ir stiprinsime sajungininkų atgrasymą, o gynybos lyderiai patvirtino keturias naujas mūsų kovines grupes Bulgarijoje, Vengrijoje, Rumunijoje ir Slovakijoje.* (Stoltenberg 2022/03/24) "My message is that the allies must supply more, must supply heavy weapons, equipment, combat systems to Ukraine." *Mano žinutė yra ta, kad sajungininkai turi tiekti daugiau, turi tiekti sunkiosios ginkluotės, įrangos, kovinių sistemų Ukrainai. Ir skubiai.* (Stoltenberg 2023/01/24)

6) "We will continue to support Ukraine to the extent necessary to continue to defend itself and, when the time comes, to take the **strongest** possible position at the negotiating table."

*Mes ir toliau remsimė Ukrainą tiek, kiek reikės, kad ji galėtų toliau gintis ir, atėjus laikui, užimti kuo stipresnę poziciją prie derybų stalo.* (Blinken 2022/11/24)

7) "Ukraine will be forever and every day will only get **stronger**. And this is understood by absolutely everyone in the world - from the UN Security Council to all capitals without exception."

*Ukraina bus amžinai ir kiekviena diena bus tik stipresnė. Ir tai supranta absolūciai visi pasaulyje – nuo JT Saugumo Tarybos iki visų be išimties sostinių.* (Zelenskyy, 2022/08/24)

8) "Ukraine is fighting for European **values**. The European Parliament and the European Union have shown strong solidarity with Ukraine in the humanitarian, military and financial fields. We granted Ukraine the status of a candidate country. Yesterday we launched the "Generators of Hope" campaign. Today, we overwhelmingly and quickly approved the 18 billion euro support package that will allow Ukraine to survive the war and rebuild critical infrastructure."

*Ukraina kovoja už europines vertėbes. Europos Parlamentas ir Europos Sajunga pademonstravo tvirtą solidarumą Ukrainai humanitarinėje, karinėje ir finansinėje srityje. Suteikėme Ukrainai šalies kandidatės statusą. Vakar pradėjome „Vilties generatorių“ kampaniją. Šiandien didele balsų dauguma ir skubiai pritarėme 18 mlrd. eurų paramos paketui, kuris leis Ukrainai išgyventi karą ir atstatyti kritinę infrastruktūrą.* (Metsola 2022/11/24)

The direct discourse examples by Annalena Baerbock (4) and Jens Stoltenberg (5) in war reporting continue to develop the ideological frame of Western unity against the aggressor through their cited reference to military support. These quotes provide readers with a rationalisation of the conflict suggesting that their military support strengthens Ukraine and, in turn, leads to peace. Additionally, political actors are cited to foster a sense of collective effort through psychological alignment with the Ukrainian people. Military defence and

support are discursively represented as moral obligations toward a collectively projected sense of unity (6). The concept of strength plays a crucial ideological role in the war narrative of direct discourse, often rhetorically intertwined with notions of collective unity (7) and unwavering support (8).

### 3.3. Polarisation in the direct discourse of news reporting

The discursive function of the identification category is further complemented by the category of polarisation, which is thematically realised through the concept of Vice. Fig. 3 below visually summarises the polarisation category of direct discourse in the war news narrative.

The theme of Vice, specifically focusing on Harm and Aggression, is predominantly presented by Ukrainian officials, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, reaching a peak coverage of 66%. In contrast, U. S. and NATO representatives incorporate this theme to a much lesser extent, at 10% and 11%, respectively. It is least evident in quotes from EU representatives, where it accounts for only 3% of the total word range. The polarisation strategy constructs an ideological confrontation primarily enacted by the cited actors representing Ukraine and its Western supporters. Within the Vice narrative, much emphasis is given to the harm and aggression caused by the perpetrator, which both victimises Ukraine as a social actor and mobilises a collective response against Russia-as-an-aggressor. The polarisations strategy goes further, intensifying the emotional and moral appeal for justice and retribution. Volodymyr Zelenskyy's vocalisation of Vice-as-harm-and-aggression serves the unifying polarisation function, positioning Us as morally right and Them as morally wrong, thereby provoking a powerful emotional reaction, e.g.:

9) "On the border there are about 200,000 of your soldiers and thousands of combat vehicles, and this move could be the beginning of a major war on the European continent. We know for a fact that we don't need war."

