

## IDEOLOGIZED IDENTITIES IN THE ROMANIAN E-NEWS. A CULTURAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC QUERY OF CONVERGED MEDIA TEXTS ON THE 2022 RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

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*Article history: Received 15 August 2022; Revised 26 October 2022; Accepted 8 November 2022; Available online 20 December 2022; Available print 30 December 2022.*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Ideologized Identities in the Romanian e-News. A Cultural Sociolinguistic Query of Converged Media Texts on the 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict.* The design for this paper is to provide a qualitative analysis of how positioning towards the two parties directly involved in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has been the catalyst of the textual morphing of two ideologized identities in some of the Romanian e-Press. The focus was on the locus of convergence of two types of mediated texts: the production of professional press editors and journalists, and of Social Networked Sites users and prosumers. With this intent, the Romanian HotNews.ro website was scrutinized, and a number of e-news items were singled out thematically and structurally. The presumption is that the mediation process has been conducive to foregrounding two ballpark antithetic identities as underpinned by correspondent ideologies. An interdisciplinary perspective was opted for, one that joins Cultural Sociolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (Agha 2007; Androutsopoulos 2006; Blommaert 2017; Herring 2013; Silverstein 2004; Thurlow 2017; Wodak 2022) with the Ethnography of Netspeak (Kozinets 2010; Markham 2016, 2020; Zappavigna 2011) and focuses on collective identities in order to diagnose how the mediated text, as part of the semiotic architecture of the said e-Press inputs, pairs up antithetic ideology-determined identities in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Sociolinguistics, Ethnography of Netspeak, ideologized identity, digital cultural practices, textual interpretation, e-Press, Social Networked Sites*

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**REZUMAT.** *Identități ideologizante în presa electronică din România. O investigație de factură sociolingvistică și culturală a unor texte mediatice convergente pe tema conflictului ruso-ucrainean din 2022.* Intenția lucrării de față este de a furniza o analiză calitativă a modului în care poziționarea față de cele două părți direct implicate în conflictul ruso-ucrainean a catalizat alcătuirea în textele unei părți a presei electronice românești a două identități ideologizante. Accentul cade asupra locului de convergență a două tipuri de texte mediatice, și anume produsele editorilor și jurnaliștilor de presă și cele ale utilizatorilor și prozumatorilor de pe siturile de socializare în rețea. S-au identificat din punct de vedere tematic și structural un număr de articole de știri electronice de pe platforma românească de știri HotNews.ro. S-a presupus că procesul de mediatizare facilitează evidențierea, în mare, a două identități antitetice, întemeiate pe ideologiile aferente. S-a optat pentru utilizarea unei perspective interdisciplinare, ce reunește Sociolingvistica culturală și Analiza critică a discursului (Agha 2007; Androutsopoulos 2006; Blommaert 2017; Herring 2013; Thurlow 2017; Silverstein 2004; Wodak 2022) și Etnografia dialogului pe Internet (Kozinets 2010; Markham 2016, 2020; Zappavigna 2011) cu accent pe identitățile colective, cu scopul de a diagnostica modul în care textul mediat, parte a arhitecturii semiotice a tipului de presă menționat, alături de identități antitetice în baza curentului ideologic căruia îi subscriu în momente de criză.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Sociolingvistică culturală, Etnografia dialogului pe Internet, identitate ideologizantă, practici culturale digitale, interpretare de text, presă electronică, situri ale rețelelor de socializare*

## Introduction

Some radical socio-political changes have occurred after the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe during the past few decades. Efforts were made by the former communist states to align their burgeoning democracies to the ones in the West boasting tradition. The road has been turbulent and peppered with several failed expectations of a swift change, which provides a partial explanation as to why some individuals, despite having lived behind the Iron Curtain, harbour nostalgia for the socialist traits of life under the past regime. However, one cannot but note the aspirational ideological shifts paralleling the lingering ambivalence across the local socio-political spectrum, the capitalism v. communist ideological pair revisited occasionally. Further note should also be taken of the fact that the political ideology canvas has diversified in somewhat of a syncretic fashion, the conservative and avant-garde features co-habiting in the postmodern recycling of imploded political leanings. It is

against this political ideology backdrop that one can perceive a latent, problematic East-West dichotomy that apparently has not of yet reached a resolution. This sense of an irresolute issue traverses individual and collective discourses be they in the Press or in Social Networked Sites (Papacharissi 2011). The former purports to be the voice of the public, the other a social arena for the grassroots negotiation of the varied publics' identities across alliances, affiliations, or interests (Zappavigna 2012). In the current setting, the armed invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which had escalated to an almost full-scale war at the time of our writing, is a metonym of a belated West versus East belligerent conflict. The actual invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Army was deemed unimaginable, the European Union states in the geo-proximity of the physical conflict stunned at an act they could not reconcile with, albeit anticipated. Bewilderment aside, the respective nations joined the people across the world engaging in the matter in ways that were somewhat more subjective given their spatial closeness to battleground. These included, amongst others, closely following the Press briefings while taking out their correlated dilemmas and anxieties to the Social Network Sites. Indeed, in accordance with the new socio-cultural practices of our times (Van Dijk 2006), the conflict became a heatedly debated topic marking the digital discourse of engaged readers of the e-Press and of Social Media users.

