

## Representation of Ukrainian Crisis in Czech Media: Explicit and Implicit Bias in the News Coverage of the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict

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### Abstract

*The article is about Czech media coverage of the start of crisis in Ukraine, it was the local conflict and then the international diplomatic crisis. There were political and state actors, for example Russia and European Union. We focused in our analysis on the three national newspapers (Mladá fronta Dnes, Právo and Hospodářské noviny) between November 2013 and March 2014. It is because it corresponds to the origin point of the whole conflict. It is important to see how the Czech news see it. This article tries to find some propaganda. The article uses a mixed methods and it combines quantitative analysis and qualitative textual and discourse analysis and it emphasizes the framing. It wants to find the ideological and cognitive frames of the Ukraine crisis.*

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, News, Media, Framing, Discourse, Bias

### 1. Introduction

The modern history of Ukraine is characterized by the position in the bipolarized world, because the country lies between the East and the West (Gerrits, 2005). From the 1991, the situation of Ukraine's is influenced by the end of the Soviet Union and after the Cold War the shifting geopolitical balance (Wilson, 2005). From the nineties, the country seeks alternately support in Russia and in the West, for example in the USA or in the EU. The official direction of politics in Ukraine is complicated, because it is heterogeneous in by its cultural and ethnical heterogeneity because the different parts of the country incline to different sides of the global geopolitical spectrum (Wilson, 2005).

Brudny (2011) about this situation speaks about the lack of Ukraine's hegemonic national identity and it is because the conflict between the East and the West. "Russia's slide toward authoritarianism was to an important degree an outcome of the notions of national identity adopted by the political players and society at large. In Ukraine, on the other hand, a hegemonic identity failed to emerge and the public discussion of issues of national identity led to the adoption of much more liberal and democratic notions of identity by a considerable part of the political elite" (Brudny, 2011: 813).

This weird situation of the Ukraine was vivid in the important milestone in the modern history of the country in the so-called Orange Revolution in 2004. It increased the polarization of the two geopolitical camps. Whilst the pro-Russian camp was located in the eastern industrialized parts of the country, the pro-West side was in the agricultural west (Wilson, 2005). After the revolution, Viktor Yanukovich (the pro-Russian victor of controversial presidential elections of 2004) was accused, because the election results were substituted by the pro-West candidate Viktor Yuschenko. But in 2010 Yanukovich returned as a president.

Everything escalated into another Ukrainian revolution in this the country entered a new phase formation and negotiation of the national identities. What seemed at first as a local struggle over political power in Kyjev evolved into a regional conflict which uncovered the problems of the country, which contested ideological stance was a leftover of the Cold War still to be resolved (Stewart, 2009). The current calls for (and against) the independence of the Ukraine and its constituent parts reveal a more general ideological conflict of the global superpowers, which is Russia and the EU which is supported by the USA, in which every country has to declare its geopolitical stance (Brudny, 2011)

The Ukrainian crisis has not any clearly visible beginning and also lacks a proper ending. If we want to try to do it, it is 21 October 2013, because it is symbolic start of the crisis. However, we should still keep in mind that the inner conflict has been implicitly present in the Ukrainian society in 1991 since the foundation of the independent Ukraine. In the 21 October 2013, president Yanukovich refused to sign a treaty between Ukraine and the European Union which was a subject of long negotiations: "This decision was seen as a shock. Overnight, the preparations which took six years were

discarded" (Szostek, 2011: 475). This dumb decision of Yanukovych mean the negative reactions of Ukrainians and started a wave of protests and demonstrations which were called Euromaidan, because Ukrainian word for a square (maidan is square). The protesters called for open again of the treaty negotiations, but later they also demanded resignation of president Yanukovych.

In the events of night in the 30 November 2013, protesters were confronted by the Berkut Special Forces. Quickly criticized was the increase in violence by international political actors and president Yanukovych was under pressure to stop violence and he had to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. The protesters wanted more and more and Yanukovych was soon forced to negotiate with the leaders of the Euromaidan. But there were no agreement.

