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Victims or contributors? Analysis of Ukrainian wartime discourse on Belarusians in the context of Russian Imperialism

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Abstract

Postcolonialism, although a relatively recent discipline within the social sciences, has largely succeeded in working through the traumas of the vicious era of colonialism by giving a voice to subaltern peoples, those who did not have one for hundreds of years. While the scholarship on the subject has largely succeeded in subjecting the imperial policies pursued by European powers or settlers towards indigenous people in Asia, Africa, or the Americas to constructive criticism, this issue within the European continent itself has long remained in the shadows. This is particularly true for Eastern Europe, where postcolonial discourse largely bypassed Russia, leaving processes in Moscow's claimed exclusive civilisational sphere of influence aside. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the issue of decolonisation of perceptions in Eastern Europe has become increasingly topical. While there is developing literature on Ukrainian perceptions of Russia and Russian colonialism's impact in general, little attention has been paid to relations and perceptions amongst subalterns.

This thesis employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the speeches and statements of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy from August 2020 to June 2024, focusing on how was shaped Ukraine's discourse on Belarus and Belarusians before and after the full-scale invasion. Using a theoretical framework grounded in postcolonial studies and concepts of Russian Hybrid Imperialism and Wartime Discourse, this research assesses how Ukraine's perception of Belarus, a country that has played a crucial yet ambiguous role in the war, has been influenced by the ongoing conflict and shared experiences of subjugation by Moscow. The study investigates whether and how Belarus and Belarusians are framed as victims or contributors to Russian imperialism in Ukrainian political discourse, and how this framing has evolved over time. The results of this research reveal a nuanced and evolving discourse that distinguishes between the Belarusian state and the Belarusian people. The analysis shows that while the pre-invasion discourse was more openly critical of the Lukashenka regime, the post-invasion period unexpectedly saw more neutral and subtle narratives towards the Belarusian state, coupled with a persistent sympathetic view of the Belarusian people. The study also identifies an emerging emphasis on decolonization narratives, particularly after 2022, which frames both Ukraine and Belarus as post-colonial subjects struggling against Russian imperial influence.

Key words:

Belarus, Ukraine, Perception, Russia's war against Ukraine, Imperialism, Russian Imperialism, Wartime discourse, Postcolonialism, Identity, Subaltern, Volodymyr Zelenskyy

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Chapter 1. Introduction

"Our Head of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, Major General Deineko Serhiy Vasylyovych, has commanded me to convey his warmest greetings to your Chairman of the Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus, Lieutenant General Lappo, and to hand over thirty pieces of silver. With contempt!" - said Colonel Oleksandr Vorobets from the 24th Border Guard Detachment to Belarusian Ambassador Ihar Sokol while trying to hand over a bag with coins inside as a group of Belarusian diplomats was leaving Ukraine on 18 March 2022. This rather unprecedented diplomatic incident was a symbolic expression of the emotions of many Ukrainians towards Belarusians after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. General Deineko called it a price for betrayal, for stabbing Ukraine in the back.¹

On 24 February 2022, Russian troops began to encroach upon the territory of Ukraine from multiple directions, from the occupied Crimea towards Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, from the occupied territories of Donbas and Russia itself deeper into the territory of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Sumy regions, and what was least expected also from the North, from the territory of Belarus into the territory of Chernihiv, Kyiv and Zhytomyr regions. Russia's aggression, violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, dramatically changed the security situation in Europe, shocking many who believed in the post-Cold War architecture of security and peace guaranteed by close economic ties with Moscow. This still ongoing war has foremost had a tragic impact on the civilian population, totally reconfiguring the reality in which Ukrainians woke up. The advancing army of the invaders destroying civilian infrastructure and committing war crimes, the rocket attacks and waves of refugees began a period of struggle for the survival of the nation and the independence of the Ukrainian state, which has now lasted for more than two years. Since then, the lives of Ukrainians have been entirely dominated by the topic of war, progress on the front line, and the expectation of events that may change its fate. Such traumatic developments significantly impacted Ukrainians and their perception of world events, including their perception of other nations. This leads us to the thesis topic: the Ukrainian perception of Belarusians since the beginning of the full-scale war.

¹ Deineko, S. (2022, March 19). Rashysty zdiisniuit vidkrytu kryvavu ahresiiu proty Ukrainy z terytorii Bilorusi..., Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/100010543215513/videos/105051626559181/>. Accessed May 24, 2024.

1.1 Research Focus

As the saying goes, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." Therefore, nations that have significantly supported Ukrainians and their fight by providing military and humanitarian aid and welcoming refugees began to be perceived explicitly positively.² However, the escalation that occurred and the outbreak of a conflict of this intensity significantly affected, above all, the perception of the invader - Russian Federation. Despite the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing hybrid war waged by Moscow on Donbas since then, there was still a sizable group of people in Ukraine who considered themselves with the Russians as one nation. Nevertheless, this number fell dramatically from 41% in August 2021 to 8% in April 2022.³ It seems evident that in the aftermath of Moscow's invasion, attitudes towards the aggressor state and the Russian people have significantly deteriorated.

Yet, the quote in the first paragraph shows that not only Russia is seen in Ukraine as an aggressor state. According to United Nations General Assembly *Resolution 3314 (XXIX)*, which defines what aggression is in international law, Belarus is also considered an aggressor by providing its territory under the pretext of military exercises to launch an attack on Ukraine.⁴ Moreover, Belarus' involvement created the possibility of a threat to Kyiv. It made it co-responsible for the crimes committed by the Russians in the vicinity of the Ukrainian capital, in Bucha and Irpin, images of which quickly circulated throughout the world and significantly contributed to a change in the international community's perception of the war character.⁵ Not only have tanks and armoured vehicles moved from the territory of Belarus, Ukraine's northern neighbours have, since the beginning of the full-scale war, served as an infrastructural base for the Russian army, where service work, medical treatment of soldiers and for the initial seven months of the aggression, also air attacks on Ukrainian territory with the use of aviation and missile weapons have been carried out.⁶ This constituted the failure of state policy in the Belarusian dimension and could have been severely disappointing for the Ukrainians, as Aliaksandr Lukashenka has repeatedly stressed that no one would come from Belarusian

² Polishcha i poliaky ochyma ukraintsv, (2022), *Mieroszewski Centre*, <https://mieroszewski.pl/upload/2022/11/польща-і-поляки-очима-українців.pdf>, Accessed April 30, 2024.

³ Vosme zahalnonatsionalne opytuvannia: Adaptatsiia ukraintsv do umov viiny. (2022, April 6), *Sotsiologichna hrupa "Reitynh"*. https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rgua1200ua042022vipress.pdf, Accessed April 30, 2024

⁴ Bruha, T. (2016). The General Assembly's Definition of the Act of Aggression. In C. Kreß & S. Barriga (Eds.), *The Crime of Aggression: A Commentary* (pp. 142–177). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Hamarowski, B., & Lompe, M. (2024). Digital witnesses to the crime: Visual representation of the Bucha massacre across social media platforms. *Media, War & Conflict*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352241243302>

⁶ Partyzany poperedily pro zahrozu raketnykh obstriliv Ukrainy cherez terytoriiu Bilorusi. (2024, March 21). *UNIAN*. <https://www.unian.ua/war/partyzani-poperedili-pro-zagrozu-raketnih-obstriliv-ukrajini-cherez-teritoriyu-bilorusi-12580554.html>, Accessed May 14, 2024

territory to Ukraine with weapons in their hands.⁷ These developments must also have impacted the shift in the Ukrainian perception of Belarusians, which makes one reflect on whether Ukrainians also perceive Belarusians in that negative paradigm as Russians.

This study argues that the discourse on Belarusians is more complex than it may appear and differs from that on Russians. However, among the available studies that have been published regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, the predominant focus is on Ukrainian perceptions of Russians and Russia, and vice versa. These issues in the context of the ongoing armed conflict since 2014 and from 2022 onwards, already in the light of a full-scale invasion, have been examined on multiple occasions.⁸ Simultaneously, current research on perceptions of Belarus and Belarusians in Ukraine in the context of a full-scale invasion is scarce. So far, there has only been one attempt in the academic literature to explore the matter of the role of Belarus in the conflict in Ukraine, which refers to issues before the full-scale invasion and how Minsk's international position was shaped by its attempts to mediate in the peace process between Kyiv and Moscow.⁹ In addition, few articles in the media analyse Belarus's role in the conflict, as well as opinion polls, such as those of the Ukrainian sociological group Rating.¹⁰ However, in these sources, the issue of the perception of Belarus in Ukraine was addressed only partially. Meanwhile, Belarusian attitudes to the post-Revolution of Dignity events in Ukraine are examined,¹¹ as well as in the context of full-scale war.¹² This indicates a gap in assessing how Belarusians are perceived in Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war, which is part of a broader subject. While extensive research has been conducted to establish imperial and (post)colonial perceptions between the imperial metropolises and their subalterns, the interaction between the two subaltern states remains underexplored. This becomes particularly intriguing

⁷ Vot kak Lukashenko godami uveryal, chto "nikogda s nashei territorii ne budut atakovat' Ukrainu." I v itoge ne sderzhal obeshchanie. (2022, February 26). *Zerkalo*. <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/10535.html>. Accessed April 17, 2024

⁸ Samokhvalov, V. (2015). Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle Revisited. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67(9), 1371–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1088513>

Pashkov, M. (2023). *Ukraine's Foreign Policy in Times of War: Features and Priorities*. Razumkov Centre. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep54543>

Kuzio, T. (2017). *Putin's war against Ukraine: Revolution, nationalism and crime*. CreateSpace.

⁹ Trejos-Mateus, F. D., Marín-Aranguren, E. M., & Arévalo-Franco, K. J. (2022). Perceptions of the role of Belarus in the Ukrainian conflict and the impact on the international system. In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 171–190). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003287018-15>

¹⁰ Reitynh Monitorynh, 26-ta khvylya: Otsinka druzhnosti krain. (10-11 liutoho, 2024), (2024). *Sotsiologichna hrupa "Reitynh"*. https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_international_1000_21022024.pdf, Accessed May 11, 2024.

¹¹ Mudrov, S. A. (2020). Belarus, Crimea and the Donbas: Belarusian attitudes to the post-maidan events in Ukraine. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 28(1), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2020.1807732>

¹² Țicălău, R. (2024). Belarusian Regime Perceptions of Russian Aggression in Ukraine. *Journal of Belarusian Studies*, 13(1), 30-47. <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.30965/20526512-bja10019>

Hansbury, P. (2020). Friends in Need: Belarusian Alliance Commitments to Russia and the Ukraine War. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33(4), 542–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1845093>

Mudrov, S. A. (2022). "We did not unleash this war. Our conscience is clear". The Russia–Ukraine military conflict and its perception in Belarus. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 30(2), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2022.2089390>

in the context of continuously present Russian imperialism, which can be categorised as 'hybrid',¹³ where the nature of expansion is more complicated, not as evident, and straightforward to grasp as other European imperialisms. Therefore, the nature of how Ukraine and Belarus, as subaltern states under Moscow's impact, interact and perceive one another is even more complex and constitutes a research puzzle.

Considering how crucial Belarus' participation in the February 2022 aggression was to attempt the realisation of Russia's imperial efforts, it can be concluded that this subject requires a comprehensive analysis of all its aspects to understand the interdependencies and unique dynamics in the Kyiv-Minsk-Moscow triangle better. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to address the existing challenges central to the shaping of the geopolitical landscape in Eastern Europe and, in the context of the ongoing war, also to the entire world order based on the post-Cold War unipolar shaping of it by the 'Collective West', to which the Kremlin is trying to throw down the gauntlet.¹⁴

1.2 Research Aims

This study aims to show that the central aspect shaping Ukrainian perception of Belarusians is the role of Moscow and its imperialistic policy impact on both Belarus and Ukraine. The thesis reveals that while the Lukashenka regime is commonly perceived as a contributor to Russian imperialism, Ukrainians' general perception of Belarusians is more nuanced, causing the differentiation between the two aggressor states nations. Understanding this differentiation is vital to explaining the multifaceted nature of the relationships between both nations and how perceptions are shaped through identity, historical, and geopolitical factors, particularly during wartime. In this thesis, I hypothesise the presence of complex perception in the examined case study due to the shared history of colonisation and subjugation by imperialist Russia. I analyse these perceptions through the lens of Moscow's colonial policies and their impact on Belarusian and Ukrainian identities, which is described as another apex of the triangle shaping much of this relationship between both subaltern nations and preventing it from being abstracted and shaped by Kyiv and Minsk alone. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature and present the issue from a new perspective by uncovering dynamics in Ukrainian discourse on different

¹³ Oskanian, K. K. (2018). A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(1), 26–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398>

¹⁴ Efimov, A., Vasilchenko, V., & Lyapin, I. (2024, February 20). The Collective West What is Putin really talking about when he rails against the West? (E. Laskin, Ed.). *Meduza*. Accessed May 12, 2024. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/02/20/the-collective-west>

Belarusian actors since the start of the protests in Belarus and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which may significantly differ.

1.3 Research Questions:

The leading question for this research that will be key to exploring these issues is:

- **How are the perceptions between subaltern states shaped under the impact of hybrid imperialism, while one state endorses such imperialism despite its colonial experiences and the other contends?**

To provide a reliable answer to this question, I also investigate several sub-questions more specific to the examined case study:

- **How do Ukrainians perceive Belarus and Belarusians following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?**
- **In Ukrainian discourse, are Belarusians treated as victims of Russian imperialism or as supporters of it?**

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This master's thesis consists of seven chapters. The introduction presents a brief overview of the topic, identifies the research puzzle, and presents the research aims and questions. Chapters 2 and 3 are crucial for navigating the topic of Ukrainian wartime discourse on Belarusians. First, Chapter 2 discusses the concepts of Russian Imperialism and wartime discourse. This part provides the theoretical framework for further empirical investigation by reviewing existing literature in the field of Imperialism and its impact on identity and verifying the relevance of the concepts to the examined case study. This delves into the case study by examining Russian Hybrid Imperialism, its impact on both subalterns, and by examining historical, identity, and geopolitical factors shaping the relationship between Ukraine and Belarus. It presents a critical context of the relations between Kyiv and both the Lukashenka

regime and Belarusian non-state actors prior to the full-scale Russian invasion. It also examines the developments after the 'big war' outbreak, what is necessary to understand the underlying processes, and sets the stage for the subsequent analysis chapter. It introduces a methodological tool of wartime discourse by reviewing its different types to explore how identities are presented, and perceptions shaped during the conflict. Before examining the data, Chapter 3 outlines the Critical Discourse Analysis method and considers the research methodology, including the choice of data sources, which are all the speeches or statements of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy mentioning Belarus or Belarusians after the 2020 rigged presidential election protests, as well as since the beginning of the full-scale invasion until the end of June 2024. It also acknowledges limitations encountered during the research. Subsequently, Chapter 4 analyses data that has been extracted by dividing it according to whether the selected speech or statement concerned Belarusian state or non-state actors, as well as Belarusian nation in general, and whether it was given before or after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Finally, I analyse collected data by using the NVivo software to explore positive, neutral and negative perceptions among Ukrainians towards Belarusian state and non-state actors, as well as Belarusians as a nation in general, and observe the dependencies and patterns arising from the discourse analysis. Lastly, I summarise the thesis findings, integrate empirical results with the theoretical framework, and answer research questions. Furthermore, I suggest directions for further scholarship. Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding the nuanced dynamics of Ukrainian discourse on Belarusians within the concept of Russian imperialism and broader historical, identity, and geopolitical context.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In order to understand how Belarusians are perceived by Ukrainians within the framework of the ongoing war, this section will approach the topic by using the concept of Russian Imperialism. Applying such a framework is intended to build appropriate lenses for carrying out the analysis that will follow right after deconstructing the given issue with the help of presented theoretical tools, as they provide valuable insights into specific dynamics shaping Ukrainian perception. Delving into the complex topic of imperialism and colonial practices of the core state, Russia, is crucial for explaining perceptions between colonised states - Ukraine and Belarus particularly during the war, in which the Belarusian state supports the colonial

centre and simultaneously experiences a complex position of coloniality. Using Russian imperialism is substantial for our case study, given that it has historically influenced the identities of both subaltern states based on their shared experience of colonisation and subjugation. Applying this concept helps to study the nuanced perception among Ukrainians towards Belarusians, distinguishing between the Lukashenka regime, Belarusian non-state actors, and the ordinary Belarusians as a whole, with their various stances on Moscow's colonial policies.

This chapter first discusses the concepts of imperialism and empire with their various dimensions, in general, to identify some salient features relevant to presenting the case study in question. In doing so, I attempt to summarise what we know so far about how the empire leads to certain identity positions. The mechanisms that influence and shape the subjugated entities' perceptions of reality are presented, based primarily on the scholarship of postcolonialism and several examples of European colonial empires of the modern era. Further, the context of Russian imperialism, central to the whole study, is introduced by presenting the idea of hybrid imperialism as a basis for further reflections grounded in the term *hybrid exceptionalism* used by Kevork Oskanian.¹⁵ I also present the historical evolution of the Russian imperial idea by explaining the key concepts shaping it from *Third Rome* to *Russkiy Mir*. Through a comprehensive overview of the nature of Russian imperialism, it is possible to put it in the context of Ukraine and Belarus and extensively discuss the impact of Moscow's colonialism on the identities and perceptions of these subalterns, which provides a basis for further analysis. Next, the concept of *wartime discourse* is presented as a methodological tool crucial for understanding how the perception of Belarusians amongst Ukrainians is being shaped during the ongoing war. This chapter presents the categorisation of wartime discourse into *political*, *media*, and *public* due to the actors shaping it, explaining how they are compatible, how each of these is formed, and how they differ. The discussed notion will also be juxtaposed with the pre-war discourse to understand what difference war makes. The exploration in this chapter of how the discourse functions during the war is crucial to this thesis, as it is the object of the following examination.

¹⁵ Oskanian, p. 27-28

2.1 Imperialism and Identity

To properly interpret the patterns arising in the Belarusian and Ukrainian identities and their interplay as subalterns under Russian imperialism, let us first trace how the formation process of distinct identities depends on their interaction with the empire. Edward W. Said in his landmark book 'Culture and Imperialism' described imperialism as a phenomenon of "*thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others*".¹⁶ Imperialism is a somewhat hackneyed but still highly relevant term for describing the surrounding reality and social constructs as one of the main drivers of these. It explains how a state spreads its power and domination over peripheries. The conquest and expansion of influence are usually achieved by incorporating new territories into the empire or effective control over them through military or economic means. Over the thousands of years, hundreds of empires have risen and fallen, forming the current world and its human perceptions. In postcolonial studies, the term used to identify the subjugated - *subaltern*, stands for socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the power hierarchy within an imperial colony and metropolis. Gyanendra Pandey writes that the voice of the subaltern has for centuries been seen as a call for recognition of their subjectivity and equal treatment, and with the development of postcolonial thought, another demand has become the recognition of their difference in this aspect of equivalence.¹⁷ Imperialism greatly affected subaltern nations, shaping their identities, and it is, therefore, essential to understanding the effects of such a policy of domination on different communities. It gives a platform for explaining the relations and narratives currently occurring between them and analysing them from an anthropological point of view, thus understanding the struggles and experiences of subalterns enriches our understanding of humans and their experiences.

While subaltern scholarship has effectively challenged Eurocentric perspectives of the world and highlighted the importance of the agency and resistance of people conquered on different continents, this field has yet to pay particular attention to similar processes within the European continent, which is the purpose of this study. Colonialism in Ernest Renan's 19th-century interpretation was presented as a way of improving the '*coloured people of the lower cultures*' through '*extension of the civilised world*', which was supposed to justify the validity of these

¹⁶ Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books

¹⁷ Pandey, G. (2006). The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(46), 4735–4741. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418914>

processes.¹⁸ While the ideological basis of intra-European colonialism is not founded in racism, as was the case with intercontinental conquests, the leading motive here is also the desire to civilise and to shape conquered in their way. The main reason for this is that colonisation between neighbouring entities is based on less contrast between the two, both culturally and geographically. Furthermore, the effects of such a policy in the case of groups with relatively small differences between colonisers and subjugated, can cause the process of their dissolution into the dominant imperial identity, which is essential to our case study and Russian domination of Belarus and Ukraine.

