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## **Full-scale war in Ukraine: reflections of Russian-speaking identities<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction.** The paper presents the analysis of Russian-speaking identities' vision and understanding of the war in Ukraine as well as the way it has affected their lives. This armed conflict has become a tragic stage for the Ukrainian people. It has also become a turning point for Russian-speaking identities both living in the RF and immigrating or living in Europe and Great Britain. So, **the objective** of this article is to address the problem of mental stereotypes and their reconsideration as well as behavioural changes in Russian-speaking identities with the war in Ukraine.

**The material of the research** consists of 100 relevant posts along with users' comments and reactions (collected between 2022 and 2023), and 10 interviews with Russian-speaking proactive actors of social networks on the Lithuanian segment of Facebook. The interviewees, aged 35-69, live in different countries (the RF, Lithuania, Great Britain, and France) belong to various ethnocultural, religious and social groups and identify themselves as transnational, multiple overlapping identities and express distinctive communicative pragmatic positions concerning the war in Ukraine. The interviews took place in December 2022.

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**Methods:** quantitative and qualitative content analysis (to study the essence of posts and comments as a hypertext); pragmatic discourse analysis (to define speakers' intentions, motives and pragmatic goals); discursive psychological method (to focus on the accomplishments of the online discussions); historical criticism (to focus on the way historical stereotypes emerged providing a larger context); textual analysis is done along with visual analysis.

The research reveals the vision of the war as a continuous and systematic opposition of Russian imperialism versus European, British, and American reflected in people's interaction on social networks, shaping and shifting their identities, understanding the war reasons, and the status of the parties involved in the conflict.

**Body. Understanding the war in Ukraine.** This issue could be quite ambiguous if considering who and why addresses it. It is noticeable that some researchers outside Ukraine try to use different nominations (including phrases) to avoid the direct explicit nomination 'war. It is rendered as *'the crisis in Ukraine'*, *'the return of the Cold War'* or *'conflict'* rather than the war [1; 3]. Such shifts from the direct notion of *'war'* could be explained by some external and internal causes e.g. political, economic and social reasons. Others use direct nominations and even the identification of the parties involved, namely, 'the Russia-Ukraine war' [5; 6; 7; 8].

On the one hand, Russian speakers approach the war in Ukraine directly and explicitly instead of the official Kremlin term 'special military operation' they use «война на Украине» / *'the war in Ukraine'*. It should be noted that in the Russian language, the preposition «на» + *name of the country* is habitually used in the context when someone is trying to attack another country or territory [2]). At the same time, the frequency of the usage of «на Украине» in a general broad context of the posts and interviews makes up 87 % of all cases. So, I can conclude

that Russian speakers either consciously or subconsciously identify Ukraine as a country to attack.

On the other hand, there exist some alterations and substitutions in the way the war in Ukraine is perceived by the interview respondents living on the territory of the RF (e.g. *'the war with NATO', 'Third World War', 'the war with banderovtsy', 'the war with nazi Ukraine and fascism'*).

I can illustrate this aspect of shifts in defining the war in Ukraine with the excerpt from the interview with Alexandr Bobylev, 69, who lives in the RF:

**Alexander Bobylev:** <...> this is not a conflict with Ukraine, this is again a conflict with a united Europe, as it has happened more than once in the history of Russia. Well, now America and Canada are also there, with the so-called Western world.

**Interviewer:** Why then, if it's a conflict with the Western world, why then did not Russia come into conflict with a member of the European Union or NATO, but still with Ukraine?

**Alexander Bobylev:** Well, probably, it was such a scenario, first of all, developed by the West. This is a touchstone. Ukraine is a touchstone. And the ahead, I believe, there will be a military conflict with NATO.<sup>2</sup>

The above-given example demonstrates a broader perspective of the war, namely, the opposition of the West (meaning Europe), and America against the East (meaning Russia and its partners). Each party accuses another of dominance, occupation, existential threats and imperialistic desires. Thus, the war is seen as a large conflict of the visions of the world. The interviewee reflects on his ideas adopted from Russian television, Kremlin propaganda, in particular.

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<sup>2</sup> **Александр Бобылев:** <...> это конфликт не с Украиной, это конфликт опять, как это уже не раз было в истории России с объединенной Европой. Ну, теперь еще и Америка с Канадой тоже туда же, с западным миром так называемым.