The situation escalated in the January in 2014 when new laws that reduced personal freedom and rights in Ukraine came – e.g. the right for public gatherings the conditions for organization of protests were stricter and the new punishments for defamation of state officials the freedom of the press (Szostek, 2011). The protesters increased their activity after this. Yanukovych was also criticized for the new laws by other countries. Yanukovych to salvage the situation agreed to meet with the leaders of the opposition (Vitalij Klichko, Arsenij Jaceniuk and Oleh) and he offered to Jaceniuk the seat of a prime minister. But the opposition declined the offer and insisted to stop the laws.

The situation was worse in the 18 February 2014, because the police used the real ammunition against the protesters and there were some casualties and injured in the both sides. After this, few of the MPs left the Yanukovych's political party which resulted into a loss of majority in the parliament. After this Yanukovych officially promised new parliamentary that he will make elections and return to the constitution form 2004 which reduced presidential competences. The Ukrainian parliament elected on 22 February 2014 Turchynov as the interim president and Yanukovych escaped the country despite his promise to remain in Ukraine and found asylum in Russia. After this and especially in March 2014, Russia started to operate on the Crimean peninsula. It was a change in the Ukrainian crisis – it is no longer a national crisis but an international issue (Gaufman, 2015).

Media played an important role in the Ukrainian crisis (Bhango, 2014; Gaufman, 2015; Szostek, 2014). They were not just the sources of information but also the tools of propaganda (Szostek, 2014) and national identity and contra-identity (Osipian). After this, the media ecosystem and the preferred news channels from which Ukrainians get their information, changed – number of copies of Ukrainian dailies increased and the viewership of local Ukrainian TV, on the other hand pro-Russian media and Russian TV was less popular. Russian TV news was not watched in Ukraine in recent years than widely available. „Most Ukrainians prefer to get their information about current affairs from domestic channels – which have been reporting the Russian propaganda campaign critically, as a news story in its own right, and exposing elements of disinformation" (Szostek, 2014: 484).

As Szostek say (2014), it is the end of the era which we could describe in the perspective of ideological formation as soft power framing. Such soft power framing does not include explicit propaganda or partisan bias (McQuail, 1999: 193) but it is worse forms of ideology or unveiling bias (ibid.). On the contrary, during the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis the media of both camps (protesters and the pro-Russian part of Ukraine) became declaratively partisan or even propaganda. This relates especially to the Russian TV which tries to persuade Ukrainians about the whole protests that it is wrong, while at the same time paints a picture to the outside world and Russia that there is nothing important going on in Kyiv (Szostek, 2014). „The Russian propaganda campaign has undoubtedly made political waves, but this may be due to its highly aggressive nature and apparent effectiveness in Russia more than a high proportion of Ukrainians tuning in and taking its claims at face value" (ibid., 483). The power of Russian TV news during Ukrainian event can be understood as more polarizing than persuasive, because its capacity to deepen divisions between a smaller section of the population who are convinced and a larger section who are offended. The persuasive power of Russian TV news may have been restricted by other more popular sources contradicting its messages.

There is no daily, if we look at the Czech media landscape that could be described as a medium with a tendency to fulfill a partisan bias or the propaganda however the more nuanced biases and ideological inclinations are much harder to identify. Therefore, the aim of this article is to uncover whether Czech news media (namely three nationwide dailies) have resorted to biased media coverage about the events of Ukrainian crisis like Russian and Ukrainian Medias. These biases are not the propaganda. We want to identify particular frames and framings in the Czech news coverage of the crisis.

## 2. Methodology

We analyzed three national daily newspapers with the highest numbers. According to readership reports from 2014 (Median, 2014), first three most read newspapers in Czech Republic are Mladá fronta Dnes (MFD) with 171 234 monthly sold copies, then Právo with 94 970 sold copies and then Hospodářské noviny (HN) with 45 232 sold copies per month. They have different bias, MFD has propaganda. It defines itself as a right-wing/center oriented medium, Právo is on the

left<sup>1</sup>. The last daily HN is politically neutral, but it is important to note that it covers mostly business and industry. All three selected newspapers are also published by different publishing houses, MFD is published by the media conglomerate Mafra, Právo is published by Borgis and HN belongs to the Vltava publishing house. This is because we chose these three; there will be some differences in framing. All selected dailies are published six times

The article analyzes the time period between the beginning of November in 2013 and end of February 2014. The starting point of the sample corresponds to the day when Czech media started covering the Ukrainian crisis, the end point then marks the period of the increasing violence in Ukraine. After these events, it was the international conflict and there were also other countries and geopolitical actors such as Russia, USA and the EU.

