

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE OF UKRAINE**  
**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF “KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY”**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**BACHELOR’S THESIS**

Degree Level — Bachelor

**STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF GENOCIDE IN THE CONTEXT**  
**OF THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE:**  
**ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL WEBSITES OF UKRAINIAN AND**  
**RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES**

Thesis on International Relations

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**KYIV-2023**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	6
1.1. Inductive Content Analysis as Research Method.....	6
1.2. Data Collection.....	9
1.3. Limitations of the Study.....	10
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	12
2.1. The Concept of “Strategic Narrative”.....	12
2.2. The Concept of “Genocide” and Its Contested Meanings in Academia.....	14
2.3. The Instrumental Use of the Term “Genocide”.....	18
FINDINGS.....	21
3.1. Strategic Narratives of Genocide in Official Communication of Ukrainian Authorities.....	21
3.2. Strategic Narratives of Genocide in Official Communication of Russian Authorities.....	26
DISCUSSION.....	32
4.1. Comparative Analysis of Ukrainian and Russian Strategic Narratives of Genocide.....	32
4.2. Implications of the (Ir)responsible Use of the Term “Genocide”: Insights from International Law, Ethics, and History.....	37
CONCLUSION.....	42
REFERENCES.....	43
APPENDIX.....	50
ANNOTATION.....	51
ANNOTATION (IN UKRAINIAN).....	52

# STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF GENOCIDE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE: ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL WEBSITES OF UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES

## INTRODUCTION

*“Studying genocide is [...] part condemnation,  
part prevention, and part research”.*

*Scott Straus*

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” in Ukraine, citing the need to “protect people [in Donbas] who, for eight years, [were facing] humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime”.<sup>1</sup> This was not the first time Putin has accused Ukraine of genocide. In 2015, he used the “G-word” to condemn Ukraine for suspending gas flow to occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, he warned the European states that, upon regaining its territories in the east, Ukraine would organise a “second Srebrenica” against its population.<sup>3</sup> And in 2021, he cried that the prolonged fighting in the Donbas region “certainly [looked] like genocide”.<sup>4</sup> Despite that, none of the international human rights organisations that worked on the ground corroborated Putin’s claims.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, in March 2022, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) confirmed that “no acts of

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<sup>1</sup> Putin, V. (2022, February 24). Address by the President of the Russian Federation. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, K. (2015, February 25). Kyiv’s suspension of gas flow to eastern Ukraine “smells of genocide” says Putin. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2015/02/25/kyiv-s-suspension-of-gas-flow-to-eastern-ukraine-smells-of-genocide-says-putin>.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters Staff. (2019, December 10). Putin warns of second Srebrenica if no amnesty for east Ukraine. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-putin>.

<sup>4</sup> BBC Staff. (2021, December 10). Russia Ukraine: Putin compares Donbas war zone to genocide. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59599066>.

<sup>5</sup> Hinton, A. (2022, February 25). Putin’s claims that Ukraine is committing genocide are baseless, but not unprecedented. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/putins-claims-that-ukraine-is-committing-genocide-are-baseless-but-not-unprecedented-177511>.

genocide, as defined by Article III of the Genocide Convention, have been committed in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts of Ukraine”, and urged Russia to immediately suspend its unjustified invasion of the neighbouring country.<sup>6</sup> However, the conclusions of the ICJ did not prevent neither Putin nor other Russian officials from using the alleged Ukrainian genocide in Donbas as a pretence for the war. Since 2014 and until now, Russia has been employing the term “genocide” in a political sense to frame the invasion of Ukraine as a “righteous war against the forces of evil” or the “fascist Kyiv regime”.<sup>7</sup> Such a misuse of the term is not a new phenomenon. According to Alexander Hinton, the UNESCO Chair on Genocide Prevention, governments around the world “have long used genocide claims to make threats against other countries, or to provide a rationale for foreign intervention”.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, “genocide” is perceived by the states as the crime of all crimes that requires an immediate and unequivocal response from both their citizens and the international society in general. Therefore, since the term was coined by a Jewish lawyer Rafael Lemkin in 1944, governments have been abusing it to rationalise their human rights violations and enhance the salience of particular conflicts at home and abroad.

Since the onset of the renewed Russian invasion, the Ukrainian authorities also began actively using the term “genocide” in their strategic communications. Usually, they abode by the legal and scholarly definitions of the term. For instance, on February 26, 2022, when they brought a genocide case to the ICJ, arguing that Russia had no right to invade its territory to “prevent or punish any purported genocide”, they used the term “genocide” solely in accordance with the Genocide Convention.<sup>9</sup> However, on numerous occasions, the Ukrainian authorities also mislabelled particular instances of violence or the war in general as “genocide” to garner international support, demonstrate the immoral nature of Russia’s aggression, or mobilise traumatic historical

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<sup>6</sup> Ukraine v. Russian Federation, (International Court of Justice March 16, 2022).

<https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220316-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Edel, A. (2023, March 10). Staring Down the Black Hole of Russia’s Future. Foreign Policy.

<sup>8</sup> Hinton, A. (2022, February 25). Putin’s claims that Ukraine is committing genocide are baseless, but not unprecedented. The Conversation.

<sup>9</sup> Ukraine institutes proceedings against the Russian Federation and requests the Court to indicate provisional measures (pp. 1–2). (2022). International Court of Justice.

<https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/182/182-20220227-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf>.

memories of mass atrocities. For example, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy repeatedly used the term “genocide” to request more aid from the European Union (EU) or the United States (US) and condemn Russian atrocities in Bucha and Mariupol.

In this regard, both Russia and Ukraine have been instrumentalising the term “genocide” to suit their political interests in the context of the war. Therefore, the **purpose** of this paper is to establish *what* narratives of genocide were used by the two states from February 2022 to February 2023 and *how* those narratives were presented to audiences at home and abroad. This study is **relevant** as it seeks to examine the potential political implications of genocide narratives in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The research **object** is the term “genocide”, while the research **subject** is the strategic narratives around the term “genocide” in Ukrainian and Russian official communication. The **theory** I use is constructivism, which presumes that reality is socially constructed by powerful actors, and the **theoretical framework** I rely on is grounded on previous academic research on strategic narratives and genocide.<sup>10</sup> My **methodology** is based on the analysis of news publications on official state websites and a critical review of primary and secondary academic literature on the definitions of genocide and their instrumentalisation in politics, while the **method** I employ is an inductive content analysis of news publications on the official websites of the Office of the President, Supreme Council, and Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and the President, State Duma, and Federation Council of Russia. The **tasks** of this paper are to define the terms “genocide” and “strategic narrative”; establish how the term “genocide” can be manipulated for political purposes; identify key strategic narratives of genocide in official communication of Ukrainian and Russian authorities; and analyse the implications of using genocide terminology in highly political contexts irresponsibly.

The paper begins with the two chapters on the *Methodological and Theoretical Foundations of the Study* where I give a detailed overview of the research methodology, discuss the ongoing scholarly debates on genocide, formulate the working definition of the term, and give an overview of the study’s limitations. The second chapter is

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<sup>10</sup> Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy Is What States Make of it: the Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.

dedicated to the *Findings of the study*. Based on the analysis of the official websites in Ukraine and Russia, I present the eight narratives of genocide and provide more insight into the themes behind them. In the third chapter, I begin the *Discussion of the Findings* by analysing the instrumentalisation of the eight narratives by the authorities in both states and pointing out the risks associated with using the term “genocide” with disregard to its legal and academic definitions. Then, in the *Conclusion* chapter, I concisely summarise the key findings of my research and discuss how they contribute to the broader scholarly discussion on the mis(use) of the term “genocide” in the context of an armed conflict.

## METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

### *1.1. Inductive Content Analysis as Research Method*

According to Barbara Downe-Wamboldt, content analysis is a “research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena”.<sup>11</sup> In social sciences, this method is used to make deductions about complex social phenomena in a systematic yet interpretative manner.<sup>12</sup> When conducting content analysis, there are typically two approaches: deductive and inductive. Deductive content analysis involves establishing a category scheme before collecting data, while inductive content analysis involves developing and refining the category scheme during the process.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this research, I use inductive content analysis (ICA). Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs recommend relying on inductive content analysis “when there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon or when knowledge is fragmented”.<sup>14</sup> Although there has been previous research on the use of the term “genocide” in the context of the

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<sup>11</sup> Downe- Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: Method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International*, 13(3), 314.

<sup>12</sup> Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis an introduction to its methodology* (p. 24). SAGE.

<sup>13</sup> Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 109–111.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

Russo-Ukrainian war, it focused on analysing publications in the media rather than on the authorities' official websites. Therefore, by employing the ICA method, this paper aims to close the research gap and prepare the ground for further descriptive and comparative studies on the topic. In this regard, the ICA method is also useful as it allows for a flexible research design and provides a perceptive account of various themes within the selected sample of publications.

ICA begins with selecting the unit of analysis, which in this paper is the term “genocide” (“геноцид”).<sup>15</sup> Then come several rounds of iterative coding, when lower-order and then higher-order categories are developed during the process of abstraction, which continues to the extent that is practical and feasible and involves extracting essential features and concepts from a particular phenomenon and generalising them to create a simplified representation.<sup>16</sup> The next step is the pretesting of the category scheme by ensuring that “the rules for classification are clear and [un]ambiguous”.<sup>17</sup> The last task is then to assess whether the revised categories are valid — that is, accurate relative to the research question — by rereading the original texts and checking whether the latest higher-order categories capture their latent and manifest meanings (*see the whole ICA framework proposed by Klaus Krippendorff on Figure 1*).<sup>18</sup> Validity is important as it provides a means of determining the accuracy and credibility of scientific research, which in turn serves as a critical foundation for the development of sound theories and policy solutions in the future. Klaus Krippendorff claims that research findings based on ICA should have face, social, and empirical validity to be considered reliable. *Face validity* means that findings “make sense” and are intuitively believable. *Social validity* implies that findings contribute to “public discussion of important social issues”. Lastly, *empirical validity* refers to the findings' ability to withstand criticism from other researchers in the field.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Downe-Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: Method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International*, 13(3), 315.

