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DOI
10.1177/1750635217702539

Publication date
2017

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Media, War and Conflict

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Makhortykh, M., & Sydorova, M. (2017). Social media and visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. *Media, War and Conflict*, *10*(3), 359-381. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217702539

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Article

Media, War & Conflict
2017, Vol. 10(3) 359–381
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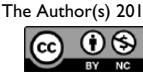

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Social media and visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of social media for visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Using a large set of visual data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte, the authors employ content analysis to examine how the conflict was represented and interpreted in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities during the peak of violence in summer 2014. The findings point to the existence of profound differences in framing the conflict among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities. The former tended to interpret the conflict as a limited military action against local insurgents, whereas the latter presented it as an all-out war against the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine. The article suggests that framing the conflict through social media facilitated the propagation of mutually exclusive views on the conflict and led to the formation of divergent expectations in Ukraine and Russia concerning the outcome of the war in Donbas.

Keywords

conflict, Russia, social media, Ukraine, visual framing, Vkontakte, war

An unshaven man with a machine gun waves a toy monkey from the downed Malaysia Airlines plane in front of photographers. A column of armoured personnel carriers flying Ukrainian flags speeds through a dusty country road. An elderly woman cries near a

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ruined house somewhere on the outskirts of Donetsk. A group of armed insurgents with an Eastern Orthodox icon and a Russian imperial flag sit around a military truck. A small company of smiling Ukrainian soldiers with new automatic rifles stand in a sunflower field under the blue sky. These are just some among thousands of images that flooded Ukrainian and Russian social networking sites in summer 2014 and influenced how internet users from both countries perceived and interpreted the conflict between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine.

In our article, we investigate the role of social media in visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, also known as the war in Donbas. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) argue that, in the current age of mediatized war, the media become an integral part of warfare, affecting the ways in which the conflict is perceived by the general public, what decisions are made by policy-makers, and how the history of the conflict is written by historians. While a number of studies examine the use of media for framing recent conflicts, including the 2003 Iraq war (Griffin, 2004), the 2008 war in Georgia (Basilaia et al., 2013), and the ongoing war in Syria (Greenwood and Jenkins, 2015), the majority of existing analyses tend to focus on mainstream media, in particular news agencies. Consequently, many of the existing studies do not account for the increasing dissemination of digital technology and the growing popularity of social media, which according to Kuntsman (2010: 2) challenge the monopoly of news media by fundamentally transforming 'modes of witnessing, feeling and remembering violent and traumatic events'. The recognition of this transformation is particularly urgent in the case of post-socialist countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, where digital media 'form a pivotal discursive territory' (Rutten and Zvereva, 2013: 2) for framing past and present conflict alike, and influence how these conflicts are represented and interpreted by the general public.

In order to contribute to the conflict framing research in the post-socialist context, we examined the emergence of visual frames related to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in social media, using data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte. In order to explore differences in framing the conflict among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities, we examined visual images published in two public Vkontakte groups – Anti-terrorist operation (*Antiterroristicheskaja operacija*) and Reports from the Novorossiyan Militia (*Svodki ot opolchenija Novorossii*) – in the second half of summer 2014. Using content analysis, we tried to answer the following questions: How did the dynamics of frame production change in the course of the conflict? What differences in framing the conflict can be detected between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities? How did internet users interact with different categories of visual content and which categories attracted the most attention? And, finally, what was the impact of the use of social media for visual framing of the events in Eastern Ukraine on the development of the conflict?

Background to the conflict

The origins of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be traced back to a series of pro-Russian rallies, which took place in March 2014 in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. These rallies were directed against the new pro-Western Ukrainian government, which was installed after the overthrow of President Yanukovich in February 2014, following a

countrywide protest campaign known as the Euromaidan protests. The crisis of legitimacy of the post-Yanukovich government, together with the fear of disruption of cultural and economic relations with Russia, which were historically strong in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, served as a starting point for the wave of anti-government protests.[1] While initially insignificant, these rallies intensified during the Crimean crisis, reaching their peak after the referendum that resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia on 18 March.

The starting point of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be related to 6 April, when groups of pro-Russian activists stormed government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and declared the formation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively). The next day, the Ukrainian government led by Oleksand Turchinov announced that 'anti-terrorist measures' (Turchinov objavil …, 2014) would be taken against armed insurgents in Eastern Ukraine. Despite the measures, however, the pro-Russian militant groups, which included both local citizens and Russian volunteers, continued to expand their control over the Donbas region by capturing administrative buildings and police stations in Kramatorsk, Horlivka and Mariupol. The city of Sloviansk, which was captured by the pro-Russian insurgents led by Igor Girkin[2] on 12 April, became the centre of rebellion as well as a place of major confrontation between the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces in the following weeks.

The conflict escalated in May 2014 after a referendum was held in DNR and LNR calling for two independent People's Republics, followed by the presidential elections in Ukraine, which were won by Petro Poroshenko. Following Poroshenko's promise to end the anti-terrorist operation in 'a matter of hours' (Macdonald and Behrakis, 2014), the Ukrainian army started advancing to the insurgent-controlled territory at the end of May. A number of skirmishes took place both in and around Donetsk and Luhansk, resulting in dozens of deaths on both the government and insurgent sides. Despite active resistance from the People's Republics, which presumably received military support from Russia (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5), pro-government forces managed to re-capture a number of cities in Eastern Ukraine, including Krasnyi Liman and Mariupol.

After a massive battle near Yampil on 19 June, where both sides used armoured vehicles and tanks, the Ukrainian government declared a week-long ceasefire in an attempt to implement Poroshenko's peace plan. The compromise, however, was not reached, and the fighting continued with a new government offensive that started on 1 July. Besides capturing a number of villages in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, on 5 July the Ukrainian army seized Sloviansk, which for three months remained a major insurgent stronghold. The army's offensive continued in the following days, resulting in the capture of Kramatorsk and Artemivsk and the retreat of insurgent troops under the command of Girkin to the Donetsk city.