This paper is a qualitative exploration of how both the ostentatious and oblique positionings towards the two parties directly involved in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict have become the main factors in forging two polarised identities as determined by two historically opposite ideologies. And if the situation triggered likewise global reactions, we dare say that the phenomenon registered a higher intensity in the countries neighbouring Ukraine for implicit historical and geographical reasons. Romania is one such country that has proven its partisanship(s). Its actual engagement became visible both in the 'real' as well as in the 'virtual' worlds of the Social Media and e-Press, the one affording, the other relaying authentic textual manifestations. Thus, a feedback loop was enabled by the meeting between the e-Press and the Social Media texts, with the Press turning the Social Network Sites expression of individual (political) leanings into representations that gratified their readership.

Since the author herself became involved on a personal level in the humanitarian crisis generated by the conflict, choosing to research the Romanian Press was a heart *and* mind rather than mind *over* heart decision. In such a situation, there is the risk of confusing the emic and etic perspectives, yet that was regarded as an advantage that could only add weight and complexity to an analysis that was being carried out on an unfolding phenomenon. To begin with, we selected the highly accessed Romanian HotNews.ro news platform, which

had been covering round the clock the development of the situation in Ukraine since its inception. Our foremost criterion for selection was thematic, to which we added, shortly after, a structural one, on noticing amongst the large volume of briefing news on the war a consistent category of e-press items that incorporated international Tweets and Instagram posts. By and large, we observed a pattern whereby the professional editors meaningfully built pieces of news around the Twitter and Instagram User Generated Content, whose messages and rhetoric they encapsulated in a catchy headline. To round up our contention, we felt it necessary to put into the mix the posts by the Romanian readers in the *Comment* section of the e-news in point, an e-locus that falls within the definition of Social Networked Sites. Thus, our cursory observation that a critical mass of people across the world had been taking divergent sides relative to the conflict paved the way to an epistemic wish to determine how this translated into interpersonal antagonism on a local level. This led to our further inference that under the *Zeitgeist* circumstances, the joint daily e-Press consumption and ritual Social Media engagement induced in readers and users the feeling of re-experiencing the Cold War atmosphere, and thus enhanced the pairing up of antithetic identities building on a rekindled ideological conflict.

Our nexus perspective is one provided by Cultural Sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (Agha, 2007; Androutsopoulos 2006; Blommaert 2017; Herring 2013; Silverstein 2004; Thurlow 2017; Wodak 2022) and the Ethnography of Netspeak (Kozinets 2010; Markham 2016, 2020; Zappavigna 2011) focusing on the *being* and *becoming* of socio-cultural identities. Our research is qualitative in that we have undertaken to explore the role of the cultural aspects and functions of language in forging identities on the Net as the host of the e-Press we have targeted. Indeed, with the advent of the Social Media, the Internet has become the locus *par excellence* where Netizens not only retrieve information or communicate but also become, in the process, members of participatory cultures (Androutsopoulos & Tereick 2013; Androutsopoulos 2016). Given everything it encumbers, they seek and find in the Net the opportunities to display allegiances based on communal mindsets, worldviews, and interests, even while they are occasioned to play out their identity repertoires (Tannen & Trester 2013). Moreover, and in as far we are concerned, it is *the* medium that fosters ideological realignments of identities when conjectured upon geopolitical crises (Wodak 2022).

### **Some Conducive Focal Concepts and Theory Turns**

In our conception of identity, we lean onto the belief that the exploration of the language displays and textual inputs in the media of our choice can lead us to valid observations, for “we fill the gap between the meagre linguistic and

other evidence available to us, and the whole person we construct using knowledge some of which may perhaps be ‘hard-wired’ into us genetically [...], but the bulk of which has been accumulated over a lifetime of experience of meeting people, making ‘hypotheses’ about what they are like, and ‘testing’ out these hypotheses in our dealings with them.” (Joseph 2004, 3) Today, the digital alternative to interacting in person is more ‘engaging’ than the one inoculated in our genes by millennia of behaviour. It is, however, also more compelling, for as interlocutors we need to swiftly break down and analyse novel and ever more dynamic types of actions that are not yet deep-seated reflexes. Online interaction requires that we supplant our genetic hard-wiring with the newly-acquired talents, the latter themselves in need of periodical updating.