**Interviewer:** А почему тогда, если это конфликт с западным миром, почему тогда Россия не вступила в конфликт с непосредственным членом Евросоюза или НАТО, а все-таки с Украиной?

**Александр Бобылев:** Ну, наверное, какой такой сценарий был, прежде всего Запада. Это пробный камень. Украина – это пробный камень. А впереди, я считаю, будет военный конфликт с НАТО.

Another dimension of the war is expressed by migrants from post-Soviet countries (mainly Russia) to Europe. It is seen as *'an attack'* and *'aggression'* against an independent country, Ukraine. For instance, Yevgeniy Titov, 46, comments on this aspect of understanding the war, *"Well, of course, It is aggression against a sovereign state, a complete violation of international laws. In general, a complete violation of the laws of humanity"*.<sup>3</sup>

Such polar visions of the essence of the war in Ukraine result in social subdivisions and opposition among Russian speakers leading to a complete absence of communication with each other due to extremely different value orientations or conflicts. I can exemplify this tendency with the analysis of the interviews. Namely, pro-Russian social media activists are regarded by pro-Europeans as *'fifth column'*, *'Putinists'*, *'useful idiots'*, *'mishandled Cossacks'*, *'those missing delicious Soviet ice cream'*, *'FSB agents'*, *'propagandists'*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, pro-Russian activists identify pro-Europeans as *'representatives of 'civilized world''*, *'fascists'*, and *'nazi'*.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that all interviewees distinguish the beginning of the war from the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014. This event has dramatically affected their lives as it became the reason for 70% of them to migrate from the Russian Federation to Europe, Lithuania, in particular. The respondents identified the following reasons for their decisions: no desire to be involved in Kremlin bloody affairs; absence of democracy, loyalty, freedoms and decent living conditions in Russia; no future for them and their children in that country.

Respondent X, 56, shares her memories about those days, *"This Moscow has become impossible to live in. Two or three days exactly after the occupation of Crimea. <...> and you wake up, and there everyone has vertical pupils,*

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<sup>3</sup> Евгений Титов, 46: «Ну, конечно, совершена агрессия в отношении суверенного государства полное нарушение международных законов. Вообще полное нарушение законов человечности.

<sup>4</sup> Original nominations: «пятая колонна», «путинисты», «полезные идиоты», «засланные казачки», «скучающие по вкусному советскому пломбиру», «агенты ФСБ», «пропагандисты».

<sup>5</sup> Original nominations: «представители «цивилизованного мира», «фашисты», «нацисты».

*something bit everyone at night. And everyone says to you, “Well, did you hear? Khokhols, Crimea is ours! We don’t hand over, we don’t hand over our own!”*<sup>6</sup>

Still, two interviewees shared their reflections about the war in Ukraine as continuous imperialistic attacks on neighbouring countries practised by Russia for more than five centuries. They also point out numerous armed conflicts initiated by RF on the territories of post-Soviet countries after the fall of the USSR (e.g. Moldova, Georgia, etc.). Thus, the war in Ukraine is perceived as a continuation of all those previous campaigns to occupy post-Soviet countries. One of the interviewees reveals her memories about the first days of the war in 2014:

Respondent X: “<...> *I didn’t pay attention to Abkhazia. I missed the war in Georgia <...>. But at that time it didn't exist for me. And then, already when they began to show me, “Well, look, these are the links of one chain!” Well, yes, indeed!*”<sup>7</sup>

Two interviewees shared their recollections about the beginning of the war in 2014 as a staged and filmed event with the scripts developed and produced by Kremlin propaganda. It created some sort of parallel reality, which had little to do with the way the situation was in Crimea, Donetsk or Lugansk at that time. For instance, according to Illya Goncharov, 36, (a migrant from Lithuania to Great Britain), it was a Russian fake that Crimea was occupied with no single shot. Anastasiia Kirilenko, 38, (a Russian journalist, and migrant to France) witnessed the events in Donetsk in February 2014 before the arrival of Russian FSB troops, “*Then no one from residents expected the war. There, in the ranks of the deceased from Heavenly Hundred, there were those from Donetsk, Kramatorsk. And there was Euromaidan (in Donetsk) <...>. But every 10th person somehow abstractly*

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<sup>6</sup> Респондент X: «Эта Москва стала непригодной для жизни. За два или три дня именно после оккупации Крыма. <...> и вы просыпаетесь, а там у всех зрачки вертикальные, всех за ночь что-то покусало. И все говорят тебе: «Ну ты слышал? Хохлы, Крым наш! Не сдаем, своих не сдаем!»