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July brought a brief break to the fighting, as both the Ukrainian government and insurgents blamed each other for the destruction of the passenger plane. In a matter of days, however, the confrontation resumed as government forces continued to capture small towns across Donbas in order to surround and isolate insurgent forces; at the same time, the Ukrainian troops undertook another attempt to secure a border between Ukraine and Russia. As the Ukrainian army moved to the suburbs of Donetks and Luhansk, both cities came under artillery fire,

resulting in a number of losses among the civilian population and significant damage to the local infrastructure. Similarly, the city of Horlivka, one of the major industrial hubs in the Donbas region, also came under heavy shelling, resulting in dozens of deaths and the flight of the civilian population.

Despite the quick advancement at the end of July, government forces were not able to secure the Ukrainian state border. Instead, at the beginning of August, a number of army units were surrounded in the south of Luhansk region and forced to either surrender or move to Russia; according to several reports, insurgent units were supported by the Russian artillery, which was shelling Ukrainian forces across the Ukrainian–Russian border (Demirjian and Birnbaum, 2014). Similarly, attempts to surround Donetsk and isolate the territory of DNR failed after a series of meeting engagements around Shakhtarsk and Miusinsk at the end of July and the beginning of August.

Yet, the decisive breakthrough in the course of the conflict occurred in the second half of August when, during the battle of Ilovaisk, pro-Russian insurgents started their counteroffensive, which resulted in the encirclement of a significant number of Ukrainian troops, including several volunteer battalions. According to the Ukrainian side, the insurgent counteroffensive was supported by regular Russian army troops, including attack helicopters and tanks (MoDoU, 2015); some reports (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5) suggest that up to 4,000 Russian soldiers participated in the insurgent counteroffensive. The subsequent advancement of insurgent forces resulted in the expansion of the territories of the People's Republics and the signing of the first Minsk agreements on 5 September, which were intended to ensure a ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and insurgents.[3]

Literature review

In recent decades, the concept of framing has become extensively used in social sciences and the humanities,[4] and is often viewed as 'the most utilized mass communication theory of the present era' (Bryant and Miron, 2004: 695). According to Entman (1993: 52), framing is a process of selection of some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'. Frames themselves, as Reese (2001: 5) argues, can be understood as organizing principles that are both socially shared and persistent over time; by revealing those principles through symbolic forms of expressions, individuals and societies can meaningfully structure the social world around them. Much research on framing focuses on political communication – i.e. how public actors use media to communicate certain views on events and issues; however, as D'Angelo and Kuypers (2009: 1) note, framing research expands far beyond 'quintessentially political sites and topics' and encompasses a variety of areas, including religion, sport and healthcare.

Because frames influence not only the ways in which information is presented, but also how it is comprehended, Scheufele (1999) points to the importance of differentiating between two types of frames: media or news frames (D'Angelo, 2002) and individual frames. Media frames can be defined as central ideas or story lines that provide meaning to certain sequences of events (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 143). In contrast, individual frames are clusters of ideas that guide processing of information on the individual level; according to Scheufele (1999: 107), these clusters can take the form of long-term

political views or short-term issue-related frames of reference. D'Angelo (2002: 873) notes that in the process of frame building both types of frames interact with each other as the prior knowledge that individuals have is essential for the processing of information conveyed in media frames; however, the differentiation between different types of frames is helpful for operationalization of the concept of framing in the context of specific case studies.

Because in our study we were particularly interested in the ways in which different aspects of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine emerged as more salient in social media, we decided to focus on conflict-related media frames, which define both the information presented to the audience and the method of presentation (Iyengar, 1991). The role of media frames is important in any social context because their selection affects the way in which an audience perceives a particular issue. However, at a time of conflict, frames become particularly significant because they determine how the cause of strife is understood and what is thought to be the appropriate response (Hammond, 2007: 18). Because of its potency, however, the use of frames can have a profound impact on the course of conflict: in some cases, as Bratic (2008) argues, it can contribute to the peaceful transformation of strife by promoting reconciliation and diminishing hostilities, whereas in others, as Hamelink (2008) points out, a particular selection of frames can motivate people to engage in more violence and impede de-escalating behaviour.

The development of communication technologies over the last two decades has brought profound changes in the ways conflict-related frames emerge by allowing individuals and societies alike to 'connect to war in a manner that was not possible before' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 1). The increased connectivity of today's media ecology facilitates the dissemination of images and stories related to war and conflict across the globe; however, such an unprecedented visibility of modern conflicts has an ambivalent impact on their representation. The increased amount of data – both visual and textual – from the conflict areas as well as a wider selection of information sources, which vary from mainstream to citizen media, has expedited the framing of today's 'mediatized conflicts' (Cottle, 2006). However, the very same factors also make framing of contemporary conflicts more chaotic and less predictable, as it becomes increasingly influenced by 'prosumption and transmediation practices among hybrid producers' (Cheong and Lundry, 2012: 502) which can offer alternative interpretations and/or challenge official narratives of conflicts.

These profound changes in representation of modern conflicts spawned a significant amount of studies[5] dedicated to the investigation of how 'selected visions of war are produced, circulated and viewed within specific historical, cultural and political circumstances' (Parry, 2010: 1186). However, a number of scholars (Brantner et al., 2011; Coleman, 2010; Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes, 2012) point out that up to now the majority of existing works have paid limited attention to the role of visual images in framing conflicts. While the situation is currently changing and an increasing number of studies are appearing on the use of visual images for framing wars and conflicts (Griffin, 2004; Neumann and Fahmy, 2012; Schwalbe et al., 2008), the analysis of verbal accounts still remains a prevalent trend in framing studies.

Despite the prevalence of analyses of verbal accounts of conflicts, the use of visual images has significant potential for the framing effort. Messaris and Abraham (2001:

220) argue that the special qualities of visuals (i.e. indexicality, iconicity and syntactic implicitness) make the use of images particularly effective for 'framing and articulating ideological messages'; a similar point is made by Hansen (2011), who notes that immediacy, circulability and ambiguity of visual images turns them into powerful tools for social construction of security issues. These arguments are supported by Schwalbe and Dougherty (2015: 142), who in their study on the use of images for framing the 2006 Israel–Lebannon war point out that not only are visuals processed quicker than texts, but they also produce an immediate emotional response. Similarly, Parry (2010: 1189) in her study of visual framing of the 2003 Iraq war argues that visual frames have a higher degree of memorability, which makes their impact higher as compared with verbal ones.