*Prie jos apie 200 tūkstančių jūsų karių tūkstančiai kovos mašinų ir šis žingsnis gali būti didelio karo Europos žemynė pradžia. Mes tikrai žinome, kad mums nereikia karo.* (Zelenskyy 2022/02/24)

10) "We see how various international platforms find the necessary solutions to help stop **Russian terror**, isolate **the terrorist state** as much as possible and find a way out of the **brutal global crises provoked by Russia**. But why is there still no OSCE among these platforms? First of all, why is a terrorist state still a member of your Parliamentary Assembly, even after nine months of its constant crimes?"

*Matome, kaip įvairios tarptautinės platformos randa būtinus sprendimus, kaip padėti sustabdyti Rusijos terorą, kuo labiau izoliuoti teroristinę valstybę*

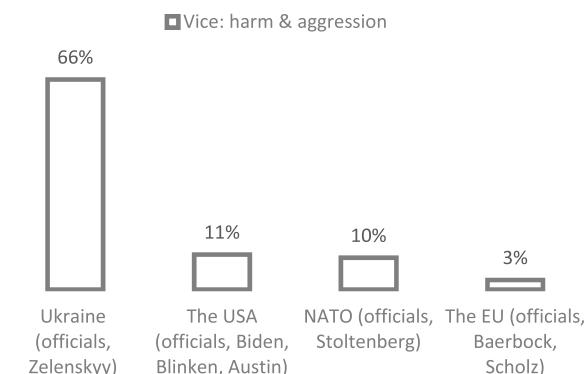


Fig. 3. Polarisation strategy in direct discourse.

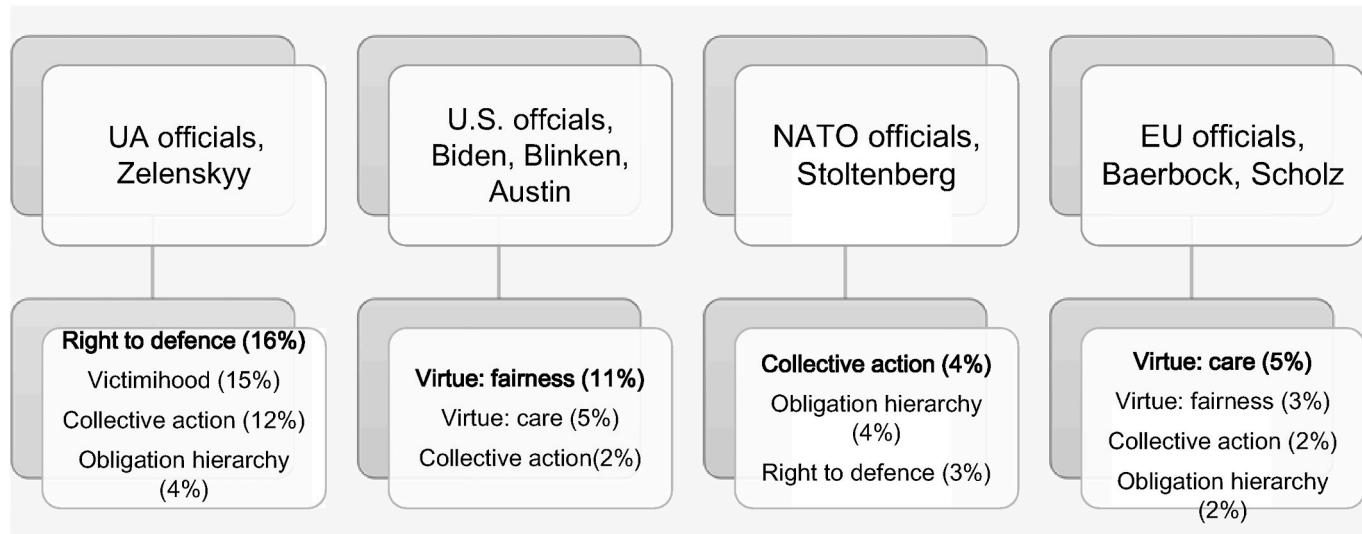


Fig. 4. Legitimisation strategy in direct discourse.