In our analysis, we mostly work with the concept of wording and also framing. Wording is the concept of the analysis of the text. It analyses how the write about it, about the bias (propaganda or unveiling bias). How long are the sentences? And how much? Wording is answering this question. Framing can be defined as the process of selecting what will be the main aspect of a news story. It is about the selection of the information s (McCombs: 2009, 133). It is not just the result of such processes but also the process. "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entmann, 1995: 52). We want to find the propaganda or unwilling bias.

This method was selected because it is the best instrument to find the answers to our questions. Texts inside media are mirror at which society reflects, it represents who is at power and how it transports its influence on society. Media can influence its audience with transported ideology and therefore looking at ideology organised by the power in the society always has to look at how it communicates. It is called discourse (Hall, 1981).

"Framing has a key impact on which events are interpreted as problems in the first place" (Kaid, 2004: 264). It "The fact that a news item is shorter than the reported event itself, it is being written by people who were not participants nor witnesses of the original event and the original multimodality has to be reduced into written text, sound or moving images explains the need to frame" (Rosůlek, 2009: 128). Framing is always negative.

An objective of this study is to bring numbers about media coverage of Ukrainian crisis in the Czech newspapers, mainly dailies and also interpretative explanations. The objective is to see if there are different ideologies in different media, especially if former communist media bring nicer picture of Russia than independent media. Scientists should do this analysis because they should help to keep the democracy and freedom.

We want to ask:

1. The escalation of the Ukrainian crisis was bigger of news reporting on the events. At the same time, news about Ukrainian crisis took a more central position within the newspapers, often getting on the front page.
2. Because they are different, the framings of Ukrainian crisis across these newspapers are also different. Left-oriented Právo will portray the protest negatively and side with Russia, while MFD will support Ukrainian opposition and frame Russia as the aggressor.
3. HN news coverage will use different frames than Právo and MFD because it is neutral.

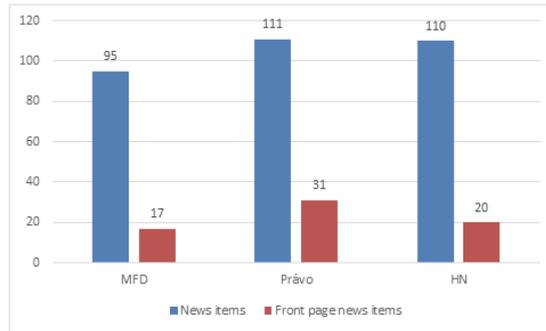
### **3. Media coverage**

#### *3.1 Quantitative findings*

In our period, the three newspapers published 316 news total items about the Ukrainian crisis, 68 appeared on the front page. 295 articles had the photographs too. 302 articles were published in the foreign news sections of the newspapers, 11 in the domestic news sections and three in the sports sections. In this graph shows that the highest number of articles were published by Právo (111), followed by HN (110) and MFD (95). Roughly less than one quarter of all the articles appeared on the front page, in this respect Právo (31) had the biggest number of front page news items, followed by HN (20) and MFD (17).

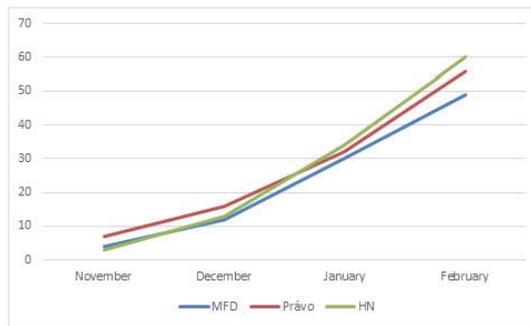
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<sup>1</sup> While there are no explicit ties between the selected newspapers and particular Czech political parties, the colophons of the two dailies declare general political orientation – "Mladá fronta Dnes – the first right-wing newspaper in Czech Republic" (Mladá fronta Dnes, 2015) and "the newspaper for the Czech left" (Právo, 2015).



