

**CRISIS COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA  
IN TIMES OF WAR.  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

In a significant escalation of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, a military invasion of Ukraine was launched by Russia on February 24, 2022. This military campaign followed a period of buildup of Russian military forces from early 2021 and a series of demands made by Russia for security measures and legal restrictions against Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. Since the events leading up to the Russian military operation in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky has used social media to expose his actions related to tensions with Moscow. At the dawn of the armed conflict, the Ukrainian president used the pages of the ministries and his official profile to promote his leadership figure and exalt his leadership in this issue. The present paper aims to investigate, using Dialogic Communication Theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and Renewal Discourse Theory (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), how the Russian-Ukrainian war (the "aggression" in official discourse) is presented in the posts of President Volodymyr Zelensky through the most used social networks in Ukraine (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The research provides valuable insights into how social media communication can increase stakeholder support and foster constructive discussions about progress. The analysis also shows that dialogue needs to be open, adaptive, unambiguous and participatory in order to engage with all relevant people.

***Keywords: crisis, war, social media, dialogic communication, renewal discourse.***

**Introduction**

In a significant escalation of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, a military invasion of Ukraine was launched by Russia on February 24, 2022. This military campaign followed a period of buildup of Russian military forces from early 2021 and a series of demands made by Russia for security measures and legal restrictions against Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. Following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on February

24, 2022, NATO has announced plans to send additional troops to Eastern Europe. Tens of thousands of people are fleeing the country, while others have chosen to stay and fight. Within 24 hours of the attack, Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky used social media to call for support from the international community. Zelensky positioned himself as a compassionate and relatable leader who could motivate his fellow citizens in what appeared to be a hopeless struggle. As a result, he was successful in rallying support from Western countries. (Oxford Analytica, 2021).

Since the events leading up to the Russian military operation in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky has used social media to publicise his actions in relation to tensions with Moscow. At the beginning of the armed conflict, the Ukrainian president used the pages of his ministry and his official profile to promote his leadership and highlight his leadership on the issue. Many of the posts include pictures of Zelenskiy, portraying him as a hero in the midst of the confrontation with the Russians. These images are aimed not only at the Ukrainian population as an audience, but also at international public opinion in order to create a positive reception of the government's leadership.

It is important to note that in a conflict situation it is relatively common for leaders to use heroic rhetoric and narratives that are considered populist during military campaigns (Baysha, 2022, p. 23). There are several historical examples of this. In the Second World War, images of Winston Churchill walking through the rubble of German bombing raids and in London's underground bomb shelters became famous, with the figure of the British leader as a representative of the people in the fight against the Nazis becoming emblematic (Baysha, 2022, p. 25). In this case, both populism and heroism are complementary, and the domestic political discourse that there is an opposition between the Ukrainian people and the corrupt elite is reflected in the antagonism of the war between Ukraine and Russia. The current war tends to highlight the antagonism between the old and new school of leadership through the portrayal of the two leaders. Vladimir Putin appears as an insular leader, photographs show him alienated from even his closest advisers, sitting alone at the end of an absurdly long conference table, his message delivered from a podium or distributed through state media. Volodimir Zelensky, on the other hand, bases his message on the idea of cooperation, common goals and team-building, delivered, as mentioned above, primarily through social media.

Currently (2022), Facebook and Instagram are the most used online platforms in Ukraine (according to statcounter.com). Twitter, as in the case of Poland and Hungary (Matuszewski & Szabó, 2019), is used as an "elite" field of communication where Ukrainian

politicians, diplomats, experts and journalists participate. Since the time of the "Revolution of Dignity" (2014), these platforms have been used by Ukrainians to share "european" tendencies and to promote "pro-western" affiliation (Matuszewski & Szabó, 2019).

The aim of this paper is to use the Dialogical Communication Theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and the Renewal Discourse Theory (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002) to examine how the Russian-Ukrainian war ("aggression" in official discourse) is represented in President Volodimir Zelensky's postings on the most widely used social networks in Ukraine (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Based on the analysis of the relevant literature, two research questions were addressed:

**RQ1:** How was the dialogic communication demonstrated in President Zelensky's response to the war crisis?

**RQ2:** How was the renewal discourse demonstrated in President Zelensky's response to the war crisis?

### **The concept of crisis and crisis communication**

According to the literature, the term crisis comes from the Greek "krisis" and "krinein" (Mair, 2010). "Krisis" is originally a medical term used by Hippocrates to describe "a turning point in an illness" (Mair, 2010). On the other hand, the term "krinein" means "to judge, separate or decide" (Mair, 2010). However, the term is not limited to these meanings. In political and legal language, it takes on the meaning of 'discrimination' or 'decision' (Coombs, 2019, p. 35). The Oxford Dictionary describes a crisis as " (...) a time of intense difficulty, distress or danger (...)", again indicating the French origin of the term crisis, which translates as "(...) a sudden change for the better or worse".

