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# The Other Within Us

A Narrative Analysis of Self- and Other-Identification on Social Media by Actors  
Involved in the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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## Abstract

This study examines narratives of Self- and Other-identification in social media content of actors, directly and indirectly involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The aim is to shed light on how social media can be instrumentalised as a means of constructing Self and Other in the context of ongoing conflict. The analysed actors are Ukrainian and Russian political elites, representatives from Ukrainian volunteer battalions and Russia-backed separatists. The thesis is based on the constructivist assumption that each of the actors understand and construct themselves in relation to others. Thereby, focus lies on narrative patterns in their respective social media content, and specifically on inherent processes of creating Self and Other. The findings suggest that all actors use the conflict as a point of reference when doing so and that all promote nationalistic narratives. Also, the target groups' self-image is not always congruent with the widely accepted categories assigned to them. Finally, the results of the study indicate a need for further research into modes of Self- and Other-identification and the reproduction of narratives on social media by actors in the context of armed conflict.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Twitter, Identity, Narratives, Self, Other, Categorisation, Metaphors, Nationalism, Qualitative Content Analysis, post-Soviet, Hybrid Warfare, Ukraine, Russia, Europe;*

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# 1. Introduction

*We are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other.* – Putin, 2014<sup>1</sup>

*Entire generations of Ukrainian patriots fought for our independence, our freedom.*<sup>2</sup> – Poroshenko, 2014

Already years prior to the eruption of protests for a closer relationship between Ukraine and the European Union (hereinafter: EU) in 2014, the EU and the government of Ukraine had initiated negotiations concerning future cooperation. Due to changes of power and accusations of corruption in the Ukrainian political leadership, it was not a smooth process. While negotiating with the EU, former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich also held talks with Russia to find the right model for cooperation with the Eurasian Customs Union.<sup>3</sup> In November 2013 Yanukovich suspended the agreement on closer relations with the EU.

The official explanation was that Ukraine had to terminate it to save the country's economy.<sup>4</sup> However, Russian president Vladimir Putin emphasized repeatedly that a free trade deal between the EU and Ukraine would have posed a major threat to the Russian economy. As a result, Russia has been accused of pressuring Ukraine to terminate its agreement with the EU, while, according to the official Russian narrative, Ukraine made an independent decision.<sup>5</sup> These two narratives, one portraying Ukraine's pivot away from the EU as a result of Russian pressure and the other claiming that Ukraine simply preferred closer relations with Russia over the EU, accompanied the events that unravelled in Ukraine shortly thereafter.

As a result of the change of foreign policy, protests (hereinafter: the Euromaidan<sup>6</sup>) for closer ties with the EU erupted in many cities in Ukraine. Shortly thereafter, these protests were countered by anti-European protesters and eventually escalated. Among the Russian leadership a new narrative emerged, namely that their Russian compatriots living in Ukraine were threatened by a mob of pro-European Ukrainian nationalists and therefore needed protection.<sup>7</sup> In the midst of the turmoil Russian troops took control over several administrative buildings in Crimea. Some weeks later Crimea declared its independence from Ukraine. According to the

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<sup>1</sup> Kremlin.ru, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 18 March 2014, The Kremlin, Moscow, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>2</sup> Twitter advanced search: (from:poroshenko) until:2014-08-25 since:2014-08-23, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>3</sup> Kyiv Post, *EU to Ukraine: Reforms necessary for trade pact*, 25 February 2013, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>4</sup> Interfax-Ukraine, *Ukraine to resume preparing agreement with EU when compensation for production drop found*, 21 November 2013, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>5</sup> AlJazeera, *Putin says Ukraine-EU deals a threat to Russia*, 27 November 2013, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>6</sup> A widely accepted metaphor for the protests. 'Euro' stands for 'European', 'Maidan' means "Place" in Ukrainian and describes the place where the protests took place.

<sup>7</sup> Twitter advanced search: (Ukraine OR compatriots) (from:KremlinRussia\_E), 2014; Kremlin.ru, *a report on human rights violations in Ukraine presented to the President of Russia*, 5 May 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

Ukrainian narrative this was done through an illegally staged referendum, while according to the Russian narrative it was a referendum in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.<sup>8</sup> The conflict in eastern Ukraine is as any other conflict not solely fought physically. To a significant extent the conflict is also mirrored in the competing narratives and discourses in the daily rhetoric of politicians, media and other interest groups. Putin commented on the Euromaidan and the events in Crimea:

I understand those who came out on the Maidan with peaceful slogans (...) However, those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine had a different agenda (...) Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites executed this coup. (...) we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part.<sup>9</sup> In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia.

At the same time, former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko stated:

The citizens of Ukraine will be unable to feel the virtues of peace and security until we regulate our relations with Russia. Russia has occupied Crimea which was, is, and will be Ukrainian. (...) We see the violation of political, language and cultural rights of citizens. Crimean Tatars and ethnical Ukrainians are objects for discrimination today.<sup>10</sup>

Both presidents claim the support of 'the people', that Crimea is theirs and accuse each other of human rights violations. In other words, their narratives are diametrically opposed. The fundamental basis of social conflicts are divisions among individuals and groups, and the emergence of conflict is according to peace researchers Bruce W. Dayton and Louis Kriesberg based on at least the following conditions: a group identity as an entity separate from others which are defined as opponents, a grievance, the formulation of concrete goals for how to change the other's behaviour and the believe in a realistic chance of bringing about that change.<sup>11</sup> These conditions are based on self-and other-identification that make people want to preserve their larger collective Selves.<sup>12</sup> Understanding the construction of these Selves is the aim of this thesis.

In the conflict in eastern Ukraine, a wide range of actors use online platforms to disseminate their narratives. They thereby continuously create and recreate their larger *Selves* in contrast to *Others*.<sup>13</sup> Social media, compared to political speeches, enable actors to share spontaneous reactions with a wide range of followers. Moreover, these platforms offer an arena

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<sup>8</sup> KyivPost, *Two Choices in Crimean Referendum: yes and yes*, 7 March 2014; and Kremlin.ru, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 18 March 2014, The Kremlin, Moscow, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>9</sup> Kremlin.ru, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 18 March 2014, The Kremlin, Moscow, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, *Speech of President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko at the PACE session*, 27 June 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>11</sup> Kriesberg, Louis & Dayton, Bruce W., *Constructive conflicts: from escalation to resolution*, Fifth edition., Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2017, p. 53

<sup>12</sup> Kriesberg, Dayton, 2017, p. 53

<sup>13</sup> *Self* and *Other* are here used as analytical concepts and therefore written with capital letters.

not only to high-profiled politicians but literally to everyone who wants to be heard. In this thesis it is examined along which categories and in relation to which narratives the actors involved construct *Self* and *Other* on social media.

## 1.1. Purpose and Research Question

*“If individuals in a group are bombarded with messages that the enemy is unlikely to stop fighting until it annihilates the entire group, most individuals from that group will act rationally by opting to fight such an enemy.”<sup>14</sup>*

Social media continuously gain popularity among political elites, activists and other interest groups. They are channels for aggregating and disseminating opinions and information on a large scale. On social media, discourses are formed and narratives created that shape our perception of the world. Especially during conflicts, mass communication can be a convenient tool for furthering one’s agenda. Technical means of mass communication are of central concern not only for the circulation of information but as mechanisms that create new kinds of human action and interaction.<sup>15</sup> On social media platforms such as Twitter, the lines between sender and receiver blur because receivers become senders the second they retweet or share content. This has an amplifying effect on the messages which now echo back and forward among online communities and spread faster and wider. The great reach narratives conveyed on mass media have makes studying them especially important.

If language can determine how we think and act, then not only are the narratives important but also their linguistic structure.<sup>16</sup> In this study, close attention is paid to the way actors make use of figurative language when constructing narratives of *Self* and *Other*. Focus lies not only on how actors define and perceive themselves and others but also on how these perceptions relate to categorisations by international and local media. The target groups are comprised of actors involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine since its outbreak in 2014. The research question that guides the analysis is:

- *How do actors involved in the conflict identify Self and Other on social media, and how do the actors’ self-images relate to how they are categorised by others?*

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<sup>14</sup> Malešević, Siniša, *The sociology of war and violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 61

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, John B., *Ideology and Modern Culture, Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass-Communication*, Polity Press, 1990, p. 265

<sup>16</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, *A Dangerous Language*, in: Gouliamos, Kōstas & Kassimeris, Christos (red.), *The marketing of war in the age of neo-militarism*, Routledge, New York, 2012, p. 23

The question is further specified by the following interrelated sub-questions:

- *How are Self and Other narratively constructed in relation to the **conflict**?*
- *How are Self and Other constructed in relation to **nationalistic narratives**?*

Napoleon once said, that “three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets”.<sup>17</sup> Nowadays, social media and the messages conveyed through them often fill the function of newspapers and if Napoleon was right, it follows that social media content exerts the same kind of power. Hence, narratives on social media could reveal a lot about existing power structures and interests, which is why they should be studied. The aim here is not to explain the conflict as a *result* of a certain narrative or discourse. What is interesting is the nature of the narratives and discourses *about* the conflict which in turn can shape our perception of it. The next chapter provides an overview of the thesis’ structure.

## 1.2. Structure

Following this section, *chapter two* explains the background and context of the analysed material, including an overview of the current media discourse. In *chapter three*, the theoretical foundation of the analysis is discussed, namely social constructivism, a re-conceptualisation of social identity theory and theories of nationalism. *Chapter four* provides a review of literature that influenced the analysis with a special focus on social media discourses, digital diplomacy, narratives about post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia and psycholinguistic aspects of social media content. In *chapter five* follows a thorough presentation of the material and the selection of the target groups. Further, the methodological framework is presented divided into four sections: narrative analysis, qualitative content analysis, analysis of figures of speech and the process of material gathering. The chapter concludes with source criticism and laying down the scope of investigation. In *chapter six*, the results of the analysis are presented and then discussed in dialogue with the theoretical concepts in *chapter seven*. The thesis ends with final remarks and recommendations for further research.

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<sup>17</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p. 217

## 2. Background and Context

This chapter provides an overview of Ukraine's and Russia's relations since the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991. Different narratives circulate of all events and the ambition is not to provide an incontestable and exhaustive version of what *really* happened. It is a summary, based on sources that were selected according to an estimation of how well they represent ideally more than just one dominating narrative. It is also an attempt to illustrate the historical and geopolitical context in which the conflict is embedded. This is important for a holistic understanding of conflict, which cannot be limited to diverging modes of identification. It needs as much to be understood through the lens of rational calculations and states' interest driven strive for securing a powerful position on the international arena. It also needs to be understood as a war about interpretations of the past, which is inevitably linked to the construction of Self and Other. It is a hybrid war, meaning that there are different battlefields ranging from the physical attacks to the fight about the minds of the people. While being conscious about its limitations, this study focuses predominantly on social media platforms. The second part of this chapter provides an overview of how the target groups are currently circumscribed by media and international organisations. This is important for understanding why these actors were chosen for the analysis.

### 2.1. Ukraine and Russia after Disintegration

The countries' relations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union started with cooperation in the military field. Ukraine held almost one third of the total Soviet arsenal of nuclear weapons and in 1992, Ukraine agreed to remove the weapons in exchange for security assurances from Russia in what is known as the Budapest Memorandum.<sup>18</sup> Several bilateral disputes followed, ranging from Russia questioning the status of Crimea, which was transferred to Ukraine in 1954, to arguments about energy supply. These were settled in 1997, by signing a bilateral Friendship Treaty, including the recognition of each others' borders and mutual security guarantees.<sup>19</sup>

After the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, a public reaction against oligarchy, corruption and election fraud in 2004, problems resurfaced, including new disputes about energy supply,

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<sup>18</sup> *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, 52241 U.N.T.S. 3007, 5 December 1994

<sup>19</sup> The New York Times, *Setting Past Aside, Russia and Ukraine Sign Friendship Treaty*, 2007, accessed: 10-05-2020

resulting in Ukraine's bid to join NATO.<sup>20</sup> Ukraine's attempts to join EU and NATO were framed by many Russian sources as a change of course to an anti-Russian policy in Ukraine and thus as a sign of hostility which again led to mistrust and worsening relations.<sup>21</sup> In 2010 the "most Russophile and neo-Soviet" Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was elected.<sup>22</sup> He closely cooperated with Russia and both the Russian President at that time Dmitry Medvedev and the then-Prime minister Vladimir Putin stated that there was a "big improvement" in the relations.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, when talks between the EU and Ukraine got more intense, Russia stopped all goods coming from Ukraine, which some interpreted as the start of a trade war against Ukraine to prevent an agreement with the EU.<sup>24</sup> And indeed, as a result, Yanukovich terminated the deal with the EU.

Yanukovich's turn towards Russia led to protests in several cities of Ukraine, known as the Euromaidan.<sup>25</sup> These demonstrations for closer ties between the EU and Ukraine were soon met by an anti-EU, pro-Russian countermovement predominantly in the Donbass in eastern Ukraine, which eventually collapsed into military stand-offs. In this context, Russia annexed Crimea and, according to analyst Sabine Fischer "provoked a war in eastern Ukraine", were armed groups occupied administrative buildings in several towns and demanded secession from Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Throughout March and April 2014, armed groups took hold of several towns in the Donbass and declared the internationally non-recognised People's Republic of Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>27</sup> In July 2014, a passenger jet was shot down over the Donbass by a Russian missile, killing all 298 persons on board.<sup>28</sup> The EU, US and NATO regarded this as proof for Russian involvement in the war and imposed sanctions. 2014 and 2015 saw the most conflict-related losses, according to the UN, with 9100 deaths and 20 7000 injured.<sup>29</sup> Despite regular extensions of the ceasefire, the situation along the contact line remains unstable until this day.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Minakov, Mikhail, *Development and Dystopia : Studies in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Eastern Europe [Elektronisk resurs]*, 2018, p. 118

<sup>21</sup> Kuzio, Taras, *Ukraine under Kuchma: Political Reform , Economic Transformation and Security Policy in Independent Ukraine*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, p.197

<sup>22</sup> Kuzio, Taras, *The Crimea: Europe's Next Flashpoint?*, The Jamestown Foundation, 2010, p. 6

<sup>23</sup> RIA Novosti, *Russia and Ukraine improve soured relations – Russian President*, 16 May 2010, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>24</sup> "О комплексе мер по вовлечению Украины в евразийский интеграционный процесс". *Zerkalo Nedeli* (in Russian) (29). 16–22 August 2013

<sup>25</sup> Johnsson, Peter, *Ukraina i historien: från äldsta tid till 2015*, 1:a uppl., Carlssons, Stockholm, 2015, p. 378

<sup>26</sup> Fischer, Sabine, *The Donbas Conflict, Opposing Interests and Narratives*, Difficult Peace Process, SWP Research Paper, No. 5, pp. 1-35, 2019, p. 7

<sup>27</sup> Fischer, Sabine, 2019, p. 9

<sup>28</sup> BBC, *MH17 Ukraine plane crash: what we know*, 26 February 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>29</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020*

<sup>30</sup> OSCE, *Trends and Observations from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine*, Document Collection, accessed: 10-05-2020

In this study, the target groups were selected based on what is known and reported about them in the media, in previous research and partly on how they presented themselves. When searching for appropriate terms, no coherent definition was found. Different actors use different categories depending on their own agenda. Part of the research objective is to examine how these externally imposed categories relate to the self-perception of the target groups.

## 2.2. Labelling of Target Groups

It is a truism that there are always several sides to a story, and ongoing conflict does not make finding an un-biased perspective easier. As the infamous quote goes: “in war, truth is the first casualty”.<sup>31</sup> Taking into account a variety of existing narratives from different sides is as close to truth as one can get. If Roland Barthes was right about that either everything is important or nothing is, then as many perspectives as possible need to be included in an analysis.<sup>32</sup> This study is an attempt to do so and focuses on actors from different sides involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

At the bottom of every conflict lies an incompatibility, rooted in conflicting interests of the involved actors.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the actors are selected based on their stated conflicting interests and their direct or indirect involvement in the conflict. The basic eligibility criterion for a target group was to have stakes in the conflict which at the state level was fulfilled by both Russian and Ukrainian state representatives. Ukraine, because the conflict takes place on Ukrainian territory and Russia, because it supports the actors on the occupied territories. Yet, officially it is not an inter-state war, therefore the involved non-state actors were relevant too, one side fighting for secession from Ukraine, and the other for retaining Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

Defining the latter was rather difficult. There exist myriads of different categorisations. While the armed groups promoting a secession from Ukraine call themselves Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LPR), the OSCE and the EU describe them as ‘armed formations’<sup>34</sup>, the NGO International Crisis Groups uses ‘Russia-backed separatists’<sup>35</sup>, the Uppsala Conflict Database labels them ‘Pro-Russian Forces’<sup>36</sup> and Ukrainian media uses

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<sup>31</sup> Goodreads, *Aeschylus*, Quotable Quote, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, *On Narrative and Narratives*, New Literary History, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 237-272, 1975, p. 245

<sup>33</sup> Kriesberg, Louis & Dayton, Bruce W., 2017, p. 53

<sup>34</sup> OSCE, *Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine* (SMM), Daily Report 95/2020 issued on 22 April 2020; Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, Statement by the Spokesperson on access to non-government controlled areas, 25 March 2020, Brussels, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>35</sup> *International Crisis Group*, Ukraine, April 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>36</sup> *Uppsala Conflict Database* (UCDP), Country Profile: Ukraine, accessed: 10-05-2020

among others ‘Pro-Russian Separatists’, ‘Russian Occupants’, ‘Russian militias’ or ‘Donbass Terrorists’.<sup>37</sup> The non-state volunteers fighting for Ukrainian unity are often not even mentioned by official organs such as the OECD, the EU or the UN. The most well-known group, Azov, refer to themselves as ‘military unit’, ‘regiment’ or ‘special purpose militia’.<sup>38</sup> A Ukrainian human rights group however calls them ‘far-right national militia’<sup>39</sup>, Ukrainian media uses ‘Ukrainian volunteer corps’<sup>40</sup>, western media uses ‘Ultra-nationalist militia’ or ‘Ukraine’s national militia’<sup>41</sup>, the investigative NGO Bellingcat uses ‘Ukrainian far-right fighters’<sup>42</sup> and the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta labels them ‘Pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalions’.<sup>43</sup>

Hence, it is difficult to use one of these labels without involuntarily subscribing to someone else’s definition. In this study the categorisation of the groups is based on the variables most agree on, namely that they are *armed*, they are *groups* and they are *fighting* over territory, where one group wants a *secession* from Ukraine and is supported by the Russian state and the other wants to restore Ukrainian unity and receives support from the Ukrainian state. Based on this observation the groups were divided into *pro-Ukrainian volunteers* and *Russia-backed separatists*. These categories are not seen as fixed terms but as vantage points, open for adjustments in the course of the analysis.