<sup>16</sup> Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 111.

<sup>17</sup> Downe-Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: Method, applications, and issues. *Health Care for Women International*, 13(3), 317.

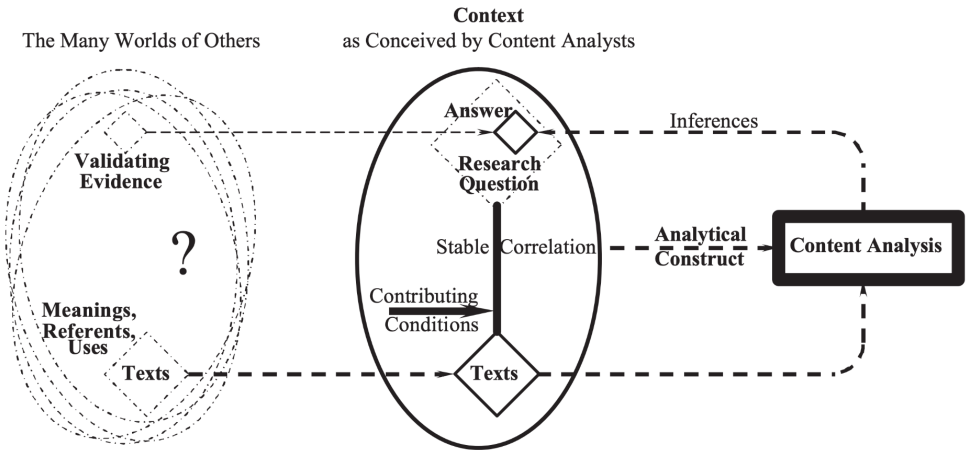
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 318.

<sup>19</sup> Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis an introduction to its methodology (p. 361-362). SAGE.

Despite being a widely used and generally acknowledged methodology, ICA has several serious limitations. *First*, to a large extent, it revolves around the researcher’s subjective interpretations of textual data, which leaves a lot of room for ambiguity and manipulation. *Second*, it is hard to replicate, as researchers invent their coding schemes and categories based on their narrow research questions. Therefore, studies based on ICA are rarely comparable, which makes it difficult to accumulate scientific knowledge within a particular field. *Third*, it can produce overgeneralisations, which lack nuance and, as a result, can lead to oversimplification of complex issues and inaccurate or incomplete conclusions.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, ICA is one of the most appropriate research methods to use, as it grants a considerable degree of flexibility to analyse relatively recent developments related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in a systematic yet interpretative way.

Figure 1. A Framework of Content Analysis. Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), 38, fig. 2,2.



1.2. Data Collection

As mentioned in the introduction, the **purpose** of this paper is to establish what narratives of genocide were used by the two states from February 2022 to February 2023 and how those narratives were presented to audiences at home and abroad.

In light of this, I performed an ICA on news publications from the official websites of the Office of the President (Офісу Президента), Supreme Council (Верховної Ради), and Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (Кабінету Міністрів), as well as the President (Президента России), State Duma (Государственной Думы), and Federal Council of Russia (Совета Федерации). The selection criteria included all publications between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023, resulting in a sample size of 253 publications (193 from Ukrainian and 60 from Russian websites). Data collection was performed manually by filtering publications using the keyword “genocide” (“геноцид”). The collected data was then systematically organised in Excel database under variables “*Country*” (Ukraine or Russia), “*Source*” (the governmental body whose website publications were analysed), “*Quoted person*” (a person who used the term “genocide”), “*Type of publication*” (news, national address, international address, social media post, interview, or official statement), “*Title*” (title of the news publication), “*Genocide as topic*” (whether genocide is the key focus of an article; “yes” or “no” answer), “*Convention use*” (whether the term “genocide” in an article is used according to the Genocide Convention definition; “yes” or “no” answer), “*Exact term*” (the exact untranslated phrase containing the word “genocide” used in an article), “*Type of genocide*” (the specific genocide mentioned in an article; for example, “Russian genocide of Ukrainian people in 2022” or “Soviet genocide of Crimean Tatars in 1944”), and “*Topic*” (the topic of an article summarised in one phrase; for instance, “Tribunal to prosecute Russia for the crime of aggression”).

Having systematised the publications, I read them for the second time and divided them into 23 lower-order categories based on variables “*Type of genocide*” and “*Topic*”. I then began to group similar categories in order to identify the underlying meanings and patterns behind them. As a result, I singled out eight higher-order categories — four based on Ukrainian and four based on Russian websites — through the process of abstraction. Last but not least, I tested the validity of the higher-order categories by rereading the publications for the third time and checking whether their content matched the assigned category. In case it did not, I reassigned the publications to another category or slightly modified the category to capture a broader range of

meanings. I give a more detailed account of each of the final categories and their interpretations in the Findings chapter of this paper.

In addition to analysing the news publications, I critically reviewed primary and secondary literature on the instrumentalisation of the term “genocide” in politics. In particular, I focused on the recent works of Alexander Hinton, Egbert Fortuin, Jens Ohlin, Luke Glanville and other scholars. I also considered the guidance note on when to refer to a situation as “genocide”, proposed by the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect to address the question of why it is important to adhere to a specific definition of “genocide” in official communication.<sup>20</sup>

### *1.3. Limitations of the Study*

As with any other study, mine has several methodological limitations. First, the number of Russian publications I analysed for the purposes of this paper was approximately three times lower than the number of Ukrainian publications. This was not due to selection bias. As described in the previous section, in both cases, I used the same approach to selecting the publications. However, the Ukrainian authorities simply posted much more content containing the term “genocide” than the Russian authorities, which naturally led to a considerable difference in quantity between the two.

Second, I did not include the executive body of Russia — the Government of Russia (Правительство Российской Федерации), — in this study, as there were no publications containing the term “genocide” on its website. This means that although I analysed the websites of the President and legislative and executive bodies of Ukraine, I only analysed the websites of the President and legislative bodies of Russia.

Third, I did not assess whether either Russia or Ukraine actually committed genocide at any point in the war. As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this study was to provide a descriptive account of how the authorities in each state used the term “genocide” in their official communication during the first year of the full-scale

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect. Guidance Note 1. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/pdf>.

invasion. Establishing whether mass atrocities amount to genocide requires a careful examination of all existing evidence, including witness testimonies and sensitive governmental documents. Generally, academic researchers, myself included, have neither access to such information nor the resources to analyse it. Therefore, I decided to leave the final say on the subject to the International Criminal Court (although Russia and Ukraine are not parties to the Rome Statute) or any other international or national legal body that has jurisdiction over the crime of genocide.

It is worth noting that on March 16, 2022, the International Court of Justice judge Joan Donoghue stated that the court did not find evidence to support Russia's allegations that Ukraine had been committing genocide against "the people of Donbas" for eight years. She also pointed out that the Genocide Convention did not give Russia or any other state the right to the "unilateral use of force in the territory of another state".<sup>21</sup> In addition, on March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the President of Russia Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children.<sup>22</sup> And according to Article II of the Genocide Convention, "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" is an act of genocide, for which "responsible rulers, public officials or private individuals" shall be punished.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, on March 15, 2023, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine published a report in which it concluded that Russia committed "a wide range of war crimes", including "wilful killings, attacks on civilians, unlawful confinement, torture, rape, and forced transfers and deportations of children", but not genocide in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Despite

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<sup>21</sup> The Guardian. (2022, March 16). UN International Court of Justice Orders Russia to Halt Invasion of Ukraine. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/16/un-international-court-of-justice-orders-russia-to-halt-invasion-of-ukraine>.

<sup>22</sup> International Criminal Court. (2023, March 17). Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. International Criminal Court.

<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.

<sup>23</sup> UN General Assembly, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December 1948, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 78, p. 277, available at:

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3ac0.html> [accessed 15 May 2023].

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (pp. 1–2). (2023). United Nations Human Rights Council.

[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A\\_HRC\\_52\\_62\\_AUV\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf).

that, as of May 2023, at least six countries recognised Russia's human rights violations against the Ukrainian people as genocide.<sup>25</sup>

The final limitation of this study is that it is likely not unbiased. As a researcher, I tried to be as impartial and objective as possible. To ensure that, I adhered to a rigorous research design and complied with the guiding principles of research ethics. However, to a considerable degree, qualitative studies, especially those based on content analysis, are produced through a complex process of reflection and interpretation.<sup>26</sup> In light of this, it is almost impossible for a researcher to remain completely neutral concerning what they study and what knowledge they generate as a result. Therefore, I acknowledge that my lived experiences as a Ukrainian residing in Ukraine in times of war might have impacted my analysis of the findings of the study in one way or another, even though my intention and priority as a researcher was to be unbiased and true to the facts.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1. *The Concept of "Strategic Narrative"*

According to Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, strategic narratives are "a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors".<sup>27</sup> In the book "Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations", they identify three types of strategic narratives: international system narratives, identity narratives, and policy narratives. *International system narratives* describe the way in which political actors perceive and comprehend

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<sup>25</sup> Вже шість країн визнали дії росії геноцидом українців: Стефанчук подякував парламентам [Six countries have already recognised Russia's actions as genocide of Ukrainians: Stefanchuk thanked the parliaments]. (2022, May 28). Ukrinform. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3494405-vze-sist-krain-viznali-dii-rosii-genocidom-ukrainciv-stefancuk-podakuvav-parlamentam.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Galdas, P. (2017). Revisiting Bias in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1).

