TWEETING REACTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF TWITTER RESPONSES TO THE
KERCH STRAIT NAVAL CLASH BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

by

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in 2013, the conflict in Ukraine has had several instances of Russian influence. The naval clash in the Kerch Strait between the two was the first open confrontation. Aided by media representation, a military crisis can evoke a rally-round-the-flag effect – an external threat uniting citizens. This study investigates this incident by examining whether a rally effect is possible in Ukraine in a social media era. Utilizing mediatization and framing theories, this study analyzes how the clash was framed by the most popular Twitter accounts and with sentiment analysis examines comments for the online public response. The findings show the rally effect did not occur. Despite a consistent anti-Russian narrative by popular accounts, the comments section showed a mixed negative response towards Ukraine, Russia, and the government. This research argues that through social media people access counternarratives beyond those of official statements and perpetuate official, contesting, and disinformation narratives online.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

DNR   Donetsk People's Republic

EU   European Union

IRA   Internet Research Agency

LNR   Luhansk People's Republic

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO   Non-governmental Organizations

RF   Russia Federation

UN   United Nations

US   United States

USSR   Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VK   VKontakte

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, political instability and conflict have characterized Ukraine's political life and society. Beginning as a peaceful protest against the government, these tensions quickly escalated to violent confrontations that drew international attention. The protests put in place a new government that was much more Western leaning than the previous government but led to uprising and armed fighting in eastern Ukraine. Particularly, in Donbas – an area that has closer historical ties to Russia than western Ukraine and an economy that relies on trade with Russia (Zhukov, 2016) – separatists worked to separate the region from the rest of Ukraine. At the time of writing, the conflict is at a stalemate with a ceasefire in place, but violations and periodic fighting still occur (OSCE, 2020).

An important aspect of this conflict has been external influence on the part of the Russian Federation. After the protests were over, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and provided military support to the separatists in eastern Ukraine. A more recent example of Russian influence is the naval clash between Ukrainian navy vessels and the Russian coast guard in the Kerch Strait in November of 2018. This incident was significant because it was the first instance of open conflict between Russia and Ukraine. After this military crisis occurred, Ukraine declared thirty days of martial law in regions bordering Russia. Studies show that during international military crises, one possible public response is the "rally round the flag" effect (Baker & Oneal, 2001; Groeling & Baum, 2008; Lambert et al., 2011). Rally round the flag is a phenomenon that refers to the public banding together during a crisis in support of the country and the government – even across partisan lines – against an external threat. The media are the main channel to spur this effect, and how the narrative of the conflict is presented is imperative for the

phenomenon to take place (Baker & Oneal, 2001). As such, the media narratives that present the events surrounding the crisis must be aligned for the effect to occur. Social media presents a new way to communicate narratives about a crisis as it involves the active participation of the public in creating narratives.

Social media specifically has played a significant role in the Ukrainian conflict, by providing more sources of information, but also by further muddying the waters. For example, using social media makes it possible to gather more information and elucidate the truth about an event, such as the reconstruction of events that led to the downing of Flight MH17 over Ukrainian airspace in 2014 (Clem, 2017). But it was also a source for numerous fake news stories and a source of confusion about the conflict (Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015), such as Russia's denial of the presence of Russian soldiers in Crimea prior to its annexation (Lanoszka, 2016). From a virtual way of connecting friends and family, social media has evolved into a political space that is used by state and non-state actors – such as activist and extremist groups – for their own goals. State actors can use social media to more directly connect with the public, as a new campaigning tool during election time (Bruns et al., 2016), or to influence public opinion both domestically and internationally (King et al., 2017; Xia et al., 2019). It has become an essential tool for the spread of information, but also presents unique challenges for democracies and multilateral diplomacy because of its ability to spread disinformation and misinformation (Zannier, 2017). Thus, with social media as a new factor, it begs the question: **In the era of social media, did the rallying around the flag effect work in the Ukrainian case of the naval incident? What explains whether this effect occurred or not?**

The hypothesis for this work is that a rally effect in the vessel incident case should have taken place. The expectation is that the Ukrainian government should have presented a unified message about the clash to the public on social media, as a government in power will present their actions in the best possible light, with other actors as the ones at fault for flare-ups in conflict (Hjarvard, 2013). Furthermore, anyone who has a well-known online presence is likely to mimic the message of the government, especially due to the culture of patriotic self-censorship that is in place in the country (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). Thus, a single narrative about the clash will be presented, and the public will then react accordingly. Moreover, due to the changes evoked by the digital age on how conflict and war now operate "ordinary people have become complicit in creating and contesting war narratives" (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 892). In other words, as people get inundated with constant streams of information and as they react to, argue against, or spread that information online, they become involved in perpetuating certain narratives about conflicts. Since a unified narrative against the aggressor – Russia – is predicted to occur, the public is hypothesized to perpetuate this narrative, causing the rally round the flag effect.

To examine the narratives presented on social media in Ukraine about the clash, a theoretical framework based on insights from different theories, including mediatization and framing theory, were utilized. Framing theory posits that information can be presented in different ways to create or underscore a certain aspect of reality (Entman, 1993). Separate frames can show different aspects of the same information, by omitting or underlining specific things. Frames can also show political power, and which meaning is the dominant way of thinking in a society (Entman, 1993). Framing theory was

therefore used to explain how the Kerch Strait incident narratives were created. Mediatization theory, on the other hand, argues that while the world shapes media, media in turn shapes the world around us as well. Conflict can occur within media, but it is also understood and legitimized through media (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015). Mediatization theory explores how social media space allows for public narratives to challenge official statements and create their own reality about the Kerch Strait incident.

In terms of research design, the present project is structured in the following way. The research focuses on the social media platform Twitter. Data collection was conducted by examining the most followed Twitter accounts in Ukraine and identifying which ones tweeted about the case study. Data analysis consisted of analyzing the relevant tweets for frames, to see how the incident was presented and if there was a singular or diverse message. For the purposes of this research, for a message to be unified the majority of all tweets needed to present a similar frame of support for Ukraine or a unified stance against Russia in relation to the incident. To gauge the online public response to the event, comments sections were analyzed via sentiment analysis. For a rally effect to take place, the majority of commenters had to express a similar stance of support for Ukraine or unity against Russia. The most popular Twitter accounts were examined as those tweets would potentially be seen by the largest number of people. Furthermore, different types of accounts were examined as information can be gathered from a variety of sources on social media, whether celebrities or politicians, not just news. Together, these steps should present a clearer picture of how the conflict is perceived in Ukraine.

The findings show that the most popular accounts on Twitter presented a similar narrative, one that paints Russia as the aggressor in the naval clash and expresses support for Ukraine. The public response, however, was not consistent with a rally around the flag effect. Instead, the majority of responses were extremely negative towards Ukraine and the Ukrainian government, with only some negativity aimed at Russia. Indeed, more than simply not showing support for Ukraine, or lack of negativity towards Russia, many of the comments were instead highly uncivil and some even repeated known disinformation narratives. Since media coverage is one of the more important factors in a rally effect (Baker & Oneal, 2001), the nature of social media, how and why people express themselves online, and the access to different narratives perpetuated by different actors online prevents the online Ukrainian public from expressing the rally effect. The presence of disinformation compounded the issue. With greater access, the public becomes complicit in the spread of these different narratives, including ones based on true and false information (Golovchenko et al., 2018; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017).

This study is unique in several ways. Numerous studies have been conducted about the different types of messages presented about the conflict in Ukraine (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Katchanovski, 2016; Watanabe, 2017), but less attention has been dedicated to the way the people in Ukraine interact with and respond to those messages. Similarly, research has been done on the role of comments and comments sections, but this was primarily in response to news articles (Marchionni, 2015; Pierce et al., 2017; Singer, 2014; Soffer, 2019), not to a broad range of actors as this work attempts to do, and not in the context of the Ukrainian conflict. This research attempts to add to the current knowledge base about the conflict in Ukraine.

The rest of this work is organized in the following way. Chapter two consists of the literature review, which examines the works on the construction of narratives in Ukraine, and how the public is affected by and in turn affects social media. Chapter three discusses the methodology used in this research. Beginning with the descriptions of the framework based on the theories of mediatization and framing, it explains the data gathering process, frame analysis, and how sentiment was identified in reply tweets. Chapter four presents additional background information about the conflict. This includes an overview of the timeline of events for the conflict beginning with the original protests, an in-depth description of events in the Kerch Strait, the media landscape in Ukraine, and finally an exploration of the Russian communication strategy in Ukraine. Chapters five and six present the results of the research, with the former conveying the numerical results and the latter discussing the broader meanings of the results. The final chapter sums up the findings with a few concluding remarks, discusses some limitations of the research, and identifies further areas of study.

CHAPTER 2: THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this literature review is threefold. First, it examines some of the studies that have previously looked at the recent conflict in Ukraine, particularly in how media and social media have portrayed the conflict. Second, a look at some of the studies that investigate the role of social media in polarizing the public. And finally, how comments sections are understood to represent public opinion and the effects this can have on those reading them. How this research fits into the greater body of knowledge around the conflict in Ukraine and social media will be discussed throughout.

2.1 Conflict in Ukraine and Media Narratives

The conflict in Ukraine has been studied from several different angles: its greater geopolitical repercussions (Desai et al., 2016), Russian goals and motivations (Averre, 2016; Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018), the role of other states in attempting to resolve the conflict (Getmanchuk & Solodkyy, 2018; Scazzieri, 2017), and on the portrayal of the conflict in media (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014; Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Clem, 2017; Katchanovski, 2016; Roman et al., 2017; Watanabe, 2017). Of the latter, studies have examined how Russian media primarily portrays the Ukrainian government and its actions in a negative and even downright violent light (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014; Watanabe, 2017), while Ukraine portrays the conflict as caused by Russian aggression, with Western media generally echoing this sentiment (Katchanovski, 2016; Roman et al., 2017). The other important factor of interest in this conflict has been the role of social media.

