



The Coverage and Reception of  
the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict



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# Comparative analysis of international legal terminology in Polish media discourse: The case of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict

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*Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Mediation of Russian-Ukrainian War:  
Language, Representation, Society, Culture*

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# Aim and Research Questions



To compare how public international legal terminology, especially nominal expressions related to warfare and conflict—is adopted and framed in the Polish media discourse during the Ukrainian-Russian conflict.


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1. How are key international legal terms framed in Polish and Romanian media coverage?
  2. What similarities and differences exist in their use and editorial treatment?
  3. What are the implications for public perception, media literacy, and international legal norms?
  4. How does the use of legal terminology influence criminalisation or normalisation of conflict actions?
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# Scope of Terminology Analyzed:

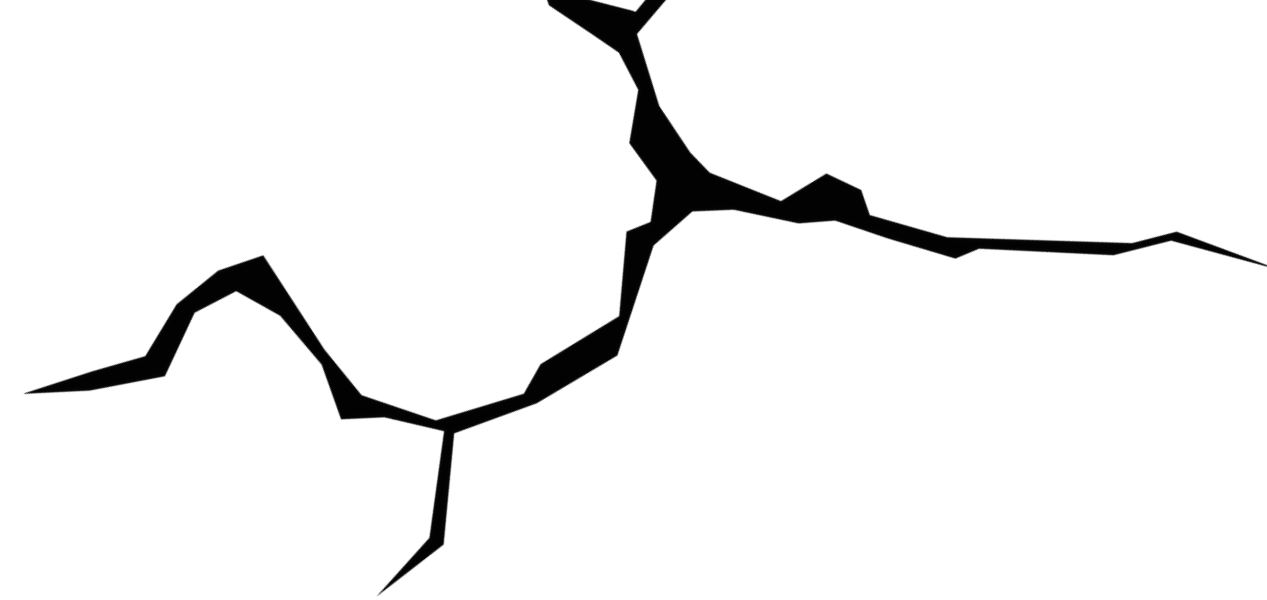


Terms within the semantic domain of warfare and international law, including:

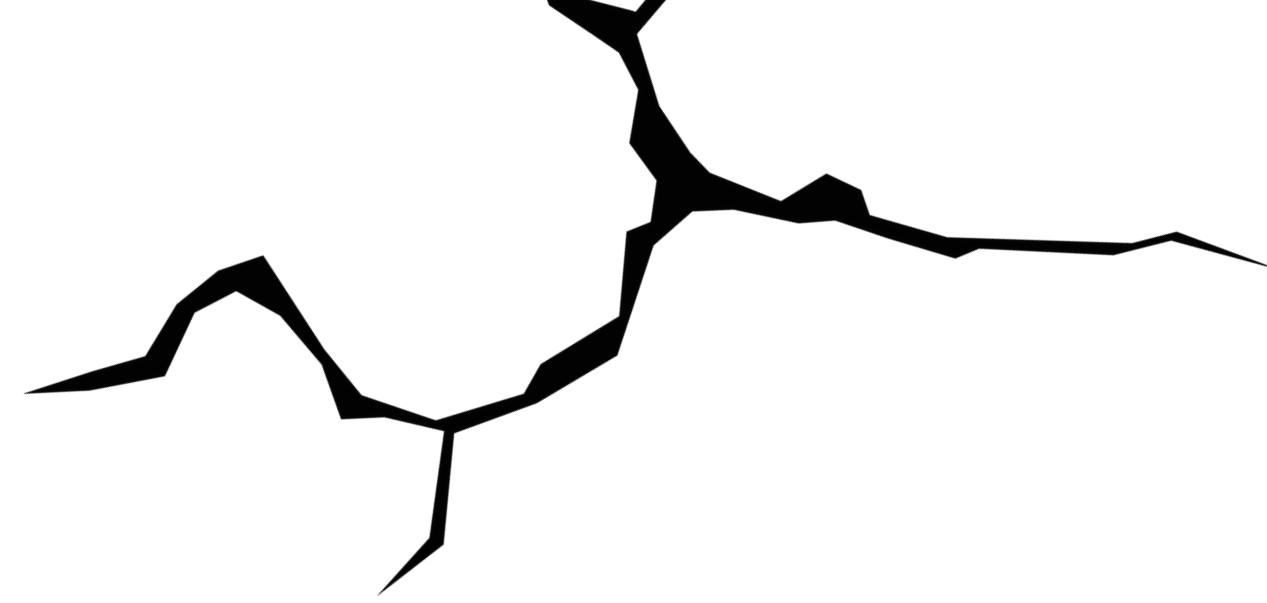
- War (Pol. *wojna*)
  - Armed conflict (Pol. *konflikt zbrojny*)
  - Armed invasion (Pol. *zbrojna inwazja*)
  - Hostilities (Pol. *działania zbrojne*)
  - Military operations (Pol. *operacje wojskowe*)
  - Aggression (Pol. *agresja*)
  - Martial law (Pol. *stan wojenny*)
  - War crime (Pol. *zbrodnia wojenna*)
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# Data

- Source: Opinion-forming online news outlets in Poland and Romania
- Timeframe: February 24, 2022 – March 2024
- Corpus construction methodology detailed at:
- <https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/corpus-compilation-and-data-annotation-protocols-in-corecon/>



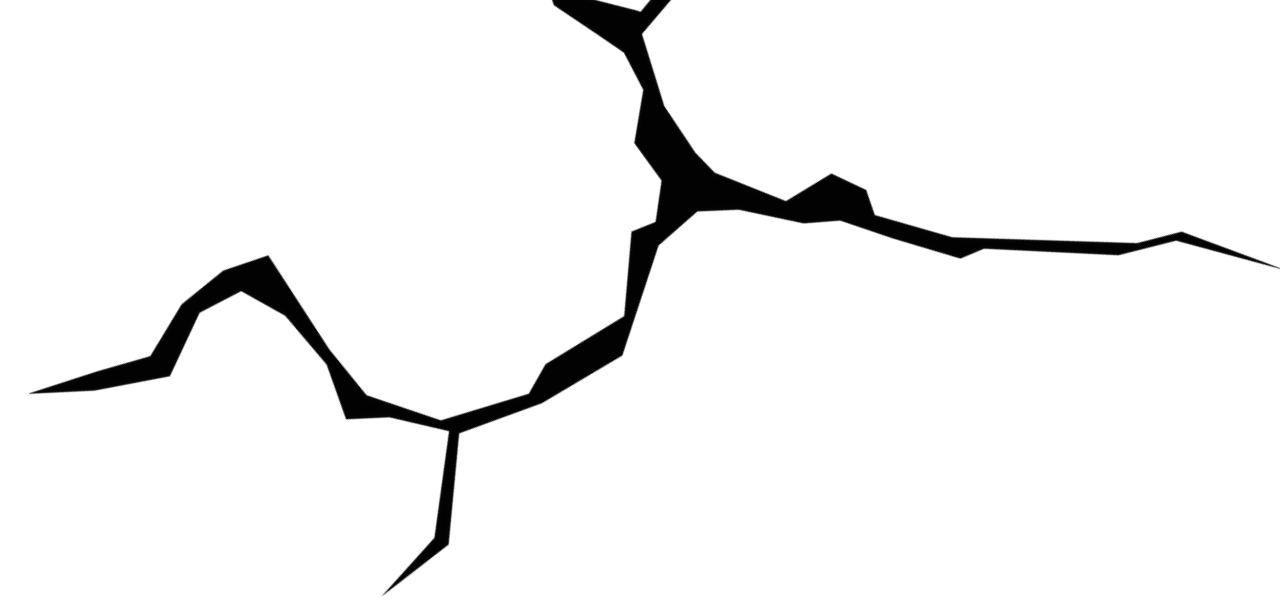
# **Method and Expected Contribution**



- Tool: Sketch Engine
- Analytical steps:
  1. Identification of key legal terms in the corpus
  2. Frequency analysis in both languages
  3. Collocation analysis to detect typical usage
  4. Semantic frame analysis to interpret contextual meanings

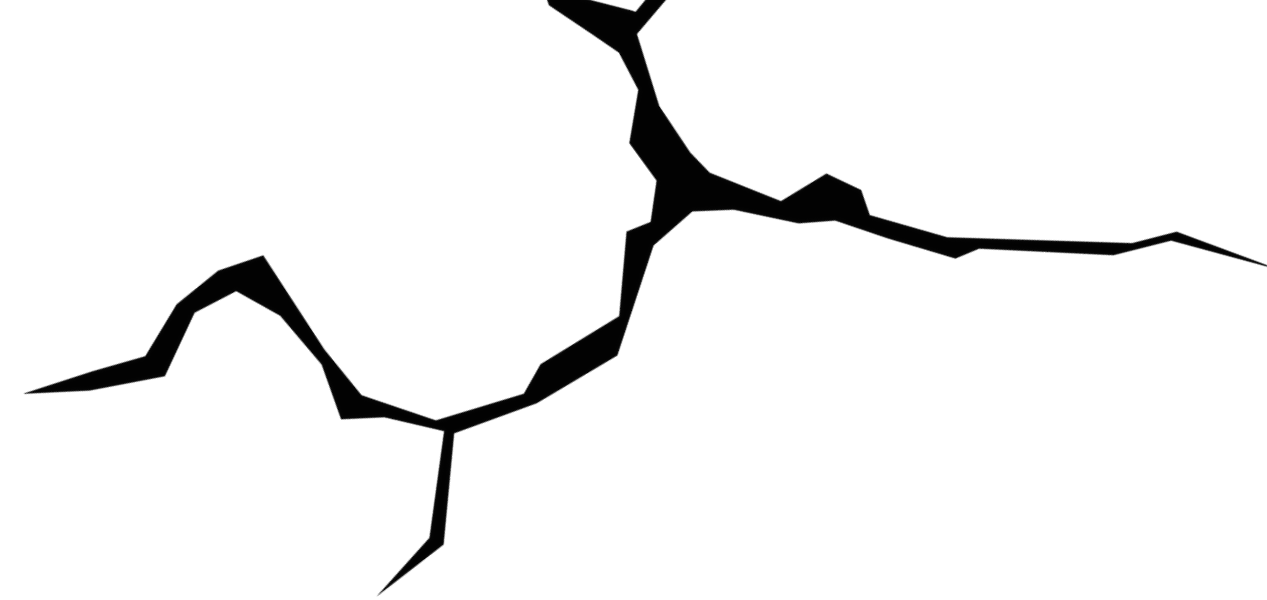
To enhance understanding of how media in different national contexts engage with international legal language during armed conflict, influencing public opinion, legal awareness, and the perception of legitimacy or illegitimacy of war-related actions.