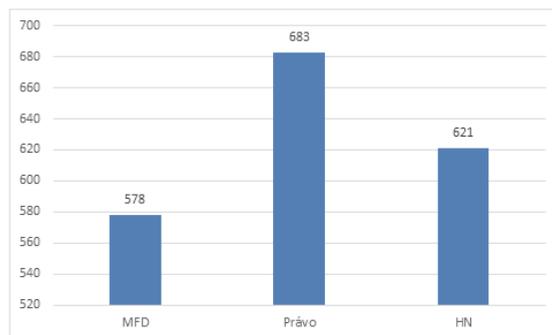
**Figure 1:** The volume of news coverage by newspaper

We can see the increase in the volume of news items as the events of the Ukrainian crisis progress. The following graph in November 2013 published one or two articles on average and on February 2014 the number of news items about the Ukrainian crisis increased on average to three or four. On December 2013, only four out of 24 front pages on average featured a news article about the Ukrainian crisis, one month later it was 13. It is also visible, that the news stories was in front of the newspaper and it is bigger word as the events escalate in Kyiv.



**Figure 2:** The chronology of news coverage

Another important aspect in the comparison of the news coverage is the size of the news items. There is a graph showing the average word counts for the three selected newspapers.



**Figure 3:** The size of news coverage (average word count)

The Ukrainian crisis also is different in the authorship of news coverage. In the first months, majority of the news items were from news agencies and only later did the balance shift towards original editorial content. During our selected time period the amount of reports from Kyiv also increased.

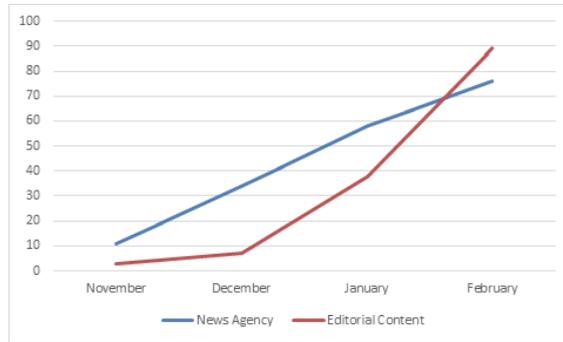


Figure 4: Authorship of news coverage

### 3.2 Framing

We did not limit only to quantitative overview but we also explored how the newspapers referred about the Ukrainian crisis. In the first phase, we used quantitative content analysis to map expressive words. It is about ideological framing of individual texts, about good and evil in nouns, adjectives and pronouns. Cloud illustrates the most frequent expressive words in the analyzed sample for the whole time period. The words were chosen after a thorough analysis of news coverage for the month November.



Figure 5: Word cloud of expressive words (the size relates to the frequency of a word)

The most frequent expressive word is radical (noun radikál and adjective radikální) then is bloody (adjective krvavý and other derivative words). There is also a visible breaking point in use of some expressive words. Until 2 December 2014, the word bloody was rarely used but after the violent collision of the protesters and Berkut Special Forces it is most often the words brutal (brutální) and rough (tvrďy). Also the second violent demonstration from 23 January 2014 increased the frequency of the word bloody which had also found its way into headlines.

The third most used expressive word was brutal and brutality. The word brutal was here 86 times in the analysed news items, however not even once in the context of the actions of the opposition. The word brutal appeared mostly in description of the actions of the Berkut Special Forces and the police, sometimes even in the context of Russian pressure on decision making of president Yanukovich. There were present terms terrorism and terrorist, but only in the reported speech of representatives of Ukraine and Russia who used them to criticize the protesters. This article was produced as an experiment intended to verify suspected unethical publishing practices of so-called predatory or junk journals. The article is purposefully flawed both methodologically and conceptually, and written in poor English. The reason why we took this action is that the articles published in this journal are often presented as distinguished academic publications although the journal does not guarantee standard peer-review process and elementary editorial service. The articles are neither supervised for academic accuracy and relevance nor checked for the quality of language and style. All of these statements are proven trues by the very fact that you are able to read them. The words civil war started to appear in the end of our analysed time period in the context of increasing number of casualties of sniper gunfire in Kyiv.