<sup>27</sup> Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). *Forging Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (p. 102). University of Michigan Press.

the current global order, *identity narratives* elucidate how political actors view their role in the broader context of international relations and what they consider right or wrong, and *policy narratives* articulate how political actors justify specific policy choices to the public at home and abroad.<sup>28</sup> The authors argue that at the heart of strategic narratives lie communication and power. They explain that strategic narratives seek to shape the behaviour of political actors by encouraging them to act in accordance with a particular vision of the future. In this regard, they compare strategic narratives to Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power", which implies the ability of political actors to shape the agenda of others by persuasion rather than coercion.<sup>29</sup>

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle claim that there are four approaches to analysing strategic narratives: rationalist, communicative action, reflexive, and poststructural. The *rationalist approach* is based on an assumption that political actors have given identities and consider strategic narratives solely practical tool to advance their rational interests nationally and globally with disregard to the interests of other actors.<sup>30</sup> The *communicative action* approach, inspired by the theoretical legacy of Jürgen Habermas, also presumes that political actors are rational, however, it points out that they use strategic narratives to "project truth claims about how the world is or how it ought to be" and invite a discussion that could facilitate mutually beneficial solutions.<sup>31</sup> The *reflexive approach* presents actors as "highly reflexive" and claims that they consider strategic narratives as part of their identities, which are deeply rooted in history. In this regard, they use such narratives to "target the contradiction and anxieties [of other actors] while upholding their own [identities]".<sup>32</sup> Lastly, the *poststructuralist approach* is premised on the idea that actors' identities are malleable, yet embedded in discursive structures that are relatively hard to change. From this perspective, strategic narratives are choices that actors make within particular discourses to give sense to the reality they operate in.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80(80), 155.

<sup>30</sup> Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). *Forging Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (p. 27). University of Michigan Press.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 36-41.

In the context of this study, I analyse the strategic narratives of genocide through the lens of the reflexive approach. I consider Ukraine and Russia reflexive actors who construct their strategic narratives not only based on their rational interests but also based on their subjective beliefs about their place in the world, as well as their histories. In this regard, I view strategic narratives as a communicative tool that Ukrainian and Russian political elites use to achieve their objective diplomatic (for instance, Volodymyr Zelenskyy being determined to receive as much military aid from its allies as possible) and subjective ideational (for example, Vladimir Putin aspiring to see Russia as a leader of a new “post-American world”) goals. Building on the research of Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, I argue that both states’ strategic narratives on genocide from February 2022 to February 2023 were not formed in a vacuum and instead were a byproduct of a continuous and public competition of anxieties and ambitions. From this standpoint, strategic narratives represent a “recursive set of overlapping ecologies in which history [is] mobilised through visuals, symbols, and appeals to emotion”.<sup>34</sup> I also come to the conclusion that Ukraine mostly uses two types of strategic narratives, namely, issue and identity narratives, while Russia also takes advantage of international system narratives to legitimise and justify its war-related decisions domestically and globally.

## *2.2. The Concept of “Genocide” and Its Contested Meanings in Academia*

Over the last seven decades, the meaning of the term “genocide” has greatly evolved. Although the Genocide Convention continues to use the definition, largely inspired by the work of Rafael Lemkin in the 1940s, the scholarly interpretations of the term have since changed and become more elaborate. According to the Genocide Convention, genocide means “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”, “intent” and “group” being the keywords.<sup>35</sup> In 1946, Lemkin argued that genocide was not the same as other types of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations. (1948). Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/pdf>.

mass murder because it targeted selected groups of people based on their immutable characteristics and was always “coordinated” and “previously prepared”.<sup>36</sup> Since then, many of his and Convention’s assumptions have been challenged by several genocide scholars, which caused what Scott Straus called a “conceptual muddle”.<sup>37</sup> What is intent and how central is it to the definition of genocide? What are the possible modes of genocide? Can states be considered perpetrators of genocide? What types of groups can be targets of genocide?

In his seminal work “Contested Meanings and Conflicting Imperatives: a Conceptual Analysis of Genocide”, Straus tries to close a conceptual gap in the academic debates by proposing a syncretic definition of genocide. He combines theoretical insights from research of the leading genocide scholars and concludes that genocide is “an organised attempt to annihilate a group that a perpetrator constitutes as an organic collectivity”, where by “organic collectivity” he means a group that is supposedly bounded by common genetic features and has the ability to reproduce itself.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Straus challenges the Convention by replacing “intent” with “an organised attempt” and placing an emphasis on how a perpetrator perceives a group’s identity, not on what its identity really is.

By removing intent from the equation, Straus addresses one of the key problems with the enforcement of the Convention. According to Christian Gerlach, “the links between intentions or planning and the realisation of violence [is] much more complex than thought before”.<sup>39</sup> Genocides do not follow a linear trajectory, and perpetrators do not always have a clear intent to commit the “crime of crimes” at the onset of violence.<sup>40</sup> However, violence as such can have genocidal consequences and be considered genocide in everything but name due to the absence of “intent” that is generally hard to prove. Henry Huttenbach argues that genocide should be defined “in terms of the actual

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<sup>36</sup> Lemkin, R. (1944). *Axis rule in occupied Europe* (p. 81). Carnegie Endowment For International.

<sup>37</sup> Straus, S. (2001). *Contested meanings and conflicting imperatives: A conceptual analysis of genocide* (p. 359). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 3(3), 349–375.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 366.

<sup>39</sup> Gerlach, C. (2006). *Extremely violent societies: an alternative to the concept of genocide* (p. 458). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 455–471.

<sup>40</sup> Lewy, G. (2007). *Can there be genocide without the intent to commit genocide?* (p. 671). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9(4), 661–674.

fate experienced by the group, [...] not the goals of the perpetrators”.<sup>41</sup> He deems the search for a motive counterproductive and advises both scholars and lawyers to decide if a crime constitutes genocide based on whether there is “substantive evidence that clearly points in the direction of total annihilation”.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, he agrees with Straus and calls for a term that would be more connected to the objective realities on the ground.

Straus also challenges the assumption that genocide can be committed only against national, ethnic, racial and religious groups. He argues that, to a considerable extent, the Genocide Convention was a result of a compromise between the world powers of the time — namely, between the Soviet Union, former European colonial empires, and the United States and Canada. The Soviet Union used its veto power several times during the drafting process to prevent the inclusion of political groups within the definition of genocide, as it sought to avoid criticism for the persecution of dissidents and “class enemies”.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the United States expressed reservations about the inclusion of the term “cultural genocide” in the Convention, as it could be “read to prohibit assimilation of minorities into American culture”.<sup>44</sup>

Straus fails to address the problem of exclusion of political groups in his definition. Instead, he focuses on the notion of “organic collectivity”, which presupposes a “natural” biological connection among the members of a group targeted by a perpetrator. In general, the main argument against the inclusion of political groups in the definition of genocide is their perceived lack of permanence.<sup>45</sup> Unlike with national or ethnic groups, a person cannot be born into a political group. However, over the last couple of decades, there have been numerous cases of genocidal violence against political groups, including the cases of Cambodia and Uganda in the 1970s, when victims were persecuted and slaughtered for allegedly being “enemies of the

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<sup>41</sup> Huttenbach, H. R. (1988). Locating the Holocaust on the Genocide Spectrum: Towards a Methodology of Definition and Categorisation (p. 294). *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 3(3), 289–303.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 297.

<sup>43</sup> Straus, S. (2001). Contested meanings and conflicting imperatives: A conceptual analysis of genocide (p. 362). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 3(3), 349–375.

<sup>44</sup> St. Charles, B. (2020). *You’re on Native Land: The Genocide Convention, Cultural Genocide, and Prevention of Indigenous Land Takings* (p. 241). University of Chicago.

<sup>45</sup> LeBlanc, L. A. (1988). The United Nations Genocide Convention and Political Groups: Should the United States Propose an Amendment? (p. 274). *Yale Journal of International Law*, 13(2), 3.

state”.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, political groups should be included in the definition of genocide to overcome the blind spot in the Convention and close the legal loophole for perpetrators.

In her book “Genocide: A Sociological Perspective”, Helen Fein establishes a more inclusive definition. She argues that genocide is a “sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim”.<sup>47</sup> Similarly to Straus, Fein uses the term “sustained purposeful action” instead of “intent” to focus on the perpetrator’s real and specific actions rather than their intentions. However, in contrast to Straus, she does not see the targets of genocide solely as representatives of what a perpetrator perceives as an “organic collectivity”. She acknowledges that genocide can be committed “through interdiction of [...] social reproduction of group members”, which means that members of political groups can also be considered victims of genocide.<sup>48</sup>

For the purposes of this study, I rely on Fein’s definition of genocide, as it gives a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon and fills some of the semantic gaps present in the Genocide Convention. While Fein's definition is similar in meaning to that of the Convention's definition, it provides an additional layer of accuracy and inclusiveness. Therefore, in this paper, I consider the use of the term “genocide” that falls within the scope of Fein’s definition the most appropriate and approach any other use of the term with a degree of caution.

### *2.3. The Instrumental Use of the Term “Genocide”*

Michelle Ringrose, quoting Karin Fierce, argues that language “can be used both as a form of communication and strategically to perpetuate certain realities”.<sup>49</sup> In this regard, words do not simply communicate meanings, they create them in ways that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 286.

<sup>47</sup> Fein, H. (1993). *Genocide: a Sociological Perspective* (p. 24). SAGE Publications Limited.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ringrose, M. E. (2020). The Politicization of the Genocide Label: Genocide Rhetoric in the UN Security Council (p. 126). *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 14(1), 124–142.

reinforce certain national and transnational interests. For decades, “genocide” was seemingly an exception to this rule, a term to be taken seriously at all times.<sup>50</sup> It was strongly associated with the horrors of the Holocaust and generally considered the ultimate crime or the crime of crimes that demanded special condemnation and allegedly obliged the signatory states of the Convention to intervene in one way or another.<sup>51</sup> For this reason, during the atrocities in Rwanda in the 1990s, the Clinton administration in the United States hesitated to use the term “genocide” to “avoid unwanted political expectations if not legal obligations” to act on its R2P commitments.<sup>52</sup> At that time, at least in the minds of the American people, “genocide” had a special place in the imagined hierarchy of atrocity crimes. It was what John Austin would call a “speech act”, a word charged with action. Seemingly, by simply naming the atrocities in Rwanda genocide, the United States government was giving up its role as an uninvolved bystander and acknowledging the exceptional importance of ending the violence by any means necessary.