# War as a Multidimensional Concept




- **Conceptual Scope:** War is both qualitatively and quantitatively defined across disciplines (e.g., political science, history, sociology, philosophy).
- **Philosophical vs. Legal Approaches:** From Hobbesian notions of insecurity to SIPRI's metric-based definitions (>1,000 deaths/year).

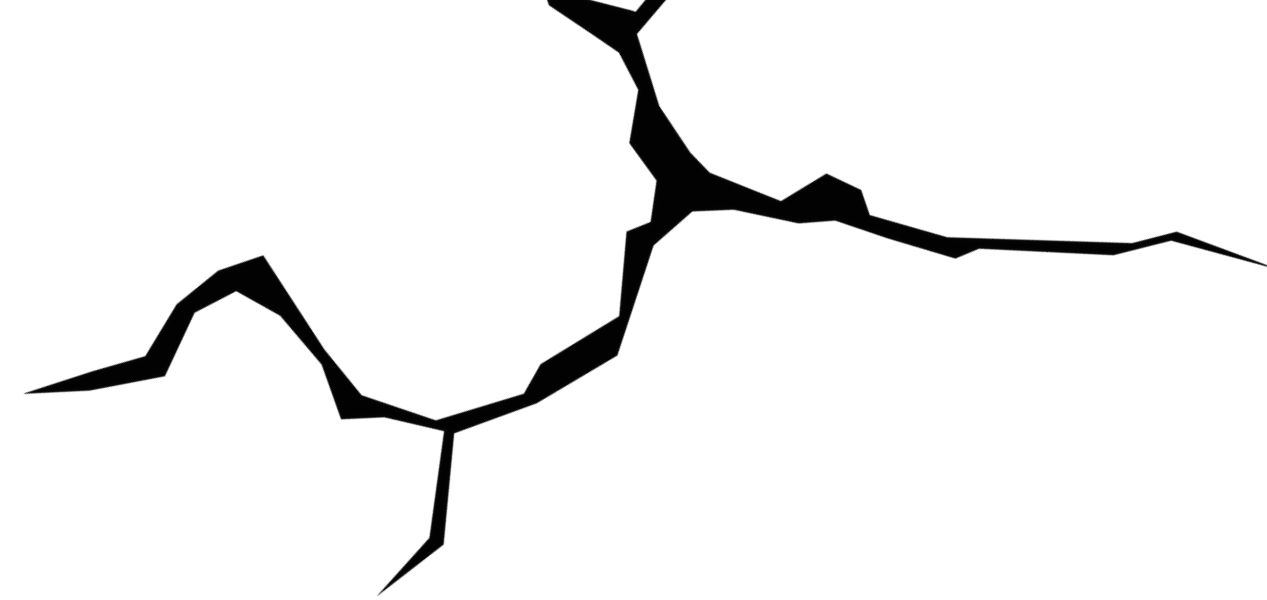
# Prohibition of Force



## UN Charter Article 2(4):

- Prohibits the **threat or use of force** against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.
  - Recognised as a **peremptory norm (ius cogens)**.
  - Reflects the international community's **commitment to peace and security**.
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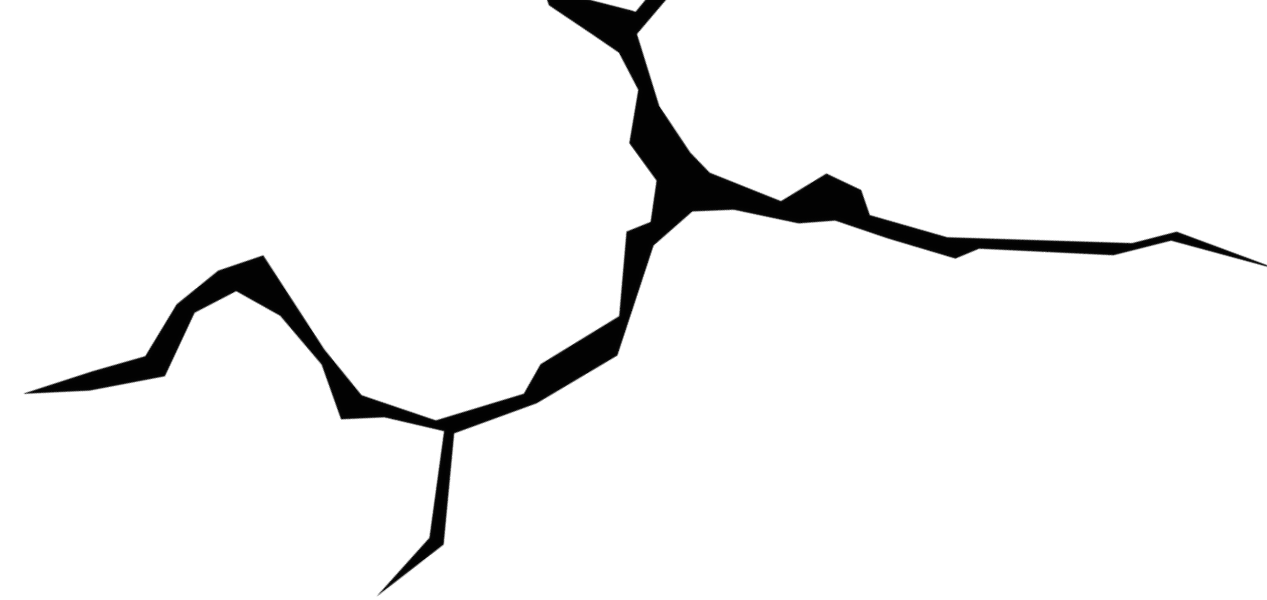
# Lack of a Singular Legal Definition



- Lack of a Singular Legal Definition:
- International law does not offer a universally recognised definition of „war“.
- The concept is interpreted through a combination of:
  - **Treaties** (e.g., UN Charter),
  - **Customary international law**, and
  - **General legal principles**.