On another note, the term *socio-cultural* is deemed by several scholars as a timely and necessary replacement of the term *social* in identity theories. This change of terminology, where accepted, has marked a substantial shift in academic work as it proceeded to contemplate how conflated (social *and* cultural) identities are made meaningful in self-expression and the categorisation of the others. A refined observer of the dynamic social and cultural changes of the last decades, Jenkins (2014) himself revised consequentially his original definition of ‘social identity’ more than once. The new syntagm and its conceptualisation have both been embraced by Cultural Sociolinguistics, and many of the scholars (Agha 2007; Androutsopoulous 2006; Blommaert 2017; Herring 2013; Silverstein 2004; Thurlow 2017) in this line of applied linguistics welcomed the fused unit, its cultural variable gaining precedence over the social one. Indeed, the social system of classes ebbing today, upending saliency-wise the social-cultural sequence relative to both collective and individual identities cannot be eluded.

Yet another aspect to be considered is the existence of two prominent approaches to language and identity, the one now deemed essentialist, the other constructionist. Categories such as nationality, class, race, gender, etc., were once regarded as fixed. In the constructionist view, researchers were/are interested in identity as a process “in which individuals construct categorical belonging, both for themselves and for others with whom they come in contact” (Joseph 2004, 84). Between the two, we felt that the constructionist approach is the more appropriate where we are concerned, for as Joseph (1997, 93) pointedly noted: “[...] the repeated reconfigurations of the USSR and Eastern-bloc countries in 1989-91, and the recognition of sub-national entities in Western Europe in the 1990’s have all contributed to a strong awareness of the fluidity and arbitrariness of nationality.” Foreshadowing the conceptualisation of identity that is currently trending in the Social Sciences, Joseph’s *fluidity* has branched out in a constellation of new meanings, especially with the advent of the Social Media. Jenkins, too, has backed the philosophical perspective for looking at

identity as *becoming* rather than *being*, and it can be safely said that the inherent dynamism of digital communication has also tipped the scales toward the idea of process. Indeed, the affordances of the Social Networked Sites have provided their users with the opportunity, the means, and even the motives for putting into motion their identity repertoires instead of sticking to fixed self-presentations. And although it has been said that fixedness is associated with ‘real-life’ identity, and fluidity with online self-presentation, the two need combining for successful communication to occur.

In what follows, it is apparent that we need to make partial recourse to the essentialist view, as we acquiesce with the axiomatic view of language as central to the formation of national identity and with the fact that “the existence of a national language is the primary foundation upon which nationalist ideology is constructed” (Joseph 1997, 94). Our leverage, however, is that since ours is a prevalingly Cultural Sociolinguistic perspective, we assume that language is both the means and the resource by which nationalist and world-order ideologies are made either transparent or oblique in discourses even while they are being renegotiated, which points to the constructionist view. Needless to say, several other elements are to be taken into account relative to collective identity construction as underpinned by ideologies in the Internet era. For instance, as regards e-news columns (part of our analytical material), the degree to which such ideologies are (made) visible may be the result of straightforward editorial leaning-related decisions, of deliberate manipulation, or of the column author’s personal creeds. Then again, it has long been established (McLuhan, 1964) that the Internet has turned us into Netizens, the dwellers of a wired global village, an image that downplays the saliency of national appurtenance, just as later it also became apparent that the term cultural was an adequate and inclusive alternative for ‘national and social’. While seen as the direct effect of the accruing engagement (Zappavigna 2012) in the globalised Social Media, all of the above have conjectured the setting into motion of the cultural functions of language. And if the argumentation above shows us as wavering between the two conflicting approaches (essentialist vs. constructionist) to language and identity, let us conclude with Markham’s enunciation (2016, 2) that “in studies of special interest groups who emerge, grow, and function as stable communities online [...], the boundaries are built discursively, or through connection, interest, and flow, rather than geography, nationality, or proximity.” We, therefore, presumed the anticipated pair of emerging identities to be foregrounded by their ideological dimension even as people locally and worldwide were processing the sudden news of the attack on Ukraine by Russia on February 24 of the year 2022.

## The Analytical Journey

### *i. The Corpus*

We chose to explore the Romanian e-news platform called HotNews.ro, the first 24/7 newspaper in Romania (as the claim reads on its Home Page), as we had found their overt editorial choices to be centripetal to engaging two types of readership relative to the situation in Ukraine. The manner in which it ranked the news items in terms of newsworthiness, by giving precedence to the situation in Ukraine, the choice of reorganising its news categories by inserting a distinct showcasing icon for the conflict entitled *War in Ukraine* (Rom.: [Război în Ucraina]), the placing of the icon as the first in the line of its until then regular categories of news, and the programmatic lexical choice of naming the conflict ‘war’ and dismissing all the other alternatives employed insistently and persistently by the two geopolitical poles involved, were just as many clues in this sense.

We harvested a longitudinal series of its e-news over a period of 5 months, roughly starting at the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in late February through late July 2022, and identified a category of clustered textual input, comprising, as follows:

- a. the edited text of the e-news items as professional publishing;
- b. the *authentic* (in Internet Sociolinguistic lingo) embedded Twitter and Instagram texts (with *text* in the wider sense of language as part of the communication semiotics on the Social Media);
- c. the posts in the *Comment* section of the said item (see a.).