At the state level, the groups were divided into *Ukrainian-* and *Russian political elites*. These labels are based on the actor’s profession (being employed by the state), former profession (former public servant) or activity in one of the established political parties. That does not mean that the individuals themselves necessarily agree with the definition, which merely aims at, on a very general level, to differentiate between the target groups and shall not be understood as a categorical statement. Part of the analysis is to examine how the actors define *themselves*. The assigned labels are thus first and foremost adjustable starting points.

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<sup>37</sup> DW, Ukraine signs key agreement with pro-Russia separatists, October 2019; UNIAN, Russian Soldier: Without Russian army Donbas militants would not last a month, October 2015; Ukrainskaya Pravda, В Донецке террористы заблокировали ряд украинских сайтов, September 2015; Ukrinform, Ostukraine: sieben Angriffe der Besatzer am Dienstag, April 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>38</sup> Azov.org, Про АЗОВ, visited: 10-05-2020

<sup>39</sup> Kharkiv Human Rights Group, Ukraine’s far-right National militia threat to use force makes them dangerous election observers, March 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>40</sup> KyivPost, Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, January 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>41</sup> RFERL, Ukrainian Monitors Record 137 Episodes of Violence, Confrontation by Ultraright Groups, January 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>42</sup> Bellingcat, Ukrainian Far-Right Fighters, White Supremacists Trained by Major European Security Firm, August 2018, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>43</sup> Novaya Gazeta, Представитель АТО: под Славянском убит украинский военнослужащий, June 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

Summing it up, the bilateral relations between Russia and Ukraine have been ambivalent for a long time. They have been in a tensed condition, fluctuating between phases of fragile cooperation, competition and disagreements – be it about territory, energy supply or membership in international organisations. The conflict in eastern Ukraine is by many treated as a symptom of these tensions which I would agree with. However, studying the conflict is more complicated since there are many different actors involved, all having different stakes in the conflict. Finding and defining them is difficult which is why one part of the research question is to examine how the definitions of the actors made by others match the actors self-perception. The next section provides an overview of the theoretical foundation of this study.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically based on a *social constructivist* perspective. Social constructivism has according to *Alexander Wendt* three basic ontological positions: firstly, normative or ideational structures are important and matter as much if not more than material structures. Secondly, identities matter in that sense that actors cannot act without it because it is their identity that gives actors interests in the first place. Thirdly, agents and structures are seen as mutually constituted.<sup>44</sup> That means, that we create the world we live in and the world we live in influences us simultaneously.<sup>45</sup> These three basic constructivist assumptions guide the analysis. Narratives are interpreted as constituted by agents but also as having an influence on future behaviour of agents. The authors of a narrative and the narrative itself are thus in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

People understand the world and their surroundings through the prism of their own imagination which in turn is shaped by social norms, ideas, values and beliefs. In the words of *Wendt* there *is* such a thing as a socially constructed reality. That means, that the understanding of the world including the Self and Other is not naturally given but constructed through and influenced by social agents.<sup>46</sup> That being said, it is not my intention to assert that a conflict is entirely socially constructed. A conflict has a very material and physical dimension which cannot be neglected in a comprehensive conflict analysis. However, the aim here is to focus on the non-physical dimension, arguing that it has the potential to shape how the physical dimension is perceived. To find narratives of identification in the material, concepts of social identity, Self and Other and nationalism were applied and are elaborated on in the following sections.

#### 3.1. Reconceptualising Social Identity

*“...unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.” – George Orwell<sup>47</sup>*

In this section I discuss the meaning of social identity, and the way it is applied in this study. The concept of social identity as proposed by *Henri Tajfel* is compared with *Rogers Brubaker's*

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<sup>44</sup> *Wendt, Alexander, Identity and Structural Change in International Politics*, in Y. Lapid, F. Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder, CO:Lynne Rienner,1996, p. 50

<sup>45</sup> *Onuf, N., A World of Our Making, Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press

<sup>46</sup> *Wendt, Alexander, Identity and Structural Change in International Politics*, in Y. Lapid, F. Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder, CO:Lynne Rienner,1996, p. 50

<sup>47</sup> *Orwell, George, All art is propaganda: critical essays*, 1. ed., Harcourt, Orlando, 2008

and *Fredrick Cooper's* critique of social identity as an analytical category. The reason why processes of Self and Other identification are important is that these were the most significant reoccurring themes in the material. In order to examine how these Selves and Others are narratively constructed, the concept of "Self and Other" needs a theoretical base.

Social groups tend to define themselves based on ideas to which members can relate positively and which are expressed in the discourse of the group-members. The function of these ideas is to define the group as an entity, distinct from others. *Tajfel* argues that we tend to divide the world into *Us* and *Them* based on social categorisation. This categorisation is based on the cognitive process to group things together and while doing so exaggerating the differences.<sup>48</sup> The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that in-groups will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group in order to enhance their self-image.<sup>49</sup>

Tajfel's research has shown that the mere fact of being categorised as a group member produces ethnocentrism and competitive intergroup behaviour, called *minimal group paradigm*. The same applies to categorizations on social media.<sup>50</sup> People differentiate themselves from others by categorisation, stereotyping and generalisation, which according to Tajfel becomes more pronounced and hostile as soon as social tensions arise.<sup>51</sup> Since the analysed content originates from a context of social tensions, these processes are of interest for this study.

Yet, there are at least two major drawbacks of social identity theory that need to be addressed. The first is the extensive emphasis on individual cognitive agency and the *absence of structural explanations*. While people differentiate themselves from others by categorisation, stereotyping and generalisation, they might not do so intentionally. *Robert Resch* and *Paul Berkeley* argue, that all discursive practises, including discursive constructions and identity formation, are bound up with social relations of power that in turn are determined by economic factors.<sup>52</sup> In their words, human agency cannot be entirely reduced to the will of the free man, but rather needs to be seen through the prism of roles and positions that are assigned by society.<sup>53</sup>

This means, all social action is characterised by a contradiction between individual agency and the *structures of society*. Accordingly, social identity (formation) cannot be

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<sup>48</sup> Simply Psychology, *Social Identity Theory*, 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>49</sup> Tajfel, Henri, *Social identity and intergroup behaviour*, Social Science Information, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 65-93, 1974, p. 72

<sup>50</sup> Hogg M.A. (2016) *Social Identity Theory*. In: McKeown S., Haji R., Ferguson N. (eds) *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*. Peace Psychology Book Series. Springer, Cham

<sup>51</sup> Tajfel, Henri, *Stereotypes, Race*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 3-14, 1963, p. 3

<sup>52</sup> Resch, Robert, Berkeley, Paul, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, University of California Press, 1992, p. 24

<sup>53</sup> Resch, Robert, Berkeley, Paul, 1992, p. 27

understood without taking into account the determining impact of structural forces. While actors might construct an identity based on the category they wish to belong to, this wish is not free but influenced by social and economic structures in society. These structures need to be taken into account when examining processes of social identification.

The second drawback is the concept's *ambiguity*. Brubaker and Cooper argue that the constructivist stance on identity leaves us without any rationale for talking about identity at all, because if it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external identifications?<sup>54</sup> They are not opposed to analysing processes of identification in general, but criticise the reifying effect the concept of social identity has.<sup>55</sup> Instead they suggest alternative, more precise analytical idioms such as 'identification of oneself and others', 'situating oneself and others in a narrative' or on the group level: "identifying oneself by membership in a class of persons sharing categorical attributes."<sup>56</sup>

Further, Brubaker and Cooper point out, that self- and other-identification are situational and contextual, that there is a basic distinction between self-identification and the identification of oneself by others. Self-identification, even though it takes place in a *dialectical interplay* with external identification (being defined by others), does not necessarily overlap with it. External identification is carried out by what they call "identifiers". The state is a powerful identifier but cannot, despite its resources, monopolise the production of categories and identifications – even less so on social media. Further, identification can be carried out anonymously by discourses or public narratives.<sup>57</sup>

While acknowledging the cognitive aspects of stereotyping and dividing the world in Us and Them as proposed by Tajfel, the concept of social identity is not used as an analytical category in this study. The focus lies on analysing the *process* of constructing an identity, not the identity itself. Therefore, the analytical categories proposed by Brubaker and Cooper were found useful. More specifically, this study refers to *Self- and Other-identification*. Thereby, structural factors can be taken into account without undermining the constructivist elements in such processes and it opens up for a more nuanced analysis of the dialectic interplay of self-identification and external identification.

One way of Self- and Other identification is to invoke a group's collective memory, which is also referred to in this thesis. *Collective memory* is a shared pool of memories, knowledge

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<sup>54</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, Cooper, Frederick, *Beyond Identity*, Theory and Society, Vol. 29, pp. 1-47, 2000, p. 1

<sup>55</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, Cooper, Frederick, 2000, p. 8

<sup>56</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, Cooper, Frederick, 2000, p. 14-15

<sup>57</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, Cooper, Frederick, 2000, p. 16

and information that is significantly associated with the group's identity.<sup>58</sup> In this study, it is the celebration of Victory Day, Independence Day and national commemorations of the past.<sup>59</sup> According to *Anthony D. Smith*, the glorious dead, such as fallen soldiers, invoke a sense of normative commitment and represent a reflexive act of national self-worship through which the nation is revealed as the sacred communion of the people.<sup>60</sup> Speaking of the nation, nationalistic narratives were invoked frequently throughout the material and are elaborated in the next section.

### 3.2. National Identification and Nationalism

Reoccurring themes in the material are references to nationality, patriotism and the nation state, often coupled with a motivation or legitimisation for the prevalent political circumstances. How Self and Other are constructed in relation to nationalism as a concept is therefore central in the analysis. The underlying assumption is as proposed by *Ernest Gellner*, that nations and nationalism neither come naturally nor exist universally.<sup>61</sup> Instead, nations are invented where they previously did not exist.<sup>62</sup> In this study, nationalism and processes of national identification are treated as invented and often unconsciously produced and reproduced.

This concept is broadened by *Benedict Anderson's* perspective. Anderson also acknowledges that nationalism is not inherent in human nature, but rejects Gellner's definition in that, that nationalism is a subconscious process, based on oblivion about our natural pluralistic condition. Anderson argues instead that nations are not only invented but *imagined* political communities.<sup>63</sup> In other words, without actively imagining them, nations and hence nationalism would not exist. Both definitions are useful for the analysis. Some narratives openly promote a national identity while others foster a nationalistic spirit more subtle. The former can be explained with Anderson's – the latter more accurately with Gellner's perspective. In the next section the concept of nationalism is discussed in a post-Soviet context, focusing on Ukraine and Russia.

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<sup>58</sup> Hirst, William; Manier, David (April 2008), *Towards a psychology of collective memory*, *Memory* (Hove, England). 16 (3): pp. 183–200

<sup>59</sup> Roediger, Henry L.; Wertsch, James V. (January 2008), *Creating a new discipline of memory studies*, *Memory Studies*. 1 (1): pp. 9–22

<sup>60</sup> Smith, Anthony D., *Chosen peoples*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 249

<sup>61</sup> Gellner, Ernest, *Nationalism*, Nya Doxa, Nora, 1997, p. 23

<sup>62</sup> Gellner, Ernest, 1997, p.25

<sup>63</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., *Den föreställda gemenskapen: reflexioner kring nationalismens ursprung och spridning*, Daidalos, Göteborg, 1993, p. 65

### 3.3. Nationalism in post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia

Nationalism as a concept appears in different shapes depending on the historical and political context and there are myriads of scholarly work on nationalism as a phenomenon in post-Soviet communities. Mikhail Molchanov for example writes about *post-communist nationalism*. He describes it as a “painful search for a European identity” (in Ukraine) and “a painful effort to distance oneself from the West” (in Russia).<sup>64</sup> Russian nationalism is conceptualised as a *reactionary defence strategy* against isolation from western Europe, Ukrainian nationalism by a desire for the West while keeping Russia as a strategic partner at arms length.<sup>65</sup> Igor Torbakov et.al. attempt to define the “true Russian nationalism” and juxtapose Russian ethnic nationalists versus Eurasianists. Roman Szporluk claims that the transition from the Soviet Union to the independent states of Russia and Ukraine was carried out in the name of nationalism. Andreas Umland et.al. point out the myths, on which the Ukrainian nation-state allegedly is based, and assert that Ukraine still lags behind other European countries in the process of nation-state building.<sup>66</sup>

While this ought neither to be an exhaustive nor representative list, it provides a glimpse into some of the existing paradigms and while all approach the issue from different angles, they have one thing in common: the presumption that nationalism and nation-formation are conscious processes. *Rogers Brubaker* does not agree. He argues that nationalism is not always a deliberate choice. Sometimes it is just a factum people are confronted with, as was the case after the first world war, where millions of people were assigned to nations other than their own and again after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, where people were forced to become residents of states, not necessarily of their own choice.<sup>67</sup>

Brubaker distinguishes between three kinds of nationalism: *nationalising nationalism*, involving ethno-cultural claims to a core-nation as legitimate owner of a state, *homeland nationalism*, transcending the borders of the state involving claims about the need to protect the interests of a nations’ ethnonational kin in other states and *minority nationalism* who define themselves as opposed to both nationalising and homeland nationalism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Molchanov, Mikhail, *Post-Communist Nationalism as a Power Resource: A Russia-Ukraine comparison*, Nationalities Papers, Abingdon, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2000, pp. 263- 288, p. 265

<sup>65</sup> Molchanov, Mikhail, 2000, p. 279

<sup>66</sup> Torbakov, I. B., *After empire : nationalist imagination and symbolic politics in Russia and Eurasia in the twentieth and twenty-first century [Elektronisk resurs]*, 2018, p. 95 and: Szporluk, Roman, *Nationalism after communism: reflections on Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland*, Nations and Nationalism, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1998, pp. 301-320, p. 318 and: Oleinik, Anton, Umland, Andreas, *Building Ukraine from Within: A Sociological, Institutional and Economic Analysis of a Nation-State in the Making*, Ibidem Verlag, 2018, p. 40

<sup>67</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 8

<sup>68</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 6

These distinctions help to nuance the analysis of the formation of a national self-identification among Russian and Ukrainian actors. For example, Ukrainian nationalism might be more centred around a core-nation while Russian nationalism rather transcends the borders of its state. Accordingly, nationalism is not confined to a certain territory and it is not necessarily something that precedes a nation. Brubaker recommends *not* to presume a nexus between a nation and nationalism, but to think about nationalism as an independent concept. Further he suggests to analyse nationalism from an eventful perspective, i.e. not always as manufactured but in some contexts as something that happens. This is important, especially when examining national self-identification in nation-states that “happened” as a result of political disintegration as they did in Ukraine and Russia.

Summing up, the concept of social identity as defined by Tajfel, the conceptualisation of modes of identification by Brubaker and the different dimensions of nationalism as laid down by Gellner, Anderson and Brubaker provide the theoretical base of the analysis. They are treated as interlinked: beyond the process of identification (Brubaker) lies the cognitive process of wanting to belong to a social group (Tajfel) without which the identification with a nation or nationalist sentiments (Gellner, Anderson) could not be understood.

#### 4. Literature Review

In this chapter I present previous research that constitutes vantage points for this study. The overview is divided into five subsections, starting with discussing the mutual constituting functions of identity-formation at the state-level. Even though this study does not focus exclusively on the state-level, it provides important theoretical insights into how the constructions of Self and Other dialectically impact each other. In the second section, the ambivalent relationship of Central Europe and *the East* is explored, because this narrative constitutes to some extent the foundation for the conflict in eastern Ukraine today. Since the empirical material is comprised of social media content, the third section deals with states’ usage of social media with a focus on digital diplomacy and identity formation. In order to provide an empirical base for the analysed non-state actors’ online behaviour, the fourth section focuses on how non-state actors with political interests make use of social media, concluding with a section on the misuse and instrumentalisation of social media in the context of conflict.

#### 4.1. Dynamics of the Self-Other Dialectic

*Constance Duncombes* examines the dynamics of Self and Other-representation among states.<sup>69</sup> According to her, state-to-state relations mirror the concept of Self and Other on the individual level.<sup>70</sup> States' ideas about Self and Other are important, as the beliefs states hold about each other influence international politics. Duncombes argues that the *recognition* of the Other and consequently of its identity is structured around systems of *representation* that affect how foreign policy is made. These processes of recognition and representation are also prevalent among the actors in this study.

*Self-Other dialectic* describes the Self's struggle for recognition. It exists only insofar as the Other recognises its existence. These modes of identification, representation and recognition of the Self by the Other and vice versa are subject to continuous interpretation and reinterpretation or as Edward Said put it: a constant struggle for the positions of master and slave.<sup>71</sup> According to Said, the self-perception in Western societies depends on 'othering' as a process where the Self is constructed in mirroring processes in which the Other is created simultaneously. In his work on nationalist discourse in Iran, *Rouzbeh Parsi* eloquently formulates it like this: the Self and the outsiders must mutually constitute each others ostensible stable roles, positions and qualities.<sup>72</sup>

By representing the Other as inferior and unequal, the Self generates a repetition of its own dominant position within the social power structure. Without the Other, the Self would be unrecognised. Thus, the representation of the Other acts to substantiate the idea of the Self. One concrete example that is relevant for this study is according to *Erik Ringmar*, Russia's Self in relation to the dominant European Other.<sup>73</sup> Russian identity emerged parallel to the construction of the European Self during the renaissance, where (western) Europe represented itself as the centre of civilisation and Russia as backward and unsophisticated.