The majority of works dedicated to visual framing of conflicts (Fahmy and Kim, 2008; Neumann and Fahmy, 2012; Parry, 2010) rely upon data from news media, such as newspapers and information agencies. While images produced by professional journalists for mainstream media remain a major source of frames, the increasing role of social media should also be recognized. As Ritzer et al. (2012) argue, the rise of social media has lead to the expansion of prosumption practices by creating an environment in which internet users can simultaneously produce and consume digital content. This prosumer turn also affects conflict framing: for instance, in their study of the 2003 Iraq war, Schwalbe et al. (2008) demonstrate that digital technology opens new venues for visual framing of conflicts by allowing quick reproduction and dissemination of images across media platforms. Similarly, in their study of framing of the Sri Lankan civil war, Neumann and Fahmy (2012) note that social media reinforce the impact of visual images by facilitating and accelerating their distribution. Finally, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) in their study of 2011 civic unrest in Egypt found that social media were distinguished from other media platforms by their interactivity and participatory potential that turned them into a significant means for framing civil strife.

The role of social media in conflict framing is particularly significant in post-socialist countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, where the local digital landscape is not only characterized by significant politicization, but is also regularly used to articulate past and present conflicts (Rutten and Zvereva, 2013). A number of studies examine the use of social media for framing public unrest and military conflict in the region, including the 2007 Moldova revolution (Lysenko and Desouza, 2012), the 2008 war in Georgia (Spörer-Wagner, 2013), the 2011–2013 protests in Russia (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013) and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine (Onuch, 2015). Yet, up to now, only a few works examine the use of social media for framing the post-Euromaidan Ukraine crisis, in particular the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.[6] By investigating how the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was framed by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian social media users, this article strives to achieve better understanding of the ways digital visuals are used for framing contemporary conflicts and to assess the impact of social media on the development of the Ukraine crisis.

Methodology

To conduct our study we used data from Vkontake, which is one of the most popular social networking sites in post-socialist countries. According to Alexa.com data (2016),

Vkontakte is the third most popular website both in Ukraine and in Russia. Furthermore, the audience of Vkontake in these two countries is significantly larger than audiences of other social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, or LiveJournal. According to Yandex data (2014), 27 million users from Ukraine were registered on Vkontakte in 2014, which is twice as large as the number of Ukrainian users registered on the second most popular social networking site in Ukraine, Odnoklasniki. Similarly, in 2014, the Vkontakte audience in Russia reached 52.7 million users, whereas the Odnoklasniki audience was only 42.6 million (Mail.ru, 2014).

In order to collect visual data related to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, we used two public VKontakte groups – Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and Reports from the Novorossiyan Militia (RftNM). The first group was founded on 6 April 2014, and at the time of data collection it included more than 118,000 members and expressed support for the Ukrainian government. The second group was founded on 26 May 2014 and at the time of data collection it included almost 440,000 members and supported the pro-Russian insurgents. Our choice of groups was related to several factors, including their similar thematic (both groups positioned themselves as sources of the latest updates on the conflict) and administrative profiles (both groups were curated by small groups of administrators who were responsible for publishing materials, including image posts), the large number of subscribers (>100,000), the large amount of visual materials published and the ability of users to leave comments on published visuals.

On 1 June 2015, we manually collected all visual images published in the two groups between 17 July (the downing of Flight 17) and 5 September (the signing of the first Minsk agreements). The resulting sample consisted of 1,518 images, out of which 295 were taken from the ATO group and 1,223 originated from the RftNM group. Following earlier works (Griffin, 2004; Griffin and Lee, 1995; Parry, 2010; Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015) that rely upon content analysis of conflict-related images, we coded all images from our sample using a selection of metrics, which are described below.

We started by classifying images based on their content features. In our selection of categories, we relied on previous works, in particular the study by Griffin and Lee (1995) on visual representation of the Gulf war. For our study we identified the following thematic categories of images: (1) *action*: images showing combat action (e.g. exchange of fire between infantry units); (2) *animals*: images showing animals (e.g. kittens); (3) *civilians*: images showing civilian population (or individuals attributed as such); (4) *combatants*: images showing combatants (or individuals attributed as such); (5) *dead*: images showing fatalities (e.g. dead human bodies); (6) *documents*: images showing government decrees or military orders; (7) *enemies*: images showing living opponents (or individuals attributed as such); (8) *equipment*: images showing small-scale military equipment (e.g. firearms or ammo); (9) *landscape*: images showing surrounding landscape (e.g. Eastern Ukrainian spoil piles); (10) *maps*: images showing maps or military plans; (11) *military machines*: images showing large-scale military equipment (e.g. tanks or helicopters); (12) *personalities*: images showing military or political leaders involved in the conflict (e.g. Girkin or Poroshenko); (13) *ruins*: images showing traces of destruction inflicted in the course of the conflict (e.g. burned houses); (14) *symbols*: images showing items with symbolic meaning (e.g. Ukrainian flags or Orthodox icons); and (15) *trophies*: images showing military equipment captured from the opposing camp (or attributed as such).

Following a number of works on conflict framing (Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015; Schwalbe et al., 2008) that emphasize the importance of content features related to human actors (e.g. gender and age), we used separate classification metrics for classifying images that showed people, including both dead and living ones. First, we classified the gender of individuals, using the following categories: (1) *male*: images showing males; (2) *female*: images showing females; (3) *mixed*: images showing a combination of females and males as well as images where it was not possible to identify gender (e.g. in the case of burnt corpses). Then we classified the age of individuals, using the following categories: (1) *child*: images showing children and teenagers (or individuals attributed as such); (2) *adult*: images showing adults (or individuals attributed as such); (3) *mixed*: images showing a combination of people of different ages as well as images where it was not possible to reliably identify age. Finally, we classified images according to the number of individuals, using the following categories: (1) *1*: images that showed a single individual; (2) *2–5*: images showing between two and five individuals; (3) *6–9*: images showing between six and nine individuals; and (4) *10+*: images showing 10 or more individuals.