Luke Glanville argues that during the war in Darfur, the “ideational power” of the term “genocide”, at least in the US, decreased. He claims that the Bush administration began to use the word not to communicate the readiness of the United States to intervene, but to “ease domestic demands to “do something” without having to take meaningful action to end suffering”.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, merely labelling an event as genocide began to be seen as almost equivalent to taking action. What happened was what Beitel van der Merwe would call “genocide inflation”.<sup>54</sup> The rhetorical turn taken by the Bush administration decreased the semantic power of the term and lowered the bar for what the public deemed an adequate response to genocide.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Glanville, L. (2009). Is “genocide” still a powerful word? (p. 467). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11(4), 467–486.

<sup>51</sup> Buchwald, T. F., & Keith, A. (2019). *By Any Other Name: How, When, and Why the US Government Has Made Genocide Determinations* (p. 15). Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

<sup>52</sup> Glanville, L. (2009). Is “genocide” still a powerful word? (p. 471). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11(4), 467–486.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 478.

<sup>54</sup> Van der Merwe, H. J. (2016). Reflections on the Trivialisation of Genocide: Can We Afford to Part with the Special Stigma Attached to Genocide? (p. 118). *South African Computer Journal*, 29(2), 116–139.

<sup>55</sup> Glanville, L. (2009). Is “genocide” still a powerful word? (p. 480). *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11(4), 467–486.

In modern Russia, politicians have been using the word “genocide” frivolously since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, in 2001, Russian politicians Konstantin Zalutin and Aleksandr Sevastyanov wrote an article for the Russian newspaper “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” in which they accused the administration of the Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma of “ethnocide” and “cultural genocide” on Russians residing in the east of Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> According to Douglas Irvin-Erickson and Michelle Ringrose, the term “genocide” is a rhetorical tool that expands the dividing line between “Us” and “Them” and emphasises the struggle between good and evil”.<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, Russian elites have been instrumentalising the term to portray their country as morally innocent and their country’s enemies as morally corrupt. In his book “The Road to Unfreedom”, Timothy Snyder argues that modern Russia puts itself “at the centre of a cyclical story of victimhood”.<sup>58</sup> He claims that Vladimir Putin pioneers the politics of eternity, according to which the “righteous” Russian nation is constantly endangered by the “gruesome” collective West. In light of this, Snyder contends that Russian politicians “manufacture crisis and manipulate resultant emotion” to preserve the internal cohesion in the face of economic or geopolitical troubles and pin the blame for those troubles on an external enemy presented as an existential threat.<sup>59</sup> In this case, “genocide”, being a strong and emotional term, can act as an ideal rhetorical tool to create a sense of urgency in the society and strengthen the country’s image as both a martyr and a rescuer.

Ukraine began occasionally using the “G-word” in 2008 when the Ukrainian parliament recognised Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people. At that time, the intent of the politicians was to “repay the historical debt to the millions of people who were starved to death” during the 1932-1933 famine.<sup>60</sup> According to Ringrose, the

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<sup>56</sup> Fortuin, E. (2022). Ukraine commits genocide on Russians: the term “genocide” in Russian propaganda (p. 324). *Russian Linguistics*.

<sup>57</sup> Irvin-Erickson, D. (2017). *Genocide Discourses: American and Russian Strategic Narratives of Conflict in Iraq and Ukraine* (p. 136). *Politics and Governance*, 5(3), 130; Ringrose, M. E. (2020). The Politicization of the Genocide Label: Genocide Rhetoric in the UN Security Council (p. 131). *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 14(1), 124–142.

<sup>58</sup> Snyder, T. (2018, March 16). Vladimir Putin’s politics of eternity | Timothy Snyder. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/16/vladimir-putin-russia-politics-of-eternity-timothy-snyder>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Віктор Ющенко підписав у середу закон, за яким голодомор у 1932-1933 роках в Україні визнано геноцидом українського народу [On Wednesday, Viktor Yushchenko signed a law according to which the

acknowledgement of the crimes of the past brings consolation to the victims and eases the transgenerational cultural trauma for their descendants.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Todd Buchwald and Adam Keith claim that “for groups who faced eradication, naming their existential harm a “genocide” serves as an important symbolic recognition of the inherent value the group itself brings to the world”.<sup>62</sup> This is part of what makes genocide so special. The legal acknowledgement of the “crime of crimes” signals to the victims that their hardships are perceived as unspeakable enough to evoke the highest level of condemnation. Crimes against humanity and war crimes do not have such symbolic power. This explains why the conclusion of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine that the Russian army was committing “a wide range of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law” but not genocide in Ukraine in 2022 caused outrage in Ukrainian society. As Peter Wilson, the ambassador of the UK Mission to the UN, noted in his address to the Security Council in 2015, the “denial [of genocide] is the final insult to the victims” as it downplays their traumatic experiences.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, “genocide” is a term that has legal, symbolic and political implications. On the one hand, it is integrated into strategic narratives of the states to create a sense of urgency and justify interventionist policies. On the other hand, it is used to emphasise the evil nature of the crimes committed by perpetrators and show the highest level of respect to the victims and their families. Although in the past the term seemingly had a considerable “ideational power” and was used with a degree of caution, lately, it appears to have lost at least some of its former potency due to the frivolous use by politicians and in the media.

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Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine was recognised as genocide of the Ukrainian people]. (2008, February 5). Radio Free Europe. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/955312.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Ringrose, M. E. (2020). The Politicization of the Genocide Label: Genocide Rhetoric in the UN Security Council (p. 127). *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 14(1), 124–142.

<sup>62</sup> Buchwald, T. F., & Keith, A. (2019). *By Any Other Name: How, When, and Why the US Government Has Made Genocide Determinations* (p. 5). Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, P. (2015, July 8). “Russia’s actions tarnish the memory of all those who died in the Srebrenica genocide.” Government of the United Kingdom.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/russias-actions-tarnishes-the-memory-of-all-those-who-died-in-the-srebrenica-genocide>.

## FINDINGS

### *3.1. Strategic Narratives of Genocide in Official Communication of Ukrainian Authorities*

From February 24, 2022, to February 24, 2023, the Ukrainian authorities used four strategic narratives of genocide in their official communication (*see Figure 2*):

- 1) *“World, stop it”*. The international community must aid Ukraine to stop or prevent genocide by Russia;
- 2) *“Crime and punishment”*. Russian soldiers and leaders must be tried nationally and internationally for committing the crime of genocide in Ukraine;
- 3) *“They did it before”*. Russia has a history of committing genocide in Ukraine;
- 4) *“It cannot get worse”*. The atrocities that Russia commits against Ukrainians are so horrendous that they must be called genocide.

Each narrative was directly or indirectly connected to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and largely targeted international audiences. According to the typology developed by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, the narratives *“World, stop it”*, *“Crime and punishment”* and *“It cannot get worse”* were policy narratives, aimed at promoting or justifying particular policy decisions by both the Ukrainian and foreign governments. In contrast, the narrative *“They did it before”* was an identity narrative, primarily revolving around Ukrainian history and its reverberations in the context of the ongoing war.

In 52% of Ukrainian publications, analysed for the purposes of this study, the Ukrainian authorities used the terms “genocide” (“геноцид”), “genocide of the Ukrainian people” (“геноцид українського народу”) or “the crime of genocide” (“злочин геноциду”). Other terms used at least three times were “policy of genocide” (“політика геноциду”), “signs of genocide” (“ознаки геноциду”), and “genocide of the Crimean Tatar people” (“геноцид кримськотатарського народу”). 94% of the

publications were about the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, while the remaining 6% concerned Holodomor, genocides abroad (namely, in Rwanda and Armenia), and Russia’s repressions against the Crimean Tatar population in Crimea. In 17% of the publications, genocide was the main topic, while in 83% of the publications it was mentioned incidentally. The most common themes in the publications were Ukraine requesting aid from its Western allies (21%); Ukraine calling for the prosecution of atrocity crimes committed by Russian soldiers and authorities (22%); and Ukraine's condemnation of Russia for committing crimes against noncombatants (13%).

Figure 2. Strategic narratives of genocide used by Ukrainian authorities

<b>№</b>	<b>Strategic Narrative</b>	<b>№</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Key phrases</b>
1	<i>“World, stop it”</i> The international community must aid Ukraine to stop or prevent genocide by Russia	83	43	Policy	Aid, sanctions, condemnation, postwar reconstruction
2	<i>“Crime and punishment”</i> Russian soldiers and leaders must be punished for committing the crime of genocide in Ukraine	48	25	Policy	Hague, tribunal, ICJ, justice, reparations
3	<i>“They did it before”</i> Russia has a history of committing genocide in Ukraine	49	25	Identity	Holodomor, deportation of Crimean Tatars
4	<i>“It cannot get worse”</i> The atrocities that Russia commits against Ukrainians	13	7	Policy	Bucha, Mariupol, deportation

	are so horrendous that they must be called genocide				
	<i>Overall</i>	<i>193</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>

- “*World, stop it*”. Strategic narrative №1: “The international community must aid Ukraine to stop or prevent genocide by Russia”

The first strategic narrative was composed of four key themes, identified in the publications. Namely, Ukraine requesting aid from its Western allies (21% of the publications); Ukraine requesting aid from the international community in general (6% of the publications); Ukraine’s cooperation with international organisations, including the UN and Red Cross (9% of the publications), and Ukraine demanding international condemnation of Russia’s aggression (7% of the publications). Each of the themes targeted international audiences and was centred around the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The instrumental goal of the first strategic narrative was to convince foreign governments to support Ukraine’s struggle against Russia militarily, financially, and rhetorically.