Ringmar argues that the recognition of Russia's Self as the insignificant Other in the eyes of Europe made the nation-state feel insecure, which in turn affected Russia's foreign policy. The struggle for recognition is therefore central for the construction of the state because a state views itself and its position within the state-system partially in terms of how the Other

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<sup>69</sup> Duncombes, Constance, *Foreign policy and the politics of representation: the West and its Others*, Global Change, Peace & Security, No. 23, vol.1, 2011, pp. 31-46

<sup>70</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2011, p. 32

<sup>71</sup> Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 2003[1979], p. 332

<sup>72</sup> Parsi, Rouzbeh, *In search of caravans lost: Iranian intellectuals and nationalist discourse in the inter-war years*, Historiska institutionen, Lunds universitet, Lund, 2009, p. 48; 53;

<sup>73</sup> Ringmar, Erik, *The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia Against the West*, Cooperation and Conflict, No. 37, 2002, pp. 115-136, p. 115-116

recognises it. I argue that this also applies to non-state actors and individual human beings, therefore Ringmar is relevant in the context of this thesis, where the focus lies partly on how state representatives – but also non-state actors struggle for mutual recognition.<sup>74</sup> In the next section the Self-Other dialectic in the central/east European context is further elaborated.

## 4.2. “The East” in Central European Identity Formation

*Drunk they defeated Napoleon. Drunk they beat Hitler. Drunk they could win against NATO. – Edward Luttwak<sup>75</sup>*

Identity is inconceivable without difference; it needs to be contrasted to something. Iver B. Neumann argues, that the debate about Central Europe, including Ukraine, its history, shape and mission is a good example of a search for identity. Identity is a relation, that is always forming and reforming in discourse. It follows, that ‘Central Europe’ does not *exist*, but is continuously *created*.<sup>76</sup> If identity depends on contrast to an Other, the formation of identity, of Self and Other, proceed together and influence each other.

According to Neumann, the important question is *how* this differentiation is produced. When he wrote this article in 1993 he characterised the ‘central European project’ as a metaphor against Soviet rule over Eastern Europe but simultaneously also against the American way of life in Western Europe. Whether this can be maintained today is doubtful. However, what might not have changed so much is that Russia plays the role of the non-European Other for central European states.<sup>77</sup> The question is, according to Neumann, not so much whether or not Russia is morally inferior but whether this condition is confined in time to the Soviet political system or whether the Other is eternal Russia (and therefore an unchangeable condition). As the famous writer Milan Kundera put it:

Russia is not just as one more European power- but as singular civilisation an Other civilisation...totalitarian Russian civilisation is the radical negation of the modern West.<sup>78</sup>

Neumann draws parallels between European integration and nationalism and claims that the ‘central European project’ in fact is similar to nationalism, inasmuch as it tries to turn the political field into a battlefield between groups that are not only culturally, but often ethnically

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<sup>74</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2011, p. 38

<sup>75</sup> Neumann, Iver B., *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation*, 1998, p. 104

<sup>76</sup> Neumann, Iver B., *European Identity, EU expansion and the integration/exclusion nexus*, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 23, No. 3, 1998, pp. 397- 416, p. 405

<sup>77</sup> Neumann, Iver, B. 1993, p. 369

<sup>78</sup> Iver, Neumann, *European Identity, EU expansion and the integration/exclusion nexus*, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 23, No. 3, 1998, pp. 397- 416 p. 403

defined. The ‘central European project’ is a too vague expression for an analytical concept that could be applied here. However, it is an interesting thought that the European integration of Central Europe, including Ukraine, would be advocated deliberately at the expense of Russia.<sup>79</sup> But maybe it is even more interesting to see it the other way around. Maybe Russia thrives on being the Other, separated from the rest. As former top aide of the Russian president Vladislav Surkov formulated and sounding quite content about it: “Russia is a Western-Eastern half-breed nation. With its double-headed statehood, hybrid mentality, intercontinental territory and bipolar history, it is charismatic, talented, beautiful and lonely.”<sup>80</sup>

Neumann examines also how a state’s identity is constructed in relation to the concept of Europe. He argues that a reoccurring theme is to represent the own state as ‘more European’ than one’s ‘more eastern’ neighbouring states.<sup>81</sup> He comes to the conclusion that among western- and central European states, Russia has consistently been seen as an irregularity and that the inclusion of Central European states into western European institutional structures has been accompanied by stressing the exclusion of Russia.<sup>82</sup> This way of looking at it is an important complementary perspective to be kept in mind later during the analysis.

### 4.3. Social Media and States

*Modern states are built not only on force and wealth but also on their capacity to more effectively communicate normative demands for state loyalty and national unity.*<sup>83</sup>

Social media is a key medium for communication and states have increasingly come to operate within this ecosystem.<sup>84</sup> Constance Duncombes studies how states use social media and argues that they are fundamentally changing the space within which inter-state dialogue and diplomacy unfolds.<sup>85</sup> Diplomats increasingly rely on Twitter when communicating with their counterparts, and this exchange occurs now in front of a global audience which makes it an even more important research field.<sup>86</sup>

By giving state representatives a platform where they can publically communicate, Twitter shapes states’ struggle for mutual recognition. When a state believes it is recognised in

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<sup>79</sup> Neumann, Iver, B. 1998, p. 405

<sup>80</sup> Surkov, Vladislav, *The Loneliness of the Half-Breed*, Russia in Global Affairs: Opinions, 28 August 2018

<sup>81</sup> Neumann, Iver, B. 1998, p. 407

<sup>82</sup> Neumann, Iver, B. 1998, p. 412

<sup>83</sup> Duncombes, Constance, *Twitter and transformative diplomacy: social media and Iran-US relations*, International Affairs, No. 93, vol. 3, 2017, pp. 551

<sup>84</sup> Duncombes, Constance, *The Politics of Twitter: Emotions and the Power of Social Media*, International Political Sociology (2019) no. 13, pp. 409-429

<sup>85</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, pp. 545-562

<sup>86</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 547

a way that is different from how it represents itself, it will try to change that and engage in a struggle for recognition.<sup>87</sup> I argue in this thesis that this even applies to non-state actors. Social media effectively cultivate communities of identity formation. According to Duncombes, how a state represents itself and recognises others via social media can make particular foreign policy options possible and rule out others. Further, the collapse of space and time brought about by social media has added to the complex environment in which diplomacy occurs. Social media shapes and transforms diplomacy.<sup>88</sup> Duncombes argues, that this state-to-state diplomatic engagement through social media remains under-examined. This is true even for the engagement among non-state actors and between states and non-state actors, which especially in conflicts that involve a variety of actors other than states could provide important insights.

In his study about the implications of mass media on state sovereignty, *Camber Warren* argues that modern states are built not only on their monopoly on the use of force or their economy, but also on their capacity to effectively communicate normative demands for state loyalty and national unity.<sup>89</sup> Communication matters, because foreign policy is socially and politically constructed through language.<sup>90</sup> Policy-makers increasingly employ Twitter during formal meetings to communicate directly with their counterparts. Diplomacy pursued through this channels becomes a public resource, increasing the power of the online audience, that is given the chance to directly contribute to reinforce what is being said by commenting and retweeting.

Social media provides insight into patterns of representation that reflect a particular form of state identity. Duncombes argues that representations of state identity projected through social media can shape recognition and thereby legitimise political possibilities for change.<sup>91</sup> Information technology is an inescapable tool of international relations, in the form of digital diplomacy and cyberspace as the new frontier of warfare.<sup>92</sup> Analysing social media posts can therefore reveal a lot about the intentions of actors. Duncombes argues that we should look at the broader picture of state interaction and take into consideration the space, social media platforms such as Twitter allow for dialogue. This space could then be used in a constructive way.

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<sup>87</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 548

<sup>88</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 549

<sup>89</sup> Warren, T. Camber, *Not by Words Alone: Soft Power, Mass Media, and the Production of State Sovereignty*, International Organisation, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2014, p. 112

<sup>90</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 554

<sup>91</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 556

<sup>92</sup> Duncombes, Constance, 2017, p. 562

#### 4.4. Social Media and Non-State Actors

While Duncombes examines states, *Julia Ebner* focuses on how non-state actors, more specifically extremists (jihadists and right-wing extremists) use it to spread their narratives. Ebner argues, that what a history book did before, social media does today, which is creating narratives about our perceived reality.<sup>93</sup> Extremists use social media for that purpose and the digital nature of it contributes significantly to how fast these narratives and often binary world-views spread. Several hundred years ago, creating and disseminating narratives was a privilege confined only to the most influential. Today, almost everybody can do it.<sup>94</sup> According to Ebner, *narratives have traditionally been the most powerful means to control – but are today paradoxically also the least controllable determinants of power.*

During the last hundred years, (print) media has had a decisive role in both escalating and solving conflicts. Social media has increased the potential scope and speed of such narratives: they overcome territorial boundaries, language barriers and can reach millions of people in less than a minute. Ebner argues that political extremists took advantage of the narrating possibilities enabled by social media, more than anyone else. Now, they spread their messages completely independent from any authority's approval or the support of mainstream media.<sup>95</sup> Social media gives an insight into how these actors operate and reveal patterns of their communication which is why studying discourses and narratives on social media is crucial in order to fill the empirical gap.

To a lesser extent but nonetheless existent, there is also scholarly work on the nexus between social media and post-Soviet nation-building. Post-Soviet nostalgia such as the use of history as an important mobilization force has been a theme on social media in both Ukrainian and Russian contexts. *Ivan Kozachenko* for example studies the use of Soviet-era symbols, myths and narratives within groups on social media during the Ukraine-crisis 2014-2015.<sup>96</sup> In a qualitative content analysis of online discussions, Kozachenko sheds light on how groups on social media are interlinked. He reveals that the analysed groups are primarily driven by neo-Soviet myths and hopes for a new USSR to emerge. However, his work focused on the EU-critical movement. This thesis takes the analysis further by including political elites and non-state interest groups with different opinions.

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<sup>93</sup> Ebner, Julia, *Wut: was Islamisten und Rechtsextreme mit uns machen*, Theiss Verlag, Darmstadt, 2018, p. 150

<sup>94</sup> Ebner, Julia, 2018, p. 150

<sup>95</sup> Ebner, Julia, 2018, p. 151

<sup>96</sup> Kozachenko, Ivan, *Fighting for the Soviet Union 2.0: Digital nostalgia and national belonging in the context of the Ukrainian crisis*, Communist and Post-Communist Studies, University of Cambridge, No. 52, 2019, pp. 1-10

*Elizaveta Gaufman* analyses the discursive construction of the Ukrainian crisis in Russian media and the usage of World War II narratives in order to represent the Euromaidan participants as being on the wrong side of history, which is an very interesting approach.<sup>97</sup> Gaufman stresses the importance of collective memory as an intrinsic part of national and individual identity, following the logic of self-inflation and by default negative stereotyping of the other.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.5. Social Media, Disinformation and Information War

Another important perspective on social media is provided by *Mykola Makhortykh* and *Yehor Lyebyedyev* who study the usage of Twitter hashtags in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>99</sup> They focus on the Twitter campaign #SaveDonbassPeople in 2014, suggesting that the conflict is *framed* as a clash of identities, rather than *resulting from* clashing identities. This is an aspect born in mind in this study. While the analysis targets the construction of Self and an Other in the context of conflict it is not argued that these constructions are the roots of the conflict. Rather it is assumed that the emergence of conflict affects the self-perception in relation to others among the actors and that the relation between conflict, Self and Other needs to be examined more closely.

Further, Makhortykh and Lyebyedyev contest the view that online-platforms make the internet more democratic. Instead it makes tools of propaganda more easily accessible for a wider range of actors, who with the help of digital media exaggerate and inflate differences among each other based on made-up dichotomies.<sup>100</sup> The fact that social media platforms are used to spread propaganda, and in the conflict in Ukraine are continuously exploited to disseminate disinformation and misinformation is an important aspect of the material in this study. However, I do not argue that social media utterances are a reliable source when it comes to the description of certain events. What is important is the existence of the narratives and their potential impact on public opinion.

Makhortykh and Lyebyedyev conclude that further research is needed on interactions between different actors involved in the crisis, on the internationalisation of the conflict, the evolution of frames for representing the conflict and the way how social media can be used for

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<sup>97</sup> Gaufman, Elizaveta, World War II 2.0: *Digital memory of Faascism in Russia in the Aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine*, Journal of Regional Security, No. 10:1, pp. 17-36, 2015, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

<sup>98</sup> Gaufman, Elizaveta, 2015, p. 21

<sup>99</sup> Makhortykh, Mykola, Lyebyedyev, Yehor, #SaveDonbassPeople: *Twitter, Propaganda, and Conflict in Eastern Ukraine*, The Communication Review, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 239-270, 2015

<sup>100</sup> Makhortykh, Mykola, Lyebyedyev, Yehor, 2015, p. 263

propaganda.<sup>101</sup> This study builds upon at least two of these suggestions: it aims at deepening the understanding for the interactions between different actors involved in the crisis and highlights some of the reoccurring frames used for representing the conflict.

As the conflict in eastern Ukraine is widely viewed as a hybrid war, with cyberspace including mass media and online platforms such as Twitter constituting an important part of the battlefield, a few words need to be said about it. *Yevgeniy Golovchenko et. al.* examine the role of civil society in what they call the information-warfare over Ukraine.<sup>102</sup> The most influential agenda-setters can only be identified by examining what is said, how information flows and by whom it is spread whereby citizens as a combined group have, according to Golovchenko et.al, the highest impact.<sup>103</sup> Even though the focus of this study is not to problematize information-warfare and disinformation in particular, it relates to the findings of Golovchenko et.al by further developing the understanding for non-state actors on online platforms and their narratives. The greater knowledge one has about the actors' way of communicating, the better one can respond to their actions and develop strategies to counter disinformation. While it exceeds the scope of this study to examine this more extensively, it is an important task for further research. In the next chapter follows a discussion of the analysed material and the methodological approaches to it.

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<sup>101</sup> Makhortykh, Mykola, Lyebedyev, Yehor, 2015, p. 269

<sup>102</sup> Golovchenk, Yevgeniy, Hartmann, Mareike, Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, *State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation*, International Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 5, pp. 975-994, 2018

<sup>103</sup> Golovchenk, Yevgeniy, Hartmann, Mareike, Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, 2018, p. 990

## 5. Material and Methodological Approaches

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, social media content is relevant when studying conflicts. Even though text sequences are relatively short, previous research has shown that this form of communication can tell us something important about the identity of the authors. The material in this study is comprised of social media content produced by selected groups, predominantly on Twitter. Overall about 3000 tweets, posts and short speeches published on social media were collected from which the content for closer analysis was derived. Apart from having become an important platform where discourses and narratives are produced and reproduced, social media also channels spontaneous reactions in a far greater degree than other forms of media. This is interesting because it adds a new, less predictable dimension to how narratives and discourses are shaped. Further, social media gives actors a voice, who otherwise would not have been able to disseminate their opinion publically. The construction of narratives and identities on social media are no longer confined to influential politicians and media companies. To answer the research questions, it was important to include several target groups from different sides to the conflict. In the following section, the selection of the material is explained, presented and summarised, starting with an overview of the target groups.

### 5.1. Selection of Target Groups

The criteria for selecting the target groups were determined based on an informed assumption of who is directly and indirectly involved in the conflict and does communicate on social media. This was investigated by thoroughly reading Ukrainian and Russian news from the period 2014-2020 and through dialogue with people living in the countries. The groups that turned out to be most involved in the conflict are *Russian* and *Ukrainian political elites, volunteers* fighting for the Ukrainian side and *Russia-backed groups* fighting for secession from Ukraine. Alternative relevant actors for such an analysis could have been cultural elites or intellectuals. They certainly have a great impact on both politics and public opinion. However, the purpose is to explore narratives among actors either on a political or military level involved in the conflict. Narratives and discourses produced by cultural elites and intellectuals are influential, but not central for answering the research question posed in this thesis. However, for a holistic understanding of discourses about the conflict cultural elites and intellectuals would need to be included, which is an important topic for further research.

The labels used to describe the actors in this study are based on *general conceptions* derived from media, institutional reports and previous research. They are, as pointed out in the background chapter (Chapter 2) not understood as fixed categories but open to adjustment. The target groups in this study are referred to as *Ukrainian political elites*, *Russian political elites*, *pro-Ukrainian volunteers* and *Russia-backed separatists*. Yet, they are used as tentative assumptions and will be compared to the actors' self-perception. As a next step, these actors were searched after on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and V Kontakte. In the following sections the individual actors per target group are presented.

### **The Ukrainian Political Elite**

Former President *Petro Poroshenko* turned out to be one of the most active users, whose party, European Solidarity suffered heavy losses in the parliamentary elections in 2019.<sup>104</sup> Ukraine's current President *Volodymyr Zelensky* has only had his account since his election in 2019 but represents an important actor and a shift in Ukrainian politics and is therefore included. Reoccurring is also content from Interior Minister *Arsen Avakov*. He has direct contact to the Azov volunteer battalion that will be described further down and issued its incorporation into the army. Another interesting figure is *Pavlo Klimkin*, a diplomat who played a central role in the negotiations of the Association Agreement with the EU. He was working for the integration of Ukraine into the EU already before the protests broke out in 2014.<sup>105</sup>

In general, it was difficult to find female politicians. One of the most well-known is head of the centre-right party *Batkyvshchyna* (Fatherland) *Yuliya Tymoshenko*, but she has not been very active on her Twitter account. However, she often holds strong opinions and her party's account quotes her regularly, which is why it has been included in the analysis.