All the above-mentioned classifications were produced by two independent coders, each of whom examined all images from the collection. In those cases when an image could be attributed to several different categories, the choice was made according to the image's focus (e.g. when a kitten was present in the forefront with a few insurgents in the back, the image was classified as the one from the animal category). Krippendorff's alpha was counted to ensure inter-coder reliability; the resulting rates were 0.82 (content), 0.96 (gender), 0.95 (age) and 0.93 (number of individuals). In the case of discrepancies, two original coders discussed and consensus-coded them; this procedure was used for all classifications in this article.

After classifying images based on their content features, we used descriptive statistics for examining how Vkontakte users received images from different categories. Based on existing scholarship on users' reactions on social networking sites,[7] we used the number of likes and comments as an indicator of users' interest. Similar to Facebook, the use of the Like button in Vkontakte indicates that a user added a certain object (e.g. image or comment) to the list of his or her preferred materials, which would be recommended to his or her friends. Unlike comments (i.e. users' reactions which usually take the form of verbal texts, but also can be visual texts), which do not appear in the activity feed of users' friends, likes allow for not only expressing interest towards certain materials, but also automatically sharing them with friends. Thus, we counted the number of likes and comments that each individual image received, and then calculated five-number summaries in order to examine what kind of reactions were provoked by different categories of images.

Findings

Dynamics of frame production

We started our investigation of visual framing of the war in Donbas by examining the dynamics of frame production in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communities in

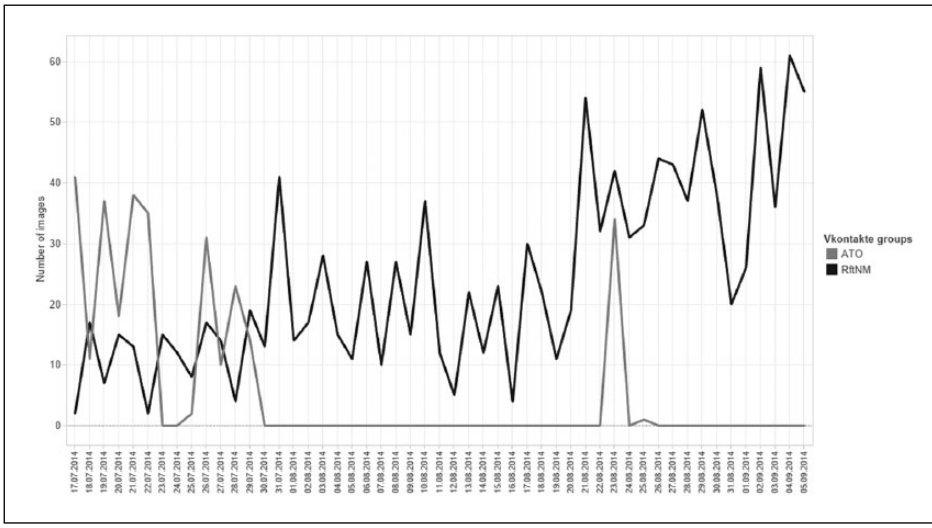

Figure 1. Dynamics of frame production in the ATO and RftNM groups.

Vkontakte. Based on Figure 1, which shows the number of images published on a day-to-day basis, we found significant differences in the way the conflict was approached in the ATO and RftNM groups. Unlike the RftNM group, which sustained consistent activity during the whole period of observation, the ATO group was mostly active in the second half of July and in the second half of August. Furthermore, except for a few days in August, when members of both groups were actively publishing conflict-related images, the low activity in one group was contrasted by the high activity in another one. This pattern is particularly illustrative in the period between 17 July and 28 July, when local peaks of activity in the ATO group were contrasted by activity drops in the RftNM group and vice versa.

While these distinctions can be attributed to a number of reasons, including different policies of group administrations or specific patterns of user activity, we suggest that dynamics of frame production in the ATO and RftNM groups was related to the course of the conflict. According to our observations, the rate of frame production increased at the time of gains for a particular side and decreased at the time of losses. In the ATO group, the largest activity was observed in the second half of July, which was the period of significant gains for the Ukrainian army that preceded the encirclement of Ukrainian troops in the south of the Luhansk region and a series of defeats in August. Similarly, in the RftNM group, the rise of activity was observed at the end of July and the beginning of August, which corresponds to several successful meeting engagements around Shakhtarsk and the above-mentioned encirclement of the large group of Ukrainian troops, and after 20 August, which corresponds to the beginning of the insurgents' counteroffensive near Ilovaisk, which ended with the first Minsk agreements.

These observations are further supported by the examination of activity peaks, which coincide with important milestones in the course of the conflict, in particular significant

territorial gains and heavy losses inflicted on the opposite side. The largest peak of activity of the RftNM group (21 August) corresponds to the turning point in the conflict, when successful defensive actions on the part of pro-Russian insurgents allowed them to stop the advancement of the Ukrainian army in Ilovaisk and prevent the encirclement of Donetsk. Similarly, other peaks in the RftNM group correspond to the insurgents' victories in Shakhtarsk (31 July), Artemivka, Pavlogradske and the Luhansk airport (31 August), and Lutuhyne, Peremozhne and Alexandrivka (2 September).

The same pattern is observed in the ATO group, where local peaks of activity correspond to successful operations on the part of the Ukrainian army, such as the seizure of Donetsk airport and the successful breach of the encirclement of Luhansk airport (19 July), the capture of Georgiyivka, Dzerzhynsk and Soledar (22 July), and the destruction of insurgent groups in Lisichansk as well as the advancement to the outskirts of Horlivka (26 July). The only exception is represented by the August peak, which was related not to military gains, but to the appearance of messages about the active involvement of the Russian army in the conflict and the presence of regular Russian units near Ilovaisk.