In this regard, the term “genocide” was used to create a sense of urgency and push the international community, represented by states and international organisations, to provide immediate and substantial support to Ukraine. For instance, in one of his addresses in March 2022, Zelenskyy urged the EU to impose new sanctions on Russia for the Mariupol hospital strike, which he called the “final proof [...] of genocide of Ukrainians” (“остаточний доказ [...] того, що відбувається геноцид українців”).<sup>64</sup>

- “*Crime and punishment*”. Strategic narrative №2: “Russian soldiers and leaders must be punished for committing the crime of genocide in Ukraine”

<sup>64</sup> Europeans must tighten sanctions against Russia so that it has no chance to continue the genocide in Ukraine – address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — Official website of the President of Ukraine. (2023). Official Website of the President of Ukraine. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/yevropejci-povinni-posilyuvati-sankciyi-proti-rosiyi-tak-sho-73465>.

The second strategic narrative was a synthesis of two themes, identified in the publications: Ukraine demanding Russia's expulsion from the UN, especially from the UN Security Council (3% of the publications), and Ukraine calling for the prosecution of atrocity crimes committed by Russian soldiers and authorities (22% of the publications). Same as the previous one, this narrative was predominantly addressed to international audiences and was solely focused on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its objective was to start a discussion about the legal repercussions of Russian aggression and prepare the ground for the future prosecution of Russian war criminals.

In light of this, the Ukrainian government mostly used the term “genocide” in its legal sense and in reference to the International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court, and hypothetical International Criminal Tribunal for the Russian Federation. For instance, Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba repeatedly used the term “genocide” in his public speeches at the UN in order to advocate for the international prosecution of Russian atrocity crimes in Ukraine (“the International Criminal Court should have all the necessary capabilities to investigate perpetrators of crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of genocide”).<sup>65</sup>

- “*They did it before*”. Strategic narrative №3: Russia has a history of committing genocide in Ukraine

The third strategic narrative was born out of two main themes. The first was Ukraine's historical memory of the Holodomor, a man-made famine from 1932 to 1933, widely recognised as a genocide of the Ukrainian people (5% of the publications). The second theme was the deportation of Crimean Tatars in the Soviet Union in May 1944 (2% of the publications). Unlike the previous two narratives, this one was primarily targeted towards the domestic audience and focused on both the past and present. Its

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<sup>65</sup> Dmytro Kuleba: Ukraine consolidates all peace-loving nations around the protection of the UN Charter and the principle of territorial integrity. (2022, September 22). Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/dmytro-kuleba-ukraina-konsoliduie-vsi-myroliubni-narody-dovkola-zakhystu-sta-tutu-oon-ta-pryntsyphu-terytorialnoi-tsilisnosti>.

objective was to demonstrate the historical continuity of Russian “genocidal policies” against the people living in Ukraine. In this regard, in November 2022, Volodymyr Zelenskyy used the term “genocide” in his national address, drawing a comparison between Russia's blockade of Ukraine's grain exports through the Black Sea and Holodomor (“Ukrainians went through genocide. And today we are doing everything possible and impossible to stop Russia's new genocidal policy. A new one — but similar to the one that killed millions in the previous century”).<sup>66</sup>

- *“It cannot get worse”*. Strategic narrative №4: The atrocities that Russia commits against Ukrainians are so horrendous that they must be called genocide

The fourth and final strategic narrative revolved around three themes. The first theme was Ukraine's condemnation of Russia for committing crimes against noncombatants (13% of the publications). The second theme was Ukraine's condemnation of Russia for abducting Ukrainian children (5% of the publications). The third theme was Ukraine's condemnation of Russia for mass killings in Bucha, Borodyanka, and Mariupol (7% of the publications). This narrative was primarily aimed at international audiences and was used exclusively in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The term “genocide” was frequently used to underscore the gravity of the crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine and urge foreign audiences to intervene in any way possible to halt the atrocities. As a result, this narrative was highly emotive and focused on graphic depictions of the unfolding violence in Ukraine. For example, in his article for the Supreme Council's website, Mykhaylo Radutsky, Head of the Committee on National Health, Medical Care and Health Insurance, referred to the Bucha massacre as genocide because Russian soldiers “tortured and shot [...], raped and killed” so many

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<sup>66</sup> Never again should hunger be used as a weapon – address of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — Official website of the President of Ukraine. (2022). Official Website of the President of Ukraine. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/nikoli-bilshe-golod-ne-maye-vikoristovuvatis-yak-zbroya-zver-79469>.

Ukrainian men and women that the town's streets were "filled with corpses" ("вулиці Бучі завалені трупами").<sup>67</sup>

### 3.2. *Strategic Narratives of Genocide in Official Communication of Russian Authorities*

Between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023, the Russian authorities used four strategic narratives of genocide in their official communication:

- 1) "*We must save Donbas*". The Kyiv regime had been committing genocide against the people of Donbas for years, so Russia had to interfere;
- 2) "*It is all West's fault*". The collective West had been enabling Ukraine to commit genocide against the people of Donbas for years, so Russia had to interfere;
- 3) "*We are not the bad guys here*". Nazis committed genocide of the Soviet people during the World War II;
- 4) "*Russia is invincible*". The collective West is trying to defeat Russia by imposing sanctions and aiding Ukraine, but Russia only emerges stronger in the multipolar world.

The narratives "*We must save Donbas*", "*It is all West's fault*", and "*Russia is invincible*" were directly connected to the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, while the narrative "*We are not the bad guys here*" concerned the World War II. Each of the narratives was largely addressed to the domestic audience. The narratives "*It is all West's fault*", "*We are not the bad guys here*", and "*Russia is invincible*" were focused on the "collective West" (namely, the United States and the EU), and the narrative "*We must save Donbas*" pertained to the "Kyiv regime", represented by Volodymyr Zelensky and his team. The narratives "*We must save Donbas*" and "*It is all West's fault*" were policy narratives, the purpose of which was to justify the invasion of Ukraine to domestic and international audiences, narrative "*We are not the bad guys*

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<sup>67</sup> Бучанська різня назавжди увійде до переліку найстрашніших злочинів проти людства [The Bucha massacre will forever be included in the list of the most terrible crimes against humanity]. (2022, April 3). Supreme Council of Ukraine. <https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/razom/221265.html>.

*here*” was an identity narrative, which revolved around the traumatic legacies of the World War II and their impact on modern Russia, and narrative “*Russia is invincible*” was an international system narrative, which aimed to present Russia as a global leader, capable of easily overcoming external and internal challenges.

In 47% of Russian publications, analysed for the purposes of this study, the most frequently used terms were “genocide” (“геноцид”) and “genocide against the people in the Donbas” (“геноцид в отношении людей на Донбассе”). Other terms used at least two times were “genocide of the Soviet people by the Nazis and their accomplices during the Great Patriotic War” (“геноцид советского народа со стороны нацистов и их пособников в годы Великой Отечественной войны”) and “genocide of the Russian people” (“геноцид русского населения”) in reference to the ethnically Russian population living in the Donbas. In 72% of the publications, the term “genocide” was mentioned in the context of Ukraine’s alleged genocide against the people of Donbas. At the same time, in 12% of the publications, “genocide” was used in regard to the alleged Nazi genocide of the Soviet people. In 10% of the publications, genocide was the main topic, while in 90% of the publications it was mentioned incidentally. The recurring themes in the publications were Russia’s historical memory of World War II (13%); Russia’s response to Western sanctions and economic recession (13%); sham referendums on joining Russia in the occupied parts of Ukraine (13%); and Russia allegedly saving the people in the east of Ukraine from the “neo-Nazi” government in Kyiv (12%).

Figure 3. Strategic narratives of genocide used by Russian authorities

<b>№</b>	<b>Strategic Narrative</b>	<b>№</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Key phrases</b>
1	“ <i>We must save Donbas</i> ” The Kyiv regime had been committing genocide against the people of Donbas for	20	33	Policy	Donbas, eight years, neo-Nazi Kyiv regime

	years, so Russia had to interfere				
2	<p><i>“It is all West’s fault”</i></p> <p>The collective West had been enabling Ukraine to commit genocide against the people of Donbas for years, so Russia had to interfere</p>	21	35	Policy	Donbas, collective West, US, real masters
3	<p><i>“We are not the bad guys here”</i></p> <p>Nazis committed genocide against the Soviet people during World War II</p>	9	15	Identity	Nazis, Great Patriotic War, Leningrad blockade
4	<p><i>“Russia is invincible”</i></p> <p>The collective West is trying to defeat Russia by imposing sanctions and aiding Ukraine, but Russia only emerges stronger in the multipolar world</p>	10	17	International system	Economy, values, historical, multipolar world
	<i>Overall</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>100</i>		<i>NA</i>

- *“We must save Donbas”*. ”Strategic narrative №1: The Kyiv regime had been committing genocide against the people of Donbas for years, so Russia had to interfere

The first strategic narrative was a product of two themes: Russia claiming that the results of the sham referendums in the occupied regions of Ukraine meant that the

population of those regions supported Russia (8% of the publications) and Russia arguing that it invaded Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from alleged genocide by the Ukrainian government (25% of the publications). The narrative was largely directed at the domestic audience and had the goal to justify the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The term “genocide” was used solely with regard to the 2014 war in the Donbas and Ukraine’s alleged campaign to “destroy everything Russian” in its eastern regions.<sup>68</sup> In light of this, the “Kyiv regime” was mostly portrayed as illegal, since it came to power following what Moscow called a “coup d’état” in 2014, and neo-Nazi.