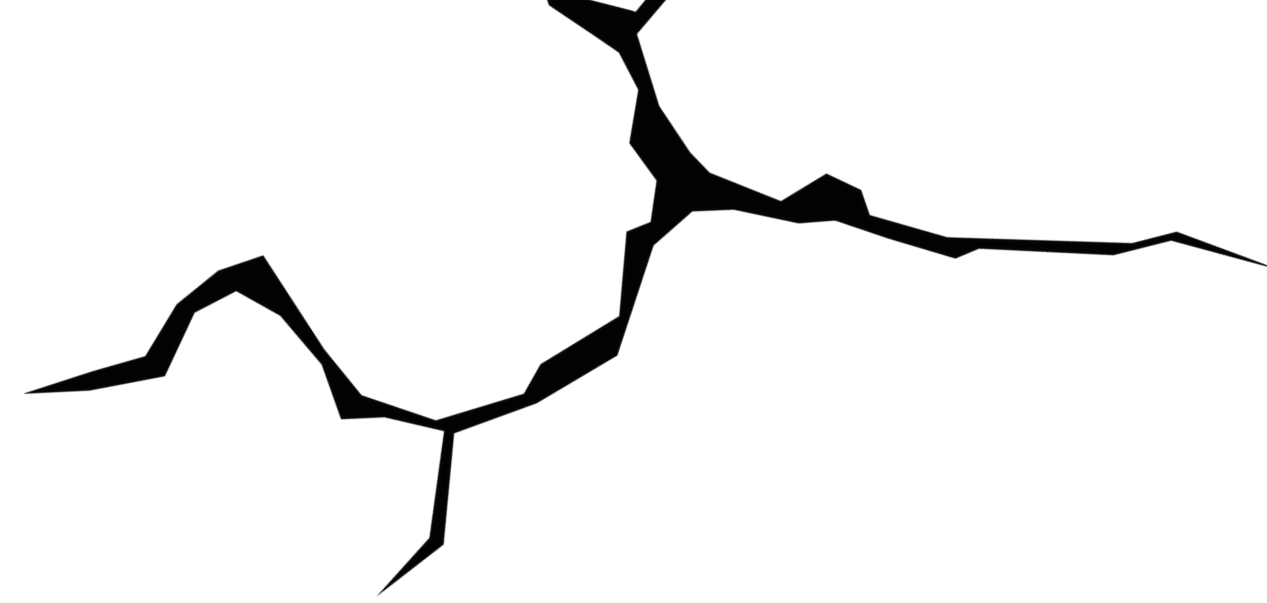


## Classical Legal Definition



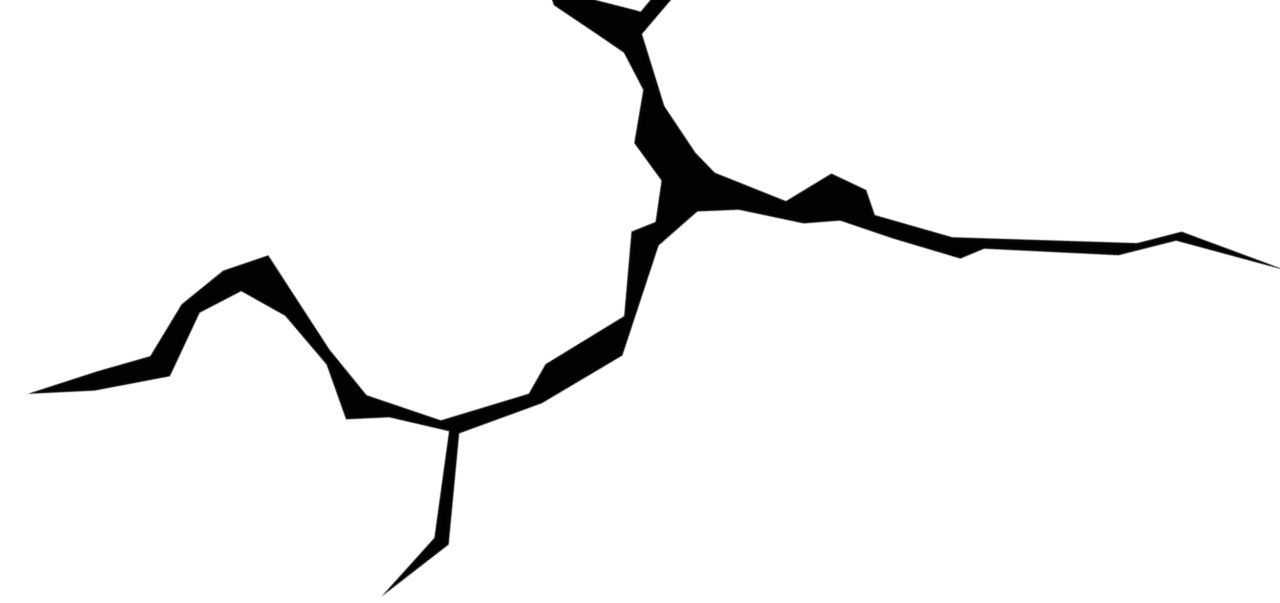
- Oppenheim (1952):  
“A contention between two or more States through their armed forces for the purpose of overpowering each other and imposing such conditions of peace as the victor pleases.”
- Emphasises **formal state conflict**, but **excludes** non-traditional warfare (e.g., guerrilla tactics, insurgencies).

# Formal Declaration of War – Historical and Legal Function



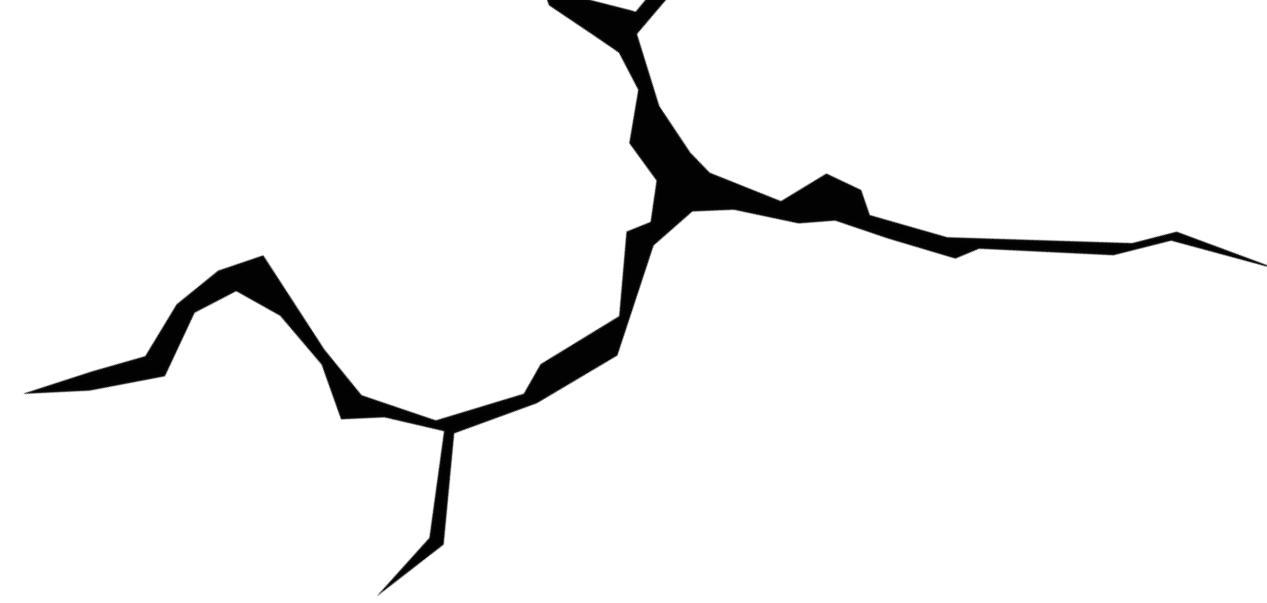
- Defined in **Hague Convention III, Article 1**:
  - A **unilateral act** marking the transition from *law of peace* to *ius in bello*.
  - Triggers legal consequences:
    - **Diplomatic severance,**
    - **Neutrality enforcement,**
    - **Humanitarian law applicability.**

## **Decline in Formal Declarations:**



- Rare in **21st-century conflicts**.
- **Notable exceptions:**  
**Georgia (2008)** against Russia (South Ossetia),  
**Israel (2023)** against Hamas.
- Most contemporary wars **begin without formal declaration**.

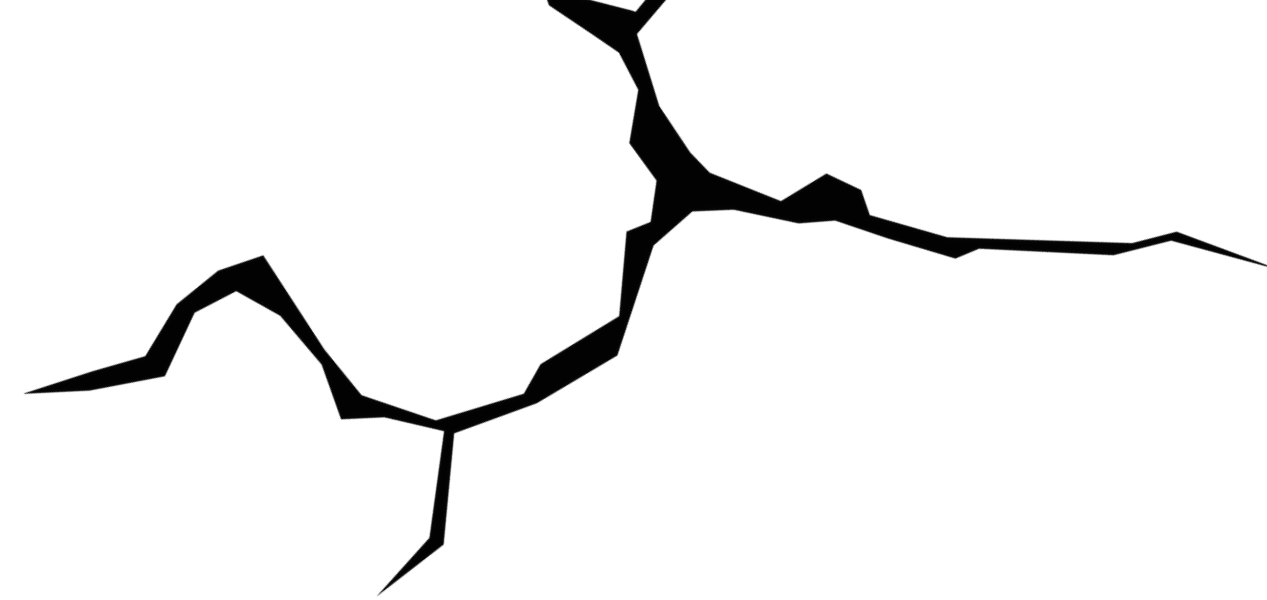
## Case Study – Russia and Ukraine



- No formal war declarations by either state.
- Russia's narrative:
  - Justified as a “*special military operation*” under **UN Charter Article 51**.
  - Claimed defensive intent to protect Donbas population.
  - Reinforced by **Criminal Code Article 207.3** banning contradicting narratives.
- Ukraine's response:
  - Denounced as **aggression**,
  - Imposed **martial law**, but **did not declare war**.

# Martial Law

- **Domestic measure**, but subject to international constraints:
  - **ICCPR Art. 4, ECHR Art. 15** – allow derogations during emergencies.
  - Must meet standards of **necessity, proportionality, non-discrimination, temporariness, and judicial oversight**.

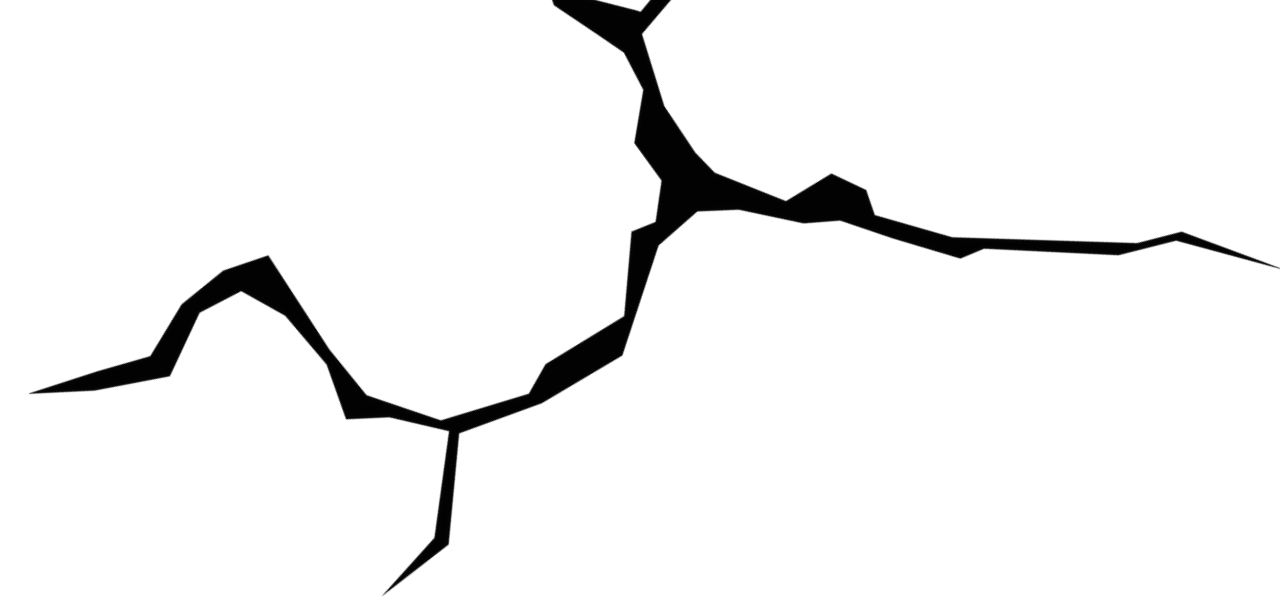


# Armed Conflict

- **Geneva Conventions (1949), Article 2:** Establish "armed conflict" as an umbrella term, applicable regardless of formal war declaration.
- **Typology:**
  - **IAC** – between states.
  - **NIAC** – within a state, per *Tadić* case (ICTY, 1995).
- **SIPRI Classification:** Quantitative threshold ( $\geq 1,000$  deaths = war).