ir ieškoti išeities iš žiaurių pasaulinių krizių, kurias išprovokavo Rusija. Bet kodėl tarp šių platformų vis dar nėra ESBO? Visi pirmi, kodėl teroristinė valstybė tebėra jūsų Parlamentinės Asamblejos narė, net po devynis mėnesius jos nuolat vykdomyi nusikaltimų? (Zelenskyy 2022/11/24)

The Vice-as-harm-and-aggression theme acquires a highly emotional charge in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's direct discourse, which is morally polarising as well. This is achieved by emphasising a stark difference between the magnitude of Russia's aggression and harm not only for Ukraine but the entire world, as in (9). Moreover, this emotionally polarising trigger helps the speaker to raise the theme of moral responsibility (10) on behalf of the international community to stop the brutal aggressor. Negative emotions such as anger and disgust are further activated by his references to crime and terror in (10). This allows the speaker to collectively extend victimisation to the international community and request moral justice. The speaker's stance for peace emphasises moral righteousness, becoming a moral antidote to aggression and brutality. In this sense, the intention for peace is used to normalise the reactive aggression, as implied by the speaker's request for a collective international response.

By contrast, the same theme of Vice-as-harm-and-aggression used by Ukrainian officials with a slightly different polarising function. Even though it draws on the same divide between the aggressor and the victim, it is used to rationalise the war by quantifying the aggressor's losses that are presented as a moral gain and justice in the on-going war. For example:

11) "Ukrainian soldiers repelled five attacks by Russian troops. During the fighting, up to 130 soldiers, 9 tanks, 1 armored personnel carrier, 6 infantry fighting vehicles, 5 self-propelled howitzers and artillery guns, 8 grenade launchers and 1 UR-77 (Soviet self-propelled mine clearance device) were destroyed."

Ukrainos kariai atmuso penkias rusų kariuomenės atakas. Kautynių metu buvo sunaikinta: iki 130 kareivių, 9 tankai, 1 šarvuotis transporteris, 6 pėstininkų kovos mašinos, 5 savaeigės haubicos ir artilerijos pabūklai, 8 granatsvaidžiai ir 1 UR-77 (sovietinė savaeigė minų valymo priemonė). (UA officials, 2022/03/24)

12) "On the twenty-ninth day, the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people to the Russian military invasion continues. Despite heavy losses and demoralized personnel, the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation continues the war against Ukraine. The enemy continues to destroy the infrastructure of peaceful

Ukrainian towns and villages, grossly violating the rules and not complying with the requirements of international humanitarian law."

Dvidešimt devinta dieną tėsiasi didvyriškas Ukrainos žmonių pasipriešinimas Rusijos karinei invazijai. Nepaisant didelių nuostolių ir demoralizuoto personalo, Rusijos Federacijos karinė-politinė vadovybė tėsia karą prieš Ukrainą. Priešas toliau naikina taikių Ukrainos miestų ir kaimų infrastruktūrą, šiurkščiai pažeisdamas taisykles ir nesilaikydamas tarptautinės humanitarinės teisės reikalavimų. (UA officials, 2022/03/24)

The theme of Vice is the second most recurrent among the cited actors representing the U.S. and NATO (see Fig. 3). Similarly to their Ukrainian counterparts, they emphasise the harmful consequences of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Despite this general similarity, the narrative patterns of the Vice theme are different in terms of the cited actors' focus on the shared collective responsibility in the war narrative.

13) "V. Zelensky asked me to call on world leaders to speak out clearly against **President Putin's brutal aggression** and to support the people of Ukraine."