At the same time, the “Donbas people” (“народ Донбасса”) were primarily presented as ethnically Russian and Russian-speaking. In his speech on February 24, 2022, president Vladimir Putin declared that Russia was launching a so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine to “protect the people [in the Donbas] who had been subjected to oppression and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years” and for whom Russia was the only source of hope (“защита людей, которые на протяжении восьми лет подвергаются издевательствам, геноциду со стороны киевского режима”).<sup>69</sup>

- *“It is all West’s fault”*. Strategic narrative №2: The collective West had been enabling Ukraine to commit genocide against the people of Donbas for years, so Russia had to interfere

The second narrative was composed of three themes. Namely, Russia accusing the US, NATO and the West in general of perpetuating the war in Ukraine (5%, 15% and 15% of the publications respectively). It targeted both domestic and international audiences and presented the invasion of Ukraine as a “civilisational” struggle between Russia and the “collective West” with the United States in the lead. According to the

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<sup>68</sup> German foreign office “sorry” for tweet taking a dig at Russia’s African outreach with a leopard emoji. (2023, January 26). CBC News.

<https://www.cbcnews.com/news/germany-russia-africa-tweet-leopard-tanks-emoji-apology/>.

<sup>69</sup> Обращение Президента Российской Федерации [Address of the President of the Russian Federation]. (2022, February 24). President of Russia. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

narrative, Ukraine was merely a “pawn” in the bigger geopolitical game and did not have agency to make serious decisions about the course of the war.

In contrast, the West was portrayed as a “puppeteer” (“кукловод”) or a “master” (“хозяин”), which exploited the government in Kyiv to achieve the goal of weakening Russia as a global power and driving it out of global politics. For instance, in his address to the representatives of the so-called “Luhansk People’s Republic” and “Donetsk People’s Republic” (“LDPR”), the Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin accused the EU and the United States of “consistently turning the territory of Ukraine into a bridgehead against Russia” (“последовательно [превращают] территорию Украины в плацдарм для борьбы с Россией”).<sup>70</sup>

- “*We are not the bad guys here*”. Strategic narrative №3: Nazis committed genocide against the Soviet people during World War II

The third strategic narrative was a combination of two interconnected themes: Russia condemning Nazi Germany and its allies for committing genocide against the Soviet people during World War II (15% of the publications) and Russia condemning Nazi Germany and its allies for committing genocide against the Russian population in particular during World War II (3% of the publications). It was largely addressed to the domestic audience and was distinct from other narratives as it focused on World War II rather than the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The purpose of this narrative was to commemorate the atrocities the Europeans committed against the Soviet — namely, the Soviet Russian — population in the 1940s, and present the Soviet Union as an innocent victim of the Nazi invasion. In this regard, the term “genocide” was mostly used not in its legal sense, but in reference to mass killings of the “Bolsheviks, communists [...], and ordinary Soviet people” by the Nazis.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Председатель ГД: отказ Киева и его западных “хозяев” от переговоров влияет на перспективы сохранения украинской государственности [Chairman of the State Duma: the refusal of Kyiv and its Western “bosses” from negotiations affects the prospects for preserving Ukrainian statehood]. (2022, July 14). State Duma. <http://duma.gov.ru/news/54962/>.

<sup>71</sup> Заседание Совета по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека [Meeting of the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights]. (2022, December 7). President of Russia. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70046>.

In many cases, the demonym “Soviet people” denoted not the diverse population of the Soviet Union, but a national group allegedly formed as a result of the creation of the Soviet Union. For instance, in his annual speech at the annual meeting of the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, Vladimir Putin said that the Nazis “went beyond some political and class considerations and subjected the entire Soviet people to genocide” (“вышли за рамки каких-то политических и классовых оценок и весь советский народ подвергали геноциду”).<sup>72</sup>

- “*Russia is invincible*”. Strategic narrative №4: The collective West is trying to defeat Russia by imposing sanctions and aiding Ukraine, but Russia only emerges stronger in the multipolar world

The fourth strategic narrative was formed by two themes. In particular, Russia boasting of being invincible to Western economic sanctions (5% of the publications) and Russia claiming that its values and vision of the world were morally superior to those of the West (12% of the publications). The narrative targeted both domestic and international audiences and mostly revolved around the 2022 war in Ukraine and its negative consequences for Russia. Its goal was to demonstrate that, despite economic and military hardships, Russia continued to be a “righteous” global actor in what it called a new multipolar world. In light of this, the term “genocide” was predominantly used in reference to the war in the east of Ukraine and Moscow’s alleged mission to “save the people of Donbas” from the “neo-Nazi Kyiv regime”.

In contrast to the first strategic narrative, which had similar contents, this one presented the invasion of Ukraine as almost an existential struggle, meant to define Russia’s place in world history. For example, in his address at the International Legal Forum in July 2022, Vladimir Putin said that by invading Ukraine Russia once again demonstrated its aspirations to “build a more democratic and just world in which the rights of all peoples and the preservation of the cultural and civilisational diversity of mankind would be guaranteed” (“сформировать более демократический и

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

справедливый мир, в котором гарантировались бы права всех народов и сохранение культурно-цивилизационного многообразия человечества”).<sup>73</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### *4.1. Comparative Analysis of Ukrainian and Russian Strategic Narratives of Genocide*

Three out of four Ukrainian strategic narratives of genocide are policy narratives. Their key purpose is to convince the international community — especially the EU and the United States — to support Ukraine militarily, economically, legally, or rhetorically. In this regard, the term “genocide” acts as an “organising framework for collective action”.<sup>74</sup>

The Western states are presented as “ethical” (or “responsible”) powers, whose role is to strengthen justice and protect human rights globally.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, Ukrainians are portrayed as either innocent victims of Russian aggression, requiring immediate assistance, or courageous fighters, paying the highest price to protect Western democratic peace and freedom from Russia’s “barbaric war”. The mentions of genocide are meant to evoke a sense of urgency and propel the distant observers abroad to act on their R2P obligations (one of which is to ensure a “timely and decisive collective response” to prevent or stop genocide).<sup>76</sup> The war is depicted as an existential struggle in which, to quote Volodymyr Zelenskyy, “life will win over death, and light will win over darkness”.<sup>77</sup> In this struggle, Ukrainians — the “Us” group — represent light and maintain the moral high ground. In comparison, Russians — the “Them” group — are seen as the opposite of the good and righteous. According to Irvin-Erickson, such binary

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<sup>73</sup> Обращение к участникам X Петербургского международного юридического форума [Address to the participants of the X St. Petersburg International Legal Forum]. (2022, June 30). President of Russia. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68785>.

<sup>74</sup> Irvin-Erickson, D. (2017). Genocide Discourses: American and Russian Strategic Narratives of Conflict in Iraq and Ukraine (p. 131). *Politics and Governance*, 5(3), 130.

<sup>75</sup> Aggestam, L. (2008). Introduction: ethical power Europe? *International Affairs*, 84(1), 1–11.

<sup>76</sup> Timely and decisive response vital to uphold “responsibility to protect” – UN officials | UN News. (2012, September 5). UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/09/418822>.

<sup>77</sup> Shuster, S. (2022, December 7). Volodymyr Zelensky Is TIME’s 2022 Person of the Year. *Time*. <https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2022-volodymyr-zelensky/>.

perspective “present[s] genocide in the terms of a systematic theory of good and evil [...] and carr[ies] over the belief that genocide can only be stopped through external violence”.<sup>78</sup>

In this regard, the Russian aggression is viewed not as a mere land grab, but as a colonial war, aimed at erasing the Ukrainian identity.<sup>79</sup> In his 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, Vladimir Putin argued the two peoples form a “single whole” and belong to “the same historical and spiritual space”.<sup>80</sup> He also claimed that “modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era [...], shaped on the lands of historical Russia”.<sup>81</sup> In response to Putin’s essay, Volodymyr Zelenskyy compared the alleged “kinship” of Russia and Ukraine to the brotherhood of biblical Cain and Abel and mocked the Russian president for spending a great deal of his valuable time on disproving Ukraine’s legitimacy as a nation and a state.<sup>82</sup>

According to Buchwald and Keith, the purpose of genocide is not only to destroy a group physically but also to eradicate “the inherent value the group [...] brings to the world”. In his essay, Putin not only denies Ukraine its reading of history, but also gives credit for the achievements and tragedies Ukrainians consider their own to the “greater Russian nation” (allegedly consisting of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians). For instance, he presents the Holodomor, which 93% of Ukrainians consider a genocide of the Ukrainian people, as a “common tragedy of collectivisation and famine”.<sup>83</sup>

For this reason, the Ukrainian authorities recount another version of common history (“besides controlling the view of the present, [...] Ukraine also tends to incorporate past events into the general story of struggling for freedom”).<sup>84</sup> In their strategic narratives of genocide, Russia is portrayed as a colonial empire, which, for the

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<sup>78</sup> Irvin-Erickson, D. (2017). Genocide Discourses: American and Russian Strategic Narratives of Conflict in Iraq and Ukraine (p. 133). *Politics and Governance*, 5(3), 130.

<sup>79</sup> Snyder, T. (2022, April 28). The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War. *The New Yorker*.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>.

<sup>80</sup> Putin, V. (2021, July 12). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. President of Russia; Kremlin.  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Zelenskiy Trolls Putin After Russian President Publishes Article On Ukraine. (2021, July 13). Radio Free Europe. <https://www.rferl.org/a/zelenskiy-trolls-putin-ukraine/31356912.html>.

<sup>83</sup> The dynamics of attitude towards the 1932-33 Holodomor. (2022, November 25). Sociological Group “Rating.” [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/dinam\\_ka\\_stavleniya\\_do\\_golodomoru\\_1932-33](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/dinam_ka_stavleniya_do_golodomoru_1932-33).