Part of the attention on social media in Ukraine has been in regards to the protest movements. As with many other revolutions and protest movements in recent memory, the 2013/2014 protests in Ukraine were partly facilitated by social media, and were therefore the subject of much study (Jost et al., 2018; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017; Onuch, 2015; Ryabchuk, 2014; Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). Social media was used not only to help organize the protests, but also to provide logistical support and to update activists of any relevant political developments (Jost et al., 2018). More importantly to this research, social media – like traditional media – was used as a tool to spread different narratives about the protests by a variety of actors. A study found that while traditional media discussed the protests in Ukraine as an international issue – Ukraine distancing itself from Russia and seeking closer ties to the West – local social media showed that from the local perspective the protests were not about geopolitical ties, but about fighting greater corruption within the government (Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). Thus, social media can unify people under one narrative to achieve a political goal. Moreover, Surzhko-Harned and Zahuranec argue that more than anything, this shows that social media can act as an important alternative to traditional media, and that online public participation is imperative in understanding the genuine motivations of the local population for taking part in a conflict (2017). Studying local social media can clarify how domestic narratives are different from international ones.

However, that is not always the case. Social media has had its pitfalls in the Ukrainian conflict, as it can create its own form of reality that does not always reflect real life. Mejias and Vokuev argue that social media depicted a misleading narrative about the protests, one where the majority of the Ukrainian public supported the European-aimed

agenda of the new post-revolution government, which did not reflect the reality of the whole of the Ukrainian public (2017). It was this separation of online reality from real life that helped spark the conflict in eastern Ukraine (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). In this respect, different narratives – especially online narratives – about conflict can have detrimental long-term effects.

Research about different narratives concerning the conflict on social media persisted beyond the initial protests. Within Ukraine itself, by studying online posts created by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian activists about the fighting in eastern Ukraine, studies found that the types of messages disseminated by individuals depended on prior sympathies, whether citizens took on a pro-Russian stance or a pro-Ukrainian stance (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017). Furthermore, although the narratives about the fighting were first created purposefully by organized groups, non-activists became complicit in perpetuating these narratives by engaging with the messages on social media. Other findings also show that in an effort to draw international attention, online activist campaigns can use social media as a propaganda tool to organize support and discredit the opposing side in dehumanizing ways (Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015).

Compounding the issue of how the conflict was presented, and understood, is the presence of disinformation. Social media can both help spread false information and help disprove it. Studies show that online debate can be used to fact-check fake news stories (Colliander, 2019; Pedersen & Burnett, 2018), perpetuate true and false narratives (Golovchenko et al., 2018; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017), or crowd-source information to arrive at the most accurate account of events regarding the conflict (Clem, 2017). A NATO Strategic Communications project examined how the conflict in Ukraine was

discussed online by Russia and pro-Russian activists and the online response via comments on various online platforms. Among several conclusions, they found that comments showed an image of Russia as a superpower that minds its own business and Ukraine as a weak, even fascist, state (Ionatamishvili et al., 2016). Together, these findings suggest that in the Ukrainian conflict social media has been used as a tool to shape narratives by different governments, activists, and the public. Social media has also spread disinformation about the conflict while at the same time providing an alternative source of information, outside of government control.

To date, little research has been done regarding events past the early stages of the conflict. This project is meant to add to this knowledge base about the role of social media in constructing narratives around the conflict by examining a more recent incident. It also expands on this research by looking at whether social media narratives can unify the public in a rally effect.

2.2 Polarization and Rally Round the Flag Effect

Beyond mobilizing the public into protest movements, social media affects the public outside of conflict situations as well. In order for a single narrative about conflict to emerge within the country, the public needs to be united in the interpretation of an issue. Therefore, polarization gaps need to be overcome, at least regarding the issue of the conflict itself. This is how it is possible for the rally round the flag effect to take place. Indeed, proper media coverage of the crisis is one of the most important aspects for this effect to take place on a substantial scale (Baker & Oneal, 2001). When it does occur, it tends to unite groups of people, even previously disparate, polarized people into one stance.

Research is mixed when it comes to the role of social media and polarization. Some studies show that online, people are more likely to isolate themselves within echo chambers, only discussing topics with like-minded individuals and disregarding opposing views (Barberá et al., 2015; Duvanova et al., 2016). Twitter has been shown to have an echo chamber environment (Barberá, 2015a). In fact, some echo chambers can even lead to radicalization, with traditional source of media completely disregarded as false information, and only certain social media channels regarded as presenting the "truth" about the world (Lewis, 2018). An example of this is some of the different far right movements that have gained greater prominence in recent years.

However, not all studies show that social media will inevitably lead to increased polarization. Another study conducted by Barberá does seem to show the potential of social media bridging political polarization (2015b) and even if it does not, individuals can at least become exposed to other viewpoints online, leading to a more informed public (Jost et al., 2018). Still others argue that it simply depends on the type of discussion and the issue in question. Echo chambers occur when polarizing and heavily politicized topics are discussed, such as abortion (Barberá et al., 2015) or elections (Duvanova et al., 2015) but that does not mean other viewpoints are wholly invisible.

Barberá et al. also point out that times of national tragedy, like a bombing, can bring people together, no matter their political affiliations (2015). This is a somewhat similar concept to the rally round the flag phenomenon. Because the incident being studied in this work is a more clear *external* threat rather than previously studied division due to internal turmoil in eastern Ukraine (Duvanova et al., 2016), it has the potential to

unite most of Ukraine under a common cause, thus perpetuating a single narrative about the conflict.

2.3 Comments and Public Opinion

One of the larger parts of this research focuses on public perception of the conflict, and this was studied by examining comments sections on Twitter. Comments sections are an important area of study, as they reveal a glimpse of opinions about specific issues, and opinions about the way, or by whom, those issues are presented. Some studies even suggest that examining online comments can be used to predict social responses – such as revolutions or uprisings – to significant political events (Oster et al., 2015). At the very least, comments do provide a window into the opinions held by some members of the online public. Indeed, those that read comments consider them to be a "reliable testimony of public opinion climate," as they are written by regular people (Soffer, 2019, p. 779). In fact, journalists frequently use online comments as a representation of general public opinion (McGregor, 2019). Furthermore, this tendency to think of online discussions as representative of public opinion has greater real world implications, such as influencing the opinions of the general public and even politicians (De Kraker et al., 2014).

Of the existing literature about online comments, a significant portion has primarily focused on comments in relation to news articles (Marchionni, 2015; Singer, 2014; Soffer, 2019; Stroud et al., 2016). Comments have become a ubiquitous feature for online news websites, so much so that not having a comments section is generally a conscious choice on the part of a news organization, as opposed to an outdated mode of

operation (Stroud et al., 2016). It is considered a way to engage with the audience and provide an outlet for expressing opinion.

The types of comments present in relation to an issue can have different effects. Papacharissi contends that online discussions can have great democratic potential, provided they remain civil (2004). Other studies echo this idea by showing that civil comments can lead to productive discussion and deliberation on a topic (Molina & Jennings, 2018). Reading online comments can also create a sense of social agreement on a topic, that could lead to a conformity of opinions (Lee & Chun, 2016). Ultimately, comments can have positive outcomes, initiating conversations and deliberation on complex issues, or even help weed out what is true or false. Comments that identify fake news make it more likely that others will not believe or share the fake news stories (Colliander, 2019). Thus, comments can lead to discussions and a better understanding of a topic, with the potential of reaching a consensus on an issue.

However, if comments can lead to better informed discussions, other studies show that they can have the opposite effect as well. Comments have the potential to decrease the persuasiveness of a message, if the comments disagree with the message itself or the source that provided the message (Greenwood et al., 2016; Waddell, 2018). This can also lead to negative real-world actions. Pierce et al. show that even if an initial assessment of a politician or a message was positive, negative comments can have a detrimental impact on those reading the comments, lessening the initial positive assessment of that politician (Pierce et al., 2017). Negative and uncivil comments can also shape what the general public opinion is perceived as. Audience attitudes about a subject can remain the same, but negative comments increase the perception that the general public is highly polarized

on the subject (Anderson et al., 2014), and informed deliberation on the topic is then unlikely to occur (Hwang et al., 2014).

Other than a window into online public opinion, these studies present several relevant implications about comments. Comments are an important way of assessing public opinion, not because they are necessarily representative of the general public opinion, but because comments are perceived to be the public opinion by those reading them. Moreover, the content of the comments can have an affect as well, whether decreasing or increasing the persuasiveness of a message, or changing perception of the public. For the purposes of this research, this suggests that the comments discussing the Kerch Strait incident can themselves have an affect on the perception about the incident. This project will apply this research to news, but also go beyond by investigating the comments to other actors that provide information about a topic.

Much of the focus around the Ukrainian conflict has been about the way it has been presented in media, with a few studies focusing specifically on the role of social media. As previous literature shows, social media is important during a time of crisis for a variety of reasons, as it can be used to spread information about the conflict – both true and misleading, a source for public opinion and a way to influence it, and a tool that can overcome or increase polarization. In Ukraine it has been used as a way to create and perpetuate narratives about the conflict by governments and the public. This work updates the research around the Ukrainian conflict by looking at a later incident and by looking specifically at the role of comments. The next chapter examines theories about how and why narratives can be created. It also provides an explanation of methods used in this work to collect and analyze data.