V. Zelenskis prašė manęs paraginti pasaulio lyderius aiškiai pasisakyti prieš žiaurią prezidento Putino agresiją ir palaikyti Ukrainos žmones. (Biden, 2022/02/24)

14) "NATO allies will meet to resolve the consequences of **Russia's aggressive actions**. We stand with the people of Ukraine at this terrible time. NATO will do whatever it takes to protect and defend all allies."

NATO sąjungininkės susitiks spręsti Rusijos agresyvių veiksmų padariniai. Šiuo siaubingu metu esame kartu su Ukrainos žmonėmis. NATO padarys viską, ko reikia, kad apsaugotų ir apgintų visas sąjungininkes. (Stoltenberg, 2022/02/24)

15) "This is a contribution to help them as they continue to experience significant energy-related challenges due to **Russian strikes**."

Tai indėlis siekiant padėti jems, nes jie ir toliau patiria didelius su energija susijusius iššūkius dėl Rusijos smūgių. (US officials, 2022/11/24)

16) “Continued attacks on infrastructure are designed to keep Ukrainian civilians cold and dark. This terrible tactic will not break the resolve of Ukraine and its partners.”

*Besitęsiantys išpuoliai prieš infrastruktūrą yra skirti tam, kad Ukrainos civiliai gyventojai liktu šalti ir tamsūs. Ši siaubinga taktika nepalaus Ukrainos ir jos partnerių ryžto.* (Blinken, 2022/11/24)

The theme of aggression is conveyed through references such as “Putin’s brutal aggression” (13), “Russia’s aggressive actions” (14), “Russia strikes” (15), and “continued attacks on infrastructure” (16). These references are emotionally charged by the use of attributes like “brutal”, “terrible”, “cold and dark”. However, when U.S. and NATO representatives use the vice-as-harm-and-aggression theme, it rationalises the belief that with their contribution extends the ethical limits of the war to encompass Ukraine’s victory as a collective goal. This rationalisation is reinforced by transactional language such as “a contribution to help them” or “Ukraine and its partners”. The emotional side of the Vice-as-harm-and-aggression is balanced by framing the collective response to aggression and the victory against the aggressor as an only viable outcome. The following subsection will provide more detail about the thematic context, in which the analysed direct discourse is embedded.

### 3.4. The broader thematic context of the war news

The analysis of direct quotes reveals journalists’ ideological engagement with the war narrative. Specifically, by embedding the selected quotations, journalists reinforced the themes of collective identity and collective emotion in their war reporting. Additionally, significant observations were made regarding the contextual use of these embedded quotes. The content analysis identified direct quotes as playing a prominent role in war news reporting, ranking third in frequency within the dataset, with 352 cases. The remaining news content centres around four recurring themes: ‘the Other’, ‘military equipment’, ‘quantification’, and ‘attack’. A comparison of their frequency distribution is presented in Fig. 4 below.

As illustrated above, the theme of ‘The Other’ emerges as the most recurrent theme in the dataset with 443 coding references (25%). This is followed by the themes of ‘military equipment’ (366 coding references) and direct quotes (352 coding references), each accounting for 20% of the dataset. The themes of ‘quantification’ (315 coding references) and the theme of ‘attacking’ (304 coding references) complete the distribution at 18% and 17% of the textual coverage, respectively. Each of these themes contributes to reinforcing the war narrative by highlighting different dimensions of the constructed ideological meaning.

The most prominent thematic category of the Other represents an ideological extension of the discourse strategy of polarisation, in which political and state actors are depicted as threats to the collective ‘Self’. In the data sample, the Other is referenced in the two primary ways: as “Russians” and as “Russian soldiers”. Notably, these references appear exclusively in political and military contexts, although the term “Russians” implies the nation. The second most recurrent theme emerges through references to military equipment, while its detailed numerical description constitutes the third most frequent theme. Finally, the last most recurring theme centres on coverage of the enemy’s attacks and their descriptions. Typical examples are provided in Table 4.