<sup>84</sup> Lazarenko, V. (2018). Conflict in Ukraine: multiplicity of narratives about the war and displacement (p. 554). *European Politics and Society*, 20(5), 550–566.

last 400 years, has been using coercion and violence to erase the Ukrainian identity and replace it with the “Malorussian cultural identity within the greater Russian nation”.<sup>85</sup> The traumatic collective memories of the past — especially the Holodomor, Red Renaissance, and mass imprisonments in Gulags — are thought to act as a shaping force in the construction of the Ukrainian national identity.

On the one hand, they capture the violent and aggressive nature of the Russian colonial rule, which, in the view of many Ukrainians, lasted from the signing of the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, when the Cossacks pledged allegiance to the Tsar of Russia, to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. On the other hand, they demonstrate the endurance and persistence of the Ukrainian people in the face of continuous oppression and the absence of an independent state. As Gilad Hirschberger, a social psychologist and Holocaust scholar, argues, historical traumas “increase group cohesion” and “over time [...] become the epicentre of group identity, and the lens through which group members understand their social environment”.<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, the meanings and purposes of the Ukrainian strategic narratives of genocide depend on the context. While the policy narratives are a “cry for help”, addressed to the international community, which is deemed moral and just, the identity narrative, mainly focused on the Holodomor and, to a lesser degree, mass deportations of Crimean Tatars, helps the Ukrainian authorities strengthen national identity and preserve social cohesion through the process of “an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma [which] generates a search for [new] meaning[s]”.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to Ukraine, Russia uses three types of strategic narratives of genocide — namely, policy, identity, and international system narratives, — which primarily, but not exclusively, target the domestic audiences. Similarly to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Putin’s Russia presents the “collective West”, headed by the United States (or the “Empire of Lies”), as an existential threat, which allegedly aims to undo Russia and compromise its historically “brotherly” relations with Ukraine (seen as “an inseparable

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<sup>85</sup> Putin, V. (2021, July 12). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. President of Russia; Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>86</sup> Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning (p. 2). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(1441).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

organ of the virginal Russian body”).<sup>88</sup> In this regard, Russia is perceived as spiritual and loyal to tradition, while the West is considered “decadent and absurd”.<sup>89</sup>

According to Timothy Snyder, the Russian authorities extensively use the “Us” versus “Them” binary to distract the population from domestic problems.<sup>90</sup> What explains the continuous economic recession? Why the country has been ruled by a kleptocratic regime, composed of a tight circle of Vladimir Putin’s friends, for decades? Why has the government doubled down on its campaign to suppress public dissent and censor free speech? For the Russian authorities, the answer to these questions is not corruption or nepotism, but the greedy and hypocritical collective West, which constantly puts spokes in Russia’s wheels. In this regard, the only way to “restore Russia’s former glory” is not to embark on comprehensive and ambitious reforms, but to win the “war that will end all wars” against the external enemy.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, the Russian authorities resort to genocide rhetoric to “manufacture crisis and manipulate the resultant emotion”.<sup>92</sup> How can Russians worry about its GDP decline, if the West is allegedly committing genocide against the Donbas people, using Ukrainians as cannon fodder? Why care about the development of the North Caucasus region, if Ukraine’s fascist government is seemingly aiming to destroy “everything Russian” in the east and south of the country? As Snyder argues, by emphasising the ideological logic behind Russian foreign policy decisions, the Russian authorities “instruct their citizens to experience elation and outrage at short intervals, drowning the future in the present”.<sup>93</sup> In this regard, Russia is presented as a reluctant hero, which has a moral obligation to protect its “near abroad” from the demise, brought about by the “decaying West”, while Ukraine is portrayed as a “prodigal younger brother”, who lost his way and yearns for a “return home” to Russia.

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<sup>88</sup> Snyder, T. (2018). *The Road to Unfreedom* (p. 111). Crown.

<sup>89</sup> Khaldarova, I. (2016). *Strategic Narratives of the Ukraine Conflict Projected for Domestic and International Audiences by Russian TV Channels* (p. 127). In *Media and the Ukraine Crisis: Hybrid Practices and Narratives of Conflict* (pp. 123–138). Peter Lang Verlag; Katerina Fridrichová. (2023). *Mugged by reality: Russia’s strategic narratives and the war in Ukraine* (p. 7). *Defence & Security Analysis*, 39(1), 1–15.

<sup>90</sup> Snyder, T. (2018, March 16). Vladimir Putin’s politics of eternity. *The Guardian*.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Snyder, T. (2018). *The Road to Unfreedom* (p. 6). Crown.

As mentioned in the Findings section, the Russian elites distinguish the Ukrainian people from the Ukrainian authorities. While the Ukrainian people are allegedly perceived as “hardworking [...], talented [and capable of] achieving success and outstanding results with perseverance and determination”, the Ukrainian ruling circle is considered not only Russophobic and nationalist but also illegitimate.<sup>94</sup> This is a classic example of the “divide and rule” strategy, which aims to pit one part of the whole against the other and cause chaos. In this context, the term “genocide” is used to highlight the disparity between “Us” (the “ordinary people”, especially those from the east and south of Ukraine, who are assumed to be sympathetic to Russia) and “Them” (the Ukrainian authorities, who allegedly oppress ethnic Russians and “Russian Ukrainians” and are inspired by the “Nazi ideology” of the Banderites”).

Frequent references to history play a major role in Russian strategic communication. In contrast to Ukrainians, who primarily mobilise historical memories of loss and trauma, Russians tend to remember their past from the perspective of glory. In this regard, they celebrate the Soviet victory in the Second World War (also known as the Great Patriotic War) as their most “sacred achievement”.<sup>95</sup> In his article for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Kolesnikov argues that since Vladimir Putin rose to power, the Russian “cult of victory [evolved into the] cult of war”, generally portrayed as “rightful [...] aggression with a protectionist core”.<sup>96</sup> From this perspective, allegations of genocide came to be viewed as a valid pretence for armed intervention. Therefore, by comparing the Ukrainian elites to the Third Reich and accusing them of genocide against the people of the Donbas, the Russian authorities gave themselves the green light to begin a war, allegedly aimed at protecting “millions [...] who pinned their hopes on Russia”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Putin, V. (2021, July 12). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. President of Russia; Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>95</sup> Khaldarova, I. (2016). Strategic Narratives of the Ukraine Conflict Projected for Domestic and International Audiences by Russian TV Channels (p. 128). In *Media and the Ukraine Crisis: Hybrid Practices and Narratives of Conflict* (pp. 123–138). Peter Lang Verlag.

<sup>96</sup> Kolesnikov, A. (2022, November 21). Scientific Putinism: Shaping Official Ideology in Russia. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88451>; Lazarenko, V. (2018). Conflict in Ukraine: Multiplicity of Narratives about the War and Displacement (p. 556). *European Politics and Society*, 20(5), 550–566.

<sup>97</sup> Kursani, S. (2022). Beyond Putin’s Analogies: The Genocide Debate on Ukraine and the Balkan Analogy Worth Noting (p. 3). *Journal of Genocide Research*.

To summarise, Russian strategic narratives of genocide are largely rooted in Russia's historical memories of the victorious Second World War, "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy in regard to its relations with the "collective West", and neocolonial beliefs about its "brotherly ties" with Ukraine.

#### *4.2. Implications of the (Ir)responsible Use of the Term "Genocide": Insights from International Law, Ethics, and History*

Genocide is widely considered the "crime of crimes", as its ambition is to eliminate entire groups either in whole or in part. The single mention of the word immediately evokes the horrendous memories of the Holocaust and produces emotions ranging from fear and hatred to numbness and helplessness.<sup>98</sup> This implies that "genocide" is not and cannot be just a legal term. Instead, it is a term, which is deeply entrenched in Western history and philosophy of morality. When an event is labelled genocide, there is no longer doubt about "who is the lamb and who is the knife" in a conflict as the invisible dividing line between good and evil becomes not only evident but also indisputable.

The strong emotional connotation of the term "genocide" is part of the reason why politicians from around the world have been (ab)using it since it was coined by Lemkin in 1944. According to Rogers Brubaker, "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" use cultural and psychological materials to "galvanise and crystallise [...] groups".<sup>99</sup> In this regard, the term "genocide" can act as a useful rhetorical device to mobilise "groupness" within a politicised entity for the purpose of resisting a real or imagined enemy.<sup>100</sup>

However, according to David Luban, using the term "genocide" casually solely to achieve a particular objective or make a rhetorical point can have considerable negative

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<sup>98</sup> Kraft, R. (2004). Emotional Memory in Survivors of the Holocaust: A Qualitative Study of Oral Testimony (pp. 157–159). In *Memory and Emotion* (pp. 347–359). Oxford University Press.

<sup>99</sup> Brubaker, R. (2002). Ethnicity without groups (p. 171). *European Journal of Sociology*, 43(2), 163–189.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

consequences.<sup>101</sup> To begin with, it is essential to recognise that “genocide” is not merely a descriptive term but a legal concept that carries legal implications for both the victims and the perpetrators of the crime. Proving genocide in a court of law, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), is a complex and lengthy process. It requires the prosecution to provide substantial evidence of a perpetrator’s specific intent to destroy a targeted group, which sometimes takes years, if not decades, to collect and analyse. In this regard, making premature genocide accusations may unjustifiably portray the ICC (or any other legal body responsible for prosecuting genocide) as incompetent or biased, which can create unreasonable expectations regarding the outcome of the proceedings and further erode the remaining public trust in the international justice system.

For instance, on March 15, 2023, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine published a report, according to which Russia presumably committed “a wide range of war crimes” in Ukraine, including “wilful killings, attacks on civilians, unlawful confinement, torture, rape, and forced transfers and deportations of children”.<sup>102</sup> However, as the head of the Commission, Erik Mose, said at the press conference in Geneva, the investigative mission did not find evidence that “there [was] a genocide within Ukraine”.<sup>103</sup> Both the document and Mose’s comment caused a public outcry among Ukrainians in the social media, many of whom thought that the report downplayed the “atrocious cruelty” of the Russian crimes in Ukraine and presented the hardships endured by ordinary Ukrainians as not “horrible enough” to be considered genocide. In light of this, some of the commentators accused the UN of being “impotent”, “cowardly”, and “sympathetic to the Kremlin”.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Luban, D. (2006). Calling Genocide by Its Rightful Name: Lemkin’s Word, Darfur, and the UN Report (p. 4). *Chicago Journal of Criminal Law*, 7(1), 1–18.