If type a. texts are mass-media edited inputs, type b. are the product of the Social Media average user, members of military organisations, officials ‘speaking’ in their personal capacities, or else they may be re-tweets or re-posts of news outlets (the authenticity lies in the action itself: re-tweeting is a/the message), with type c. texts also classifiable as authentic production on Social Networked Sites (given the convergence of the New Media).

The corpus was not collected *per se* but was delineated *in situ* with the help of a HotNews.ro platform affordance which allows readers to filter content. The same has also enabled us to narrow down the analytical material (see ANNEX for the link to the longitudinal, filtered archive). We have surveyed the HotNews.ro items featured under the *War in Ukraine* section during the time span mentioned in two operational stages. The first, covering February to June 2022, led us to the observation that a critical mass of Romanians had adopted two opposing sides in the conflict. We then proceeded to refine even more our selection, as we had noted by then the recurrent e-news structural pattern

aforementioned. Our criterion of selection became thus twofold, thematic *and* structural, and we narrow-targeted the items that embedded Tweets and Instagram posts and hosted posts by engaged readers in the *Comment* sections. Next, we sourced our second stage exemplifications from the archived items covering the month of July 2022.

Considering the functioning characteristics of e-news sites and our use of one as a corpus-archive, we need to underscore some of its peculiarities. It is not just new material that is being uploaded round the clock, but the archived items themselves may undergo erratum processes, headlines may be altered or whole items may be removed (this, however, very rarely). Moreover, the production of new posts in the *Comment* section is pan-chronic, new ones may be added as belated reactions to early comments and may initiate new threads at any point in time. Consequently, every example cluster comprises the e-news item with the embedded (multimedia) Twitter or Instagram Post and the posts in the *Comment* section at the moment of retrieval.

### *ii. Methodology*

We summarised the results of our first operational stage as a set of preliminary general observations. We drew up a synopsis of the thematic items indexing culturalist talk, which we regarded as a potent generator of, or closely mirroring polarised identities. Additionally, we found that perceptible attitudinal and emotional overtones were concurrent with and underpinned the following generic-nationalistic themes:

- humour and sarcasm at the expense of the Russian army;
- defiance of the invading Russian military by the Ukrainian civilians;
- otherization of the Russians as a nation;
- Russian military's (high-ranking officers and regular soldiers alike) ignoble manner of doing combat.

Our concrete exemplifications (see ANNEX) of detailed findings, as part of our second operational stage, are extracted from the July section of the archived e-news, the month which marked the 150th day of a war that was originally designed by its on-setters as a *blitzkrieg*. By then, the identities we had foreshadowed would have gained a strong contour, but it is not our intention to perform a diachronic pursuit thereof. Instead, we assumed our analysis of the targeted e-news items would confirm as well as nuance our preliminary observations, which is the line along which we are deconstructing the examples below. These are sourced from the clustered categories of texts mentioned above, alternately cloaked in Romanian as the language of the headlines of the HotNews.ro edited items and of the posts in the *Comment* sections, and in

English as the *lingua franca* of the embedded Tweets and Instagram posts. This add-on to our preliminary observations expanded the scope of our objectives, as we noticed an additional dimension to the antithetic identities specifically sought. We deemed that salient, as it supplanted whatever ideological ‘bonding’ had already occurred locally, through the communication occurring across the multilingual and globalising Internet (Danet & Herring 2007). Indeed, the varied ethnic backgrounds of the text producers, consumers, and prosumers, the ethos of the parties physically engaged in the war, and the cultural propensities of the authors of the mediated texts rendered it quite poignant. All in all, we explored the texts of the selected e-Press items, with language seen as part of the overall semiotics of communication across the converged textual inputs rather than as piecemeal of multimodal communication. The coordinates of our analysis were the thematic content and the critical nuances of the discourses of the e-Press and of the embedded Social Media items, both of which, in this case, were instrumental in forging identities as a languaculture act.

*iii. Focal discussion of the findings*

In the early stages of the conflict, mocking the alleged superiority of the Russian army (personnel and weapons) quickly became a favourite discursive strategy in the Social Media and was just as swiftly tapped into by HotNews.ro. Memes of abandoned Russian tanks tugged by Ukrainian farm tractors with entertaining captions were trending. As an aside, they had become so popular and suggestive of the hearty involvement of the whole of the Ukrainian population, in contrast to the perceived mercenary composition of the invading army, that they were featured in a stamp series issued by the Ukrainian government. Sarcasm and humour targeting the invading army were identified in the July corpus-archive as coincidental with the glorification of the home army defending its territory. For instance, in within the example 3 cluster, the original embedded Tweet is worded neutrally: *Destroying an enemy armored personnel carrier with a Javelin* – the corresponding HotNews.ro headline is longer, uses click-bait wording and is the carrier of multiple messages: in addition to the factual information, it anticipates the success of the hit concomitant with suggesting that the famed Russian army vehicles are vulnerable to the inferior weaponry used in the Ukrainian counterattacks (the square bracketing indicates our English glossing of the original Romanian headlines, see ANNEX):

[New and clear images of a Javelin attack: How the rocket soars before hitting full-on a Russian armoured vehicle].

