

Demystifying, delegitimizing, debunking: Discursive editorial strategies of neutralizing the rationales for Russia's intervention in Ukraine

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Abstract

This study explores the ongoing coverage of the war in Ukraine with special attention paid to how media editors of 15 most prominent mainstream outlets in Poland, a country known for its pro-Ukrainian stance, neutralize Russia's justifications for the invasion. It uses a special-purpose corpus of self-collected online publications released between February 2022 and June 2024. With both automated and manual methods of analysing collocates of such keywords as 'Kremlin' (753 instances), 'special operation' (139) and 'NATO' (1162), the study identifies a range of thematic domains, salient linguistic framings and rhetorical devices. It documents specific discursive strategies – demystification, delegitimation and debunking – used by editors to recontextualize Russia's claims to wage preemptive war in Ukraine. The results show how editors use language to gauge audiences' understandings of war and reactions to it. The findings can be used for journalism training or for raising critical media literacy and resilience to disinformation.

Keywords

debunking, editorial strategy, neutralization, preemption, recontextualization, Ukraine war, war coverage

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Introduction

Most consumers of general news and political media have heard the reasons that Russian President Vladimir Putin and his regime offered to justify what they called a special military operation, which in fact has been a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since February 2022, the Russian propaganda has promoted some recurring narratives justifying that war, including the need to ‘demilitarize and denazify’ Ukraine, counter NATO expansion that threatens Russia’s security, or protect ethnic Russians from an ‘oppressive and belligerent’ Kyiv regime. At some point, it was even claimed that Russia was simply finishing a war that Ukraine, together with the collective West, started by making a strategic pledge to join the EU and NATO (Hughes, 2014). This study explores in detail how Polish mainstream media, known for their pro-Ukrainian stance (Brusylowska and Maksymenko, 2023), recontextualize these claims in their coverage of the first two years of the war, frequently not only reporting but also neutralizing the Russian argumentation. The theoretical and analytic framework of ‘recontextualization’ from Discourse Studies allows us to look at how language is recruited to represent, evaluate or legitimize an action in a secondary text (Van Leeuwen, 2008), which is the linguistic equivalent to what journalism studies researchers often refer to as framing (see Lichtenstein et al., 2018).

This study continues an important line of research on discourse patterns in responsible coverage of crises and conflicts (see Cap, 2022; Knoblock, 2020; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Studying the current war coverage in countries beyond Ukraine and Russia is necessary to trace how solidarity can be built or how public opinion can be steered to accept warlike or peaceful solutions of international conflicts. Poland has a pluralistic media landscape that offers a variety of data to trace such patterns of coverage and, as here, recontextualization, which can be described, interpreted and assessed for journalism training, critical media literacy and resilience to disinformation (Guess, 2020). However, instead of looking at how editors in *individual* media outlets present the Russian narrative vis-à-vis their outlet’s ideological stance, we use an *aggregated* dataset of news from top 15 Polish mainstream outlets (amounting to the corpus of 1.2 million words, collected within the international project CORECON and publicly available at <https://corecon.omeka.net/>, which enables future comparisons across countries.

We check how specific terms that are key to the Russian narrative, for example ‘special operation’, are neutralized. With both automated and manual methods of analysing keyword collocates (Heritage and Taylor, 2024), we categorize keyword usages into thematic domains, identify their linguistic embedding and analyse their rhetoric in order to find salient editorial strategies (Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2007). We exemplify how Polish editors represent Russia’s claims to wage preemptive or preventive war and identify three main patterns of neutralization – demystification, delegitimation and debunking. While the term *neutralization* has been previously used in political discourse (Cap, 2022), we hope to make a significant contribution to language-oriented research on conflict coverage by introducing this new typology of media neutralization techniques.

The analysis is preceded by an overview of the geopolitical context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, with reference to international legal studies. To understand why certain claims to war are to be questioned by the media, we refer to the ‘just war’

doctrine and the ethical dilemmas behind the delineation of a state's right to preemption or prevention as well as the conditions that undermine a state's rights to attack (Gray, 2007). Given the task of examining the recontextualization of Russia's justifications of war, the keywords 'Kremlin', 'special operation' and 'NATO' are selected as entry points to examining the self-collected corpus to establish the ways in which the Russian narrative was represented in Polish-language journalistic texts. The discussion aims to shed light on the implications of linguistic choices and argumentative schemas behind editorial neutralization and on refutational rhetorical devices that are salient in dealing with propagandas.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Preemption or prevention as justifications for war

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has offered various justifications for its actions, including the need to 'demilitarize and denazify' Ukraine, protect its Russian speakers and counter NATO's eastward expansion. Political scientists have disputed these justifications and see them as pretexts rather than genuine threats requiring immediate military action. While Russia has often framed its actions as *preemptive*, many analysts argue that the invasion fits more closely with the definition of *preventive* war, aimed at countering a potential future threat rather than an immediate one. Legal military literature explains two of the 'just war' reasons to justify the preemptive use of force, namely *necessity* and *proportionality* (Peilouw, 2022). These concepts establish the need for the use of preemption through Article 51 of the United Nations Charter saying that a state is permitted to attack another state that is preparing its armed forces for assault, provided it acts proportionately. The condition of necessity requires that the need for self-defence is immediate, exceptional, and there is no possibility to negotiate alternatives. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter restricts self-defence measures to cases when an armed attack has already been initiated. Based on this logic, a preventative war would violate international law, given that no attack has happened (United Nations Charter, Article 51., 1945).

