



Persuasive leadership through framing, rhetoric, and history: An analysis of Zelensky's speeches after the invasion of Ukraine


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ENG Abstract. Political communication is a key element at crucial moments in history to influence governments and public opinion in allied countries. The speeches of Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, have played an important role in his communicative strategy to try to maintain and increase the support of other states for his country in the war against Russia. This research analyzes the speeches he addressed to parliaments and citizens of different nations in the first two months after the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Based on a qualitative methodology that reconstructs the structure of the frames and identifies the rhetorical devices present in 27 complete speeches of the Ukrainian leader, the results reveal the predominance of four frames that associate the war with a clash of two antagonistic moral models that make any kind of equidistance impossible, and the existence of a threat to global security to which the international community cannot remain indifferent. To reinforce the persuasive effectiveness of his arguments and emphasize the need for the different measures he proposes, Zelensky uses historical analogies as a key symbolic mechanism in all the speeches analyzed, so that references to the legacy of memory facilitate the assimilation of his ideas by the public opinions of each society.

Keywords: Political communication, political leadership, framing, historical analogy, russo-ukrainian war.

ES Liderazgo persuasivo a través del encuadre, la retórica y la historia: un análisis de los discursos de Zelensky tras la invasión de Ucrania

Resumen. La comunicación política es un elemento clave en los momentos cruciales de la historia para influir en los gobiernos y opiniones públicas de países aliados. Los discursos del presidente de Ucrania, Volodymyr Zelensky, han jugado un importante papel en su estrategia comunicativa para tratar de mantener y aumentar el apoyo de otros estados a su país en el conflicto bélico que le enfrenta a Rusia. Esta investigación analiza los discursos que dirigió a los parlamentos y a los ciudadanos de diferentes naciones en los dos primeros meses tras la invasión de Ucrania el 24 de febrero de 2022. A partir de una metodología cualitativa que reconstruye la estructura de los encuadres e identifica las figuras retóricas presentes en 27 intervenciones completas del líder ucraniano, los resultados revelan el predominio de cuatro encuadres que asocian la guerra con un choque de dos modelos morales antagonistas que imposibilitan cualquier tipo de equidistancia y la existencia de una amenaza a la seguridad global ante la que la comunidad internacional no puede permanecer indiferente. Para reforzar la efectividad persuasiva de sus argumentos y enfatizar la necesidad de las distintas medidas que propone, Zelensky utiliza las analogías históricas como un mecanismo simbólico clave en la totalidad de los discursos analizados, de forma que las referencias al legado memorístico faciliten la asimilación de sus ideas por parte de las opiniones públicas de cada sociedad.

Palabras clave: Comunicación política, liderazgo político, *framing*, analogía histórica, guerra ruso-ucraniana.

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1. Introduction

The power of communication has played a crucial role in shaping historical events. In this sense, the significance of conflicts lies as much in their outcomes as in the ideas that lead to them and in the different ways in which they are communicated. As a result, historians have examined not only political and economic factors but also discourse and leadership. To understand a conflict, long-term trends matter as much as the key moments that bring about significant changes, and collective movements can be as decisive as the role of individuals. In this respect, analyzing leadership and its persuasive strategies can aid in comprehending the importance of communication in the relationship between individuals and their societies.

What intellectual and emotional qualities transform certain politicians into leaders capable of inspiring their communities? Exalted or condemned by history, leaders from Pericles to Mandela, including Lincoln, Gandhi, Roosevelt, Hitler, and Churchill, share a sense of opportunity, the ability to inspire others, the ambition to pursue great goals, the resilience to persevere through adversity, and skill in handling both words and emotions. Their leadership stemmed from “an instinctive understanding of the mood of their times”, enabling them to steer history in a particular direction—either becoming heroes when they built consensus or villains if they opted for dissent (MacMillan, 2017, p. 20).

Many of the great crossroads that raise or topple leaders are of a warlike nature. Wars are extreme situations that test the limits of discourse and leadership. They generate unique vocabularies capable of facilitating or hindering understanding, humanizing, or dehumanizing victims, and clarifying or obscuring reality with significant mobilizing power. Zelensky's story is that of an entertainer turned folk hero, of a novice politician turned into a leader recognized by statespeople all over the world. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Zelensky's popularity surged to 90%, a threefold increase from its December 2021 low of 30%. The number of followers on his Twitter account, which he had opened only three years earlier, exceeded five million, which in the case of Instagram reached 14 million. The use of social media was a key factor in his strategy of gathering support (Urban & McLeod, 2022).

In terms of his discursive strategy, in the run-up to the war, Zelensky established historical analogies as a symbolic element with which to win support for his cause. Ukraine's survival depended on the conviction that this was not just another aggression, but an event that involved the whole world and a decisive chapter in the history of civilization. With this message he addressed the European Parliament on March 1, 2022: Ukraine is fighting for freedom, but not only its own, but that of Europe, in a battle between light and darkness. A message that would be taken up by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, when in her reply to the Ukrainian leader she validated his reference to Nazism to point to Russia as the culprit for the fact that war has returned to Europe, causing “a clash between two worlds” to break out.