Example 4 reinforces the multi-semantics and enhances the irony. It reads like the satisfactory realisation that the invading army is running short of fully

functioning weapons and needs to resort to its obsolete armament. The full weight of the inherent sarcasm is conveyed by the second part of the headline:

[The Russian army brought out their stock of 2S7Pion self-propelled guns. Perhaps they are being taken to the scrapyards]

The commendation of the Ukrainian soldiers is non-negotiable in several of the HotNews.ro headlines, which, at face value, are merely summarizing raw facts, as in example 1:

[Ukrainian soldiers have published the first images of the new M270 launchers in action / How they differ from the HIMARS systems]

Underneath its denotative layer, the headline carries the strong connotation that the Ukrainian soldiers defending their country are highly motivated, the evidence of which lies in their deft manipulation of high-technology Western weaponry with which they are less than familiar. The embedded Tweet video reinforces the connotation by showing the weapons in full, real action, that is, a direct hit of the enemy. The accompanying musical score (most of the embedded material is multimedia) is cross-referential. It starts with a Ukrainian patriotic song and moves on to a mundane popular foreign jingle resonating with fun-making and play.

A defiant attitude set in after the initial astonishment and disconcertedness felt by the Ukrainian city and village dwellers on being attacked by the representatives of a kindred nation, despite the number of prior episodes (e.g., the Annexation of Crimea preceded by, according to translocal folklore, the moving in of some 'little green men' wearing no insignia indicative of any national army) in anticipation of what was to follow. Instances of invading soldiers being addressed or confronted in the Russian language by Ukrainian citizens (be they Russian minority or Ukrainian majority) were a common sight captured by journalists doing fieldwork in the early days of the conflict. If with some it could have been a sign of bipartisanship, soon enough, when enemy bombing became a daily occurrence in the Ukrainian localities, including those beyond the front line as officially delineated by the Russian military, the reality of the situation struck hard. Many Ukrainian locals fell prey to the terror-inducing conduct of the invaders, but several resisted the pressure by resorting to physical or symbolical subversion. In example 2, a young woman wearing a blue T-shirt with a logo reading *Ukraine* is captured displaying a rebelling (Rocker) gesture towards the Russian flag placed on a bombed-out edifice in the city of Mariupol. This functions as a singling out of a distinct socio-cultural category: young Ukrainian *aficionados* courageously expressing their stance

against the war on their country and the refusal to accept defeat despite the obvious outcome. Thus, focal leisure-related activities of youth subcultures are upcycled into one brave and selfless act even while the city had by then undergone utter destruction and become the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the iconic Spanish town of Guernica in World War II.

Instances of considering the Russians the *Other* are plentiful. In example 7, Ukrainians are shown as 'humane' humans in stark opposition with the Russians generically likened to the pseudo-human *Orcs*, the infamous fictional characters of the highly popular fantasy saga by J.R.R. Tolkien. The name was quickly adopted by many engaged readers as part of the broader convention that equated the Russian Federation with the equally infamous world of *Modor* (the creation of the same author). They became in-house names for many commentators, who used it to index indiscriminately all Russians. Through over-lexicalisation, as is sometimes the case with anti-languages, they were also used as a ploy for avoiding censorship by HotNews.org administrators alongside other instances of play with lexical variants: *rusnaci*, a derogatory Romanian name for Russians, becomes *ruznaci*, *ruzznaci*, etc. (see below). The Ukrainian soldiers are documented, here, as finding the time, in the grasp of a dangerous situation, to rescue a kitten left behind by the Russians after a brief occupancy of Snake Island. The images of the actual rescue are showcased alongside the replacement of the Russian banner by the Ukrainians' own, an indication that the two actions are deemed equally iconic of a nation that is noble and multifaceted, whereas the invaders are uniquely ignoble. In fact, many TV recounts of Ukrainians fleeing the country to the neighbouring friendly states were accompanied by clips showing the refugees taking along their pets as the norm rather than an exception, picturing them as the responsible representatives of an animal-loving nation.