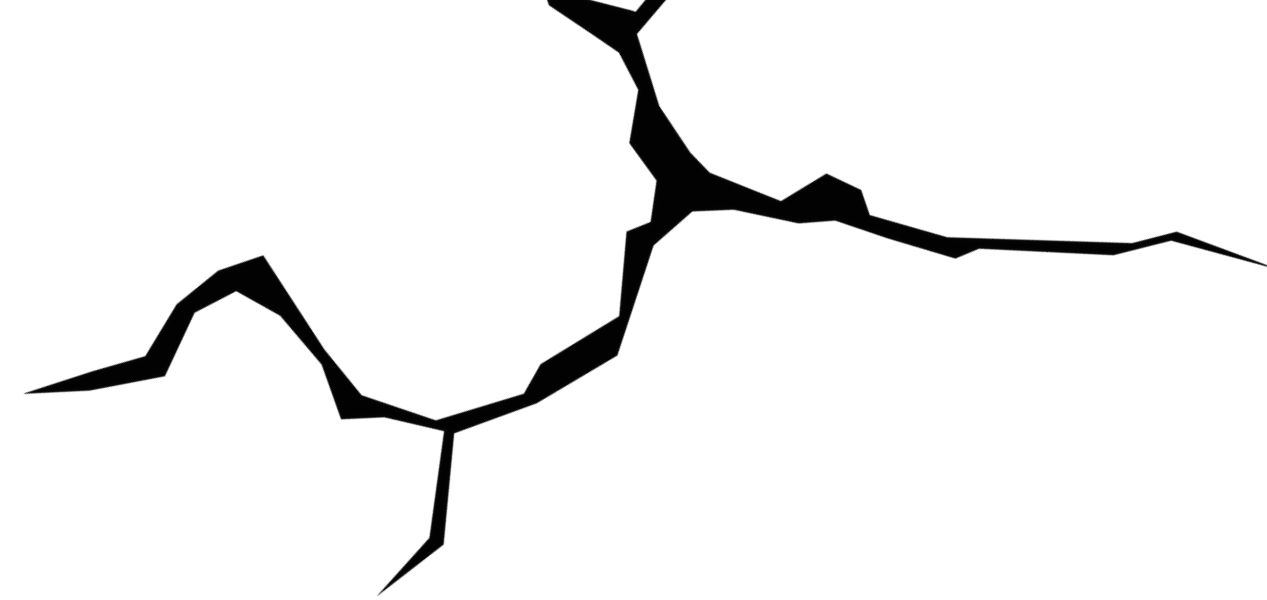


# Hostilities and Military Operations



- **Hostilities:** Dynamic form of armed conflict; includes acts of violence (offensive/defensive).
  - Regulated by **Hague Convention IV** and **ICRC's Interpretive Guidance (2009)**.
- **Military Operations:**
  - Encompass maneuvers, offensives, bombardments.
  - Governed by **IHL**, especially **Geneva Conventions** and **Additional Protocols**.
  - Emphasize **distinction**, **proportionality**, and **civilian protection**.

# Aggression and Armed Invasion

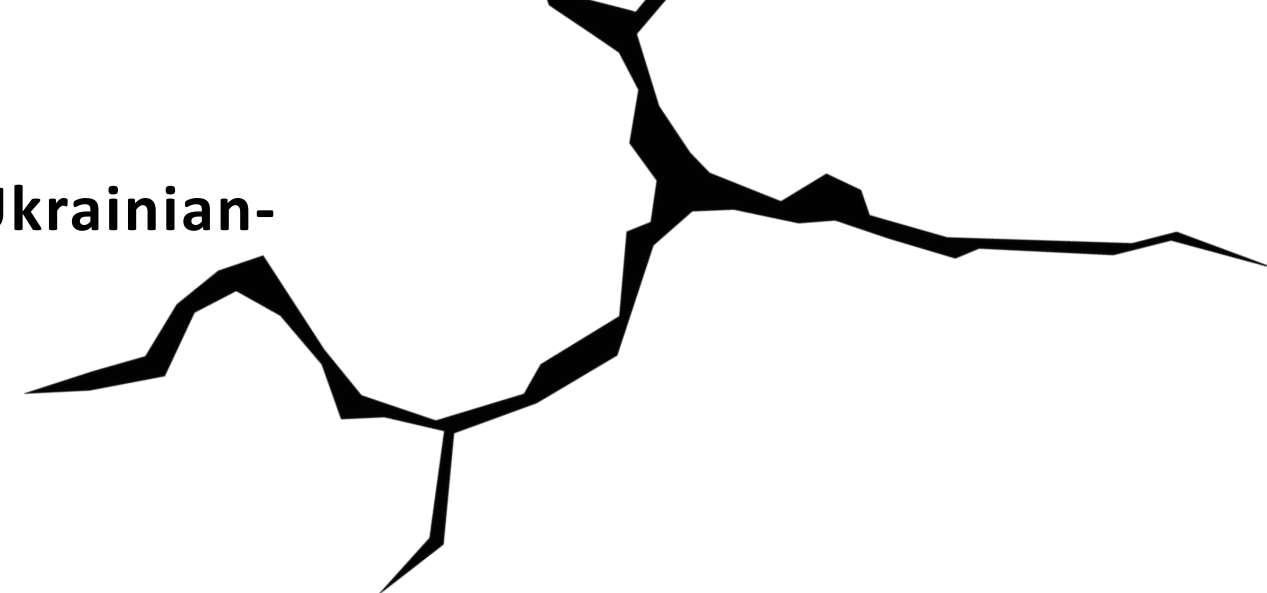


- **Aggression:**
  - Defined in **Rome Statute Art. 8 bis** and **UNGA Res. 3314 (1974)**.
  - Encompasses **planning and execution** by political/military leaders.
  - Acts include **invasion, bombardment, blockade**.
  - Key legal references:
    - **ICJ (2022)** – Ukraine v. Russia.
    - **ECHR (2022)** – frames Russia's actions as aggression.
    - **ICC** – lacks jurisdiction but Ukraine urges prosecution.
- **Armed Invasion:**
  - Subset of aggression; violates **UN Charter Art. 2(4)**.
  - Legally enables **self-defence (Art. 51)** and **IHL applicability**.



Term	Legal Domain	Specificity	Short Description	Primary Legal Framework	Example Use
armed aggression	Jus ad bellum	instantaneous	focuses on initiation of war (a grave, unlawful use of force by one state against another)	UN Charter (Art. 51), UNGA Res. 3314	full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022)
armed conflict	Jus in bello	continuing	focuses on conduct of war (sustained armed violence between parties)	Geneva Conventions (Common Arts. 2 & 3), ICTY Tadić case	Syrian Civil War, Russia-Ukraine conflict
armed invasion	Jus ad bellum	initiatory	violation of sovereignty	UN Charter (Art. 2(4)), UNGA Res. 3314	Russia entering Crimea (2014)
hostilities	Jus in bello	episodic	broad combat activities, signal the start or existence of armed conflict	Geneva Conventions, AP I & II	from cyber attacks to artillery exchanges
martial law	domestic	emergency	domestic emergency and suspension of civil law	national laws	Ukraine's declaration after 2022 invasion
military operations	Jus in bello	strategic	types of tactical maneuvers	Geneva Conventions, IHL	airstrikes, sieges, military deployments, cross-border skirmishes, shelling
war	Jus ad bellum	declarative	requires formal declaration of the state	customary international law, Hague Conventions	WWII, Iran-Iraq War

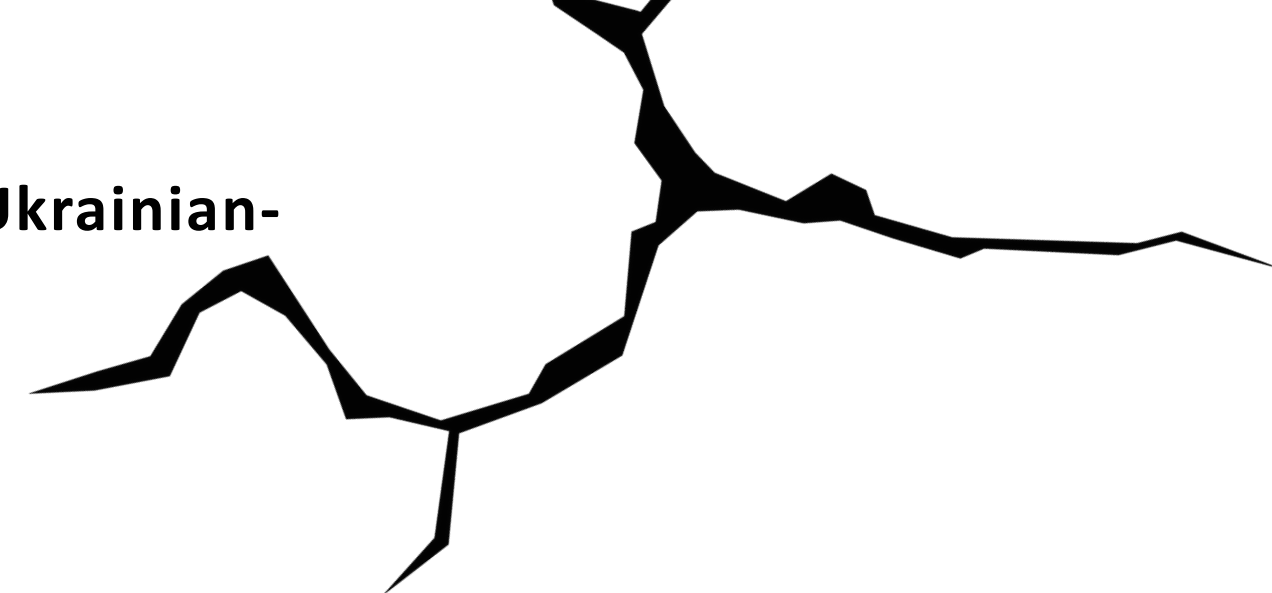
## Quantitative Analysis of Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse on the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict



### Dominance of the term *wojna* ("war"):

- Appears **5,187 times** (over **90%** of war-related legal terms).
- Functions as the primary narrative frame.
- Frequently intensified with adjectives like *brutalna* ("brutal"), *pełnoskalowa* ("full-scale"), and *totalna* ("total").
- Commonly collocates with action verbs (*rozpocząć*, *trwać*, *wygrać*) and time markers (*pierwszy dzień wojny*, *rok wojny*).
- Serves both **descriptive and affective/mobilising** roles.