### **The Pro-Ukrainian Volunteers**

A common Russian narrative about the conflict in Ukraine is that it is driven by a mob of fascists.<sup>106</sup> The Russian ministry of foreign affairs stated in 2014 that Russia needs to continue the resistance to the attempts of reviving Nazism and that they will draw attention to the "rampant ultra-nationalism" and gross suppression of opposing parties and politicians in Ukraine.<sup>107</sup> However, there is almost no electoral support for far-right political parties in Ukraine, neither in the recent nor previous elections.<sup>108</sup> Yet, there are actors, often described as

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<sup>104</sup> The Verchovna Rada of Ukraine, *Personnel and Structure, Deputy Factions and Groups of IX convocation*

<sup>105</sup> *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, Команда Петра Порошенка. Перші призначення, 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>106</sup> RT, *No to the Nazi coup d'etat in Ukraine! Rome protesters rally against fascism*, 17 May 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>107</sup> Twitter advanced Search: (from:mfa\_russia) until:2014-10-25 since:2014-10-15, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>108</sup> Uppsala Conflict Database, *Ukraine: Donetsk* – Summary, accessed: 10-05-2020

far-right or ultranationalist, comprised of pro-Ukrainian armed volunteers fighting in the Donbass.<sup>109</sup> In 2015, many of these groups were incorporated into the army because they were a decisive force when defending Ukrainian towns against occupation by the separatists.<sup>110</sup> One of the largest is the *Azov Battalion*. Azov has been accused of cooperating with far-right movements across Europe and even recruiting foreigners to join the war.<sup>111</sup> In Ukraine, the volunteers enjoy an image as defenders of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and regularly receive rewards from the government.<sup>112</sup> Andreas Umland has repeatedly argued that far-right movements do exist and can be problematic, but that they do not pose a real threat to Ukrainian democracy.<sup>113</sup> He points out that nationalism within “battling post-colonial countries who are still under attack” needs to be treated differently than nationalism in long-ago settled independent states, and argues:

Even nationalisms’ most militant expression can, under conditions of an ongoing war for independence not be easily interpreted as right-wing extremism, uncivil society or anti-democratic politics.<sup>114</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is not to prove the opposite. Rather it is complementary, because even if militant nationalism cannot be interpreted without taking into account its context, it needs to be interpreted as something that could spill over into everyday politics and therefore as a potential threat to human rights. The selected actors in this category are the official accounts of the *Azov Battalion*, the *Right Sector*, Azov leader *Andriy Biletsky* and the leaders of the Right Sector battalion *Vasil Labaichuk* and *Andriy Tarasenko*. The actors were chosen based upon an assessment of impact in form of amount of followers and online activity. The Azov battalion and Right Sector are elaborated on in the following sections.

## **The Azov Battalion**

*The regiment does not possess an ideology, but a worldview.*<sup>115</sup>

The Azov Battalion was established in May 2014. Later that year, Azov was, by the order of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, reorganized and expanded into a special force

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<sup>109</sup> RFERL, *Azov, Ukraine’s most prominent Ultranationalist Group Sets its Sights on U.S., Europe*, November 2018, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>110</sup> *Роз’яснення щодо статусу спеціального підрозділу "Азов"* [Clarification as to the status of Special Forces "Azov"]. ngu.gov.ua (in Ukrainian). 23 April 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>111</sup> Svenska Dagbladet, *svensk Nynazist deltar i striderna*, 2014-07-23, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>112</sup> Artem, Shevchenko, *Volunteer Battalions: Story of a Heroic Deed of Battalions That Saved Ukraine*, Folio, 2017 and: Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukrainian Volunteer Day

<sup>113</sup> Umland, Andreas, *Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: the Prehistory and Emergence of the Azov Battalion in 2014*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31:1, pp. 105-131, 2019, p. 108

<sup>114</sup> Umland, Andreas, 2019, p. 123

<sup>115</sup> Azov.org, *Про АЗОВ*, 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine.<sup>116</sup> According to information from their official homepage, Azov performs a crucial role in countering Russian aggression. They call themselves ‘Special Operations Regiment’, that only performs those functions assigned to it as a regular unit of the Ukrainian National Guard.<sup>117</sup> Azov does not spell out any ideological foundation, however according to other sources, the movement includes ultranationalists supporting white supremacy and anti-Semitic viewpoints.<sup>118</sup> The Ukrainian newspaper Euromaidanpress reports that the Azov battalion is respected for its discipline, high battle morals and effectiveness in protecting the city of Mariupol and that it is not a militia organization.<sup>119</sup>

### **Right Sector**

*Independence is when the nation itself governs its state according to its national interests, not a puppet in the hands of foreign governments or transnational corporations (...)*<sup>120</sup>

Right Sector is a Ukrainian nationalist political party and paramilitary movement, generally referred to as far-right.<sup>121</sup> During the elections in 2019, the party won no seats which means that the party holds no formal political power.<sup>122</sup> Like Azov, the Right Sector volunteer battalion is now merged with the Ukrainian army. According to the Right Sector’s own description, their ideology is ‘the Ukrainian national idea’, based on ethno-social and spiritually cultural factors. ‘Ukrainian nationalism’ is defined as follows:

An ideology of national freedom, the freedom of the people and individual  
An idea and cause in the name of Ukraine  
An ideology of defense, preservation and state assertion of the Ukrainian nation  
A philosophy of national existence.<sup>123</sup>

Right Sectors website says, that its members distrust the imperial ambitions of both Russia and the West. The former leader of the Right Sector Yarosh told the German newspaper Der Spiegel that he sees neither the EU nor NATO as potential partner but believes that they are part of a

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<sup>116</sup> Azov.org, Про АЗОВ, 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>117</sup> Azov.org, Manipulative Accusations in the address of the Special Operations Regiment AZOV, March 2019

<sup>118</sup> Aljazeera, Driven by far-right ideology, Azov Battalion mans Ukraine’s front line, 24 July 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>119</sup> Euromaidanpress, Is the Azov Battalion a terrorist organisation as 40 US House Democrats claim?, November, 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>120</sup> Pravyu Sektor, Міфи Незалежності, August 2017, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>121</sup> Короткий ідеологічно-виховний курс для ВО «Тризуб» ім. С. Бандери та «Правого сектора», accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>122</sup> Wikipedia, Right Sector, Election Results; visited: 10-05-2020

<sup>123</sup> Короткий ідеологічно-виховний курс для ВО «Тризуб» ім. С. Бандери та «Правого сектора», accessed: 10-05-2020

Ukraine-unfriendly coalition.<sup>124</sup> Their clear ideological vision and effective organisation made them relevant for the analysis.

### **The Russian Political Elite**

*Clearly, Ukraine is closer to us than anyone else, because we are almost one people.*<sup>125</sup>

Finding individuals from the Russian political elites on social media was challenging. The most active accounts turned out to be the official accounts of the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, the *Government* and the *Kremlin*. Vladimir Putin has no active personal account on Twitter, however, the Kremlin's institutional account features statements made by Putin in almost every post. Hence, even though he has no private account, his voice permeates the content disseminated by the Kremlin and is often echoed by the government and other Russian politicians. Putin's voice is constantly prevalent, despite not having a personal account. Former president and prime minister *Dmitry Medvedev* however holds an individual account that has been included.

### **The Russia-Backed Separatists**

*Donbass and Crimea, like most of Ukraine, are Russian territory, we use equipment and mercenaries there, wherever we want.*<sup>126</sup>

In 2014, separatists occupied several regions in eastern Ukraine, later proclaiming the so called peoples republics of Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR). The ruling party in DPR is Donetsk Republic (DR).<sup>127</sup> On their homepage their ideology is described as Russophile, Eurosceptic, anti-atlantic, anti-american and Russian-nationalist.<sup>128</sup>

The selected actors are Pavel Gubarev, Denis Pushilin, Sergej Aksenov and Natalja Poklonskaja. *Pavel Gubarev* is a separatist who advocates pan-Slavism and was a member of the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity paramilitary group.<sup>129</sup> *Denis Pushilin* is the president of the self-proclaimed peoples' republic Donetsk. *Sergej Aksenov* is the head of the annexed

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<sup>124</sup> *Der Spiegel*, Ukrainian Civilians Take up Arms, April 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>125</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Donbas OR Crimea OR Europe OR Peace OR War OR Values OR Ukraine OR Донбасс OR Крым OR Европа OR Мир OR Война OR Ценности OR Украина) (from:MedvedevRussiaE) , accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>126</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Donbas OR Crimea OR Europe OR Peace OR War OR Values OR Ukraine OR Донбасс OR Крым OR Европа OR Мир OR Война OR Ценности OR Украина) (from:SpmBp OR from:AlexZacharchenko OR from:juchkovsky OR from:pushilindenis) , accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>127</sup> Обращение к гражданам Донбасса, Донецкая Республика, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>128</sup> ДОНЕЦКАЯ РЕСПУБЛИКА, О нас, ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ «ДОНЕЦКАЯ РЕСПУБЛИКА», 2014 - 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>129</sup> Snyder, Tymothy, *Far-Right Forces are Influencing Russia's Actions in Crimea*, 17 March 2014

peninsula Crimea. He has been active on Twitter since 2014 where he has 88 000 followers. Talking about Crimea, *Natalja Poklonskaja* state prosecutor of Crimea is included too. Most accounts are based on Twitter but in the rare cases where links to other social media profiles were made, these, mostly Facebook, Vkontakte or Government homepages, were included as well. All accounts have in common that they have been frequently used during the period between 2014 and 2020.

## 5.2. Methodological Approach

The purpose of this study is to examine how the above presented actors narratively construct and express their identities on social media and how their self-perception relates to externally assigned identities. Hereby, the structure of these narratives and the modes of identity formation are analysed. Constructing narratives on social media, where they can be endlessly reproduced, has the potential to synchronise peoples' way of thinking and links people together within a certain social context which makes them powerful tools.<sup>130</sup> The focus of the analysis lies on how the concrete narratives on a micro-level, i.e. stories about the conflict on social media, can be related to accumulative and reoccurring narrative themes on a macro-level, such as more general attitudes towards the conflict.<sup>131</sup> This study covers six years of social media content, in order to access this accumulative themes.

Narrative analysis can be conducted with different methods; qualitative content analysis is one of them. The material is diverse, in the sense that it consists of Twitter posts (very short texts), Facebook posts (longer texts) and webpage content (much longer, less personal texts). In order to access the material in its diversity, the model of *qualitative content analysis* by Hsieh and Shannon is used and extended by including a *linguistic perspective*, inspired by George Lakoff and John B. Thompson. Both approaches are situated within the framework of narrative analysis. In the following sections, these methods are elaborated, beginning with an overview of narratives and narrative analysis. Hereby, Roland Barthe's theory of a *structural narrative analysis*, Hayden White's description of the *use of narrativity* when presenting reality and Jörn Ruesens interpretation of *historical narratives* are the central vantage points. In the next sections these approaches are separately elaborated on.

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<sup>130</sup> Robertson, Alexa, in: Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), *Textens mening och makt: metodbok i samhällsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*, 3., [utök.] uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2012, p. 256

<sup>131</sup> Robertson, Alexa, 2012, p. 259

### 5.2.1. Narratives and Narrative Analysis

*All wars require coherent and believable narratives and all narratives are built on disparate binary codes that separate the sacred from the profane, the good from evil, the rational from the irrational.*<sup>132</sup>

In this study, the underlying assumption is that human beings construct, communicate and understand the world through narratives. Consequently, this also applies to social media. *Hayden White* argues that narratives permeate our understanding of the world to such an extent that studying them means to reflect on the nature of humanity itself.<sup>133</sup> It follows that in order to understand anything that has to do with human beings, one needs to study the narratives through which they communicate. White defines narratives as metacodes on which transcultural messages about a shared reality are transmitted.<sup>134</sup> Hence, narratives are important for anyone who wants to transmit a message including actors on social media. As *Roland Barthes* put it, there is not and there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative.<sup>135</sup>

The empirical material of this study is comprised of fairly small text segments. However, according to Barthes, even such small segments are meaningful parts of a narrative because the sentence is the smallest segment that is systematically representative of discourse.<sup>136</sup> He argues, that narratives operative on several levels: levels of function, action and narration, where a function refers to the words, action to the content, and narration to how the content is told.<sup>137</sup> Functions are the *story* (what is happening?), actions are the *discourse* (how is the story told).<sup>138</sup>

Similarly, *Tzvetan Todorov*, a scholar of the Russian formalist tradition, proposes that narratives work on two principal levels where the *story* is the argument made and the *discourse* are tenses, aspects and modes, which amount to a narrative.<sup>139</sup> If, as Barthes suggests, one sentence can be representative of a discourse, and if discourses as Todorov suggests amount to narratives, than short texts such as posts on social media are suitable material within which narratives can be identified. The first step of a narrative analysis is to break it down to its smallest discursive units. With social media it is the other way around: the posts are already small discursive units. The challenge is to piece them back together and reconstruct the superior coherent narrative they belong to. In the process of doing so, all details matter. Even if a

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<sup>132</sup> Smith, Philip, *Why war?: the cultural logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 27

<sup>133</sup> White, Hayden, *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1980, pp. 5-27, p. 5

<sup>134</sup> White, Hayden, 1980, p. 7

<sup>135</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6., No. 2, 1975, pp. 237-272

<sup>136</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, 1975, p. 239

<sup>137</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, 1975, p. 239

<sup>138</sup> Robertson, Alexa, 2012, p. 230

<sup>139</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, 1975, p. 241

sentence might appear meaningless, it is nonetheless a (meaningless) part of the bigger picture. As Barthes puts it:

Even though a detail might appear trivial, it would nonetheless end up pointing to its own absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning or nothing has.<sup>140</sup>

All narrative communication, including communication on social media as is argued in this thesis, includes a sender and a recipient. However, social media makes real-time idea and event sharing possible on a global scale and narratives do not only work vertically, with one sender and one recipient but rather centrifugally, where anyone can contribute, enlarge or alter the narrative. In other words: narratives go many ways, blurring the lines between narrator and audience, endowing literally everyone with the ability to become a part of (re)telling the story. This multidirectional process obstructs the ability to trace content back to its original source, however, it enables us to identify trends because some stories become more popular than others.

One more important aspect for this study is intersubjectivity. Finding and analysing narratives depends on interpretation. According to historian *Jörn Rüsen*, interpretation is always to some degree subjective, which does not make it less credible as long as it reveals meaningful patterns over a longer period of time.<sup>141</sup> Further, Rüsen argues that narration is a system of mental operations that serves to establish the identity of *both* its authors and listeners.<sup>142</sup> Narratives are thus produced not only by the analysed actors but also by the analyst. How they are approached here, is explained in the next section.

### 5.2.2. Qualitative Content Analysis

*Qualitative content analysis is (...) a research method for the subjective interpretation of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.*<sup>143</sup>

If a narrative, as elaborated in the previous section, consist of a story and a discourse, then the story can be accessed by contextualisation of what the authors say with the actual events they refer to. Identifying the discourse, or the way *how* the narrative is expressed in the material requires a more systematic approach. Qualitative content analysis is such an approach. It is suitable for detecting patterns in a larger material and is traditionally conducted either with

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<sup>140</sup> Barthes, Roland, Duisit, Lionel, 1975, p. 245

<sup>141</sup> Rüsen, Jörn, *Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason*, Berghan Books, 2008, P. 11

<sup>142</sup> Rüsen, Jörn, 2008, p. 11

<sup>143</sup> Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, Shannon, Sarah E., *Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis*, Qualitative Health Research, Vol. 15, No. 9, November 2005, p. 1278

automated data analytics or manual. The latter is used here, because it allows for a deeper and more complex analysis.<sup>144</sup>

Content analysis usually includes the construction of a coding scheme, which is applied on the material for a systematic reading and filtering of what is relevant. The strict fixation on certain words or counting of words however would fail to capture important information that is obscured or expressed in metaphorical constructions. Therefore, the approach in this study is less strict and focuses instead on the main themes that emerged after a preliminary reading of the material. More explicitly, the focus lies on the reoccurring narratives within which the actors identify themselves and others. After several rounds of reading, most of the utterances that contained elements of Self- and Other-identification could be related to the conflict (conflict narrative) or to nationalism (nationalistic narrative), which constitute the two main themes around which the analysis is structured.

In order to do this, a conventional approach to qualitative content analysis inspired by *Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon* was used.<sup>145</sup> ‘Conventional’ means that there are no predefined categories or coding schemes as in a Directed Content Analysis, neither is counting words part of the method as in Summative Analysis’. Instead, the data, in this case about 3000 text sequences, is repeatedly read to obtain a sense of the whole. In a second round, the data is read more closely to identify reoccurring themes and concepts. During this phase, first impressions are noted down and contribute to the definition of concepts that are then assembled to meaningful clusters (the main narratives) to be used in the final stage of analysis.<sup>146</sup> The advantage of the conventional approach is that information is derived directly from the material. It is thus avoided to impose preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives. Often messages are obscured or delivered implicitly. Therefore, linguistic means with which content is explicitly or implicitly conveyed are taken into account as well. How this is done is explained in the next section.

### 5.2.3. Figures of Speech

*Metaphors cannot be seen or touched, but they create massive effects, and political intimidation is one such effect.– George Lakoff<sup>147</sup>*

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<sup>144</sup> Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), 2012, p. 51

<sup>145</sup> Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, Shannon, Sarah, 2005, p. 1279

<sup>146</sup> Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, Shannon, Sarah, 2005, p. 1279

<sup>147</sup> Lakoff, George, Frisch, Evan, *Five Years after 9/11: Drop the War Metaphor*, HuffPost, November 2006

The third methodological level is rooted in the field of rhetoric, more specifically the use of figurative expressions. Analysing metaphors can reveal the hidden content of messages or something more general about a prevalent discourse.<sup>148</sup> Even though the focus on linguistics constitutes only a marginal part of the analysis, it was useful for discovering nuances that could otherwise have fallen off the radar. Twitter allows only a limited amount of characters in each post, hence the few words used tend to become more laden. Therefore, it is not only interesting what is being said but also how this is done at the micro-level. *Ruta Marcinkeviciene* argues that the more important a topic is for the existence of society, the more awareness does the language deserve that is used to talk about it.<sup>149</sup> As it turned out, figures of speech were frequently used by all actors in this study, especially when talking about the conflict.

In general, figurative language such as metaphors, euphemisms or synecdoche, can be used to conceal the real meaning or obscure relations of domination, *John B. Thompson* argues. According to Thompson, *metaphors* can be used to dissimulate social relations by representing them or the individuals and groups embedded as endowed with characteristics which they do not literally possess and thereby accentuate certain features at the expense of others (using the term terrorist when referring to an adversary). *Euphemisms* describe phenomena in terms which elicit a positive evaluation (calling a war a ‘fight for freedom’), while *synecdoche* conflates a part with the whole or vice versa and can be used for dehumanising, for example when referring to Ukraine by using ‘Kyiv’ (conflating part with whole), or referring to the Russian president by using ‘Russia’ (conflating whole with part).<sup>150</sup> Often these tropes overlap or fulfil several of the criteria. What is important is that they are subtle but have an impact on how a narrative is constructed and most importantly, how it is perceived.

