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PRESS UNDER PRESSURE: FRAMING OF THE RUSSIAN- UKRAINIAN CONFLICT IN THE SLOVAK PRESS

Andrej HABIŇÁK

ABSTRACT:

Theories of media effects represent a key area of research within media and communication studies that deals with the way media contents influence the cognitive, affective and behavioural responses of individuals, as well as their wider social and cultural impacts on society. Fundamental theories include agenda-setting, framing and priming. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the powerful effects of the media on the formation of public opinion, social norms, and political processes, emphasising the critical importance of readers' media literacy. The present study primarily focuses on framing. It represents a key concept in the field of communication and media studies, which describes how the way information is presented can influence an audience's perception and decision-making. This article examines different dimensions of framing, including its use in print media informing about the ongoing war in Ukraine, and analyses to what extent framing can be considered a manipulative tool. Through the analysis of media theory in this area and Slovak print media, this article provides certain insight on framing as a phenomenon that plays a fundamental role in the formation of public opinion and explores its potential linguistic and ethical implications. In conclusion, the author proposes concepts that could help minimise the risk of the manipulative use of framing.

KEYWORDS:

framing, language, media manipulation, priming, Slovak press

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1 Introduction

Recently, the question of the objectivity and credibility of the media has become an increasingly urgent topic in the field of media and communication studies. Although these issues have been addressed in the past, especially in connection with various types of propaganda in the 20th century, the current situation once again forces the public to critically review the credibility of the media. Propaganda has repeatedly led people to question who and what they can believe throughout the last century, a phenomenon not limited to Europe, but which is also having a significant impact on the North American continent. Propaganda is not as prominent today as it was in the past, but it cannot be said that it has disappeared. This article examines the historical and contemporary challenges to the issue of media credibility, and analyses how framing can play a key role in shaping public opinion. It is therefore not surprising that in the second half of the 20th century, various theories about the manipulation of the media audience began to emerge. The emergence of these media manipulation theories is a natural consequence of the growing influence of the media on society and the growing distrust of their objectivity and credibility. These theories are often based on the belief that the media can be a tool to influence public opinion, sometimes in favour of certain interest groups, governments or corporations.

It is interesting that in the Central European area such observations appear “a little later” and by that we mean several decades. Specifically, in Slovakia, this issue has been mainly addressed for the last decade. It was during this period that people began to care more about content, which was presented in the media, because suddenly it was no longer just about providing general information, infotainment, presenting the statements of politicians, or just about an accident on the highway or the birth of a lemur in the city zoo. On the contrary, it was in the last decade that society began to face complex questions that concerned everyone. The press, television and radio dealt with complex events such as illegal mass migration, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict taking place just across the borders of our country on a daily basis. However, the listener, viewer or reader reached the position that some news in the media was not to their liking, they questioned them, and this also led to the fact that they began to check the absorbed information, compare it in various media sources, browse the Internet, etc. to discuss everything with their acquaintances.

Apparently, all this was the impetus for the common man to start checking information from the media. And in the end, they really came to terms with inconsistencies, errors, and mistakes. This created space for conspiracy theories, questioning not only the objectivity of the media, but also science itself, political systems, law, democracy, freedom, medicine, etc. When, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Slovak government even shut down some of the so-called alternative media, many doubted the freedom of speech, expecting the beginning of a new totality and the establishment of a groundbreaking line of thought, the direction of which would be set by state governments and media corporations. Society was divided into two groups, which labelled each other, called each other names, mocked and insulted one another. This state of society continues to this day, fading away only very slowly. We think that this can also be the reason why we are currently dealing with the questionable objectivity of the media. As we can see, they are very powerful, their influence on people's thinking and actions is considerable, and so they also have a huge responsibility towards society. It obliges them to protect their credit, their brand, their image in the world of information, their credibility. Certainly, in the field of information and mass media, several techniques of media manipulation are well-known. The submitted study aims to focus primarily on the framing technique.

2 Framing in the Context of Priming and Agenda-Setting

Framing, as it is known, is one of the most used media manipulation techniques. It focuses on the way information is presented and structured to influence how the audience perceives and interprets it. The point is that even if the facts themselves are true, the way they are presented can greatly influence people's opinions and reactions. Our aim is to explain to the reader a broader spectrum of knowledge about this technique, even from the opposite opinion spectrum – that it is not a manipulative technique, just a way of neutrally presenting information with regard to the audience, the time of the presentation or the scope of the topic covered.

Entman is an eminent American professor and researcher in the field of communication and political science. He is best known for his contributions to framing theory, which examines how the media present information and how this affects public perceptions and opinions. Entman's work in this area is often cited and recognised as key to understanding media influence on public debate and political processes. Entman characterises “framing” as follows:

Framing theory is based on the assumption that news media play a decisive role in the process of forming public opinion. It helps clarify how citizens perceive and understand political events mediated by the media and how the meaning of the news message affects the formation and choice of their opinions. By testing framing theory, it is possible to quantify the degree of effect that communicated information can have on its recipients. (1993, p. 51)

Another well-known professor of communication theory, de Vreese, complements this characteristic when he notes that, from a theoretical point of view, framing follows the theory of agenda-setting, because it assumes that “certain aspects of perceived reality are purposefully selected and emphasised in news reports” and other on the contrary, they are deliberately neglected. The degree of attention paid by the news to individual pieces of information then outlines the main topics of public debate and determines which issues are perceived as predominant in society (2004, p. 37). De Vreese is the author of numerous publications that explore framing, agenda-setting, and other key concepts in communication. He works at the University of Amsterdam, where he contributes to the understanding of how media and political messages influence the public and political processes. It can be concluded that there are two key theories of media manipulation:

1. **Agenda-setting:** This theory suggests that the media do not necessarily tell people what to think, but effectively determine what will be discussed. By selecting and emphasising certain topics, the media shape which issues will be perceived as most important in society. For example, if the media constantly covers crime, it can create the impression that it is an urgent problem, even though statistically there may not be a significant increase in crime.
2. **Framing:** Framing, as discussed earlier, refers to the way the media present information. It is about choosing certain aspects of reality and emphasising them at the expense of others, which can lead to a different perception of the same event. For example, the same event can be presented as either a “success” or a “controversy”, depending on how the media frame their news.

Both theories show that media have a significant influence on how the public perceives and understands world events and issues. The degree of importance of information within the presented news agenda remains the starting variable for determining the main topics of public debate. However, from the point of view of framing theory, news articles no longer determine only what people should think about, but also how they should evaluate the presented information. Framing can thus, next to the theory of priming, be included in the category of media effects, which is called by academics second-level agenda-setting.

Priming is another media communication theory that deals with how the media influence the public perception of events and personalities by emphasising certain aspects of those events or personalities. This concept posits that

frequent and intense exposure to certain themes or features can influence how people remember and evaluate those themes or features. Authors and researchers such as Kinder and Iyengar (2010), Entman (1993), McCombs and Shaw (1972), Scheufele (1999), Weaver (2007), Freedman (1999) and many others have dealt with these three media theories in the past. Currently, the works of authors such as Lecheler and de Vreese (2020), Druckman et al. (2011) are known.

Framing focuses on how the media present information with a certain intention, which affects how people understand and interpret events. It is a process in which certain aspects of reality are highlighted and others suppressed to create a particular context or meaning. Thus, according to framing theory, it is not only about what is said, but also how it is said and the intention behind it. This theory assumes that presentation, choice of words, emphasis of certain facts and their contextualisation can affect how people understand and perceive certain topics. For example, if economic news is framed positively or negatively, it can affect public confidence in economic policy or satisfaction with the state of the economy. For example, in the media, the same event or problem can be presented in different ways: as a “crisis” or as an “opportunity for improvement”. These different frames can lead to different public attitudes and reactions.

Iyengar and Kinder (2010) and McCombs and Shaw (1972) agree that priming, on the other hand, focuses on preparing the audience to receive certain information or evaluations. Priming involves a process by which the media repeatedly emphasise certain topics or issues, creating a basis for evaluating subsequent information. This means that if the media frequently discuss a particular aspect of an event, people are then likely to use it as a reference point when evaluating other related issues. Both theories are important for understanding how the media shape public opinion. However, each approach uses different mechanisms to achieve this goal. Framing tends to have a strong influence on the understanding and interpretation of information, while priming affects how people evaluate and compare different topics. As Iyengar states:

Framing theory differs conceptually from priming in that it does not focus on creating evaluative criteria for salient themes, but rather on interpreting the information conveyed. It assumes that the way an event is presented can fundamentally influence how the public perceives and understands it. Essentially, framing means presenting information with a pre-defined and deliberately created meaning. (Iyengar, 2009, p. 185)

The conclusions of Nelson and Oxley’s research go further when they claim that framing effects are often perceived as forms of targeted manipulation or persuasion (Nelson & Oxley, 1999). Other authors mentioned were more concerned with framing in politics, but the media and political scene are directly connected, so we can say that their conclusions are generally valid for framing in any field. They argue that framing is considered a factor that can contribute to the public’s perception of politics as a dirty power struggle. This approach can lead to an increase in political disgust, a decrease in citizens’ interest in political issues, and a decrease in voter turnout (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993; Capella & Jamieson, 1997). If we project this thesis into the media field, we can freely interpret that framing is responsible for the disgust of the media product receiver and for reducing the credibility or viewership of the media in general. On the other hand, some researchers consider the use of framed messages by politicians or the media as a legitimate tool in democratic political competition and argue that the previously mentioned negative effects are exaggerated (Iyengar, 1991; Druckman, 2001; Moy & Pfau, 2001; Newton, 2006; Irwin & van Holsteyn, 2008). According to these authors, the decline in trust in political representatives is not primarily caused by framing, but it is a consequence of the broader characteristics of political culture in society. Druckman further sees framing as an effective tool for political communication, as the media simplify the complexity and quantity of everyday information through framing. This approach helps the public to be well informed about the information world and in the individual selection and processing of information, which affects the formation of their own opinions. Druckman also argues that citizens choose trusted news sources to help them select information, and “framing effects do not necessarily mean that individuals are defenceless puppets in the manipulative process of political and media elites” (2001, p. 145). Furthermore, de Vreese tries to reach a certain consensus of opinions when he claims that the question of the misuse of these techniques for manipulation is very complex and its character

falls within the field of research on media studies, journalism, psychology, political science or sociology (de Vreese, 2005).