John Breuilly, in his paper on the relationship between modern empires and nation-states, notes that the impact of different imperial experiences on today's state of affairs is so substantial that former imperial nation-states and former subaltern nation-states are actually two kinds of states.¹⁹ This distinction of identities and collective memory preserved amongst both of them largely shapes the differences in nation-states' perceptions of the world order, leading to many problematic issues in international politics nowadays, as the example of the current Russian war against Ukraine shows. Matthew A. Beaudoin finds the simple division between colonisers and colonised when it comes to identity too simple, as they are in fact not homogeneous categories.²⁰ Indeed, everyone's experience differs, due to the various cultural codes based mainly on the history of the family and their relationship with the coloniser and the degree of acceptance of their subaltern reality. The explanation for this is imperial rule's significant impact on identity development and shifts amongst subalterns, as well as relationships between them and colonisers, resulting in different ways of perceiving reality based on their privilege or lack thereof. Empires' way of governing imposes their political, cultural, and social order dominance on the conquered populations, which evokes their different response to the policies of the metropolis. Over the course of time imperial rule usually leads to creating a *hybrid identity* where colonised people may take over the rules, customs enforced by the colonisers while at the same time maintaining their indigenous way of life, what Homi K. Bhabha defines as a *third space* that enables something new to emerge.²¹ Subalterns also often revive and strengthen their pre-colonial identities in reaction to imperial control. Putting themselves in a position of resistance to the empire's influence facilitates preserving local traditions, languages,

¹⁸ Renan, E. (2015). *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Breuilly, J. (2017). Modern empires and nation-states. *Thesis Eleven*, 139(1), 11-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513617700036>

²⁰ Beaudoin, M. A. (2013). A hybrid identity in a pluralistic nineteenth-century colonial context. *Historical Archaeology*, 47, 45-63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03376898>

²¹ Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

and customs as components of national identity. This is especially common when the conquered group is relatively large and has already a well-formed identity before colonisation started. However, when the local identity is not so well developed, and the dominated group is comparatively less numerous, the opposite process may occur, and distinctiveness may critically decline.

In the case of the Western European colonial empires and their territorial conquests and dominance in regions remote from them, where the conquered peoples were also significantly different culturally, with vastly different languages and traditions, or by physical characteristics such as skin colour, the process of identity swapping to an imperial one is rather complex. It is worth mentioning in this context the figure of Amitav Ghosh, Indian writer, and social anthropologist raised in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, winner of many prestigious awards as a writer of literature in the historical fiction genre. His writing captures a picture of the complex identities of South Asian communities and has had an important influence on the development of aesthetic theories relevant to today's postcolonial scholarship. This theory takes into account not only material and historical sources, but also cultural works to describe reality, which is debatable among scholars, but has gained legitimacy by portraying the experience of a minority through the narrative of its representatives themselves, focusing less on the aesthetic and literary aspects.²² *'Did we ever have a hope? (...) We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that I suppose is where I am...'* In Ghosh's acclaimed piece 'The Glass Palace', the words of Lieutenant Arjun Roy participating in the rebellion against British imperial domination, show the complexity of the identity of a man who although has not adopted an imperial identity, worked for the British and lived in the reality that was completely created by the coloniser. Undoubtedly, considerations did not take a similar shape for everyone exploited by the empire, and the experiences of other individuals may have been shaped more beyond the context of subalternity.²³ However, society's general perception is made up of individual experiences, which need to be given space to resonate and what impacts political and social issues such as those touched upon in this study, that is why it is so important to understand hybrid identities as one of the main links between imperialism and identity.

²² Su, J. J. (2011). Amitav Ghosh and the Aesthetic Turn in Postcolonial Studies. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34(3), 65–86. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.34.3.65>

²³ MacKenzie, J. (2015). The British Empire: Ramshackle or Rampaging? A Historiographical Reflection. *The Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 43(1), 99-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2015.997120>

Empires form the historical background that continues to influence national identity and sets the framework for *contextualising self-perception*. This influence is characterised by the creation of certain interpersonal connections and the same experiences among people from formerly colonised regions, based on a shared imperial past, which take root in their identity and facilitates their constant postcolonial self-defining. The way colonial history is remembered and taught can significantly determine how postcolonial societies define themselves in relation to their former metropolises, in which the material and symbolic layers are essential. Karen Fox and Samuel Furphy provide evidence of this by presenting the Australian struggle for national self-recognition based on the shift from an Imperial system of awarding national honours. It showed an emerging nationalism and how relating to and negotiating themselves in relation to Britishness is still significant for local identity. Although the authors present issues that were of great importance to Australia's emerging post-imperial identity in the 1970s and 1980s, this debate is still relevant today and is fuelled by topics such as the awarding of the controversial Order of Imperial Origins, or Australian Knighthood, to Prince Philip in 2015, which caused then Prime Minister Tony Abbott decline in support. This shows that the identity and perception of the world and of oneself within it is still being negotiated, even for stable states like Australia, which is not in the position of being exposed to the destructive actions of other Empires.²⁴

Another important notion of imperial impact is *linguistic imperialism* presented by Heath Rose and John Bosco Conama, as it is a legacy of the imperial era shaping reality today. The authors outline how the introduction of policies favouring the use of one language over another, in this case English over Irish Sign Language, leads to the exclusion of certain communities. Ireland, which, as a result of London's imperial policies, has largely lost its language and even today, after a bloody struggle for independence and with decades of functioning as a separate state, is unable to revive its mother tongue or even ensure that its few speakers are not discriminated. Promotion by the Empire of its language instead of the language of the local community is a practice common to most empires, as it transmits a cultural code defined and shaped by the metropolis. In this way, the possibility of creating and interacting with local heritage and culture, including those that are traditional to the community and influence the preservation of

²⁴ Fox, K. and Furphy, S. (2017). The Politics of National Recognition: Honouring Australians in a Post-Imperial World. *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 63(1), 93-111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12317>

identity, is deliberately reduced, and an alternative promoted by the metropolis is offered instead.²⁵

To sum up, each empire and colonial power is different, and all sorts of state-structured social constructs have emerged over the centuries, differing in their nature of operation, and in the way they impact identities at the centre of the empire and at its periphery. Differences exist by era and geography, and although each case of empires must be considered separately, various similarities between them allow to draw certain parallels regarding the nature of their influence, of which the following characteristics were present: *hybrid identity*, *contextualising self-perception*, *linguistic imperialism*. Therefore, the imperial modes of influence discussed above will be confronted with the case of Russian imperialism to see what characterises this case study.

2.2 Russian Hybrid Imperialism

We are in the middle of 2024, almost a quarter of the 21st century has passed, there are thousands of works in the body of humanity deconstructing all the mechanisms that shape social structures. Postcolonial science has given us new insights into people's perceptions of reality, their identities and has included those who were excluded for years in the global discourse. The concept of empire, and all the factors that shape its behaviour, has been discussed in depth. Optimists might hope that, since we now know the ways in which oppressive imperial organisms emerge in international politics, it is simply enough now to avoid all the traps and build general global peace and prosperity. Of course, what appears on paper to be an achievable goal is much more complex, and understanding the intricacies of problematic social processes does not provide a remedy to stop them, it is not something that can be grasped with theory. Black clouds have hung over a world that for a long time seemed to many to be flashing forward, and the so-called 'Collective West' after the end of the Cold War shaping the dominant global postcolonial discourse has, after decades of being stuck in lethargy, awoken to the reality in which Russia openly claims to be at war with it, with as yet no clear solution to overcoming the current challenges. Caused by the Russian Federation, the largest armed conflict in Europe after the Second World War resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, spiked with nuclear blackmail, with the withdrawal of treaties

²⁵ Rose, H. and Conama, J. B. (2017). Linguistic imperialism: still a valid construct in relation to language policy for Irish Sign Language. *Language Policy*, 17(3), 385-404. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-017-9446-2>

crowning the end of the Cold War,²⁶ the world is once again on the edge of a global conflict. Someone might think that this is just another armed conflict in the world and that, from a European perspective, we only see something when it appears nearby, or that there has never been a day on our planet without war. Especially in the context of the effects of the colonisation processes initiated by empires from the Old Continent, discussed in the previous paragraph, it would be worth being careful not to view everything around us from a Eurocentric position. However, analyses of the processes surrounding the ongoing war - an extremely relevant case study of imperialism in the postcolonial era - are particularly important, as its significance for global security and the system of geopolitical poles shaping it is unprecedented, and its repercussions already affect or could potentially affect everyone on the planet. The case that has led us to such a place is Moscow's imperialism, an imperialism of hybrid form. This section of the study shows what state thought influences and shapes decisions in the Kremlin and how Russian ideology forms its state self-perception, the identities of its citizens, and that of other nations.

The nature of Russian imperialism is far from straightforward, unlike other European empires, where the metropolis simply subjugated and exploited the subalterns on another continent, the case of Russia is often seen rather differently, due to its more complex nature, which can be categorised as 'hybrid imperialism'. It is a concept that precisely captures the way the Russian state functions in today's postcolonial era. To properly understand the correlation in this postcolonial conception of worldview, let us again return to Said, who, referring to French philosopher Michel Foucault,²⁷ alluded to the unequal relations between West and East as the power-knowledge nexus that makes how power is generally shaped in the world.²⁸ Kevork Oskanian begins to explain the phenomenon of Russia's hybrid exceptionalism by identifying that Russia's hierarchical worldview is also a similar case of a long-standing power-knowledge nexus, within which a justification of hierarchy is made through claims of Russian superiority in a specific civilisational sphere with a perceived shared history described as the '*near abroad*'. Hierarchical control in Russian terms means control over people who are subordinated to them, giving Moscow the right to carry out a certain civilisational mission. Over the centuries, this mission has adopted a somewhat different character, but Oskanian identifies that

²⁶ Podvig, P. (2024). Preserving the nuclear test ban after Russia revoked its CTBT ratification. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 80(2), 75–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2314431>

²⁷ Foucault, M. (2020). Power/knowledge. In *The new social theory reader* (pp. 73-79). Routledge.

²⁸ Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162-206.

Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books

the imperial thought that accompanied Russian statehood both in the period of the Russian Empire initiated by Peter the Great in 1721, as well as the Soviet Union, and so today in its present form of the Russian Federation, has always laid claim to a separate civilisational space, but in each of its forms found a different ideological basis for this. Throughout its history, Russia has always expressed it quite explicitly apart from the few years in 1990s, when it was still unable to redefine itself in a new form after the collapse of the empire in its previous incarnation, the USSR, which led to a certain thaw in relations with the West. Some scholars even started to see Russia as a potential part of this community.²⁹ However, even during this brief period, in which Russia did not so clearly express itself in an expansive and aggressive manner, there were still signs that it was seeking to exercise some form of control in its proximity. Oskanian here cites Yeltsin's request to the UN Security Council for an open-ended UN mandate to address threats to international security within its near abroad space.³⁰ Nevertheless, these signs were there, exemplified by the Chechen wars, as well as various involvements or interventions in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, or during the civil war in Tajikistan. Despite this activity and a reactive imperial policy, the chaos of the dashing nineties was not favourable to more decisive action. It must be remembered that Moscow emerged as a loser from the Cold War and had to deal with the transformation of the definition of its statehood to a new postcolonial model of international relations, in which being openly imperial is anathema. It can be argued that Moscow's imperial thought has been consistent and practically unchanged since it adopted this status in the Early Modern Period. Moreover, if one traces its development, it is possible to note the fact that such an ideology had accompanied the metropolis located in Moscow well before it revealed itself as an empire. As early as the 15th century, there is an example of it in the case of the ideology of the Third Rome, created by the Orthodox cleric Philotheus of Pskov. In his letter to the ruler of Moscow, the first Rome fell because of heresy, the second Rome - Constantinople - because of the betrayal of the true faith, the third Rome is Moscow and there will be no fourth. The author of the doctrine merely sought to emphasise the validity of the Orthodox faith, but de facto this concept was incorporated into the ideological foundation of Russian foreign policy, which thereby designed for itself a certain model of hierarchy, within which it was to act as a unique civilising mission based on Orthodoxy.³¹

²⁹ Baranovsky, V. (2000). Russia: a part of Europe or apart from Europe?. *International Affairs*, 76(3), 443-458, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00145>

³⁰ Hill, F., Jewett P. (1994). "Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy Towards Russia." (1-2) Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Belfer Center.

³¹ Strémooukhoff, D. (1953). Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine. *Speculum*, 28(1), 84-101.

Oskanian presents Moscow's hybridity as an entity situated between the West and the former colonial East/South, or in other words, 'the Occident and the Orient'. Within this perception, Russia sees itself as a distinct civilisation, an empire that cannot be put into either framework.³² Also, the adaptation of historical elements from different imperial eras with modern hierarchical discourses testifies to the relative ease with which quite different identities are combined. It is the perception of oneself as an empire, where it is the imperial statehood that is at the centre, not individuals. This narrative has become so entrenched among Russian rulers that this fixation on imperial status preoccupies every decision-maker in the Kremlin, no matter who might be there and what their ideological grounding of these claims might be. This perception of oneself in the world between the Orient and the Occident also influences the different perceptions of its various subalterns and is projected onto Moscow's relations with other actors in the international order, namely the post-Soviet states. This is shown by the Orientalising perception of some of the subaltern regions within the Imperial conception, i.e. the portrayal of the Caucasus and Central Asia as savage and inferior, which puts forward parallels to the also racism-based, colonialism that was the ideological basis of Western European conquest in various continents. In the case of other subalterns, such as Ukraine and Belarus, the discourse was focused on blurring borders and presenting the subjugated also as Russians. The most striking expression of this is the proposal of a new definition of shared identity by including both of the closest subaltern entities to the west of Moscow in the concept of Triune Russian Nation, as will be discussed later. However, a common theme in both cases is the negation of subjectivity and independent distinct status, exemplified by statements made by leading figures of the Russian state that some of the subalterns are 'artificial' states and lost 'Russian' land.³³ This perception of the periphery is valid even within a single state organism and demonstrates a significant impact on Moscow's relations with the other subjects of the Russian Federation. Its dynamics are also constructed on an imperial dimension, which is well illustrated by the notion of Internal Colonialism,³⁴ with the metropolis draining all assets from resource-rich regions, including those of human beings by sending comparatively many more

³² Oskanian, K. K. (2018). A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(1), 26–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398>

³³ "Alma-Ata - eto nash gorod". Vitse-spiker Gosdumy Tolstoi obvinil kazakhov v zhelanii iskusstvenno otdelit'sia ot Rossii. *Novaya Gazeta*. (2024, May 30). <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/05/30/alma-ata-eto-nash-gorod-vitse-spiker-gosdumy-tolstoi-obvinil-kazakhov-zhelanii-iskusstvenno-otdelitsia-ot-rossii-news> Accessed June 2, 2024

³⁴ Etkind, A. (2015). How Russia 'Colonized Itself': Internal Colonization in Classical Russian Historiography. *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 3(2), 159-172. <https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.481>

soldiers from colonised parts of the Federation to war in Ukraine.³⁵ Russia, moreover, does not see itself as an entity within today's officially recognised borders of the Russian Federation, within which it has never existed before, which is well reflected in Vladimir Putin's viral response to a geography student, regarding the identification of Russian borders, that '*Russia's borders do not end anywhere*'.³⁶ And although Moscow tries to project its hierarchy in the near abroad with the same method, i.e. de-subjectification, today it is integrated into a postcolonial discourse and uses liberal discourses on international law and economic issues to justify its actions. This shows that although Russia tries to challenge this way of describing the world by promoting the idea of multipolarity, it is still forced to function in the paradigm of the 'Collective West' and uses its language to describe reality.³⁷ This is best illustrated by Putin's statement to the Russian media in December 2000: '*We should get rid of imperial ambitions. Concentrating on our national interests is the number one priority at the moment*', occurring in the year of the brutal pacification of Chechnya.³⁸

In the context of the ongoing war, the proposal to negotiate a new fair order in Europe, as the Kremlin understands it, was a negotiation not only with its opponent but also with itself, its imperial idea of which part of Europe it considers its zone of privileged interest. I specifically refer to the ultimatum to return to the 1997 NATO alliance borders delivered towards the West by Vice Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov at the end of 2021.³⁹ The main objective of this ultimatum was an attempt to ensure that Moscow's imperial interests were as secure as possible. In this sense, the alleged expansion of NATO was to be prevented by the creation of a buffer zone, which de facto was meant to delimit spheres of influence in Europe and was, in the case of a very doubtful acceptance, a wishful scenario of events on the way to securing a multipolar world order with Moscow being one of its poles. In this case, if the offer was rejected, the Kremlin's plan was to depart in part from its hybridity in the sense of attempting to explicitly and overtly reject the prevailing rules of postcolonial discourse and to employ the option of forcible border change in the expectation that the rest of the world's discourse-makers would

³⁵ Bessudnov, A. (2023). Ethnic and regional inequalities in Russian military fatalities in Ukraine: Preliminary findings from crowdsourced data. *Demographic Research*, 48, <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2023.48.31>.

³⁶ Putin: "Granitsy Rossii nigde ne zakanchivaiutsia." (2016, November 24). *BBC News Russkaya sluzhba*. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-38093222>, Accessed June 2, 2024

³⁷ Čanji, D., & Kazharski, A. (2022). When the "subaltern empire" speaks. On recognition, Eurasian integration, and the Russo-Georgian war. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 64(5), 561–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2022.2040375>

³⁸ Drozdova, O., & Robinson, P. (2019). A Study of Vladimir Putin's Rhetoric. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(5), 805–823. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1603362>

³⁹ Lukjanov, F. (2021). US & NATO Won't Accept Russia's Security Demands, So What Next?. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 12, 21.

simply be forced to accept it, due to the lack of other instruments to act. Rivalry with another empire/perception of the world, competition over exclusive civilisational space is contained in this Russian nexus of knowledge and power, which is the basis of state thought, where the state must be strong and is above all else. As Putin states *'What is the world for if there is no Russia in it?'*⁴⁰

This is another parallel showing that for Russia the existence of statehood precisely in the form of an empire is seen as natural, desirable and the only one possible, just as in fascist Italy becoming an essential facet of statehood and power.⁴¹ Oskanian concludes that it is not possible for Russian imperialism to be simply accepted as this would mean that other actors in international relations would reconcile themselves to this state of affairs, where Russia is entitled to its hierarchical demands. In the examined case of the current war, on the other hand, the liberation of the subaltern from the embrace of Russian imperialism is an existential question for the Russian state, as is increasingly mentioned in the Russian discourse on the war with Ukraine, since the Ukraine winning the war means a start of the decolonisation process for Moscow, which could potentially lead to the collapse of the Russian state. The question might arise in this regard, but why specifically is Ukraine so important for Moscow? I will try to address it through the following subsection.

2.3 Impact of Russian Imperialism on Subalterns

The history of Russia has been considerably central not only to its lot but also to shaping the borders and politics of Eastern Europe at large. The drive towards Imperialism has been in one continuous line, from the Muscovy and Tsarist eras through the Soviet times and into the modern Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin, which is put into practice by a desire to control neighbouring territories, including Ukraine and Belarus. The Kremlin's tactic is to resist regional democratic trends, recognising their emergence as a significant threat to their own power. As Zarina Burkadze notes, authoritarian great powers such as Russia see regional democratisation in terms of broader great power competition, and, therefore, foster the rise of authoritarianism and empower illiberal forces.⁴² In the case of Russia, this is highlighted by its

⁴⁰ Ivan Belyaev. (2018, March 9). Zachem mir bez Rossii? Sotsseti obsuzhdaiut novye otkroveniia Putina. *Radio Svoboda*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29086249.html>. Accessed 3 June, 2024

⁴¹ Cerasi, L. (2014). Empires ancient and modern: strength, modernity and power in imperial ideology from the Liberal period to Fascism. *Modern Italy*, 19(4), 421-438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.968116>

⁴² Burkadze, Z. (2022). *Great Power Competition and the Path to Democracy: The Case of Georgia, 1991-2020* (Vol. 28). Boydell & Brewer. p. 12

attempts to oppose every possible democratic transition in the post-Soviet area, seen by the Kremlin as its exclusive civilisational space. It is evidenced by its allergic reaction to Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Revolution of Dignity, support of Lukashenka in keeping power after the 2020 protests, as well as its disastrous relations with Caucasian leaders who came to power with the help of streets, as Saakashvili in Georgia and Pashinyan in Armenia. Finally, its assistance in crushing protests in Kazakhstan and its only ever use of CSTO⁴³ forces to keep a friendly authoritarian regime in power. Moscow decision-makers fear a situation where such events in neighbouring countries would trigger similar processes in Russia itself through 'diffusion' or 'contagion', a process by which a democratic transition in one country causes similar transitions nearby.⁴⁴ The previously introduced concept of Russian Hybrid Imperialism is essential to explaining how the development of the metropolis' persistent influence and subjugation policies has troubled other nations for centuries. This study argues that these are also crucial factors influencing the Ukrainian perception of Belarusians, which is presented in the following part.

Triune Russian Nation

Due to an ongoing war, and the complicated role of Belarusians in it, the topic in question is still highly relevant, and the role of both examined subalterns within the Russian Imperial concept is also an issue discussed in the public debate. The recent viral clash between Ukrainian publicist Vitaly Portnikov and Russian opposition journalist Yulia Latynina demonstrates the relevance of its examination and still radically different approach to this issue between Ukrainians and Russian opponents of Vladimir Putin's regime, what contributes to complicated stance of the former regarding the important issue discussed in Ukrainian wartime discourse, “*if there are good Russians*”? Latynina outlined a vision of the Russian Empire, which stated that Ukrainians were its legitimate creators and could significantly influence decision-making. Thus, according to her, seeing this period as a time of repression is ridiculous. Portnikov, on the other hand, defied imperial clichés by explaining that the concept of a Russian empire with the leading idea of a *Triune Russian Nation* did not foresee partnership but the rejection of their

⁴³ CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization

⁴⁴ Ambrosio, T. (2007). Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution: How the Kremlin Resists Regional Democratic Trends. *Democratization*, 14(2), 232–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701245736>

national identity by Ukrainians and Belarusians. Russia only accepted those who were willing to align themselves with Russian identity and become like them.⁴⁵

The conquest of Ukrainian and Belarusian lands in the 16-17th centuries was the beginning of the development of an expansive policy of the Muscovite state. The subjugation of the closest lands, enabled the formation of a strategic depth for securing the metropolis and obtaining different resources, creating the conditions for further expansion. This relatively early conquest significantly influenced the situating of Ukraine and Belarus in Russian state thought as an indispensable part of the emerging empire, and significantly influenced the intrusive policies of Russification of the periphery and suppression of local languages, cultures, and identities. The attempt to create, together with Ukrainians and Belarusians, a unified nation expressed through, amongst others, the idea of a Triune Russian Nation was implemented to assimilate and control these subjugated regions. The resources, manpower, and strategic locations of Ukraine and Belarus were tapped to benefit Moscow, and currently, even though the two states are in diametrically opposed positions in regard the metropolis, both have a shared experience of the historical impact of Russian imperialism on their own and each other's perception in the world and Moscow's role in the history of their societies.