CHAPTER 3: ASSESSING THE RALLYING ROUND THE FLAG EFFECT: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used in this study, as well as the methods used during the research process. It first outlines mediatization theory and framing theory and discusses how the two work in conjunction in this research. The following sections describe the area of study, how and which tweets were gathered, and how tweets were analyzed for frames and reply tweets coded for sentiment.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Mediatization Theory

This work is premised on the idea that media influence perceptions and understanding of reality. This concept is known as mediatization theory. With fake news and disinformation campaigns becoming a part of our day to day lives, what is real becomes a more ambiguous term. As such, mediatization theory is a way of "understanding shifting media power *on* and its use *by* a range of actors" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015, p. 1323). The theory of mediatization is the exploration of how the evolution of media has fundamentally changed society and culture and their various institutions. Some argue that mediatization is "one of the most profound long-term transformations of society, along with other meta-processes, such as globalization, individualization and commercialization" (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2017, p. 4). More broadly, mediatization refers to an ongoing process which is "characterized by a *duality*, in that the media have become *integrated* into the operations of other social institutions and cultural spheres, while also acquiring the status of social institutions *in their own*

right" [emphasis in original] (Hjarvard, 2013, p 17). And as the media have gained their own independence and authority, other institutions had to change their own operations to fit in with those of the media, thereby creating a certain kind of interdependence. Although there is significant variation in the degree of this interdependence depending on the industry in question, it can be clearly seen in the realm of politics and conflict.

The way governments and politicians speak to the public is predicated on the rules of media institutions: by giving interview and providing sound bytes, reserving time and space to speak to reporters, among other ways. One of the roles of the news media is to convey political information to the audience, thereby influencing the development of public opinion about politics. The process is, of course, more complicated than that, as people's backgrounds and biases shape their understanding in ways that do not necessarily reflect what the media may have wanted to convey originally (Hjarvard, 2013). It can be argued that one of the functions of the media when it comes to politics is to reveal the story, the real truth behind the spin of politics. However, it is also important to remember that fundamentally, both politics and the media have a similar goal "to seek publicity in order to achieve authority. Considered in this way, the logics of politics and the media may support each other in the co-construction of *political realities.*" [emphasis added by author] (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 45).

Media have their own kinds of internal logic that get adopted by those who use them. Which means "media characteristics influence other institutions and culture and society at large" (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2017, p. 4). This process has intensified with social media. Through social media, politicians can address people directly, and use social media to create their own narrative about important events, especially when it

comes to conflict (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2018). This is relevant as scholars argue that it must be done well for a rally round the flag effect to take place (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Donald Trump is one example of a political leader using social media to communicate directly with the people, providing his thoughts and opinions about current events and shaping his own narrative in a direct manner through Twitter. Similarly, journalists use online comments as a representation of general public opinion (McGregor, 2019).

More importantly, people can respond and have political discussions on a wider spectrum because of social media. Because the public can express themselves to the public, they become a part of the creation and maintenance of political discussions. In this way, the public also become complicit in constructing political realities. As with everyday political discussions, this theory can be extended to the kinds of realities that are constructed during conflict as well.

When it comes to mediatization and conflict, Hoskins and O'Loughlin argue that mediatization has gone through three different stages: broadcast era war, diffused war, and finally arrested war – the current stage (2015). Whereas diffused war was characterized by too much information being available online, creating various different narratives, the current phase is characterized by the mainstream taking the online world of user-generated content and repurposing it for their own means (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015). User-generated content has an element of authenticity to it, which also creates more trust as people are more prone to believe a regular person rather than someone in a position of power (Ionatamishvili et al., 2016). Consequently, when those in power use user-generated content, it appears more trustworthy than simply communicating a message or a statement to the public. This can be used to connect with

the public on a different level, but it can also be used as a specific tool to achieve a goal, like the spread of disinformation. One example is the Chinese government using online discussions to distract the public from contentious issues in the country (King et al., 2017).

With the evolution of media – especially social media – politics, conflict and the media have become more and more interconnected. One of the developments to come out of this is that people have the ability to participate in the creation of political realities, perpetuating narratives that may be similar to or diverge from official narratives. The other development is how the mainstream (be it governments or other organizations) are able to use social media tools to weaponize them for their own purposes and have their political narrative or reality dominate. Troll factories, disinformation campaigns, fake news are just some of the different ways in which this can happen. Social media becomes this strange battleground where elites and the public can produce a variety of realities about what occurs in a conflict. It is worth exploring, then, the public reality, and the mainstream reality, and how they compare. One way these different realities are constructed is with the use of frames.

3.1.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory, at its basic level, looks at the ways in which the presentation of information influences the consciousness of people in different ways. As Robert Entman puts it, framing is the process of "*[selecting] some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described" [emphasis in original] (1993, p. 52). In other

words, framing theory posits that communication is not simply the conveyance of plain facts, but that that conveyance is done in such a way as to highlight some information or hide other pieces information. The same information can be presented in completely different ways to create completely different narratives. Ultimately, "frames help people organize what they see in everyday life" (Borah, p. 248).

The existence of a frame within a text does not immediately guarantee that it will have any kind of influence on anyone (Entman, 1993). Moreover, even if the frame is influential, the final interpretation of that frame by a receiver may not correspond to the original intentions of the sender. Personal history, biases, and even cultural understanding and background all play a role in the way frames are interpreted. The effectiveness of a frame is measurable on a scale, with varying degrees of effect. Nevertheless, the intention of framing is that it will have an affect on a large percentage of the audience that is exposed to that frame, even if it will never be a universal effect (Entman, 1993).

Framing theory is most often connected to agenda-setting. This relates back to the concept that a message is specifically constructed to convey a particular meaning to the greater audience with a certain goal (Hurtíková, 2013). During times of conflict, this becomes especially significant as frames can explain what the conflict is about and what steps need to be taken to resolve it (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017). In this way frames can influence presentation and comprehension of conflict, as in not only what to think, but how to think about it.

Frames are especially important to consider in political communication. With traditional media, frames were primarily created by journalists or politicians and the message was spread to a wide audience. However, through processes of public

deliberation, people can take part in the practice of frame creation (Borah, 2011). With the advent of social media, that process has become even more collaborative and immediate. Online platforms allow the public to interact, respond, and even break down existing frames in political communication. Thus, people themselves can become part of the cycle, reinforcing a particular frame, debunking it, or creating their own frames (Golovchenko et al., 2018). As such, framing theory becomes an important part of studying social media. How the 'audience' frames an event or responds to a frame can tell a lot about the public perception of that event, and what the dominant frame for the general public is.

These two theories of mediatization and framing can work together in explaining how narratives about conflict are created and how the construction of narrative themselves become contested spaces. Social media is not real life, but social media becomes part of a process that creates a certain version of reality and framing is one of the ways it does that. The way information is presented can have implications. As Baker and Oneal argue, a rally round the flag effect is more likely to take place depending on the kind of media coverage that it receives from political leaders and opinion leaders (2001). In terms of this research, this suggests that the way the Kerch Strait incident is communicated and *framed* will have an affect on the public perception of that incident and whether they support the official narratives or not. As an aspect of social media inherently consists of voicing public perception, public opinion can be created, expressed, and influenced online. Thus, mediatization shows that social media becomes another place for narrative conflict to occur. Mediatization is the process of the public and official conversations creating the reality of the Ukrainian perspective about the clash, while

framing is creating specific messages about how people should think about the naval clash between Ukraine and Russia. If a rally effect takes place, then the official frame is dominant and it "worked", and a unified Ukrainian understanding emerges about the event. If the effect does not take place, then the public reality as depicted on social media and the official reality are different.

3.2 Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

Social media is an interesting source to study on its own, but it also provides a useful research tool to examine the dissemination of information and how that information is being understood by the public. In this case, Twitter was the specific area of study, as it is frequently used for news gathering purposes and for analyzing political preferences (Barberá, 2015a). Moreover, Twitter is at once a source of the spread of disinformation and campaigns to counter disinformation (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016), making it a relevant source of study in the formation of public opinion. Most importantly, unlike many other social media platforms, most tweets are public and therefore more easily gathered for research purposes.

To more closely examine the discussions that occurred online about the incident, a set of tweets was collected from the most popular Twitter accounts in Ukraine. For the purposes of this research the selection of top accounts was based solely on the number of followers. These accounts were identified by the online marketing website Socialbakers (https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/ukraine). Socialbakers was used because it is the only free website that provides information about the most popular accounts for a social media platform specifically by country. As the aim of this research

was to specifically focus on Ukraine and Ukrainian accounts, Socialbakers made it possible to isolate popular profiles to Ukrainian only.

The top 130 profiles were examined and categorized based on the affiliation of the account. The decision to examine the top 130 profiles was due to the range they encompassed. Range here refers to the range of different accounts – beyond just politicians and news which were the dominant type of account in the top 50 – but also the number of followers. Their follower size ranged from 3.0 million followers to 30,002 followers, meaning that this also included a large and varied audience. Overall, the categories included politicians, celebrities, news, government organizations, non-government organizations, sports, bloggers, journalists, community organizations, and other. The "other" category consisted of any accounts that did not directly fit into the previous categories. In cases of overlap, the most apparent category was used.

All accounts that became inactive prior to the event or did not exist at the time of the event were discarded from the sample. The remaining accounts were examined for general online political activity, ie do they regularly discuss political events of any kind? The ones that were not and did not discuss the Kerch Strait incident were also removed from the sample.

The time range for the tweets was for three days, from November 25th to the 27th, 2018. The clash took place on the 25th, at which point initial reporting flowed in and first reactions took place online. On the 26th Russia released their official statement about the events that occurred. The 27th was included primarily for additional information and for any later responses. Although this is a short time range, it does cover the first, initial reactions to the clash as it was happening in real time. Later reactions focused more on

the government's decision to enact martial law and are worthy of their own study, which was beyond the scope of this project.

To identify the relevant information, Advanced Search on Twitter was used to isolate tweets to each of the relevant accounts for the specified dates. The search form used was "(from:account name) until:2018-11-27 since:2018-11-25." Only posts discussing the events in the Kerch Strait were examined, not the actions that occurred because of the clash. Specifically, all discussions of the Ukrainian government debating and implementing martial law as a consequence of the events in the sea were considered a separate issue and were not included in the sample. However, tweets describing reactions of the international community were considered a continuation of the discussion about what occurred and were included.