Together, these observations suggest that the dynamics of frame production in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communities changed significantly during the conflict; furthermore, these changes seem to be influenced by the course of the conflict itself. In both the ATO and RftNM groups, the increase in framing activity corresponded to periods of military gains with activity peaks often coinciding with the end of successful military operations. Such a pattern can be explained both by practical aspects of military actions (i.e. more possibilities for producing visual materials for the winning side, which can either bring professional journalists to the captured area or provide combatants with a respite allowing them to produce and/or upload already produced visuals) and ideological aspects of conflict framing (i.e. the incentive for each side to present the conflict in a brighter light, which entails greater emphasis on victories as opposed to defeats). Furthermore, it can be connected to the coverage of the conflict in mainstream media, which in the case of Ukraine was mostly focused on successful advancement of Ukrainian troops, thus being particularly active at the time of the Ukrainian army's gains, whereas Russian media with its emphasis on the suffering endured by civilians and criticism of Ukraine's actions was more consistent in its coverage of the conflict. Finally, the importance of the group's administrators should be also recognized: unlike the ATO group, which positioned itself exclusively as the source of information updates, the RftNM group occasionally called for public mobilization and also promoted a few fund-raising campaigns for humanitarian aid for the Donbas population.

Frequency of content features

After exploring the dynamics of frame production, we examined the content features of images used in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communities. Table 1 points to a number of similarities in framing the conflict by both sides. However, these similarities mainly concerned the least frequent thematic categories of images, which were equally rarely employed in the ATO and RftNM groups. Examples of such infrequent categories included the ones related to animals (e.g. pets adopted by combatants) and landscape (e.g. images of Donbas steppes and spoil piles). Similarly, both sides employed relatively few images of combat action (e.g. gun fights or artillery duels) and enemies (e.g.

Table 1. Frequency of thematic content features in the ATO and RftNM groups.

	ATO group	RftNM group
Action	9 (3)	42 (3)
Animals	5 (2)	4 (1)
Civilians	3 (1)	128 (10)
Combatants	94 (32)	218 (18)
Dead	19 (6)	71 (6)
Documents	19 (6)	67 (5)
Enemies	11 (4)	36 (3)
Equipment	12 (4)	98 (8)
Landscape	7 (2)	11 (1)
Maps	10 (4)	23 (2)
Military machines	46 (16)	16 (1)
Personalities	5 (2)	21 (2)
Ruins	17 (6)	374 (31)
Symbols	13 (4)	16 (1)
Trophies	25 (8)	98 (8)

*In Tables 1 and 2 the number outside the brackets refers to the number of images, whereas the number inside the brackets refers to the percentage of images from the respective group that this category encompasses.

prisoners of war); in both cases, the sparsity of such images can be explained not only by a conscious choice, but also by the difficulty of acquiring such types of images.

Some similarities in thematic selection of images that we observed between the two groups also contrasted with recognized patterns of framing conflicts in mainstream media. Unlike earlier studies, which examined the visual framing of the Iraq wars of 1991 (Griffin and Lee, 1995) and 2003 (Griffin, 2004) and of the Israel–Lebanon conflict (Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015), we found only a few images related to significant personalities (e.g. prominent military figures, such as Girkin, or political leaders, such as Poroshenko); instead, the majority of individuals present on images were rank-and-file combatants or ordinary civilians. At the same time, both Vkontakte groups employed images of dead combatants and civilians (often very graphic ones) more frequently than mainstream media, which can be explained by a lower risk of reputational damage and thus lesser incentive for censorship.

Despite these similarities, our findings also pointed to the presence of profound differences in how the conflict was framed by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian internet users. Two of the most common categories of images in the ATO group were the ones that dealt with combatants (i.e. soldiers of the Ukrainian army and paramilitary units) and military machines (e.g. helicopters and tanks). Similar to the way recent conflicts were portrayed in Western mainstream media (Griffin, 2004; Schwalbe, 2013; Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015), the ATO group represented the war in Donbas through images of shining military vehicles and photogenic young soldiers. This patriotic perspective on the conflict was amplified by a number of images with recognizable symbols (e.g. blue and yellow flags, and insignias with tridents), which occurred more frequently than in the case of the RftNM group.

Table 2. Gender, age, and number content features.

	ATO group	RftNM group
Gender		
Female	4 (3)	45 (8)
Male	149 (94)	431 (77)
Mixed	5 (3)	86 (15)
Age		
Child	7 (5)	19 (3)
Adult	149 (94)	517 (92)
Mixed	2 (1)	26 (5)
Number		
1	57 (36)	212 (38)
2–5	69 (44)	220 (39)
6–9	13 (8)	44 (8)
10+	19 (12)	86 (15)

While in some cases the underrepresentation of the above mentioned categories of images in the RftNM group can be attributed to objective factors (for instance, the lack of images of military machines can be related to the limited use of military machinery by insurgents, who instead produced images with military equipment, such as guns, camouflage and personal armour), we argue that it also points to a different way of framing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Unlike the ATO group, which effectively concealed more gruesome aspects of the conflict, the most common category of visual images in the RftNM group was the one that dealt with traces of destruction (e.g. burnt houses, wrecked cars and destroyed military vehicles). This less glorious portrayal of the conflict was amplified by the large number of images of civilians (often crying and suffering). The frequent use of such images can be viewed as a combination of two common strategies of (in)security depiction, namely familiarization and suffering (Hansen, 2011: 59); it is also worth noting that images of civilians were almost absent from the ATO group, which instead focused on the images of combatants and mostly ignored the presence of the civilian population in the conflict zone.

Further distinctions between framing of the conflict by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communities can be also traced in the way human actors were represented in both groups. As shown in Table 2, both sides framed the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as a mostly male and adult affair, which is similar to the mainstream media portrayal of recent conflicts, such as the 2003 Iraq war (Schwalbe, 2013). Yet, unlike the pro-Ukrainian group, where almost all images portrayed males, the pro-Russian group accommodated for more nuanced framing of the conflict and involved more images of women as well as images with both male and female individuals (mostly civilian ones). Such a choice of images in the RftNM group not only accentuated non-military aspects of the conflict (e.g. the suffering of civilians and the humanitarian consequences of the conflict), but also evoked more emotional reactions from users that allowed for more effective mobilization.