The thematic construal of the above themes highlights the controversial aspects of the war news narrative. The themes of ‘the Other’ and ‘attack’ reinforce the discourse strategy of polarisation portraying the enemy as a significant threat to human safety and existence. Meanwhile, the themes of ‘military equipment’ and ‘quantification’ offer a rationalised perspective on the war and its on-going escalation. The detailed description of military equipment and its quantification introduce a competitive element to the portrayal of war, suggesting that possessing greater quantities of military assets ensures strength, resilience and victory. Consequently, the evolving narrative evokes two contradictory

**Table 4**  
Thematic construction of war news reporting.

| Thematic categories | Raw frequency | Examples   |
|---------------------|---------------|--|
| The Other           | 443           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>V. Putin declared a black day for Europe and the world.</li> <li>V. Putinas paskelbė juodą dieną Europai ir pasauliui. (2022/02/24)</li> <li>Tehran is now directly involved by sending its people and supplying weapons that affect the civilian population and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine.</li> <li>Teheranas dabar tiesiogiai dalyvauja siūsdamas savo žmones ir tiekdamas ginklus, darancius poveikį civiliams gyventojams bei civilinei infrastruktūrai Ukrainoje. (2022/10/24)</li> <li>Russians terrorist and deliberately kill civilians.</li> <li>Rusai terorizuoją ir sėmoningai žudę civilius gyventojus. (2023/01/24)</li> <li>The Ukrainian military says it has destroyed several more Russian tanks and military helicopters.</li> <li>Ukrainos kariuomenė praneša sunaikinus daugelis Rusijos tankus ir karinius sraigtasparnius. (2022/02/24)</li> <li>Ukrainian soldiers shot down a Russian drone and Su-34 fighter jet.</li> <li>Ukrainos kariai numušę Rusijos droną ir naikintuvą „Su-34“. (2022/03/24)</li> <li>It is announced that the first of 4 batches of HIMARS systems is already in Ukraine.</li> <li>Skelbiamą, kad pirmoji iš 4 HIMARS sistemos partijų jau yra Ukrainoje. (2022/06/24)</li> <li>According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the country’s army killed 29,350 Russian soldiers, destroyed 1302 tanks, 3194 armored infantry vehicles, 606 artillery systems, 201 salvo fire systems, 93 anti-aircraft defense systems, 205 airplanes, 170 helicopters, 480 drones, 112 winged aircraft missiles, 2213 other machines and fuel tanks, 13 ships, 43 special equipment units.</li> <li>Ukrainos generalinio stabu duomenimis, šalies kariuomenė nukovė 29,350 rusų karių, sunaikino 1302 tankus, 3194 šarvuotasių pėstininkų mašinas, 606 artilerijos sistemas, 201 salvinės ugnies sistemas, 93 prieslėktuvinių gynybos sistemas, 205 lėktuvus, 170 sraigtasparnių, 480 bepilčių orlaivių, 112 sparnuotųjų raketų, 2213 kitų mašinų ir kuro talpyklų, 13 laivų, 43 spec. iėrių vienetus. (2022/05/24)</li> <li>Russia is attacking military infrastructure and has already advanced 5 km deep into the territory of Ukraine from the northern border.</li> <li>Rusija atakuoja karię infrastruktūrą ir nuo šiaurinės sienos jau pasistumėjo 5 km gilyn į Ukrainos teritoriją. (2022/02/24)</li> <li>The threat of missile and air attacks from the territory of Belarus is growing.</li> <li>Auga raketų ir antskrydžių atakų iš Baltarusijos teritorijos grėsmė. (2022/05/24)</li> <li>In the Dnipropetrovsk region, Russia attacked a train station with rockets.</li> <li>Dnipropetrovsko srityje Rusija raketomis atakavo traukininių stotį. (2022/08/24)</li> </ul> |
| Military equipment  | 366           |  |
| Quantification      | 315           |  |
| Attack              | 304           |  |
| Total               | 1780          |  |

emotions simultaneously: fear of the deadly and destructive nature of war, and a rationalised transactional perception of war as a means of securing strength and legitimacy. The consistent use of direct quotations throughout the year reinforces this contradictory narrative by introducing emotional and ideological dimensions to the narrative. The systematic nature of direct quotations, alongside other recurrent themes, is presented in Fig. 5.