2.3.1 Russian Imperialism and Ukraine

For decades and still despite some recent changes, scholarship as to the peoples of the post-Soviet republics, and especially those subjugated that are part of the Russian Federation has been dominated by Moscow, in most cases simply ignoring the subjectivity of the subalterns and their stories of themselves. For a long time in the West, studies on the post-Soviet area were frequently called Russian studies, and the states of the former Soviet empire were seen almost exclusively through the prism of Moscow, reproducing its narratives and fostering the uniqueness of Russia's role in the region through its significant overrepresentation in the discourse on this region of the world.⁴⁶ Only recently have voices been raised about the need

⁴⁵ Pohorilko, M. (2024, May 29). Portnikov Latynina battle - history of Ukraine and Russia - Ukrainians and Russians are fraternal peoples or not - reaction of social networks. *Obozrevatel*. <https://eng.obozrevatel.com/section-society/news-portnikov-effectively-put-the-good-russian-latynina-in-her-place-by-giving-an-excursion-into-history-and-caused-a-stir-on-social-media-video-29-05-2024.html>. Accessed June 4, 2024.

⁴⁶ Gorodnichenko, Y., Sologoub, I., & Deryugina, T. (2023, June 21). Why Russian studies in the West failed to provide a clue about Russia and Ukraine. *Vox Ukraine*, <https://voxukraine.org/en/why-russian-studies-in-the-west-failed-to-provide-a-clue-about-russia-and-ukraine>. Accessed June 15, 2024

Gorodnichenko, Y., Sologoub, I., & Deryugina, T. (2023, October 17). Russian studies in the West: Time for a critical review. *VoxUkraine*. <https://voxukraine.org/en/russian-studies-in-the-west-time-for-a-critical-review>. Accessed June 15, 2024

to decolonise it.⁴⁷ Such a focus on the colonial centre in Western perception is, of course, explained by the fact that it is rooted in the Cold War time when the empire took the form of the Soviet Union and was embedded in a geopolitical rivalry with Moscow. However, this approach, which was also continued after the collapse of the USSR, ignored the perspective of the subalterns, and replicated the mistakes highlighted by postcolonial scholarship that had previously been made towards Western-colonised peoples in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Thus, it can be argued that postcolonial discourse largely bypassed Russia, leaving processes in Moscow's claimed exclusive civilisational sphere of influence aside.

This situation has only gradually started to change in the context of the last decade's events.⁴⁸ Ukraine's role in powering these processes is substantial and of relevance to all post-Soviet subjugated nations, influencing the decolonising of the global discourse about them from a Moscow-centric one towards a view of the history that includes the experience of the peoples conquered by Russia. It started in light of the ongoing war against Ukraine since 2014,⁴⁹ and accelerated significantly after the full-scale invasion of 2022.⁵⁰ Only then did this replication of the Russian colonial discourse in the discussion of its subalterns begin to be substantially revised and subjected to critical rethinking. However, it is still too early to claim a fully completed decolonisation. These processes illustrate that only such significant developments as the genocidal war against its largest subaltern opened eyes more widely to the nature of Russian imperial statehood to the world, something that the Chechen wars or the 2008 aggression against Georgia failed to achieve.

Still, in order to influence the world discourse, one must first reach a certain consensus and agreement in the internal public debate, establishing in a social contract, a vision of themselves and their history. In the context of the impact of an oppressive empire, it requires a process of self-decolonisation, especially when colonial policies had a significant impact on identity formation, which is the example of our case study. As Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak

⁴⁷ Shaipov, A., & Shaipova, Y. (2023, February 11). It's high time to decolonize Western Russia studies. *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/11/russia-studies-war-ukraine-decolonize-imperialism-western-academics-soviet-empire-urasia-eastern-europe-university/>. Accessed June 16, 2024.

⁴⁸ Byford, A., Doak, C., & Hutchings, S. (2024). Decolonizing the transnational, transnationalizing the decolonial: Russian studies at the crossroads. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqae038>

⁴⁹ Kuzio, T. (2020). *Crisis in Russian studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War*. Bristol: E-International Relations.

Snyder, T. (2015). Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World. *Slavic Review*, 74(4), 695–707. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.4.695>

⁵⁰ Botanova, K., & Palko, O. (2024). From the decolonial à la Russe to the colonial à la Ukrainienne. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqae040>

argues, Ukraine, in Moscow's perception, was an inseparable part of the Russian imperial core, as illustrated by its invasive narratives, and at the same time acted as a centre of anti-imperial resistance, which reflects the complexity of its colonial experience and frames, in a way, the two dimensions that emerged in Ukrainian identity.⁵¹ The need to subjugate Ukraine also stems from a coded perception of Ukraine as the second largest nation of the former Empire, as a potential rival and progenitor of a different civilisational vision in an area considered by Moscow to be its traditional sphere of influence. In this notion Ukraine could possibly represent a rival idea of self-determination and an alternative vision of development for its people than under the auspices and close embrace of Moscow, what is the issue currently. Taras Kuzio admits that Ukrainian identity is split on two main identities: “*Ukrainian identity, which believes Ukrainians are a distinct people different to Russians, and pan-Russian identity, which believes Russians and Ukrainians are ‘fraternal brothers’ who have always been one nation and always will be united in the Russian World.*”⁵²

Due to such a policy of metropolis, the focused on self-redefinition decolonising discourse in Ukraine, as well as in Belarus, which I will return to later, had a difficult challenge, as the degree of Russification of the country after several centuries at the time of the collapse of the USSR was very significant. With a totalitarian system dominating Ukrainian lands for decades, there emerged a people with a new identity - Homo Sovieticus, which was a continuation of the Little Russian identity, as those seeing Ukraine's future in the Moscow state project and constituting a significant part of society. This is best illustrated by the data on Russian linguistic imperialism depicting the use of Ukrainian and Russian, where the role of the latter increasingly increased, leading to a situation in which the imperial language was considered the language of the elite, essential for a successful career, in which most education was conducted, including dominance in the higher education,⁵³ and which replaced Ukrainian as the main language of Ukrainians, above all in the urban area.⁵⁴ Such processes have led to the vast majority of Ukrainians being bilingual, with a large proportion also speaking a hybrid of Ukrainian and Russian - surzhyk. This Russification of the public space also continued through the larger period of independence after the collapse of the USSR, where the market share of Russian-

⁵¹ Hrytsak, Y. (2015). The Postcolonial Is Not Enough. *Slavic Review*, 74(4), 732–737. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.4.732>

⁵² Kuzio, T. (2024). Ukrainian versus Pan-Russian Identities: The Roots of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12422>

⁵³ Aref’ev, A. L. (2018). Russian-language education in Ukraine: History and present situation. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 88*(5), 454–462. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331618060023>

⁵⁴ Dnistrianskyi, M. S. (2008). *Etnogeografii Ukrainy* (p. 189). Lviv: Vydavnychyi tsentr LNU imeni Ivana Franka.

language newspapers, radio and television increased. In 2012, steps were also taken to legally secure the dominant status of the Russian language by Viktor Yanukovich's political establishment with the introduction of the law 'On the Principles of the State Language Policy' known as the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko law. This law provoked strong opposition from Ukrainian society and was used by the Kremlin in its information campaign against Ukraine during the process of internal decolonisation, which only began with permanent and significant changes in Ukraine's political course and the consequent deterioration of relations with Russia following the Kremlin's aggression.⁵⁵

It was only such significant events for the formation of a new distinct from Moscow Ukrainian identity as the Euromaidan - Revolution of Dignity with the overthrow of the power of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, Russian military aggression in 2014, and the occupation of part of the territory that accelerated the use of decolonial optics. Following these events, an upward trend in the development of Ukrainian identity policies with the promotion of an official state language began. At the same time, the parallel weakness of pro-Russian political parties led to the progressive marginalisation of pan-Russian identity in Ukraine. However, the decolonisation of itself and the formation of a new perception of what Ukraine is and who Ukrainians are is undoubtedly a complicated process, influenced by various factors that have resulted in a consensus still not being reached after the events of 2014. Russia has been doing its utmost to stop these undesirable processes using various tactics. Key among them was Moscow's speculation of political issues like the war in Donbas and the events of 2 May 2014 in Odesa to trigger the needed changes in the identity of Ukrainians.

The unwillingness of Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy to implement the Russian interpretation of the 2014-2015 Minsk Agreements, which would have transformed the occupied Donbas territories into a Moscow-ruled autonomy, with the right to block Ukrainian European integration,⁵⁶ de facto creating a restrained state and gradually transforming Ukraine into a Russian satellite led to the attempted forcible subjugation of Ukraine undertaken in February 2022.⁵⁷ The Russian portrayal of the events in Odesa on 2nd May 2014 was, in turn, a tactic of making Nazis out of Ukrainians. Odesa clashes were essential

⁵⁵ Bilaniuk, L. (2016). Ideologies of language in wartime. *Revolution and war in contemporary Ukraine: The challenge of change*, 151-152.

⁵⁶ Arel, D., & Driscoll, J. (2023). Ukraine's unnamed war: Before the Russian invasion of 2022. *Cambridge University Press*. p. 193

⁵⁷ Kuzio, Ukrainian versus Pan-Russian identities. p. 2.

for the whole conflict perception and its use in Russian propaganda. The deaths of dozens of people, mainly including pro-Russian anti-Maidan activists but also pro-Ukrainian activists, were portrayed in Russian media narratives as the turning point. They portrayed the event as a scenario where 'terrifying Nazis' killed innocent pro-Russian Ukrainians for their willingness to speak Russian and the memory of the common heroic ancestors from the Great Patriotic War, although the reality was far more nuanced.⁵⁸ The events in Odesa have become central to the overarching Russian narrative of Ukrainian Nazis, a narrative that continues to be employed to this day. Putin has also referenced 'neo-Nazis' and 'denazification' in his justification for the invasion of Ukraine. Evidence shows many defectors naming Odesa events as motivation to join separatist forces. It is through such techniques of messaging that Russian propaganda was able to cause the defection of several thousand Ukrainian citizens in the initial stages of the hybrid war in an attempt to legitimise its actions against Ukraine as the will of the local population. These Ukrainian citizens intended to fight for 'good Ukraine', part of a common project with Russia, 'one nation' they could identify with, as a response to an 'organised coup, during which Western puppets came to power and want to change the meaning of being Ukrainian, as an opposite to being Russian.'⁵⁹

In line with this strategy of developing an alternative identity, Russian imperial tactics attempted to divide Ukraine into parts, using the motif of demonisation of Western Ukraine.⁶⁰ During the Orange Revolution in 2004, it was used to divide Ukraine into the Western part, predominantly Ukrainian-speaking, and Eastern, predominantly Russian-speaking, depicting it as an 'authentic Ukrainian identity.' In the narrative promoted by Yanukovich's Russian political technologists, the Western part was to exalt itself and consider the Eastern part inferior and less valuable. This tactic was unsuccessful then as it resulted in a victory of protesters and defeat for Moscow. However, one of the outcomes of these events was a summit of pro-Russian Ukrainian deputies in Severodonetsk, which was attended primarily by delegates from the south and east of the country under the auspices of Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov and the Russian Embassy. This event laid the foundation for Kremlin political strategists to work on

⁵⁸ Binder, E., & Kaltseis, M. (2020). 'Odessa 2014: alternative news and atrocity narratives on Russian TV.' *Culture & Theory*, Volume 193, 185-210.

⁵⁹ Hale, H.E., O. Shevel & O. Onuch. (2018). 'Believing Facts in the Fog of War: Identity, Media and Hot Cognition in Ukraine's 2014 Odesa Tragedy.' *Geopolitics*, 23:4, 851-881.

⁶⁰ Riabchuk, M. (2015). 'Two Ukraines' Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence? *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15:1, 138-156.

the Donetsk Republic project, which continued to develop in the near future.⁶¹ It shows that Ukrainians are sometimes treated as equals, co-citizens, but only when they agree with the Russian discourse about themselves. In this understanding Ukrainians are one/brother nation until they don't perceive themselves as distinct, then they are Nazis. These identity policies in relation to subalterns make Russia a very ambiguous type of empire, different in that respect from other European colonialisms.⁶²

To sum up, in the period after the collapse of the USSR, Moscow was still the leading actor shaping identities and, thus, political processes. In the decolonisation process of redefining its identity, Ukraine acted primarily in a reactive manner. The response to the Kremlin's imperial policy after 2014 was to rid public space and the symbolic layer of colonial traces, as evidenced by the Decommunisation Law and the demolition of monuments to Vladimir Lenin after 2014.⁶³ Certainly, the launching of a full-scale war and the attempted destruction of Ukrainian statehood with accompanying genocidal practices such as the razing to the ground of entire cities, war crimes, systematic rocket attacks, humanitarian crisis, deportation and brainwashing of Ukrainian children, systematic destruction of Ukrainian heritage, culture, and language and identity on occupied territories,⁶⁴ could not pass unnoticed and became a new stage in the formation of the Ukrainian nation. Events after 24 February 2022 resulted in a strong derussification and decolonisation of public space from the remains of the Russian empire legacy, such as the monuments and streets of Pushkin and other Russians.⁶⁵ Ukrainian language use has also increased significantly.⁶⁶ The society largely united in the face of the threat of Russian imperialism and adopted the Ukrainian optics on the conflict, carrying out significant steps towards self-decolonisation and spreading this optic to the world, laying the foundations for a global decolonisation of the discourse on Russia.

⁶¹ Barbieri, J. (2020). The Dark Side of Decentralization Reform in Ukraine: Deterring or Facilitating Russia-Sponsored Separatism? In H. Shelest & M. Rabinovych (Eds.), *Decentralization, Regional Diversity, and Conflict: The Case of Ukraine* (pp. 211–256). Springer International Publishing.

⁶² Teper, Y. (2016). Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: national or imperial? *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32(4), 378–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1076959>

Shestopalova, A. (2023). Constructing Nazis on Political Demand: Agenda-Setting and Framing in Russian State-Controlled TV Coverage of the Euromaidan, Annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 112-137. <https://doi.org/10.51870/fuqi2558>

⁶³ Rozenas, A., & Vlasenko, A. (2022). The real consequences of symbolic politics: breaking the Soviet past in Ukraine. *The Journal of Politics*, 84(3), 1263-1277. <https://doi.org/10.1086/718210>

⁶⁴ Moser, M. (2023). The Ukrainian language in the temporarily occupied territories (2014–October 2022). *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal*, (10), 1-48. <https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj270983.2023-10.2-48>

⁶⁵ Piechowska, M. THE NEW UKRAINE AND HOMO UCRAINENSIS. In Point of No Return? The Transformation of the Global Order After The Russian Invasion of Ukraine (pp. 24-27). *PISM Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*.

⁶⁶ Racek, D., Davidson, B. I., Thurner, P. W., Zhu, X. X., & Kauermann, G. (2024). The Russian war in Ukraine increased Ukrainian language use on social media. *Communications Psychology*, 2(1),1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-023-00045-6>

2.3.2 Russian Imperialism and Belarus

In the context of the ongoing war, the concept of Russian imperialism in relation to the Ukrainians is explicitly very relevant and is an obvious lens for explaining the ongoing processes. In the case of the Belarusians, it is more complex. As a country that is so crucial to the processes taking place during the ongoing war, its research is clearly overlooked. There are quite different views in this context as to what extent the Belarusians have been victims of Russian imperialism. It all depends on one's perspective, as widespread statements range from the opinion that Belarusians have been subjugated and exploited by Moscow, or that Belarus voluntarily joined the expansionist plans, and aided and contributed to the imperial policy of the 'elder sibling'. But of course, nothing is black and white, and so this issue will be subjected to an in-depth assessment of the impact Russian imperialism has had on Belarusianness.

In the postcolonial perspective, the case of Ukraine is the easiest to grasp of all Moscow's subalterns, the images of war most clearly appeal to people's reason and change their perceptions of reality, and a gradual decolonisation process is taking place. Although in the case of Belarus the discourse of decolonising and targeting the reduction of Moscow's lens also materially emerged after the 2020 protests and Russian invasion on Ukraine, it is still not fully embraced both internally as well as abroad. It can be evidenced by the naming in many languages of the country with a cliché from the Russian 'Belorussia', translation of the term White Russia instead of Belarus, although this has also slowly started to change in recent years.⁶⁷ Belarus, similarly to Ukraine, or even more, due to the higher degree of control, tightened bilateral relations and the greater degree of Russification of society, is perceived by Kremlin decision-makers as part of Russia's strategic territory, an area that it is necessary to control in order to ensure state security. Through the territory of Belarus lies the shortest path linking Europe and Moscow between the Daugava and Dnieper rivers through the so-called Smolensk Gate, across which all the armies heading from the West were going to capture Moscow. Control over Belarus, like that over Ukraine, is also necessary to create and project a social perception of Moscow - the empire, for which control over other East Slavic nations, considered as constituent parts of the great Russian nation is essential.

⁶⁷ Deputat parlamentu Frantsyi prapanavau zmyanits nazvu Belarusi u frantsuzskaj move, (2024, June 7). *Belsat*. <https://belsat.eu/news/07-06-2024-deputat-parlamentu-frantsyi-prapanavau-zmyanits-nazvu-belarusi-u-frantsuzskaj-move>. Accessed June 19, 2024.

However, since gaining independence in 1991, in contrast to the other states of the former Soviet Union seeking a new version of themselves as independent states, Belarus has hardly changed its image from that of the communist era, remaining the most Russified of all the former republics of the USSR. A referendum initiated by Lukashenka in 1995, the legitimacy of which is disputed, changed Belarus' historic national symbols to those of the Belarusian Soviet Republic, and gave the Russian language official status as the only state in the world besides Russia. This influenced and exacerbated the already deplorable situation of the Belarusian language, which was almost completely marginalised because of intensive Russification after the Second World War. Consequently, over the last few centuries, except the short periods of the Belarusian People's Republic and first years of independence, between the collapse of the USSR and the election of Lukashenka as president, Belarusian identity developed all the time within the framework of imperial Moscow statehood, what caused problems with developing distinctive national identity. Under such conditions, Belarusian identity, as distinct from Russian identity, has had a challenging time. Moreover, it has traditionally been under-expressed due to the considerable isolation of Belarusians, the vast majority of whom lived in villages and swampy areas during the formation at the turn of the 20th century of the modern Belarus nation. The concept of national identity reached them later, and most people over a long period described themselves as 'Tutejshyya' - people from here, without perceiving themselves within broader social constructs.⁶⁸ The harsh conditions under which the Belarusian identity was formed, combined with a significantly smaller population than the other subalterns examined - the Ukrainians - and the dominant imperial nation - the Russians - resulted in a much greater degree of Russification than in the example of its southern neighbours. Grigory Ioffe argues that “*lack of national consolidation presents a far greater problem for Belarus than the much-reviled Lukashenka regime, particularly in the context of recent disputes with Russia over oil and gas transit and pricing*”⁶⁹ This accurately describes the problem of the Belarusian people with the decolonisation of the discourse about themselves and their own identity, which, by putting themselves in the tight grip of Moscow playing its dirty imperial game and losing all distinctiveness, may be tragic in its consequences. However, the Lukashenka regime is the essence of the problem itself, as its priority is to stay in power, in return for which, piece by piece, it surrenders the assets of Belarusian sovereignty into the hands of the Kremlin. David Marples even states that the Belarusian regime has de facto

⁶⁸ Bekus, N. (2008). European Belarus versus State Ideology: Construction of the Nation in the Belarusian Political Discourses. *Polish Sociological Review*, 163(3), 263-283.