Distinguishing between the two types of battling, the one, the defence of the sovereignty of one's country, the other, an unprovoked invasion of an independent state, is also a matter of complexity. Russians are held culpable for conducting a war befitting the past century. Overriding all political agreements and ignoring all modern rules of physical combat, the Russian war doctrine is culture clashing. In this vein, the repetitive Russian nuclear threats (post WW II taboos) carried against the whole of Europe and the USA (or 'the collective West', as worded by the Russian pro-war propaganda) rather than just Ukraine as the self-appointed enemy, weaponizing food, petrol and gas with dire consequences for states that have no geopolitical contingency with the conflict, the indiscriminate bombing of civilian buildings, the deportation of a high number of the local population, the deflection of blame, the claim of false objectives, are projected as modern day military and political *faux-pas*. All of the above were reflected critically by the HotNews.ro press platform, which wholeheartedly

embraced Ukraine's own propaganda, and thus transgressed journalism deontology. The editorial stance purported that grief be voiced singularly over the Ukrainian casualties and fatalities, insisting on the civilian ones, while the loss of lives among the Russian military was reported obliquely, as the result of successful Ukrainian strikes. The former were augmented through graphic visuals (photos or videos) anchoring the edited text, whereas the latter were trivialised, through issuing routine daily statistics.

As regards the embedded Russian images documenting their own strikes with advanced weapons, they are presented laconically (see Example 5), inviting readers, for a change, to form their own opinions on what was intended as a daunting threat by the invading state claiming military superiority. In example 6, on the other hand, a point is made of highlighting the creative and ludic strategy of the Ukrainians. Christian iconography was craftily superposed over photos of popular weapons and became viral memes. A possible reading of the 'male' Saint HIMARS<sup>2</sup> (featured in the example) and of the 'female' Saint Javelin<sup>3</sup> (the first to be circulated) takes Christian referencing even further, inferring that the women and men of Ukraine may be destined to martyrdom, but they *will* faithfully engage in a battle against a doctrinal Evil. Any one of them might as well be Saint George slaying the dragon, or David defeating Goliath, and not just in effigy. If weaponizing food and rattling of the nuclear sabre are unacceptable tactics by modern warring standards, in contrast, Ukrainian-manipulated Western weapons must be canonised for their destruction of Russians in an iniquitous battle.

Several of the themes above have been picked up and snowballed in the *Comment* sections of the e-news investigated. Galvanized by the editorial rhetoric, heated debates are afforded by such websites. Readers today are no longer passive media consumers who are narcotised into accepting wholesale the preferred messages of the dominant ideology. Today's keen information-seeking Netizens have achieved the media literacy (Martin 2008) to decode the now super-diversified messages. In this sense, the discursive actions and reactions in the comments we have analysed are cloaked in a hate-speech type of language, ranging from mild sarcasm to extreme licentiousness. Such hostile attitudes as have become apparent could only be underpinned by some clashing ideologies running deep. We thus concluded that that must be a significant factor in determining the abovementioned discursive choices. The language style of most comments is licentious, overflowing with expletives, overtly offensive and strongly *other*-directed 'speech-acts.' The *other* is an interlocutor identified as someone holding the opposite position or else belonging to an

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<sup>2</sup> American high mobility artillery rocket system.

<sup>3</sup> American advanced anti-tank portable missile system.

‘unfriendly’ nation and is labelled accordingly. A highly incidental and offhand label employed is: ‘Russian-paid troll’ (Rom. [*postac plătit de ruși*]). Ingenuity in circumnavigating rules and creativity in finding solutions to elude conversation etiquette are part of the stock talent of digital natives, as extolled by David Crystal (2011). One such strategy can also be traced in the play with names – *Putler* for *Putin* – not only for avoiding censorship, but also for indexing a perceived similarity between the infamous German dictator of WW II and the current Russian president. The name *Orci* (Engl.: Orcs) is the favourite substitute for the Russian soldiers (see above) and its high incidence indicates that it is preferred to other (less frequent) lexical alternatives – for example, *mujici*, whose equivalent in English is *Russian peasant*, or those combining playing with spelling and underpinned by derogative connotations: *ruzznacii* instead of the neutral *rușii* (Romanian for *Russians*). In fact, *Orci* has become conventionalized to the degree that even some of the Romanian Press has adopted it. The authors’ nicknames or avatars are also creative, the result of Net-afforded multi-modal play and display for expressing an unequivocal stance: for language-only examples we found *Soljenitin* (deliberate simplified spelling of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s surname, the Nobel Prize Russian author and dissident who wrote about the Russian Gulag), or *Alecsei* (a play on the spelling of a popular Russian name: *Aleksey*, the variant suggesting an assumed Russian ethnicity, manifestly dismissive, however, of any loyalty to the home country as a notionally invading nation).

## Conclusions

We built our presumptions on a set of general observations of the e-Press briefings on the war in Ukraine and the related topics trending on the Social Network Sites. The emerging antithetic identities we set out to investigate were seen as being negotiated along a set of parallel ideological lines vis-a-vis the evolution of the armed conflict. We integrated the certified idea that Social Networked Sites, such as the *Comment* section of News platforms, and Twitter and Instagram are providing the locus for the socio-cultural negotiation of the said identities. The HotNews items themselves were found to be less than neutral and thus functioning as the catalyst for the morphing, rather than just the expression, of ideology-determined identities. The local situation delineated, and the socio-political context explained, we focused on how the engaged readership of a specifically-leaning e-press are instrumental in the process, with language as part of the semiotic architecture of digital communication functioning as the main agency.