Tweets posted in English, Russian, and Ukrainian were examined. All relevant tweets were then analyzed for frames, and the reply tweets to each post coded for sentiment. Replies were not gathered if there were less than five replies to a single tweet. This threshold was based on the fact that many tweets had only one or two replies, and sometimes from the same person. Five was considered enough to at least include several different individuals reacting to a post and thus represent separate opinions.

3.2.1 Frame Analysis

The general frames in this research were identified based on the type of content that was incorporated or ignored in the tweets. Is the party at fault identified? What kind of content was used to reinforce the frame? If quotes were used, which message did the

individual repeat? These questions were looked at in order to identify a frame. The following primary frames were used to categorize relevant tweets:

Anti-Russia: Framed the incident in terms of Russia as the clear aggressor in the clash. This included tweets that described the international community as condemning Russian actions as illegal or without merit.

Pro-Ukraine: Posts that supported Ukrainian actions, did not blame Ukrainian sailors or the Ukrainian government in any wrongdoing. In this frame the international community also expressed support for Ukraine.

Anti-Ukraine: Ukraine presented a clear and present threat to Russia. The vessels crossed into Russian waters without permission and refused to stop when ordered to, performing dangerous maneuvers. The international community condemned Ukraine's deliberate provocation in the sea.

Pro-Russia: Posts that supported Russian actions, did not place blame on Russia for provocation or attack. Support was given to Russia by the international community.

Neutral: Posts that took on an overall neutral tone when discussing events. The clash was referred to with impartial names, without naming a guilty party. Calls for de-escalation, dialogue and restraint were mentioned.

The presence of a frame was identified based on certain words, hashtags, quotes, and references. If a tweet had more than one frame, only the most prevalent or the first to appear was identified and analyzed. This was most likely to occur by combining either the Anti-Ukraine and Pro-Russia or the Anti-Russia and Pro-Ukraine frames. The overall

narrative about the conflict was considered unified if 65% of tweets presented a similar message. For example, either a Pro-Ukraine or Anti-Russia frame, or the combination of the two. Less than 65% was considered a mixed narrative. Since it is impossible for 100% of all tweets to present the same narrative, 65% was considered enough for a unified message. This allowed room for expected opposing messages and more significantly, neutral messages that did not detract or reinforce the main narrative of the incident. Once a frame was identified and the tweet had a high enough engagement rate, the replies to that tweet were analyzed and coded for sentiment.

3.2.2 Sentiment Analysis

Broadly speaking, the purpose of sentiment analysis is to recognize and classify emotion or to detect polarity within a text (Cambria et al., 2017). Particularly, sentiment analysis is used to distil large data sets into categories using emotion labels, or into binary classifications of positive and negative. The two can be complementary and some models of categorization combine the two (Cambria et al., 2017). Sentiment can be further categorized based on the strength or intensity of an expression. An example would be the difference between a smile and full-out laughter. Both are positive expressions, but one is more intense than the other. To that end, researchers can utilize a scale to classify sentiment, or use an emotion lexicon (Liu, 2017). Emotion lexicons are based on the groupings of emotions into categories – usually different negative and positive variations – compiled by theorists and researchers (Liu, 2017). To remain consistent, this research used the emotion annotation and representation language (EARL) proposed by the Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion (HUMAINE). See Table 1 for more information.

Individuals reading a tweet could respond in several ways. They can comment (also known as reply on Twitter) directly to that tweet in a reply thread, they can like the tweet, share the tweet link with others, or retweet it. Retweeting means they repost the same tweet to their own account with or without commenting on it. Likes, shares and retweets were not examined in this research, but replies were manually coded using the previously mentioned EARL classification system. Each comment was categorized based on sentiment and target. Or to put it more simply, the analysis consisted of analyzing what emotion was expressed in a reply and towards whom or what. If no specific target was presented in the reply, it was coded into the "general" category. If multiple sentiments could be identified within a reply, the tweet was coded only for the most apparent one. Similarly, if a reply target could fit within two categories, only one was selected.

Two additional categories were used outside of the EARL proposal to classify responses: suspended and other. The "suspended" category consisted of all replies that were unavailable because the account was suspended by Twitter sometime between the original time of posting and the time of research. The "other" category consisted of tweets that could not be coded. Most often, this was due to them being written in a language other than Ukrainian, Russian, or English. In other cases, it was because they provided a broken link, reposted a deleted tweet, or were simply incomprehensible.

Much of the sentiment expressed was towards a specific target. The targets were broadly categorized as Russia, Ukraine, the Ukrainian Government, International Community, and Account. To simplify things, Russia as a target category conflated several refences, such as the president of Russia, the Russian Coast Guard, all of which

were generally referred to as Russia. Similarly, Ukraine as a category consisted of the Ukrainian people, military forces, or the Ukrainian vessels involved in the clash. The Ukrainian Government included the party in power, parliament, and the president of Ukraine. The International Community consisted of replies directed at countries other than Russia or Ukraine. It also included large organizational bodies, such as NATO, the EU, and the UN. The final category, Account, represented sentiment directed towards the account making the original post to which people were replying to. In other words, if a politician tweeted about the incident and the sentiment was targeted at that politician specifically, it was coded into the Account category.

Generally, there is no numeric measurement that indicates that a rally effect took place. Instead, it is marked by an increase in public support, and varies case by case. Likewise, to date the rally effect has not been studied through social media, meaning there is no set precedent for when a rally effect occurs online specifically. As such, for the purpose of this study, a rally effect was considered to have taken place if the majority of sentiment – at least 55% – was either positive towards Ukraine and the government or negative towards Russia. There is evidence that one of the key causes of the rally effect is anger towards those that attack the ingroup, in this case the country (Lambert et al., 2011). Accordingly, negative sentiment towards the aggressor is one indication of the rally effect. If the majority of replies were positive towards Ukraine and/or negative towards Russia, then the rally effect occurred.

By examining replies to a variety of accounts and to different frames, the intention was for a more coherent picture to emerge about the audience perception of the situation and the actors involved. Chapter 5 details the results of this research. The next

chapter provides background information pertinent to this research. Specifically, it provides information about the development of the conflict – including an overview of the naval clash case study, the Ukrainian media landscape, and Russian influence in Ukrainian media.

Table 1: HUMAINE polarity annotations of emotions

Negative and forceful	Negative and passive	Quiet positive
Anger	Boredom	Calm
Annoyance	Despair	Content
Contempt	Disappointment	Relaxed
Disgust	Hurt	Relieved
Irritation	Sadness	Serene
Negative and not in control	**Positive and lively**	**Caring**
Anxiety	Amusement	Affection
Embarrassment	Delight	Empathy
Fear	Elation	Friendliness
Helplessness	Excitement	Love
Powerlessness	Happiness	
Worry	Joy	
	Pleasure	
Negative thoughts	**Positive thoughts**	**Reactive**
Doubts	Courage	Interest
Envy	Hope	Politeness
Frustration	Pride	Surprised
Guilt	Satisfaction	
Shame	Trust	
Agitation		
Stress		
Shock		
Tension		

Note: Reprinted from "Many Facets of Sentiment Analysis" by B. Liu (p.29). In E. Cambria, D. Das, S. Bandyopadhyay, A. Feraco (Eds.), *A Practical Guide to Sentiment Analysis,* 2017, Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55394-8_1

CHAPTER 4: SETTING THE STAGE: THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE, THE KERCH STRAIT INCIDENT AND RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

The primary focus of this chapter is to put the conflict in Ukraine into context. It begins with an overview of the conflict as it began in 2013 and what role media played in it. This is followed by a description of the case study itself, what took place on November 25th in the Kerch Strait and an examination of arguments about who was responsible. And finally, this chapter will cover the media landscape in Ukraine and the Russian communication strategy and its influence in Ukraine.

4.1 Timeline of Conflict

The current conflict in Ukraine first emerged at the tail end of 2013, when the then-president, Viktor Yanukovych, backed out of the European Union Association Agreement (Roman et al., 2017). Instead of creating closer ties to the EU, the government declared that Ukraine would strengthen existing relations with Russia. This caused mass outrage and quickly led to mobilization and protests in the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv. While the protest movement – known as Euromaidan, or the Revolution of Dignity – began peacefully, it eventually escalated with violent clashes between protesters and government forces, leading to the death of over a hundred people (Talmazan, 2019). After that point, in February of 2014, Yanukovych was ousted and fled to Russia, with a new government put in place.

The end of the revolution and the change in government created mounting tension in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. There were already pro-government rallies occurring during Euromaidan – known as anti-Maidan – in certain regions, but unrest

increased after Yanukovych fled the country (Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015). While the new Ukrainian government was sorting itself out, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in March of the same year. Although denying it at the time, Russia moved soldiers – or "little green men" – into position in February of 2014 to take over key buildings in the peninsula (Anthony, 2015; Biersack & O'Lear, 2014). A referendum was held where the population of Crimea voted on whether to remain a part of Ukraine or join the Russian Federation. The results were overwhelmingly in favour of Russia, but the US and EU denounced these results as false and illegal ("Crimea Referendum: Voters 'Back Russia Union,'" 2014) and later imposed sanctions on Russia. Nevertheless, the confusion about what was happening in Crimea made direct confrontation with Russia difficult to legitimize (Golovchenko et al., 2018), and thus Crimea remains occupied to this day.