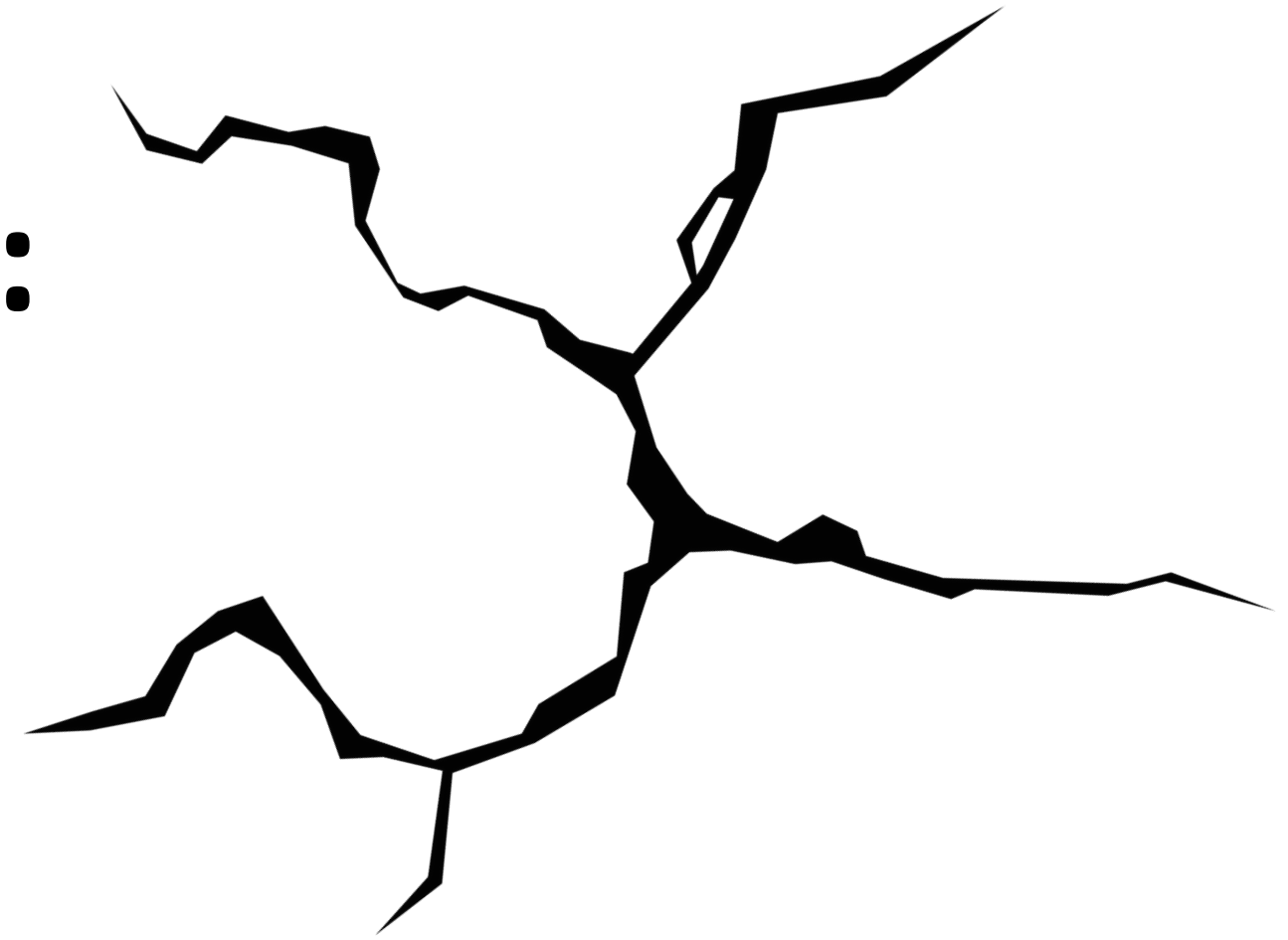
# Quantitative Analysis of Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse on the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict



## Other terms (frequency in corpus):

- *Agresja* ("aggression"): **454** times (~8%), tied to blame attribution (e.g., *rosyjska agresja*).
- *Zbrodnia wojenna* ("war crime"): **58** times, linked to legal accountability, e.g. *Międzynarodowy Trybunał Karny*.
- *Konflikt zbrojny* ("armed conflict"): **29** times, typically used in institutional/legal discourse.
- *Operacje wojskowe* ("military operations"): **29** times, with neutral/technical tone.
- *Stan wojenny* ("martial law"): **21** times, in contexts of legal mechanisms and national security.
- *Działania zbrojne* ("hostilities"): **9** times, used in factual summaries.
- *Zbrojna inwazja* ("armed invasion"): **6** times, surprisingly rare despite legal relevance.

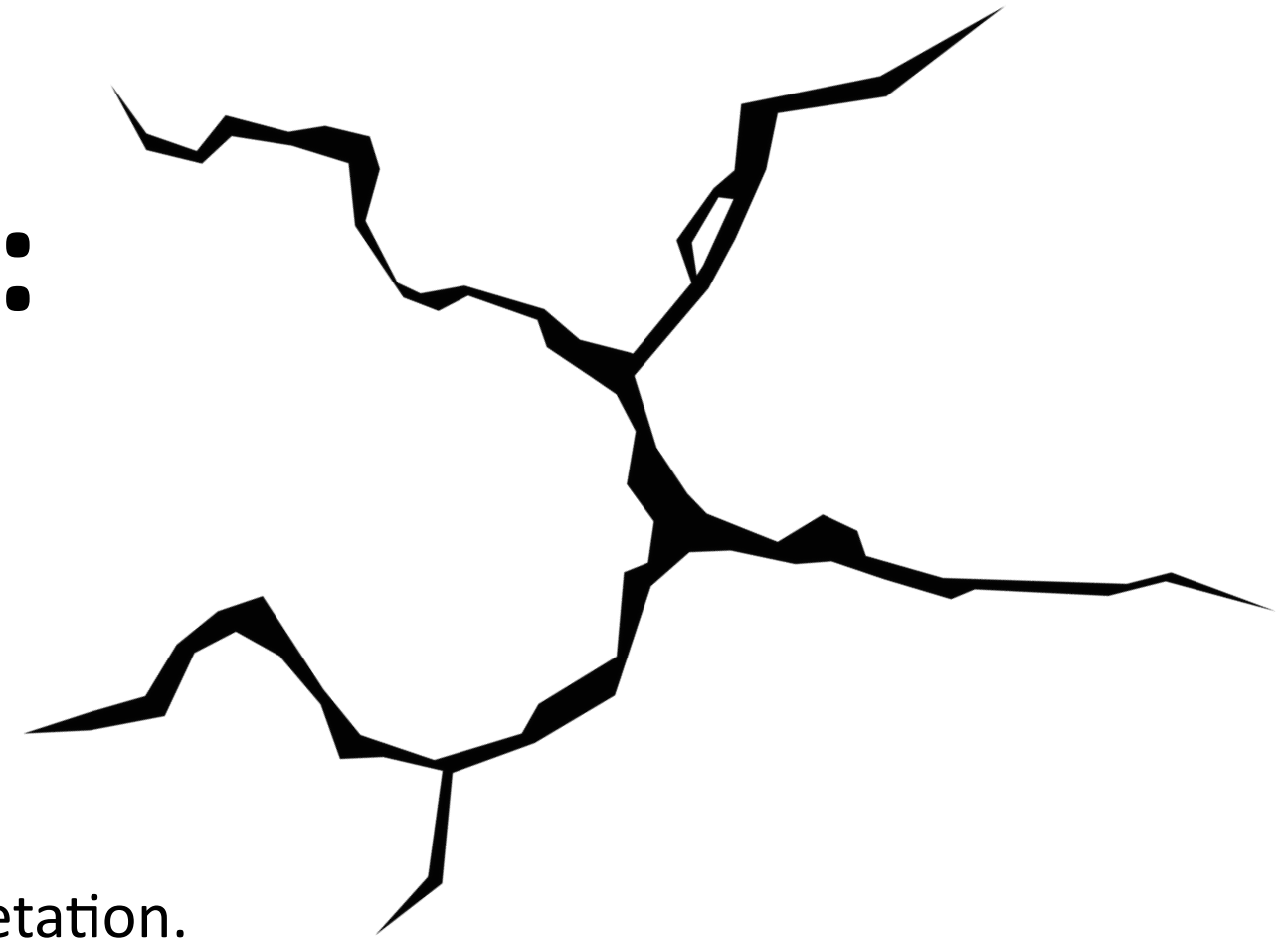
# Discourse Patterns & Framing:



## Media Preference:

- Clear preference for *wojna* and *agresja*, which **amplify emotional and legal framing**.
- More formal/legal terms (e.g., *konflikt zbrojny*, *operacje wojskowe*) are used in **institutional, technical, or bureaucratic** contexts.
- This suggests a strategic **lexical emphasis on illegality, brutality, and existential threat**.