Summing up, the methodological framework consists of three levels. The foundation is to identify narratives according to the definitions provided by Barthes, White and Ruesen.<sup>151</sup> This is done through contextualising and searching for larger narrative patterns in the individual utterances. The second level is repeatedly reading the material to identify reoccurring narratives of Self- and Other-identification by using (conventional) qualitative content analysis as proposed by Hsieh and Shannon. Finally, some fragments of the texts are analysed on a micro-

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<sup>148</sup> Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), 2012, p. 299

<sup>149</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, *A Dangerous Language*, in: Gouliamos, Kōstas & Kassimeris, Christos (red.), *The marketing of war in the age of neo-militarism*, Routledge, New York, 2012, p.23

<sup>150</sup> Thompson, John B., *Ideology and modern culture: critical social theory in the era of mass communication*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990, p. 63

<sup>151</sup> Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), 2012, p. 230

level from a linguistic perspective. In the next section some practical details about how the collection of the material was approached are explained.

#### 5.2.4. Selection of Content: Keyword-, Date-, and Event-based Search Strings

Twitter has an advanced search-function where accounts can be filtered according to the following categories:

Words

All of these words

*Example: what's happening · contains both "what's" and "happening"*

This exact phrase

*Example: happy hour · contains the exact phrase "happy hour"*

Any of these words

*Example: cats dogs · contains either "cats" or "dogs" (or both)*

None of these words

*Example: cats dogs · does not contain "cats" and does not contain "dogs"*

Accounts

From these accounts

*Example: @Twitter · sent from @Twitter*

Dates

From: Month-Day-Year To: Month-Day-Year

In total, utterances by all target groups concerning thirty events were collected, starting with the Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2014. The central conflict-related events that were included are the *outbreak of violent conflict* between pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan armed groups, the *occupation of parts of the Donbas* by Russia-backed separatists and the *annexation of Crimea* by Russian armed forces. Also, less hostile events were included, like the *peace agreements* brokered by Russia and Ukraine facilitated by France and Germany in the Belarusian capital Minsk, and utterances about the resulting cease-fire implementation and at some point even the exchange of prisoners.

Further, national holidays like the Ukrainian Independence Day and Victory Day of ending the Nazi-occupation celebrated by both Russia and Ukraine are included. Commemoration of the historical past is covered by including the *Holodomor Memorial Day* in Ukraine, where Ukraine mourns the victims of the great human-made famine under Stalin in 1933 and the *Holocaust memorial day* that is paid attention to in both Ukraine and Russia. Not all utterances were deemed relevant for the research question, therefore not all events will be commented upon in the analysis. The process of material gathering generated about 3000 posts, proportionally to the users from all target groups. In the next section the limitations of this thesis are outlined before turning to the analysis.

### 5.3. Scope of Investigation and Limitations

*Understanding means going in circles. It consists of an endless recapitulation and reassessment of collective memories, ever more voluminous but always selective. Nothing can be final and conclusive.*<sup>152</sup>

Every new generation must rewrite history, Zygmunt Bauman writes, and the historian and his individual social and political context are part of the process he is studying.<sup>153</sup> But is this study *historical*? Bauman would probably argue it is. According to him, an event becomes historical because of our effort to reach it, to understand it and thereby incorporate it in our present, which is what this study does. However, its theoretical foundation is based on the constructivist assumption that human beings create the world they live in and that in turn their creations are influenced by their social surroundings. The study is thus also *sociological*- maybe even anthropological and psychological. In other words: it is influenced by a variety of empirical schools and therefore best described as *interdisciplinary*.

So, how can a researcher ensure, that a study despite its interdisciplinary character does not slide into the pitfalls of arbitrariness and cherry-picking? This chapter is an attempt to answer this question and provides an assessment of the study's limitations. A first potential objection could be that this study is *qualitative* not *quantitative*. Analysis of social media content is often conducted quantitatively because the vast amount of content is easier to process. Further, automated analysis makes the research less dependent on the subjective interpretation because what is important is the *amount*, rather than the specific content of each text sequence.

However, while among others natural sciences emphasise that empirical validation must be impersonal, interpreting any human act is to re-create the actor's web of motives and intentions and requires a sympathetic self-identification with the actors.<sup>154</sup> In other words: one could not understand human acts by validating them in an impersonal manner. Since the purpose of this study is to understand human acts, a qualitative method is appropriate and the emphasis on the researcher's subjective interpretation does not mean that the result will be less valid. Rather, the researcher must be part of the process she is studying, or as Hegel puts it:

The object of knowledge is different from the object of truth. The subject of cognition [the researcher] must remain an active agent, of whose impact no object [the empirical material] and no knowledge can be cleansed. The subject is an indispensable condition of all

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<sup>152</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Hermeneutics and social science: approaches to understanding*, Routledge, 2010, p.21

<sup>153</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, 2010, p. 25

<sup>154</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, 2010, p. 30

knowledge. Subjectivity has been shown as inseparable from cognition. An objective knowledge, therefore, could be reached, if at all, through this subjectivity.<sup>155</sup>

According to him, it is important to abandon the naïve view of science to know “for sure” that this is exactly what happened. Further, every human action is part of tradition. We are immersed in traditions which we cannot comprehend but which are the base of our understanding and the interpretations we make.<sup>156</sup> That means that I as a researcher inevitably impact the research outcome based on the traditions I am consciously and subconsciously immersed in. This does not have to be a problem as long as it is brought into awareness and no claims to absolute truth are made.

Another critique could be that the material solely stems from the period of ongoing conflict which skews the analysis. Certainly, the relations between the actors are in an exceptional circumstance due to the conflict. However, it is these circumstances, that are interesting for this study. This affects the analysis and the material shall not be mistaken for being representative for Ukrainian-Russian relations in general. To avoid one-sidedness, a larger perspective on the relations is provided in the background chapter, however it is not this thesis’ ambition to provide an exhaustive explanation for the countries’ bilateral relations in general.

The material is comprised of *social media content*, ranging from small articles, website content or comments to smaller posts and statuses. In comparison to longer texts such as speeches or transcripts of debates, such small text-sequences contain less information and one could argue less suitable material for a qualitative analysis. Especially narratives and larger patterns could be difficult to detect. To avoid such pitfalls, a total of 3000 posts was collected and repeatedly read. Only the most reoccurring concepts were further pursued in the analysis and the selected statements were chosen accordingly.

A lot of the material had to be translated from Ukrainian and Russian. I have relied on my own ability to translate the texts into English and was in continuous dialogue with Ukrainian and Russian speakers in order to avoid misinterpretations. The quite extensive use of quotations in the analysis serves the purpose of highlighting the nuances in the actors reasoning and for allowing the reader to experience the fashion in which the different authors communicate.

I also want to take the opportunity to point out that the analysed material can neither be used as proof for what really happened nor as evidence for a certain actor’s opinion. Despite the attempt to solely include authentic accounts, there are no guarantees for the content being

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<sup>155</sup> cited in: Bauman, Zygmunt, 2010, p. 30

<sup>156</sup> Widdershoven, Guy A.M., 1992, p. 5

actually disseminated by the actor himself. However, the point of the analysis is not to examine *what* was happening, but *how* discourses are created and disseminated. For answering the research question it does not really matter whether or not a statement is neutral or twisted or whether it was disseminated by a bot or a real human being. What matters is that a certain discourse and a narrative exist and how they operate. Because whether or not these narratives are based on lies or not, they will influence public opinion, which is why they need to be studied. One major advantage with social media is that content is often produced spontaneously and that access to it is not confined to only a privileged few. This provides an unfiltered insight into the users' agenda and access to a heterogeneous group of actors, which was important for this study.

## 6. Analysis

In this chapter I am going to analyse how actors involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine construct narratives within which they identify themselves and others and how these Selves and Others relate to the *conflict* and *nationalistic* narratives. In order to answer each of the research questions, the analysis is divided into two main and several subsections. The division is not clear-cut and narratives or modes of identification overlap often. The ambition is not to treat the narratives as distinctive phenomena but to structure and highlight tendencies in the material. The selected statements of all actors are analysed, sometimes comparatively, sometimes in dialogue with each other and sometimes acknowledging that there are no intersections at all. Of particular interest is which themes intersect, which do not and how this can be related to the process of Self- and Other-identification.

The starting point is the conflict itself. In this section it is chronologically and comparatively discussed how the actors define Self and Other in relation to the conflict. Chronologically means, that the findings are presented according to how the conflict evolved since 2014, including some contextualisation. Comparatively means that the statements are synchronically compared among the different target groups to find possible intersections and/or divergences. Further, the intersection of the perceptions of the Self with the description of the Self by the Other is investigated. During the whole process, the individual text sequences are treated as parts of larger narratives.

### 6.1. Self and Other in Narratives of the Conflict

*If we do not stand in solidarity, the aggressor can move on. If Russia stops firing there will be peace, if Ukraine stops firing - there will be no Ukraine.*<sup>157</sup> – Petro Poroshenko

In this section focus lies on the first sub-research question: how the conflict is narratively constructed and how self- and other-identification takes place within that narrative. Social groups cannot act without identifying, because it is their identity that gives them their interests in the first place.<sup>158</sup> If identification forms the interest of actors which in turn guide their actions, studying the modes of identification is relevant especially during conflict. The analysis is conducted chronologically, following the events prior to and during the conflict.

Starting in 2014, protests against the government erupted in several cities of Ukraine, where many of the Ukrainian politicians who later succeeded the ousted government of

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<sup>157</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR values OR Цінності OR cooperation OR negotiation OR переговори OR співпраця) (from:poroshenko), 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>158</sup> Wendt, Alexander, *Identity and Structural Change in International Politics*, in Y. Lapid, F. Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder, CO:Lynne Rienner,1996, p. 50

Russian-friendly president Yanukovich were driving forces.<sup>159</sup> Businessman and current Interior Minister Arsen Avakov has been active in the movement from the start.<sup>160</sup> He comments the protests as follows:

Scum and villains! I would say who, but I will fall under the new law on defamation... what is happening on the streets of Kiev, is aggression provoked by the authorities. The revolutionary creativity of the masses dictates the order of the day...<sup>161</sup>

Avakov signals that he is on the side of the people. By explicitly degrading the authorities and simultaneously pointing to the creativity of the masses, he identifies with the masses and legitimises them. This utterance reflects many of the Ukrainian political elites' framing of the protests. It is not portrayed as a protest against politicians in general, but against corrupt, Russophile elites. Thereby a distance between "good" politicians (themselves) and "bad politicians" (Russophile, corrupt politicians) is created.

Jörn Rüsen, after studying Germans' relation to the Holocaust and their tendency to separate themselves from the events by demonising the Nazi perpetrators, conceptualised these mechanisms as *identity formation by concealment*, meaning, projecting the problem (here: corrupt, Russophile politicians and the resulting popular discontent) into the otherness of the perpetrators and therefore beyond the limits of one's own Self.<sup>162</sup> Thereby, Avakov directs attention away from him being part of the political elite and partly responsible for the weak system. The Ukrainian centre-right party *Batkyvshchyna* (Fatherland) provides a more internationally oriented perspective on the protests:

The whole world is delighted to see Ukraine fighting for its European future ...Russia is trying to deprive our countries of their ability to pursue an independent foreign policy... The Foreign Ministry stresses that Ukraine wants to resolve the situation on Crimea, exceptionally peacefully.<sup>163</sup>

*Batkyvshchyna* uses a synecdoche (conflating a part with a whole or vice versa), by calling the pro-EU part of the country 'Ukraine', with the effect of making it seem as if Ukraine was a homogenous society where everybody wants the same thing: closer ties with the EU.<sup>164</sup> Also, by saying that Ukraine 'is fighting' and 'wants to resolve', Ukraine is personified.<sup>165</sup> By

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<sup>159</sup> *RFERL*, Who is Who in Ukraine's Euromaidan Protests, December 2013, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>160</sup> Avakov, Arsen, Political Exposed Persons Register (PEP), visited: 10-05-2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>161</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from:AvakovArsen) until:2014-02-15 since:2014-01-15, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>162</sup> Rüsen, Jörn, *Holocaust Memory and German Identity*, Berghahn Books, 2008, p. 199

<sup>163</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:Batkyvshchyna), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>164</sup> Thompson, John B., *Ideology and modern culture: critical social theory in the era of mass communication*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990

<sup>165</sup> Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors we live by*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003[1980], p. 35

claiming that ‘our countries’ are threatened, Ukraine is portrayed as part of a supranational *We* and the threat from Russia transcending the borders of Ukraine. By invoking the ‘whole world’ as supportive of Ukraine, Russia is rhetorically isolated.

Russia is portrayed as the lonely Other, Ukraine as reasonable community. According to Tajfel, this mode of identification of the Self by referring to a worse Other, is a form of *evaluative intergroup differentiation*, whereby we exaggerate differences between Self and Other in order to enhance our self-image.<sup>166</sup> This self-image is further boosted by stressing that Ukraine wants to resolve the situation “exceptionally peacefully”, emphasising Ukraine as the constructive part in the conflict.

### 6.1.1. From *Crisis* to *War*

After some months into the conflict, a paradigm-shift from framing the conflict as crisis to calling it war takes place. Batkyvshchyna Yuliya Tymoshenko tweets:

Our weapon is peace. Russia will not go to war with the whole world... We must win this war and we will win it (...) The Kremlin should understand that Ukraine is a sovereign nation that is free to unite with the EU when it wants.<sup>167</sup>

The effect of calling a situation a war is that extraordinary measures of self-defence appear more legitimate.<sup>168</sup> It *injects urgency* into the issue and can lead to the mobilisation of political support and resources to counter the threat, i.e. Russia. Interesting is also the mentioning of peace. It is not presented as a desirable condition but a *means to an end*: winning the war. By framing *peace as a weapon*, the weapon, though conceptually opposed to the actual condition of peace, is associated with peace-making and thus legitimised.<sup>169</sup>

The emphasis of peace can also be understood by placing Ukraine in its international context. At that time, Ukraine was striving for a closer relationship with the EU, where central stated principles are the mutual respect for territorial integrity and the peaceful settlement of conflicts.<sup>170</sup> Thereby the Self is framed as part of a *civilised community* while the Other, Russia, is reduced to ‘The Kremlin’. This metaphor has a dehumanising effect. The politicians meant

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<sup>166</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 75

<sup>167</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:Batkyvshchyna) , accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>168</sup> Collins, Alan (red.), *Contemporary Security Studies*, 5. Ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, p. 177

<sup>169</sup> Bergström, Göran & Boréus, Kristina (red.), p. 230

<sup>170</sup> Keatinge, Patrick, *The European Union and the Ukraine Crisis*, Institute of International and European Affairs, p. 1

are not associated with individuals with names and faces, but a building that also symbolises political power.<sup>171</sup>

Batkyvshchyna speaks for Ukraine as a homogenous EU-loving whole. The Self is favoured over Russia by the whole world, while Russia is an impersonal isolated aggressor. The reference to Russia is not substantial for the main message, namely: “Ukraine is a sovereign nation that is free to unite with the EU whenever it wants.” However, it is used to create a *contrast to the Self* to further highlight the own distinctiveness.<sup>172</sup> Also the conflict is now framed as a war, which injects urgency into the situation. Another conflict-related perspective comes from former Ukrainian president *Petro Poroshenko*:

Russia does not believe in such things as democracy and human rights. They believe in "world domination" and "zones of influence" (...) The purpose of the Russian Federation is to destroy liberal freedoms and human rights. They do it with tanks in some places, in others with fake news (...) Ukraine made a sovereign decision to live its way and promote the Free World based on democratic values and rules. Russia punishes Ukraine for this decision. It kills. It ruins homes. It lies on an industrial scale.<sup>173</sup>

Here Russia is *personified*, able to destroy, punish, kill and ruin.<sup>174</sup> He endows Russia with human traits and simultaneously de-individualises and dehumanises the actual individuals by conflating them with Russia as a whole.<sup>175</sup> In contrast, the Self is framed as morally superior. Instead of killing, ruining and lying, Ukraine promotes democratic values and is a part of the ‘Free World’, which underlines the *moral power of the Self*. As Tajfel argues, the characteristics of one’s group achieve most of their significance in relation to perceived differences from others. These differences are here accentuated when invoking Ukrainian values in contrast to an immoral Other.<sup>176</sup>

### 6.1.2. The Internal Crisis and Civil War Narrative

In contrast to Batkyvshchyna and Poroshenko, *Dmitry Medvedev*, Russian prime minister at that time, frames the conflict as a *crisis*, rooted in the differing values of the Ukrainian people:

Ukraine’s problem is that its society is deeply divided and people have different values. Some people want to be part of Europe, whereas others think Ukraine should pursue ties with the Eurasian Economic Union we’ve established. Some people want to speak Ukrainian only,

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<sup>171</sup> Malešević, Siniša, *The sociology of war and violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 142

<sup>172</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 71

<sup>173</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR values OR Цінності OR cooperation OR negotiation OR переговори OR співпраця) (from:poroshenko), 2017; 2018, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>174</sup> Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, 2003, p. 35

<sup>175</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p.142; Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 61

<sup>176</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 71

whereas others say they want to speak Russian because they've spoken it their whole life. This is the root of the problems that have been growing in Ukraine in the past 20 years.<sup>177</sup>

The *Self* is distanced from the conflict, which is an *internal problem* of Ukraine. By claiming that the Ukrainian society is divided, the conflict is framed as the inevitable outcome of a process that has been going on for a long time, unrecognised by the authorities. Thereby, he imposes a split between Ukrainian politicians and the people. He does not refer to Russia once, but focuses solely on depicting the Other, the Ukrainian politicians, as intolerant, chaotic and detached from their people. He makes no effort of portraying Russia as morally superior but by *removing the Self* from the narrative, he removes agency and thus responsibility. Quite contradictory to his claim that the conflict is rooted in differing values, he states a later:

(...) the Ukrainian crisis was engineered. (...) and the former and current leaders of Ukraine are responsible for it. The former failed to restore law and order, while the latter allowed a civil war to break out. The Ukrainian people must hold them accountable.<sup>178</sup> (...) the Ukrainian crisis can be resolved only in Ukraine by the Ukrainians. Neither the Russian Federation, nor the European Union, nor the United States, but the Ukrainians must do it.<sup>179</sup>

The incapability of the Ukrainian political elites is cited as the primary reason for the conflict but simultaneously they were apparently capable of engineering the whole thing. Also, the conflict is now called a *civil war*, further distancing it from the Self. By advising the Ukrainian people to hold their politicians accountable, the Self is framed as paternalistic assistant of the Ukrainian people. Referring to the conflict is used to portray the Self as the benevolent advisor and creates *positively valued distinctiveness* from the Other, the Ukrainian politicians.<sup>180</sup>

### 6.1.3. Conflict and Peace Discourse

*Мир на умовах капітуляції – це не мир, це і є капітуляція!*  
[peace on the conditions of surrender is not peace, it is surrender!]<sup>181</sup>

The immediate result of the Euromaidan-protests was the Yanukovich administration leaving their positions in early 2014, followed by violent clashes between pro- and anti-Maidan protesters, the non-violent annexation of Crimea by Russian troops and the occupation of several towns in the Donbass area by separatists.<sup>182</sup> Later that year, Petro Poroshenko was

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<sup>177</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: Ukraine (from:@GovernmentRF), 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>178</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: Ukraine (from:@GovernmentRF), 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>179</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: Ukraine (from:@GovernmentRF), 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>180</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. p. 72

<sup>181</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR values OR Цінності OR cooperation OR negotiation OR переговори OR співпраця) (from:poroshenko), 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>182</sup> Fischer, Sabine, *The Donbas Conflict, Opposing Interests and Narratives*, Difficult Peace Process, SWP Research Paper, No. 5, pp. 1-35, 2019

elected president. During his election campaign, Poroshenko made “stopping the war, putting an end to this chaos and bringing peace to a united Ukraine” his priority.<sup>183</sup> He did not only inherit an interim government that was unpopular but also a country under pressure from Russia, which was demanding payments of gas bills.<sup>184</sup> He now had to deal with the people’s high expectations to stop the war and bring back Crimea. In the beginning of his presidency in 2014 he expressed his attitude to the conflict:

Peace can be built through dialogue with all the people of Donbass. I am ready for that...I was running for slogans of peace and therefore I consider it necessary to establish peace in Ukraine...our goal is not war; our goal is peace!... We want to put an end to violence and prevent war from escalating. This is a question not only of Ukraine or of Europe but of the whole world.<sup>185</sup>

Poroshenko speaks in first person. Although he identifies with Ukraine later in the statement, he draws a line between himself and the country which gives him *personal agency*. He does not point out an Other but constructs a *pacifistic and cooperative Self*. He portrays the war as a matter of global security, injecting urgency into the matter. Yet, the focus lies on *prevention of escalation* rather than fighting back. Very soon however, in 2015, the rhetoric switches to emphasizing military solutions:

Ukrainians do not want war. I as president want peace, but peace will be when we have a strong army...We are for peace, but we are not pacifists. We will increase the capacity of the army... born in the heat of the war, our army passed the test of fire, liberated most of the Donbas from the invaders and stopped the enemy.<sup>186</sup>

Again he *personalises* the statement. Moreover, he separates himself discursively from the Ukrainians. Peace is now portrayed as dependent on military capacity and the Self is oxymoronically *no longer pacifistic* but still *for peace*. It is doubtful whether peace can be truly supported while opposing pacifism. The sentence is structured as to associate military means with peace, thereby rhetorically reconciling the irreconcilable.<sup>187</sup>

The army is described as heroic liberators, an *euphemisation* of the war. The Other is described as *the enemy* and thereby dehumanised. Categorisations like this are, according to Tajfel, the attempt to *extract illusionary order* from chaos as they focus attention on some traits,

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<sup>183</sup> The Guardian, *Petro Poroshenko Wins Ukraine Presidency According to Exit Polls*, 25 March 2014, accessed 30. March 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>184</sup> The New York Times, *Pro-European Businessman Claims Victory in Ukraine Presidential Vote*, 2014, accessed on 30 March 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>185</sup> Twitter advanced search: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:poroshenko), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>186</sup> Twitter advanced search: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:poroshenko) , accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>187</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, 2012, p. 29

here on the Other's enmity, and deflect it from others, i.e. the Other's less hostile qualities.<sup>188</sup> While order, even if it is illusory, is what many people might want especially in times of uncertainty, the reinforcement of binary categories – we, the liberators, they, the enemy – also reinforces alienation among the groups which runs contrary to honest attempts of conflict resolution. As time passes, Poroshenko's rhetoric gets more hostile:

Russia's war against Ukraine has proven that weakness provokes aggression...military equipment will bring us closer to victory day... the fantasies for peace in exchange for territory are illusory. With this approach there will be neither peace nor territories.

Compared with 2014, the definition of peace has visibly narrowed. From signalling openness to dialogue to a pragmatic understanding of peace as a condition that may be compromised with. Valuing territory at the expense of peace reveals a strong *identification with that territory*. Picturing the end of a war as victory day is not only illusory, it also indicates a *zero-sum perception*, which leaves no room for compromise. However, the so-called Minsk peace-agreements from 2014 and 2015 are in fact built upon compromises – and signed by Poroshenko. This indicates that he despite his social media output is interested in ending the war and even Poroshenko does refer to other things than the army:

The left part of my visit to Donbass is devoted to peace affairs. Peace is what Donbass and Ukraine are striving for! (in 2015)

I am doing my best to minimize the impact of the war on society and give it a focus on building a new Ukraine. Now, more than ever, we need the unity of society and the state. Trying to undermine this unity is also an element of hybrid warfare. (in 2016)

In the first statement he refers to the Donbass directly, in the second he points out society as an important part. However, by separating the Donbass from Ukraine (Peace is what Donbass *and* Ukraine are striving for) he implicitly draws a line. Probably he knows about the prejudices in many parts of Ukraine and wants to convince his followers that *even* the Donbass wants peace.<sup>189</sup> In the second sequence he speaks in first person again, making it sound as if he does not want to take responsibility for what other politicians do. 'Doing ones best' signals uncertainty. It sounds apologetic, as if he is not really able to control things. Simultaneously however, Poroshenko goes on enforcing the nexus between peace and the military:

Everything Russia is doing in Ukraine today has one purpose: to destroy the Ukrainian state as such. Today Ukraine is at the forefront: it is the Ukrainian army that, at the cost of the

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<sup>188</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 6

<sup>189</sup> International Crisis Group, Nobody Wants Us: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine, Report No. 252, accessed: 10-05-2020

lives of its heroes, protects peace, stability and democracy in Europe. It is in Ukraine that Europe's creation continues.<sup>190</sup>

Russia is accused of aiming to annihilate Ukraine as a state and Ukraine is portrayed as *protecting Europe from the Other*, Russia. According to that narrative, Europe depends on the Self. The Ukrainian army is thus portrayed as morally good, and existential for the protection not only of Europe but *European values*. Moral superiority is also on the Russian government's agenda. In 2014, the government tweeted:

Our current goal is to help restore peace in Ukraine. We can do so only through negotiations. Central Ukraine, the central government must listen to eastern Ukraine (...) Anyone who wants them to agree can help. So does Russia, although we do not consider ourselves responsible for this conflict. Indeed, Ukraine is close to us, and the people who live there are very close to us. They are, in fact, our relatives.<sup>191</sup>

The Self is framed as peace-keeper concerned about the people who live in Ukraine (ergo: not the Ukrainians per se). Stressing that Ukraine is close to Russia is part of a larger Russian narrative, according to which Ukraine is called 'little Russia', a Russian borderland or simply a part of Russia.<sup>192</sup> Thus the Other is *internalised within the benevolent Self*. It is part of a narrative which many Ukrainians reject because it deprives them of their independence.<sup>193</sup>

#### 6.1.4. Non-State Perspectives

The non-state actors also create their Selves and the Other in relation to the conflict: it permeates their very existence. The pro-Ukrainian armed volunteers *Azov* portray themselves as serious and reliable warriors:

We fight for every metre of our land, the situation is extremely difficult.<sup>194</sup> Azov responded quickly and (...) were the first to assist local residents. Azovites are not going to retreat or give any city to the terrorists. The Azov Regiment (...) is fully operational and will not allow the enemy into its territories.

Azov uses a military terminology, both when referring to Self and Other. The Self is portrayed as brave and humble, the Other is described as the enemy and terrorists. According to Tajfel, a social group will only identify positively with each other if it manages to keep its distinctiveness

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<sup>190</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR values OR Цінності OR cooperation OR negotiation OR переговори OR співпраця) (from:poroshenko), 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>191</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Donbas OR Crimea OR Europe OR Peace OR War OR Values OR Ukraine OR Донбасс OR Крым OR Европа OR Мир OR Война OR Ценности OR Украина) (from:MedvedevRussiaE), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>192</sup> Ефименко, А.Я. *История украинского народа*. К., "Льбедь", 1990, стр. 87.

<sup>193</sup> Euromaidanpress, "Malorossiya": *Yet Another Russian Imperial Myth Salvaged from the Garbage Dump of History*, 2017, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>194</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from:@polk\_azov), 2014, accessed: 10-05-2020

to other groups.<sup>195</sup> Conflicts are based on distinctiveness and thus ideal to refer to in order to increase in-group-affiliations.<sup>196</sup> The Russia-backed separatists view of the conflict is well represented by separatist leader *Alexander Zhuchkovsky*'s post on VKontakte two years into the conflict:

What I have said does not mean that tomorrow a bright future will come to the Donbass and that Russian policy regarding Ukraine / LDPR [abbreviation for Luhansk and Donetsk Peoples' Republics] should be fully approved. Unfortunately, the current precarious and uncertain situation may last for a long time, and from the side of the Russian Federation outrageous statements may be made more than once, contrary to our expectations.

(...) At the same time, in our propaganda and in our actions, we must defend the only possible and desirable option for Donbass to develop events towards its entry into Russia.<sup>197</sup>

While Zhuchkovsky arrives at the conclusion that the only desirable option is to integrate with Russia, he also distances himself from the Russian leadership twice. First, he clarifies, that Russian policy should not necessarily be fully approved, then he points out, that the Russian Federation might make statements contrary to his expectations. Both the separatists and the volunteers talk much less about peace than the elites. One of the few quotes by the separatist Juchkovsky, mentioning peace is:

Peace on the conditions of the enemy is surrender, so we want the war to continue to force the enemy to peace on our terms.<sup>198</sup>

In this statement, *peace* is deprived all of the words initial meaning. Rather than describing a condition free from violence, it is here a *synonym for defeat*. A slightly more detailed account is given by *Natalya Poklonskaya*, prosecutor on Crimea:

Today, reporters asked me a question: "What are your expectations for 2020?" I hope for peace, an end to the war in the Donbass, the restoration of fraternal relations between Russia and Ukraine and the strengthening of our friendship.<sup>199</sup>

Poklonskaya puts herself in a passive position. Rhetorically she averts responsibility and appears to be a concerned, albeit benevolent and optimistic bystander. Poklonskaya is very popular on social media and even though she talks about politics in form of personal expectations, she has a representative function for Crimea as a whole. The pro-Ukrainian volunteer fighters *Azov* do not share her hopeful narrative:

Today Ukraine is in fact the only country on which Europe's fate depends. Instead, the latter is trying to drive a "beast into a cage" in a peaceful, diplomatic way. EU countries are, for

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<sup>195</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 72

<sup>196</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 67

<sup>197</sup> Alexander Zhuchkovsky, VKontakte Profile, 2016, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>198</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Donbas OR Crimea OR Europe OR Peace OR War OR Values OR Ukraine OR Донбасс OR Крым OR Европа OR Мир OR Война OR Ценности OR Украина) (from:SpмВр OR from:AlexZaxarchenko OR from:juchkovsky OR from:pushilindenis), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>199</sup> Natalya Poklonskaya, VKontakte Profile, 2019

some reason, convinced that the war is far from them and will not come, as Russia will not be able to withstand NATO. They have forgotten about the "mysterious" Russian soul who is poisoned by Putin's television and sees enemies all over the world!<sup>200</sup>

The Self, is constructed as decisive for the whole of Europe. Azov uses figurative, metaphoric wordings to describe the Other. Thereby the Other, Russia and the Russians, is mystified. Putin is given a lot of agency and the Russian population (the poisoned Russian souls) are lumped together as one homogenous entity, defenceless exposed to Putin's manipulations. The Other is presented as *an erratic and strategic beast* (Putin) but also as *a passive victim* (the Russians). They imply that they know best how to handle Russia and that the NATO is not sufficiently equipped to protect Europe. The Other is thus not only Russia or Putin but also the EU and the NATO. Azov is surrounded by Others.

### 6.1.5. Partial Findings

The analysis shows how the actors construct their Self and the Other in relation to the conflict. The Ukrainian elite portrays it as a conflict between Russia and the world, where the Self (Ukraine) is part of a value-based supranational community and the Other (Russia) an isolated nihilistic entity. The Russian elite does not even acknowledge that they are involved in the conflict. It is framed as a civil war, rooted in the incapability of the Ukrainian politicians and divisions in society. Their Self is passive but benevolent and paternalistically includes the Other, which is Ukraine, within itself. Both parties used categorisations and metaphors when referring to each other with the effect of de-individuating and dehumanising the Other.<sup>201</sup> Both parties struggle framing the Self as morally superior, more civilised and more peace-loving.

The volunteers construct their *Self* not only in relation to – but as *part of the conflict* which is existential for them because it is their primary occupation giving them their significance. They identify with the role of saviours and defenders of the country while referring to the Other as the enemy. The separatists see themselves as 'Peoples Republics' and opposed to 'the West'. While the stated goal is to unite with Russia, the cited separatists are critical of some of the Russian policy. While this does not have to mean much, it indicates that Russia in fact, contrary to Medvedev's statement, has a role in the conflict. The constructed Self of the actors did not overlap with externally assigned categories such as 'pro-Russian separatists', 'pro-Russian militias', 'far-right battalions' or 'ultranationalists'. Instead, Azov portrayed

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<sup>200</sup> (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни) (from: Polk\_Azov), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>201</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, 2012, p. 29

themselves as humble *protectors* of civilians and instead of being primarily pro-Russian, the separatists framed themselves as independent republics.

One preliminary conclusion is, that the actors' conflict-narratives diverge. What was similar was that all actors framed Self and Other in relation to the conflict, which confirms Tajfel's perspective on social categorisation, according to which the characteristics of one's own group achieve most significance in relation to perceived differences from others.<sup>202</sup> Conflicts are based on incompatibilities and differentiations between groups. Thus, the *conflict narrative* offers a repertoire of topics that are easily instrumentalised for the purpose of enhancing the Self at the expense of the Other. The risk is that the conflict transforms from being perceived as an unpleasant condition to a narrative needed to sustain the own, positively valued distinctiveness.

## 6.2. Self and Other in Narratives of Nationalising- and Homeland

### Nationalism

*We are for peace, but we defend our Fatherland the way how real patriots do.*<sup>203</sup>

About thirty years ago, the political landscape of East Central Europe and Eurasia underwent a reconfiguration. From the disintegration of the Soviet Union, twenty-four successor states emerged. Therefore, Brubaker suggests that these successor states, including Russia and Ukraine, cannot be analysed as national but rather as *nationalising* states. Accordingly, these new states were national in form but not in substance and had to be filled with national content.<sup>204</sup> This process of filling the states with national content is still ongoing and the analysed utterances in this section are part of that process of bringing population, territory and culture into the congruence that defines a nation state. Brubaker defines five main nationalist discourses, characterising post-Soviet states: the idea that the state contains a ethno-cultural *core nation*, a claim to a state of and for the core nation, the claim that the core nation is in a weak or unhealthy condition, that state action is needed to strengthen the core nation and that such action is needed to *redress previous discrimination* or oppression.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 71

<sup>203</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR values OR Цінності OR cooperation OR negotiation OR переговори OR співпраця) (from:poroshenko), 2015, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>204</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalising states revisited: projects and processes of nationalisation in post-Soviet states*, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 34, No. 11, pp. 1785-1814, 2011, p. 1786

<sup>205</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 2011, p. 1787

The aim of this section is to detect and analyse nationalist discourses in the material, starting with statements from national holidays and commemorations. Anthony D. Smith has analysed the links between commemorating the past wars and nation-formation, where he focused on the notion of a 'chosen people'.<sup>206</sup> The feeling, of being a chosen people creates a sense of collective superiority and is a concept frequently invoked by the actors – for example on Independence Day in Ukraine.<sup>207</sup>

### 6.2.1. Ukrainian Independence Day and Den' Pobedy or 'Victory Day'

On the Ukrainian Independence Day several actors draw on the concept of a 'chosen people' in order to promote a national Self. In 2016, the Ukrainian diplomat *Pavlo Klimkin* posts:

Independence is the result of the struggle of generations of Ukrainians for their own color on the political map of the world. (...)The parade is a signal to the enemy: Ukrainians are seriously prepared to continue to fight for their independence.<sup>208</sup>

Not only does he create the feeling of Ukrainians being *chosen to fight* for independence but *legitimizes* this fight by placing it in a historical context: Ukrainians have always fought for it, the struggle has been going on for generations which is why the struggle needs to continue.<sup>209</sup> He also appeals to Ukrainians as a homogenous group – all Ukrainians are prepared to fight – and uses euphemisms when framing the war as a 'struggle of generations'.<sup>210</sup> This processes serve consciously or unconsciously to nurture the sense of an ethnocultural core-nation.<sup>211</sup> *Poroshenko* comments on Independence Day in 2018:

"As long as the nation fights, it lives," said Levko Lukyanenko, author of the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. Today, Levko would be ninety years old. We are all deeply grateful to the legendary man for his outstanding contribution to the fight for Ukraine's freedom and the freedom of its citizens.<sup>212</sup>