This change in status for Crimea amplified unrest in the east of Ukraine even more and led to the stage of the conflict that is ongoing at the time of writing. In the Luhansk and Donetsk regions – jointly referred to as Donbas – protesters seized various government buildings and began a separatist movement, renaming the regions as the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (shortened to DNR and LNR, based on the Ukrainian and Russian translations) (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017). This prompted an all-out armed conflict, with thousands of casualties and displacement of the local population. What followed was a continually escalating fight between government forces and the DNR and LNR (Anthony, 2015). Government forces were able to recapture several cities in Donbas, but the separatists were eventually backed by the Russian military, which provided volunteers, weapons, and training for the separatists

(Katchanovski, 2016). Russia denied any kind of Russian military presence in the region, despite overwhelming evidence, and only admitted to it over a year later (Walker, 2015).

After a period of heavy fighting and heavy losses, with input from several nations, two ceasefire agreements (Minsk I and later the Minsk II Protocol) were put in place to deescalate the situation on both sides. However, although the intensification of fighting has decreased dramatically, there have been numerous ceasefire violations since the agreements were first introduced. Even in 2019 alone there were close to 300,000 ceasefire violations on both the Ukrainian and the separatist sides, as reported by the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (OSCE, 2020). Despite the most recent diplomatic meetings and agreements between Russia and Ukraine, there was scepticism about the effectiveness and long-term maintenance of the ceasefires (Ellyatt, 2019).

A key thread weaving throughout the whole crisis in Ukraine has been the variety of competing narratives about the situation, with rampant propaganda and misinformation spreading both on and offline. Even going back to the initial protests, depending on who was reporting, the protesters were either people rallying for closer ties with the EU and against being controlled by Russia, or they were portrayed as Western-backed puppets trying to put a new, fascist government in power (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). When the conflict ramped up in eastern Ukraine, vastly different reports were similarly presented in the media. The separatists were portrayed as either terrorists or freedom fighters by Ukraine and Russia, respectively (Katchanovski, 2016). The conflict itself was characterized by Ukraine as having minor support and as Russia attacking Ukraine, or by Russia as having a lot of support and as a civil war to protect the Russian minority living in Ukraine (Roman et al., 2017). Ukraine frequently downplayed the army's role in the

civilian casualties and blamed it all on the separatists, while Russia emphasized the opposite.

Differing narratives played a role in significant international incidents around the conflict as well – specifically, the case of the downing of Flight MH17 at the height of fighting in eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014. When Flight MH17 was shot down, there was similarly a lot of confusion about what transpired. Ukraine blamed Russia for the event, while the Russians blamed Ukraine (Clem, 2017). Access to the site was restricted and at the time no clear evidence was provided either way. Eventually, a joint-investigation team revealed that the separatists shot down the airplane with a Russian provided missile system, although Russian officials continued to deny these findings ("Four Charged with Murder for Downing Flight MH17," 2019).

With the Russian government continually denying its involvement in the events in Ukraine and the Ukrainian government downplaying some of the army's actions, it is sometimes difficult to parse out the truth about the conflict. This duality of narratives about the conflict persisted during the naval clash which is the focus of this research.

4.2 Case Study – The Kerch Strait Naval Incident

To get from ports in the Black Sea to ports in the Azov Sea, Ukrainian vessels need to sail through the Kerch Strait, which is a strip of water between the Crimean Peninsula and mainland Russia. Since the annexation, Russia built a bridge to connect the two land masses and increased its military presence in the area. On the morning of November 25, 2018, three Ukrainian vessels were sailing to a port in Mariupol in the Sea of Azov from the Black Sea port in Odesa. The clash consisted of two confrontations.

First, the Ukrainian ships were intercepted and one was rammed several times by the Russian navy on the way to Mariupol ("Russia-Ukraine Tensions Rise after Kerch Strait Ship Capture," 2018). As the vessels approached the bridge that crosses the strait, a tanker was used to block the way under the bridge and several helicopters and jets were raised to prevent the Ukrainian vessels from continuing to their destination. The second confrontation came when the Ukrainian ships turned back to Odesa, at which point the Russian navy pursued, fired on, and boarded the Ukrainian ships. Several of the sailors were injured in the process. The vessels and the crew members were all captured and taken to Crimea (Roth, 2018).

For the most part, both Ukraine and Russia agreed on the sequence of events described above. The confusion was more in the details about who was at fault for the clash and disputes about territorial borders and proper procedure necessary to sail across the Kerch Strait. Russian officials stated that the Russian coast guard hailed the Ukrainian vessels and ordered them to turn back, as they did not have permission to cross the strait and would therefore be illegally crossing into Russian territory (Federal Security Service, 2018). The Ukrainian ships ignored these calls to stop and continued crossing while performing dangerous maneuvers. The Ukrainian officials, on the other hand, claimed that the ships were in international waters and were illegally intercepted for no apparent reason. They followed proper procedures by informing the dispatcher of the crossing ahead of time, but after receiving no response went ahead with the crossing, as these were neutral waters ("Росія залучила бойові вертольоти до супроводу українських кораблів – ВМС," 2018).

Russia also claimed that they shut down the area temporarily and the Ukrainian

vessels were in the Kerch Strait illegally, while Ukraine stated Russian actions were

illegal as the area was free for shipping ("Martial Law Vote after Ukraine-Russia Clash,"

2018). Based on existing maritime law, what is considered territorial waters, and the

distance between the Ukrainian ships and land, there is an argument to be made that the

vessels were in Russia's territorial waters at one point during the incident (Cruickshank,

2018). However, the accuracy of this claim is debatable based on the status of the

Crimean Peninsula. Ukraine does not recognize Crimea as Russian territory, while Russia

does. Whether Crimea is considered part of the Russian Federation or not impacts the

location of borders in territorial waters. Furthermore, there is a 2003 agreement in play

between the two nations (*Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Ukraine on

Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Strait of Kerch*, 2003), that states that

the waters of the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait are to be freely used by both countries

(Cruickshank, 2018).

During the UN Security Council emergency meeting, Russian officials blamed the

Ukrainian president for orchestrating the whole incident in order to postpone the

Ukrainian election, which was to be held in a few months (Nichols, 2018). Others say the

act of aggression was instigated by Russia as a way to bolster Russian public opinion of

Vladimir Putin, as prior to the clash his ratings were low (Roth, 2018). Overall, the

international response primarily called for de-escalation of tension, with most nations

calling it an act of aggression on the part of Russia, while some agreed that it was a

violation of Russia's territorial borders ("UN Urges Russia and Ukraine to Step Away

from Further Confrontation at Sea," 2018).

This event was also significant in that it was the first time that Russia and Ukraine were in direct open conflict, as opposed to previous confrontations. Although this was the first open clash between Russia and Ukraine, tension had been building for years by that point. There were fears that this would lead to further escalation between the two states ("Russia-Ukraine Tensions Rise after Kerch Strait Ship Capture," 2018). Following the confrontation, the Ukrainian government invoked martial law in Ukrainian regions bordering Russia for thirty days.

As has already been mentioned, the media played an important role in this conflict. It is thus worth examining what the media landscape in Ukraine is like.

4.3 Media Landscape in Ukraine

Although Ukraine is a democratic country, the media landscape is a contested space, with somewhat limited freedom. Traditional media, such as broadcast media, are primarily owned by different oligarchs in the country. Not all are affiliated with the government, but they do have various political ties and allegiances that shift depending on who is in power (Szostek, 2014). Depending on the agenda of a particular oligarch, the news will reflect the agenda of the owner of the medium. Although there are a variety of alternative media options available, this does limit the freedom of the press and the impartiality of information presented to the public. When trust in the government erodes and state media is believed to report skewed information, citizens begin to look to other sources for information, such as social media (Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). To that end, many Ukrainians turned away from mainstream media to seek news online and via social media sites. As was mentioned previously, Euromaidan was primarily organized on Facebook, for example.

The rate of adoption of the Internet – and by extension social media – grew later in Ukraine than in some other parts of the world. At the time of writing, the penetration rate of the Internet in the country is about 64%, as reported by Freedom House (2019). However, despite the rising prominence of the Internet, citizens do not have unlimited and completely free access to the online world. It is considered a "partly free" country when it comes to Internet access (Freedom House, 2019). There are many restrictions to websites and the kind of political content that can be posted online. Ukrainian Internet users can face fines and even jail time for posting messages online that the government considers as extremist or supporting separatist movements (Webb, 2017). Thus, freedom of speech is somewhat restricted online.

In terms of social media platforms, Ukrainians use several platforms, with Facebook currently being the most popular. For a long time, the Russian owned VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki were the most popular social media platforms in Ukraine. However, as tension between Russia and Ukraine continued, the Ukrainian government banned Russian owned media in 2017, including Russian networks, social media platforms and online websites (Holland, 2018). This move was criticized internationally for limiting freedom of speech, but was defended by the Ukrainian government as a necessary step to protect the population from Russian propaganda (Yurkova, 2018). The ban caused many people to transition over to Western social media platforms instead, such as Facebook and Twitter (Bay et al., 2019). However, not everyone made the move. Some simply stopped using social media, as they hold little trust towards Western owned media, while others started using alternative means to continue accessing Russian owned platforms and sites (Holland, 2018). Of the ones that

stayed active on popular websites like VK, their overall online activity decreased, or more concerning, became more radicalized (Bay et al., 2019). Despite the restrictions, Russian propaganda messages still occasionally show up in Ukrainian news (Laba, 2019).

Nevertheless, social media in Ukraine remains an important part of how citizens engage with each other, with the news, and with politicians. Social media use keeps growing in the country, and through it citizens take part in digital activism such as political debates about policy, government reform, and the role of civil society (Freedom House, 2019). Furthermore, social media has been one of the key avenues to stay up to date on developments about the conflict, specifically about what the situation in eastern Ukraine is, as both online and offline access to that area remains limited. Online access in Donbas is both provided and restricted by Russia (Freedom House, 2019). Russian media influence has been felt in a variety of ways in Ukraine and around the world. Indeed, Russia utilizes several strategies to spread influential messages in different parts of the world.