Theorists and strategists have made further observations aimed at improving the understanding of conditions for *preventive* war, arguing that preventive war was simply a war where the timing of attack is controlled by one side (Gray, 2007: ix-x; Gupta, 2008). There are some criteria for preventive action to fall under the 'just war' doctrine:

Force must be the last resort, not temporally, but with reference to the expected failure of other policy instruments. The condition to be prevented by force has to be judged too dangerous to tolerate. The benefits of preventive military action must be expected to be far greater than the costs. There has to be a high probability of military success. (Gray, 2007: ix-x)

Preventive actions must be carried out with the consideration of impact that will occur, and not doing so violates the principle of proportionality (Reisman and Armstrong, 2006). However, against the theoretical backdrop, the justification of preventive and

preemptive warfare is always problematic regarding proportionality, since both types of attack damage life and property far more than, say, sanctions or deterrence.

International studies often warn against the unilateral decision of a state to engage in preemptive measures. According to Reisman and Armstrong (2006: 525):

the claim to preemptive self-defense is a claim to entitlement to use unilaterally, without prior international authorization, high levels of violence to arrest an incipient development that is not yet operational or directly threatening, but that, if permitted to mature, could be seen by the potential preemptor as susceptible to neutralization only at a higher and possibly unacceptable cost to itself.

Legal requirements relating to the acceptability of self-defence measures provide that states have the absolute right to protect their territorial sovereignty through acts of self-defence. However, unilaterally carrying out preemptive acts of self-defence, without previous international sanction or resolution, is justified only by the anticipation of an urgent development that is an immediate threat.

Military historians also note that while the US – by attacking Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s – sanctioned preemption in modern military strategy, it challenged the international rules governing the use of force by attacking without the support of most major world powers (Mitchell, 2004). While the threat of a terrorist organization or a rogue regime deploying WMD was a compelling argument for preemption, the US established a dangerous precedent that strong states could attack on the perceived threat to their vital interests (Daalder, 2007). As a result, the criticism of current Russian military operation can come not only from theory and law, but also from the history lessons about the destabilizing consequences of disproportional preemption. In this context, most international bodies, including the UN, view Russia's actions in Ukraine as an unprovoked act of aggression rather than a defensive measure against an imminent future threat. In the context of this study, it is important to reiterate that the justifications the Kremlin offers for its so-called 'special military operation' are recognized as security concerns or baseless allegations of threats (Peskind, 2022), which do not guarantee legality. For this reason, responsible journalism should call such ramifications into question (Višňovský and Radošinská, 2021). These implications will be studied based on the example of editorial strategies of recontextualization of the phrase 'special operation' in Polish outlets.

Kremlin's security-related narratives

Since at least the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has been seen as a proxy war between Russia and the West – the US, NATO and member states of the EU (Hughes, 2014). In accordance with his increasingly authoritarian policy line, even before the war broke out in 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin had been framing the military interventionism as a necessary measure to protect Russia's security interests. According to Nițoiu (2024), the Russian narrative was mainly aimed at the West, which stood frequently accused of deliberately escalating the conflict with Moscow. Against this background, the supposedly preemptive attack undertaken by

Russia places Ukraine at the forefront of the conflict with the West and is a reaction to the support for resistance in Donbas or an example of the use of hybrid warfare. Russia, in turn, has been accused of staging numerous destabilizing incidents, such as the poisoning of the Skripals in the UK, cyber-attacks in the US, or electoral interventions in Europe.

Russia's major security concerns, however, include NATO's eastward expansion and the path of Ukraine joining the alliance. A significant part of Russia's justification of the 2022 invasion is rooted in its opposition to NATO's expansion, which Russia perceives as a direct threat to its security. In an article on various frames of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict in the media, Lichtenstein et al. (2018) describe Russia's hardline diplomacy as a reaction to the enlargement of the EU and NATO, seen as an issue diminishing its sense of security, influence and interests. Other analysts reiterate the idea that NATO accession of some of the states belonging to the former Soviet sphere of influence was a source of tension, competition and conflict for Kremlin elites (Tsygankov, 2022).

The acceptance of Ukraine to potentially join NATO has been cited as a red line by Russia, prompting claims that the invasion was necessary to ensure a buffer zone between Russia and NATO members (Peskind, 2022). Ukraine started the process of joining NATO in 2008, through the Membership Action Plan but, in 2010, the then pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich cancelled the initiative. His action sparked the so-called 'Euromaidan movement' that ultimately overthrew Yanukovich, with citizens and organizations strongly advocating for the development of stronger ties with the West. In 2019, with Volodymyr Zelenskyy elected president, the campaign to join NATO was rekindled and the new political perspective was even reified as an amendment to the Ukrainian constitution (European Integration Portal, 2019). In 2021, the Alliance leaders publicly announced their commitment to begin the process of granting NATO membership to Ukraine. The Russian president responded aggressively, considering this pledge as an unacceptable step, and saying that 'NATO expansion must be rolled back, and Ukrainian membership is a red line' (Rainsford, 2022). As a result, the Kremlin propagated a narrative of being forced to act, given the betrayal of the Alliance's alleged promise that it would not advance towards the east. Russia has started claiming that, by joining NATO, Ukraine was preparing to take aggressive actions in the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and possibly even against Russia itself.

Russia also wants its actions to be seen as a form of defence against a supposedly violent and hostile Ukrainian state that oppresses people affiliated to Russian culture. In Putin's own words:

There is nothing stronger than the determination of millions of people who, by their culture, religion, traditions, and language, consider themselves part of Russia, whose ancestors lived in a single country for centuries. There is nothing stronger than their determination to return to their true historical homeland. (Putin, 2022)

Helping these 'oppressed' people 'return to the motherland' becomes another justification for military intervention and validates the clash of civilizations discourse that has been central to the narratives insisting on the dangers of the colonial expansion led by the

West (Repnikova, 2023). Under the guise of humanitarian protection, the Kremlin says it is shielding Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine from alleged persecution and genocide by the Ukrainian government (Šulc, 2023). For the Kremlin, the Ukrainian government's harbouring of neo-Nazi elements, via extremist nationalist groups, is supposedly posing a direct threat to ethnic Russians in Ukraine, and must be 'demilitarized' and 'denazified', although this characterization is not supported by international analysis (Shestopalova, 2023). To reiterate, while marginal right-wing radical groups exist in many countries, including Ukraine, they have not been active actors in Ukrainian political life and their existence cannot serve as a basis for Russia's aggression. For the sake of this study, it is important to trace to what extent and how the editors that present these Russian claims call the Kremlin's narrative into question and recontextualize its portrayal of NATO.