By referring to Lukyanenko, Poroshenko relies on a narrative portraying the fight for independence as predestined, natural condition.<sup>213</sup> 'As long as a nation fights, it lives' implies conversely, that if Ukraine would stop fighting, it could die. The fighting is portrayed as essential for preserving Ukraine. His successor *Volodymyr Zelensky* uses a slightly different language. On Independence Day in 2019 he says:

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<sup>206</sup> Smith, Anthony D., *Chosen peoples*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2003, p.6

<sup>207</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p. 66

<sup>208</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from:pavloklimkin) until:2016-08-25 since:2016-08-24, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>209</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 61

<sup>210</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 60

<sup>211</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalism reframed: nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 4

<sup>212</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from:poroshenko) until:2018-08-25 since:2018-08-24, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>213</sup> Gellner, Ernest, 1997, p.8; Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., 1993, p. 6

Fellow Ukrainians! We are different. But we are united. We must be united, because only then are we strong. We should understand that we have to count only on ourselves. Not quarrel over the past, but unite for the future. Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking, regardless of age, gender, religion - we must be one people. Not on posters, not on slogans, but here. In everyone's heart.<sup>214</sup>

In comparison with Poroshenko, Zelensky focuses much less on the army, on explicitly naming the war or using references to the past. Rather, he constructs a Self that is oriented toward the future. Most of all he appeals to unity and patriotism:

We must move forward, build the country together, do the impossible together and tell ourselves every morning: "I am Ukrainian. And I can do anything!". Our land is unique, lovely, unbreakable, incredible, amazing, fabulous, wonderful, beautiful. If it was not for our Homeland, humanity might not even know these words. After all, they were invented to describe Ukraine.<sup>215</sup>

Zelensky describes Ukraine as an exceptional country and the Ukrainians as an exceptional, strong people but in comparison to Poroshenko, who frequently used words like 'fight', and 'victory', Zelensky uses motivational phrases. Further, there is a significant difference in talking about building the own country instead of fighting an enemy and could be one of the reasons behind his support, at least in the beginning of his presidency. If this is what people wanted to hear, it is also a sign for how tired they are of war. The *pro-Ukrainian volunteers* also use references to a common culture to create their self-image. *Cultural expressions* such as collective memories and commemoration contribute to *making war socially meaningful*.<sup>216</sup> It is thus not surprising, that Independence Day is an occasion celebrated maybe especially in times of war. *Azov* writes in 2016:

Independence is not a set of formal signs of power, borders or economy. Independence is first and foremost an internal state. Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred and thousands of those who gave their lives in battles for their Motherland remained independent.<sup>217</sup>

Accordingly, independence is more than a legal status of a state or an adjective: it is a philosophy worth dying for and the readiness to die is portrayed as the precondition for true freedom. The same year, *Azov*-leader *Andriy Biletskiy* states:

The war has opened many eyes - the country is in a state of internal occupation. The branches of power are paralyzed by the bearers of the colonial system, and the humanitarian space is

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<sup>214</sup> President of Ukraine Official Website, *Speech by the President of Ukraine during the independence day festivities*, 24.08.2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>215</sup> President of Ukraine Official Website, *Speech by the President of Ukraine during the independence day festivities*, 24.08.2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>216</sup> Malesevic, Sinisa, 2010, p. 64

<sup>217</sup> Natsionalnyi Korespondent, *Privitannja Andriy Biletskovo Do Dnja Nezaleshnosti Ukrayiniy*, August 2016, accessed: 10-05-2020

imbued with foreign ideology (...) Another 10 years of such "independence" and the capture of the country would not need a single soldier.<sup>218</sup>

Unlike the Ukrainian politicians, Biletskiy speaks of the conflict as an internal problem. The Other is not an external enemy but is *situated within the Self* and the political elites bear responsibility for it. In this sense his conflict narrative is similar to the Russian one. Biletskiy draws a line between Self and Other, which in this case is the own government. The government however tries to approach the volunteers. They have been armed and incorporated as a branch of the Ukrainian regular armed forces.<sup>219</sup> Further, Ukraine has in 2017 introduced a national holiday honouring the braveness of the volunteers.<sup>220</sup> The government thus seems to try to win over the volunteers and make them part of the Self. The political party and paramilitary movement *Pravyi Sektor* takes the opportunity of Independence Day to do away with some 'myths':

The first myth is, that the Ukrainian state was formed in 1991. Yes, our present state started to exist then, but the history of Ukrainian statehood dates back several thousand years. Let us remember that the first Antes and Slavic states, Kievan Rus, Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rus', Hetmanate (...) and other states are native Ukrainian. So, the state has existed for a long time - we lost it and we restored it. In 1991 the Ukrainian state was not created but restored.<sup>221</sup>

Gellner would argue that Pravyi Sektor invents just another new myth here. Claiming that the state of Ukraine needs to be 'restored' is according to Gellner a typical characteristic of nationalists: the *claim that the nation has always existed*, that it vanished from peoples' consciousness and needs to be brought back into their minds.<sup>222</sup> Yet, as Gellner argues, nation states have not existed for a long time but are invented, based on oblivion about the fact that our natural condition is pluralistic.<sup>223</sup> Pravyi Sektor contributes to this nationalistic narrative as it goes on:

At the international level, Ukraine is a *neo-colony* divided into spheres of influence between the Russian Federation and the EU. So, from the point of view of the Ukrainian nationalists, the present state formation with the name "Ukraine" is really only a transitional stage (...) The present Ukraine is, of course, better than the USSR, but it is only a foothold in the way

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<sup>218</sup> Natsionalnyi Korespondent, *Privittannja Andriy Biletskovo Do Dnja Nezaleshnosti Ukrayiniy*, August 2016, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>219</sup> Gomza, Ivan, Zajaczkowski, Johann, *Black Sun Rising: Political Opportunity Structure Perceptions and Institutionalization of the Azov Movement in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine*, Nationalities Paper, 2019, vol. 47:5, pp. 775-800, p. 782

<sup>220</sup> Censor.net, *Ukraine celebrates Volunteer Fighter Day*, 14. March 2019, accessed 04. April 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>221</sup> Pravyi Sektor, *Міфи Незалежності*, August 2017, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>222</sup> Gellner, Ernest, *Thought and Language*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964, p. 168

<sup>223</sup> Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and nationalism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 57; Gellner, Ernest, 1997, p. 8

of creation of a real nation-state. And we started fighting for our Independence only in 2014  
- let no one think that it somehow reached us peacefully in 1991.<sup>224</sup>

Pravyi Sektor share the opinion that Ukraine has not yet reached 'real independence' and they too distance themselves from the political leadership. The Self is described as being in a weak state (a neo-colony) surrounded by *patronising Others* with vested interests. This state that can only be changed through violent action, which they legitimise by referring to the past: "it did not come peacefully in 1991 which is why it must not come peacefully this time either." Both Azov and Pravyi Sektor distances themselves from the original demands of the Euromaidan for a closer relationship with the EU. Also when there is no specific national holiday, ideological content can be found, as in the following statement by Poroshenko:

Russian aggression is a war of world views. Ukrainians fight for freedom, democracy and the right of self-determination.<sup>225</sup> (...) During the two years of this war, we have proved the world that the enemy is stopped not only by the strength of weapons of the Ukrainian soldiers but also by the spiritual power and unity of the Ukrainian people.<sup>226</sup>

He universalises the conflict by calling it a conflict of worldviews.<sup>227</sup> He adds that the worldview of the Self is based on freedom, democracy and the right of self-determination – implying that the Other does not share them. He uses words like 'aggression', 'fight' or 'enemy' as opposed to 'the spiritual power and unity of the Ukrainian people', creating *positive valued distinctiveness* from the Other. He emphasises the moral superiority of the Ukrainian soldiers and Ukrainian people by contrasting them against 'the aggressor' who does not respect freedom and Ukrainian unity. That Ukrainians themselves might not feel this unity and that this might be one of the core issues of the conflict is thereby concealed. Another anniversary is Victory Day, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, where Soviet forces defeated the German troops in 1945. *Russian President Putin* seized the opportunity for *demonstrating unity* of Self and Other:

"In the bloody battles for Ukraine during the Great Patriotic War, our multi-ethnic nation demonstrated in all its grandeur its determination and unity (...) Our parents and grandparents fought side by side for the freedom and independence of our Motherland; (...) It is vitally important to instil lofty patriotic values in the younger generation and to actively resist any attempts at reviving the Nazi ideology, fomenting inter-ethnic strife and falsifying our shared history (...) I wish peace and prosperity to the entire fraternal people of Ukraine."<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Pravyi Sektor, Міфи Незалежності, August 2017, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>225</sup> Twitter advanced search: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:poroshenko), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>226</sup> Twitter advanced search: (Донбас OR Donbas OR Donbass OR Крим OR Crimea OR Європа OR Europe OR Росія OR Russia OR Україна OR Ukraine OR Peace OR Мир OR war OR війни OR stagnation OR Застій) (from:poroshenko), accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>227</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p.61

<sup>228</sup> President of Russia, *Vladimir Putin congratulated veterans of the Great Patriotic War and the people of Ukraine on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ukraine's liberation from Nazi occupation*, 28 October 2014

Putin stresses the need to resist Nazi ideology, which is based on a nationalistic worldview but simultaneously appeals to the grandeur of his nation, the independence of the Motherland and the importance to instil patriotic values – which some describe as not very far from Nazi-ideology.<sup>229</sup> While Putin identifies with a ‘multi-ethnic strife’, he is still very concerned about creating an ethnocultural unity. Russia is multi-ethnic but it is also determined and unified. Moreover, patriotic values need to be ‘instilled’ into young people but Putin is still convinced that Russia resists Nazism.<sup>230</sup> Ukraine on the contrary, revives Nazism and falsifies the common history. Not only are these statements contradictory, Putin also uses nationalist terminology, no matter how much he stresses Russia’s multi-ethnicity. The separatists also celebrate victory day, however, their narratives are less festive:

I just want to remind you that behind a beautiful festive picture with parades and salutes very close - there is a heavy gloomy reality, pain, blood and the filth of war. A war that does not stop for a day and is going on right now.<sup>231</sup>

A leading figure among the separatists, *Jushkovsky*, uses the occasion to highlight the war. It is interesting because he does not claim any heroic role, motivates his followers or attempts to legitimise the war. Most of all he sounds *disillusioned* and tired. Two years later, his rhetoric changed:

Happy Victory Day! But when celebrating our Victory over the German fascist invaders, remember that these days the Ukrainian fascist invaders shell artillery in our cities and kill people, and the Latvian fascist invaders prohibit the Russian language and throw Russians into prisons.<sup>232</sup>

Here, he frames the conflict as a *continuation of the fascist threat* from the second world war. He identifies with Russia and claims that Russian-speakers and Russians are repressed, which is part of the same *homeland-nationalist* narrative created by Putin, only that Juchkovsky tells it from the perspective of a national minority.

### 6.2.2. Russian Elites, Separatists and Homeland-Nationalism

Among the Russian political establishment, almost all statements made with reference to values, ideology or culture were *not* used for self-identification but to describe the Other, often Ukraine but also the EU, US and NATO. Malešević argues that ideological power serves to legitimise collective action, the Russian elites however, instrumentalise ideological content to

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<sup>229</sup> Thorne, Steve, *The Language of War*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 38

<sup>230</sup> Thorne, Steve, 2006, p. 38

<sup>231</sup> Vkontakte, Zuhuchkovsky, Alexander, 10 May 2016, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>232</sup> Twitter advanced search: (from:juchkovsky) until:2018-12-31 since:2018-01-01, accessed: 10-05-2020

de-legitimatised the Other.<sup>233</sup> As a result, the own actions appear necessary for countering the Other's wrongful actions, as in the following statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

Surprisingly, the #EU and the #US assume that the 'free' choice has already been made for #Ukraine, which is a 'European future'. Russia does not recognize the principles of Maidan democracy, spontaneous and uncontrollable mob-rule on the streets.<sup>234</sup>

In 2014 it was still unclear where the Euromaidan was heading. Probably, the MFA still assumed there was a chance for Ukraine to take a step back from the EU. The use of inverted commas insinuates that the Euromaidan is not to be taken seriously. Further, Ukraine is portrayed as a passive object, stuck between the EU and the US. *Natalya Poklonskaya* supports a similar narrative:

The overseas "Revolution of Dignity" led the Ukrainians along the wrong path: they are forced to deny and destroy everything connected with Russia. This is the road to nowhere ... Ukrainians must preserve their culture, customs, traditions ... Unfortunately, with the manic ideas of cave nationalists and trembling power in front of these orcs, you can lose an entire country and nation ...<sup>235</sup>

Poklonskaya presents 'the Ukrainians' as misled by Russophobic nationalists. She uses metaphors to describe the Other as orcs, implying that they are not only evil but also retarded. She too uses inverted commas to indicate that she does not take the protests seriously and portrays 'the Ukrainians' as passive victims. She focuses entirely on discrediting the Other. Prime minister *Dmitry Medvedev* portrays the pro-European protests as undemocratic:

The events of the past few weeks have exacerbated political tensions. People are dying. War has been proclaimed against the civilised world. 2015<sup>236</sup>

He does not further specify the 'civilised world' but most likely he includes himself and his country in this category. He is not blaming anyone nor is he pointing out what side he belongs to. This makes him sound honestly concerned. By declaring the civilised world at war, he lies the moral foundation for *self-defence*. By launching such a narrative now, extraordinary measures of self-defence might be easier to motivate later on. Indeed, this is what happens a little later in a post by the MFA:

We want to curtail the influence of radicals and nationalists who are trying to play the first fiddle in #Ukraine (...) Russia considers Ukrainian civilian requests for protection from

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<sup>233</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p. 83

<sup>234</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from:mfa\_russia) until:2014-02-15 since:2014-01-15, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>235</sup> Instagram, nv\_poklonskaya, 26 February 2020, accessed: 10-05-2020, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>236</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (Donbas OR Crimea OR Europe OR Peace OR War OR Values OR Ukraine OR Донбасс OR Крым OR Европа OR Мир OR Война OR Ценности OR Украина) (from:MedvedevRussiaE) , accessed: 10-05-2020

radicals (...) <sup>237</sup> We will defend interests of Russians, our compatriots using political, diplomatic and legal means to ensure their rights and freedoms. <sup>238</sup>

In contrast to the nationalising nationalism in the narratives of the Ukrainian elites, the Russian elites refrain from manifesting a Russian core-nation confined to a Russian territory or state. They refer to Ukrainian civilians, Russians and compatriots and themselves as responsible for their protection. This transborder-concern for all people affiliated to Russia is what Brubaker calls *homeland nationalism*.<sup>239</sup> The latter is characterised by asserting a state's right and obligation to monitor the condition and protect the interests of 'their' ethnonational kin in other states. Typically, such claims are made when the ethnonational kin in question is seen as threatened by the nationalising policies of the state in which they live.<sup>240</sup> Further, homeland states claim that their responsibilities transcend the borders of territory and citizenship, which makes it a political rather than an ethnographic category.

These mechanisms seem to describe both Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine sees itself as a nation state of and for a core-nation in a transitional process of nationalising, i.e. becoming entirely independent. Russia sees its ethnonational kin in Ukraine threatened by the Ukrainian nationalising policies and claim their responsibility to protect them. Both countries seem to need each other for sustaining their Self. Ukraine needs Russia as the Other from which they can differentiate themselves. Russia rhetorically incorporates Ukraine within itself, in the sense that the fate of Ukraine is portrayed as within their realm of responsibility.

### 6.2.3. Partial Findings

In the previous section I analysed how the target groups use ideological (nationalistic) references to a common culture or values to create their Self. Nationalism is an ideology. To understand how it works in the narratives of the actors, Thompson's model of how ideology operates is helpful. He distinguishes between five general modes: legitimization, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification.<sup>241</sup> One strategy of legitimization is *narrativisation*. Thereby, claims are embedded in stories which recount the past and treat the present as part of a timeless tradition.<sup>242</sup> In the case of nationalist narratives this is done by referring to the notion of a 'chosen people', who are predestined and therefore rightfully entitled to a certain

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<sup>237</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from: mfa\_russia) until:2014-03-23 since:2014-03-13, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>238</sup> *Twitter advanced search*: (from: mfa\_russia) until:2014-02-28 since:2014-02-22, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>239</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

<sup>240</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

<sup>241</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 60

<sup>242</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 62

territory.<sup>243</sup> These mechanisms can be detected in utterances of all actors. The Ukrainian elite identifies with its fight for independence that has to go on, because it has always been there. They thereby reinforce the idea of a *core-nation* and the claim to a state of and for the core-nation.<sup>244</sup>

Further, the conflict is framed as a conflict of worldviews. Thompson calls this *legitimation by universalisation*. Thereby, arrangements that serve the interests of some individuals are presented to serve the interests of all.<sup>245</sup> It also has the effect of presenting the Other with the opposing worldview as immoral and the Self as morally superior. The volunteers argue that the elites only use independence as a phrase, while ‘real’ independence is yet to come. They identify with their own interpretation of independence, not with the version provided by the government. Yet both groups presume a Ukrainian core-nation (Ukrainian nationals), a claim to a state of and for that core-nation (the Ukrainian territory), the claim that the core-nation still is in a weak condition (the fight for real independence must go on, a nation that does not fight dies), that action is needed to change that which is justified by previous oppression (occupation by Russia throughout history). The Ukrainian narrative is thus an expression of *nationalising nationalism*.<sup>246</sup>

The Russian elite does not use references to culture or values to construct a Self but rather to de-legitimize the Other. Medvedev points out that there is a need for protecting Russia’s compatriots in Ukraine, which is typical for what Brubaker calls *homeland nationalism*.<sup>247</sup> Russia is presented as a multi-ethnic nation and references to Nazi-ideology are repeatedly invoked to discredit Ukraine. Nazism is used as the ultimate legitimation for Russia to protect people – no matter where. In the light of a Nazi-threat, most action seems appropriate. Here, once again narrativisation is used to legitimate the own course of action. The conflict in (note: not with!) Ukraine is portrayed as a continuation of Russia’s fight against the evils of Nazism for which it is predestined.