The discussion about framing and its effects reflects a wide spectrum of academic opinions. While some researchers see framing as an effective tool for explaining complex topics and simplifying complex information, others warn of its potential to manipulate and create biased interpretations. This discrepancy emphasises the complex nature of media effects and suggests that their interpretation can be strongly influenced by the context and perspective of individual researchers. New knowledge from the implementation of further research showed that the very identification of the main idea of news reporting represents a very broad definition of framing. Entman, probably the most frequently cited author of framing definitions in the professional literature, derives his opinions from the mentioned hypothesis. Entman defines framing as the process by which “certain aspects of perceived reality are selected and emphasised more than others in the communicated information in order to achieve an intended interpretation, moral evaluation, or recommendation for the evaluation of the information provided” (1993, p. 52). In this way, framing affects how information is perceived and interpreted by the public.

The first part of Entman’s definition of framing focuses on the way in which certain aspects are highlighted in what is being communicated. It is not only whether these aspects are present or not, but also how the recipients of the information can directly recognise them. The second part of the definition clearly distinguishes framing theory from agenda-setting theory by Entman emphasising the ability of frames to shape opinions directly through a specific mode and value of interpretation. He further argues that frames provide specific guidance on how information should be perceived and evaluated and does not depend only on whether the information appears in the communicated message (Entman, 1993). A specific evaluation, recommendation, or moral evaluation is assigned to the information located in the frame, offering recipients simplified schemas for interpreting more complex situations. In other words, frames serve as evaluative barriers that help information recipients orient themselves when considering the topics presented, especially those with which they have no personal experience. Put simply, frames are the structures within which people form opinions about specific events or topics.

Norris (2003) looks at the whole issue of framing rather pragmatically, when he claims that in news reports frames are presented as stories that offer viewers a specific view and understanding of the presented events. Journalists use them as an effective tool to portray events in the limited time available to them, especially in television news. Although the specific details of events may be unique, the way in which journalists inform the public is often very similar to that used in previous events. In this context, the main characteristic of the reporting framework is its consistent form. This fixed form of framing “produces simple, consistent and meaningfully predictable narratives that participate in the social construction of reality” (Norris, 2003, p. 2). From a psychological point of view, he evaluates Entman’s frames in such a way that the key attribute of framing is his ability to present the ready-made meaning of a news report and thereby evoke a specific thought process for its interpretation. In other words, frames act as templates by which individuals process information. These templates guide the way people understand and evaluate the messages presented and help them interpret the content based on predefined patterns.

Tversky and Kahneman’s experiment is often cited as an illustrative example of the valence effect of framing, which outlines the influence value information can have on the formation of an individual’s opinion preferences and decisions. In this experiment, they tested the effects of thematically congruent fictional news coverage presented in different meaning forms (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). Respondents were divided into two groups, each group receiving the same information but presented in different ways. In the experiment conducted by Tversky and Kahneman, the following issue was presented: “Imagine that the United States government is preparing for an outbreak of an unusual Asian disease. Approximately 600 residents are expected to succumb to the disease” (1986, p. 260). The respondents of the first group were then asked: “Two alternative programs have been proposed to suppress this infection. Based on scientific estimates, let us assume that the exact consequences of the plans would be as follows: (1) If program A is adopted, 200 inhabitants will be saved. (2) If program B is adopted, there is a $\frac{1}{3}$ chance that all 600 residents will be saved, but a $\frac{2}{3}$ chance that no one will survive. Which of these two programs would you prefer? Both programs actually mention the rescue of 200 residents. However, program A represents a choice without confronting risk, while program B involves a risky choice. Tversky and Kahneman (1986) found that

72% of respondents from the first group preferred program A, while 28% chose program B. Different alternatives were presented to the second group of respondents: “1. If program A were adopted, 400 residents would die. 2. If program B were adopted, there is a $\frac{1}{3}$ chance that no one will die, but a $\frac{2}{3}$ chance that 600 residents will perish.” The proposed solutions are exactly the same in content as those presented to the respondents of the first group. Alternatives 3 and 4 are, however, significantly negative compared to the previous options. They focus on the number of victims of the disease instead of the number of residents saved. A total of 72% of the respondents saw a threat in adopting program B, while 28% of them considered it appropriate to choose program A. Thus, the respondents’ preferences changed by 50% depending on the importance value of the announced alternatives, even though each of them offered the same result in terms of content. In the experiment conducted by Tversky and Kahneman, which is related to decision-making and risk assessment, an issue related to the way of presentation and preferences in decision-making was presented. This experiment, also known as “risk negotiation” or the “vaccine example”, was part of their research on “prospect theory”. This experiment is also very interesting because, more than 30 years before COVID-19, it examines the audience’s reaction to a hypothetical scenario of an outbreak of an unusual disease that may affect people. It is remarkable in that it is primarily about how to save as many lives as possible, but participants were asked to choose between two different measures, with each measure having a different presentation and expressing the risks and benefits in different ways. This experiment was focused on how the method of presentation affects decision-making and risk perception. It showed that people often prefer measures that are presented in a positive light (for example, saving a certain number of people), even if the objective risk is the same or even higher. This preference changes when the same options are presented in a negative light (for example, the death of a certain number of people). It has been found that people often try to avoid risk when presented with negative consequences, even if they are as likely as in positive scenarios. It is strikingly reminiscent of the reality 30 years later during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of the media in it. Several authors in Slovakia deal in their studies with related questions of objectivity, culture, language and law in media space (see, for example, Solík, 2021; Ungerová & Škvareninová, 2022; Habiňák, 2021; Škarba & Višňovský, 2022; Čábyová et al., 2024; Pravdová et al., 2014; Gálik et al., 2024; Pravdová, 2022).