2. Political discourse and leadership in times of crisis

Political language occupies an essential place in the development of public life. As a political act, speech is characterized by its influence. Through language, leaders shape attitudes, values, and beliefs. As the main practical social activity for disseminating and manipulating ideologies within a process of interaction, political discourse is an essential part in the formation of leadership (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2003).

Understood as a relational phenomenon of power and influence to decide strategies involving individual and collective efforts (Natera, 1999; Yukl, 2012), leadership relies on communication for its consolidation. Political leadership and the discourses that sustain it also depend on the context in which they are inserted, i.e., the specific circumstances, the problems they must face and the structures in which they interact. The dominant values and beliefs of the time shape both the leader's behavior and followers' perceptions of them (Bass, 1990).

However, there are certain traits common to great leaders in history, especially among those who emerged in situations of conflict and who have been typified as transformational or innovative leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Linz, 2001): such as a sense of opportunity, ambition for great goals, resilience in adversity, charisma to inspire confidence, and conviction to make unpopular or risky decisions (MacMillan, 2017).

In periods of crisis of institutional legitimacy, systemic weaknesses create opportunities for the emergence of critical or disruptive leaders with tendencies toward power centralization, though not all strong leadership is inherently anti-democratic. Perceived threats to the survival of democracy can also foster leadership grounded in the defense of endangered values (Lassalle & Quero, 2019, p. 10).

In today's political landscape, shaped by social media and post-truth dynamics, two critical factors influencing leadership stand out in recent studies: interaction with the environment and image creation. Their mobilizing power in conflict situations will depend on both factors. Effective communication, which captures attention and channels it toward specific goals, positions leaders as creators of meaning, inspiring followers to adopt ideals aligned with their vision of reality (Bryman, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Linz, 2001; Nye, 2011). This mobilizing image is made possible by the symbolic capital they can treasure by becoming administrators of certain common values, but also by their successful adaptations to the political context. The communicative articulation of ideas and values is critical to consolidating leadership. Leaders construct their visions discursively, employing interpretive frameworks to define reality and generate meaning.

3. Strategic framing and the role of historical analogy in political discourse

The strategic framing of conflict situations is a key factor in the generation of public perceptions influenced by symbolic representations about them (Marín-Albaladejo, 2017; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Sádaba, 2008). Viewed in this way, the discourses of political leaders are articulated around frames or central ideas

with which they try to configure the essential meaning of “an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). They highlight specific aspects of controversial issues and employ communicative elements to promote particular definitions to achieve their objectives. They also evaluate their causes, the necessary solutions, and the values at stake (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Public issue frames are shaped by elements shared within a society and by cultural resonances in other contexts (Chihu, 2022; Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007). In this manner, the interpretive frameworks of political discourses are often constructed with terms, concepts, and images that have a high cultural congruence (Entman, 2004) or symbolic charge, to provoke certain mental associations in the addressees (Reese, 2001). Thus, identifying frames requires attention not only to the explicit content of texts but also to the latent meanings they evoke (Canel & Sanders, 2006; Kitzinger, 2007; Reese, 2001; Van Dijk, 2003). As an important tradition in the study of framing, the examination of frames involves elucidating the connection of symbolic mechanisms such as metaphors, stereotypes, examples, historical analogies, cultural references, etc. (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Van Gorp, 2010).

Consequently, the identification of the implicit ideas or reasoning to which the set of symbolic resources used to promote each frame refers requires qualitative analyses that scrutinize in depth the structure of the frames (Marín-Albaladejo, 2017), that is, of the interpretive packages made up of framing and resonance mechanisms that jointly project certain visions on public affairs (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Van Gorp, 2010).

Symbolic resources such as metaphors, cultural references, and historical analogies appeal to shared social memory, facilitating the comprehension of political messages (Chihu, 2022; Marín-Albaladejo, 2017). The assimilation of facts, situations, and events from the present with others from the past often takes place by equating them with memories and narratives of historical events that are central in shaping the social identity of a community (Edy, 1999). In this way, a historical analogy can constitute a frame with great persuasive power, if it is projected in a context in which it has a high explanatory power and accumulates a broad consensus on the interpretation of the facts.

Analogical comparison with the present is based on the use of lessons from the past to confront decisions on current issues. According to Edy (1999), although this rhetorical device is used in different times, contexts, and places, its argumentative power is mainly based on the acceptance of the supposed neutrality of a given account of the past and on the idea that historical phenomena are essentially cyclical in nature. The persuasive power of this mechanism lies in its ability to simplify complex issues (Więclawski, 2022), in its emotional impact on the audience, and in the fact that the interpretation of current events occurs through a symbolic representation of the past whose meaning is not questioned in the public sphere (Edy, 1999). In argumentation, analogy is used to clarify an issue, explaining a complex relationship through another more familiar to the audience. For this purpose, words are used in different contexts that turn into maxims or metaphors present-

ed with a general truth value and with the aim of emotionally reinforcing an interpretation of a fact to achieve public adhesion (Charaudeau, 2009).

However, Neustadt and May (1988) warn about the rigid and simplistic schemes of reality introduced by some historical metaphors, which sometimes lead to political issues being approached based on erroneous evaluations and distorted judgments based on assumptions of imprecise analogies or which do not take into account the different nuances that exist when extrapolating the facts to different contexts. Several works also caution of the risks of overlooking the fact that historical analogies are mere narrative constructions about events that are actually open to different interpretations (Kitzinger, 2000), as well as of their purely instrumental use, on a recurrent basis, in international relations and contemporary politics with the exclusive purpose of promoting a certain ideological vision and justifying certain strategic decisions of the actors involved (Mumford, 2015; Więclawski, 2022).