<sup>7</sup> Респондент X: «<...> я пропустила Абхазию. Я пропустила войну в Грузии <...>. Но тогда для меня этого всего не существовало. И потом, уже когда мне стали показывать: «Ну, смотри, это же звенья одной цепи!» Ну, действительно, да.»

*said, "We need to be with Russia". But still, no one suspected what would happen. And Russia burned it all, all this Russian television. I saw live how they created a fake. Well, they shot close-ups of people who were clearly with the foreman. That is, they were paid for by some kind of protesters, that they were creating a front, a second front. ”<sup>8</sup>*

**Breaking stereotypes.** The war in Ukraine as a significant lasting military, political, economic, and historical process launched a re-stereotyping of some social beliefs inside and outside the countries involved. With the change of conditions, ideas change as well. It should be noted that the process of social re-stereotyping is permanent in life and dramatic events like wars catalyze it. Such sort of transformation is inevitable when people’s views and stereotypes face reality and are tested in the real field of application [9].

Stereotypes are abstract, one-sided, and easy to grasp and manipulate a distinguished audience. That is the reason why they became specific instruments employed in the Russian-Ukrainian war in the aspect of the psycho-informational struggle of the parties involved. On the other hand, breaking stereotypes became a reverse tool to reveal some weaknesses of the enemies. Formation of a stereotype is a cognitive process, which does not necessarily directly correlate with objective reality and its conditions, meaning stereotypes exist in humans’ minds until reality and its realia do not provide some striking facts or factors which oppose stereotypic views and make people reconsider their opinions.

Another factor influenced communicators' understanding of the events and parties involved in their reconsideration of the situation after they migrated to a different region of Ukraine or another country with the break of the war. People

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<sup>8</sup> Анастасия Кириленко: «Тогда войны никто не ждал из местных жителей (в Донецке). Там в рядах Небесной сотни есть погибшие из Донецка, Краматорска. И там был Евромайдан <...>. Но каждый 10-й человек как-то абстрактно говорил: «Нам надо быть с Россией». Но все равно, никто не подозревал, что будет такое. А Россия это все сжигала, все это российское телевидение. Я видела в прямом эфире, как они создавали фейк. Ну, снимали крупным планом людей, которые были явно с бригадиром. То есть они явно были оплаченные какие-то там митингующие, что они создают фронт, второй фронт».

appear in different surroundings, and new realia, which influence their views and the system of values in the process of their adaptation. One more factor is direct or indirect contact with the parties of the conflict – Russia and Ukraine as well as their allies.

The dominant stereotypes which underwent re-stereotyping are the status of Russia and Ukraine. Before the war, Ukraine was not fully perceived as an independent state but rather as part of the Russian Federation. The latter was considered a mighty, strong and diligent partner in the international arena. With the development of the events at the battlefields which could be followed online and on television in real-time, the images of both countries have been rapidly changing. Namely, the stereotypical vision of Russia's second-world army dwindled to nothing with the carelessly planned, provided and maintained so-called 'special military operation'. The image of Ukraine as the fighter, who could resist and unite 52 countries of the world against Russian military aggression and crimes, rose dramatically. Such sort of reconsideration happened gradually in people's minds. The interviewee *Evgeny Titov, 46*, a Russian journalist who migrated to Lithuania after his publications about the Crimea bridge shares his reflections about re-stereotyping which took place with the war, "*<...> this war has a positive effect in the way myths are dispelled. That is, Russia was believed to be the key player in the region, and Ukraine was still considered to be some kind of state-dependent on Russia. But this war has shown that Russia is in many ways untenable as a state, it turned out that its army is untenable, and the system of government is untenable. And vice versa, it showed that Ukraine is a real state, because its system of government withstood, its army withstood. <...> the understanding of countries has completely changed. It turned out that everything was not as it seemed, that Russia turned out to be bankrupt, and Ukraine was*

*bankable as a state. This is some positive effect. Even though it is, of course, a terrible tragedy.*”<sup>9</sup>