4.4 Russian Communication Strategy in Ukraine

One of Russia's major military strategies in recent years has been the employment of hybrid warfare to achieve international goals. Hybrid warfare is a continually changing strategy that employs unconventional tactics and more recently have gained a distinct reliance on new technology (Rusnáková, 2017). As Lanoszka argues, former Soviet regions – such as Ukraine – are particularly susceptible to Russian hybrid warfare (2016). This is primarily because of the various complex regional divides, weak civil society, and the continued struggle for independence of some of these regions (Lanoszka, 2016). As another former Soviet region, Russia is aware of these complexities and is able to take

advantage and manipulate actors and regions in Ukraine in a way to sow discord and prevent strong ties from emerging within the country. Russian and Ukrainian identities have been intertwined together for a long time, even before the emergence of the USSR, and Russian propaganda has been at work in Ukraine in some capacity throughout their history (Yurkova, 2018). Though most of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine would identify themselves as Ukrainian first, some would identify themselves as Russian, despite living in Ukraine (Gentile, 2015).

This idea of identity is a large portion of the current Russian propaganda strategy, specifically that Ukraine does not have a separate identity from Russia (Kuzio, 2006). In fact, one of the justifications used by Russia for the actions taken within Ukraine's borders was that "Ukraine had no history as a state and thus no right to be respected as one" (Bateson, 2017, p. 43). Another justification used was citing the fear that the new, post-Euromaidan government was going to target Russian people living in Crimea in a form of ethnic cleansing (Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2017). Some of the other frequent propaganda messages used about Ukraine include calling it a fascist state, a failed state, war in Ukraine was orchestrated by the West, Russia is not a part of the conflict, and many others (Yurkova, 2018). Russia dedicates a lot of resources to spread these narratives in Ukraine and abroad.

One specific disinformation strategy is the spread of fake news stories. Fake news is defined as news articles that purposefully contain false information that may deceive readers (Colliander, 2019). These kinds of news stories became rather rampant in Ukraine, spreading horrifying stories about atrocities committed by the Ukrainian army, usually with fake witnesses and photoshopped picture evidence (Khaldarova & Pantti,

2016). They became so prevalent that a crowdsourced project known as StopFake.org emerged in Ukraine in 2014 to combat the spread of false information (Yurkova, 2018). StopFake fact check and debunk news stories and have gained international recognition for their efforts. Another strategy used by Russia is the Internet Research Agency, IRA, which consists of paid individuals – trolls – whose task is to write and spread propaganda messages all over different social media platforms in the guise of regular people (Chen, 2015). This has previously included derogatory messages about the Ukrainian president and Ukrainians in general (Chen, 2015). Some trolls can even have robust backgrounds and authentic seeming personalities that make what they say seem more believable (Xia et al., 2019). Thus, Russia has a highly organized propaganda machine spreading disinformation around the world.

It is difficult to say whether this type of disinformation is effective at influencing people's opinions. There is evidence that Russian narratives get picked up by trusted news agencies without realizing it (Watanabe, 2017), and more sophisticated or subtle disinformation messages that are more difficult to counter can influence at least parts of a population (Aro, 2016). However, it is still difficult to ascertain exactly how widespread the influence is, and it seems to depend on the country or issue in question. In the context of Ukraine, one study found that Ukrainians are extremely sceptical of any narratives that come out of Russia (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016). Nevertheless, propaganda has played a role in the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine and during the annexation of Crimea. Undoubtedly, it has impacted the media landscape in Ukraine.

Like many other parts of the world, online activity in Ukraine is deeply ingrained with offline activity and studying what happens online is therefore of high interest. This

chapter provided background information about Ukraine, both in terms of the conflict

itself and media information, for the purpose of enhancing understanding about the

overall situation in Ukraine. Using the methodology described in Chapter 3 the following

chapter discusses the research conducted and presents the results of this study.

CHAPTER 5: THE KERCH NAVAL CLASH AND ITS EFFECTS: MAIN FINDINGS

Using the methods described in the Chapter 3, this chapter presents the findings of this research. First, there is an examination of the most popular accounts on Twitter in Ukraine. Next is how the case study was framed by these accounts. And finally, findings about the audience response to those accounts and the frames they presented. In total 5,329 tweets were analyzed, of which 1,112 were posts from the most followed accounts, and 4,217 were replies to those posts.

5.1 Profiling Popular Twitter Accounts

Examining the relevant accounts showed that of the top 130 accounts, only 111 existed or were still active at the time of the incident. Categorizing the most followed Twitter profiles in Ukraine revealed that the majority consisted of news (22.5%), politicians (18.9%), and celebrities (18.0%), totaling 66 out of 111 accounts. The rest were a combination of sports, fan pages, community updates, and other organizations. Only about half of them tweeted about the clash between Russia and Ukraine. For the most part, the ones that did not mention the incident almost never use their Twitter accounts in a political capacity or to discuss current events. Instead, they were either personal accounts or used for promotional purposes.

The accounts that discussed the case study were primarily ones that were politically active in some capacity on a regular basis. Every news outlet and almost every politician (16 out of 21) made some form of remark about the clash, as did government and non-government related organizations. As such, the total sample size of popular

accounts that discussed the Kerch Strait came out to 54 accounts. See Table 2 for a full break-down of accounts and which ones discussed the clash.

Table 2: Classification of most popular Twitter accounts in Ukraine

Accounts	Number of Accounts	Number Discussing Naval Clash
Celebrities	20	1
Politicians	21	16
News	25	25
Government Affiliated	7	5
NGOs	5	5
Gamers	5	0
Sports	7	0
Blogger	2	1
Journalists	4	0
Community	4	0
Other	11	1
Total	**111**	**54**

The few political accounts that did not mention the situation between Russia and Ukraine were ones that work on a more municipal or community level. However, there were two notable exceptions: one politician known to have close ties to Russia, the other was the leader of the DNR. Although regularly tweeting on a normal basis, both accounts were silent during the selected period of study.

There were no notable political influencers outside of those that existed within the political sphere already. Only one celebrity and one blogger tweeted about the situation at sea. However, the celebrity account would regularly discuss political issues, and would eventually become a member of Ukrainian Parliament. In other words, there were almost no discussions held by individuals or groups that were not affiliated or worked with the government or new organizations in some capacity.

The most prolific posters were the different news accounts. Of all posts, 89.4% were updates from news organizations about what was happening in the Kerch Strait. The second most prolific were politicians, at only 5.0%, followed by NGOs at 2.8%, government affiliated organizations at 2.1%, and the other section made up 0.7%. The news generally posted most frequently, as they provided real-time updates about the situation. Almost all other accounts only posted several tweets with their reaction to ongoing events. However, the engagement rates from the audience were much higher with the non-news accounts. Frequently, many posts from news accounts would garner one or two replies and some retweets or likes, whereas a tweet from a politician would produce hundreds of replies and thousands of retweets and likes.

5.2 Framing the Incident

When it comes to how the events were framed in Kerch, the majority of accounts used an Anti-Russian frame. For every single type of accounts, more than half of the frames used were Anti-Russia – out of 1,112 tweets a total of 749 were Anti-Russia. A little under a hundred tweets presented a Pro-Ukraine frame. In some cases, the two frames were present in the same post. In fact, the Anti-Russia and Pro-Ukraine frames ostensibly could be considered two sides of the same coin and were frequently used in conjunction. Boiled down to its basic points, most of them read as "Russia attacked Ukraine, Ukraine acted lawfully."

Many of the tweets produced by the news were the equivalent of a headline without a lot of other information provided. They frequently used a variation of "Russian Provocation" or "Russian Attack" as a shorthand to provide updates and developments about the clash. For example, "Russian attack in Azov Sea: Klimkin warns of an armed

response" (author's translation). When quotes from individuals were used, they were frequently from individuals accusing Russia of provocation or expressing support for Ukraine. Such as, "'Russian actions have no justification.' NATO commented on RF aggression in Azov Sea" (author's translation). Few did the opposite. News accounts also presented footage from sailors of Russian vessels ramming Ukrainian ships, and recordings of the discussions had by crew members on board the Russian ships as proof of Russian aggression.

Very few tweets depicted the sequence of events as presented by Russia. Many news accounts ignored the Russian version of events, not posting Russian statements or quoting Russian experts. If a tweet did describe events as expressed by Russia, it was done in a way to immediately discredit the Russian narrative. Essentially, Russia attacked Ukraine, and then played the victim. One example is a video published by Russia of the Ukrainian sailors confessing to deliberate provocation at sea as ordered by Ukrainian authorities. These videos were immediately discredited as forced confessions, that people under torture will say anything to survive (Kalashnyk, 2018). When discussing world reactions, the few countries that condemned Ukrainian actions as provocation were not tweeted about at all. And even if an international reaction was neutral, some tweets would still frame the response as reacting to Russian aggression. Thus, primarily only support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia were posted.

The second most frequent frame used was the neutral frame at 18.7% of all posts. When using a shorthand to explain what situation news updates were referring to, a more impartial description was used, such as calling it an incident, an event, clash between Russia and Ukraine, etc., without specifically blaming one party in provocation. This

frame was commonly used in conjunction with international responses, where other

countries would call for de-escalation and restraint from all parties. Or would simply be

expressed as either Country X or an individual reacted to events in Kerch without

describing what that reaction was, for example "Trump reacted to the incident in the

Kerch Strait" (author's translation).

The Anti-Ukrainian and Pro-Russian frames were very scarce. They were

primarily seen only in the news as a description of what Russia has stated and were

drowned out by the sheer number of Anti-Russian frames.