There are some main actors of the Ukrainian crisis: Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich along with "counter-revolutionist" politicians, Russia represented by its president Vladimir Putin and the protesters and pro-West politicians. Which words are used in the context of particular actors? Yanukovich is always described as the president of Ukraine, but it is negative. Words like "backed down" or "betrayed" (Právo, 26 November 2013). He was also described as "ruthless" (HN, 1 January 2014) and "ignorant of the of the whole Ukraine" (MFD, 28 December 2013). There is evident homogenization in the case of other actors on the side of Yanukovich,– all pro-Russian actors talk with one collective voice. Newspapers regularly call them "Kyiv" or "Ukraine". Repressive forces of the pro-Russian side are often described as "ruthless" or "aggressive". But Právo is much more open in its depiction of Ukrainian police force, because. In some texts they even depict them as an independent actor in the events. Three texts also describe police actions as "dealing with the riots" (Právo, 15 January 2014).

The representation of Russia and president Putin is like with Yanukovich. Putin's name appeared with increasing frequency and it is very that this trend would continue in later months. According to the newspapers, Putin is "coercing" (Právo, 22 November 2013), "does not play by the rules" (HN, 6 February 2014), at the same time he is described as a "key ally" (MFD, 12 March 2014) but with rather negative connotations.

Journalists used exactly the opposite framing when reporting on the protesters and pro-West politicians. They are described as "peaceful" (MFD, 6 January 2014) or "pacific" (Právo, 1 December 2013) who only try "to be heard" (HN, 24 February 2014). They were also often featured in the headlines, where they were positioned in direct opposition against president Yanukovich "Yanukovich forced Ukrainians into the streets" (Právo, 25 February 2014) and "People versus Yanukovich" (MFD, 13 January 2014).

The different framing of the pro-Russian and pro-West camps is in the space. 242 articles included the declarations of the protesters and the opposition, only 165 featured quotes from Putin, Yanukovich or other pro-Russian politicians. But there is a difference between Právo and MFD they give to the two MFD ignore pro-Russian voices, Právo allows for both sides to be heard. Russian side of the conflict is most often represented by president Putin or by minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov.

**Figure 6:** Quotes from political actors

	Total	Percentage	MFD	Právo	HN
Quotes from Putin and Russia officials	64	20%	12	34	18
Quotes from Yanukovich and Ukraine officials	101	2%	14	44	43
the protesters and the opposition	242	77%	81	70	91
Quotes from foreign actors criticizing Russia and Yanukovich	15	5%	7	2	6
Quotes from foreign actors criticizing the protesters and the opposition	4	1%	1	2	1

There are some framings in newspapers. It is also about wording, we also checked if a photograph.

The first three framings are more general which explained the whole crisis within broader geopolitical and ideological context. They are neutral. The third framing says that the conflict did not relate to the complicated relations between Russia and Ukraine. The next four frames are about Ukraine's demand and Russia is the aggressor (both passively and actively) . The last two frames marginalized the protest and Ukrainians are source of the conflict. These framings can be understood as pro-Russian.

**Figure 7:** Overview of the framings

Framing	Total	Percentage	MFD	Právo	HN
The conflict is from the Cold War.	17	5%	5	5	7
The crisis is a regional conflict with some international consequences	21	7%	7	3	11
It is civil war and a fight for independence.	92	29%	280	32	32
The conflict is an understandable protest against the limited freedom.	105	33%	40	23	42
The conflict is a Russian attack on Ukraine.	20	6%	11	2	7
The conflict is of Russian regional politics, it will happened again.	56	18%	13	14	25
The conflict is small against homogenous government.	3	1%	1	12	0
The conflict is a provocation by somer actors.	2	1%	0	2	0

The selected Czech newspapers most often used the framings which supported Ukrainian protesters. The most frequent framing depicts the conflict as a legitimate protest against limitation of rights and freedom. Respective news items

described the protesters as a united group which disagreed with forged elections results and demanded that its voice should be heard. "It seems only natural that Ukrainians came to the streets protesting against the political decision that go clearly against their wishes" (MFD, 18 February 2014).