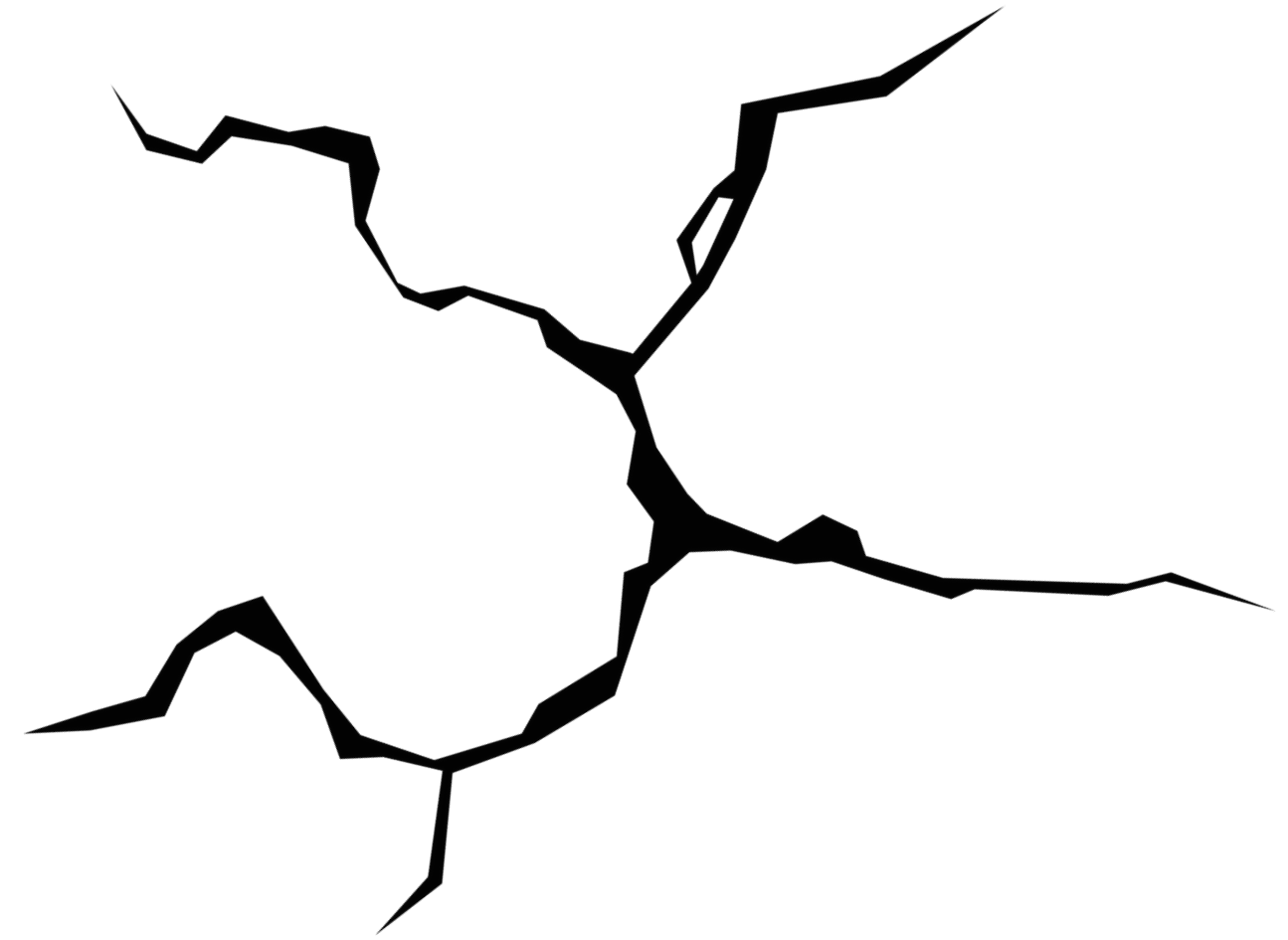
# **Discourse Patterns & Framing:**



## **Discursive Roles:**

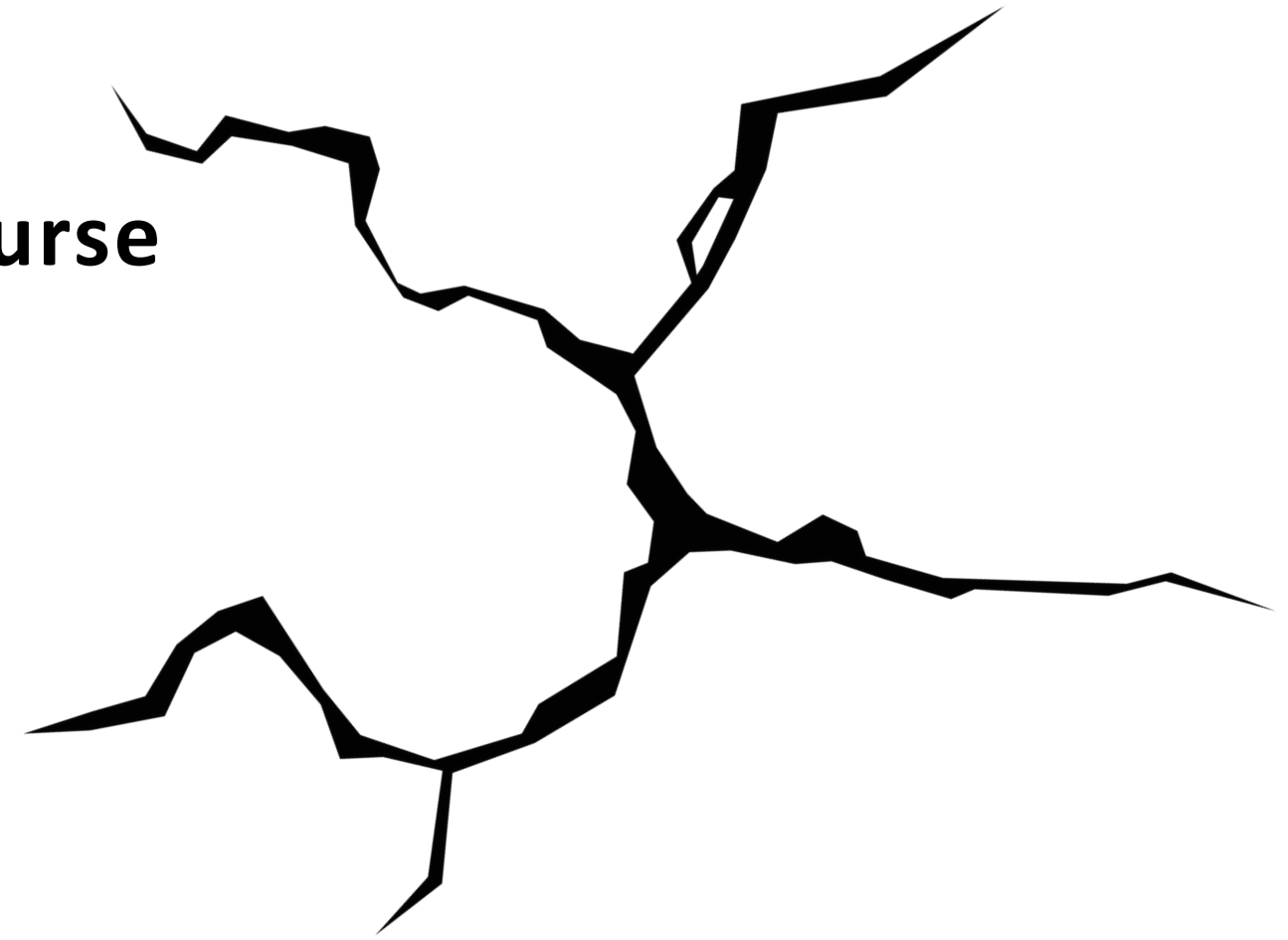
- *Wojna* appears widely in **headlines, leads, and summaries**, shaping public interpretation.
- *Agresja* supports legal and moral evaluation, often **explicitly linking Russia to criminal responsibility**.
- *Zbrodnia wojenna* aligns with **international humanitarian law discourse** and moral condemnation.
- Technical terms are **fact-oriented** and largely **excluded from editorial or emotive framing**.

# Conclusions:



Polish media overwhelmingly frame the conflict as a full-scale war, with strong emphasis on legality, aggression, and victimisation. Less emotive, technical terminology remains marginal. This pattern reflects a deliberate alignment with international legal norms and a rejection of euphemistic or neutral language, distancing Polish coverage from narratives typical of authoritarian or state-controlled propaganda.