Although researchers have tried over time to find a universally accepted definition of the concept, this has not been achieved to the present day (Coombs, 2019, p. 35). Each definition describes a specific characteristic of the concept, with researchers Heath & Millar (2004) proposing around 20 definitions in this regard.

Coombs (2019) defines a crisis as "a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly" (p. 2), and notes that effective crisis communication can minimize the impact of the crisis on the organization's reputation and operations. According to Sellnow and Seeger (2021), crisis communication involves "strategic efforts by organizations to protect, repair, and rebuild their reputations after threats to their ability to maintain relationships with stakeholders" (p. 41).

The literature on crisis communication emphasizes the importance of transparency, honesty, and timely communication during a crisis, as well as the need for organizations to take responsibility for their actions and show empathy towards those affected by the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2022; Ulmer et al., 2019). Overall, the concept of crisis communication is vital for organizations to manage the risks and uncertainties that arise from crises and maintain their reputation and relationships with stakeholders.

### **Dialogic communication theory**

The Dialogic communication theory has become increasingly important in the study of crisis communication, as it emphasizes the importance of interaction and collaboration between organizations and stakeholders. Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that dialogue is essential for understanding, learning, and developing relationships between organizations and their publics. This approach is particularly relevant for crisis communication, as it promotes transparency, responsiveness, and engagement with stakeholders, which are critical for building trust and managing a crisis effectively.

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified four principles of dialogic communication: respect for stakeholders, understanding of stakeholders' perspectives, sharing of power with stakeholders, and a commitment to ongoing dialogue. These principles are seen as key to building and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, and to fostering mutual understanding and trust. The theory emphasizes the importance of a two-way flow of communication, in which stakeholders are given opportunities to provide feedback and participate in decision-making processes. Ultimately, the goal of dialogic communication is to build stronger, more collaborative relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, and to foster a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for organizational outcomes.

### **Theory of renewal discourse**

According to Sellnow and Timothy's (2002) research, organizations that recovered quickly from crises demonstrated communication that was spontaneous, optimistic, ethical, and forward-looking, with an emphasis on leadership and community. Rather than seeing crises as solely negative, communication highlights the potential for opportunities and can drive organizational change and community adaptation. While traditional crisis communication literature has focused on preserving an organization's reputation, renewal discourse concentrates on what the organization should aspire to be or become following a crisis. This

approach considers how the public perceives the organization's identity, which can impact their acceptance of the post-crisis response. (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021, p. 41). Ulmer (2007) argues that renewal discourse theory emerged as an alternative to theories of image repair, which focus on restoring an organization's reputation after a crisis. Instead, renewal discourse theory suggests that crises can be seen as opportunities for substantive change that benefits stakeholders. The theory emphasizes the importance of communication in shaping stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's identity and its response to the crisis. By adopting a renewal discourse approach, organizations can build trust, maintain relationships with stakeholders, and emerge from crises stronger and more resilient.

### **Methodology**

The present research was conducted through a content analysis of the social media posts of the President of Ukraine, Volodimir Zelensky, using dialogical communication theory (Kent, Taylor, 2002) and renewal discourse theory (Sellnow, Timothy, 2013). A deductive thematic analysis followed to analyse the social networks on three digital channels using the QDA Miner 6 software program. The presence of emergent themes in the data was assessed by reviewing the literature. An analysis was first conducted at the semantic level, followed by a more interpretive approach to examine the underlying ideas (Saldaña, 2014).

For these analyses, a sample of posts by the President of Ukraine was collected from three digital channels from 1 January 2022 to 31 March 2022. These channels are Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The initial sample size included a corpus of 325 tweets, 300 Facebook posts and 325 Instagram posts. After some data refinement, the final sample included a corpus of 163 tweets reposted on Facebook and Instagram, differing only in that these two platforms allowed the addition of an image or video. All these posts are in the public domain.