Historical analogies lose their rhetorical force, and the social acceptance of the discursive framework becomes difficult when they do not fit well with the present situation they are supposed to represent or when their congruence with the collective memory of the society they address fails. Likewise, their capacity to influence may also be limited by the controversy aroused by certain historical narratives in countries where there are “crossed memories” (Casanova, 2020), especially “in societies scarred by civil wars, genocides, and authoritarian regimes” (p. 271).

Collective memories are continuously reconstructed and endowed with new meanings, myths, and symbolic objects within their respective communities (Chihu, 2022; Halbwachs, 1980). In any case, there are usually certain events, stereotypes or symbols that survive in a long tradition and involve the generational transmission (Jervis, 1976; Mumford, 2015) of a memorial legacy that is recurrently used in political discourses as a dramatization tool to assign guilt and reproduce roles of victims, heroes, and villains. On this point, Casanova (2020, p. 280) argues that two major paradigms of memory currently predominate in Europe: the Holocaust and the victims of communist regimes. Similarly, other works have highlighted the importance of the invocation of the “Great Patriotic War” in Russia (Stone, 2012), and the struggle against Nazism and fascism as commonplaces within the discursive rhetoric of the Russian and Ukrainian leaders, Putin and Zelensky (Camargo & Urbán, 2022). Their use as a discursive resource in international public diplomacy actions can contribute to the construction of a successful frame that has a positive reception in audiences and serves the intended objectives (Azpiroz, 2013). Hence, it is essential in the analysis of framing to detect this type of symbolic mechanisms that appeal to the collective memory of societies.

4. Objectives, research questions, and methodology

This research aims to analyze the frames and persuasive strategies employed in Volodymyr Zelensky’s speeches, with particular focus on the argumentative, affective, and mobilizing functions of historical analo-

gy within his rhetorical strategy during his telematic tour of international parliaments in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This analysis seeks to reveal the cognitive frames used by Zelensky in his addresses, articulated from experiences of the present, whose comparison with events of the past allows the demonstration of shared values that, in turn, enhance his persuasive capacity. To address these objectives, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What rhetorical strategies articulated Zelensky's speeches?

RQ2: What role did historical analogy play in Zelensky's argumentative structure as both a symbolic framing mechanism and rhetorical device?

RQ3: What frames prevailed?

This study employs a qualitative analysis to identify the principal frames and rhetorical strategies utilized by the Ukrainian leader to articulate his vision and narrative of the conflict. The analysis is based on 27 full speeches delivered by Zelensky to foreign parliaments and peoples during the first two months of the Russo-Ukrainian War (March and April 2022). The legislatures and peoples he addressed included the European Parliament, United Kingdom, Poland, Canada, United States, Germany, Switzerland, Israel, Italy, France, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Netherlands, Australia, Romania, Spain, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece, Finland, South Korea, Lithuania, Estonia, and Portugal. The full transcripts of these speeches to foreign nations were retrieved from the website of the Presidential Office of Ukraine (n.d.).

Following the inductive methodology outlined by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and Van Gorp (2010), this research reconstructs the interpretive packages of his persuasive narrative. Each frame is related to a cultural theme that constitutes the central organizing idea and is composed of a set of reasoning and symbolic mechanisms. The reasoning devices correspond to the functions of the frames identified by Entman (1993; 2004), i.e., they form a complete interpretation of a given problem, its implications, and the remedies to be applied. Framing devices refer to rhetorical tools, including metaphors, contrasts, and keywords, which evoke discourse arguments (Kitzinger, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993) and "function as demonstrable indicators of the frame" (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 91).

First, the symbolic elements of each discourse and the interpretations associated with them are systematically registered, and then the connections between them are established, so that the frame packages or coherent structures of framing mechanisms and persistent ideas in different speeches can be finally identified in a frame matrix (Van Gorp, 2007). Additionally, this analysis examines the rhetorical devices used by Zelensky to communicate ideas and proposals, as well as the prominent role of historical analogies in his persuasive narrative. The reliability of this qualitative method is based on the consistency of its processes, achieved through constant comparison of data through their organization in multiple tables. Using a word frequency counter, the speeches of the Ukrainian leader are also quantified to observe the relationship between the main arguments he presents and the keywords that stand out.

5. Results

In his tour of speeches addressed to foreign parliaments, Zelensky faced a dual persuasive challenge: uniting the elites of each country behind his strategy while garnering public support. To achieve this, Zelensky tailored his speeches to each context, identifying the most effective means of engaging his audiences. This approach required balancing diverse opinions within each country and identifying points of consensus rooted in broadly supported ideas.

Building on these premises, Zelensky's speeches align with the core characteristics of political discourse: simplification, truthfulness, values, emotional appeal, and rhetorical devices (Charaudeau, 2009). In his speeches, the conflict is framed in such a way that it can be understood by a heterogeneous audience; a reasoning aimed at making a moral choice is offered based on the defense of values and a description of the facts faithful to reality; reality is dramatized through storytelling; and finally, the semantic and symbolic weight of the discourse is amplified by rhetorical devices, including anaphora, repetition, audience appeals, and most notably, historical analogy.