<sup>102</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (pp. 1–2). (2023). United Nations Human Rights Council.

[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A\\_HRC\\_52\\_62\\_AUV\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Murder, torture, and rape but no genocide – the UN’s latest report on Ukraine. (2023, March 16). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/16/murder-torture-and-rape-but-no-genocide-the-uns-latest-report-on-ukraine>.

<sup>104</sup> В ООН опублікували звіт про розслідування злочинів російських окупантів в Україні [The UN published a report on the investigation of the crimes committed by the Russian occupiers in Ukraine]. (2023, March 16). Hromadske. [https://t.me/hromadske\\_ua/30518](https://t.me/hromadske_ua/30518).

For months before the report was published, the Ukrainian government had been actively employing strategic narratives, identified in the previous chapter, to frame the Russian invasion of Ukraine as not only a crime of aggression but also as genocide. This suggests that the negative public response to the UN report and Mose's commentary could be explained by how the Ukrainian authorities regularly used the term "genocide" not necessarily in its legal meaning but to emphasise the grave seriousness of the Russian atrocities in Ukraine. In this regard, the failure of the UN Commission and its head to explicitly label the crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine as genocide might have led many Ukrainians to feel that neither their traumatic experience nor the gravity of Russian cruelty were adequately acknowledged in the international community.

Although the report did mention that it was highly possible that Russia committed numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine, many Ukrainians seemingly saw this statement as a mere "consolation prize". However, according to the Rome Statute that sets out the legal framework for the ICC, the level of gravity of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide is considered equal, which means that, at least in theory, they can have the same punishment at the discretion of the ICC judges.<sup>105</sup> That said, the specific punishment depends on the circumstances of the crime and is decided by the ICC judges on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, considering that the severity of the punishment is not tied to the classification of the crime, why was it so important for Ukrainians that the UN Commission recognised the Russian aggression as genocide?

In his 2006 article, Luban argues that "the word "genocide" has come to mean something different in the public imagination than it means in the law" and that in everyday speech people normally consider any mass atrocities, no matter if they were committed with or without a specific intent, a genocide.<sup>106</sup> In this regard, he analyses the 2005 UN report on Darfur, in which, similarly to the Ukrainian case, the International UN Commission of Inquiry on Darfur concluded that the Sudanese government

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<sup>105</sup> International Criminal Court. (1998). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

<https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>.

<sup>106</sup> Luban, D. (2006). Calling Genocide by Its Rightful Name: Lemkin's Word, Darfur, and the UN Report (pp. 4–5). *Chicago Journal of Criminal Law*, 7(1), 1–18.

committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, but not genocide in the Darfur region. He claims, that although the UN report “insisted that the war crimes and crimes against humanity found in Darfur [were] just as evil and [...] legally significant as genocide” and that there was “no hierarchy among international crimes”, for ordinary people, the UN findings meant that the violence in Darfur could not be considered the “crime of crimes” and, therefore, was not urgent enough to create a legal obligation to act.<sup>107</sup> This suggests that by 2005, the understanding of "genocide" had significantly transformed, expanding beyond its legal definition. It had become a term that not only redefined the global moral landscape but also served as an identity marker for groups that had previously endured mass violence.<sup>108</sup>

The historical and emotional baggage behind “genocide” is one of the reasons why it is so important for governments and organisations to use the term responsibly. Treating “genocide” as yet another rhetorical tool to make a point is inconsiderate not only toward the victims of violence and injustice but also in terms of international law. Not every mass murder can be considered genocide. This, however, does not have to mean that some mass murders deserve more condemnation than others. At the same time, it would be unreasonable to believe that “genocide” could ever be a neutral legal term, detached from the “dirty world of politics”. As Luban points out, “words and culture shape each other, and culture did not leave Lemkin’s word untouched”.<sup>109</sup> Lawyers may continue trying to present “genocide” as yet another legal term that can be broken down into simple and objective components, but the social reality is much more complex than that. “Genocide” can describe the nature of mass atrocities and be a tool of propaganda, lay the foundation of national identity and be a cry for help. It is the multiple layers of meanings that seemingly make the term so powerful. In this regard, even Lemkin, who coined the term, did not envision genocide solely as a legal concept. On the contrary, he expected it to be a “rare term that [would carry] in it society’s

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 2–4.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 6.

revulsion and indignation”.<sup>110</sup> The keyword here is “rare”, as when the term is overused and regularly misused, it allegedly loses some of its rhetorical power.

However, whether “genocide” has ever had such power is also a curious question, as there is a lack of substantial empirical research on the topic. In 2017, Benjamin Valentino and Ethan Weinberg conducted a study examining the impact of the word “genocide” and analogies to the Holocaust on public opinion in the US. They used a controlled survey experiment on a representative sample of Americans to collect data and found that “labelling a violent event “genocide” or equating it to the Holocaust [did] not induce the public to become significantly more supportive of intervention, nor [did] it significantly alter moral judgements about the victims or the perpetrators”.<sup>111</sup> This could mean that in the United States public discourse, “genocide” is perceived not as a rare term reserved for exceptional circumstances, but yet another synonym to “extreme violence”.

Have the scholars been wrong about genocide having a special place in the collective consciousness? Are the findings of Valentino and Weinberg applicable outside the context of the US? Is it possible that genocide lost some of its emotional power due to the persistent misuse of the term in politics and media? These are some of the key questions to consider in future research.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the key strategic narratives of genocide in official communication of Ukrainian and Russian authorities and shed light on how those narratives were used to promote national interests at home and abroad.

Using an inductive content analysis, I singled out eight strategic narratives of genocide — four in Ukraine and four in Russia, — and then discussed their meaning from historical, legal, and ethical perspectives. I found that the Ukrainian authorities primarily used strategic narratives of genocide to create a sense of urgency and prompt

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<sup>110</sup> Valentino, B. A., & Weinberg, E. M. (2017). More than words? “Genocide,” Holocaust analogies, and public opinion in the United States (p. 278). *Journal of Human Rights*, 16(3), 276–292.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

the international community to support Ukraine in the face of aggression. In comparison, the Russian authorities used them to justify the invasion of Ukraine and pin the blame for its negative domestic and international consequences on the United States and the EU, or the “collective West”.

I also analysed the implications of the irresponsible use of genocide rhetoric in highly political contexts — in particular, in the context of the war. Based on an extensive literature review, I came to the conclusion that instrumental and trivial mentions of the term “genocide” could create unreasonable public expectations of national and international legal systems and be inconsiderate to the victims of violence, especially those, who technically were subjected not to genocide, but to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In the final subsection of my paper, I raised the question of whether genocide had lost its rhetorical power nationally and globally due to the overuse and misuse of the term. In this regard, I did not find enough evidence neither to formulate a strong hypothesis nor make an educated guess. This indicates the need for further research on the public perception of genocide in geographically and historically diverse contexts, including in Ukraine and Russia. More comparable studies on the role of genocide and genocide analogies in the public discourse could enable researchers to elevate the semantic debate on genocide and develop more ethical and sustainable policy recommendations on strategic communications for the governments.<sup>112</sup>.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader theoretical discussion on the instrumental use of the term “genocide” in strategic state communications and potentially could assist policymakers in formulating more informed and responsible communication strategies.

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## APPENDIX

A link to an Excel table, containing all the raw data, analysed for the purposes of this study: <http://surl.li/hpspe>.

**ANNOTATION**  
**BACHELOR'S THESIS**

**Topic:** Strategic Narratives of Genocide in the Context of the Full-Scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Analysis of Official Websites of Ukrainian and Russian Authorities

**Студентка:** Hrytsei Anhelina

**Year of study, faculty:** fourth year of study, faculty of social sciences and social technologies

**Наукова керівниця:** Candidate of Political Sciences, senior lecturer Zarembo Kateryna

**Reviewer:**

**Defended:** June 2022

**Short Summary:** This study explores how the Ukrainian and Russian authorities used the term “genocide” in their strategic communication during the first year of the 2022 war. Based on an inductive content analysis of news publications on official state websites, it identifies eight strategic narratives of genocide and analyses their possible political, legal, and ethical implications from a comparative perspective. In addition, based on an extensive literature review, it discusses the potential negative effects of the irresponsible use of genocide terminology in highly political contexts.

## АНОТАЦІЯ

### КВАЛІФІКАЦІЙНОЇ РОБОТИ

**Тема:** Стратегічні наративи геноциду в контексті повномасштабного російського вторгнення в Україну: аналіз офіційних вебсайтів української та російської влади

**Студентка:** Грицей Ангеліна Володимирівна

**Рік навчання, факультет:** 4 рік навчання, факультет соціальних наук та соціальних технологій

**Наукова керівниця:** кандидатка політичних наук, старша викладачка Зарембо Катерина Валеріївна

**Рецензентка:**

**Захищена:** червня 2022 року

**Короткий зміст:** Мета цього дослідження — встановити, як українські та російські органи влади послуговувалися терміном “геноцид” у своїх стратегічних комунікаціях упродовж першого року повномасштабної війни. Провівши індуктивний контент-аналіз новинних публікацій на офіційних державних вебсайтах, авторка виокремила вісім стратегічних наративів геноциду та проаналізувала їхні політичні, правові та етичні значення у порівняльній перспективі. Крім того, спираючись на вичерпний огляд наукової літератури, вона окреслила ймовірні негативні наслідки безвідповідального вживання терміну “геноцид” у високо політизованих середовищах.