⁶⁹ Ioffe, G. (2007). Unfinished Nation-Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Election. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 48(1), 37–58. <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.48.1.37>

renounced the country's independence through extensive integration with Russia.⁷⁰ In this paradigm, it can be argued that the actions outlined above, which were aimed at destroying the Belarusian language, national symbols, and Belarusian identity as distinct from Russian, are de facto extensions of Moscow's imperial policy and that the decolonisation process following the collapse of the USSR took place in a very limited way. The activities of Lukashenka's regime in this context should not be portrayed as identical to Belarusians and Belarusianness, as these are persecuted and repressed by the state. They rather qualify him as a representative of the Russian imperial vision of the 'correct Belarusian' who sees himself in the context of Moscow. Lukashenka is de facto fulfilling the role not much different from the Russian administration leaders in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Both he, who officially bases his legitimacy on the will and choice of the Belarusian people, and those there who have been openly appointed by Moscow introduce policies based on the destruction of the identity and vision of their regions that are different from Russia's imperial perspective. Understanding how critical and dominant this discourse is in Lukashenka's state today, one can see developments in Bhabha's *third space*. A mixed Belarusian-Russian hybrid identity is being created within this framework, expressed by such statements of Lukashenka that '*Belarusians are Russians with a quality sign*',⁷¹ or that '*Belarusians are in fact one people with Russians*'.⁷² Subsequently, we should consider current Belarusian state actors within the framework of Russian imperialism, as they tend to follow Moscow's policies in exchange for helping to maintain the stability of Lukashenka's power.

Although there was a noticeable period of Soft-Belarusisation after the 2014 demonstration of the nature of Russian imperialism against Ukraine, which was triggered by civil society and with some acceptance and encouragement from the regime looking to balance the international situation and thaw relations with the West.⁷³ It is these few months after the elections that have fundamentally changed Belarusian society and the state of affairs in the country. Demonstrations swept across the country, gathering several hundred thousand participants at the most numerous protests in Minsk. Belarusians began to get to know their neighbours

⁷⁰ Marples, D. (2013). *Belarus: a denationalized nation*. Routledge.

⁷¹ Lukashenko zaiavil, chto belorusov i rossiyan ne udastsia stolknut', (2019, January 18), TASS. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6015797>, Accessed June 27, 2024.

⁷² Lukashenko: my s ruskimi - odin narod, (2012, September 21). *Nasha Niva*. <https://nashaniva.com/ru/80496/>, Accessed June 27, 2024

⁷³ Marin, Anaïs. 2020. "Belarusian Nationalism in the 2010s: A Case of Anti-Colonialism? Origins, Features and Outcomes of Ongoing 'Soft Belarusianisation.'" *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 9 (1): 27–50. <https://dx.doi.org/10.30965/20526512-12340003>

through the local yard, neighbourhood, and city chats, where they coordinated and supported each other. The brutal response of the authorities, more than 20 deaths as a result of suppressed protests and abuse in prisons, detention of tens of thousands of people, more than a thousand of whom are still considered political prisoners, and shutdown of hundreds of NGOs, have in resistance caused a revival of Belarusian identity and the need to decolonise the discourse about themselves. The harsh experience of repression and the desire to resist the Lukashenka regime have thus influenced the emergence of a trend towards a return to the Belarusian language, with the simultaneous development of a Russian-speaking Belarusian identity in the reality of language imperialism.⁷⁴ Mass repression, sanctions from the international community, and Lukashenka's re-alignment with Moscow have influenced the emigration from the country of 200,000-500,000 Belarusians, a significant part of whom, due to the risk of return and arrest, are isolated from processes within the country, and actively interacting with those remaining in Belarus. The redefinition among many Belarusians of their national identity has also changed their perception of Moscow's role in these processes and set in motion a process of decolonisation. Currently, two main concepts of Belarusianness are developing. In contrast to the state hybrid Belarusian-Russian identity, a distinct national identity is formed with the central roles of the white-red-white flag and Pahonia coat of arms and the growing importance of the Belarusian language. It develops mainly among the diaspora and is based on decolonisation from Moscow and the aspiration for democratisation and European integration of the country. This vision is centred around Belarusian non-state actors such as opposition activists, with the prominent role of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus with presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a leader, and Belarusian military volunteers fighting on the side of Ukraine in the ongoing war against Russia.

After the 2020 protests, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, understanding the non-alternative nature of Russian support for keeping the power in the country, yielded to Moscow's demands and allowed an attack on Ukraine from Belarusian territory. It completely changed the reality for Belarusians by sharply intensifying Russification. Many examples illustrate this total turn towards Moscow. Belarusian pro-Russian imperialist activists such as Volha Bondarava, known for her denunciations of activists and struggle against the Belarusian language, live a peaceful life in a country ruled by Lukashenka. It contrasts the pro-democratic Belarusian opposition, which is utterly persecuted. Pro-Russian activists feel free to shift the Overton

⁷⁴ Bekus, N. (2023). Reassembling Society in a Nation-State: History, Language, and Identity Discourses of Belarus. *Nationalities Papers*, 51(1), 98–113. doi:10.1017/nps.2022.60

window and vectors in public discourse inside the country even more towards Moscow. Also noticeable are the attempts to obliterate Belarusian identity by the preparation of common history textbooks with Russia, with the portrayal of the history of both nations as one.⁷⁵

The extensive role of Belarus in the Russian context is also depicted by the use of Belarusian territory to create a migration crisis on the border with EU countries inspired and managed with support from Moscow, a copy of which could also be observed on Russia's border with Finland, is yet another example of Russian instrumental use of Belarus. Facilitating illegal migration acts as pressure on those Western states closest to Ukraine. Being subjected to the projection of a real threat from Belarusian territory, these countries may reconsider more actively contributing to limit the harmful impact of Russian imperial policy on its critical Ukrainian direction. It also provides an opportunity to explore potentially sensitive locations on the Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland borders, which could be valuable information regarding the possibility of provocation and for preparations for potential escalation with NATO countries. Moscow is also using the Belarusian dictator to convey various signals, such as readiness for peace talks, becoming Putin's de facto voice on many issues he does not speak about personally. Lukashenka's tactic is to use various contradictory narratives to confuse and mislead. Also of paramount importance is the escalation of the issue of the deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus and the possible holding of military exercises involving their use, which is a direct threat to NATO countries, intended to warn of a possible confrontation between the two sides and to deter more active support for Ukraine. Lukashenka also uses the presence and likely use of nuclear weapons to frighten off potential internal opponents, posing as the actual owner of this weapon of mass destruction when, in fact, it is controlled by Moscow. The Belarusian state resources are also used to organise re-education camps for Ukrainian children from Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, which is an act of genocide for which the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Putin and Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova Belova. During the camps organised under the cover of the state controlled Belarusian Red Cross, children, in addition to the promised recovery, are also russified and sent on excursions to military bases and subjected to militarisation.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Navaborski A. (2024, February 1). Belarus' i Rasiëia damovilisya stvaryts' agul'nia padručniki historyi dla shkolau i universytetau, *Belsat.eu*, <https://belsat.eu/news/01-02-2024-belarus-i-raseya-damovilisya-stvaryts-agulnyya-padruchniki-gistoryi>. Accessed 25 June, 2024

⁷⁶ Savchuk, M., & Shauliuh, A. (2024, March 13). Belarusian vacation camps for Ukrainian children more about reeducation than recuperation. *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-camps-ukrainian-children-propaganda/32860476.html>. Accessed June 29, 2024

To sum up, the trap of mass repression into which Lukashenka fell after the elections to crush any possible opposition and the lack of prospects for a return to the pre-2020 state in the relations with the West and total dependence on Moscow poses Belarus with an enormous threat of being swallowed up entirely by Russian imperialism. The current situation could be exploited at some point by the Russian Federation, which is increasingly pushing for integration within the Union State. Lukashenka may gradually relinquish Belarusian independence to retain, albeit partial and formal, powers and security guarantees. This Lukashenka game of keeping power is all the more dangerous and complex because the situation in Belarus is interconnected with events in Ukraine. In the case of the end of ongoing war, regardless of the outcome, there are severe threats to the existence of Belarus. In the event of a Russian defeat, there is the risk of formalising the occupation of Belarus by the Kremlin to show some achievement to the Russians that could calm public opinion. In the event of the victory of Russian imperialism in Ukraine, it seems natural to try to formally unite the 'three fraternal nations' in the bosom of the empire. All these developments illustrate that Belarus today should be seen as a state colonised by Russia, despite officially keeping independence.

2.3.3 Contextual Background: A Case Study of Ukrainian-Belarusian Relations

Ukraine and Belarus are neighbours, with over a thousand kilometres of common border. Despite the many ties of shared history and the similar perturbations that have faced them, the mutually intelligible languages, similar cultures, and customs, they don't really know each other. This is also emphasised in the context of the ongoing war as the architect of the processes that are taking place between Ukraine and Belarus, and therefore the main factor shaping their mutual perception is the role of the external actor, Moscow, with its colonisation policy. The Ukrainian portrayal of Belarus is somewhat complex and ambiguous, and while Ukrainians have been able to largely decolonise the perception of themselves vis-à-vis Russia, decolonising the perception of their closest neighbours, the Belarusians, through the prism of Moscow is proving to be a much more difficult task.

Building on the impact of Russian imperialism on Ukraine and Belarus outlined above, we can see some patterns within which both statehoods developed. Both nations share a history of independent rule from Moscow, during which they mainly identified themselves as Ruthenians. The Duchy of Polatsk and the Kyivan Rus, later the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ensured that the

ancestors of today's Ukrainians and Belarusians lived for most of their history as a united Ruthenian nation within a common state organism, developing distinctiveness only at the turn of the 19th century.⁷⁷ Both nations are bound together by the history of conquest and colonisation by Moscow, which, starting from the 16th century until the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the 18th century, gradually subjugated all the territory of today's Ukraine and Belarus, except Galicia, Bukovyna, and Transcarpathia, which came under the control of the Habsburg Monarchy. Moscow's occupation meant the start of intensive Russification policies aimed at creating a Triune Russian Nation. Ukrainians and Belarusians share their memory of Moscow-led genocide and repressions, as exemplified by Holodomor and Kurapaty, as well as of suppression of independence after World War I, as shown by the memory of the Battle of Kruty, Slutsk Uprising. The colonisers' actions significantly impacted how Ukrainians and Belarusians perceived themselves and the world, influencing the emergence of multiple identity issues over several centuries as they attempted to define themselves in a colonised environment. These identity struggles remained present even after the creation of the independent states of Ukraine and Belarus, through different collective experiences creating separate and distinct identities of the two nations, with varying degrees of Russification despite the similar way imperialism affected both peoples. Accordingly, the current relations between neighbouring Ukraine and Belarus are the legacy of the concept of the Triune Russian Nation as a continuously present factor of Russian statehood. The Ukrainian-Belarusian relationship as independent states was shaped by the colonial paradigm from which it has failed to break free and which has led to the current state of affairs, the lack of understanding, the poor familiarity with each other, and the two states being on different sides of the barricade.

A significant difference between the two subalterns is how the protests in both states were conducted and their outcomes. The unsuccessful Belarus 2020 protests can be seen as a subaltern's voice that has not been heard enough and, therefore, has not been fully incorporated into the Ukrainian discourse. The different outcomes of mass movements against the authoritarian power in comparison to the Ukrainian Orange Revolution and Euromaidan have influenced how Ukrainians view Belarusians, particularly in the context of the current war. *'They should have done as we did'*, such words are most often used by Ukrainians to refer to events in their country and project them on Belarusians without taking into account how much

⁷⁷ Kotljarchuk, A., & Zakharov, N. (2022). Belarus' relations with Ukraine and the 2022 Russian invasion. Historical ties, society, and geopolitik. *Baltic Worlds: 1-2*, pp. 32-37

more significantly the mechanisms of colonisation and destruction of civil society have affected their northern neighbours. Nevertheless, the suppression of the 2020 protests by Belarusian authorities resonated strongly within Ukraine, where many saw parallels with their own experience during the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014. The brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in Belarus evoked empathy and solidarity among Ukrainians, fostering a sense of shared struggle against autocratic oppression and Russian influence. After 2020, Belarusian political refugees seeking asylum in Ukraine arrived, many of whom later became volunteers and soldiers joining the Ukrainian army during the Russian invasion, which influenced their more visible role within Ukrainian society.

According to Vitaly Portnikov, *'For Ukrainians, Belarus has lost its sovereignty with its armed forces having been involved in the war with Russia on Ukrainian territory. We understand that this is a war that was started by the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka against the people of Belarus.'* Although the Ukrainians understand that the Belarusians do not intend to take an active part in the war,⁷⁸ and Lukashenka is under the control of Russia, this still does not significantly change the perception of Belarusians by Ukrainians based on public opinion polls. These show that Belarusians are mostly badly perceived in Ukraine, better only than Russians.⁷⁹ This perception among Ukrainians stems from the participation of the Belarusian state in the aggression, neglecting the colonisation aspect of the Belarusian people and state. As of August 2022, the attitude towards Belarusians was negative for 52%, neutral for 34%, and positive for 10% of Ukrainians.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the perception of Belarusians as victims of Moscow's colonisation policy adds a layer of complexity to the Ukrainian view. Given the deep divide in Belarusian society, there arises a need to distinguish between state and non-state actors with specific identities that they represent and Belarusians as a whole to understand how relations with them are shaped.

Ukraine has developed a specific policy towards Belarusian non-state actors, which oppose the regime and attempt to restore constitutional order in Belarus. They can be divided into two main categories: the political wing of the opposition, United Transitional Cabinet, headed by

⁷⁸ *Perception of the Russia's war in Ukraine and potential role of Belarus in it.* (2022, May 20). FOMOSO. <https://www.fomoso.org/en/mosopedia/research/perception-of-the-russias-war-in-ukraine-and-potential-role-of-belarus-in-it/>. Accessed June 30, 2024

⁷⁹ Paniotto, V. (2024, January 29) *INTER-ETHNIC PREJUDICES IN UKRAINE, OCTOBER 2023*. KIIS. <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1364> Accessed June 30, 2024

⁸⁰ Simnadtsiatie zahal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannia: Identychnist'. Patriotyzm. Tsinnosti, (2022, August 23), Sotsiolohichna hrupa "Reitynh". https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ua_1000_independence_082022_xvii_press.pdf, Accessed June 30, 2024.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the armed wing: Belarusians fighting in the Ukrainian army, primarily in the Kalinouski regiment as well as the Belarusian Volunteer Corps and Pahonia, Terror units.⁸¹ Both wings represent various approaches to solving the problem of decolonisation of Belarus. Ukraine sees these actors as representatives of the democratic desires of Belarusian society. However, Ukrainian officials avoid explicit contacts and official relations with representatives of the Belarusian opposition and even block Tsikhanouskaya's participation in joint events.⁸²

It can be argued that Ukraine is trying to develop tactics that would allow cooperation with those Belarusians who share common goals with Kyiv and see this as a path to the liberation of their country. On the other hand, maintaining a channel of contact with the Lukashenka regime may be needed to keep some influence over Belarus, which, in the context of war, may be necessary for Ukraine's security and territorial integrity. Since the beginning of the full-scale war in relation to Belarus, all actions taken have been considered in the context of the possible consequences of the Belarusian army joining the war. Arguably, currently, it is hard to expect after the failed February 2022 offensive that Ukraine, which hadn't prepared defensive fortifications on the border and was much less supported by its international partners and managed to defend itself anyway, could now find itself in a worse situation. Also, the number of Russian troops in Belarus has dropped significantly, and despite some tensions in June/July 2024,⁸³ a similar offensive from Belarusian territory is rather out of time now. The use of the Belarusian army on Ukrainian territory could be suicidal for the Lukashenka regime due to the possibility of renewed escalation within the country in the event of unpopular decisions, which could be a significant threat to the stability of his power. It would probably destroy the future of Belarus-Ukraine relations after the war, as the lack of direct participation of Belarusian troops causes the differentiation in the perception of Belarusians and Russians. The Ukrainian authorities are developing their policies and actions towards Belarus differently than towards Russia. Lukashenka is also attempting to avoid confrontation with Kyiv, as can be seen from his lack of serious reaction to the diversion against the severely affecting Ukrainians, A50

⁸¹ Kol'ki belaruskikh dobraakhvotnikau vaiue va Ukrainie i dzie. Abnoulieny haid pa usikh farmavanniakh. (2023, July 10). *Radyio Svaboda*. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32490477.html>, Accessed June 28, 2024.

⁸² Khvostova, M., Kryvosheiev, D., & Slunkin, P. (2023, April 6). The Zelensky-Lukashenka-Tsikhanouskaya Triangle: Understanding Ukraine's relationship with the Belarusian opposition. *ECFR*. <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-zelensky-lukashenka-tsikhanouskaya-triangle-understanding-ukraines-relationship-with-the-belarusian-opposition/>, Accessed June 30, 2024

⁸³ Hodunova, K. (2024, June 29). 'Tension rises' at border with Belarus, Minsk accuses Kyiv of deploying troops. *The Kyiv Independent*. Accessed July 2, 2024. <https://kyivindependent.com/tension-rises-at-ukraine-belarus-state-border-ukraine-allegedly-deploys-troops-belarusian-military-claims/>

aircraft at the airport of Machulishchy with the use of a drone, which Kyiv has admitted to.⁸⁴ Except for this case, Ukraine does not openly attack Belarusian territory as it does with Russia. The cessation of Russian attacks from Belarusian territory in October 2022 coincided with the emergence of Ukraine's technical capabilities for such attacks, which may suggest consultations and the existence of some red lines between Kyiv and Minsk aimed at not involving Belarus directly in the war. Also, the sanctions policy lobbied by Ukraine focuses on differentiating Belarus from Russia and is not aimed at disrupting the Belarusian economy. The idea is not to antagonise Lukashenka to the point of making him agree to have Belarusian troops involved in clashes. After a full-scale invasion, the sanctions packages were introduced twice in March 2022, then in June 2022, the next one only in August 2023 and June 2024, while to Russia it is much more active, with 15 sanctions packages introduced during this period.⁸⁵

In summary, the historical context of Ukraine-Belarus relations states that Ukraine and Belarus are close neighbours with many historical, cultural, and emotional ties. However, Ukrainian-Belarusian relations after Belarus' participation in the aggression against Ukraine are at their worst point in history. While this is the result of Moscow's imperial influence, the underdeveloped decolonising discourse needs to provide a deeper insight into the core of the problem in the relationship between Ukrainians and Belarusians. The contextual background offers an insight into how the Ukrainian state shapes its relations with different Belarusian actors. However, examining how the discourse is shaped will explain how coherent the Ukrainian state policy is. It will be examined by reviewing how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy portrays different Belarusian actors in his speeches and statements.

2.4 Wartime Discourse

Presented theories and concepts give us some insight into why Belarusians might be perceived in Ukraine in certain ways. The study of wartime discourse aims to give us insights into how these perceptions are realised and encouraged during the different conflicts worldwide. War

⁸⁴ Navaborski, A. (2024, March 26). Kirauinik SBU patsverdziv datychnasts Ukrainy da ataki na raseiski samaliot u Machulishchakh. [belsat.eu, https://belsat.eu/news/26-03-2024-sbu-patsverdzilla-datychnasts-da-ataki-u-machulishchah](https://belsat.eu/news/26-03-2024-sbu-patsverdzilla-datychnasts-da-ataki-u-machulishchah), Accessed June 30, 2024.

⁸⁵ EU sanctions against Belarus - [consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/). (2024, July 12). Accessed July 25, 2024.
EU sanctions against Russia - [consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/). (2024, July 23). Accessed July 25, 2024.

generates hundreds of pieces of information every day: news of ongoing clashes, rocket and drone strikes, meetings of officials, diplomatic and political developments, and many other burning social issues reach us incessantly. How these events are portrayed shapes our perception of conflict reality. This information stream is formed as a discourse and can be divided into intertwining *political, media, and public* due to the critical roles of named actors in its creation. John Zaller describes politicians, media, and citizens as the three centres that shape the circulation of information through mutual interaction, thereby framing how most society perceives the presented issues.⁸⁶ Overall, as stated by Phillips and Hardy, discourse produces and makes real social reality, and gives meaning to different social interactions, which cannot be fully understood without reference to it.⁸⁷ Discourse is shaped through language, which gives intended meanings to communicate thoughts and influence perceptions, and constructs knowledge within a particular context. In the context of war, discourse plays a central role in creating the public's attitudes and understanding of conflict dynamics. Discourse is vital in the outbreak, management, and debate about ongoing armed conflicts. For hostilities to begin, the necessary conditions must occur, such as the mobilisation of resources and society, as well as the legitimisation of actions through discourse to explain their necessity and lack of other alternatives.⁸⁸ The discourse also sets and creates the image of the enemy in the way its creator needs by aiming to divide into a group of its own and strangers, who can be subjected to various tactics, including dehumanisation, or to assign blame for the tragedy of war. This happens because during wartime, propaganda and censorship increase to convey a carefully selected and tested clear message to citizens, to support the war effort, and to increase the unity of the nation.⁸⁹ Pankov, Mihelj, and Bajt, in their article on discourse during the war in Yugoslavia argue that the beginning of the conflict narrows the range of narratives offered in the public domain. Still, it does not impose a complete closure of the negotiation and contestation of meanings, which can expand over time to include different perspectives that did not have a place at the beginning.⁹⁰

2.4.1 Wartime Political Discourse

⁸⁶ Zaller, J. (1999). *A theory of media politics: How the interests of politicians, journalists, and citizens shape the news*. University of Chicago Press.