3 Framing of the War in Ukraine in the Slovak Press

We focused the research part of our study on a more current topic in the media – the war in Ukraine and its framing in the Slovak press. We chose a wide range of periodicals: dailies Pravda, SME, Denník N, Hospodárske noviny, Nový čas, Plus jeden den. The total research sample consisted of 211 prints. We set the main goal – to evaluate the focal points of framing the war in Ukraine in the Slovak press. We chose two sub-goals:

- to identify and categorise different media frames used in reporting on the war in Ukraine in different media. Compare how the framing of the war in Ukraine differs in various media sources (Western and Russian media).

RQ1: What are the main frames used by the media in presenting the war in Ukraine? What are the differences in the framing of the war in Ukraine between different media sources?

Method: Content analysis of media articles to identify key frames (e.g., aggression-defence frame).

- to investigate how linguistic means contribute to the creation of different frames.

RQ2: Which linguistic means help the framing of the researched topic in print?

Method: Content analysis of print articles to identify how these linguistic means are used to emphasise or suppress certain aspects of the topic.

We start from the premise that the importance of framing also lies in the fact that it can influence how the public perceives this war conflict, the causes of its origins, the participants themselves and possible solutions to the conflict in the future. In general, it can be said that media framing can differ depending on the political, geographical, historical or cultural context of the given media, or the country where these media are published, or the composition of the population from the point of view of national minorities, ethnicity, etc. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has been ongoing since February 2014, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, but the real open military intervention in Ukrainian territory began in February 2022. If since 2014 we could observe the nascent conflict more or less sporadically, then from February 2022 the frequency increased significantly, and the media provide daily news on the given topic (appropriate agenda-setting). In our study, we analysed more than 200 randomly selected articles from the Slovak press, where we focused on the basic aspects of framing, its tools and consequences on the reader's opinion. Here are some key aspects that influence the framing of the war in Ukraine in the Slovak print, based on our analysis. We contrasted them with classic framing aspects:

Table 1. Examples of the most common ways of framing the war in Ukraine in the Slovak press

aggressor and defender	In the Slovak media, the conflict is usually framed as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, where Russia is portrayed as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim who resists the invasion.
democracy and authoritarianism	The conflict is often presented as a struggle between democracy (represented by Ukraine) and authoritarianism (represented by Russia). This framing emphasizes the moral obligation to support Ukraine.
international law	The violation of international law is often emphasized, while Russia is accused of violating Ukraine's sovereignty and international standards, of illegitimately organized referendum on foreign (Ukrainian) territory.
protection of the Russian-speaking population	In the Slovak press, this war conflict is also framed as the protection of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine against the threat from Ukrainian nationalists.
fight against fascism	The conflict is often presented as a fight against fascist elements in the Ukrainian government, parliament and army, thereby legitimizing military intervention. It mentions, for example, the Azov regiment, Ukrainian parliament politician Andriy Bileckyj (nicknamed White Leader), the Right Sector or Freedom political parties, the heroization of the nationalist Stepan Bandera, or the organization of far-right military camps for children, the ultra-nationalist organization Patriots of Ukraine and the neo-Nazi group Social-National Assembly. These organizations have in the past attacked dissenting civilians and minorities.
defence of national interests	Russia is often portrayed as a defender of its national interests against the West, which allegedly manipulates Ukraine. Russia is a protector against liberalism, illegal migration, Islam and LGBT ideology.

Source: own processing, 2024

The media make minimal efforts to maintain a neutral, less judgemental stance. If some are doing it, then probably they are those existing in other parts of the world, i.e., outside of Europe, which are not affected by the conflict (e.g., in Asia or South America). They are likely to choose neutral or balanced framing more often, where they try to present both sides of the conflict without clearly assigning blame. From time to time, even in our media, there are reports that focus more on geopolitical consequences. Sometimes the war is framed in a broader geopolitical context, where the implications for global security, energy markets, and the economy are analysed.

Media framing plays a key role in how the public understands and responds to the war in Ukraine. Different media can present a conflict from different points of view, which can lead to different interpretations of what is happening. Framing by the Slovak print media uses various techniques of perception manipulation, from a linguistic point of view it is about means of expression or the choice of words itself, stylisation of sentences, context (and taking it out of context), structure of displayed information. Here are some identified ways in which framing works in Slovak printed materials.

Selection of Linguistic Means

Using certain words that carry positive or negative connotations can affect how readers understand an event. For example, using the expression “freedom fighter” vs. “terrorist” to describe the same person can change the reader’s sympathy or antipathy. Other examples: fascist from Azov vs. member of Azov paramilitary units, military operation vs. war, extreme right vs. neo-Nazi, surrender vs. being evacuated, stabilisation of the region vs. occupation of the region, disruption of logistics vs. destruction of roads, railways, bridges, ports, etc.

Focusing on Certain Aspects of the Presented Event, Preferring Certain Information or Phenomena

Individual newspapers or media focus on specific aspects of a story. However, on the other hand they completely ignore other aspects, e.g., a report on a protest in Kyiv or Moscow square can emphasise violence or the peaceful course of events, depending on the image the media want to create. They will either denote them as violence or as a (peaceful) demonstration or publicly expressed disapproval of the people. During the advance of the troops of one or the other army, the aspect of success in the form of occupied lands can be emphasised, or on the contrary, the consequences of the advance are presented – destroyed buildings, wounded people, conversations with civilians.