Recontextualization in journalism

The theoretical framework of this study draws on the concept of recontextualization, as it is understood in Discourse Studies. According to Van Leeuwen (2008: vii), recontextualization is performed when representations of social practices, such as actors, their roles, identities and styles, or actions, settings and timings become 'excluded from the discourse or transformed' and 'elements such as purposes and legitimations for the actions' are added. As a result, just as in the case of framing, journalistic texts background some of the original detail of the social practice they recontextualize and focus on legitimation or critique, expressed with linguistic or rhetorical devices (p. viii). This approach is derived from Bernstein (1986), who studied how science produced in academia was represented in educational materials and used to serve a specific (ideological) purpose in the school context. When social practices are highly structured, the texts that recontextualize them may omit some details about sequences of actions, performance modes, resources and eligibility conditions. However, recontextualization may involve ideology-driven semantic deletions, additions (e.g. repetitions, reactions), substitutions or rhetorically charged rearrangements (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 17–19), which will be traced in this analysis.

In political reporting, the recontextualizer's interests and ideologies may cause the transformation of the representation of social practice, for example by attributing specific purposes to social action, adding legitimations (reasons why a given action has to or should not take place), or overlying details with evaluations, be they moral or aesthetic (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 20–21). These 'reactions' have elements of judgment attributed to participants through direct or indirect speech of those involved in social action. Moreover, the recontextualizer's evaluations may be passed in an explicit or implicit way through word choice, structure and semantic prosody, pragmatic categories (terms of address, (im)politeness) or rhetorical devices (irony, rhetorical questions). These features of recontextualization are important to identify as they are likely to occur when commentators and editors of outlets with strong editorial lines cover political issues of controversy (Richardson, 2007).

In addition, analyses aimed at capturing and deconstructing evaluations and legitimations should be done with sufficient knowledge of the context (Van Leeuwen, 2007). In journalism, this may include understanding the target audience, conventional formats, commercial interest and ideologies behind outlets' editorial practices. Many journalistic texts, even news wires (Watanabe, 2017), inhere elements of commentary aligned with persuasion and realized through rhetorical devices deployed to convince their audiences of their validity. Argumentatively, some recontextualizations will likely challenge or 'neutralize' the claims attributed to social practice participants. Based on that assumption, this study explores editors' thematic, linguistic and rhetorical choices, based on the example of an aggregated dataset of diverse Polish mainstream media, which allows for a representative and calibrated sampling that can reveal the repertoire of applied neutralizing editorial strategies (Molek-Kozakowska, 2024; Cap, 2022).

The rhetoric of editorial neutralizing can be operationalized through three strategies: demystifying, delegitimizing and debunking. Demystifying for us consists of identifying and explaining the actual intent or likely consequence of a certain act or statement by a political actor, for example by interrogating their arguments, contextualizing their actions or comparing them with previous statements made elsewhere (Cap, 2022). Delegitimizing involves challenging the reason why something should be the case. Following Van Leeuwen (2007), this could be done by bringing up rational arguments against a claim, including scientific data and authority opinions, historical cases or common sense, moral reasons to argue why it is wrong, or even 'mythopoetic' devices, such as narratives, anecdotes or adages with an embedded counterpoint. Debunking in journalistic recontextualization includes attributing purposeful ill-intent, such as attempted misrepresentation or disinformation, to a political actor by fact-checking, refuting the false or defective argument or exposing its rhetorical construction as a distracting propaganda manoeuvre. Such neutralizing manoeuvres may be accompanied by giving a more probable alternative account of the action deduced on the basis of verifiable information (Višňovský and Radošinská, 2021).

Methods: Corpus, sampling and keywords

This study uses a special-purpose self-collected corpus of the CORECON project, of which the Polish-language dataset, comprising approximately 2360 texts on Ukraine (1.2 million words), was compiled from 15 top media outlets between February 2022 and June 2024. These outlets were selected given their high circulation and opinion-making capacity, profile (politics, economy, society), primary mediation technology (TV, print, online), format (broadsheet, tabloid) and ideological spread (progressive, conservative) Molek-Kozakowska, 2024) to be representative of the Polish mediasphere regarding its journalistic and editorial characteristics. These are: Bankier (economic online portal), Business Insider (economic online portal), *Do Rzeczy* (conservative political weekly), *Fakt* (centrist tabloid), *Forbes* (economic magazine), Forsal (economic online forum), *Gazeta Wyborcza* (progressive socio-political daily), Money.pl (economic online portal), *Newsweek Polska* (franchised centrist political weekly), *Polityka* (progressive political weekly), PolsatNews (centrist commercial television station), *SuperExpress* (conservative tabloid) and TVN24 (progressive commercial

television), *Wpollyce.pl* (online version of a conservative weekly) and *Wprost* (centrist socio-political weekly).

An automatic selection of keywords and concordances was performed with three keywords that correspond to the issue analysed here, namely 'Kreml' (Polish for Kremlin), 'operacja specjalna/specjalna operacja' (special operation) and 'NATO'. In each case, concordance lines comprising 25 words to the left and to the right of the keyword were selected to be analysed. This operation yielded 2,054 stretches of text of 51 words each, with the keyword in the middle (concordance lines). In the course of preliminary reading and pilot coding performed to establish the coding protocol, we confirmed this to be sufficient to identify each keyword's linguistic embedding, thematic domain and accompanying rhetorical devices (if any).