⁸⁷ Phillips, N., & Hardy, C. (2002). What is discourse analysis?. In *Discourse Analysis* (pp. 2-17). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983921>

⁸⁸ Hodges, A. (Ed.). (2013). *Discourses of war and peace*. OUP USA. p.3

⁸⁹ Cook, C. (2019). *Building unity through state narratives: The evolving British media discourse during World War II, 1939-1941*. (Electronic Theses and Dissertations, No. 6734). University of Central Florida. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/6734>

⁹⁰ Pankov, M., Mihelj, S., & Bajt, V. (2011). Nationalism, gender and the multivocality of war discourse in television news. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(7), 1043-1059. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711415745>

Starting with the operationalisation of political wartime discourse, it is influenced by policymakers who, through their speeches, statements, as well as legislative initiative or diplomatic activity, shape the image of war. Their words and actions are widely broadcast by which they influence public opinion and set certain trends, positioning themselves as leaders of a warring country. Yaylacı claims that official discourse is reshaped to serve the interests of the state. *'In wartime, it is of primary interest for the state to disseminate its official discourse (describing the nature, reasons, and costs of the conflict).'*⁹¹

As Dalia Gavriely-Nuri states, creating discourse in this way can be used to normalise, justify, and legitimise violence through specific linguistic mechanisms.⁹² These war-normalising metaphors became a very revealing feature of Israeli government political discourse during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, about how the whole country came to see the military action. The idea of WAR IS WOMEN'S WORK, WAR IS MEDICINE, WAR IS SPORT, and WAR IS BUSINESS metamorphosed the aggressive, dangerous, and destructive process to a regular and routine part of life, one that was needed and being conducted by the precise rules of the game. The metaphor WAR IS WOMEN'S WORK linked the war to 'traditional' women's activities, including cooking, cleaning, and taking children to school. This metaphor would thus break the automatic linkage between 'men' and 'war' and instead present war as much like a utility, a basic necessity that everyone should and can conduct. The metaphor WAR IS MEDICINE elaborated a little more on why the war was necessary to cure a disease/infection described as Hezbollah. Such metaphors emphasised presumed professionalism, and high ethics of the commanders and soldiers. Such a connotation meant that the wars that took place in Israel were inevitable and conducted in 'no-choice' terms to save human life. The metaphor WAR IS SPORT pictured a war as an ordinary sporting contest with goals, rules of the game, and equal in power opponents. Such a metaphor created the image of fighting by the specified rules and fortified national morals and conviction. WAR IS BUSINESS metaphor turned the war into a businesslike rational affair, with costs, benefits, and investments. This metaphor demoralised and gave explicit rationality to the war. By using such war-normalising metaphors, the Israeli political discourse changes some features of the meaning of the concept of war, creates new features, and enhances already existing ones, while others are hidden. Introduced

⁹¹ Yaylacı, Ş. (2020). Utility of focus groups in retrospective analysis of conflict contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 160940692092273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920922735>

⁹² Gavriely-Nuri, D. (2008). The 'metaphorical annihilation' of the second Lebanon war (2006) from the Israeli political discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 19(1), 5-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926507083685>

by author, *metaphorical annihilation* of the Second Lebanon War acted as camouflage to get permission from the Israeli people for this new war and the massive bombardment of Lebanon to be viewed as ordinary and rational parts of living. This refers to the term *symbolic annihilation*⁹³ by creating a certain framework of desirable thinking in this sense, where the aim is to divert attention away from things that should not be the focus of the audience.

2.4.2 Wartime Media Discourse

Crucial in constructing this shaped by politicians' agenda are the media.⁹⁴ Van Dijk states that in political debate, discourse is susceptible to the abuse of power that involves the manipulation of minds, with the aim of forming the desired attitude among the audience.⁹⁵ This is particularly the case for the time of armed conflict, when the attention of the politicians shaping the discourse is focused on supporting the war effort. And while a certain limitation of the available narratives may seem justified, there is a risk of negative perplexity through a possible attempt to achieve a monopoly in this area, where the lack of alternative viewpoints may create a certain illusion of a state of war.

A case study of this thesis, Ukraine exemplifies such a situation and embodies the interdependence of political and media discourse through the operation of the United News Telemarathon under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, which has brought together some of the country's largest TV channels since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The initial rationale for this arrangement was to safeguard the information hygiene of citizens, who were to be provided with a reliable and trustworthy source of information, acting as an official media outlet shaped by the state and avoiding different narratives of the same events, which was crucial especially in the first days of the aggression, when the number of news was incredibly difficult to handle. This solution was also intended to eliminate widespread fake news and counteract the panic that could arise because of Russian produced disinformation. To some extent, it might seem that this instrument fulfilled its role and was necessary, but its acceptance more than two years after its launch is quite different. Currently, 62 % of Ukrainian journalists say it is a form of censorship on the part of the authorities and

⁹³ Tuchman, G. (2000). The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media. In: Crothers, L., Lockhart, C. (eds) *Culture and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62397-6_9

⁹⁴ Iyengar, S., & Simon, A. (1993). News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing. *Communication Research*, 20(3), 365-383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365093020003002>

⁹⁵ van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359-383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>

65 % believe it should cease broadcasting.⁹⁶ The current state of affairs is in line with the conclusions of the Van Dijk study, which argues that during wartime the media are used to create an agenda desired by those in power due to the general reduction in the tools of democratic control by the public.

Examples of the media discourse of the war in Yugoslavia shows that a major pattern noticeable in wartime discourse is that it tends to be grounded in nationalism, simplifying complex issues into dichotomous division 'us' versus 'them'.⁹⁷ Another important finding of the article is that wartime discourse tends to over-emphasize homogeneity and monovocality, overlooking more complex identities and affiliations. This is crucial in deconstructing the discourse on Belarusians, as the idea is that if there is a narrative that portrays them solely as aggressors without delving into the complexity of the issue of colonialism experience, it can influence an overall exclusively negative perception among Ukrainians. Sanz contributes to the 'us' versus 'them' idea based on analysis of texts posted by the Kavkaz Center (KC) news agency. He concludes that Chechen Guerillas used discursive strategies revolving around the construction of an 'us' embodying the Chechen victims versus Russian 'other', who caused their tragedy.⁹⁸

In this regard, media wartime discourse is one such that helps understand processes through which conflict redraws identity and perception. Propaganda, aggressive narratives, and nationalistic rhetoric remains assured in creating social attitudes in times of conflict. What is most important here is the final impact on the content consumers. An example of this is the confession of Olga Skabeeva, one of Russian propagandists responsible for redrawing perceptions of Ukraine, that *'there is no such thing as objective information. There is only information for which, unfortunately, someone has paid'*. At the same time, she considers Russian state propaganda to be *'common sense propaganda'*, even if it is *'aggressive imposition'*. In Olga Skabeeva's opinion, facts are not so important, it is important how they are presented. People should be 'helped' to form the 'right' attitude to what is happening and if you are a patriot, you 'become close to your state' and work for it. Example of Russia perfectly illustrates that discourse with the help of propaganda can be shaped with the aim of framing

⁹⁶ Vyklyky dlya svobody slova ta zhurnalistiv v umovakh viyny: Sotsiologichne doslidzhennya, (2023). *Tsentr prav lyudyny ZMINA*. https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/05/freedomofspeechandjournalistsatwar_socialresearchua_web.pdf. Accessed May 26, 2024.

⁹⁷ Pankov, M., Mihelj, S., & Bajt, V. (2011). Nationalism, gender and the multivocality of war discourse in television news. *Media Culture & Society*, 33(7), 1043-1059. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711415745>

⁹⁸ Tarin Sanz, A. (2017). When we are the violent: The Chechen Islamist guerrillas' discourse on their own armed actions. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(2), 185-195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2017.05.002>

society 'in the right way' and affect the identity transformation. Oleinik & Paniotto claim that the success of propaganda is decisive for the outcome of the battle of discourse, which complements the clash on the military battlefield. In this understanding '*The Russian political leader frames the war as an imperial war. The Ukrainian political leader frames it as a war of national liberation.*'⁹⁹

2.4.3 Wartime Public Discourse

Wilson in his article explores the importance of discourse about the war in shaping public memory about it. The author argues that through the participation of a large proportion of the population in the fights of the First World War, certain words and statements have permanently integrated into the language and form the perception of the war by future generations, even though there are no more witnesses left.¹⁰⁰ In a similar way, during Russia's current war against Ukraine, a vocabulary carrying a certain emotional charge is developed to influence the perception of the issues presented. Research conducted by Kovalchuk and Litkovych examines the use of verbal aggression by one hundred Ukrainians to describe the harsh reality of war.¹⁰¹ It shows that 116 invectives were adopted into the public discourse of Ukrainians, referring largely to Russians, but also towards Belarusians. Of those concerning Belarusians, there were 'Bulbofuehrer', 'bulbashi' and 'deruny'.¹⁰² A limitation of this article, however, is that respondents could only mark one option group of words, which they usually use to discharge aggression, and those invectives that refer to Belarusians were included in one group with those describing allies who hesitantly supported Ukraine. I believe that combining the co-aggressor state and Ukraine's partners together may have made respondents less willing to tick this option. With the possibility of a single-choice option, and with the combination of those response options that refer to Russians and Belarusians (together with Ukraine's partners), the imbalance was 98% to 2% for those which describe Russians. However, with the possibility of a multiple-choice option and separating Belarusians into a distinct group, it would have been possible to

⁹⁹ Oleinik, A., & Paniotto, V. (2024). Propaganda channels and their comparative effectiveness: The case of Russia's war in Ukraine. *International Sociology*, 39(3), 217-240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809241232637>

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, R. (2015). Still fighting in the trenches: 'war discourse' and the memory of the first world war in Britain. *Memory Studies*, 8(4), 454-469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015575174>

¹⁰¹ Kovalchuk, L., & Litkovych, Y. (2022). Psycholinguistic aspects of representing aggression in wartime media discourse. *East European Journal of Psycholinguistics*, 9(2), 67-81. <https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2022.9.2.kov>

¹⁰² 'Bulbofuehrer' is used to pejoratively describe the country's leader Lukashenka, where 'bulbo' comes from Belarusian word 'bulba' meaning potato and 'fuehrer' is a reference to the German dictator Adolf Hitler. Similarly words 'bulbashi' and 'deruny' in relation to Belarusians in general also derive from potatoes or potato pancakes laughing at Belarus as the land of potatoes

examine the actual Ukrainian discourse towards them and compare these results with that towards Russians and some of Ukraine's partners.

The evolution of public wartime discourse can be seen in the legacy of phrases like 'support the army', which, during most wars, is commonly found among all discourse-shaping sides of the public debate. In the context of our case study, an example of a catchy slogan encouraging support for collections for military purposes is, for example, the 'send Franko to the front line' initiative, encouraging people to donate their twenty hryvnias depicting Ivan Franko for the needs of the front line.¹⁰³ An amazing phenomenon illustrating the formation of public discourse in Ukraine during the current war is the example of a genuine cult of volunteerism and army fundraisers. In Ukraine, a globally unique digitised system of army support coordinated by thousands of volunteers and supported by millions of Ukrainians and supporters of the Ukrainian cause from abroad has been created. According to research carried out by Madryha, Bilousov, Zubrytska, Teremtsova, Druchek, and Fedinec, with a level of involvement in financial support of the army of 88% among respondents, Ukrainians have already raised a minimum of hundreds of millions of dollars, which helps to carry out military operations and replace the state where it is unable to take care of the needs of the army.¹⁰⁴

In the context of Ukraine, an interesting observation relating to the whole spectrum of information strategy formation by all participating subjects is the meme phrase, which defines the emotional load of a given news item by being classified as 'зрада' - betrayal or 'перемога' - victory as a way of perceiving reality. This is a symptom of mood swings that often occur due to the different nature of the events. According to Oksana Moroz, a specialist in countering disinformation, it is the effect of propaganda efforts: *'Everyone has noticed that as soon as we have victorious news from the front, the enemy immediately sneaks us some very bad news. And when there is bad news, it makes black become even blacker.'*¹⁰⁵ On the basis of such

¹⁰³ Klymkovetskyi, M. (2022, June 21). "Vidprav Franka na front": volonteriy stvoryly proiekt shchodennykh nevelykykh vneskiv na armiiu. *hromadske.ua*. <https://hromadske.ua/posts/vidprav-franka-na-front-volonteri-stvorili-projekt-shodennykh-nevelykykh-vneskiv-na-armiiu>, Accessed 28 June, 2024

¹⁰⁴ Madryha, T., Bilousov, Y., Zubrytska, L., Teremtsova, N., & Druchek, O. (2023). The role of the volunteer movement in the security policy of the state in the context of military operations. *Amazonia Investiga*, 12(66), 326-334. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2023.66.06.30>

Fedinec, C. (2023). The Ukrainian Civil Volunteer Movement during Wartime (2014–2022). In B. Madlovics & B. Magyar (Eds.), *Ukraine's Patronal Democracy and the Russian Invasion: The Russia-Ukraine War, Volume One* (pp. 331–352). Central European University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7829/ji.3985461.15>

¹⁰⁵ "Zrada-peremoha" — pastka vorozhoi propahandy. (2023, May 2). *Novyny | Radio Kultura*. <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=101327>, Accessed May 30, 2024.

discourse, there is often a distortion of reality when, in the case of any negative news, there is a search for this betrayal, and its culprit.

In conclusion, war discourse is a complex phenomenon that captures political narratives, media coverages with current public debate and historical memory. Discourse, as a strategy of communication is crucial for the change of attitude of perception in a society at war. Through its analysis and understanding we can have some insights as to how societies remember, interpret and respond to wars all over history. The wartime discourse places a significant role in public opinion and national identity regarding the perception of 'the other' within the conflict. How Ukrainians view Belarusians is an outcome of complex interplay of factors that underpins the need for deeper insight into the wartime discourse and its consequences for interstate relations.

Theoretical assumptions

Based on the theoretical and conceptual section, my assumptions are that the shared history of Russian imperialism likely shapes the discourse on Belarusians. In President Zelenskyy's speeches, Belarusians are described as a nation targeted by Russian imperialism despite the Lukashenka regime's alignment with Moscow. However, discourse may sometimes treat the Belarusians through a prism of their relationship with Russia, and consider them accomplices to the aggression, despite the general trend to decolonise the perception of Belarusians from a Russian imperial lens. The Ukrainian discourse likely differentiates between the state actors, that is, the regime of Lukashenka and the non-state actors, as well as the Belarusian people in general. The authorities in Ukrainian perception are most likely described as fostering Russian imperialism and aggression and non-state actors are supposedly seen as victims of Russian imperialism, with the attitude towards ordinary Belarusians being more sympathetic, and a tendency to divide between these actors increasing the longer the war lasts. There should be observed shifts in discourse before and after the full-scale invasion. Before February 2022, the Ukrainian discourse on Belarus was presumably more friendly and subtle.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to be conducted in four steps. It analyses Ukrainian wartime discourse on Belarus, using the speeches and statements of President Zelenskyy as its primary source. As identified by Calossi, Calugi and Coticchia, discourse analysis investigates how it constructs meaning by systematically studying texts and uncovering the various interpretations assigned to them.¹⁰⁶ Thus, this research examines discourse and aims to establish the relationship between discourse and the actual actions of the Ukrainian state. Extensive data analysis is conducted on the dataset acquired from the official website of the President of Ukraine <https://www.president.gov.ua/en>, which consists of transcripts of all 123 President Zelenskyy's speeches and statements mentioning Belarus or Belarusians from August 9, 2020, to June 30, 2024.

Initially, I collect and process speeches and statements, organising the data chronologically and grouping it into pre- and post-invasion periods, to sharpen the picture and capture the change in the discourse and understand the effects of war on the discourse of different actors involved. At the subsequent stage of CDA, I start using NVivo software. It is used for thematic and actor-centred sentiment analysis, enabling systematic coding and visualisation of data. The nature of the discourse analysis is interpretative, which means that researchers seek to establish different patterns of categorisation by identifying how people use language.¹⁰⁷ I carry out a thematic analysis of all speeches and statements, in which I distinguish the most significant themes that pertain to Ukraine's perception and framing of various Belarusian actors relating to the ongoing war and Russian imperialism. Therefore, coding framework is developed during a thematic analysis and consists of the most essential components of the discourse and uses theoretical concepts of postcolonial studies, subaltern states, and wartime discourse presented before. For this thesis codes are developed for such themes as: *Belarus' geopolitical importance*, *Threats from Belarus*, *Decolonisation Narratives*, *Russian colonialism's impact on Belarus*, *Political Crisis in Belarus*, *Belarus' involvement in Russia's war and genocide*, *Ties between Ukrainians and Belarusians*, *Ukrainian Relations with the different Belarusian actors*, *Sanctions*, and for other minor. These codes make it possible to observe the trends and contexts within which the Ukrainian discourse is shaped. Subsequently, in step three, I conduct an actor-centred sentiment analysis to assess and compare the sentiment regarding them. Three central codes of attitudes were identified in the Ukrainian perception of Belarusians. A *positive*, which portrays its

¹⁰⁶ Calossi, E., Calugi, F., & Coticchia, F. (2013). Peace and war in the political discourse of Italian Marxist and post-Marxist parties. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 5(3), 309–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2013.848618>

¹⁰⁷ Calossi, E., Calugi, F., & Coticchia, F. (2013). Peace and war in the political discourse of Italian Marxist and post-Marxist parties. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 5(3), 309–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2013.848618>

neighbours in a favourable light and considers Belarusians as victims of Russian imperialism, a *neutral*, whose message is not emotionally charged, and a *negative*, which portrays Belarusians in a derogatory way, blaming them for contributing to Moscow's imperialism. I identify sentiment to the Belarusian state and non-state actors, as well as Belarusians in general in relation to the most important recurring themes. Both thematic and actor-centred sentiment analysis help to underline shifts in the discourse over time. I examine collected data concerning the dynamics of the frequency of referring to various themes and Belarusian actors, identifying changes occurring before and after the full-scale invasion, and putting them in the context of relevant events.

The use of these frameworks allows us to interpret the more profound implications of the discourse. The most significant examples of data, characteristic for different themes, actors, and sentiments are examined in detail. Implementation of this method emphasises the relationships between discourse and other social elements of reality, such as power relations, ideologies, and social practices. It also involves analysing how discourse shapes and is shaped by social structures and contexts.¹⁰⁸ This three-stage process comes up with the empirical findings based on the official political wartime discourse upon Belarus in Ukraine for the period under study, which allows answering the research questions. It outlines how, in the context of protests in Belarus, ongoing war, and the impact of Russian imperialism, a Ukrainian leader with a dominant influence on all power assets, frames Belarus and different Belarusian actors. It presents how President Zelenskyy perceives and speaks about another subaltern state, Belarus, in its strategic communications and how this discursive image evolves with the changing (geo)political circumstances. The case study approach, selecting Ukraine and Belarus as subaltern states within the context of Russian imperialism, is innovative in examining the relationship between these two European states in the light of postcolonial scholarship. Ukraine and Belarus were selected as case studies for several compelling reasons. Both nations have a long history of subjugation under Russian imperial rule, providing a rich background for examining postcolonial dynamics in Eastern Europe, which, as the region, is usually overlooked. While sharing similar historical backgrounds, Ukraine and Belarus have followed divergent paths since the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly in their relationships with the colonial centre - Russia. The close cultural and historical ties between Ukraine and Belarus and the ongoing war in Ukraine, with Belarus' complex involvement, offer a unique opportunity

¹⁰⁸ Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838250>

to study the real-time evolution of perception between two subaltern states in the light of critical developments in their decolonisation process. The given context of more ambiguous Russian imperialism than these explored so far in postcolonial scholarship is also the specific value of the research in focus.

To sum up, the thematic analysis identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within the data.¹⁰⁹ This method is particularly suitable for this study because it identifies recurring themes in Ukrainian discourse about Belarus, helping uncover underlying perceptions and attitudes. It is flexible enough to accommodate wartime discourse's complex and evolving nature. It can reveal both explicit and implicit trends within the discourse, which is crucial when dealing with sensitive geopolitical issues. Actor-centred sentiment analysis is used to examine the emotional tone and attitudes expressed towards different Belarusian actors in different contexts of a Ukrainian discourse over time. This approach is justified because it provides a nuanced presentation of how different Belarusian actors, state, non-state, and Belarusians generally, who may have distinct identities and attitudes to the ongoing war, are perceived and portrayed. It also can reveal potential contradictions or complexities in Ukrainian attitudes towards Belarus.

The study deconstructs a discourse by focusing on several key elements: examining specific terms, and rhetorical devices as for example “*North Korea, Nicaragua, Belarus and Syria. Such a list that everything is clear*”, or that Zelenskyy calls Lukashenka by name only, avoiding calling him President. These instruments are presented and used in discussing Belarus' role in the world order, and analysing how stories about Belarus are constructed and framed. This thesis also identifies what is not explicitly stated or is deliberately excluded from the discourse and explores how the discourse relates to broader historical narratives and cultural references. This methodological approach, combining thematic and actor-centred sentiment analysis within critical discourse analysis, and in the context of carefully selected case study theoretical framework, is well-suited to uncover the nuances and complexities of Ukrainian wartime discourse on Belarus. It allows for a comprehensive examination of how subaltern states perceive and discuss each other in the context of ongoing geopolitical tensions and the still sustaining imperial influence.