Contextualisation within the Framework of History or Culture

Complementary historical or cultural context to the presented events is a frequent phenomenon in the print media. The media also use the contextualisation of the war in Ukraine by placing it in a wider framework. Information without a wider context has a different meaning to information with a context. If we focus on the historical context of print reports about the conflict in Ukraine, without contextualisation it may seem that the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is simply the result of Russia’s territorial ambitions or Ukraine’s efforts for independence from the East and its efforts to integrate with the West. With contextualisation, we see the entire conflict differently – we perceive it in the context of the history of relations between Russia and Ukraine, we see that the roots of the tension go deep into the past. For example, in the 20th century, Ukraine suffered under Soviet rule, especially during the famine of 1932 – 1933, which some historians describe as harsh Stalinist reforms in the Soviet Union, while other historians consider it an act of genocide by Stalin. These historical grievances add another layer of tension and resistance to Russian influence to the current conflict, even though Stalin was not Russian but Georgian. The media often emphasise these reprisals even today.

It is similar if we focus on the cultural context of the news in the press about the war in Ukraine. Without contextualisation, the conflict may appear to be purely political or military, with no deeper cultural basis or influence. With contextualisation, when we consider the cultural context, we understand that Ukraine strives for a strong national identity, which is often in contrast with Russian cultural influence. For many Ukrainians, the conflict is also a struggle to preserve their national identity and independence against the historical pressure for Russification or the overall influence of Russia on their country.

However, the Slovak print seems to go into hyper-contextualisation, i.e., it develops a context that is not completely obvious, clear or provable. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia can be seen as a purely regional matter between two neighbouring states. Objectively, and not with the addition of an exclamation mark, such as: according to our sources, according to the Ukrainian government, according to our opinion, according to unverified information, according to the American adviser of the White House, according to XY, etc. With hyper-contextualisation, the Slovak media push the conflict into a geopolitical framework with seemingly global consequences. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine are part of a broader Russian strategy to regain influence over post-Soviet states and oppose the expansion of NATO and the EU to the East. The Czech portal goes even further, where it claims that Russia wants to restore the Soviet Union with a zone of influence across all countries, including Germany, as was the case after the Second World War. The reaction of Western countries, including sanctions and military support for Ukraine, also reflects concerns about the destabilisation of the European security architecture.

Using Metaphors and Comparisons – Analogies

The use of metaphors and analogies can simplify complex topics. However, at the same time inappropriate metaphors and analogies can mislead the receiver. It occurs with print of any kind, mainstream, tabloid, right-wing and left-wing, conservative or liberal. For example, comparing state security to the security of a household can lead to incorrect security policies. Also, comparing an aggressive neighbour in a block of flats with a military or raw material world power protecting its geopolitical influence will surely raise many questions and stormy reactions.

The above-mentioned four points create a kind of “snowball” of the consequences of framing in Slovak print. It has a significant influence on public opinion and people’s behaviour. It can be seen in recent years how topics such as illegal migration, the coronavirus pandemic or the war in Ukraine have changed the way news is presented in the media sphere, but they have also affected the political culture in Slovakia, and even the mood of the entire society. Some of the consequences of Slovak print framing include:

- a) Polarisation of society. Various media use framing to reinforce political or ideological divisions. Today, society in Slovakia is significantly polarised compared to five years ago. Framing made a significant contribution.
- b) Changing the priorities of the population. People consider some questions more important than others depending on how they are presented. Framing, priming and agenda-setting are part of the change in what readers or viewers will consider urgent and what they will prefer and deal with first.
- c) Impact on personal decision-making: Media framing has an impact on decision-making at a personal, but also political level. News about the military conflict in Ukraine and its economic or security impacts on the common man makes many people change their decisions about investments, spending money, building a house, buying real estate, keeping cash outside of a bank account, about starting a planned study or about security in the form of a job, travel, etc.

The linguistic means and the vocabulary used by a journalist significantly influence people’s view of the same topic through different framing techniques. Habiňák (2019, 2020b) claims that this happens most easily through emotionally charged words. Journalists do this, but politicians do as well (Habiňák, 2020a). Habiňák further explains:

It is mainly the expressive words. In expressive words, there are two basic groups of words: positive and negative. Both in a certain way evoke feelings of joy, love, sympathy or sorrow, hatred or anger. Denotations with a positive connotation include familiar words, hypocoristics, children’s words and euphemisms. Words with a negative emotional connotation include pejoratives, vulgar words, ironic, joking and mocking words. Diminutives and augmentatives are also added to the expressive layer of vocabulary. (Habiňák, 2020b, p. 17)

Here are some other types of words and language elements that change the perception of the topic in the media output of the Slovak print newspapers:

Table 2. The most common means of framing from the category of language elements that change the perception of the topic

emotionally coloured words	Words that evoke strong emotions influence reactions. For example, "disaster, tragedy" can evoke more urgency than "problem, sad event, drama, obstacle, sorrow".
euphemisms and dysphemisms	Euphemisms gently and positively formulate negative aspects ("unpleasant situations" instead of "crisis problems"), while dysphemisms dramatize or ridicule ("political flop, embarrassment" instead of "failed policy", military fiasco instead of military failure).
key words	Using certain keywords can trigger specific associations. For example, words like "innovation" vs "experiment" can influence how a project or technology is perceived.
evaluative expressions	Expressions that contain evaluations or judgments ("impermissible" vs. "undesirable") can form an opinion about the ethics or appropriateness of a certain situation.
active vs. passive sentence formulations	Active wording ("the government increases aid to Ukraine") can be perceived differently than passive wording ("aid to Ukraine has been increased"), which can emphasize the impersonal nature of the event.
framing profit vs loss	Framing the situation in terms of potential gains ("increased battlefield activity") or losses ("loss of combat momentum") can influence how the topic is perceived.
comparative expressions	Comparing things to something familiar can change perceptions, e.g. "...as during a humanitarian crisis" vs "...as under normal circumstances".
national, cultural or ideological connotations	Words with national or cultural connotations can influence perceptions, e.g. "national security" can have different connotations depending on the political context. In one political context, the term may be associated with the protection of citizens and territory from external threats, while in another it may be understood as a justification for authoritarian measures or restrictions on civil liberties.

Source: own processing, 2024

In connection with the framing of the war in Ukraine, there are probably more striking euphemisms and dysphemisms. Euphemisms are language devices that reduce or soften the harshness or unpleasantness of an expression. In the context of the war in Ukraine, they are often used to soften or obscure the reality of wartime conflict. Here are some examples:

Table 3. Euphemisms and dysphemisms as the most significant framing tool of vocabulary in the Slovak press

special military operation	This term was used at the beginning of the conflict instead of the word "war" or "invasion," which was intended to reduce the seriousness of the fact that it was a war conflict.
humanitarian mission	Rather than referring to a military operation or occupation, the term is used to emphasize the purported protection of civilians or the provision of aid, even though this may involve military intervention.
neutralization of threats	It is used instead of "killing" or "attacking the enemy", softening the image of military violence.
stabilization of the region	A term used instead of "occupation" or "control over territory", which obscures the aggressive nature of the action.
disruption of logistics	A euphemism for the destruction of supply routes, bombing of transport infrastructure, or an economic blockade.
collateral damage	A term used to refer to unintended or collateral damage in the context of military operations, i.e. to living and non-living targets that were not intentionally hit.
preventive intervention	An attack without direct provocation, often used to justify aggressive military actions.
control over the situation	It is used to describe the military or political suppression of resistance, thereby reducing the impression of coercion or violence.

Source: own processing, 2024

These euphemisms are often part of propaganda or rhetoric that tries to influence public opinion and reduce negative reactions to military actions.

Dysphemisms are also often used in the print media reporting on the war in Ukraine. Dysphemisms are words or expressions with a negative or derogatory tone that are used to express unfavourable attitudes, criticism, or to emphasise the negative aspects of a certain event or person. For example, in the context of the war in Ukraine, dysphemisms appear in the Slovak media when describing the parties to the conflict, their actions or policies. Russian forces are often referred to as “occupiers” or “aggressors”, while actions (attributed to them) such as “massacre”, “atrocities” or “invasion” have extremely negative connotations. These expressions are often used to express a critical attitude towards Russia and its military operations. Similarly, Russian state media or pro-Russian media may use dysphemisms to describe Ukrainian forces or Western allies of Ukraine, for example “neo-Nazis” or fascists, NATO soldiers, supporters of Bandera. Dysphemisms in the media are part of a broader language context that shapes the public’s perception of the conflict. Their use can contribute to polarisation, reinforce stereotypes and deepen the conflict by reducing the possibility of objective assessment of the situation and encouraging emotional reactions. An example is the same actions of the Ukrainian army, which, however, are no longer described as a massacre or “retribution”.

In addition to expressive vocabulary, there are several linguistic devices, stylistic figures and tropes that can influence priming, agenda-setting and framing. These language techniques dramatically change how information is perceived and interpreted. To illustrate it, we present some examples from print we analysed:

Table 4. Stylistic tropes as a framing tool in Slovak press

metaphors	war front, diplomatic weapons, rocket rain, storm over Ukraine, war labyrinth
hyperboles	weapons hydra, war machine, apocalyptic bombing, city in flames, land destruction, endless attacks, war taking dreams
personification	war has invaded the country/city, peace has disappeared from the talks, Ukraine is bleeding, war has taken its toll
symbol	fight for freedom, iron fist, light at the end of the tunnel, streams of blood, white doves, Russian bear, burning bridges of brotherhood, locked diplomatic doors
allusion	new cold war, Maidan 2, East Berlin Wall, Moscow Pandora's Box
synecdoche	Kremlin commanded, Kiev does not give up, weapons from Washington, Putin's hand, the West is behind them
epithet	merciless attack, brutal invasion, unbreakable will, innocent victims, hopeless situation, heroic defence, bloody battles
metonymy	Washington controls Ukraine, the Putin regime, Kremlin, Kiev, Brussels, cracks in the defence
oxymoron	bloody peace, glorious defeat, silent war, peaceful invasion, heroic defeat, light in the darkness of war

Source: own processing, 2024

Language analysis of media outputs is an effective tool to examine how the media present various topics and issues, and it provides valuable insights into how language is used to influence public perception. In media analysis, various aspects of language and framing are often examined, which are directly linked to each other. In media and political discourse, priming is often used to shape public opinion, influence attitudes and reactions to various aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Here are some ways in which priming is manifested on this topic in the Slovak press:

Table 5. The most common ways of priming in the Slovak press

selection of words	Our press uses specific language elements to evoke certain reactions, e.g. the use of terms such as "invasion" vs. "conflict" or "humanitarian crisis" vs. "bloody conflict" can influence how people perceive the severity of the situation and what emotions are associated with it.
news framing	The way news of war is framed affects public perception, e.g. if the news focuses on the heroism and determination of Ukrainian defenders, this should affect how the public perceives support for Ukraine.
selection and emphasis on information	The media emphasize certain aspects of the conflict, such as military successes, humanitarian crises or geopolitical consequences. In this way, they influence what becomes "important" for the public.
visual presentation	The use of dramatic or emotional images, such as photographs of destroyed cities or the suffering of civilians, increases the emotional impact of news and influences the opinions of viewers and readers.
political statements	It is through the press that the politicians use priming to shape public opinion by emphasizing a certain perspective or threat, e.g. statements about the "aggressive" practices of one side or the "defensive" practices of the other influence how readers understand and evaluate the conflict.
propaganda and disinformation	Within a conflict, different parties may use priming to spread propaganda or disinformation to influence public perception or motivate certain actions. Whether these elements are found in our printed materials is often difficult to determine.

Source: own processing, 2024

Iyengar in his publication *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* analyses how the media use framing and priming to influence political opinion. He considers priming a psychological concept that deals with how exposure to a certain stimulus (such as a word, image, sound, or thought) can unconsciously influence our subsequent behaviour, thoughts, or decisions. It is the process by which a particular stimulus prepares us to respond more quickly or easily to a related stimulus (Iyengar, 1991). Table 6 presents examples of priming used in the Slovak press relating to the war in Ukraine.

Table 6. Examples of priming in the context of the war in Ukraine

<p>Framing the conflict in the position of "defensive struggle" vs. "unwarranted aggression"</p>	<p>Slovakia's press presents the conflict in different ways, which affects how people understand and react to war. Many international media and some Slovak sources describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "unauthorized aggression", thereby criticizing Russian actions and emphasizing their injustice.</p>
<p>Emphasis on humanitarian crises</p>	<p>Our print often depicts the suffering of civilians and humanitarian crises in the war zone in Ukraine, which should increase the empathy of Slovaks and increase the support for humanitarian measures. "Humanitarian crisis" vs. "war zone": The way war-affected areas are labelled can affect how people perceive the whole situation. A "humanitarian crisis" can highlight the need for help and empathy, while a "war zone" can convey the impression that it is a dangerous place dominated by violence.</p>
<p>Presenting different perspectives</p>	<p>Our press emphasizes various stories, such as military successes or failures, which influences public opinions about which side has the upper hand. The Ukrainian and pro-Western media, for example, emphasize successful Ukrainian counterattacks or the defence of key areas, thus reinforcing the narrative of the determination and effectiveness of Ukrainian forces. This of course boosts morale at home and abroad and supports decisions to help Ukraine more. In turn, Russian media supporting the invasion may minimize reporting on Russian military failures and focus more on the mistakes of the Ukrainian forces or problems in the West. This serves to maintain support for the Russian government and military operations among the domestic population. The Ukrainian media often present stories of heroic soldiers defying the odds, thus reinforcing the image of Ukrainian resistance.</p>
<p>Focusing on "civilian victims"</p>	<p>Almost every day we read or watch on TV how the media repeatedly focuses on civilian victims and destroyed buildings. The audience is thus prepared to perceive the other side of the conflict as an aggressor who recklessly attacks civilians, which influences the opinions of the people and politicians.</p>
<p>Repeating visual images of destroyed civilian structures</p>	<p>News repeatedly show destroyed houses, housing estates, hospitals, schools in Ukraine, etc. The audience is thus "primed" to perceive the war as an extremely cruel and ruthless conflict, which in turn influences the public opinion.</p>

Source: own processing, 2024

4 Discussion: How to Resist Framing

As already mentioned, framing is the way in which information is presented to influence people's perceptions and reactions. This procedure can be very effective in manipulating public opinion or personal opinions. So how can one not become a victim of framing? We recommend following three steps:

1. use critical thinking,
2. read news from several sources. Even though this study is primarily about print media, it is necessary to underline the need to perceive news not only from print media, but also from the widest spectrum of media possible,
3. properly understand the text and the context of the event – this, however, requires time, effort, study, analysis and correct interpretation.

Much has already been written about critical thinking. In Slovak, this technique could be loosely replaced by the phrase “take your wits in a handful” or “use your peasant (common) sense”. So it is necessary to be aware of the fact how the information is presented and analyse it from several angles or perspectives. Critical thinking is the ability to analyse, evaluate and then synthesise information objectively, with logic. However, it is a process of actively and systematically examining information to determine whether it is true, reliable, and relevant to a given context. Critical thinking also includes the ability to identify assumptions, biases and errors in reasoning, as well as to create and evaluate arguments.

We call the second step “reading news from multiple sources”, that is, verifying information from multiple media in order to reveal differences in presentation. Different sources can provide different perspectives on the same event or problem. Reading multiple sources allows us to see things from different perspectives and better understand the complexity of the problem in its entirety. For example, the war in Ukraine can be presented differently in different media depending on their ideological tendencies. Unfortunately, Slovak media often lose their ability to be objective. They lean too much towards one of the two opposing poles of evaluating the event. A certain degree of bias is common practice for our press. It may be identified by the imbalance of news objectivity. By reading information from different sources, we can better identify these biases and obtain a more balanced image. For example, some media may emphasise certain aspects of a story, while others may ignore certain information completely. For example, after the explosion of Nord Stream 2, some pro-Western media used expressions such as: “accident”, “incident” or “explosion”, even though it was presented from the beginning that this gas pipeline was deliberately destroyed by a bomb. They did not use words like “sabotage”, “attack”, “terrorist act”, “barbarism” in their articles.