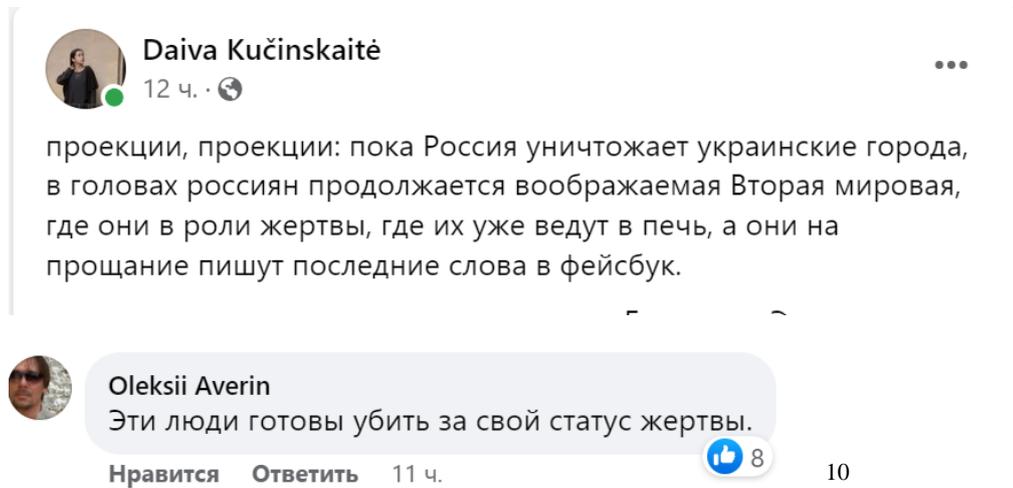
Another stereotype helps to approach the reasons for the war. It is a crucial stereotypical belief experienced by Russia and its population – the dialectic status of ‘*a victim*’ and ‘*rescuer*’. The matter is that the idea of the constant existential thread is some fundamental issue of insecurity transmitted by Russia on SNS as well as Russian television (news, TV programmes like «60 МИНУТ», «Время покажет» etc.) regularly. Such sort of danger is perceived coming from European countries and their values as well as North America, in general, and corresponding international organizations like NATO. On the other hand, Ukraine and Ukrainians are understood as the principle bearers of this thread because of pro-European policy in the country and ‘*rusophobic*’ ideas, which are reversely verbalized in nominations ‘*nazi*’ and ‘*fascists*’ (meaning those who love Ukraine and identify themselves with it). That means that basic national belonging and love are perceived in their extreme options – Nazism and fascism. Correspondingly, Russia reflects its self-conception as a victim of Nazism and fascism, which is embodied in the fears routed and coming from World War II although it did not affect Russia as much as Ukraine in those times (it should be noted that present-day territories of Russian were partially involved in that war). This triggering psychological aspect works well for Kremlin propaganda exploiting Russian speakers' memory work, fears and misery which they are trying to expand outside their country. This stereotype and its re-stereotyping

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<sup>9</sup> Original piece of the interview:

Евгений Титов: «Но, с другой стороны, если мыслить диалектически, то каждое явление оно, оно очень многомерная, многоплановая. И эта война, она имеет положительный эффект в том, что развеяны мифы. То есть считалось, что Россия это ключевой главный игрок в регионе, а Украина все таки некая зависимая от Россия государство. Но эта война показала, что Россия во многих моментах несостоятельна как государство, оказалось, что несостоятельна ее армия несостоятельна, система управления. И наоборот, она показала, что Украина то как раз состоялась как государство, потому что выдержала ее система управления, выдержала ее армия. То есть вот это понимание, но что ли? То есть на геополитической геополитической карте региона понимание стран совершенно изменилось. Оказалось, что все не так, как представлялось, что Россия оказалась несостоятельной, а Украина именно состоятельной, как государство. Вот в этом некий положительный эффект. При том, что это, конечно, страшная трагедия.»

became a triggering topic for discussions in SNS (the Lithuanian segment of Facebook, in particular):



This status of ‘*a victim*’ being widely popularized and exploited in the RF has created the status of ‘*a rescuer*’ meaning Russia, the Russian people and the so-called the ‘Russian world’ opposing and fighting the threatening European, and American enemies on the battlefields of Ukraine. Thus, on the one hand, it creates the illusion of the Russian army liberating Ukraine from Nazism and fascism, European and American influence. On the other hand, it creates another illusion of protecting the Russian Federation from these dangers and the expansion of NATO to the East.

These peculiarities of the ‘Russian world’ fit into S. Karpman’s Drama Triangle, which justifies such sort of drama-intense relationship transactions (1968) [4].