5.1. Rhetorical devices

In addition to historical analogies, the analyzed speeches employ rhetorical devices as a strategic means to connect with the audience. These devices reinforce the appellative function of language oriented towards memory and action, with the purpose of requesting, thanking, or exhorting through the use of vocatives. As exemplified in "We need you now" (United States), "And I ask you... Please, just look" (Cyprus), "And I urge you now" (Greece), "You have no doubt whether to help us (...). Thank you for taking special care of our people" (Ireland), vocatives serve to establish a direct, personal engagement with the audience.

Moreover, Zelensky's emotional tone consistently appeals to the audience's empathy for the suffering of the Ukrainian people. This emotional connection is reinforced through the second-person plural imperative mode and interrogative sentences that demand action from the audience, thereby involving them in the rhetorical situation. For instance, "Terrible explosions. Justin, imagine that you hear it. And your children hear it. Hear missile strikes at Ottawa airport (...). And your children hug you and ask: 'What happened, dad?'" (Canada) invites the audience to visualize the tragedy from a personal perspective, thus enhancing identification with the victims.

The use of the first-person narrative is a pivotal rhetorical strategy that personalizes the message and evokes empathy. This approach enables Zelensky to convey authenticity and emotional depth: "I cannot be sure of all the leaders of all European nations, but I am sure that we will be with you in defending freedom. As much as needed" (Poland); "Now I am almost 45 years old. Today my age stopped when the hearts of more than 100 children stopped beating. I see no sense in life if it cannot stop death. And this is my main mission as the Leader of my people - great Ukrainians" (United States). By sharing personal experiences, the speaker humanizes abstract concepts such as freedom, civilization, and peace, transforming them into relatable, everyday situations.

In this sense, storytelling becomes a cornerstone of Zelensky's rhetorical arsenal, often blending his personal narrative with broader experiences to illustrate the reality of the war that lived. Sometimes he adopts the role of protagonist, as in "I have often been to your country. And I know very well how you live. And one day, standing near Chillon Castle, I asked my friends –we were one company– 'Why can't we live like this?'" (Switzerland). On other occasions, he highlights the experiences of ordinary individuals, who serve as symbols of the atrocities of war: "When I addressed a rally in Florence and dozens of other European cities a little over a week ago, I asked all Italians, all Europeans to remember the number 79. The number of children killed in Ukraine at that time" (Italy).

Furthermore, repetition and parallelism –particularly anaphoras, epiphoras, anadiplosis, and antithesis– are employed to heighten emotional intensity and focus attention on core messages. These figures of speech create rhythm and emphasize key terms, turning certain phrases into slogans that encapsulate the speaker's message. For example: "Feel what we feel. Feel how we want to live. And how we want to win. Win for life" (Canada); "today I can say: I have a necessity. The necessity to protect our sky. The necessity for your decision. Your help. And it will mean exactly the same thing" (United States). Anaphoras, in particular, help organize sentences by reiterating terms that become memorable for the audience: "With your help, with the help of the civilization of great countries. With your support (...) I am especially grateful to you, Boris, my friend!" (United Kingdom).

At the same time, antithesis juxtaposes opposing concepts to highlight the irreconcilable nature of the conflict, leaving no room for alternative interpretations. This rhetorical device accentuates the binary opposition between good and evil, civilization and barbarism: "Ukraine that saves people despite the terror of the invaders. Defends freedom despite the blows of one of the world's largest armies. Defends despite the open sky. Still open to Russian missiles, aircraft, helicopters" (United Kingdom).

In addition, Zelensky relies on connotative language and hyperbole to amplify emotional engagement, creating vivid mental images that provoke rejection of the aggressor's actions. Expressions such as "when there is someone who beats like a savage" (Poland) and "they must cease to be sponsors of Russia's military machine, sponsors of the killing of children and women, sponsors of rape, robbery and looting by the Russian army" (France) underscore the absolute moral condemnation of the opposing side. Finally, Zelensky frequently resorts to maxims that elevate the historical importance of his speeches, summarizing complex situations with concise, impactful statements: "This is the price of the delay" (Italy); "and I will note only one thing –indifference kills. Premeditation is often er-

roneous. And mediation can be between states, not between good and evil" (Israel). These maxims crystallize key messages, ensuring they resonate long after the speech has ended.

5.2. Historical analogies

With rhetoric comparable to that of Winston Churchill in his 1940 "We shall fight on the beaches" speech, the Ukrainian President addressed the international community in the hope of enlisting its help in resisting the Russian invasion. By stating that he was speaking in Ukraine's "darkest hour", he was evoking Churchill's decision to confront the Nazi army in its advance across Europe. "We shall defend our land, whatever the cost may be (...) We shall fight in the woods, in the fields, on the beaches, in the cities and villages", Zelensky said before the House of Commons of the British Parliament. In his speech to the U.S. Congress, he also denounced being attacked "from the air. In a way no one expected", drawing a symbolic comparison with the air raids on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the 9/11 attacks in 2001 suffered by the United States.