All identified 753 concordance lines with the keyword 'Kremlin' were analysed thematically, focusing on instances of representing 'Kremlin' as a political agent justifying war. The manual analysis was assisted by AI for summarizing and hierarchizing the thematic foci of each outlet. We uploaded the concordance lines from each of the 15 outlets into a newly created user account on ChatGPT 4.0 and used the Polish version of the prompt 'Please summarize in 5 points and in no more than 200 words the main decisions and actions of Kremlin using the data provided.' The use of ChatGPT was supplementary to the process of thematic analysis of the keywords, as the results only helped to condense and order information included in concordance lines. It is believed that with bigger textual stretches, automation reduces possible coders' biases.

The AI-generated results were cross-checked by a team of two researchers using established close-reading techniques to ensure alignment with identified reporting strategies. To achieve this alignment, a semantic analysis of adjacent verbs that indicate actions, modifiers that indicate sentiment and attribution structures that indicate evaluation was performed. Through the thematic analysis of editorial recontextualizations of statements and actions of the Kremlin regime, we were able to make notes of some rhetorical devices (distancing, refutational, ironic) deployed for the purpose of neutralization.

Following that, a linguistic analysis examines 139 instances of collocations with 'special operation' (henceforth SO), sometimes modified with the words 'military' or 'anti-terrorist'. The majority of concordance lines with SO pointed to a formulation that the Russian regime and its media used to refer to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with some denoting Ukrainians' actions (destroying a bridge in Crimea by the 'special operations division' of the armed forces – 26 instances). The phrase SO was closely analysed for all linguistic resources that indicate the editors' distancing themselves from this term in Russian narrative. The frequency and examples of specific types of neutralizing recontextualizations are provided.

Finally, there are 1,162 cases where the keyword 'NATO' is used (together with a few dozen examples with 'Alliance'). The significance of NATO as an entity in the context of justifying the invasion should not be underestimated (see section 2.2). Thematically, the coverage of NATO in the corpus is diverse and involves: (1) proceedings related to Finland and Sweden joining NATO; (2) statements by NATO officials regarding actions in view of the 2022 invasion; (3) declarations related to Ukraine joining NATO in the future; and (4) NATO expansion as a cause of Russia's 2022 invasion. The editorial

recontextualizations of the claim that Russia is forced to attack Ukraine preemptively based on security concerns is analysed on a downsized sample of 3 percent of all 1162 excerpts ($n = 35$), identified through a manual search where ‘NATO’ is found to collocate with ‘expand/expansion’ or ‘security’. A 3 percent sample allows for in-depth qualitative analysis while ensuring manageability and is deemed as sufficient to capture key rhetorical neutralization strategies, particularly demystifying, delegitimizing and debunking.

Results

This section reports on a *thematic* analysis of 753 instances of the keyword ‘Kremlin’, a more fine-grained *linguistic* analysis of 139 uses of the most controversial term coined by Russian propaganda – ‘special operation’ and a *rhetorical* analysis of examples of editorial demystifying, delegitimizing and debunking relating the collocates of ‘NATO’ with the terms ‘expansion’ and ‘security’.

Kremlin

Table 1 reports on the results of the ChatGPT-supported thematic summary of 753 instances of the keyword ‘Kremlin’. Each identified salient topic (e.g. the Kremlin’s military strategy, propaganda campaigns, official statements, economic decisions, international outreach, Putin’s personality, social issues) is complemented by the manual identification of the main editorial strategies of its recontextualization (e.g. explaining, exemplifying, questioning, exposing, ridiculing). The 15 outlets whose texts on Ukraine were compiled into a searchable corpus, are arranged in descending order by the number of concordance lines with the instances of the keyword ‘Kremlin’.

Table 1 illustrates several salient thematic preoccupations related to the characterization of the Kremlin as a regime that is largely detached from the needs of the Russian society, representing select elite interests, aggressively militarized, economically inefficient even if powerful, intrinsically divided and dependent on propaganda systems. In addition, Vladimir Putin and his inner circle are represented as accountable for a number of wrong decisions and inflammatory statements that prevent the war from de-escalating and that underscore security concerns that are based on imperialistic or authoritarian ideologies. The thematic analysis reveals editorial concerns both with the military actions undertaken and with the informational war, with conspiracy, propaganda and fake news, and cyber-activism mentioned by many outlets. The analysis of editorial strategies reveals the editors’ strategy to build on various sources of information (historical, institutional, alternative) to explain the (actual) rationales behind Kremlin’s geopolitics and to expose Russia’s (actual) intent behind the official façade.

Special operation

With reference to Putin’s ‘special operation’ (SO), the semantic meaning of the verbs frequently attached to it include: to start/initiate (*rozpocząć*), to call/declare (*ogłosić*), to carryout/conduct (*(prze)prowadzić*), to realize/progress (*trwać/przebiegać*), to expand

Table 1. Editorial strategies for presenting Kremlin-related coverage.