While the distribution of images by age and the number of persons was similar in both groups, we identified a few distinctions between two online communities. While both groups mostly portrayed adult men, the majority of images from the ATO group showed relatively young (20–30-year-old) males, whereas the age composition in the RftNM group was more complex and gravitated towards 40–50 years, including a number of elderly people in their 60s and 70s. Similarly, while the most common number of people showed on images was either one or between two and five, in the ATO group such images usually showed combatants, who posed as lone fighters or brothers in arms, thus amplifying the patriotic interpretation of the conflict. In contrast, the majority of images of single individuals from the RftNM group propagated feelings of isolation and suffering by showing civilians (usually lone women or elderly men amidst ruins), whereas combatants usually posed in large groups of 10+ people that embodied the all-together fight for the survival of the Eastern Ukrainian population.

These observations point to the presence of profound differences in framing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian internet users. The former tended to use visual images for propagating the patriotic view on the events in Eastern Ukraine and emphasizing 'the good war' interpretation of the conflict. For these purposes, images of combatants, military machines and captured trophies were mostly used while, in contrast, images that showed traces of destruction or civilians were underrepresented. The opposite situation was observed in the pro-Russian community, which accentuated images of destruction and suffering civilians; such a selection of visual images led to the representation of the conflict as an humanitarian crisis, which was caused by the actions of the Ukrainian government.

Reception of content features

In the final part of our study we investigated how images with different content features were received by Vkontakte users, using likes and comments as indicators of interest towards particular categories of images. As Tables 3–6 demonstrate, the number of likes and comments varied significantly not only among different categories of images, but also among images that belonged to the same category. Because a separate study would be necessary for the detailed investigation of factors that influenced such a significant difference in reception of individual images, we decided to focus on general differences between various categories of images and explore how pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users interacted with distinct categories of thematic as well as gender/age/number content features.

Table 3 indicates that a number of thematic categories of images that were underrepresented in our sample were able to attract significant attention both from pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users. One of these thematic categories was the one related to animals; images from this category usually showed kittens and puppies, often sitting on the knees of combatants or civilians. The popularity of such images can be attributed to general fascination for images of cute animals that characterizes contemporary internet culture (Kotenko, 2013). Consequently, as Khosla et al. (2014) point out in their study of reception of images on social media, the mere presence of an animal in a particular image often has a positive impact on the amount of attention that this image attracts.

Table 3. Reception of thematic categories in the ATO and RftNM groups (likes).

	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum
Action	9 (6)	16 (67)	82 (185)	111 (467)	235 (2251)
Animals	34 (281)	88 (714)	367 (1106)	2511 (1106)	2580 (1529)
Civilians	26 (5)	92 (40)	157 (101)	124 (370)	193 (5131)
Combatants	6 (19)	40 (230)	111 (406)	408 (648)	5407 (8367)
Dead	0 (8)	8 (33)	38 (49)	92 (219)	3380 (3814)
Documents	0 (15)	6 (37)	40 (69)	262 (573)	1505 (6497)
Enemies	7 (27)	82 (93)	324 (265)	355 (675)	812 (2058)
Equipment	2 (14)	20 (39)	44 (116)	210 (307)	980 (2612)
Landscape	10 (7)	12 (27)	14 (42)	28 (107)	326 (217)
Maps	2 (65)	36 (982)	146 (1262)	236 (3059)	885 (2271)
Military machines	2 (58)	23 (111)	54 (406)	246 (506)	4113 (1418)
Personalities	224 (375)	371 (508)	393 (592)	399 (2024)	633 (7820)
Ruins	1 (9)	4 (28)	4 (105)	6 (224)	77 (3726)
Symbols	15 (66)	24 (144)	44 (326)	237 (530)	1356 (3471)
Trophies	3 (51)	10 (151)	17 (194)	53 (339)	884 (4780)

[a]Here, and in the following tables, the number outside the brackets refers to the ATO group, whereas the number inside the brackets is related to the RftNM group.

Similarly, images of significant personalities, such as Poroshenko, Semenchenko and Girkin, were frequently liked by both sides, even though the number of such images was insignificant. The popularity of the personalities category among Vkontakte users can be attributed to the frequent use of images of military and political leaders by mainstream media, which is one of the common patterns for framing military conflicts (Griffin and Lee, 1995; Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015); consequently, internet users recognized this pattern and reacted to it positively by liking images of this sort. The last category of images, which was equally popular among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users, was the one that showed maps of the conflict. Unlike the animals category, the popularity of which can be attributed to affective responses elicited by the cuteness of this sort of images, we suggest that the popularity of maps can be explained by their interpretative potential, which was particularly valuable in the context of chaos and misinformation that characterized the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in summer 2014.

We also identified several thematic categories that were popular in one group, but attracted lesser attention in the other one. For instance, in the ATO group, images of enemies, mostly, prisoners of war, attracted significantly greater attention than in the RftNM group. Such a distinction can be interpreted as another piece of evidence of a more positive perception of the conflict among pro-Ukrainian users, who tended to like images that emphasized gains on their side, in particular captured enemy soldiers; it also can be viewed as a positive reception of the belittling strategy of the depiction of the Other (Hansen, 2011: 59), which should make the Other's threat look manageable. At the same time, such images had significant interpretative value because they allowed supporters of the pro-Ukrainian side to visualize their opponents.[8] In contrast, pro-Russian users more often liked images of combatants, military machines (mostly of tanks and

Table 4. Reception of thematic categories in the ATO and RftNM groups (comments).

	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum
Action	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (15)	0 (75)	12 (516)
Animals	0 (0)	0 (18)	6 (56)	15 (146)	19 (203)
Civilians	0 (0)	1 (0)	1 (11)	1 (50)	6 (445)
Combatants	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (61)	48 (1688)
Dead	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0)	10 (43)	32 (1467)
Documents	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (0)	26 (14)	90 (936)
Enemies	0 (0)	0 (0)	10 (0)	31 (7)	57 (676)
Equipment	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (14)	5 (60)	20 (600)
Landscape	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (10)	22 (29)
Maps	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (0)	22 (0)	35 (271)
Military machines	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (25)	24 (239)
Personalities	4 (0)	7 (0)	11 (0)	12 (50)	13 (263)
Ruins	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (13)	12 (328)
Symbols	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (9)	7 (38)	38 (351)
Trophies	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (50)	11 (350)

armoured personnel carriers) and symbols (Orthodox icons and Russian flags). Such a combination of content features indicates that pro-Russian users were particularly eager to like images that were dealing with insurgent forces and presented them as the defenders of the Russian population and/or the Orthodox faith in Donbas.