Table 3: Number of tweets by frame

Frame	Number of Tweets
Anti-Russia	749 (67.4%)
Pro-Ukraine	91 (8.2%)
Anti-Ukraine	57 (5.1%)
Pro-Russia	7 (0.6%)
Neutral	208 (18.7%)
Total	**1,112**

Looking at the frames by category of account did not provide significant variation

in frames. In every single category the Anti-Russia frame made up at least 50% - and

usually more – of all posts. News accounts were the only ones to provide the most tweets

using all frames. Almost all other categories did not present an anti-Ukraine or pro-

Russia frame at all, focusing almost exclusively on Anti-Russian frames. Politicians and

other accounts used the hashtag #RussiaAttackedUkraine to express their stance on the

event. In some cases, there was no questioning of who the provocateur even was, and

Russia attacking was taken as obvious. Only one politician explicitly blamed Ukraine for

provocations at sea, posting two tweets about the event. However, as this was the leader

of Crimea, perhaps this response was unsurprising. The one NGO that presented anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian frames did so when reporting on Russian statements regarding the incident. A full breakdown of all posts gathered can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Categorizing accounts and their tweets based on frames

Category	Frame	Number of Tweets
Politicians	Anti-Russia	43 (76.8%)
	Pro-Ukraine	11 (19.6%)
	Anti-Ukraine	2 (3.6%)
	Pro-Russia	0
	Neutral	0
	Total	**56**
Governmental	Anti-Russia	18 (78.3%)
	Pro-Ukraine	1 (4.3%)
	Anti-Ukraine	0
	Pro-Russia	0
	Neutral	4 (17.4%)
	Total	**23**
NGOs	Anti-Russia	20 (64.5%)
	Pro-Ukraine	1 (3.2%)
	Anti-Ukraine	1 (3.2%)
	Pro-Russia	1 (3.2%)
	Neutral	8 (25.8%)
	Total	**31**
Other	Anti-Russia	4 (50.0%)
	Pro-Ukraine	4 (50.0%)
	Anti-Ukraine	0
	Pro-Russia	0
	Neutral	0
	Total	**8**
News	Anti-Russia	664 (66.8%)
	Pro-Ukraine	74 (7.4%)
	Anti-Ukraine	54 (5.4%)
	Pro-Russia	6 (0.6%)
	Neutral	196 (19.7%)
	Total	**994**

Overall, a fairly consistent message was presented about what had transpired between Russia and Ukraine in the sea across all types of accounts.

5.3 The Online Public Response

A total of 4,217 tweets were collected as responses to tweets posted by the accounts listed above. The online response was overwhelmingly negative to all posts. The majority of all responses – 65% – were Negative and Forceful, with Negative Thoughts coming in at a distant second at 9.8% and Positive Thoughts made up 6.3% of responses. All other sentiment expressions each made up less than two percent of all responses. The remainder of responses were either from Suspended accounts (5.4%) or categorized as Other (8.6%). Not every type of sentiment listed in the HUMAINE polarity of emotions was present in the gathered data and those emotions were therefore not included in the findings. Table 5 shows the full categorization of all responses.

Targets for a sentiment were generally expressed with only three types of sentiment: Negative and Forceful, Negative Thoughts, and Positive Thoughts. The rest simply expressed some sort of feeling regarding the general situation and were therefore not further coded for target. Table 6 shows the classification of responses based on targets of sentiment. The General category was included for replies that expressed a sentiment but without specifying what it was aimed at. Of the Negative and Forceful responses, most were geared towards the Account category (28.5%), followed by Ukraine (24.5%), the Ukrainian Government (15%), Russia (14.1%), and finally the International Community (8.9%). Much of the negative sentiment towards the Account category came from negative reactions to political accounts, which will be discussed in greater detail below. Some examples of Negative and Forceful responses towards the Ukrainian Government included "You'll eat lobster and that's it we know you're @#$% cowards. Impotent #$@&*" or "Is it possible to fulfil the requirements of Ukrainians instead? Sit

in jail, for everything you have done as the president of Ukraine. You're an enemy of the people" (author's translation). Towards Ukraine, some examples of negativity included "Some kind of stupid boys on boats. They fired at themselves and in Russian waters too…" and "Hohly[1] became brave… They should have been drowned, instead of wasting effort ramming them" (author's translation).

In comparison to Ukraine and the different subsets of Ukraine, Russia garnered a rather small amount of Negative and Forceful sentiment, 14.1%. An example would be "Those Katsapy[2] are animals!" or "Proposing a flash mob – A good Katsap – is a Dead Katsap!" (author's translation).

Relatively speaking, the International Community was the focus of the most amount of Negative Thoughts at 104 replies (25.1%), with Account and the Ukrainian Government coming in at a close second and third with 93 (22.4%) and 87 (21%) replies, respectively. Ukraine received the most Positive Thoughts at 91 replies (34.1%), and Russia and Account both received an equal number of Positive Thoughts, 65 each. Some Positive Thoughts towards Ukraine were expressed as "Glory to Ukraine" or "Glory to our heroes" and towards Russia as "Well done, Russia" or "Glory to Russia" (author's translation).

The responses were further broken down and categorized based on the type of account that made the original post as well as responses based on the different frames.

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[1] Derogatory term for Ukrainians
[2] Derogatory term for Russians

Table 5: All responses coded by sentiment

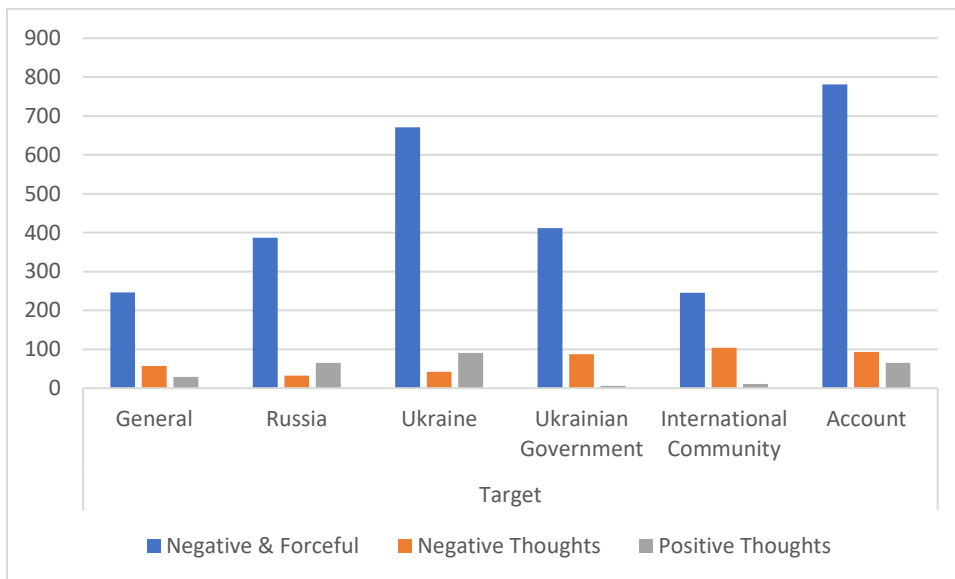| Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	2,742 (65.0%)
Negative Thoughts	415 (9.8%)
Negative Passive	81 (1.9%)
Negative and Not in Control	45 (1.1%)
Positive Lively	19 (0.5%)
Positive Thoughts	267 (6.3%)
Quiet Positive	9 (0.2%)
Reactive	46 (1.1%)
Suspended	229 (5.4%)
Other	364 (8.6%)
Total	**4,217**

Figure 1: All responses categorized by target of sentiment

5.3.1 Responses Categorized by Frames

Responses did not vary significantly based on different frames. In terms of only numbers, the Anti-Russia frame received the most responses (2,977 in total out of 4,217), but as most tweets had an Anti-Russia frame, this distribution corresponds accordingly. Similarly, there were very few Pro-Russia framed tweets, and subsequently there were no replies to that frame. Or at least not enough to warrant a full examination.

The majority of responses to each frame were still Negative and Forceful. Based on percentages of responses to each frame, the Negative Forceful replies ranged from 61.6% (Pro-Ukrainian frame) to 72.1% (Neutral frame). Not including Suspended accounts and Other responses, Negative Thoughts were almost always the second most common response, although still far below the Negative and Forceful replies, ranging from 8.6% to 14.9%. The only exception was the Pro-Ukraine frame, which had more Positive Thoughts (9.9%) than negative (8.6%). Otherwise Positive Thoughts were the third most numerous responses, ranging from 2.2% to 9.9%. A full list of replies categorized by type of frame can be seen in Tables 6-9.

Examining the three most numerous sentiments – Negative Forceful, Negative Thoughts, and Positive Thoughts – based on frames revealed that sentiment was focused on different subjects. Of the negative and forceful replies found in the Anti-Russian frame, the majority were focused on the accounts that made the post (29.3%) and on Ukraine in general (24.7%). A similar response was found with the Pro-Ukraine frame, with most Negative Forceful responses aimed at Accounts (39.2%), while Ukraine and the Ukrainian Government both received a similar amount, 22.6% and 17.4% respectively.

Table 6: Responses to Anti-Ukraine Frame

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	148 (67.3%)
Negative Thoughts	19 (8.6%)
Negative Passive	2 (0.9%)
Negative and Not in Control	2 (0.9%)
Positive Lively	3 (1.4%)
Positive Thoughts	12 (5.5%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	0
Suspended	15 (6.8%)
Other	19 (8.6%)
Total	**220**

Table 7: Responses to Neutral Frame

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	150 (72.1%)
Negative Thoughts	31 (14.9%)
Negative Passive	3 (1.4%)
Negative and Not in Control	4 (1.9%)
Positive Lively	1 (0.5%)
Positive Thoughts	5 (2.4%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	0
Suspended	3 (1.4%)
Other	11 (5.3%)
Total	**208**

Table 8: Responses to Anti-Russia Frame

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	2,050 (68.9%)
Negative Thoughts	311 (10.4%)
Negative Passive	32 (1.1%)
Negative and Not in Control	12 (0.4%)
Positive Lively	8 (0.3%)
Positive Thoughts	160 (5.4%)
Quiet Positive	9 (0.3%)
Reactive	43 (1.4%)
Suspended	126 (4.2%)
Other	226 (7.6%)
Total	**2,977**

Table 9: Responses to Pro-Ukraine Frame

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	387 (61.6%)
Negative Thoughts	54 (8.6%)
Negative Passive	14 (2.2%)
Negative and Not in Control	9 (1.4%)
Positive Lively	4 (0.6%)
Positive Thoughts	62 (9.9%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	3 (0.5%)
Suspended	49 (7.8%)
Other	46 (7.3%)
Total	**628**

The target for most Negative and Forceful replies to the Anti-Ukraine frame was Ukraine itself (42.6%) and Russia (34.5%). While within the Neutral frame it was the International Community (27.3%) and once again Ukraine (25.3%) that had the most Negative Forceful responses. The International Community receiving the most Negative Forceful replies in this case most likely occurred because the neutral frame was most frequently used when describing reactions from the world.