No of instances	Outlet	Corresponding main editorial strategies of recontextualization
208	<i>Newsweek Polska</i>	(1) analyses the motives behind Russian imperialism and authoritarianism; (2) provides commentary on how the war is influencing regional politics and economic developments in Eastern Europe and Ukraine; (3) explains the mechanisms of Russian propaganda, from Kremlin ideologues and Putin's political advisors to state media and ordinary Russians who, according to polls, support the war and refuse to believe in Russian army atrocities; (4) reports on social and economic changes within Russia in response to sanctions, costs of war and possible conscription; (5) analyses the system of oligarchy and volatility of Russian decision-making; (6) calls out spin and conspiracy theorizing against Ukraine; (7) traces how the blogosphere responds to frontline news and how offensives are evaluated in terms of who is likely to gain military advantage and at what cost.
81	<i>Polityka</i>	(1) denounces Kremlin's justifications for preemption and its nuclear threats; (2) explains how Kremlin regime nullifies its critics and opposition to war; (3) follows the mechanisms of power struggles within Kremlin elites and among oligarchs; (4) zooms in on how Kremlin portrays Ukraine's relations with the US/West; (5) traces the struggles of Russian propagandists to win the information war with pro-Ukrainian cyber-activists.
68	<i>Forbes</i>	(1) documents how Kremlin misuses economic and human resources to desperately advance a war that it had assumed would be easier; (2) uses expert analysis to expose Kremlin's bad strategizing and mismanagement; (3) explores Putin's personal motivations, grip on power and propaganda that maintains his cult; (4) explains why Russia's conditions for peace are not acceptable; (5) explains why Kremlin's hybrid war to discredit Ukraine has not been successful.
57	<i>Fakt</i>	(1) focuses on Russian conscription issues showing how Kremlin does not hesitate to send thousands of poorly trained and equipped soldiers to imminent death; (2) criticizes fear-mongering in Pieskov's threats of WWII and nuclear attack; (3) explores Putin's personality as a ruthless former KGB agent who is able to eliminate his domestic opponents and critics (Wagner Group's lead Yevgeny Prigozhin); (4) revisits Kremlin's many fake claims and pretexts for the invasion.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

No of instances	Outlet	Corresponding main editorial strategies of recontextualization
51	Wpoltyce.pl	(1) explains the role of Russian secret services in politics; (2) gives historical and economic context to connections between Kremlin elites and international political and business actors; (3) analyses the perceptions of Poland in Russia and Ukraine; (4) calls out Kremlin nuclear threats and rhetoric of war.
41	Wprost	(1) speculates about the conditions of holding peace talks; (2) analyses the ongoing work of Russian propagandists and the hidden meaning of official Kremlin statements; (3) discusses the implications of NATO expansion and the details of military and humanitarian support for Ukraine; (4) calls out fake news disseminated by Kremlin propagandists about Ukrainian and Western actors.
39	PolsatNews	(1) reports how Kremlin responds to information about Ukrainian successful defences and counterattacks; (2) explains how the regime enforces compliance to war decisions; (3) attributes losses and failures to decisions of Kremlin officials struggling to please Putin; (4) unpacks propagandistic messages that emanate from Kremlin spokespeople.
38	TVN24	(1) discusses the connections between Kremlin and the Orthodox Church; (2) explains mechanics of Kremlin's disinformation regarding the statistics of losses; (3) traces how Kremlin officials cater to China and seek new alliances with rogue states; (4) speculates about possible Ukrainian drone attacks on Kremlin; (5) analyses power dynamics and how Kremlin elites ended up wrong about the prospects of conquering Ukraine.
36	Money.pl	(1) explains how Kremlin finances its military and how increasingly desperate it is to shift the economy to mobilize the resources; (2) explores the level of determination of Kremlin elites to continue the invasion despite the costs; (3) exposes losses and failures in international political and economic relations that Kremlin tries to hide or explain away.
32	Gazeta Wyborcza	(1) explains complex geopolitical relations and historical contexts of Russian imperialism; (2) exposes Kremlin's propagandistic tactics and absurd colonialist claims to Ukrainian territory; (3) criticizes Kremlin 'nuclear blackmailing'; (4) covers extensively the acts of aggression against civilians and infrastructures.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

No of instances	Outlet	Corresponding main editorial strategies of recontextualization
30	<i>SuperExpress</i>	(1) exposes how Kremlin blames the West for its special operation in Ukraine; (2) describes Russian state media propagandists as servile and absurdist in their claims; (3) reports on daring attacks by Ukrainians and how Kremlin desperately tries to hide the losses; (4) indulges in speculations about Putin's lookalikes, his deteriorating health and his secretive but lush private life.
26	Bankier	(1) questions if ever Kremlin's decisions were or could be fully transparent for analysis of economic implications; (2) dismisses Kremlin's claims to protect the separatist republics from being invaded by Ukraine; (3) exposes Kremlin officials as being detached from reality and naïve about Russia's ability to control Ukraine; (4) speculates if Putin would accept any peace offer except for Ukraine's surrender; (5) interprets actions of the regime as enactments of authoritarianism, and economic and ideological dominance.
19	Forsal	(1) explains the geopolitical power play by Kremlin and its counting on 'Western allies' weaknesses transpiring at a time of crisis; (2) discusses the advancements in the technological devices that win wars in the 21st century and that Kremlin had underestimated.
17	Business Insider	(1) exemplifies Russia's slow decline caused by economic sanctions and Kremlin's desperate attempts to work with China to overcome isolation; (2) condemns Kremlin for not hesitating to starve millions as a result of blocking the ports that process Ukrainian grain.
10	<i>Do Rzeczy</i>	(1) exposes Kremlin's propaganda efforts to appear successful in its failed 'special operation'; (2) ridicules Putin's cult in the state media; (3) warns of disinformation campaigns staged to drive a wedge between Ukraine's allies and weaken support for it.

(*rozszerzyć*), to support (*popierać*) and to end/conclude (*zakończyć*). Such verbs foreground the notions of devising, implementing and waging the SO as a de facto military invasion/campaign.