### **Data collected and analyzed**

To ensure consistency in coding, the literature review and the two research questions were taken into consideration. The most common words in the text were identified, which provided possible ideas in the initial stages of the study. Word clouds were generated using QDA Miner coding software based on word frequency analysis. These word clouds revealed trends and patterns that helped to make sense of the context in which the words appeared. An example of a word cloud showing the 50 most frequent words in the three datasets is provided below:

Word Cloud



Figure 1 Wordcloud of posts generated by QDA Miner 6 software

## Results

Zelensky's style of tweeting differs from the typical understanding of political communication through social media in several ways. Despite similarities such as regularly posting updates during important events and mentioning official visits and commemorations, Zelensky frequently tweets about meetings and phone calls. Additionally, he makes use of mentions, which is in contrast to previous research that found politicians underutilize this social media feature (Guerrero-Solé, 2018):

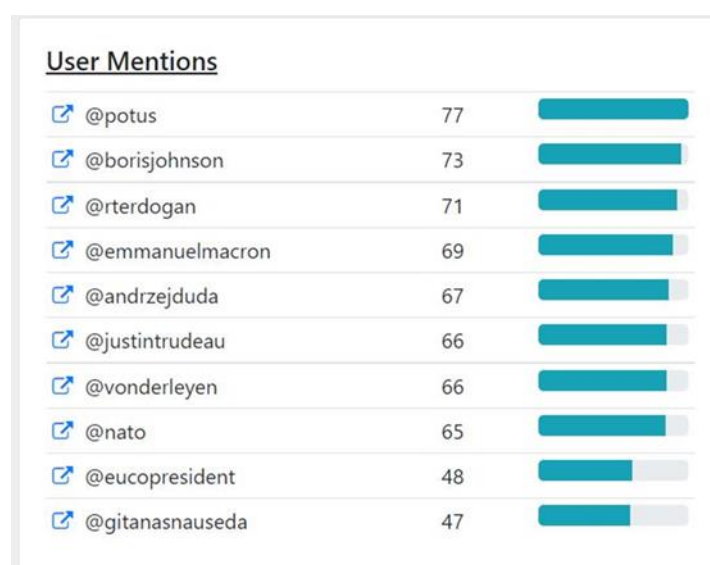


Figure 2 Content analysis of Volodimir Zelensky's tweets collected with the Twitter analytics tool Vicinitas on 15.05.2022

**RQ1** - The President's communication team developed specific # hashtags during events such as #stoprussia, #strongertogether, #donbas, etc., to collect and centralize all relevant mentions on Twitter. This approach made it easier for stakeholders to access and respond to content related to the ongoing crisis. The primary function of Twitter in this context was to raise awareness and draw attention to the conflict.

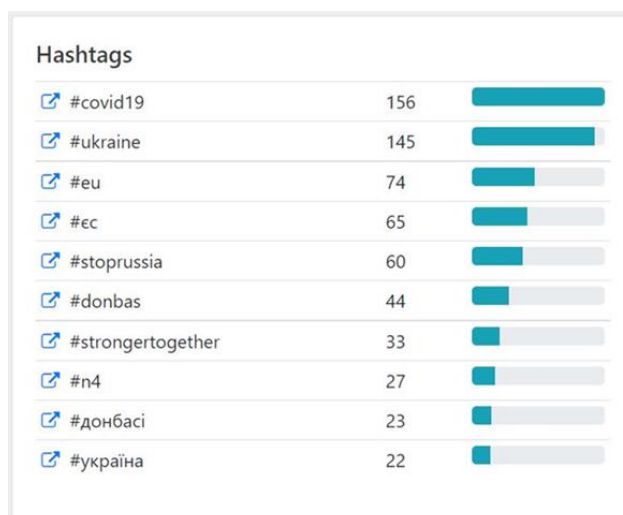


Figure 3. Content analysis of Volodimir Zelensky's tweets collected with the Twitter analytics tool Vicinitas on 15.05.2022.

The deductive thematic analysis of the social media posts resulted in 4 themes highlighted by the information provided online: official events, official actions, reactions to events, claims, data and statistics. The percentages in which they are reflected in the online posts can be seen in the graph below:

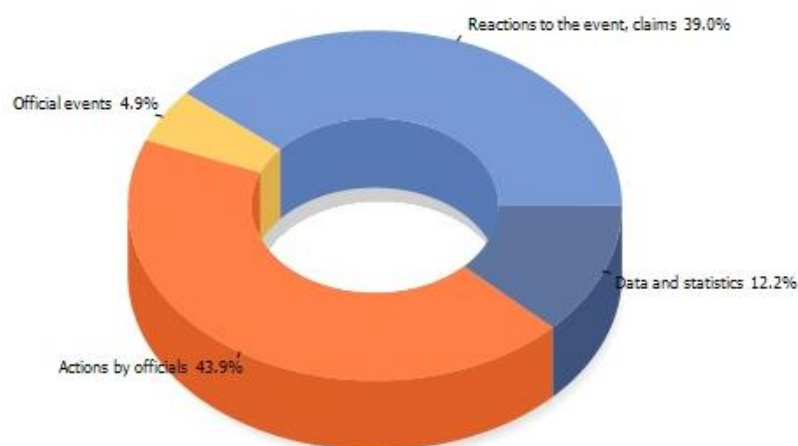


Figure 4. Deductive thematic analysis of Volodimir Zelensky's tweets, encoding with QDA Miner 6 software