¹⁰⁹ Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2016). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>

3.2. Limitations

As it is hardly possible to measure the perception of Belarusians among all Ukrainians, I chose to analyse political wartime discourse, because it presents the position of the state. It is the most influential Ukrainian actor regarding Belarus, shaping also largely media and public discourse given the dominant role of the authorities in presenting the situation around the country through the United News Telemarathon and other strategic communication instruments. This is to a certain degree a limitation, but that is the nature of academic studies. Public opinion polls portraying the perception of Belarusians by regular Ukrainians are also presented to address this limitation. To avoid cherry picking, data selected for analysis contains all entries for the keywords 'Belarus, Belarusian, Minsk and Lukashenka', excluding these naming Minsk agreements, as it refers to the output of peace negotiations before the full-scale invasion, not to Belarus itself. The analysed data includes speeches and statements from the period of the Belarusian election protests after 9 August 2020 and after the start of the full-scale war to analyse each mention and have a complete picture of how the full-scale war changed the Ukrainian discourse on Belarus.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis and Empirical Findings

This chapter is the essential part of this thesis, and directly tackles the examination of the Ukrainian wartime discourse. It consequently clarifies how the assumptions based on the theoretical-conceptual part, and the contextual background of this case study, apply in reality. Through the extensive Critical Discourse Analysis this section answers the research questions of the study:

- How are the perceptions and identities between subaltern states shaped under the impact of hybrid imperialism, while one state endorses such imperialism despite its colonial experiences and the other contends?
- How do Ukrainians perceive Belarus and Belarusians following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?
- In Ukrainian discourse, are Belarusians treated as victims of Russian imperialism or as supporters of it?

4.1 Thematic Analysis

Proceeding directly to the data analysis, 123 official speeches or statements were acquired from the website of the President of Ukraine, which contain his direct quotation or are an official statement or comment regarding the events taking place. These speeches and statements were addressed primarily to authorities and various political bodies and were made, amongst others, at diplomatic meetings. They were also given in interviews to the media or recorded by the President in video form, which Zelenskyy has become accustomed to during the ongoing war to communicate more quickly directly with citizens and audiences. Nine codes, the most frequently recurring in the speeches and statements, were selected as the main themes. All selected main themes formed the context for mentions of Belarus a minimum of 25 times across 123 speeches and statements, with the vast majority occurring in more than one context, making the majority of the collected data on Zelenskyy's activity repeatedly coded and intertwined with each other. In addition, there were quite a few more side themes. Thus, this analysis primarily portrays the context of the main trends of the presented discourse, providing a basis for further discussion and considering other themes less extensively.

Belarus' Geopolitical Importance

The first and most commonly framed theme was Belarus' Geopolitical Importance. Sixty-five speeches and statements were identified under this code. This category occurs frequently because it also partly combines other major themes in the classification. Thus, this category also introduces the different themes, which occur less frequently and are developed and supplemented later in the analysis in the section devoted to them. In 2020, all of the 12 mentions of Belarus's geopolitical importance took place at President Zelenskyy's international meetings, primarily with partners from the European Union and the United States, where issues related mainly to the political crisis in the country, possibilities for its resolution, and the significance and impact of internal events in Belarus on international processes were addressed. Usually, in such meetings, the shared vision of Ukraine and the EU of resolving the crisis was communicated:

*“Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ursula von der Leyen also exchanged views on the development of the situation in Belarus. The interlocutors noted the common vision of Ukraine and the EU of resolving the domestic political crisis in Belarus”*¹¹⁰

In 2021, a theme that became present in President Zelenskyy's communications was the growing Russian military threat from the Belarusian territory, especially in light of the Zapad (West) 2021 military exercises. No less importantly, the migration crisis was also a key issue raised in the context of Belarus' geopolitical importance in the second half of the year:

*“The parties also discussed the tense situation on Belarus' borders with neighboring countries due to the growing flow of illegal migrants and Russia's West 2021 exercise, which is worsening the security situation in the region.”*¹¹¹

These themes will be discussed in more detail later in the analysis. Belarus and the migrant crisis are also presented as examples to Western partners of what indecisive actions towards Moscow imperialism led to.

*“To prevent a possible escalation by the Russian Federation and the deteriorating security situation in Europe, the international community must take strong preventive steps, rather than reacting to events that have already taken place, as it was with the migration crisis on Poland and Lithuania's borders with Belarus.”*¹¹²

However, these calls by the Ukrainian president to the international community did not gain approval, and decisions that could have made Moscow rethink and stop its imperial actions were not made. Thus, in the context of the events following the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was a new reality that redefined the perception of Belarus by Ukraine and the rest of the world. I have therefore used the subtheme *Peace negotiations in Belarus* to

¹¹⁰ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 28 August 2020, President of the European Commission congratulated Volodymyr Zelenskyy on reaching a truce, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-yevrokomisii-privitala-volodimira-zelenskogo-z-do-63161>, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹¹¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 23 August 2021, Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with the Prime Minister of Sweden, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-proviv-zustrich-z-premyer-ministrom-shve-70313, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹¹² Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 20 December 2021, To prevent possible escalation by Russia, strong preventive sanctions needed, not post-factum response – President of Ukraine, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zadlya-unemozhlivlennya-jmovirnoyi-eskalaciyi-z-boku-uf-potr-72197, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

categorise the role of Belarus in the peace talks between Ukraine and Russia. Belarus is mentioned ten times by Zelenskyy in this context.

“If there were no aggressive actions from your territory, we could speak in Minsk. In your city. When you were neutral, we spoke in Minsk, we met many times. This is right. This is truthful. To talk like neighbors. Right now, you haven't made your big choice yet. And it is ahead, it should depend only on you. Not on Russia, not on Ukraine, not on America, but on the people of Belarus. That is why now we say - not Minsk.”¹¹³

In the end, the talks in Belarus took place anyway, however not in the capital, but on the Prypiat River, on the border with Ukraine. President Zelenskyy portrayed participation in the talks on the territory of a co-aggressor state as a dubious chance for an agreement but one that is nevertheless worth testing. Although the Ukrainian leader did not believe in the effectiveness and success of the peace process in Belarus, the talks were nonetheless relevant from the perspective of internal discourse:

“I do not really believe in the result of this meeting, but let them try. So that no citizen of Ukraine would have any doubt that I, as President, did not try to stop the war when there was even a small chance.”¹¹⁴

In the context of Belarus' geopolitical importance, its destructive role in international relations by consistently sticking to the Russian side in votes regarding Ukraine at the UN is also mentioned:

“143 UN member states supported the resolution, which protects the basic principles of the UN Charter and condemns Russia for the criminal attempt to annex our territory. This is a record number of states supporting Ukraine today. But I believe that there will be more.”

¹¹³ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the citizens of Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-ukrainy-vladimir-zelenskij-obratilsya-k-grazhdanam-73217, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹¹⁴ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the citizens, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-do-gromadyan-73233, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

Four states came out on the side of Russia - this is very eloquent. North Korea, Nicaragua, Belarus and Syria. Such a list that everything is clear.”¹¹⁵

This rhetoric places Belarus in a disreputable position by using sarcasm towards how the list of states supporting Russia is shaped. Therefore, the use of such a rhetorical figure when considering the issue of its international activities deflates its subjectivity and relevance by lining it up with the world's most blatant dictatorship, North Korea, or making it clear that only states fully vassalised by Moscow, such as Syria, or Belarus, can vote to support Russian aggression.

The issue of the performance of Russian and Belarusian athletes at international sporting competitions also came up in 2023 in the context of the upcoming Olympic Games 2024 in Paris:

“Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed disappointment with the presence of the president of the Russian Olympic Committee at the IOC summit on November 9 and with the intentions to return Russian and Belarusian athletes to international competitions under a neutral flag.

"Since February, 184 Ukrainian athletes have died as a result of Russia's actions. One cannot try to be neutral when the foundations of peaceful life are being destroyed and universal human values are being ignored,"¹¹⁶

The raising of this issue regarding Belarus within the wartime political discourse was a matter primarily aimed at preventing the two aggressor states from enhancing their image with the help of sport and using the participation of local athletes as an information tool to normalise the presence of their countries' representatives at major international events.

During the period under review, in the context of the geopolitical importance of Belarus, there were also more positive aspects discussed than those relating to the ongoing war and political or humanitarian crises. There were also those which brought Minsk closer to Kyiv and its Western partners:

¹¹⁵ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 13 October 2022, Terror must be responded with force at all levels: on the battlefield, with sanctions, and legally - address by the President of Ukraine, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/teroru-treba-vidpovidati-siloyu-na-vsih-rivnyah-i-na-poli-bo-78477, Accessed on 19 July, 2024

¹¹⁶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 14 December 2022, President had a phone call with the President of the IOC, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-proviv-telefonnu-rozmovu-z-prezidentom-mok-79873, Accessed on 19 July, 2024

“On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the recognition of the restoration of Ukraine’s Independence by the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Lithuania, the Presidents of Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland [...] reminded that the democratic tradition developed in the Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as by the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Reform Movement Sąjūdis in Lithuania, the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, and the struggle of Belarusians for democracy represent strong pursuit of freedom, human rights and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”¹¹⁷

This statement from December 2021 identifies Belarus as an important place on the European map of democratic values, portraying the pursuit of freedom of Belarusians as one of the critical positive processes for the region. Such a statement made together with the leaders of Poland and Lithuania shows that, in their discussions with partners, the Ukrainian authorities agreed on the important positive role of the Belarusian democratic movement, putting it in contrast to the numerous joint statements on the challenges posed by the Lukashenka regime. Essential developments also took place in this paradigm after the Russian invasion had already begun. By the end of 2023, there was also a trend towards decolonising speeches by the Ukrainian president, which also described the possible fate of Belarus in the event of certain hypothetical developments:

“Either terrorist Russia will succeed in breaking freedom. And then the zone of geopolitical instability, which exists in the east of Europe, will spread throughout the continent. Or [...] Russia will lose in this confrontation. After it has lost, and as a result, a historic chance for geopolitical stability along the entire line from Scandinavia through Minsk and Kyiv to the South Caucasus will be realized.”¹¹⁸

Such positioning of the Belarus issue shows that Kyiv is keen that the settlement of the current war with Russia will put it on the side of the democratic world and subject it to decolonisation

¹¹⁷ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 2 December 2021, Joint statement by the President of Ukraine, the President of the Republic of Lithuania and the President of the Republic of Poland, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilna-zayava-prezidenta-ukrayini-prezidenta-litovskoyi-resp-71837, Accessed on 19 July, 2024

¹¹⁸ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 13 October 2023, We need reliable geopolitical stability in Europe and in the whole Euro-Atlantic space – address of the President of Ukraine to the leaders of the countries of the Joint Expeditionary Force, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/nam-potribna-nadijna-geopolitichna-stabilnist-u-yevropi-ta-n-86329, Accessed on 19 July, 2024

from Moscow's influence, the motives and significance of which will be discussed in a later section of the research.

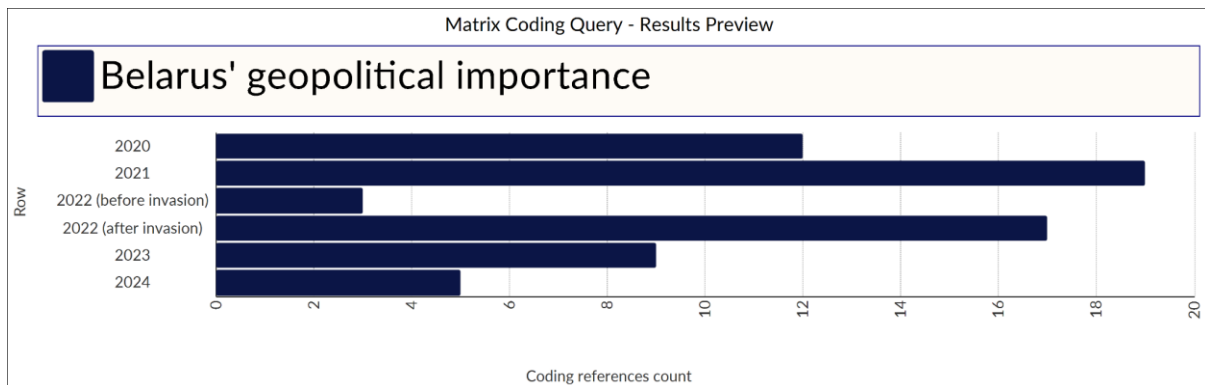


Figure 1 (*Belarus' geopolitical importance* discourse frequency over time)

As the chart shows, the issues of Belarus' geopolitical importance were constantly present in the Ukrainian discourse and distributed at a consistently high level of around 20 mentions per year in 2020-2022, during the period of the ongoing political crisis in Belarus, the migration crisis, the escalation buildup and the first months of the Russian invasion, and starting to lose its importance in 2023-2024 with some predictability of events around the ongoing war.

Threats from Belarus

Another theme that I highlighted is narratives of the threat arising from Belarus. In this section, I focus on presenting those aspects in which one subaltern, Minsk, participated in creating various types of tensions and crises in cooperation with the imperial centre in Moscow. I have used this pattern to code the data 58 times, dividing it into five subthemes according to the type of threat they addressed.

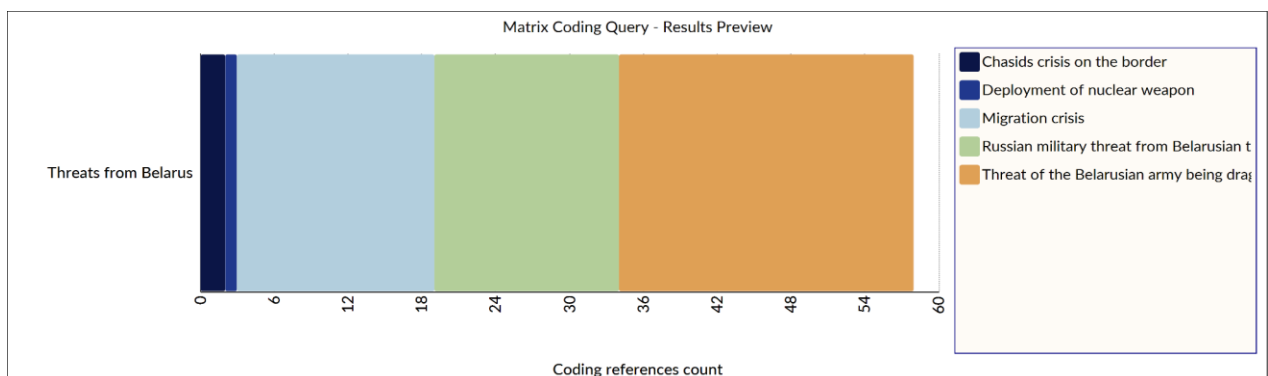


Figure 2 (*Threats from Belarus* share between subthemes)

The most frequently mentioned subtheme was *Threat of the Belarusian army being dragged into the war*, used 24 times. From the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, there was discussion about whether Belarusian armed forces would also join the ‘special military operation.’ The most intense speculation about this possibility was in the first weeks of the aggression, when the front line next to Belarusian territory was still open, and Russian troops needed support in the battle for Kyiv. And although then and so far, this threat has not been realised, with Lukashenka writhing as much as possible between pandering to Moscow, getting the necessary support from there, and bringing the Belarusian army into the fight. The topic has remained in the spotlight since 24 February 2022 and periodically returns to the discourse around the war. In this connection, Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly stressed the need to prevent such scenario:

*"It's one thing when you realize that tanks will go from Belarus. And another thing is that Russia will go to Ukraine through Belarus, another thing is that missiles are flying from Belarus. It seems that the difference is small. There were warnings that there could be an offensive from that side. But the difference is big: you are at war with the forces and means that are on the territory of Belarus, which pass through the territory of Belarus and go to Ukraine, or you are at war with two countries,"*¹¹⁹

The Ukrainian president was thus making it clear that as long as the Belarusian army did not step onto Ukrainian soil itself, Minsk would not be considered a party to the conflict by Kyiv, disregarding the Lukashenka regime's previous contribution to Moscow's imperial efforts. Such a discourse is precisely directed at state actors, making it clear that such a decision would be disastrous for the Belarusian dictator:

*"And I would like to separately address the citizens of Belarus today. Both civilians and those in uniform. You are being drawn into the war. And even more actively than in February and in the spring months. The Kremlin has already decided everything for you - your lives are worth nothing to them. But you are not slaves or cannon fodder. You do not have to die. And you can prevent anyone from deciding for you what awaits you next."*¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Volodymyr Zelensky, 21 May 2022, Before the war, the allies recommended that we dig trenches, and we told them: give weapons - President of Ukraine, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/do-pochatku-vijni-soyuzniki-rekomendovali-nam-riti-okopi-mi-75229, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

¹²⁰ Volodymyr Zelensky, 26 June 2022, Ukraine needs a powerful modern air defense, we talk about this with partners everyday - address by President Volodymyr Zelensky, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayini-potribna-potuzhna-suchasna-protipovitryana-oborona-76065>, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

As the previous statement shows, this message directed towards Belarusian soldiers also put them in contrast to Moscow and the decisions made there, defining taking part in the war as solely in Russian interests. The potential attack of Belarus also featured in Zelenskyy's narrative of strengthening the border and increasing the country's defence capabilities and capacities:

“The border was also discussed in detail at the Staff. Protection of the border with both Russia and Belarus is also a constant priority. We are preparing for all possible defense scenarios. Whoever inclines Minsk to whatever, it will not help them just as any other sick idea in this war against Ukraine and Ukrainians.”¹²¹

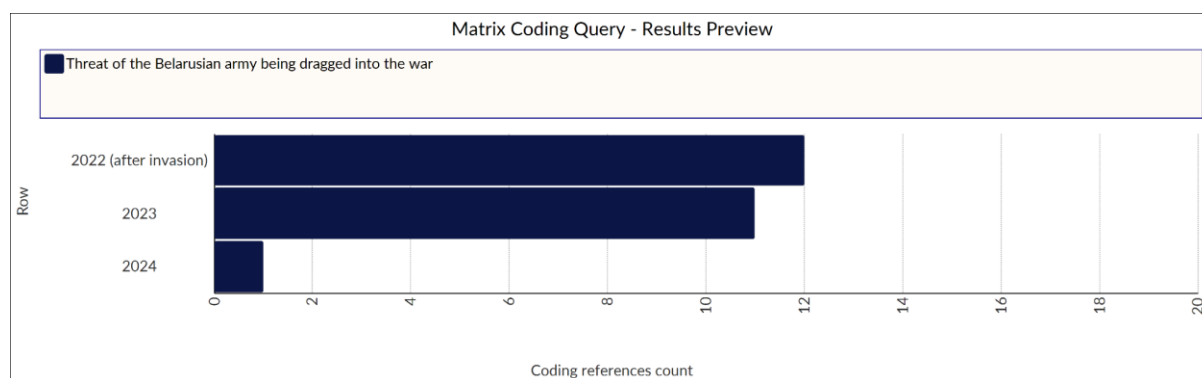


Figure 3 (*Threat of the Belarusian army being dragged into war* discourse frequency over time)

The graph above shows how the frequency of mentions of the possibility of Belarusian armed forces joining the war in President Zelenskyy's discourse has changed, which may suggest that despite a noticeable decline, the issue is still topical, as exemplified by tension on the Ukrainian-Belarusian border in the summer of 2024.