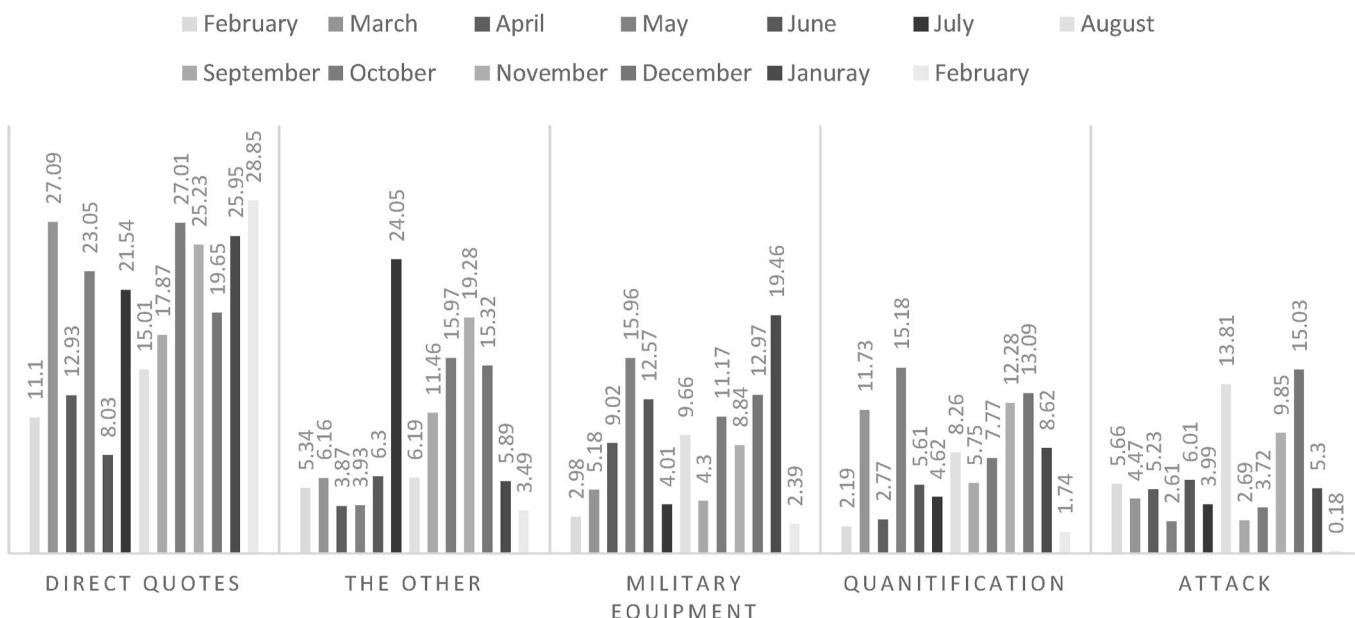


Fig. 5. Thematic representation of war news reporting throughout the year.

As illustrated in Fig. 5, direct discourse plays a vital role in the ideological construction of war news reporting, alongside four additional themes. Specifically, during the calendar year from 2022 February 24, 2022, to February 24, 2023, direct discourse appeared in war reporting at the coverage ranging from 8.03% to 28.85%. The theme of 'the Other' was observed at 3.49%–24.05%, 'military equipment' at 2.39%–19.46%, 'quantification' at 2.19%–15.18%, and 'attack' at 0.18%–15.03%. It is also noteworthy that direct discourse was more extensively covered, as it consisted of complete quotes, usually spanning more than one sentence.