# Genre-Specific Use and Rhetorical Functions of International Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse

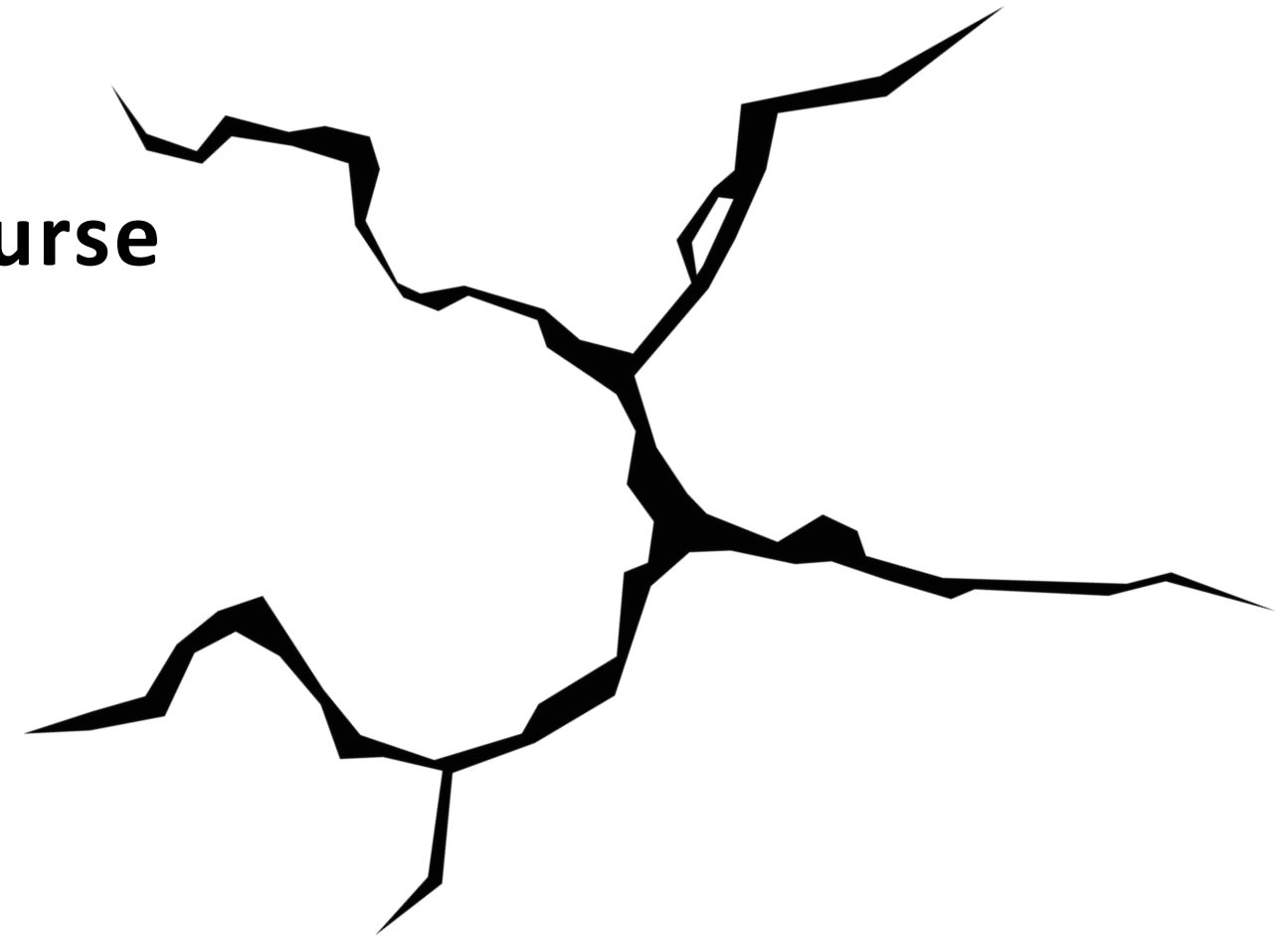


## 1. Genre-Based Terminological Variation:

- **Hard News & Wire Reports:**

- Use **neutral, technocratic terms** like *działania zbrojne* (“hostilities”) and *operacje wojskowe* (“military operations”).
- Appear in **low-emotion contexts** (troop movements, logistics).
- Often in **passive voice**, projecting impartiality.
- *Konflikt zbrojny* (“armed conflict”) occurs in legal/expert-driven articles, linked to **international law frameworks**.

# Genre-Specific Use and Rhetorical Functions of International Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse

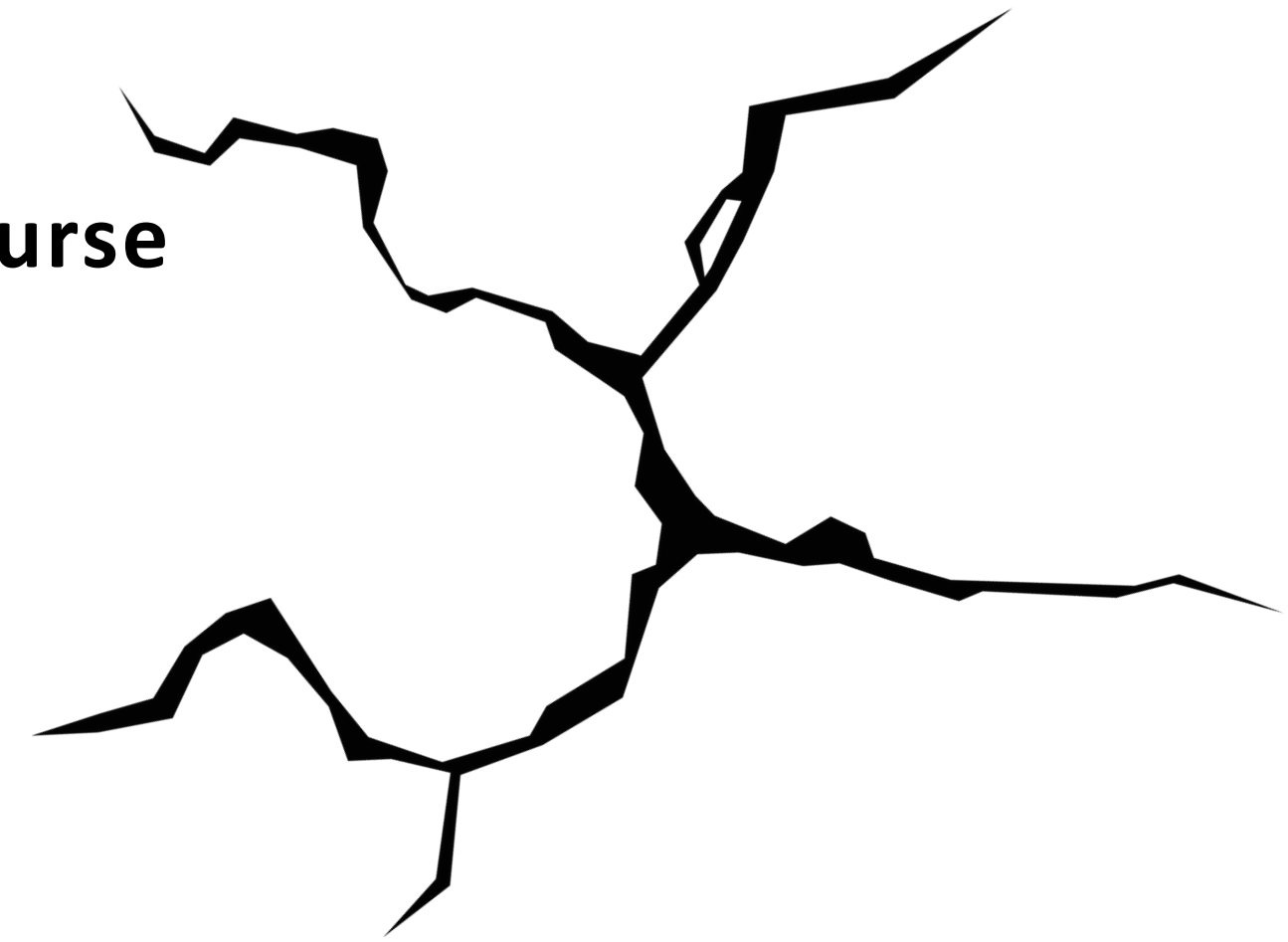


## Opinion Genres (columns, editorials, features):

- Rely on **emotionally and normatively charged terms**: *wojna* (“war”), *agresja* (“aggression”), *zbrodnia wojenna* (“war crime”).
- These function as **framing devices**, not mere descriptors.
- Often tied to **metaphor, historical analogy, or calls for solidarity**.
- *Stan wojenny* (“martial law”) appears in speculative national security contexts.
- *Zbrojna inwazja* and *konflikt zbrojny* appear mainly in early or legalistic coverage.



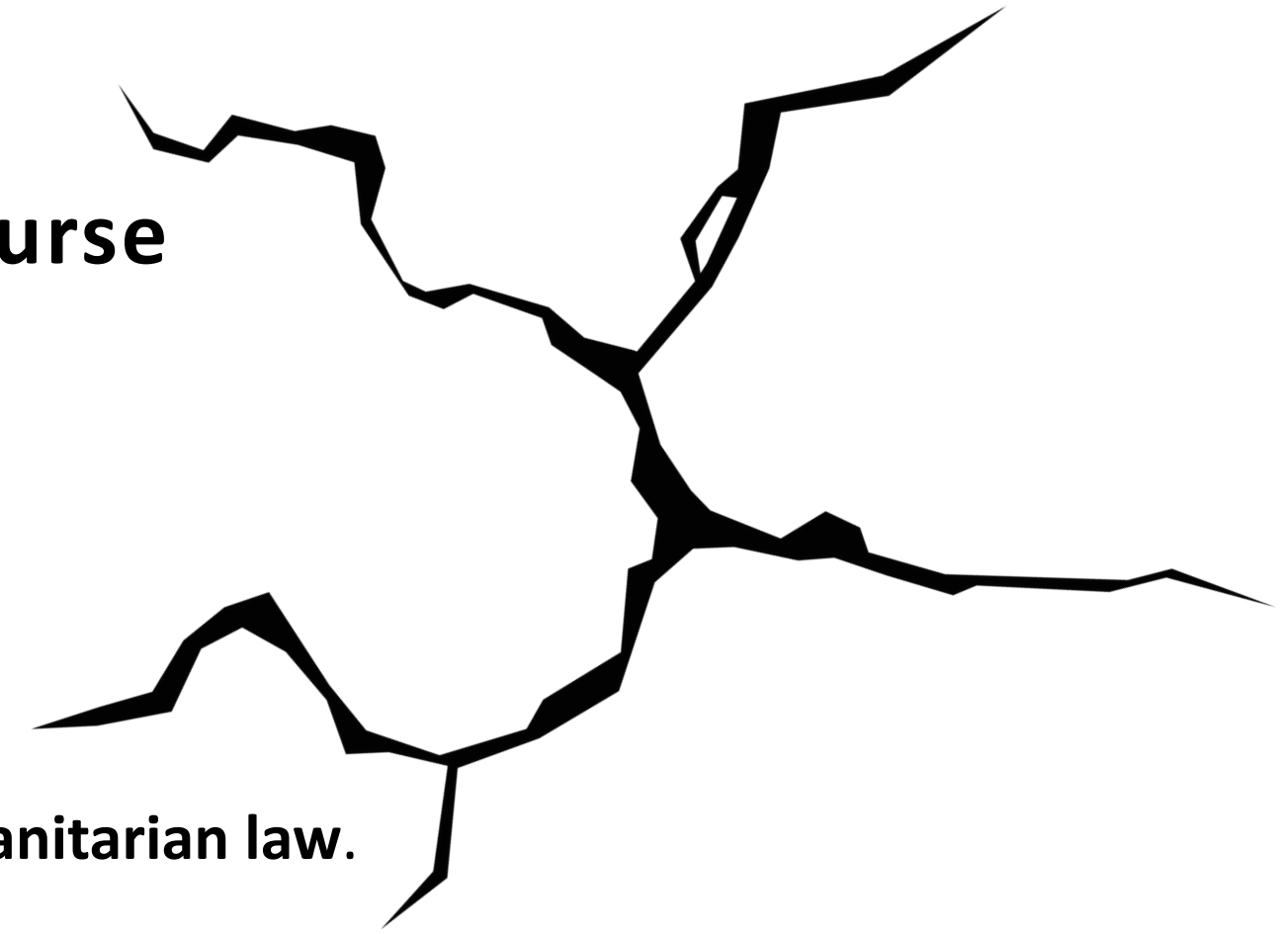
# Genre-Specific Use and Rhetorical Functions of International Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse



## 2. Ideological Convergence and Discursive Alignment:

- **Cross-ideological consistency:**
  - Both left- and right-wing media use *wojna*, *agresja*, and *zbrodnia wojenna* prominently.
  - Suggests a **shared national lexicon** framing the conflict in legal-moral terms.
  - Reflects participation in **international norm diffusion**, not neutral reporting.
- **Contrast with Russian State Media:**
  - *Specjalna operacja wojskowa* (“special military operation”) appears only **42 times**, mostly in **quotation marks or ironic contexts**.
  - Polish media **reject euphemistic language** used in Kremlin propaganda.