The issue of security on the border with Belarus was also raised in the context of the *Migration crisis*, which appeared in President Zelenskyy's discourse 16 times. This crisis, although it has not affected Ukraine in the same way as its EU neighbours, where the Lukashenka regime, together with the Kremlin, has initiated the migration of thousands of people and the smuggling

¹²¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 18 December 2022, This winter, we are preparing a special summit for the sake of peace and invite our partners to show their leadership - address by the President of Ukraine, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-gotuyemo-ciyeyi-zimi-specialnij-samit-zaradi-miru-j-zapro-79949, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

of people across the border to Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, has still been the subject of regular security briefings and consultations with partners in particular:

“The heads of state discussed in detail the difficult situation that has arisen on the European-Belarusian border. The President of Ukraine informed his Lithuanian counterpart about the decisions of the National Security and Defense Council adopted the day before to enhance security measures on the Ukrainian-Belarusian border. “We will adequately respond to the development of the situation on our border. We are already increasing the capacity of the border service. We are ready to involve other reserves as well, ”¹²²

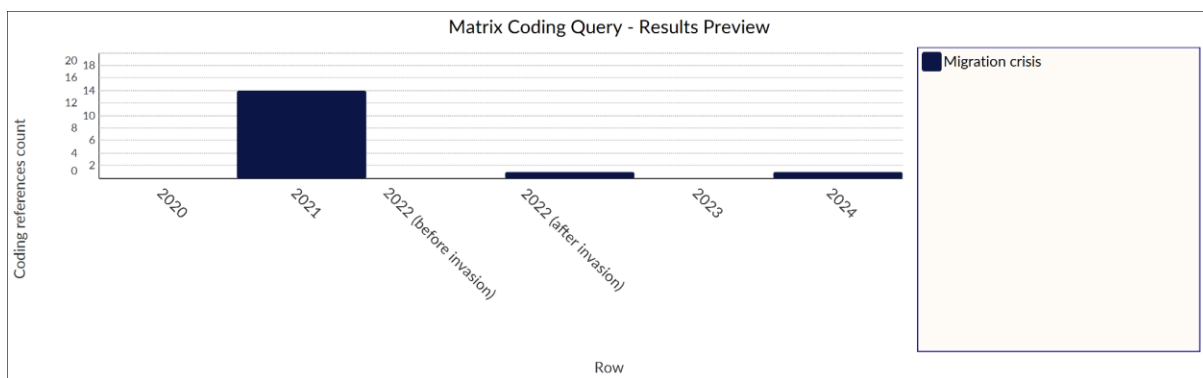


Figure 4 (*Migration crisis* discourse frequency over time)

As shown in Figure 4, it was exceptionally common for the discourse to address the topic of migration crisis in the second half of 2021 between August and December raising the issue 14 out of a total of 16 mentions. Once the full-scale war began, the topic of migration crisis in Ukrainian discourse became outdated, with the Ukrainian president only referring to it once in the context of an inappropriate response that encouraged Moscow to escalate further:

“Volodymyr Zelenskyy noted that there should have been a decisive response to both the migration crisis caused by Belarus and the construction of Nord Stream 2, which has been an energy weapon and a means of pressure from Russia from the very beginning. ”¹²³

¹²² Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 11 November 2021, President had a phone conversation with the President of Lithuania, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-proviv-telefonnu-rozmovu-z-prezidentom-litvi-71537, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

¹²³ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 3 March 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy: If the world does not help Ukraine stop Russia now, it will go "to the Berlin Wall", www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-yaksho-svit-ne-dopomozhe-ukrayini-zupini-73325, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

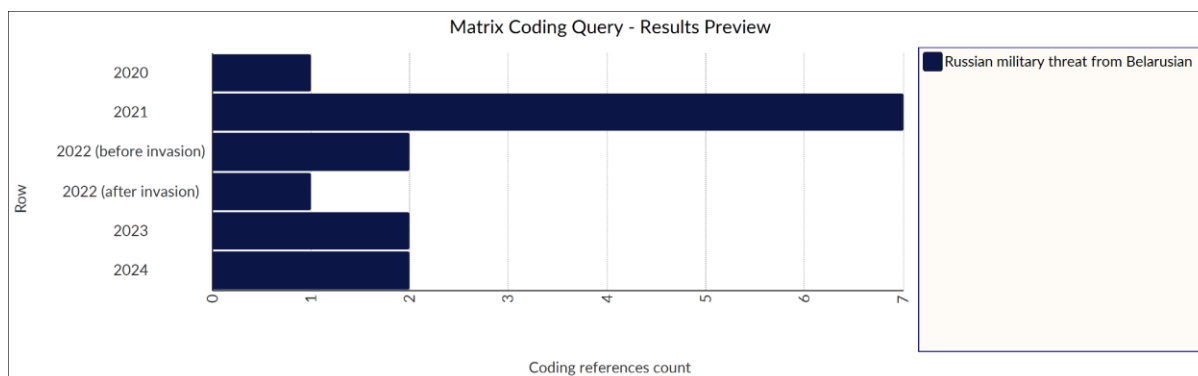


Figure 5 (*Russian military threat from Belarusian territory* discourse frequency over time)

Russian military threat from Belarusian territory was presented in the discourse slightly less frequently, 15 times, and was primarily related to the depiction of increasing tensions on the border in the months preceding the invasion. For the first time in the investigated discourse, the issue of such a threat, although not directly expressed, was already communicated in the first days after the start of the Belarusian protests following the August 2020 presidential elections:

*“The Head of State noted that the events in this country could significantly affect Ukraine. During a meeting, the parties analyzed the domestic political situation in Belarus, as well as numerous external factors that may influence the development of post-election events. [...] In addition, the parties conducted the analysis of the direct risks to Ukraine that arise due to one or another development of the situation.”*¹²⁴

These concerns and worrying scenarios regarding the possibility of Russian activity in the Belarusian direction analysed after the elections began to prove true in light of Russia's tightening grip over the Lukashenka regime. The simultaneous development of the political crisis and escalating tensions on Ukraine's border with Russia and Belarus, as well as the Kremlin's attempt to delimit European spheres of influence between Russia and the West from mid-2021 onwards, led to serious analysis of the threat of Russian actions from Belarusian territory as well:

¹²⁴ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 17 August 2020, Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a closed-door meeting concerning the aggravation of the situation in Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-proviv-zakritu-naradu-u-zvyazku-iz-zagos-62765, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

“But there may be, so to speak, "surprises" from the other side. The situation in Belarus is very dangerous now. These are our northern borders. And we understand that Russia and Belarus are constantly considering and negotiating an important geopolitical and, probably, defense agreement. After that, there may be a really serious influence of Russia and serious coordination and control of the Belarusian armed forces. Then we can consider the risk from the other side. We do not know the details of this treaty establishing a union state.”¹²⁵

After the full-scale invasion began, this theme has become outdated as the Russian threat became reality. However, threat of a Russian attack from Belarusian territory was still mentioned in the context of the arrival of Wagner's group in Belarus after the unsuccessful march on Moscow, as well as in the context of the development of defence infrastructure on the border with Belarus creating a deterrence narrative for potential new aggression from that direction:

“What we are building on the front lines is no secret. This should be known to both Russians and Belarusians or Russians on the territory of Belarus. Yes, there are defense barriers here. Yes, there will be three powerful lines of defense. There are troops here. There are 'dragon's teeth' and anti-tank ditches – it is no secret. Thanks to modern technology, all of this is present, but there is no need to conceal it because they must know that there will be resistance,”¹²⁶

As indicated in Figure 2, I have also classified speeches and statements of Volodymyr Zelenskyy concerning two minor issues into the Threats category, namely the *Deployment of nuclear weapons*, which was mentioned in March 2023 amid the announcement of the Russian decision to move part of its nuclear arsenal to the territory of Belarus. Another specific issue was the Hasidim crisis on the border, in which approximately 2,000 Hasidic pilgrims planned to come to Uman in central Ukraine and were stopped on the border between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine. The situation required a presidential discussion with the head of the State Border Service, Serhiy Deyneko, who assured that the protection of this border section would be reinforced. According to a statement posted on the President's website.

¹²⁵ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 1 June 2021, Interview of the President of Ukraine to Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-prezidenta-ukrayini-nimeckomu-vidannyu-frankfurter-68757, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

¹²⁶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 6 April 2024, The construction of fortifications in the most dangerous frontline sectors is nearing completion, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvedennya-oboronnih-sporud-na-najgaryachishih-napryamkah-nab-90097, Accessed on 20 July, 2024

“Most of them came from Israel, trusting rumors that Ukraine's border with Belarus is allegedly open. The Belarusian authorities are deliberately or unintentionally fueling these rumors with some ill-considered statements. [...] We call on the Belarusian authorities to stop creating additional tensions on the border with our country and spreading false and encouraging statements to pilgrims, which may give them the feeling that Ukraine's border may still be open to foreigners.”¹²⁷

Decolonisation Narratives

The third central theme chosen for this analysis is the emergence of many *Decolonisation narratives* from the Ukrainian President. Again, a marked contrast in their use is evident here concerning the period before and after Russia's incursion into Ukraine.

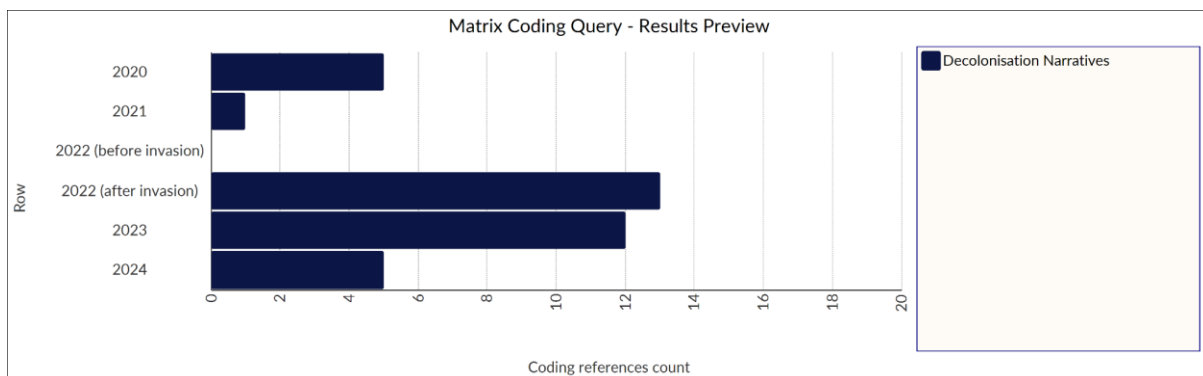


Figure 6 (*Decolonisation narratives* discourse frequency over time)

Of the 36 decolonisation narratives, as many as 30 occurred after the start of the aggression. Therefore, this study finds that decolonisation narratives tend to increase after the war. Nevertheless, in part, such optics on developments among the northern neighbours already resonated before in the context of the political crisis in Belarus.

“Ukraine and I personally are extremely interested in Belarus being a truly independent and democratic country with a strong economy and stable social relations.”¹²⁸

These words by Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2020 undermined the presidential election results and the country's sovereignty. Although not said explicitly, it can be assumed that the Ukrainian

¹²⁷ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 16 September 2020, Regarding the situation with Hasidim on the Ukraine-Belarus border, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/shodo-situaciyi-z-hasidami-na-ukrayinsko-biloruskomu-kordoni-63661, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

¹²⁸ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 10 August 2020, Ukraine calls on Belarus to be as tolerant as possible and hold open dialogue – President, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zaklikaye-bilorus-do-maksimalnoyi-terpimosti-ta-vid-62633, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

president refers to the degree of Belarus' dependence on Russia and the Lukashenka regime's symbiosis with the Kremlin.

Complementing the part on decolonisation from the previous section of *Belarus' geopolitical importance* and the speech of Zelenskyy on the desirability of creating geopolitical stability from Scandinavia through Minsk to Kyiv, this trend is noticeable starting from the Ukrainian leader's powerful speech in Warsaw in spring 2023:

*"Everyone is stronger when we are free. When we are free, it is a guarantee that freedom will endure in Moldova, will not leave Georgia and will come... will definitely come to Belarus."*¹²⁹

This shows that Zelenskyy is keen that the region's other nations, including those subalterns of Moscow that still need to pass their decolonisation path, could also consolidate their freedom through Ukrainian-Polish cooperation. Moreover, the presentation of Belarus in this light 11 times between October 2023 and June 2024 demonstrates a deep understanding of the relevance of Belarus' position in Ukraine and Europe. It shows a shift in the perception of the importance of decolonising neighbours. In this conception of the Ukrainian authorities, Belarus is supposed to be the missing piece of the puzzle to ensure security, stability, and development in this part of the world, depriving Russia of its current advantages.

Russian colonialism's impact on Belarus

The next section was also extremely important and is closely linked to the decolonisation patterns discussed above. This section deals with the 31 coded statements of the Ukrainian President, and is somewhat of the extension of the section on the impact of Russian Hybrid Imperialism on subaltern Belarus. Contrasting the issues discussed above with the reality of Moscow's colonialism in relation to Belarus as presented by Volodymyr Zelenskyy is an extremely valuable addition, and indicates how often this discourse describes it in terms of Russian influence:

"From your territory, the troops of the Russian Federation launch rockets into Ukraine. Our children are being killed from your territory, our houses are being destroyed, they are trying

¹²⁹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 5 April 2023, Russia cannot win in Europe when a Ukrainian and a Pole stand side by side - speech by the President of Ukraine before the deputies of both chambers of the National Assembly, representatives of the public of Ukraine and Poland, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rosiyi-ne-vigrati-u-yevropi-koli-ukrayinec-i-polyak-stoyat-p-82125, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

to blow up everything that has been built over decades - and, by the way, not only by us, but also by our fathers, our grandfathers.”¹³⁰

This speech describes the harsh reality of war for Ukrainians, who are forced to endure the worst nightmares of it, which, at that moment, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, also hit them from Belarus. This statement clearly emphasises that Russian troops do this. At the same time, a signal is sent to Belarusians that their shared heritage is being destroyed, appealing to the conscience of their neighbours and hoping for a reaction. Such rhetoric shows that the influence of Russian colonialism on Belarus is so strong that they are not seen as independent in Ukrainian optics. Still, the hope is also expressed that Belarusians will be able to stop the disastrous influence of Russian Hybrid Imperialism on both subalterns. The view of the lack of control of the situation in the country and the discourse of differentiation between Russian imperialism and the Belarusians is also complemented by this statement by Zelenskyy from October 2022:

*“The territory of Belarus is already used for strikes against Ukraine. And now we see a bigger threat. Russia is trying to directly draw Belarus into this war, playing a provocation that we are allegedly preparing an attack on this country. Indirectly it has already involved them. And now it wants to involve them directly.”*¹³¹

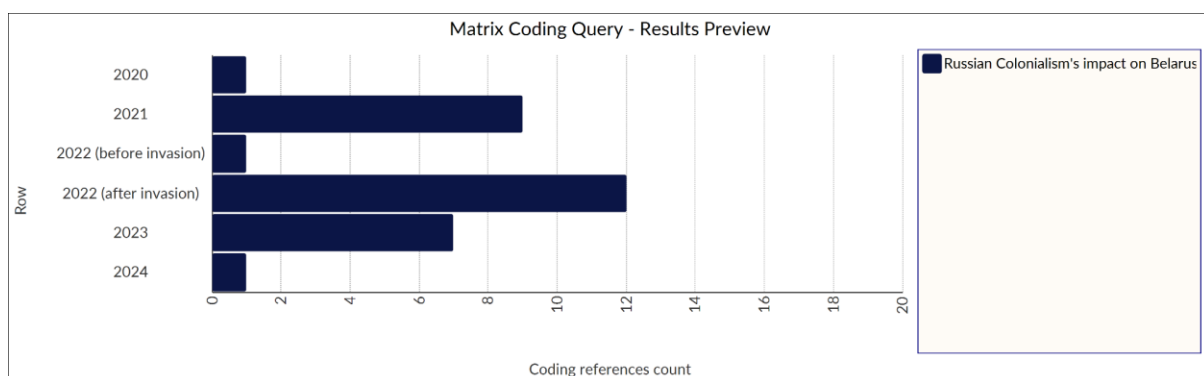


Figure 7 (*Russian colonialism's impact on Belarus* discourse frequency over time)

¹³⁰ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the citizens of Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-ukrainy-vladimir-zelenskij-obratilsya-k-grazhdanam-73217, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹³¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 11 October 2022, It is necessary to intensify common efforts to create an air shield for Ukraine - speech by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the video conference of the leaders of the Group of Seven and Ukraine, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/neobhidno-zbilshiti-spilni-zusillya-shob-stvoriti-povitryani-78417, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

The chart shows that the context of the influence of Russian imperialism on Belarus has shaped the Ukrainian discourse fairly consistently, explaining many processes taking place on the territory of the northern neighbours during the period under study. Only 2022 stands out here due to the vital role of Belarus in the escalation of the armed conflict.

Political Crisis in Belarus

The last theme in the main category for our research is unique in that it relates exclusively to the period before the ‘Great War’ began. Theme *Political Crisis in Belarus* refers to the events that began in Belarus after the rigged presidential elections in August 2020, which is also the beginning of the period examined by this thesis. Moreover, 27 of the 28 refer to 2020. The discourse of the Ukrainian leadership regarding the political course on the other side of the Pripjat can be divided into two stages. The first ten speeches or statements, which occurred still in August, focused on expressing a direct opinion on how the processes were going and asked individual Belarusian actors to take action, as exemplified by:

“We call for the most open, albeit complex, dialog, because only a broad dialog will allow the citizens of the Republic of Belarus to find a way out of the difficult crisis situation and honestly discuss further steps and formats of public interaction. Only mutual understanding between all parties can preserve the country's independence and ensure its further movement towards freedom and democracy.” [...] It is already obvious that not everyone in the country agrees with the announced provisional election results.”¹³²

Since September, the central theme has been to discuss developments in Belarus with international partners, as already mentioned in the context of the first central theme of *Belarus' geopolitical importance*. Over time, Zelenskyy became increasingly direct in expressing support for the protesters' demands, such as new elections and the release of political prisoners.

“Fair elections of the President are the best way out of this crisis. If the candidates are confident of victory, then there is nothing to fear from another election. These are the actions of a government that is not afraid of its people. I also emphasize that there must be a dialogue

¹³² Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 10 August 2020, Ukraine calls on Belarus to be as tolerant as possible and hold open dialogue – President, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zaklikaye-bilorus-do-maksimalnoyi-terpimosti-ta-vid-62633, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

with society, violence must be avoided. These are the actions of a government that cares about its people.”¹³³

In the context of the *Political Crisis*, there also appears a subtheme concerning Ukrainian citizens in Belarus. Within this pattern, four instances were identified of statements advocating the liberation of several Ukrainian citizens arrested during the protests, as well as calling on other citizens not to come to Belarus due to security concerns until the political situation stabilises.

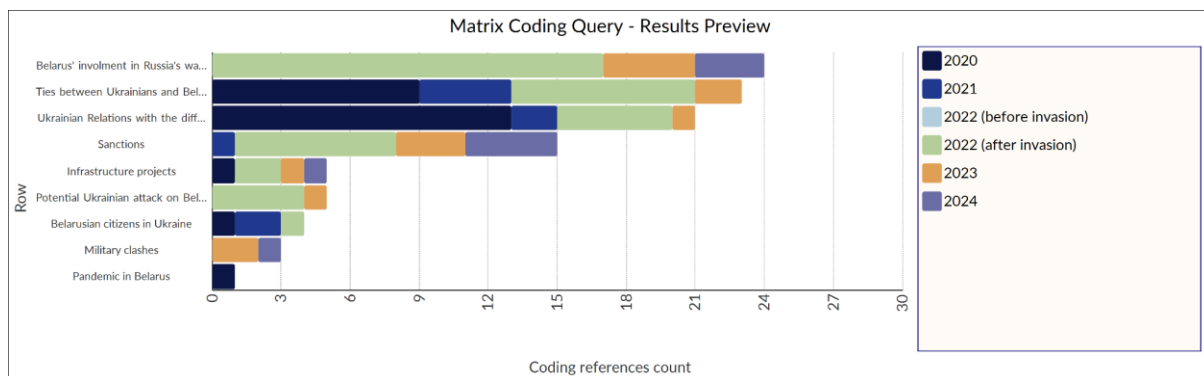


Figure 8 (Side themes discourse frequency over time)

In addition to these guiding themes, other specific discourse categories were identified according to which the collected data was assigned to the appropriate codes. Amongst these, the most prominent theme is *Belarus' involvement in Russia's war and genocide*, which, with 24 mentions, solely describes the participation and assistance of the Belarusian state in Moscow's hostilities against Ukraine after the full-scale invasion in February 2022:

*“Four days ago, cruise missiles, planes, helicopters and equipment came from Belarusian territory. They hit our homes, they hit our lives. The heavy equipment followed. And this is a dreadful deja vu.”*¹³⁴

¹³³ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 23 September 2020, Interview of the President of Ukraine to the Slovak economic media outlet *Hospodárske noviny*, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyyu-prezidenta-ukrayini-slovackomu-ekonomichnomu-vidann-63881, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

¹³⁴ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the citizens of Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-ukrainy-vladimir-zelenskij-obratilsya-k-grazhdanam-73217, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

Within this category, I also identified a subtheme, *war crimes investigations*, which discusses ongoing ICC¹³⁵ investigations regarding the Lukashenka regime's involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied territories bearing the hallmarks of genocide.

The category *Ties between Ukrainians and Belarusians*, with 23 codes, also played an essential role in shaping the discourse. It primarily represents the context of what unites the two subalterns. Most often, this context is a shared history of statehood and common identity patterns, which gives rise to the belief among many Ukrainians and Belarusians that they are the most closely related nations:

*“Belarus is our closest neighbor, and therefore we are not at all indifferent to what is happening there and what will happen to our friends next.”*¹³⁶

Theme *Ukrainian relations with the different Belarusian actors*, with 21 entries, brings together data that described relations between the Ukrainian state and different groups of *Belarusian* society: state actors, non-state actors and Belarusians in general:

*“The state will always support the IT industry, and taxes will not be above 5%, because we want Ukraine to be such an IT hub in Europe,” he added during a conversation with the media, noting that many representatives of leading IT companies from Belarus apply to Ukraine for employment.*¹³⁷

The last of the more significant categories with a minimum of 15 mentions are *sanctions*, where statements regarding measures against the Belarusian state, mainly for its involvement in the aggression against Ukraine and support of Moscow's policies, are classified. However, one of the cases analysed relates to events before 2022 and joining the European Union's restrictions on the Belarusian aviation sector in light of the hijacking in May 2021 of a Ryanair flight with Belarusian oppositionist Raman Pratasevich on board:

¹³⁵ ICC - International Criminal Court

¹³⁶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 10 August 2020, Ukraine calls on Belarus to be as tolerant as possible and hold open dialogue – President, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zaklikaye-bilorus-do-maksimalnoyi-terpimosti-ta-vid-62633, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹³⁷ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 17 September 2020, President stands for keeping the tax rate for IT at the level of 5%, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-vistupaye-za-zberezhennya-podatkovoyi-stavki-63701, Accessed on 21 July, 2024

“Given the current situation, the President instructed the government to work out a decision to terminate direct flights between Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus and close the airspace of Belarus for the flights from Ukraine and to our country.”¹³⁸

Additionally, in the earlier section, *Belarus' geopolitical importance*, an example of a call for restrictions against Russian and Belarusian athletes is also detailed.