There are several ways in which Polish editors recontextualize and neutralize the Kremlin's intended meaning of the phrase 'special operation'. One of the most common ways is to use the phrase 'SO' in inverted commas ($n = 71$), often referred to as 'scare quotes', to signal scepticism or irony and effectively question the legitimacy of the term SO as it is presented by the Kremlin. Sometimes, the phrase is modified with 'so-called SO' used with or without scare quotes ($n = 8$), as in example (1) (all examples translated by the authors use literal translation, with italics inserted to highlight the analysed feature):

- (1) Speaking about the mistakes made during the *so-called SO*, the blame is put on generals, specially Sergei Shoigu, the minister of defence. (*Newsweek*, 8 June 2023)

A wider class of distancing devices consists of various glosses attributing the term to Russia/Kremlin propaganda and explaining that it really stands for war or invasion. Some editors spell it out for the readers that SO 'is (in fact) an invasion', a 'de facto war' ($n = 5$), while many outlets use brackets for such explanations ($n = 21$) or make the real meaning clear in a subordinate clause or phrase 'as it is called in Russia', or 'as officially called by Kremlin' ($n = 11$), a combination of which is seen in example (2):

- (2) the interest in our offer has increased, which has not been so after the beginning of the SO (*this is how the attack on Ukraine is officially called – editor's note*). (*Newsweek*, 24 June 2023)

Typically, information tends to be attributed to its original source. However, in the case of references to SO, the editors make a point of stressing that it is the wording used by the Kremlin, e.g. 'Putin's SO', 'according to Putin's order/speech/declaration', 'according to (name of Russian official)', 'according to Putin's/Kremlin's narrative', 'as is routinely/propagandistically called by Kremlin', 'as cited by Russian propaganda agency TASS' ($n = 19$). Using the words 'narrative' or 'propaganda' makes it clear that the report is not built on factual, objective, or proportionate representation of events, but rather on a politically motivated and highly ideologized version of the conflict promoted by Russia, as in (3):

- (3) According to *Russian propagandists*, 'since the beginning of the SO in Ukraine, over 1200 Polish mercenaries were killed.' (*Newsweek*, 8 June 2023)

The Russian narrative is sometimes contrasted with what is deemed by the editors to be more accurate and reliable, signalled with any word that corresponds to 'however' or 'apparently' ($n = 9$), sometimes highlighting the credibility of alternative sources, for example 'according to Ukrainian authorities' and 'social media' ($n = 7$). It is evident that, apart from news wires, Polish outlets have had to rely on user-generated information, i.e. reports collected by military bloggers and opinions garnered from experts. A vast majority of texts denounce the validity and legality of the SO, especially understood as Kremlin's preemptive campaign to free Ukrainian people from their oppressive regime. To broaden the argumentation, there are expressions that indicate that besides other countries (5 and 6), some powerful individuals in Russia do not accept the term SO either (4 and 7):

- (4) Moscow's mayor: The politician has so far *distanced himself from the 'SO'*. (*PolsatNews*, 3 December 2022)

- (5) The Vatican has made it clear this is *not some SO but war*. (*Forsal*, 8 May 2023)

- (6) Since the beginning, Turkey has considered *Russia's SO against Ukraine as war* and closed the straits for ships from both states. (TVN24, 2 January 2024)
- (7) Yes, 'war', because Girkin has always been using the *forbidden word for Putin's SO*. (*Polityka*, 4 June 2022)

One outlet explicitly delegitimizes the uses of SO as 'an euphemism' (8), while others consider the motivations that drive Russian politicians to use it. They underline the fact or simply imply that naming an invasion an 'SO' is a rhetorical trick, a political manoeuvre, and a way to whitewash Russia's brutality against Ukrainian army and civilians, who tend to be assimilated, collectivized and objectified as some kind of 'enemy'.

- (8) When on 24th of February 2022, President Putin ordered an armed invasion on Ukraine, *he called it 'special military operation'*. It's a *euphemism* used mainly by Kremlin authorities, Russian government and state media. (TVN24, 9 June 2023)

The editors recreate the invalid reasoning and false pretence behind the uses of 'SO' with such phrases as: 'SO that was supposed to/was aimed to . . .' 'when the Kremlin thought that the SO would . . .' 'Russians were thinking that the SO . . .' 'They did not predict that the SO . . .' 'despite this whole SO . . .' 'In reality, the SO did not . . .' ($n = 7$). Such phrasings not only act as media distancing devices but expose certain misguided assumptions or counterfactual thinking on the Russian side. In many cases, the editors openly debunk the 'harmlessness' of the action this phrase was intended to connote (9). They call it directly as a propaganda device, or sarcastically point out that in many ways Russia itself treats it as a war (10):

- (9) There is a gruelling and destructive war, *called by the Kremlin* as 'SO'. *In reality*, it is a full-scale aggression with the use of heavy tanks, cannons and air force. Every day, there is shelling and bombing of Ukrainian towns and civilian homes. (*Fakt*, 24 February 2024)
- (10) Apparently the [Russian] economy is turned into a war mode, even if there is *officially no war*, only anti-terroristic SO. (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13 June 2022)

Some outlets tend to extrapolate the absurd rationalizations behind the launching of SO in connection with the Kremlin's claims that Ukraine needs demilitarization and denazification (11) and that people of Ukraine need to be protected from a power-hungry elite. In such cases, the lead-in and the scare quotes are meant to invalidate an obviously false, or 'phony' justification (12):

- (11) *According to Kremlin*, SO in Ukraine 'does not target people, only the authorities': We should think how to eliminate the Nazi leaders of the country. (*Fakt*, 17 July 2022)
- (12) *Russian's SO* aimed at shielding persons who are 'threatened by excesses and genocide of the Kyiv regime.' (*Do Rzeczy*, 24 April 2022)

Recontextualization strategies also include refutations of the claim that Ukraine is really a part of Russia and belongs with it, as had long been the case, or that the West is weaponizing Ukraine to help it invade Russia. The editors consistently neutralize images of Russia as a pacifist country under attack, pointing to Russia's own aggressive war rhetoric (13):

- (13) The second phase of SO: 'Now the Russian army is to *fight to fully control* Donbas and the southern parts of Ukraine, in order to *seal the territorial connection* between Russia and the annexed Crimea.' (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 April 2022)