The discursive analysis of direct discourse revealed that the strategy of identification overlaps with the other four themes, as all instances include explicit references to countries, states, or institutions. In the case of polarisation, direct discourse is reinforced by the themes of 'the Other' and 'attack'. At the same time, legitimisation emerges as a core strategy through references to military equipment and quantification, which, similarly to direct discourse, justify reactive aggression by highlighting the scale and significance of militarisation. The subsequent section will summarise the research findings and discuss their implications.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study examines how direct discourse shapes collective emotion in war news reporting. It clarifies how, from 2022 to 2023, the power dynamics of direct discourse in LRT war coverage were predominantly influenced by actors representing Ukraine and its Western allies—namely the EU, NATO and the U.S. The content analysis reveals that these speakers frame war as an ongoing conflict between the two main actors – Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine is depicted both as a victimised people and as a state and an army with a legitimate right to defence and reactive aggression. In contrast, Russia is criminalised and delegitimised as a state, government and army. Moral antagonism is directed primarily toward Russia, which is portrayed through themes of vice, particularly harm and aggression, thus establishing a clear demarcation line between the aggressor and its victim.

The strategy of *identification* establishes a clear ideological boundary between the warring sides, setting a polarising tone that frames reactive aggression as a collective call for justice and fairness. Both *polarisation* and *legitimisation* strategies contribute to a narrative in which reactive aggression is depicted as morally righteous, serving as retribution and

leading to a victorious outcome against evil. This portrayal is primarily built on the emotions of fear, anger and disgust directed and redirected towards the aggressor. The content analysis of direct discourse from Ukrainian officials, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, highlights the perceived threat posed by the aggressor. However, the emotion of fear is counterbalanced by expressions of collective support found in other quoted statements. President Zelenskyy's calls for assistance are merged with social engagement and a sense of reassurance, reinforced by the legitimisation strategy evident in quotes from EU, U.S. and NATO representatives. This framework enables speakers to rationalise the costs of war and justify its anticipated victory.

The findings of this research highlight an ideological function of news reporting that is mainly served by direct discourse. The quotations selected by journalists allow them to add moral and emotional dimensions to the reported war narrative, thereby expressing their ideological stance on the war. The explored discourse strategies – *identification*, *polarisation* and *legitimisation* – demonstrate how the ideological divide between the perpetrator and the victim acquires moral and emotional weight. These findings support the previous research on the moral dimensions of political leadership in confrontational rhetoric and foreign policy (Nye, 2020), when political leaders justify their confrontational policies by positioning themselves as moral authorities defending universal human values in their fight against perceived evil (Shogan, 2007). This study highlights that, unlike political rhetoric, war news reporting shifts towards evaluative content, where ideological meanings are conveyed more indirectly but forcefully through embedded direct quotations. The frequent citation of Ukrainian representatives, particularly Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in LRT war news reporting can be attributed to their use of strongly polarising moral rhetoric. Nonetheless, despite variations in rhetoric, all cited actors emphasise the necessity of moral obligation for achieving victory over the aggressor.

The thematic content of direct discourse is reinforced by the broader context of war news, which systematically highlights four key themes: 'the Other', 'military equipment', 'quantification' and 'attack', as illustrated in Fig. 6.

The representation of direct discourse in war reporting implies several ideological and rhetorical effects. First, by identifying the warring sides explicitly and presenting Russia as an aggressor, the war news discourse establishes a strong moral dichotomy. Such clear moral framing shapes public perception by positioning Ukraine as the victim