Finally, we identified categories of images that attracted the least popularity from Vkontakte users. In both groups, images related to local landscapes (i.e. photos of surroundings) and documents (i.e. photocopies of military orders) received the least number of likes. Similarly, images related to dead people attracted few likes compared to other categories. While the insignificant number of likes garnered by the latter category of images can be attributed to the moral dilemma (how appropriate is it to register a like on the image of someone's corpse?), it can be also viewed as an indication that both sides preferred to conceal more nefarious aspects of war by avoiding liking images that showed them and, thus, not recommending these images to their friends. This suggestion is also supported by the relatively small number of likes received by the ruins category, especially in the ATO group, where this thematic category was the least liked.

Table 4, which shows the number of comments that different thematic categories received, points to certain similarities between the distribution of likes and comments. Both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users were eager to comment on images of animals; similarly, pro-Ukrainian users were active in commenting on images that showed either significant personalities or military maps. However, the two latter categories did not attract the large number of comments among pro-Russian users, who instead were more interested in discussing either practical aspects of the conflict (e.g. by commenting on the performance of combatants in images showing combat action or by commenting on the choice of ammo in images with military equipment) or metacombat aspects – in particular, the reasons for fighting (e.g. by praising the strength of the Russian spirit in the

Table 5. Reception of gender, age, and number content features in the ATO and RftNM groups (likes).

	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum
Gender					
Female	2 (22)	2 (39)	8 (76)	12 (442)	16 (3573)
Male	0 (9)	32 (104)	99 (311)	362 (573)	5407 (8367)
Mixed	4 (5)	26 (44)	281 (226)	1068 (466)	3380 (3281)
Age					
Child	0 (18)	5 (34)	8 (49)	68 (102)	367 (3891)
Adult	1 (5)	31 (93)	101 (290)	365 (586)	5407 (8367)
Mixed	39 (13)	53 (46)	68 (170)	96 (443)	96 (2479)
Number					
1	0 (14)	16 (58)	86 (248)	328 (539)	5407 (6497)
2–5	1 (9)	26 (84)	88 (236)	282 (473)	1441 (8367)
6–9	30 (13)	37 (95)	193 (265)	340 (564)	2602 (5190)
10+	15 (5)	101 (152)	412 (400)	869 (856)	5352 (7820)

context of images of Orthodox icons and imperial flags or by condemning the actions of the Ukrainian military under images that showed suffering civilians).

Table 5, which shows the distribution of likes among images of human actors, also points to a number of similarities between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian users. In both cases, images of males attracted a significantly larger number of likes than those of females. Such a distribution can be viewed as an indicator that both sides preferred to interpret the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as a male affair. Similarly, in both cases the number of likes was higher for images that showed adults, which can be viewed as another point of agreement between both sides. Finally, in both cases the number of likes tended to increase according to the number of individuals present in the image. Consequently, despite the relatively small number of images showing large groups of individuals (i.e. between 6–9 and 10+), such images attracted the largest number of likes from Vkontakte users. The latter observation can be connected with established patterns of portraying war both in the Soviet and post-Soviet period, where military conflicts (the Second World War in particular) were represented as communal efforts with a larger emphasis on collective, rather than individual, aspects of the war.[9]

At the same time, as Table 6 indicates, a different pattern was found in the case of comments on images of human actors. Unlike likes, which were mostly associated with images of males (or actors of mixed gender in the case of the pro-Ukrainian group), comments in both cases were mostly produced in relation to images of females. Such a distribution can be explained by the predominantly negative sentiment of the latter images, which according to Burke and Develin (2016) tends to provoke more empathic reactions from web users on social networking sites. The same logic can explain the larger number of comments for images that showed actors of mixed ages. The latter – especially in the case of the RftNM group – usually showed either living or dead women with children and thus invoked more compassionate reactions in the form of verbal comments.

Our observations suggest that, despite a number of distinctions in terms of reception, both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users tended to like the same categories of images

Table 6. Reception of gender, age, and number content features in the ATO and RftNM groups (comments).

	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum
Gender					
Female	0 (0)	0 (3)	2 (24)	8 (79)	12 (1467)
Male	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	8 (39)	57 (1688)
Mixed	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (4)	16 (54)	30 (676)
Age					
Child	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (2)	32 (118)
Adult	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (47)	57 (1688)
Mixed	2 (0)	2 (0)	3 (25)	3 (94)	3 (1467)
Number					
1	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0)	10 (57)	57 (600)
2–5	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (35)	33 (1688)
6–9	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (34)	50 (445)
10+	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (0)	13 (91)	48 (676)

(i.e. images of animals, maps and remarkable personalities). Because like buttons in Vkontake not only provide a positive evaluation of a particular item but also allow users to share it with their friends, we suggest that the ways in which pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users tended to present the conflict in Donbas to their personal audiences outside the ATO and RftNM groups were rather similar. Both sides preferred to avoid the more gruesome sides of the war (i.e. images of dead people and destroyed buildings) and instead emphasize more light-hearted (i.e. cute pets) and/or symbolic (i.e. national flags and Orthodox icons) sides of the conflict. As the same time, inside both groups more empathic reactions (i.e. comments) followed a different pattern: such a difference was particularly significant in the case of pro-Russian users, who were active in discussing practical aspects of the combat actions, as well as humanitarian consequences of the conflict.

Another aspect of image reception that was common for both groups is the lack of widely recognized or remembered images, which Hansen (2015) labelled as 'international icons'. While a few images attracted a disproportionate amount of attention both in terms of likes and comments, none of them seemed to achieve the level of circulation and recognition that is necessary to qualify as an iconic one; similarly, none of the published images seemed to be reproduced or appropriated after their publication (at least in the context of two groups that we examined). While a number of factors can explain such a difference, varying from a limited audience of groups themselves to a quality of published images, it can be considered as evidence in support of Hansen's argument that because of increased speed of image production and circulation it can actually be harder 'for iconic images to establish themselves in the long term' in social media (p. 288).