As illustrated in Table 1 with the contexts of the word 'Kremlin', here too the editors expose how Russian propagandists are pushing recurring narratives about the 'benevolent and peaceful Russia' that has been attacked by its long-time and new enemies (14). In such cases, editorial recontextualization resorts to metalanguage (such words as 'narratives', 'lies', 'expressions') about how Russian preemption is justified by spin-doctors, and why Russian arguments are untenable (15):

- (14) 'We are at war' announced Dmitry Pieskov. *It's the first time that he used the word 'war'* and not 'SO'. Pieskov claimed that the operation was turned into a war as a result of actions by the 'collective West'. (*SuperExpress*, 22 March 2024)
- (15) Putin has *returned to a narrative* from the beginning of the invasion, according to which it is Ukraine that forced Russia to react and implement the SO. (*PolsatNews*, 16 June 2023)

Nato

Demystifying. With respect to the use of 'NATO', one salient editorial strategy is to attribute all security concerns to Kremlin's paranoia and particularly to Putin's anxiety with Western influence in Ukraine. To appear justified in his preemptive actions, the Russian president is often quoted as claiming that the 'enemy' is just about to threaten Russia and Russians (16), although this is not backed by evidence or examples. Some editors demystify such empty but aggressive rhetoric:

- (16) 'The *enemies who took Ukraine hostage* are using it against our country' – Vladimir Putin commented in a televised statement. This *takeover of Ukraine by NATO* is unacceptable from the Kremlin's point of view and expanding the alliance further to the east is *met with 'particular concern'* in Moscow. (*DoRzeczy*, 24 February 2022)

In addition, the editors highlight that this specific way of treating 'NATO as a threat' should be attributed to Putin's own paranoia or obsession (17). They also see that the constant reliance on the 'NATO as an enemy' schema is one of the few ways Putin can tighten his authoritarianism (18):

- (17) Macron intends to offer postwar Russia some security guarantees, as this would appease *long-time obsessions* by Putin's regime about the *alleged threat from NATO*. (*Wprost*, 13 December 2022)
- (18) In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Kissinger repeated a thesis that the war broke out because Putin *felt threatened* by NATO's expansion, which does not justify the aggression, but explains it. (*Polityka*, 30 May 2023)

Delegitimizing. One of the strategies of delegitimizing applied by the editors is to question Russia's entitlement to feel safe. In a critique of the sentiments expressed by some politicians and intellectuals (Victor Orban, Henry Kissinger, Jeffrey Sachs, even Pope Francis), the editors deconstruct the reasoning why Russia needs non-NATO or neutral countries in its neighbourhood to mitigate its security concerns (19). However, it is unrealistic for any country to expect to be surrounded by neutral neighbours. Thus, Russia's insistence on such a security requirement, despite being a nuclear power, raises questions about the legitimacy of its concerns. The editors imply that, if Russia is such a peaceful and victimized country as the Kremlin would depict it, why do the Baltic, Scandinavian and Balkan states feel they benefit from joining NATO?

- (19) Russian invasion of Ukraine is explained away by the Hungarian PM in tune with Kremlin's propaganda regarding Russia's justified sense of threat from the West. Orban says: 'NATO is systematically expanding eastwards, which the Russians don't accept, so they resolved to create a new map of European security, which assumes that *Russia must be surrounded by a neutral sphere to feel safe*.' Orban seems to be forgetting that Hungary is one of the beneficiaries of NATO's 'expanding eastwards'. (*Newsweek*, 12 March 2022)

The editors also question Russia's mythopoetic narrative (one of Van Leeuwen's, 2007, legitimization strategies) of the degenerate West that wants to engulf Russia, deceive it, take away its pride and humiliate it. While myths are important for any nation to integrate as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), the editors point to the fact that contemporary legends deployed by Russian propagandists always dwell on 'us against them' and the fear of the other supposedly conspiring against Russia on any front – territorial or axiological (20 and 21).

- (20) For Putin, the war is not only against NATO expanding or the 'Nazi pseudo-government', but also *against the permissive West*, which allegedly wants to rape the Russian virgin. (*Polityka*, 13 March 2022)
- (21) One glorious myth is a universally held belief related to Russia's WWII [victory]. Another is *a treachery myth related to NATO*, where the West deceived Russia . . . much like Hitler did. (TVN24, 26 February 2023)

The editors also work to defuse conspiracy theories that, whether directly propagated by the Kremlin or merely aligned with its interests, exaggerate the threat posed by a stronger Ukraine. Polish media see military support for Ukraine as an investment in

European security and peace, claiming that, although not yet recognized officially, Ukraine is a ‘de facto’ NATO affiliate (22), with security guarantees, military equipment and training, and ongoing strategic support motivating Ukraine to apply NATO-level standards and procedures. While some nationalist and populist circles argue against prioritizing aid to Ukraine, the editors emphasize that supporting Ukraine to fight the Russian invasion is ultimately in Poland’s interest (23):

(22) *In practice, Ukraine already belongs to NATO.* Ukrainian defence minister: ‘Indeed, we are the eastern flank default member of NATO, getting NATO equipment.’ (*SuperExpress*, 9 July 2022)

(23) Polish military support for Ukraine, even if it is only about the logistics of external army supplies from NATO allies, *is in the Polish interest.* (*Newsweek*, 25 September 2023)

Debunking. Some editors debunk the claim that Russia protects the citizens of Ukraine, giving examples of staged or rigged referenda (24), where the allegedly ‘liberated’ people overwhelmingly opposed to Russia’s protection or control of the territory.