The pair of antithetic profiles identified was registered as displayed and enacted in the converged texts of the media surveyed. They were found to gain even more contour through the set of traits displayed by the three categories of texts, tying together the following: conventionalized lexis and discourse, snowballing recurrent themes, hyperbolized comparisons. However, if initially seen as the symmetrical components of an antithetic pair, the findings pointed to a different conclusion regarding the two. It became apparent that the one that was systematically corroborated with Western values and cultural capital was all the while enhanced by means of the other, representing the East in recycled Cold War terms.

The example clusters confirmed our preliminary observations and provided some concrete instantiations. The editorial positioning of the e-news items was made transparent by the headline wording as well as by the structural choice of embedding such Social Media material as aligned to the general editorial ideological orientation. In addition, it invited engaged readers to associate with the preferred message endorsing the agreed upon World Order and universal principles on war and peace, even while it legitimated all Ukrainian actions.

The Romanian-English language mix, the first component indicating Romanian Mass- and Social-Media consumership, the second, global engagement, may also be regarded as a lingua-culture resource for the negotiation of the said identities. A mutual intelligibility of sorts is achieved through the visuals (images, video clips, memes) anchoring the texts as well as through popular culture inter-referencing: Tolkien's fiction, pop(ular) jingles and Bible referencing.

Overall, we have managed through our study to confirm that language as an important piece in the semiotic puzzle of converged mediated texts has proved to be both a tool and a resource for allowing an antithetic categorization of the supporters of the combat-parties in Ukraine on the basis of resurrected ideologies.

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**Webography:**

[https://www.hotnews.ro/razboi\\_ucraina](https://www.hotnews.ro/razboi_ucraina)

## ANNEX

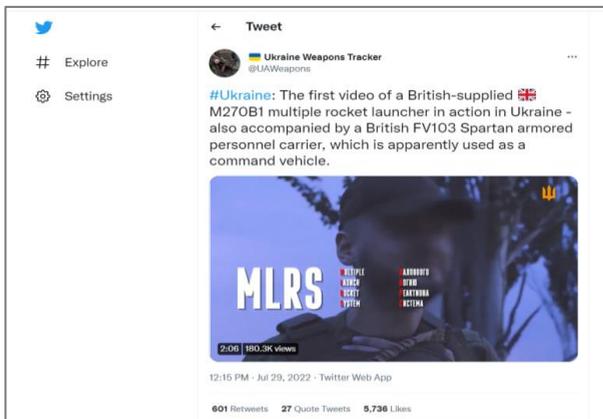
The annexed material has been retrieved on July 30, 2022, from [https://www.hotnews.ro/razboi\\_ucraina](https://www.hotnews.ro/razboi_ucraina). The analysis above was carried on the then running text. Accessing the (sub)links to the examples below will display the version corresponding to the actual moment of subsequent retrieval. The author's translations into English of the HotNews headlines follow the original Romanian title between square brackets.

**Example 1**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25705286-primele-imagini-lansatoarele-m270-primate-ucraineni-actiune.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25705286-primele-imagini-lansatoarele-m270-primate-ucraineni-actiune.htm)

HotNews headline: Soldații ucraineni au publicat primele imagini cu noile lansatoare M270 în acțiune / Cu ce diferă față de sistemele HIMARS [The Ukrainian soldiers have published the first images of the new M270 launchers in action / How are they different from the HIMARS systems]

Published: Friday, July 29, 2022: 12.47

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



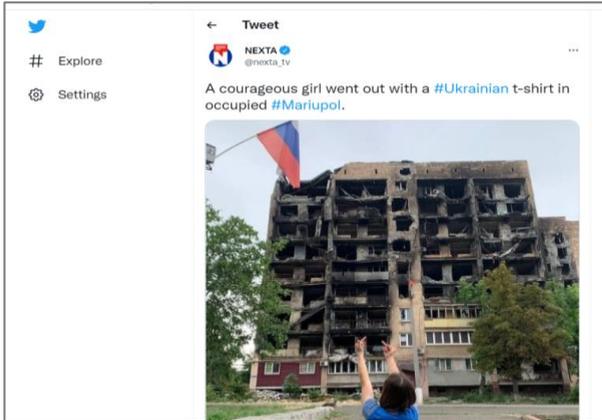
Comments: 10

**Example 2**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25704794-imaginea-zilei-cum-sfideaza-tanara-ucraineanca-rusi-mariupolul-devastat-bombardamente.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25704794-imaginea-zilei-cum-sfideaza-tanara-ucraineanca-rusi-mariupolul-devastat-bombardamente.htm)

HotNews Headline: Cum îi sfidează o tânără ucraineană pe ruși, în Mariupolul devastat de bombardamente [How a young Ukrainian woman defies the Russians in bomb-devastated Mariupol]