# Genre-Specific Use and Rhetorical Functions of International Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse

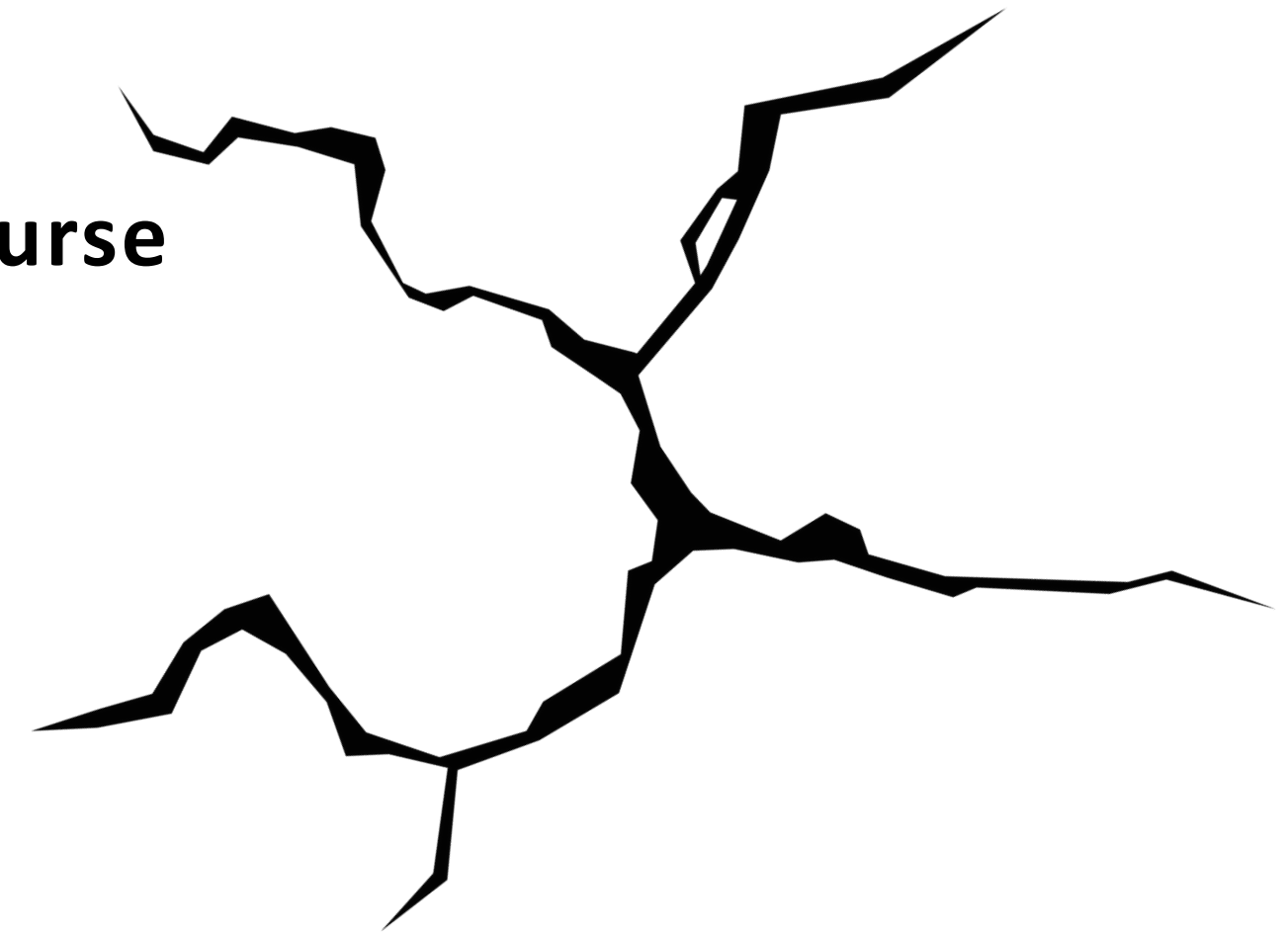


## 3. Legal and Normative Framing Functions:

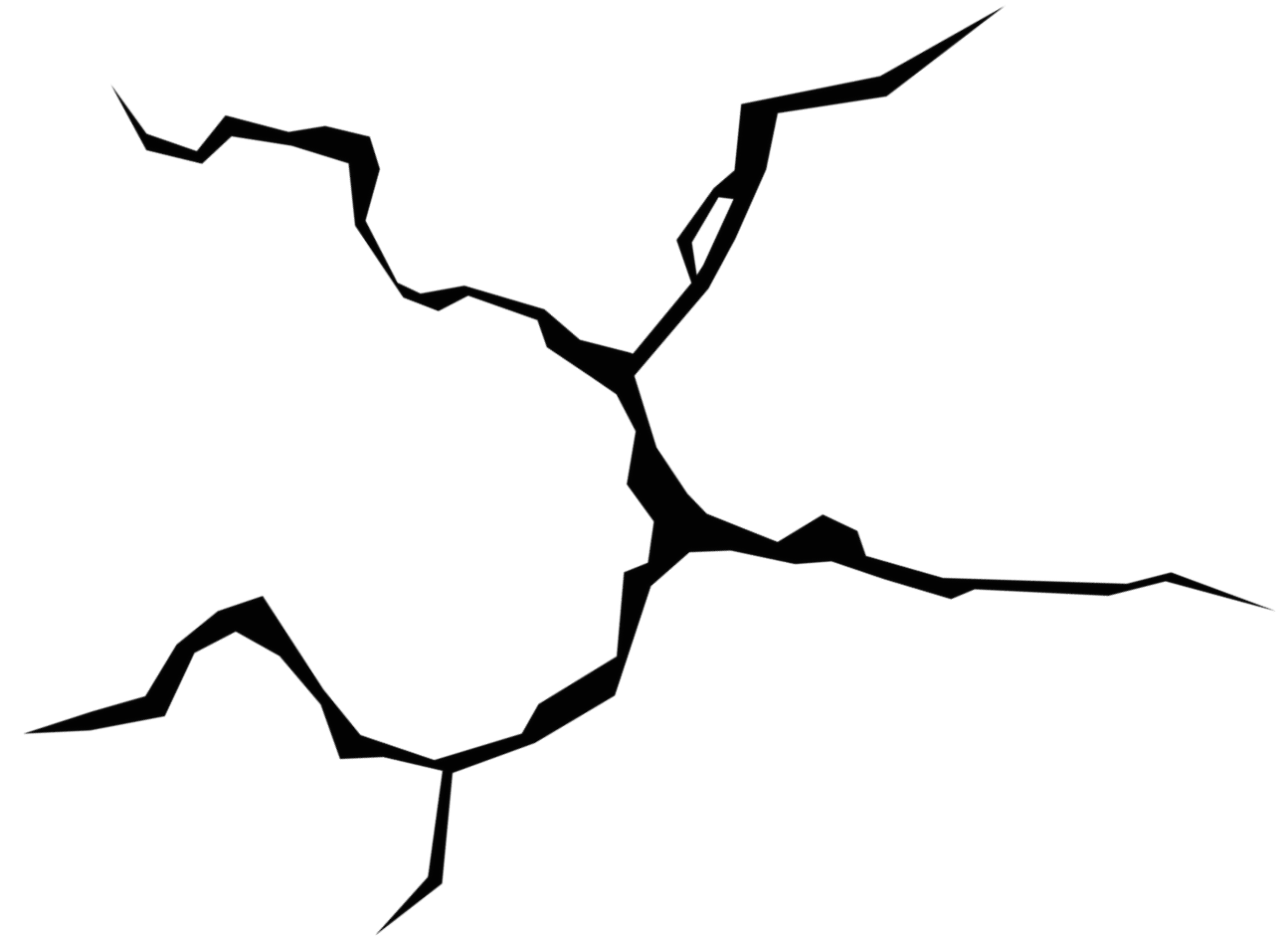
- ***Wojna* (“war”):**
  - Central term, used to signal **unlawful aggression** and invoke **international humanitarian law**.
  - Conveys urgency and scale, supporting **Western diplomatic narratives**.
- ***Agresja* (“aggression”):**
  - Reflects **UN Charter Article 2(4)** and **UNGA Resolution 3314 (1974)**.
  - Often paired with *Rosja* (“Russia”), attributing **legal and moral responsibility**.
- ***Zbrodnia wojenna* (“war crime”):**
  - Aligns with **international criminal justice**, notably **The Hague** and **ICC**.
  - Emphasises **civilian harm** and **jus in bello** violations.

# Genre-Specific Use and Rhetorical Functions of International Legal Terminology in Polish Media Discourse

- *Konflikt zbrojny, działania zbrojne, operacje wojskowe*:
  - More neutral/legalistic.
  - Found in reports referencing **UN, OSCE, or Geneva Conventions**.
  - Signal **legal thresholds** for humanitarian law applicability.
- *Stan wojenny* (“martial law”):
  - Discussed within **Ukrainian domestic law and emergency protocols**.
  - Reflects **ICCPR/ECHR** standards on civil liberties during crises.
- *Zbrojna inwazja* (“armed invasion”):
  - Legally precise (per **UNGA Resolution 3314, Art. 3(a)**), but rare.
  - Suggests preference for **morally resonant alternatives** like *wojna* and *agresja*.

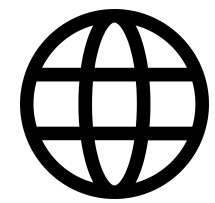


# Conclusions:



Polish media display a **strategic adoption of international legal terminology**, tailored to genre and rhetorical function. Rather than reporting neutrally, the media participate in **norm diffusion**, shaping public opinion in ways aligned with **Western legal and moral frameworks**. The lexicon underscores **legal clarity, accountability, and moral urgency**, in contrast to authoritarian euphemisms. This confirms broader theoretical insights (e.g., Sadat 2013) about media's role in supporting global responses to **crimes against humanity**

# Contact



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