Understanding the context of the event is essential in framing, because the context provides the framework in which the event takes place and influences the way we interpret and present it. Without an adequate understanding of the context, framing can lead to incomplete, distorted or incorrect interpretations of the event. Context enables a better understanding of the causes of an event and its potential consequences. For example, if the events in Ukraine are presented as an isolated incident between Ukraine and Russia, the wider background can be ignored, such as historical mutual grievances (the famine in the 1930s caused by Stalin's brutal reforms directed from Moscow or the donation of Russian Crimea to Ukraine by Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev, a native of Ukraine). It is also necessary to mention the economic and political pressures on both sides that contributed to the war conflict. As soon as we lose the context of the entire conflict, it will lead to a superficial or distorted understanding of the entire events. It is necessary to try to understand the wider context and not to be influenced by only one perspective.

A print reader should learn to identify framing and know when framing is being used to influence their opinion. Framing often involves choosing specific words, phrases, or examples that create a certain image or emotion. For example, labelling a certain political change as “reform” or “coup”, “peaceful demonstration” or “bloodshed” can affect how the reader will perceive the whole situation. In the mentioned opposite word pairs, it can be a positive or negative framing. Both types are also used by the Slovak print media. If, for example, they talk

about the Euromaidan (or as the Ukrainians call it, the Revolution of Dignity), during which more than 100 people were killed and at least 1,000 others were injured, our media use the following distinct framing opposites:

Positive framing: the use of words such as “revolution”, “freedom”, “resistance”, “democracy”.

Negative framing: the use of terms such as “unrest”, “anarchy”, “destabilisation”, “violence”.

It is necessary to notice these denotations in various media and to understand their antipole nature. The reader should monitor the language of the journalist, whether the text or speech does not contain emotionally charged words that may aim to arouse a certain reaction. For example, labelling a group of people as “terrorists” or “freedom fighters” significantly changes the perception of that group. It is not enough to be satisfied with one source of information and it is necessary to look for multiple sources that provide different perspectives on the same topic. Reading news from different media that have a different political or cultural orientation will help us develop a broader perspective.

When the reader faces a certain statement or visual material, it is important to ask oneself why the given information is presented in this way. Who benefits from this? What are the alternative explanations? Recently, we have seen mixing of facts and opinions in our media. One must learn to identify what is a fact and what is only an interpretation or opinion. Facts are verifiable pieces of information, while interpretations can be shaped by the framing or personal intent of their author.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, it is possible to emphasise several key findings and their importance, not only for media practice. We focus on how the Slovak press uses the mechanisms of framing, priming and agenda-setting in connection with the war in Ukraine, thereby significantly shaping public opinion. The analysis shows that the media often use frames emphasising specific aspects of the conflict, such as geopolitical threats, humanitarian crises or political consequences. These frameworks have a fundamental influence on the Slovak public’s perception of the situation and on the attitudes taken to this topic. Priming acts as a powerful tool to support certain frameworks, where mediated mentions of Ukraine and Russia increase the polarisation of opinions and focus the public on issues such as national security or political orientation. Agenda-setting, in turn, directs the public’s attention to certain topics, while other aspects of the war, although also significant, are more marginalised. Our findings point to the importance of media responsibility in covering war conflicts around the world. The frames chosen by the media can either exacerbate or mitigate polarisation and have a profound effect on public discourse. At the same time, the research provides the basis for further analyses of how the media shape the perception of foreign policy and conflicts. The media face the challenge of how to use framing, priming and agenda-setting to support informed and objective journalism.

The results of the study reflect the picture of how Slovak print media frame and influence the perception of events connected with the war in Ukraine. Through the analysis of media framing and priming, it has been shown that the way the media present the conflict significantly shapes the opinions of the public and their attitudes towards the individual participants in the conflict. This leads to polarised interpretations of events in society. The research points out that readers are exposed to different narratives, which can be selective and one-sided. In this context, critical thinking is recommended as an essential tool for any consumer of media content. It is imperative that citizens learn to identify potential biases and manipulations in the media and verify information through multiple sources. In addition, the study highlights the importance of reading news from different sources, which allows us to develop a more balanced view of the events. In this way, media consumers can better recognise differences in interpretation of the same events and avoid uncritically accepting one-sided views.

Understanding information in a historical and national context has been identified as the key element for the correct perception and interpretation of media contents. Historical contexts and national components play an important role in how events are presented and received by the public. Without understanding these contexts, there is a risk that the information will be understood superficially or distorted. In conclusion, it can be stated that the development of critical thinking, the ability to analyse news from various sources and the understanding of historical and national contexts are necessary for the creation of an informed and resilient public. These skills should be supported not only within the educational system, but also through public discussions and initiatives that should motivate citizens to assume a more active and critical approach to media content. Framing is a powerful tool used by the media to influence public opinion. Understanding how it works is the key to be able to identify manipulation and to better-informed news perception. By consciously analysing how information is framed, readers and viewers can make better decisions and understand complex topics. Therefore, the final decision about whom and what to believe and how to behave is left up to the individual in society.

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