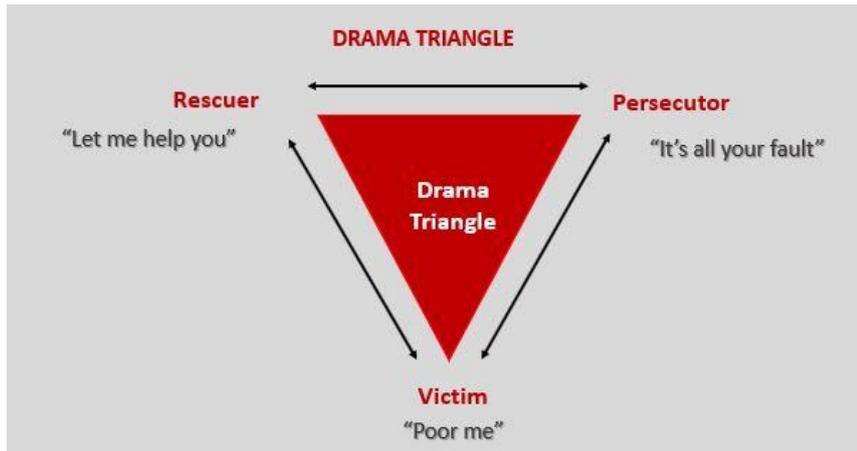
#### Chart 1. S. Karpman’s Drama Triangle

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<sup>10</sup> Translation:

Daiva Kucinskaite: projections, projections: while Russia is destroying Ukrainian cities, the imaginary World War II goes on in the minds of Russians, where they are in the role of a victim, where they are already led into the oven, and they write their last words on Facebook as parting.

Oleksii Averin: These people are ready to kill for their status of a victim.



An interviewee who wished to be pseudonymized Anna, 58, reveals her ideas about such sort of interaction the Russian speakers' experience under the influence of Kremlin propaganda and the model of the 'Russian world' with the inner Self and others in the following way, “First, **we must stop considering ourselves** a sufferer, a righteous man, and a gift. <...> Stop feeling like a gift in a small provincial world, in some incomprehensible Lesser Europe. You can’t imagine how funny it was when you realize that you have an imperial mindset, and here you have an imperial mindset, and here you have an imperial mindset.”

Stereotyping and re-stereotyping these fundamental beliefs can be found in one of the Facebook posts by Viktor Denisenko, a Russian-speaking Lithuanian researcher from Vilnius:



**Viktor Denisenko** почувается ...

ВДЯЧНИМ.

22 год · 🌐

Oh, sometimes I feel so grateful to Kremlin propaganda media like RT. It is so easy to work. Yesterday I grab just the first article from their site and got an excellent collection of fakes and disinformation narratives in one text. Today with Lithuanian and ERASMUS students we will analyze it during the workshop in Lithuanian Military Academy.

Some claims from the text:

- ➡ V. Zelensky is a servant not of the Ukrainian people but "of America"
- ➡ Ukrainians destroyed "Mriya" by themselves (and in general it was a Soviet project and Ukraine has nothing to do with it)
- ➡ That "the Western press linked Zelensky's foreign trips to a travelling circus" (NOTE: in reality, this claim was made on the ONE French TV channel).
- ➡ That "supplying Kiev with new lethal weapons means using Ukrainians as cannon fodder" (NOTE: oh, this is an old one and already boring...)
- ➡ And that supply Kyiv by weapons means "bring the world to potential catastrophe" (NOTE: Boooo!...)
- ➡ And in general the war is "Zelensky's blood adventure"

Thus, the war in Ukraine became a fundamental factor in breaking some principle stereotypes of 'the Russian world', understanding the reasons for the war and the parties involved. The main stereotypical beliefs about Russia's mighty, powerful state turned out to be unsustainable and had little to do with reality. On the other hand, the status of Ukraine is undergoing reconsideration as well. Furthermore, the Russian dominant self-conception idea of a victim and rescuer is being proved unrealistic as well.

**Conclusions.** The full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war has launched dramatic processes of reconsideration and re-stereotyping among Russian speakers inside and outside the conflict. It starts from various options to define and understand this military, political, social and economic struggle (balancing between 'war' and

'*conflict*'), and its consequences for people's destinies. Another issue is breaking stereotypes associated with fundamental stereotypes about the parties involved, and their status. Furthermore, stereotyping and re-stereotyping help understand one of the reasons for the war through the Russian model of self-conception 'victim-rescuer'.

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