The separatists do not use the occasion of Victory Day for self-promotion as much as the elites. Instead they remind their readers of the everyday reality of war. Yet, they too frame the war as part of a historic struggle against fascism. All groups use, intentionally or unintentionally, occasions of national holidays and commemoration for legitimating the Self

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<sup>243</sup> Smith, Anthony, D., *The ‘Sacred’ Dimension of Nationalism*, Journal of International Studies, Vol. 29, No.3, pp. 791-814, 2000

<sup>244</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 4

<sup>245</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p. 60

<sup>246</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 4

<sup>247</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 4

and discrediting the Other. All of them express themselves in favour of the own nation. The difference however lies in how they do it.

Even though the Russian or Russia-backed actors repeatedly claim to oppose nationalism, they still construct very nationalistic narratives. That poses conceptual questions to nationalism as a belief system. Do actors need to perceive themselves as nationalists for acting nationalistic or is such behaviour independent from an explicit self-identification? The findings suggest the latter. In the Ukrainian context being a nationalist seems almost common sense and has a positive connotation. It is perceived as synonymous with independence from repressive hegemonic power relations. Contrary to that, among the Russian- and Russia-backed actors, nationalism has a negative connotation and is portrayed as almost synonymous with Nazism. While the “Ukrainian nationalism” might be more pronounced and explicit, further research is needed into the Russian “covert nationalism” as a complex and contradictory phenomenon.

## 7. Discussion of Findings

*The main research question* to be answered was how actors involved in the conflict narratively identify themselves and others on social media and how these Selves and Others are interrelated. The findings prove that such processes take place among all actors, albeit in different ways. The Ukrainian political elites portray the conflict as a continuum of past injustices and themselves as the victims. This confirms Brubaker’s theory of nationalising nations in the post-Soviet space.<sup>248</sup> Russia is referred to not only as the Other but the *opposing Other*. Tajfel explains such processes of categorisation with our need for orientation and defining our place in society and this need presumably increases in the context of ongoing conflict.<sup>249</sup>

The Russia-backed separatists are not perceived as the “real” opponents in the war but as terrorist puppets, managed by the Kremlin. This image is reinforced by a de facto unwillingness to have a dialogue. This lack of dialogue across the war zone further facilitates *dehumanisation* of each side by the other.<sup>250</sup> The terrorist label presupposes a victim’s perspective and implies that extraordinary measures are legitimate to counter this threat.<sup>251</sup> In contrast, the separatists *perceive themselves* neither as terrorists nor as puppets of the Kremlin. Rather, they appear to

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<sup>248</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, p. 4

<sup>249</sup> Tajfel, Henri, 1974, p. 75

<sup>250</sup> Kriesberg, Louise, Dayton, Bruce, 2017, p. 13

<sup>251</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, 2012, p. 39; Collins, Alan (red.), 2019, p. 178

be serious about being accepted as *autonomous legal entities* by other states and even distance themselves from the Kremlin in some statements.<sup>252</sup>

The Ukrainian elites create not only a national – but also an *international Self*. They repeatedly claim the support of the whole world in contrast to an isolated Russia. Even though many of them were involved in politics already prior to the Euromaidan, they tend to separate themselves from the political elite that was in power before 2014. This diachronic process of identifying the Self as distinct from a previous Other is a form of *identification by concealment*: the negative features leading up to the Euromaidan are projected into the Otherness of the former political elite, beyond the limit of the Self.<sup>253</sup> Thereby a part of the Self is portrayed as alienated.

The Ukrainian volunteers portray themselves as differentiated from the mainstream politicians and as defenders of the people. This propagation of the Self requires an emotional climate in order to be effective.<sup>254</sup> Narratives of armed conflict and the fear they create provide the ideal emotional precondition for such ends. The volunteers do not see themselves as part of an international community and emphasise repeatedly that Ukraine has not yet reached ‘real independence’, due to the elites reliance on external help – a typical feature for nationalising states.<sup>255</sup> The Ukrainian politicians and the international community are accused of abandoning Ukraine and thus both constructed as an Other, ergo: the definition of the Self among the volunteers is narrow. Their Self is alienated from- but paradoxically also situated *within* a larger Other, the Ukrainian state.

They label the separatists as hostile occupants and seem, contrary to the Ukrainian elite, to perceive them as serious opponents. The volunteers’ self-image is not congruent with the externally assigned labels, such as ‘volunteer battalions’. Instead, they see themselves as nationalists, promoting Ukrainian independence but also as a serious part of a larger Other, the Ukrainian army.<sup>256</sup> They present themselves primarily as a counter-movement to all external forces in Ukraine and call themselves a ‘regiment’, not a battalion. Thus, their Self is constructed as surrounded by Others, the separatists are the enemy but are referred to more frequently as in the narratives of the politicians. The mainstream politicians are perceived as an *alienated* but still *related* Other.

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<sup>252</sup> Vkontakte, Zuhuchkovsky, Alexander, 10 May 2016, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>253</sup> Rüsen, Jörn, *Holocaust Memory and German Identity*, Berghan Books, 2008, p. 199

<sup>254</sup> Tajfel, Henri, *Stereotypes, Race*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 3-14, 1963, p. 12

<sup>255</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, p. 4

<sup>256</sup> Azov.org, Ппо АЗОВ, accessed: 10-05-2020

A common feature among both elites and volunteers is that they refer to Russia as *the aggressor*. This short description has a lot of rhetorical functions. With ‘the aggressor’ they certainly do not mean the whole country but its political elite, the Kremlin. The metaphor (a synecdoche) thus conflates a whole (Russia) with a part of it (the political leadership).<sup>257</sup> Further, Russia is *personified* because a country is strictly speaking a geographical construction which cannot ‘act’ and thus cannot act aggressively. Personification aims at making sense of the world in terms we understand, on the basis of our own motivations and characteristics. ‘The aggressor’ makes sense to most people, whereas a detailed description of the Russian foreign policy would not. Paradoxically, this personification has a *de-personifying effect*: speaking of several people as one (aggressive) person, de-individualises and thereby dehumanises the individuals meant by it. If we think of a whole country as an aggressor that wants to hurt us, the metaphor also justifies mobilisation against this Other.<sup>258</sup>

The Russian political elite identifies with the role as benevolent bystander, supportive of the Ukrainian people and their Russian compatriots living in Ukraine. This narrative of “an ethnonational kin in another state that needs protection” confirms what Brubaker says about *homeland nationalism*.<sup>259</sup> The Euromaidan-protesters are framed as an unorganised, violent mob, which stands in stark opposition to the Ukrainian narrative which describes the Euromaidan as “the revolution of dignity”. The Ukrainian government is framed as a fascist movement, often referred to as a continuation of the fascist occupation during the second world war from which the Ukrainian population needs protection.

While referring to Ukraine as the fascist Other, the Russian politicians simultaneously stress that they hold no hostile attitudes towards Ukraine. Instead, Ukraine is portrayed as part of the Self, sharing a common past. Ukrainian independence and sovereignty is framed as *unnatural*, something that deprives the Ukrainian people of their culture. According to Gellner, this rhetoric is typical for nationalists. They do not understand that they are nationalistic themselves, and portray the nation as the natural condition that needs to be restored.<sup>260</sup> The Russian politicians often claim to oppose nationalism. Yet, their narratives fulfil all characteristics of Brubaker’s definition of *homeland nationalism*.<sup>261</sup>

Ukrainian independence and most of all Ukraine’s turn towards western Europe is presented as an unsustainable development to be reversed as soon as Ukrainians come to their

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<sup>257</sup> Thompson, John B., 1990, p.61

<sup>258</sup> Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, 2003, p. 34

<sup>259</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

<sup>260</sup> Gellner, Ernest, 1997, p. 8

<sup>261</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

senses. Unsurprisingly, the Russian elites do not share the view of being ‘the aggressor’. Rather, they create a contradictory narrative where they bear no responsibility for the conflict but at the same time bear a lot of responsibility when it comes to *protecting their* compatriots in Ukraine. Their Self is thus constructed in opposition to an Other, namely the Ukrainian leadership (and the EU, US, NATO). Simultaneously, the Ukrainian people and compatriots living in Ukraine are portrayed as an Other that is an indivisible part of the Self.

The Russia-backed separatists portray themselves as liberators. They do not identify with the role of occupants or invaders, but rather as acting on behalf of all the people, who feel affiliated to Russia. Brubaker calls this *minority nationalism*, characterised by opposing nationalising policy of the state they live in and the demand for state recognition of their distinct nationality.<sup>262</sup> Rising claims for independence as the separatists do can be explained by the analytical category of minority nationalism which according to Brubaker is another typical phenomenon in post-Soviet states.<sup>263</sup>

While the separatists repeatedly express themselves positively towards Russia, some of the key figures also reveal their dissatisfaction with Russia’s policy towards the Donbass. Sometimes they indicate that they feel neglected, because they, contrary to Crimea, have not been offered to join the Russian Federation.<sup>264</sup> Further, the financial resources Russia invests in Crimea but not in the Donbass cannot possibly have gone unrecognised.<sup>265</sup> Their self-image is not congruent with the externally assigned labels, such as ‘pro-Russian separatists’ or ‘pro-Russian militias’. They identify as independent People’s Republics, and want to be recognised as such. What they have in common with the volunteers is that they do not identify with any international community. Their Self is also surrounded by several Others. Even Russia is portrayed as an Other, but an Other they want to be a part of.

The answer to the *second research question*, how the actors narratively constructed the conflict as a space for identification, is that there is a nexus between the conflict, Self and Other among all target groups. A conflict offers the ideal toolkit to construct the Self in contrast to an Other, a feature among all target groups except for the Russian elites, who diverge from the general pattern. They rather use the conflict to demonstrate the *similarities* with the Ukrainian people while opposing the Ukrainian politicians. They thus define a part of the Other as something which ought to be within the realm of the Self. The *pro-Ukrainian volunteers* do not

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<sup>262</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

<sup>263</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 6

<sup>264</sup> BBC, Ukraine conflict: Russia rejects new Donetsk rebel ‘state’, July 2017, accessed: 10-05-2020

<sup>265</sup> *The Moscow Times*, Russia Still Paying Price for Crimea Five Years After Annexation, March 2019, accessed: 10-05-2020

explicitly speak about the conflict but their very existence is permeated by it. They do not even once mention peace as a desirable condition, which makes sense: it is the conflict, not peace, that gives them their significance.

Both the volunteers and the separatists frame the conflict as a war. As time passes by, the Ukrainian elites do so too, the Russian elites however cling to *civil war*, *crisis* and *conflict* with the effect of *euphemising* what is happening on the ground.<sup>266</sup> Both of the latter claim, that their goal is peace. However, the Ukrainian elites do not see peace as an alternative if it does not include ‘victory’, meaning regaining control over both Crimea and the Donbass. The Russian politicians put the responsibility on the Ukrainian politicians and see themselves as peace-keepers. In contrast, neither the volunteers nor the separatists talk much about peace, either because it seems utopian to them or because it would mean that they lose their positions. The conflict gives them salary and a purpose. Depending on their social background that could be an improvement to their situation prior to the conflict.

The findings concerning the *third research question*, how modes of identification relate to nationalist narratives, show different narratives among the target groups. While the Ukrainian elites often refer to Ukraine’s independence and unity, the volunteers argue that ‘real unity’ is not reached yet and reveal that they see Ukraine as still in a transitional state: it is not yet Ukrainian enough. The Ukrainian elites too identify with the eternal struggle for independence but in comparison to the volunteers they picture Ukraine as part of Europe, to which it is returning. The volunteers see this as undermining Ukraine’s ‘real’ independence. Both volunteers and elites claim that there *is* such a thing as the ‘Ukrainian core-nation’, that there is a state of and for that nation, that the nation currently is in a weak condition and that state-action is needed to redress this ongoing oppression. They both construct nationalising narratives within which they situate themselves as part of an ongoing struggle for independence.<sup>267</sup>

The Russian elites identify themselves as a multi-ethnic nation, a narrative that is mirrored by the separatists. This nation includes compatriots living in other states, such as Ukraine. They do not rely on modes of differentiation as much as the other actors, rather, they identify themselves as similar to Ukraine, a narrative that the Ukrainian actors strongly oppose. The Russian elites claim that their compatriots living in Ukraine are discriminated against by Ukraine’s nationalising policy (their claims to independence) and need protection. Further, their responsibility vis-à-vis their compatriots transcends boundaries of territory and citizenship.

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<sup>266</sup> Marcinkeviciene, Ruta, 2012, p. 27

<sup>267</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

Their narratives are marinated in homeland nationalism.<sup>268</sup> The separatists identify themselves as Russia's compatriots and are thus part of the same narrative.

All actors use social media and the conflict as a means for creating their national identity. The conflict and the creation of the national Self are thus narratively intertwined. The Ukrainian elites promote a *nationalising nationalism*, the volunteers contribute to that by supporting the claim that the core-nation is in a weak condition and that action is needed to strengthen it. The narratives of the Russian elites reveal a *homeland nationalism* of which the *separatists* become part by identifying themselves as a *national minority* that needs protection. Taken together, all are existential parts of interrelated nationalistic narratives and nationalisms.

Malešević argues that devotion to a nation is never instinctive or automatic but is dependent on permanent institutional (state-level) and extra-institutional support.<sup>269</sup> To be efficient, national stereotyping and the creation of nationalist narratives have to rely on already existing sentiments and perceptions, which is/are? ensured through centrifugal ideologisation. Centrifugal ideologisation is a structural phenomenon and serves to sustain nationalism and nationalist ideology by promoting low intensity *everyday nationalism*. The long-term potency of nationalist ideology comes from its habitual reproduction in the daily rhetoric.<sup>270</sup> The analysed actors and their narratives on social media are part of this rhetoric and of the centrifugal processes.

The narratives of the actors are related but seldom overlap. The Ukrainian political elites constructed their Self as part of an international community, defined by its eternal fight for independence from a threatening Other, which is Russia. The separatists are treated as a part of Russia, not a separate Other. The Ukrainian Self is thus *exclusive* of the Other. On the contrary, the Russian elite constructs an *inclusive* Self, which is imposed on the Other. While opposing the Ukrainian politicians, the Self is portrayed as 'incomplete' as long as the Other, Ukraine, is not part of it. Thus Ukraine as the Other is placed *within* the realm of the Self. Both the volunteers' and the separatists' Selves are surrounded by a variety of Others to whom they relate differently. The volunteers see themselves as opposed to most Others, while the separatists, even though they differentiate themselves from Russia too, aim at becoming a part of the Other, Russia.

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<sup>268</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, 1996, p. 5

<sup>269</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p. 194

<sup>270</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p. 194

## 7.1. Concluding Remarks

In this section, some final remarks and recommendations for further research are made, starting with a conclusive summary. The results of the study provide an insight into the self-understanding of different actors involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The analysis of the actors' social media content shows that the conflict narrative does not invent Self and Other from scratch. Instead it builds on and exaggerates nationalistic narratives. One might thus conclude that nationalistic narratives provided the framework for the conflict narratives. This does not mean that nationalist discourse is to be blamed for the conflict. It means that the definition of Self and Other in times of conflict emerges from categories and self-perceptions that already existed. Therefore, Self and Other in times of conflict are not actually created but *recreated* from pre-existing structures. They are more extreme replicates of Self and Other in times of peace.

A conclusion that can be drawn from comparing the utterances about the conflict and the ones with nationalist content is that the main themes do not differ much among the target groups respectively. The conflict narrative is imbued with nationalist discourse and nationalist discourse is shaped by the conflict narrative – and that goes for all target groups to a different extent. That finding is in line with the claim that conflict only exaggerates pre-existing tendencies and that ideologies such as nationalism are a convenient set of beliefs to exploit or resort to when mobilising for and legitimising a certain course of action.<sup>271</sup> That said, this does not mean that nationalism always leads to conflict. However, nationalism in contrast to supranationalism or universalism, is as a set of beliefs more suited to draw boundaries between the own nation and others. If one is to believe that ideas and beliefs guide our actions, then nationalism can to some extent be held responsible for how the actors relate to themselves and each other. Nationalism includes an element of valuing the own nations interests over others'.<sup>272</sup> Formulating one's interest in nationalist terms thus always carries some inherent tension between the Self and the Other.

The conflict highlights the different forms of nationalism in the Ukrainian and Russian context respectively. While Ukrainian nationalism seems to be more *reactive* in nature – the bigger the threat, the stronger the commitment to the nation – Russian nationalism is *covert*, but nonetheless strong enough to legitimise the pursuance of nationalist goals on other state's territories. The findings of this study suggest that the conflict narrative functioned as a

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<sup>271</sup> Malešević, Siniša, 2010, p.190

<sup>272</sup> Smith, Anthony D., *Chosen peoples*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 249

magnifying glass for seeing the different pronunciations of nationalism in a Ukrainian and a Russian context. It also unveiled that Russian discourse is nationalistic – not necessarily in its terminology but in its content.

Ukrainian nationalism cannot be understood without taking into account the geopolitical context and Russian self-understanding needs to be understood as nationalistic despite the actors' denial of it. Finally, nationalism, although in different pronunciations, permeates the discourses of all target groups' self-understanding. The actors whose social media content was analysed were chosen from political elites and non-state actors who are physically involved in the conflict. In the future, it would be interesting to do a similar study, although with a focus on cultural and intellectual elites in order to get an insight into how they contribute to these narratives.

The study also reveals the complex and dialectic interplay of Self and Other which in the case of Russia and Ukraine is opposing but also mutually reinforcing. The Russian and Ukrainian Selves are diverging but intersecting. They have made the Other consciously or subconsciously into such a central part of their daily rhetoric and self-understanding, that it seems they “need” the Other to maintain their current Self. Thus, a re-definition or reformulation of the Self in relation to the Other might be necessary in order to approach the conflict in a more constructive way and to avoid to constantly recreate the Self in relation to the Other and thereby manifest their interrelatedness. It exceeds the scope of this thesis but it would be an important topic for future research how such a re-definition would impact the conflict. Moreover, further research is needed on social media as a means for disseminating propaganda and about different forms of nationalism operative in both Ukraine and Russia in relation to the conflict.

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