(24) [pro-Russian propaganda] ‘calls for immediate compromise’ between Russia and Ukraine, because the war was a response to NATO threat and to laws discriminating Russian-speaking minorities. *This led to a referendum in Crimea. The fact that Crimea was annexed first is never mentioned.* (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 28 June 2022)

On many occasions, while recontextualizing the rationales for the continuing invasion, the editors aim to expose the outrageous and yet persistent nature of some Russian propaganda claims. The official reasons for the war are repeated so often by the propaganda apparatus that, through a process of conditioning and information control, many ordinary Russians may have come to accept them as truth. The blame for the conflict is shifted to Ukraine itself (25), or to NATO countries, as they are portrayed as the ones that started the war or did not want to negotiate a diplomatic solution with Russia.

(25) Putin was *free to convince the public* that, after the cold war, Russia was striving for stabilization, but the West rejected these efforts. It humiliated and besieged Russia with NATO expansion. Putin also said that Ukraine started the war in 2014 after ‘the coup’, which he called the Maidan revolution. (*Newsweek*, 6 March 2024)

Discussion

In journalism studies, much attention is paid to how political information is represented via various journalistic practices and textual conventions. Such categories as news values, frames and sentiments are often studied to trace which information is selected to coincide with the editorial ideological positions and which expressive

measures make it resonant with target audiences, also in the case of geopolitical conflicts (Ji et al., 2024; Watanabe, 2017). While documenting how individual outlets that have opinion-making capacity represent military conflicts is important (Brusylovska and Maksymenko, 2023; Wolfsfeld, 1997), this study has looked at the thematic, linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of a broader journalistic practice of editorial recontextualization. It has traced how Polish media editors and journalists reconstruct war discourse by strategically neutralizing Russia's justification of the invasion of Ukraine.

While the term *neutralizing* has been used in political discourse analysis (Cap, 2022), and the notion of legitimization is often applied in analysing representation and ideology in discourse (Fowler, 1991; Heritage and Taylor, 2024; Richardson, 2007; Van Leeuwen, 2007), we operationalized the notion of editorial neutralization in a novel way by distinguishing three strategies: demystifying, delegitimizing and debunking. We exemplified how editors demystify Kremlin's actual intent behind some belligerent claims by interrogating Russian arguments, contextualizing military actions or comparing them with previous claims. We have shown editorial delegitimizing, which involves challenging the reason why something should be believed, often realized by bringing up rational arguments against the Russian claims, including data and international observers' opinions. It is even possible for editors to defuse 'mythopoetic' devices, such as Russian narratives, myths and collective memory by explaining their 'irrational' premises. Meanwhile, the editorial debunking consisted of exposing purposeful ill intent or disinformation attempts through their refutation of false claims or meta-references to the rhetorical constructions of Russian politics and Russian propaganda manoeuvres.

This study resonates with earlier research on the topic that document the strategies of Ukrainian–Russian conflict reporting, the usage of metaphors to legitimize subordination, or various misrepresentations of Ukraine by Russian propaganda (Knoblock, 2020; Shestopalova, 2023). While the rhetorical and linguistic means to demystify, delegitimize or debunk are not clear-cut nor mutually exclusive, we believe that the typology we developed can be useful for further comparative research (see Lichtenstein et al., 2018). Such research could have important implications for assessing editors' accountability and responsibility towards the communities they serve (Anderson, 1991; Višňovský and Radošinská, 2021).

Conclusion

Despite the many different justifications provided by Russia for its supposedly preemptive invasion of Ukraine, including claims of self-defence against NATO and protection of Russian speakers, a significant part of the international community has rejected these narratives (Repnikova, 2023). The framing of the invasion as a defensive measure against NATO's encroachment into Russia's sphere of influence and alleged Ukrainian aggression has been met with scepticism (Peskind, 2022). Rather than a 'necessary security measure', Russian actions are sometimes perceived as a colonialist move ultimately challenging the stability and democratic changes in the region (HYPERLINK \l "ref25" \o "ref25_3" Shestopalova, 2023). This situation is reminiscent of the US-led war on terror, where similar justifications for preemptive strikes were made (HYPERLINK \l "ref10" \o "ref10_2" Gupta, 2008). However, unlike the US, which framed its actions within

anti-terrorist operations against those who harbour WMDs, Russia's accusations lack substantial legal arguments for preemption.

This study has documented how Russia's justifications for war were represented in Polish-language journalism through a variety of recontextualization strategies. While the definitions of preemption in our literature review on 'just wars' offer a historical and theoretical perspective on the ethical self-defence measures, providing a necessary context, our empirical analysis focuses on the editorial strategies of neutralizing false pretexts for invasion in journalism. As the aim of the article has been to look at the range of possible forms used in editorial neutralization, through such an analysis, we are unable to find out what motivates editors to choose such devices and whether other contextual aspects of the coverage (format, ideological affiliation) are correlated with the identified forms. Another study could be devoted to quantifying the ratios of different neutralization patterns or comparing selected recontextualization strategies and framing strategies across countries.

The study contributes to raising awareness of the necessity to interrogate the discursive processes employed for recontextualization and to further identify strategies that will enable journalists to better gauge diverse audiences' understanding of and reactions to issues of social relevance. As guardians of public opinion and watchdogs of democracy, editors have a long-standing duty to their communities not only to report and clarify the topical issues, but also to demystify, delegitimize and debunk propagandas and disinformation. The ways this can be done effectively have been identified above and can be used for journalism training and raising critical media literacy as well as resilience to disinformation.

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More information about the project can be found at: <https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/>

Ethical approval

No ethical approval is required for this kind of research at the affiliated institutions. The protocol of the use of ChatGPT for summarizing data for thematic analysis is explained in the methods section.

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Data availability statement

Corpus: Data from media outlets that consented to their material being publicly available is <https://corecon.omeka.net/> Dataset: All concordance lines used for this study (in Polish) are available for inspection. Requests by email to the corresponding author.

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