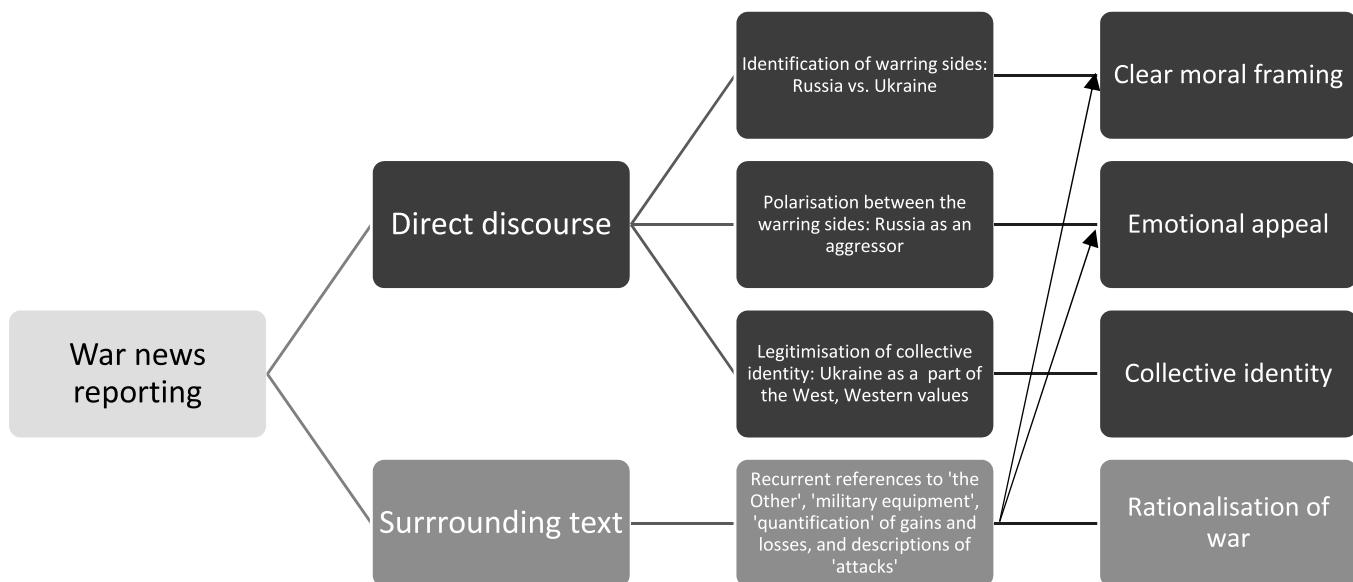


Fig. 6. The discourse structure of war news reporting.

and Russia as the perpetrator of unjustified aggression. The discourse strategy of polarisation reinforces “us vs. them” dynamic, emphasises division and intensifies emotional engagement, by particularly highlighting aggression and victimhood. Within the legitimisation strategy, by linking Ukraine to Western values and portraying it as part of the West, the discourse fosters solidarity and shared ideological alignment. This creates a sense of collective responsibility and justification for political and military support. The surrounding text with its references to “the Other”, “military equipment”, “quantification” of losses and gains, and descriptions of “attacks”, both engages in the collective sentiment and at the same time suggests a more detached analytical framing. This repeated use of technical and statistical language can recontextualise aggression and normalise conflict by presenting war as a calculated and strategic process rather than focusing on its human costs.

In the context of the Baltic States, particularly Lithuania, this form of news reporting can be seen as a discourse of intersubjective resilience, framing exposure to adversity caused by Russia as a form of psychological adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000; Rutter, 2006). Past traumas of occupation and oppression are revisited and reinforced through war news reporting, strengthening the ‘we-reality’ (Bakó & Zana, 2023) in response to aggression and fostering a shared sense of resilience and self-esteem. As Bakó & Zana (2023: 316) rightly observe, in cases of large-scale societal trauma, “the intersubjective community, the we, becomes more dominant” and creates a sense of security. From an engagement perspective, this study demonstrates how direct discourse allows journalists to ideologically affirm their stance on war and frame the concept of collective identity within an emotional spectrum where higher virtues prevail. Nonetheless, from a narrative perspective, this study highlights how the war news reporting shaped by direct discourse may inadvertently justify reactive aggression in the name of higher virtues, suppress the traumatic realities of war and fragment individual perceptions of aggression. Further research could explore how direct discourse across various media platforms shapes ideological frameworks and recontextualises war-related political realities. Finally, it would be worthwhile to examine whether such divisions exist not only within individual nations, but also national and international media outlets.

#### Disclosure statement

I declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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