Zelensky's content was characterized by authenticity, with transparency being one of his core values that was consistently reflected in his communication about the crisis. The study utilized a theoretical framework (see Appendix 1) to classify and subcategorize the dialogic communication strategies employed by Zelensky. The identified categories included reciprocity, engagement, risk, empathy, and approach.

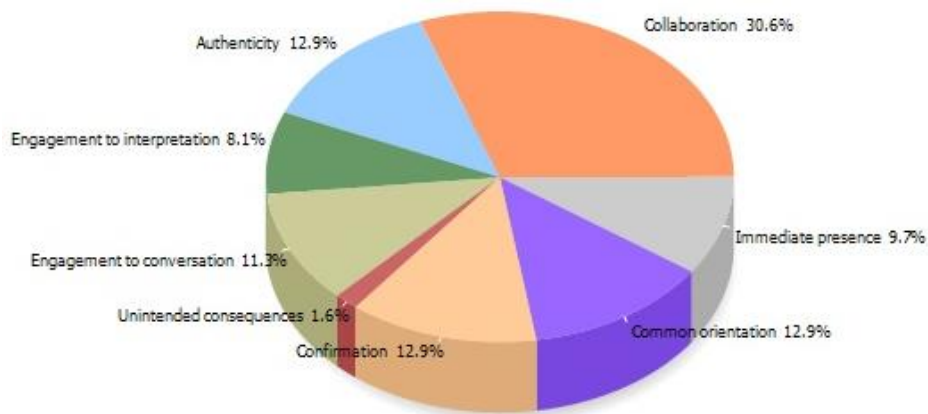


Figure 5. Analysis of Volodimir Zelensky's tweets, encoding by QDA Miner 6 software.

**RQ2** - Zelensky exhibited "vigilant resilience" by proactively anticipating potential challenges and responding to stakeholder needs through effective communication. He engaged in collaborative dialogue to provide support, treated the crisis as a learning opportunity, and took concrete steps towards recovery. As a result of his communication response, Zelensky's audience was receptive to his proposed path forward, both during the crisis and in the post-crisis period. This is evident from the support extended by all the countries that joined Ukraine (see Appendix 2).

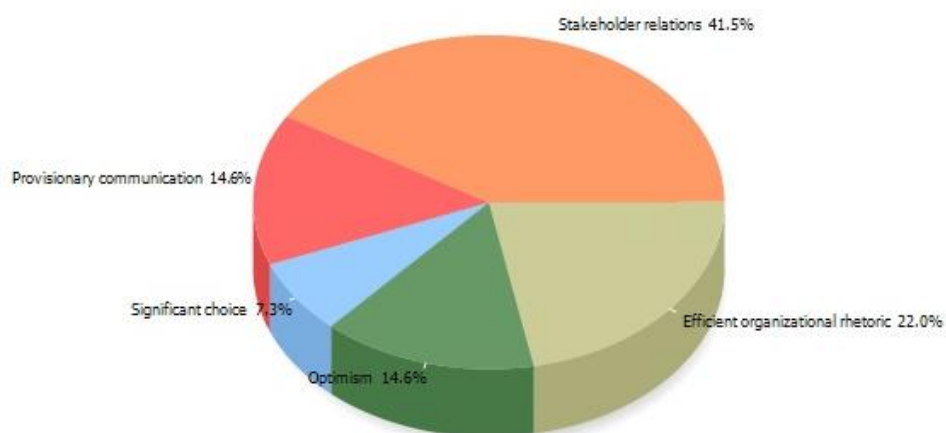


Figure 6. Analysis of Volodimir Zelensky's tweets, encoding by QDA Miner 6 software.



## **Conclusions**

The present study utilized a deductive approach to qualitative thematic analysis to demonstrate how dialogic content was employed in social media communication to promote a discourse of renewal. By integrating dialogic communication with a discourse of renewal, the study highlights the importance of stakeholder support and relationship building in strengthening crisis communication on social media platforms.