After his first speech before the EU Parliament, where Zelensky recalled that Ukraine is part of Europe, all his addresses evoked or referred to paradigmatic historical events relevant to his audience. Thus, his main rhetorical strategy was the adaptation of the speech to each of the audiences to which he conveyed his plea against the invasion. Therefore, Zelensky invoked the most representative events in European history. Before the Bundestag, he referred to the new wall "between freedom and lack of freedom" and urged Chancellor Scholz to assume the leadership role that history demands of him: "Give Germany the leadership role that it has earned, so that your descendants can be proud of you". Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, he compared the Russian invasion to Nazism and referenced the Babi Yar massacre: "The people of Israel, you saw how Russian rockets hit Babi Yar. You know what this place means, where the victims of the Holocaust are buried". In his address to the Spanish deputies, the date chosen was 1937: "When the whole world learned the name of one of your cities –Guernica. Imagine that in ordinary cities, conditions can be artificially created where more than a hundred thousand people live for weeks without water".

Each historical reference reinforces a narrative axis on the idea that Europe is going through a turning point of the same magnitude as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Second World War. From the Chernobyl disaster to the crimes of Ceaușescu, from the Soviet invasions to the famine in Ireland, the Ukrainian President suited the message to each context with the aim of awakening the audience's sensitivity by recalling tragedies that are part of the memory of each nation (a complete chronology of the historical analogies can be found within Table 1).

Table 1. Chronology of historical events referenced and employed for historical analogies by Zelensky in his speeches based on the nationality of his audience. An asterisk (*) indicates that the event is referenced implicitly.

Year	Historical analogy/reference	Audience
482-	Kyiv, a city that has experienced many wars throughout its history, like Rome*	Italy
12 th -16 th century	Conflict in the Mariupol area between the Crimean Tatars, the Nogay Horde, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and Muscovy	France
c. 1566/1568-1648	Eighty Years' War/Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Empire	Netherlands
1583-1997	British Empire and colonialism*	Ireland
Late 18 th century	A group of American revolutionary leaders (later known as the 'Founding Fathers') establish the United States of America and elaborate a framework of government for the new nation	United States
1815-	Switzerland, a peaceful nation that has not fought an international war for more than two centuries	Switzerland
1845-1852	Irish Potato Famine*	Ireland
1914-1918	World War I	France
	• Battle of Ypres (1914-1918)	Belgium
	• Battle of Verdun (1916)	France
1920	Founding of the Nazi Party	Israel
1933-1945	Persecution of Jews by Nazi Germany	Israel
1937	Bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War	Spain
1939-1945	World War II	Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States
	• German-occupied Europe (1938-1945)	Estonia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal
	• Soviet invasion of Finland (1939)	Finland
	• Baltic Sea campaigns (1939-1945)	Norway
	• German bombing of Rotterdam (1940)	Netherlands
	• "We shall fight on the beaches" speech delivered by British PM Winston Churchill (1940)	United Kingdom
	• Battle of Britain (1940)	United Kingdom
	• "The Darkest Hour" phrase, widely attributed to Winston Churchill (1940-1941)*	Portugal
	• Soviet deportations from Estonia (1941 and 1945-1951)	Estonia
	• Holocaust/Final Solution to the Jewish Issue (1941-1945)	Canada, Denmark, France, Israel
	• Ukrainians save Jews during the Holocaust (1941-1944)	Israel
	• Babi Yar massacre carried out by Nazi Germany's forces that kill 30,771 Jews from Kyiv (1941)	Canada, Germany, Israel, United Kingdom
	• Attack on Pearl Harbor (1941)	United States
• Deportation of the Soviet Greeks (1942-1949)	Greece	
1948-	Korean conflict between South Korea and the totalitarian dictatorship of North Korea*	South Korea
1950-1953	Korean War	South Korea

1961-1989	Berlin Wall	Germany
1963	"I have a dream" speech delivered by the major leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr.	United States
1965-1989	Nicolae Ceaușescu regime	Romania
1969-1974	Quote from the Kyiv-born and former Israeli PM Golda Meir	Israel
1974	Carnation Revolution	Portugal
1986	Chernobyl disaster	Japan
1990	Lithuania becomes first Soviet republic to declare independence from the USSR*	Lithuania
1995	Tokyo subway sarin attack*	Japan
2001	September 11 attacks	United States
2005-2010	Quote from the former president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński	Poland
2010	Smolensk air disaster, in which Polish Air Force Flight 101 crashes near the Russian city of the same name, killing 96 people on board including the then-president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński	Poland
2011	Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that led to the nuclear Fukushima accident*	Japan
2014	Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation	Cyprus, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden
2014-2022	War in Donbas	Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Sweden
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 with 27 Australian citizens and 192 Dutch citizens on board by Russian-controlled forces (2014) 	Australia, Netherlands
2016	Transportation of a heavy mining generator to Perth on the Ukrainian Mriya aircraft, one of the largest in the world	Australia

Source: own production.

5.3. Frames

The qualitative analysis has allowed us to identify four main frames in Zelensky's speeches (the frame matrix can be found within Table 2).

Table 2. Frame packages identified in Zelensky's speeches.