Published: Friday, July 29, 2022, 08:53

Embedded Tweeter PrintScreen



Comments: 12

**Example 3**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25695368-video-noi-imagini-clare-atac-javelin-cum-urca-racheta-inainte-lovi-plin-blindat-rusesc.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25695368-video-noi-imagini-clare-atac-javelin-cum-urca-racheta-inainte-lovi-plin-blindat-rusesc.htm)

HotNews headline: Noi imagini clare cu un atac Javelin: Cum urcă racheta înainte de a lovi în plin un blindat rusesc [New and clear images of a Javelin attack: How the rocket soars before hitting full-on a Russian armoured vehicle]

Published: Sunday, July 24, 2022, 13:16

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



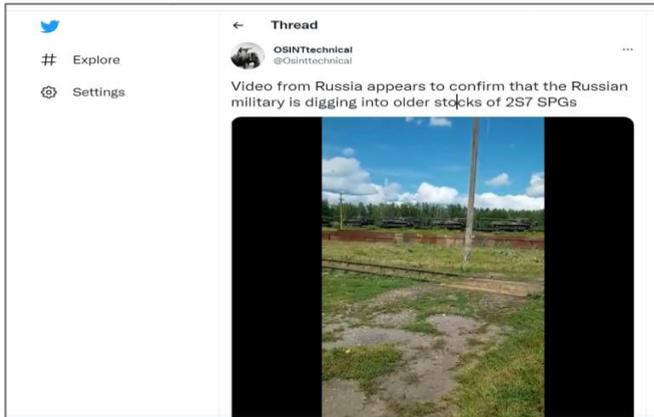
Comments: 7

**Example 4**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25698770-rusii-scos-naftalina-vechile-tunuri-autopropulsate-2s7-pion.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25698770-rusii-scos-naftalina-vechile-tunuri-autopropulsate-2s7-pion.htm)

HotNews Headline: Armata rusă a scos din depozite alte tunuri autopropulsate 2S7 „Pion”: „Poate le duc la fier vechi” [The Russian army brought out their stock of 2S7Pion self-propelled guns. Maybe they are taking them to the scrapyard]

Published: July 26, 2022, 13:59

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



Comments: 20

**Example 5**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25696968-rusia-publicat-imagini-momentul-lansarii-rachetelor-kalibr-asupra-orasului-port-odesa.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25696968-rusia-publicat-imagini-momentul-lansarii-rachetelor-kalibr-asupra-orasului-port-odesa.htm)

HotNews Headline: Rusia a publicat imagini cu momentul lansării rachetelor Kalibr asupra Odesei din Marea Neagră [Russia published images of the moment of launching Kalibr rockets onto Odessa from the Black Sea]

Published: Monday, July 25, 2022, 13:59

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



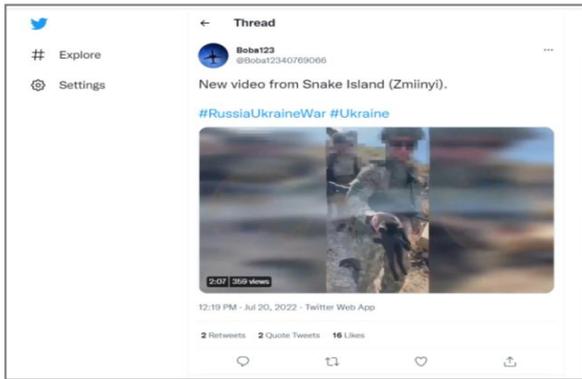
Comments: 27

**Example 6**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25688108-video-operatiune-spionajului-militar-ucrainean-insula-serpilor-fost-recuperate-arme-documente-militare-rusesti-plus-pisica-trait-cateva-luni-sub-ocupatie.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25688108-video-operatiune-spionajului-militar-ucrainean-insula-serpilor-fost-recuperate-arme-documente-militare-rusesti-plus-pisica-trait-cateva-luni-sub-ocupatie.htm)

HotNews Headline: Operațiune a spionajului militar ucrainean pe Insula Șerpilor: Au fost recuperate arme și documente militare rusești, plus „o pisică ce a trăit câteva luni sub ocupație” [Operation by Ukraine military intelligence on Snake Island: Russian weapons and documents were recuperated, plus a cat that had lived several months under occupation.]

Published: Wednesday, July 20, 2022, 13:25

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



Comments: 19

**Example 7**, at [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi\\_ucraina-25677935-sfantul-himars-noua-mema-din-calendarul-armatei-ucrainene.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25677935-sfantul-himars-noua-mema-din-calendarul-armatei-ucrainene.htm)

HotNews Headline: „Sfântul HIMARS”, noua memă din calendarul armatei ucrainene [Saint HIMARS, the new meme on the Ukrainian army’s calendar]

Published: Thursday, July 14, 2022, 13:35

Embedded Twitter PrintScreen



Comments: 7