All things considered, it can be said that President Zelensky's use of Twitter in February-March 2022 is an extension of his *modus operandi* in his television programme and internal decisions taken during his term in office. This claim can be justified by examining how the Ukrainian president mentions the leaders of the Western world.

In the various examples highlighted in the study, it was found that the former actor uses a rhetoric of mobilization for the Ukrainian people and the international community, especially the Western one, when he points out that his country belongs to Europe and in order to be part of this group it must take a number of steps that would bring Kiev closer to the West, such as participating in international organizations composed of countries that are supposed to be part of this group, such as the European Union and NATO.

The short time frame of the data collected is one of the limitations of this study, limitations that can be addressed and supplemented by future research as the conflict unfolds.

*Appendix 1*

| <b>Categories</b> | <b>Subcategories</b>         | <b>Textual examples</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reciprocity       | Collaboration                | “We keep in touch with loyal friends constantly. I spoke with @GitanasNauseda about the current military situation, international efforts to force the aggressor to peace and Ukraine's membership in the #EU. Thank you, Gitanas, for your continued support.”                           |
| Engagement        | Engagement to conversation   | “Nuclear terrorism requires decisive action in response. At the #UN Security Council meeting, we called for closing the sky over and launching an operation to maintain peace and security. The goal is to save hazardous facilities. The world must not watch, but help!”                |
| Engagement        | Authenticity                 | “I welcome the establishment by the #UN Human Rights Council of the International Commission of Inquiry to investigate facts of Russian war crimes against Ukraine. Evidence will be documented and used in international courts. Russian war criminals will be held accountable.”        |
| Engagement        | Engagement to interpretation | “To the world: what is the point of saying «never again» for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babyn Yar? At least 5 killed. History repeating...”                                                                                                |
| Risc              | Unintended consequences      | “Mariupol. Direct strike of Russian troops at the maternity hospital. People, children are under the wreckage. Atrocity! How much longer will the world be an accomplice ignoring terror? Close the sky right now! Stop the killings! You have power but you seem to be losing humanity.” |
| Empathy           | Confirmation                 | “I extend my heartfelt condolences to the family of Brent Renaud who lost his life while documenting the ruthlessness & evil inflicted upon □□ people by Russia. May Brent’s life &                                                                                                       |

sacrifice inspire the world to stand up in fight for the forces of light against forces of darkness. <https://t.co/bvQjM470OU>”

|          |                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Empathy  | Common orientation | “We appreciate the support of the friendly people of Guatemala and personally @DrGiammattei during □□’s struggle against Russian aggression. We will remember a clear and strong position of □□. We need to expand the anti-war coalition. Let's stop the war together. #StopRussia”      |
| Presence | Immediate presence | “Evacuation of civilians from Azovstal began. The 1st group of about 100 people is already heading to the controlled area. Tomorrow we’ll meet them in Zaporizhzhia. Grateful to our team! Now they, together with #UN, are working on the evacuation of other civilians from the plant.” |

## Appendix 2

| Categories            | Subcategories              | Textual examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ethical communication | Stakeholder relations      | “Sincere thanks to @vonderleyen, @JustinTrudeau, @GlbICtn for supporting □□, millions of Ukrainians. The #StandUpForUkraine initiative has already raised \$10+ bn. This is a huge contribution to □□'s support after □□ invasion. Grateful to everyone who joins. Let's do it together! <a href="https://t.co/7YxbZAYCEk">https://t.co/7YxbZAYCEk</a> ” |
| Ethical communication | Provisionary communication | “Informed EC President @vonderleyen about the provision of the completed questionnaire - an important step towards #EU membership! Discussed the increase of security aid to □□ in the face of RF's aggression. Also discussed postwar reconstruction. We appreciate the support of □□!”                                                                 |

|                       |                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ethical communication | Provisionary communication        | “Evacuation of civilians from Azovstal began. The 1st group of about 100 people is already heading to the controlled area. Tomorrow we’ll meet them in Zaporizhzhia. Grateful to our team! Now they, together with #UN, are working on the evacuation of other civilians from the plant.”  |
| Prospective vision    | Optimism                          | “42 states took Ukraine’s side in the case against Russia at the International Court of Justice and intend to join the proceedings. Grateful to partners who chose the right side of history. The side of truth, international law, and justice. Together, we'll hold Russia accountable.” |
| Prospective vision    | Efficient organizational rhetoric | “Ukraine has submitted its application against Russia to the ICJ. Russia must be held accountable for manipulating the notion of genocide to justify aggression. We request an urgent decision ordering Russia to cease military activity now and expect trials to start next week.”       |

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