Frame	1. Civilization and barbarism	2. David and Goliath	3. Ethical principles (values) vs. Strategic interests (anti-values)	4. The big family or the common home
Problem definition	Two different worlds. A global limit situation: the fate of the democratic world	Inferiority in the face of a powerful villain that Ukraine heroically defends itself against	Thanks, and criticisms: insufficient measures, invasion continues to be financed	Ukraine fights for the values and destiny of the continent
Causes	Russia's sense of impunity, wants to enslave Ukraine and other countries.	The enemy's greater resources are opposed by the moral superiority and determination of a united people	Cowardly, short-sighted, and hypocritical attitudes; injustice due to economic interests, equidistance	Ukraine = Europe; Russia threatens European integration

Consequences	War crimes, destruction, horror, refugees	The response will always be firm	Paralysis leads to more suffering; alliances don't work; lack of strong support	Together = more stability and security for the continent
Moral values / emotions	Freedom, peace, democracy, human rights, and international law	Heroism, unity, courage, patriotic sacrifice, dignity. Emotions: pride	Coherence, commitment, sincerity; emotions: a feeling of abandonment.	European unity; emotions: friendship between twinned nations
Solutions / actions	Exemplary punishments, alliance to deter aggressor nations	United resistance against the invader. Help from other countries	More support (weapons, "close the sky", and sanctions); new system of international commitments	Political leaders must strengthen the alliance with Ukraine; rapid accession to the EU
Symbolic devices (keywords, metaphors, historical analogies)	Occupiers, terrorist state, barbaric, crimes, bombs, savages, evil // free world, peaceful cities, civilization, schools, families, etc. Metaphors: "anti-war coalition", "United for peace". Historical analogies: destruction of cities, genocides, discourses and struggles against totalitarianism (e.g., Nazi, Soviet)	Ukraine: heroic defenders, unbreakable, martyrs, sacrifice, great struggle. Russia: nuclear blackmail, full-scale. Military machine/ordinary people. A life-saving mission vs. "a dictator with huge resources". Historical analogies: people against invaders or oppressive regimes	Peace vs. income; reliable partner, do more, true support, moral leaders, "indifference kills". Contrasts: words/facts. Metaphors: a market flooded with our blood. Historical analogies: "Never again" (Holocaust) as worthless words	Relatives, common history-heritage-values, our identity, common home, akin by nature, Europeans like you, live together, gateway to Europe

Source: own production.

5.3.1. Civilization and barbarism

This frame reproduces a narrative cliché with a long tradition in the Western world based on the idea that there are two antagonistic ways of life (e.g., Ordiz-Vázquez, 1993), that of the civilized order that responds to forms of harmonious coexistence, typical of the progress of human societies, and that of the savage actions of the peoples that represent backwardness and wickedness. In line with this dual approach, Zelensky presents the war as a borderline situation in which European values and the fate of the democratic world are at stake in the face of an aggressor whose atrocities (e.g., murdered children, ruined cities, tortured civilians, indiscriminate slaughter) can only be compared to those of Nazism and the most terrible events of the past.

Accordingly, his speeches insist on the idea that the conflict with Russia is not solely a Ukrainian issue, but rather a matter of "global security", so that the country he leads has become a line of defense of the civilized and "free world" against the barbaric attack of a terrorist, destructive, and invading state committing war crimes. As a result, Ukraine has no choice but to wage war against a cruel villain who lacks all scruples and causes unconscionable destruction. The invasion appears as one more phase of a premeditated plan of conquest that affects all neighboring countries and endangers the entire continent.

All this makes an alliance of states defending freedom essential to jointly dissuade those countries that intend to conquer others, which necessarily im-

plies an exemplary punishment of the Russian officers: "So that no other country in the world thinks that it can kill people with impunity just like that, that it can destroy neighboring countries" (Sweden).

The inhumanity that Zelensky associates with Russia contrasts with the values with which he represents Ukraine. This frame is seen in the constant use of terms and expressions that convey "a collision of two different worlds" (South Korea). From this perspective, the semantic map related to the Russian state is mainly constituted by such words as "invasion", "barbaric", "terrorist state", "brutal", "destruction", "looting", "occupiers", "war criminals", "colonizers", "missiles", "killings", "tyranny", "evil", "without God", "lawlessness", etc. In contrast, the country Zelensky leads is framed by terms such as "peaceful cities/life", "communities", "freedom", "democracy", "civilization", "values", "schools", "hospitals", "families", "hearts", "goodness", and "future", among others.

The narrative he establishes about the war with this frame is that of a battlefield between good and evil, expressed in multiple dichotomies: freedom/tyranny, solidarity/hatred, great people/savages, light/darkness, life/death, peace/state violence, free world/aggressors. With metaphors ("anti-war coalition", "united for peace", "wall... between freedom and slavery... grows stronger with each bomb", etc.) and historical analogies the Ukrainian President tries to make this frame assimilated by the audiences of his messages.

5.3.2. David and Goliath

The perspective offered by this frame is not only the unbalanced fighting situation against an evil and much more powerful enemy (Alonso Belmonte & Porto, 2020; Van Os *et al.*, 2008), but also the central idea that Ukrainians are bravely and heroically defending their homeland and the freedom of the world. Thus, he opposes the inferiority of military resources to their greatness or moral superiority before the enemy: “The largest state in the world... And the smallest from a moral point of view” (Japan) and the firm response of a whole country united for the defense of the Ukrainian state and which they will not be able “to break” (e.g., European Parliament and Romania).