Conclusions

In this study, we examined visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online communities. Our findings suggest that social media such as

Vkontakte were intensively used for framing the conflict during the peak of violence in summer 2014. However, we also found that dynamics of production of visual frames related to the war in Donbas experienced significant changes during the period of observation. These changes seem to be common for mainstream and social media as in both cases the supply of visual materials depended on the situation in the conflict zone, increasing at a time of gains for a particular side and decreasing at a time of losses. The fluctuations were particularly significant in the case of the pro-Ukrainian group, whereas the pro-Russian group was more consistent in terms of frame production. While these differences between groups can be traced back to diverse patterns of mainstream media framing of the conflict in Ukraine and Russia, they can also be related to decisions on the part of group administrators and their view on the purpose behind the group, which in the case of the pro-Russian group was related to public mobilization and thus required more consistent framing effort.

Our study pointed to the presence of fundamental differences in the way the conflict was framed by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users. The former tended to present the conflict in Eastern Ukraine from the patriotic perspective and frame it as 'the good war'; such an interpretation was articulated through the predominant use of such thematic categories as military machines, combatants and trophies. In contrast, pro-Russian users presented the conflict as an humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the destruction and suffering that the war brought through the predominant use of civilians and ruins categories. Further distinctions were found in the use of content features related to gender/age/number of persons; while both groups tended to frame the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as a predominantly male and adult affair, the pro-Russian group provided a more nuanced representation of the conflict in terms of gender and age of human actors. The selection of content features related to human actors also showed a generational divide between the two groups: in the ATO group, the majority of images showed young males in their 20s and 30s whereas, in the RftNM group, the majority of human actors were in their 40s and 50s.

These profound differences in the choice of content features between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian users were contrasted by similarities in the reception of those features. In both cases, users tended to like those images that articulated light-hearted aspects of the conflict, such as pets or symbols, or those that were common in mainstream media coverage of the conflict, such as images of political or military leaders, as well as combatants. In contrast, images dealing with more gruesome aspects of the conflict, such as images of death and destruction, garnered less popularity and thus were confined to the online communities where they originated. Such images, however, spawned a larger number of comments, especially in the pro-Russian group, which can be attributed to a recognized social media trend, according to which images with negative sentiment attract more empathic reactions in the form of comments. Consequently, we suggest that users' reactions to conflict-related frames in social media were influenced both by social media trends, such as an affinity for images of cute animals, and mainstream media patterns of conflict framing, such as a focus on recognizable political and military personalities.

The difference between the ways in which the conflict was framed inside the two initial groups and the ways in which Vkontakte users presented it to their individual audiences through the use of like buttons also poses additional questions concerning the role of agency in framing conflicts in the context of social media. In both the ATO and RftNM groups, a small group of community administrators were responsible for the initial frame

production; however, after the initial set of images was released, individual group members became responsible for their selective distribution across their personal networks. Such a double cycle of frame prosumption makes the study of frame setting more complex, because the process of frame building on social media becomes less deliberate. Consequently, it can be argued that frames on social media can be not only intentionally constructed (e.g. by community administrators) but also can emerge through the choices of uncoordinated individuals (e.g. individual community members who share certain pieces of content with their personal networks).

Together, our observations suggest that the use of social media for visual framing of the war in Donbas facilitated construction of different and often mutually exclusive views on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine among pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian internet users. Unlike pro-Ukrainian users, who presented the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as a limited military action against local insurgents, pro-Russian users interpreted it as an all-out war initiated by an extremist Ukrainian government. Consequently, the propagation of such contradictory interpretations has led to the formation of different views on the nature of the conflict as well as divergent expectations concerning the outcome of the war in Donbas. Thus, we argue that social media have not only complicated the potential dialogue between Ukraine and the People's Republics, but also aggravated collective traumas from both sides of the frontline, in particular the ones related to events such as the Ilovaisk battle and the Minsk agreements, which interfered with the above-mentioned patterns in framing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. For more information on the reasons behind the crisis in Eastern Ukraine as well as the initial stage of the crisis, see Dubrovkin (2014), Gentile (2015) and Zhukov (2015).
2. More commonly known as Igor Strelkov, Girkin is a former Russian officer, who allegedly served in Russia's Federal Security Service before retirement in 2013. He participated in several military conflicts in Eastern Europe, including those in Transnistria, Bosnia and Chechnya. In 2014, Girkin became one of the major leaders of pro-Russian paramilitary units in Crimea, which played an important role in the annexation of the peninsula by Russia. Following the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Crimea, Girkin departed to mainland Ukraine, where he became one of the leaders of the military insurgency in Eastern Ukraine until August 2014, when he resigned and returned to Russia.
3. While the Ukraine crisis continued beyond the first Minsk agreements in September 2014, we are not examining its subsequent stages in this article because of the focus on the conflict's early stage and the lack of data for later periods.
4. The body of literature attached to the concept of framing is too significant to be summarized in a sentence or two; however, we would like to note several works that are of particular relevance for the current study: Pan and Kosicki (1991), Entman (1993, 2004), Scheufele (1999), Reese et al. (2001), D'Angelo (2002) and D'Angelo and Kuypers (2009).
5. To name a few: Cottle (2006), Hammond (2007), Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010), Carruthers (2011), Butler (2012) and Olmastroni (2014).

6. For a few exceptions, see works by Gaufman (2015), Makhortykh and Lyebyedyev (2015), and Suslov (2015).
7. See, for instance, works by Gerlitz and Helmond (2013), Wang et al. (2013), Khosla et al. (2014), and Burke and Develin (2016).
8. This suggestion is related to general confusion that characterized the representation of enemies of the Ukrainian army in Eastern Ukraine both in mainstream and digital Ukrainian media. Unlike pro-insurgent media, which quickly adopted a set of tropes (often supplemented with visual images) that presented Ukrainian troops as fascists and/or extreme nationalists, Ukrainian media provided rather fragmentary images of opponents, ranging from Russian special forces and conscripts to local bandits and drug dealers. Consequently, visual frames that allowed pro-Ukrainian users to actually see what kind of enemy the Ukrainian army was dealing with were able to attract significant interest.
9. See, for instance, works by Tumarkin (1994), Merridale (2001), Gudkov (2005) and Marwick (2012).

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