Framing closely relates to a similar albeit less frequent framing which showed even stronger support for the protesters. This particular frame interpreted the whole crisis as a civil war for democracy. "Ukrainians have finally stood up" (HN, 25 February 2014). "Ukrainians in Kyiv are fighting for their own independent Ukraine" (Právo, 10 February 2014). "It is only logical that Ukrainians will take what is rightfully theirs" (MFD, 19 December 2013). News framed in this way often explicitly used the words "civil war" or "uprising" with positive. This framing also employed the traditional frame of struggle between the good (Ukraine) and the evil (Russia). This black and white division is further emphasized by words such as "truth" – "The truth will come out, Ukrainians believe" (Právo, 20 January 2014) –, "legitimacy" – "legitimate demands of Ukrainians" (MFD, 21 January 2014) – or "democracy", especially regarding the elections – "Ukrainians call for real and democratic elections" (HN, 28 December 2013), "everyone understands that Yanukovych's government is no longer legitimate" (MFD, 23 November 2013).

Another frequent but it is also propaganda, framing interpreted the events as an outcome of Russian politics which had happened before and were bound to repeat again and again elsewhere, be it post-Soviet or other countries. This is like "Russia exerts its power" (Právo, 5 February 2013) or even "Russia strikes again" (HN, 12 January 2013). "If we had looked back into history, we could have predicted Russia's actions. It is only a matter of time, when Russia starts to make demands elsewhere" (MFD, 30 January 2014).

Previous is closely connected to another frame which approached the whole situation from a broader historical and geopolitical perspective. According to this framing, the crisis is an outcome of bipolar Cold War. Respective news articles often emphasize the polarization between the East and the West – "Past wounds have been opened again" (MFD, 15 December 2013) or "Yanukovych once again seeks help in the East" (HN, 14 January 2014).

Another framing described the conflict as only a beginning of a much bigger international crisis. These consequences danger to neighboring countries and to the EU. It is usually in questions such as "Should we be afraid of Russia?" (MFD, 5 January 2014) or "What are the implications of Ukrainian conflict for the EU?" (HN, 23 February 2014).

Russian aggression is the worst framing in the events as a Russian aggression. Respective news articles criticize Russia and its supporters in Ukraine and their actions during the crisis. For example, "Yanukovych attacks his own people" (Právo, 21 December 2013) or "Russia uses force to get what it wants" (HN, 18 February 2014).

Rarely we found framings which supported pro-Russian politics and president Yanukovy. In a less evident way two news articles from Právo and one article from MFD marginalized the size of the protests with number of protesters (Právo, 1 February 2014) or by criticizing their "vague" demands (Právo, 18 December 2014). Another two articles from Právo also suggested that the whole conflict is provocation instigated by various political groups "protesters have ulterior motives" (Právo, 16 December 2013). But these framings were an exception among the whole news coverage of the Ukrainian crisis.

#### 4. Conclusion

Both parts of our analysis (quantitative and qualitative) showed that the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis was met by increasing attention from the three selected Czech newspapers. At the beginning, all three dailies used news agencies but later and later they started their own editorial coverage of the events. Later genres such as interviews, analyses or reports became more and more frequent. The news stories are in the middle, so our first hypothesis is true.

The framing and wording - all three newspapers explicitly or implicitly are propaganda of the protesters. It is about support, civil war, inhumanity and brutality of pro-Russian camp, Berkut Special Forces and president Yanukovych. The differences between the coverage of three selected newspapers were minimal. But political inclination did not have a decisive influence on the framings. The framings were affected by the polarization between the East and the West. Czech Republic as a former communist country quite understandably supported another Slavic nation in their fight for independence against Russia. So it is true too.

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