In this sense, Zelensky’s speeches extol values such as heroism, unity, firmness, courage, patriotic sacrifice, or dignity, among others, as well as appealing to emotions such as the defense of one’s own homeland and national pride which make it easy to identify with the resistance to submission to an invader. As actors associated with this narrative, he praises anonymous soldiers who have acted as “heroic defenders” and represents the citizens of the country as a whole as a people turned into an army ready to defend itself to the end: “Unarmed Ukrainians protested everywhere in the occupied cities. Stopping armored vehicles with bare hands... Ukrainians became heroes. Hundreds of thousands of people. Entire cities. Children, adults – all” (United Kingdom). Moreover, Zelensky assigns himself the archetype of the classical hero who has a mission of salvation: “As the Leader of my people” (United States).

Among the words used to promote this frame are “firmly”, “unbreakable”, “heroes”, “martyrs”, “sacrifice”, “together”, “brave”, “homeland”, “great struggle”, as well as others that express the abuse by the Russian giant: “nuclear blackmail”, “full-scale invasion”, “huge resources”. In this way, it is also possible to identify the repeated use of antitheses such as offensive-conquest/resistance, military machine/ordinary people, cruelty/courage, weapons for evil/to save lives. Likewise, he alludes to analogous historical situations in which a people courageously defended itself against the invader (e.g., Finland against the USSR, the Greek heroes of Thermopylae, etc.) or rebelled against an authoritarian regime with which there could be no dialogue (e.g., the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania, Carnation Revolution in Portugal, etc.).

5.3.3. Ethical principles versus strategic interests

The core of this frame is the contrast between values and anti-values attributed to the behavior of other countries and other international actors. Therefore, the central idea presented is the problem of strategic interests taking precedence over ethics, since, although “peace is more important than income” (United States), some supposed allies do not respond as they should. Such a perspective implies, along with expressions of gratitude, the expression of abundant reproaches for the insufficiency and lack of force of the measures to help Ukraine, so that the maintenance of the economic financing of the invader and the paralysis of some countries lead to worse consequences and more deaths.

The values at stake, according to this interpretation, are firmness of principles, coherence, the sacrifice of economic interests for the values of peace and freedom, honor, sincerity, fraternity (“reliable partner”), and global commitment. Against this he denounces the cowardly, short-sighted, and hypocritical attitudes, indifference to the victims, strategic calculations, injustice due to the primacy of economic interests, incoherence, and equidistance of some rulers and states, as well as the feeling of abandonment that Ukraine has experienced due to failed alliances. Within this narrative, the clarity of support from ordinary people and responsible companies contrasts with the reluctance and obstacles of politicians and businessmen who are driven only by selfishness and sacrifice principles for money. In addition to emphasizing the differences between what some leaders do and others do, we can observe the following antitheses: strong/weak, wise/doesn’t see the obvious, honest/hypocrite, words/facts, true leadership/lack of leadership, afraid/not afraid of Russia.

The repetition of the word “economy” as a rhetorical strategy and the expression of terms such as “help”, “sanctions”, “protect”, “do much more”, “new alliances”, “true” support, or “moral leaders”, among others, constitute the semantic set that tends to project this frame. Slogans such as “indifference kills” (Israel), “stop the war” (e.g. Germany, Norway), or “stop Russia” (Canada), and metaphors such as “leave this market flooded with our blood” (United States) or “don’t be a resort for murderers” (Italy) are associated with the main solutions he calls for: cutting off any economic relationship with Russia, creating a “no-fly zone”, and a greater international commitment. We detect historical analogies here as well, such as “the trade routes” that “are barbed wire over the new wall that divides Europe” or “‘Never again’ (a post-Holocaust slogan). And who saw that these words are worthless” (Germany).

5.3.4. The big family or the common home

These symbolic elements, which accentuate the central idea that the situation in Ukraine is a problem that affects all European nations that share the same values, are found above all in the speeches that Zelensky addresses to the countries of the continent. At the core of this frame are metaphors appealing to the strength of European unity and feelings of friendship between countries that are part of the same big family with common cultural, historical, and identity ties: “To live together in a European family” (Denmark); “In our common European home” (e.g., Ireland/Greece); “Ukraine (...) has already done a lot to protect our common European values, our common European home” (Sweden).

This interpretive frame implies that Ukraine’s destiny must be its full and rapid accession to the EU, and that European political representatives must strengthen the alliance with Ukraine to ensure the security of the entire continent, since peace, the values of European integration and decades of history of the common project are under threat. Consequently, Ukraine is represented as “the gateway to Europe for Russian troops” (Italy), whose soldiers are fighting “for the security of the European Union!” (Sweden), and that it is the victim of an “aggression (...) against everything that life in Europe is built on” (Denmark).