Furthermore, the categories *Infrastructure projects*, *Potential Ukrainian attack on Belarus*, *Belarusian citizens in Ukraine*, *Military battles*, and *Pandemic in Belarus* appear several times each. These touch on the construction of roads and fortifications on the border with Belarus; the denial of rumours by the Lukashenka regime and the Kremlin about a possible attack on Belarus; the opportunity for Belarusian specialists to come to Ukraine in light of the ongoing repression, and the protection of those at risk from the regime in the context of the murder of Belarusian activist Vital Shyshou in Kyiv in 2021; the course of the hostilities and the rewarding of the families of the fallen heroes defending the border with Belarus; and the irresponsible policy of the Belarusian regime on the issue of the pandemic and the provocation of the crisis with the presence of Hassidim on the border.

This thematic analysis reveals, therefore, that Belarus or Belarusians in the speeches and statements of Volodymyr Zelenskyy have been referenced in many different contexts. The main themes in this discourse include the themes of war, security, the Belarusian political crisis, the impact of Russian hybrid imperialism on both subalterns, and the relationship between these nations. The Ukrainian president is constructing a narrative that, on the one hand, criticises Lukashenka's regime and, on the other, seeks to preserve relations with Belarusian society. This tactic is at the same time intended to counter undesirable actions of the authorities while at the same time not allowing Belarus to sink entirely into the depths of Russian colonial influence, which is crucial in terms of stability and resistance against Russian aggression, and of great importance for the future of neighbourly relations and the region as a whole.

4.2 Actor-centred Sentiment Analysis

¹³⁸ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 24 May 2021, President instructed the government to prepare a decision to terminate air travel between Ukraine and Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-doruchiv-uryadu-pidgotuvati-rishennya-shodo-pripin-68645, Accessed on 24 July, 2024

In addition to extensively discussing the themes of the discourse and picking out what the Ukrainian official discourse is most focused on concerning Belarusians, including primarily in the context of the ongoing war, the next complementary stage of the data analysis is to explore the discourse in terms of who it concerns and in light of the themes previously discussed. As presented earlier, three groups of Belarusian actors were identified for this research.

Belarusian state actors

Belarusian state actors are essential in the examined discourse, primarily because one man holds full power. Therefore, his consolidated, oppressive, Moscow-dependent system must be the target of policy towards Belarus. In this relationship, Ukrainians have to constantly consider the possible consequences of different methods of shaping it, which is noticeable from the data analysis in Figure 9. Based on it, there is a clear predominance of negative sentiment, which was the subject of 34 out of 45 mentions by the Belarusian authorities, which is well illustrated by this statement:

“We called on the Belarusian authorities to stop enabling the Russian war of aggression by permitting Russian armed forces to use Belarusian territory and by providing support and training to the Russian military. The Belarusian regime must fully abide by its obligations under international law.”¹³⁹

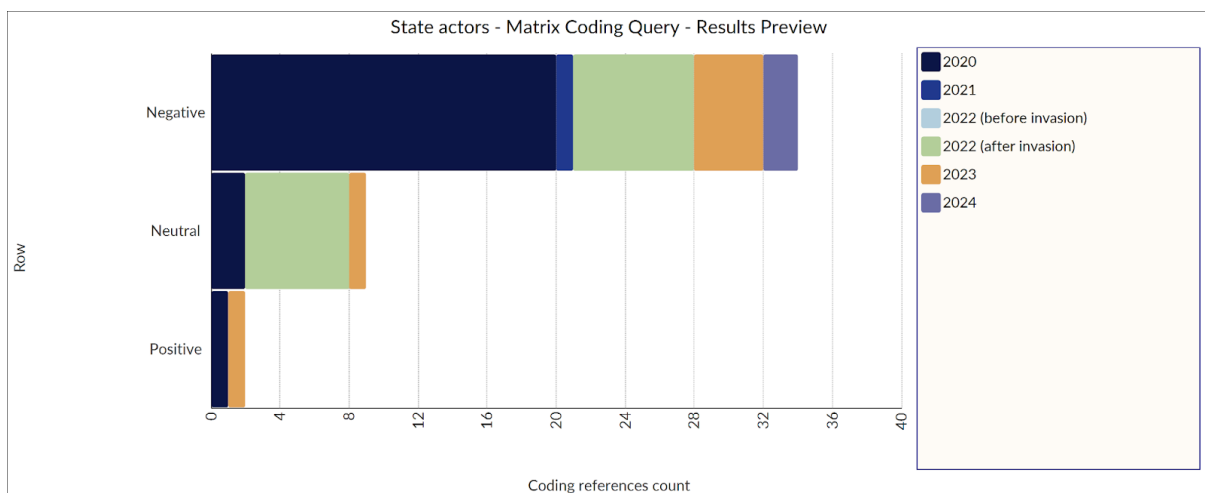


Figure 9 (*State actors* sentiment discourse analysis over time)

¹³⁹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 3 February 2023, Joint statement following the 24th EU-Ukraine Summit, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilna-zayava-za-pidsumkami-24-go-samitu-ukrayina-yes-80765, Accessed on 24 July, 2024

However, as the figure shows, more than half of the regime's negative references occurred in 2020 in the context of the political crisis. After 2021, when Belarusian state actors were almost not mentioned, the frequency in 2022 increased significantly. In doing so, a change in the proportion of negative to neutral sentiment is noticeable. Although the Belarusian state participated in Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, the discourse towards its representatives has, contrary to expectations, become more favourable compared to the period before the aggression, which is one of the thesis's main findings. This picture of things and the more cautious formulation of statements about the regime's representatives may reflect fears of the Belarusian army becoming directly involved in the armed conflict:

“I had a phone conversation with Alexander Lukashenko. We haven't spoken to him in two years. And today I had a long substantive conversation with him. I explained to him in detail the impossibility of our clash. I do not want missiles, planes, helicopters to fly to Ukraine from Belarus. I do not want troops to go to Ukraine from Belarus.”¹⁴⁰

However, it is worth noting in this context that Zelenskyy refers to the Belarusian dictator by name, not as president, which demonstrates the consistency of not recognising his legitimacy in the light of the rigged elections, even in a negotiating setting in the early days of a full-scale Russian invasion.

Belarusian Non-state Actors

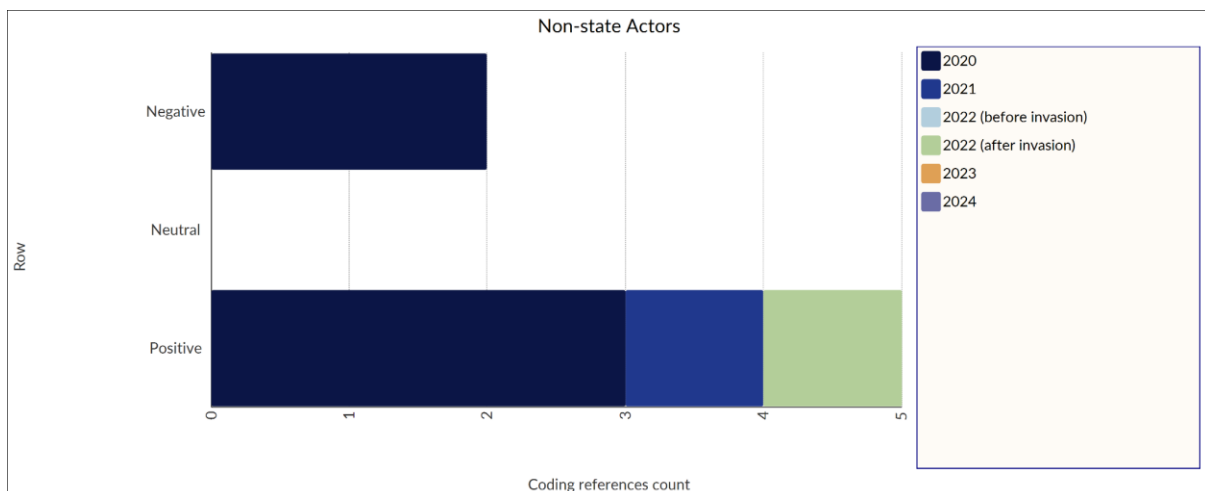


Figure 10 (*Non-state actors* sentiment discourse analysis over time)

¹⁴⁰ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the citizens, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-do-gromadyan-73233, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

As Figure 10 illustrates, the sentiment towards Belarusian non-state actors was mostly positive. The highest number of such references was in the 2020s in the context of the ongoing political crisis in Belarus and increased repression against this segment of society. Of the seven mentions, five had a positive connotation. Among other things, Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for the release of political prisoners. The discourse was also sympathetic when it came to activists:

“Every Belarusian who can be a target for criminals due to the public political position must get a special and reliable protection. The Security Service of Ukraine and the Ministry of Internal Affairs must work out a clear algorithm for assessing possible risks, as well as a system of responses to these risks in order to eliminate any threat to people. Currently, the list of citizens of the Republic of Belarus has been formed, for whom appropriate measures have already been taken to assess risks, provide additional support for their stay on the territory of our country and ensure security.”¹⁴¹

However, based on the data analysed, relations with Belarusian opposition, while generally friendly, are rough for Ukraine. This is particularly true with the Belarusian opposition community in exile centred around presidential election candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Non-state actors are practically non-existent when compared to other Belarusian actors, which is due to their inability to take real action and exert significant influence on the processes taking place in Belarus, as stated by the Ukrainian leader:

“The only thing we don't see yet is a symbol. In each similar case, the people had a leader (he or she does not matter), there was one around whom people gathered. I don't see this leader yet.”¹⁴²

Belarusians in general

¹⁴¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 4 August 2021, Law enforcement agencies will provide additional protection to those Belarusians who may be in danger - President, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/pravoohoronni-organi-zabezpechat-dodatkovij-zahist-tim-bilor-69945, Accessed on 24 July, 2024

¹⁴² Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 15 September 2020, Interview of Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Wiener Zeitung, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-volodimira-zelenskogo-vidannyu-wiener-zeitung-63633, Accessed on 24 July 2024

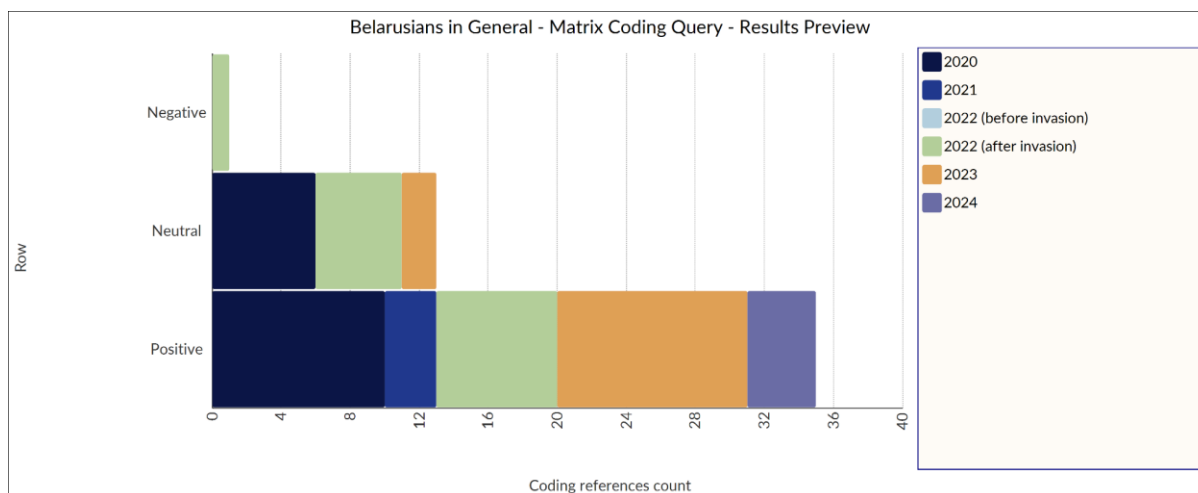


Figure 11 (*Belarusians in general* sentiment discourse analysis over time)

The following patterns are noticeable concerning *Belarusians in general*. A positive sentiment prevails in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's discourse towards Belarusians, characterising 35 of the 49 mentioned analysed. In the remaining cases, it is mainly a neutral sentiment, and only in one case, I classified the Ukrainian leader's words as a negative attitude. Positive attitude towards Belarusians prevails over neutral even in 2022 after the Russian invasion, although the prevalence of this indicator decreases regarding the data for the previously studied years 2020-2021. The period after the Russian aggression is also the only time frame in which negative sentiment occurred:

*“But you are still sleeping. And we haven't gone to bed since that moment. Because we are fighting. We are fighting for our country. We are fighting for our freedom.”*¹⁴³

This statement from February 2022 strikes a chord in the consciences of Belarusians and seems to ask, why don't you stop it? Why don't you fight? Although more than a thousand Belarusians have been detained for anti-war actions and protests in the dictatorship,¹⁴⁴ in the shock of the first hours of aggression, any resistance that did not stop Russian troops seemed insufficient. This, of course, can be understood, as this was not the time to consider whether the Belarusians supported the war and whether it was purely a Russian initiative since the facts were on the table, Belarus is a co-aggressor state. However, as I mentioned, this is the only context in which

¹⁴³ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 February 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the citizens of Belarus, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-ukrainy-vladimir-zelenskij-obratilsya-k-grazhdanam-73217, Accessed on 18 July, 2024

¹⁴⁴ Ot “sutok” do prostrelennykh kolen: rezul'taty presledovaniya belorusov za antivoennuyu pozitsiyu, (2024, February 23), Viasna Human Rights Centre. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/113108>, Accessed on 15 July, 2024

the Belarusians were framed unfavourably. Next, there is a noticeable return to the traditionally positive portrayal of neighbours that was present during the 2020 political crisis:

“In any case, I support the people of Belarus who really want change. They want to be free, democratic, to choose the leader they want. They want everything to be transparent. We do not see aggression, weapons, arson, attacks from them.”¹⁴⁵

This positive trend in the discourse on Belarusians emerges in the context of the dragging out war and the launching of a new tactic of wartime discourse involving a significant intensification of *decolonisation narratives*, as in a speech to the Polish parliament:

“Words that there is real peace between our nations. Peace between relatives. Peace between brothers. And now I really want these words to be heard by our common Belarusian neighbors. Peace between relatives, peace between neighbors, peace between brothers. We have to come to this with them as well! We will definitely come!”¹⁴⁶

To sum up, according to the results of the actor-centred sentiment analysis, Volodymyr Zelenskyy refers to non-state actors seven times in his discourse, to state actors 45 times, and Belarusians in general 48 times. This indicates that Ukraine's official policy primarily distinguishes between the two main stakeholders on the Belarusian side, and this is the Belarusian people and the Lukashenka regime, giving less importance to the opposition, which, although perceived positively, is considered by the Ukrainian side as not worth actively pursuing. Considering the potential benefits from advanced cooperation with the Belarusian opposition and the risks from a complete break in relations with the Lukashenka regime, Kyiv stays restrained in creating discourse to avoid the Belarusian army participating in Russian aggression. However, the maintenance of positive sentiment from the beginning of 2023 and decolonising narratives may suggest the shaping of a new vision of regional reality with an essential role for Belarus free of colonial influence and independent from Moscow, demonstrating the Ukrainian government's understanding of the critical role of Belarusians for Ukraine itself.

¹⁴⁵ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 15 September 2020, Interview of Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Wiener Zeitung, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-volodimira-zelenskogo-vidannyu-wiener-zeitung-63633, Accessed on 24 July 2024

¹⁴⁶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 11 March 2022, Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-v-sejmi-res-73497, Accessed on 24 July, 2024

Chapter 5. Conclusions

Answering the first research question, analysis of Ukrainian wartime discourse on Belarusians reveals complex dynamics in the perceptions between these two subaltern states impacted primarily by Russian Hybrid Imperialism. It can be concluded that the Lukashenka regime, endorsing Russian imperialism, stands as representative of a hybrid Belarusian-Russian identity, epitomising the capture of the Belarusian state by group considering themselves within the world in Moscow's paradigm. Simultaneously, representatives of a distinct Belarusian identity, despite not having a state platform, go through a process of decolonising the discourse about themselves and support other subalterns - Ukrainians in their common anticolonial struggle. The findings of the analysis of actor-centred sentiment towards Belarusians in general and non-state actors give grounds to conclude that as long as Belarusians do not adopt a colonial Russian identity, Ukrainian state will also seek a certain path of shared understanding, avoiding the trap of mutual perception through the lens of Moscow. Therefore, there is clear differentiation between the representatives of the regime and the regular people in Ukrainian wartime political discourse. It demonstrates that these perceptions, which unite and influence decolonising discourses of subalterns about each other, are shaped by a conjunction of shared historical experiences, current geopolitical realities, and the ongoing struggle against colonial influence, expressed as either a direct struggle against the Russian invader or opposition to a colonial pro-Russian identity of Lukashenka's authoritarian state.

Turning to the two sub questions, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the participation of Belarus as a co-aggressor have significantly worsened perceptions and lowered general Ukrainians' sympathy towards Belarusians as evidenced by public polls. If the Belarusian army had joined the war and directly entered Ukrainian territory, presumably, there would not have been differences in their perception in relation to the Russians. Preventing this from happening, despite complicity in launching the invasion, causes Ukrainians to differentiate between Belarusians and Russians and perceive them, in general, as subjugated to Russian imperialism. Many Ukrainians sympathised with the Belarusian 2020 presidential election protests and understand the hard path of forming a separate national identity in regard to Moscow's influence. Although, it seemed that the Ukrainians' incomplete understanding of the realities and different outcomes of the political crisis in Belarus in comparison to Maidan, and its critical impact on the participation of the Belarusian state in Russian aggression, made the voice of the second subaltern unheard. The evolving discourse on Belarusians demonstrates

that along with the process of Ukraine's self-perception decolonisation, there goes also a decolonisation of the perception of others. Thematic analysis has shown in which contexts the topic of Belarus or Belarusians is most often mentioned, so that the most frequent pattern of *Belarus's geopolitical importance* shows that the question of northern neighbours is also extremely important for the Ukrainian defining of themselves and their place in the region. Belarusians, too, have to go through a bumpy path of decolonisation in order to effectively influence the perception of other subalterns to make it possible to be fully perceived outside Russian context. It can be noticed that the topic of Belarus following Russian invasion was raised primarily in the context of the war and decolonisation narratives, so its appearance was linked to Ukraine's security issues and aimed at finding appropriate solutions and approaches to minimise risks.

At the end of the theoretical and conceptual section, I made my assumptions based on this part of the thesis where I concluded that Russian Hybrid Imperialism likely shapes the discourse on Belarusians, and that the Ukrainian president identifies Belarusians as victims of colonial influence, despite the fact that the position of the Belarusian state, captured by Lukashenka single-handedly, makes this issue more complicated, and this was a correct reflection. And while I also thought that before February 2022, the Ukrainian discourse on Belarus was presumably more friendly and subtle, in light of the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter, it shows that 2023 proved to be exceptional in terms of positive discourse towards the ordinary Belarusians, with a concomitant more restrained and subtle regarding state actors. Therefore, it can be concluded that Ukrainians generally see Belarusian people as victims of Russian imperialism, and the Lukashenka regime as a puppet of Moscow, which is a contributor to imperialism. Based on this, appropriate state policy is shaped towards them. However, unlike the Israeli wartime political discourse example from aforementioned Gavriely-Nuri's book, in the case of the Ukrainian discourse towards Belarusians, there is no highly specific strategy developed to influence various specific groups of its own society and their perception of the opponent, during the armed conflict. This may be justified by the fact that the Israeli example analyses the discourse towards an opponent who is clearly perceived as an enemy, while in the case of the Ukrainian discourse towards Belarusians the matter is much more complex. It differs in that it does not specifically address its own citizens, instead is directed towards Belarusians and is primarily aimed at discouraging them from taking part in the war on the Russian side, while focusing on issues that have the potential to unite the two subalterns against Moscow. The discourse towards the state actors bears the hallmarks of strategic awaiting and

is characterised by an attempt not to escalate the situation in the context of an armed conflict. The Ukrainian authorities understand that they cannot antagonise the Belarusians if they want to keep relative security on the northern border. Discourse also shows understanding that if they want to design the future security architecture of the region it is crucial to have Belarusian people on their side. This is why the strategy of Ukrainian political discourse is being shaped this way, which is all the response to Russian Hybrid Imperialism.

By maintaining the distinction between the Belarusian state and its people, Ukraine keeps open the potential for future cooperation and avoids pushing Belarus further into Russia's sphere of influence. This approach demonstrates an understanding of the delicate balance required in navigating post-colonial relations considering the still immense impact of an imperial power. The findings of this study lay the foundation for future research of imperial influences, offering a nuanced understanding of how nations, particularly in Eastern Europe navigate the difficult postcolonial identities and international relations in the face of persistent imperial impact. They also provide valuable insights into the dynamics of relations between subaltern states under hybrid imperialism.

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