The frequency analysis of the words used shows the quantitative prominence of the invading State (“invasion”, 50; “occupiers”, 44; “full-scale”, 22) in its adjective and noun form (“russian”, 366; “russia”, 240), the invaded nation (“ukraine”, 292; “defend”, 26) and the emphasis on the act of “war” (239) that this military operation entails. There is also a certain pre-eminence of appeals to the global scale of the conflict (“world”, 174; “countries”, 56), to “security” (44; “nuclear”, 19), and more specifically, to European territory (“europe”, 149; “european”, 110, “EU”, 19). The values of “peace” (118), “freedom” (108), and the fundamental right to life (“live”, 48; “lives”, 32) stand out, together with terms linked to “leadership” (41), collective solidarity (“together”, 63; “support”, 63; “union”, 54), and “common” (42) “history” (36) or “values” (31).

Also noteworthy are verbs associated with war destruction (“killed”, 61; “destroy”, 67; “destroyed”, 58; “crimes”, 32) and explicit mentions of military operations (“cities”, 93; “troops”, 67; “mariupol”, 66), the “weapons” (46) used (“missiles”, 45; “bombs”, 34), and their victims (“ukrainians”, 97; “children”, 90). Another relevant group of concepts is linked to appeals to the audience (“people”, 339; “feel”, 28; “imagine”, 27), demands for “help” (64; “stop”, 75; “sanctions”, 64; “support”, 63; “need”, 62; “companies”, 36; “protect”, 31), and thanks (“grateful”, 76; “thank”, 37).

6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has analyzed the persuasive narrative that Zelensky constructed as part of his international public diplomacy strategy to mobilize support for his country’s cause in the war against Russia. The results reveal that the Ukrainian President articulated his vision and the values at stake through four dominant frames: civilization and barbarism; David and Goliath; ethical principles versus strategic interests; and the big family or the common home (RQ3). These interpretive patterns associated with certain shared cultural themes (metaphors, myths, narratives, and values) reiterate the existence of a global threat, which goes beyond the situation in Ukraine, and a clash of antagonistic worlds and values between which a choice must be made.

Among the symbolic mechanisms with which the Ukrainian leader tries to get audiences to assimilate these sets of reasoning, the historical analogy stands out, which is detected in all his speeches and allows him to adapt the discourse to the audiences of different countries, by alluding to fundamental elements of the collective memory of each community (RQ2). He attempts to evoke empathy from heterogeneous audiences and provides a simplified description of the issue, clearly attributing roles and responsibilities in the situation and outlining necessary measures based on lessons from the past. Additionally, to increase the emotional impact of his addresses and encourage adherence to the proposed solutions, Zelensky employs rhetorical devices that directly appeal to the audience’s actions and uses storytelling to symbolize the suffering of the Ukrainian people and the brutality of the aggressor. The speeches’

emotional tone is also reinforced using repetition devices (such as anaphora, epiphora, and anadiplosis), as well as rhymes, connotative words, sentences or maxims, and antitheses to express the opposition of two distinct moral models (RQ1).

However, the reductionist view of reality projected by the “civilization” and “barbarism” dichotomy, despite its persuasive value, carries potential risks for public debate in contemporary societies. It contributes to legitimizing the use of polarizing discursive strategies (Marín-Albaladejo, 2022) and excessively simplifies the interpretation of international issues (Novoshytskyi, 2024). In this context, some scholars associate Zelensky’s speeches with a populist leadership style (Kuttig, 2022) or even with a Manichaean rhetoric that demonizes the adversary, excludes alternative perspectives, and complicates conflict resolution through negotiation (Baysha, 2023). Another potential limitation of his discursive strategy lies in the internal controversy that occasionally arises within the same country between different ideological groups regarding the historical events on which some analogies are based (Casanova, 2020; Kitzinger, 2000). Moreover, the recurrent comparison of current events to the Holocaust, Nazism, fascism, and other totalitarian regimes—like those made by Putin (Camargo & Urbán, 2022)—may distort public understanding and collective memory of these events, ultimately trivializing their horrific consequences (French & Baker Webster, 2022).

Our analysis identifies the frames and rhetorical devices employed by the Ukrainian President to construct an effective narrative aimed at mobilizing political representatives and influencing public opinion in democratic countries. In this regard, we have observed how European leaders have adopted some essential elements of Zelensky’s discourse. For instance, the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, referenced Zelensky’s rhetoric in her speech to the institution on February 9, 2023, stating: “When the world thinks of Ukraine, they think of the heroes fighting the odds of David beating Goliath (...) We understand that you are fighting not only for your values, but for ours” (Metsola, 2023). A year earlier, in the same venue, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, remarked that the issue “is not just about Ukraine” and framed the situation in terms like those used by Zelensky (Von der Leyen, 2022).

Consequently, it would be valuable for future research to explore and compare the extent to which the frames and analogies introduced by the Ukrainian President influence the decisions and statements of political elites, media narratives, opinion leaders, and social media in the countries he addresses. Additionally, we recommend examining the variation in his rhetorical strategies across different cultural contexts, particularly in less Westernized audiences, or over a more recent time frame—especially considering changes in the international arena brought about by the Gaza conflict and the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency.

7. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyse or synthesize study data.	Authors 1, 3
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Authors 1, 2
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Authors 1, 2
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Authors 1, 3
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Authors 1, 2
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Authors 1, 2, 3
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre- or post-publication stages.	Authors 1, 2, 3

8. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

In this article, artificial intelligence has been used solely for assistance and review purposes related to the correct use of academic English. For this specific aim, the following tool was employed: GPT-4o.

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