Positive Thoughts and Negative Thoughts were much less numerous than Negative and Forceful, and likewise scattered. For the Anti-Russia frame, most positive thoughts were aimed at Russia (33.1%) and Ukraine (26.2%), while negative thoughts were aimed at the Accounts (26.2%) and the Ukrainian Government (22.4%). Both for the Neutral frame and the Pro-Ukraine frame most Negative Thoughts were focused on the International Community – 54.8% and 42.6% respectively. There were few positive thoughts in these two frames, but of the ones analyzed, most focused on Ukraine. Figures 2-5 represent the breakdown of sentiment based on frame and target.
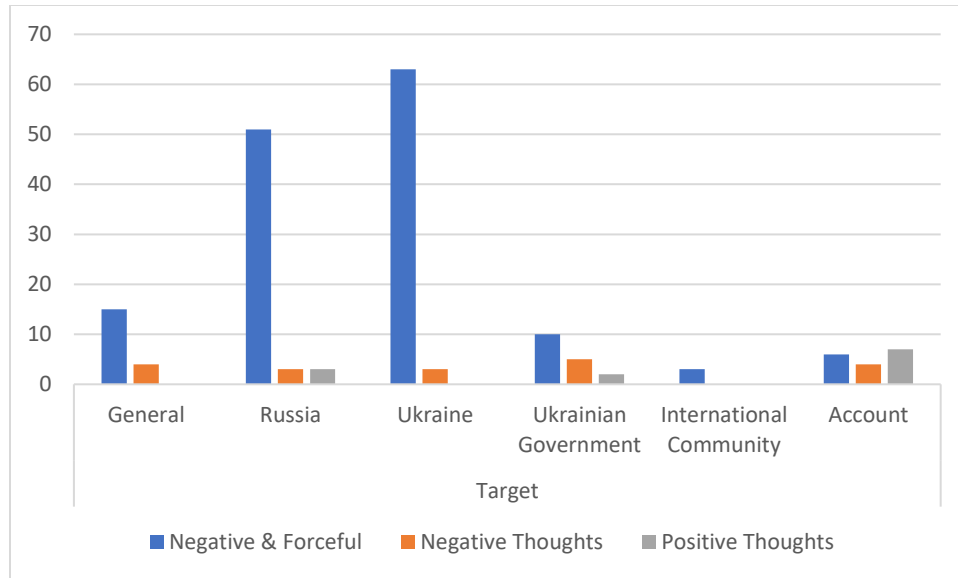
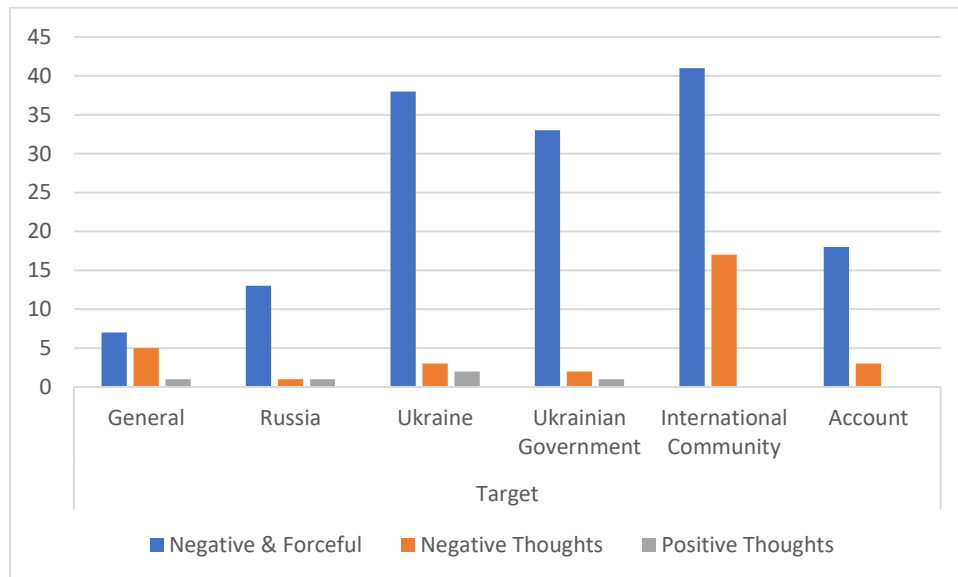*Figure 2: Responses to Anti-Ukraine Frame by Target*

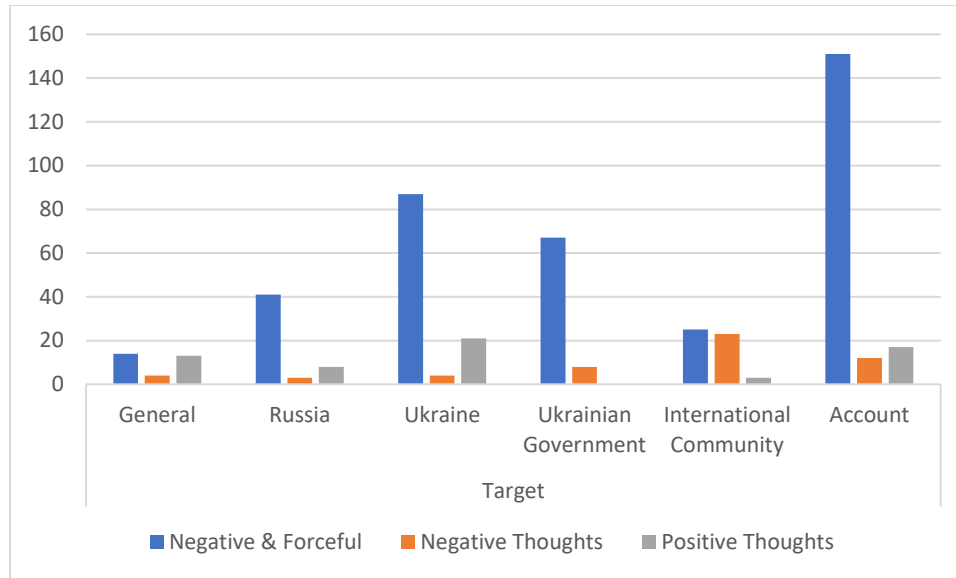*Figure 3: Responses to Neutral Frame by Target*

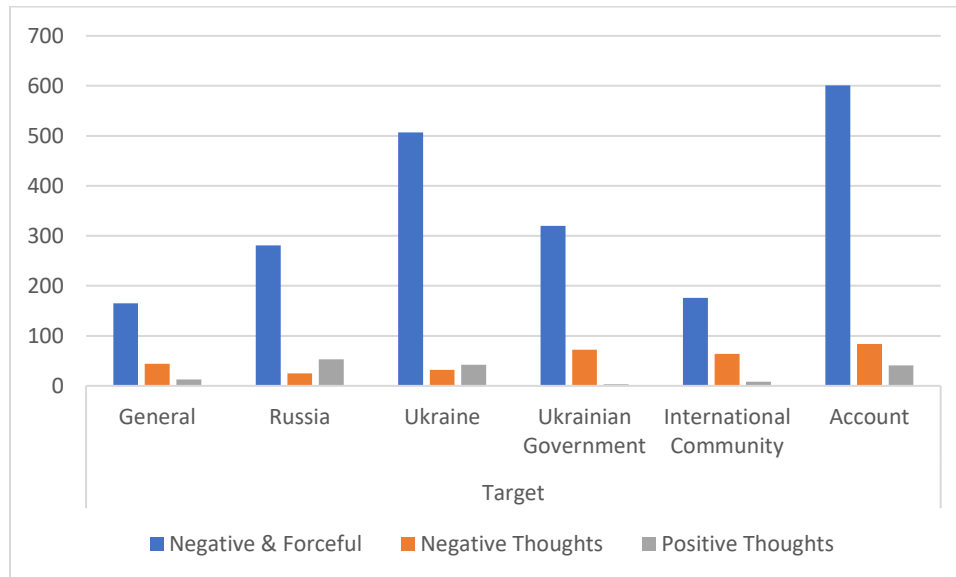*Figure 4: Responses to Pro-Ukraine Frame by Target*

Figure 5: Responses to Anti-Russia Frame by Target

Seeing as the frame used to describe the naval clash was similar across the accounts, the variation in replies could be attributed more to the type of account making a post, rather than the frame used. As such, the same data were recategorized to reflect responses based on account type, instead of based on frames.

Overall, Politicians and the News garnered the most replies. The former because there was a much higher engagement rate than with any other category, and the latter because, as was already mentioned, News accounts posted the clear majority of all tweets on the issue. However, no matter the type of account, in each category the majority of replies were still coded as Negative and Forceful. This ranged from 57% in the NGO category to 77.2% in the Governmental category. The second most frequent response was either Negative Thoughts (2.4% to 21% of responses to a category) or Positive Thoughts (4.0% to 10.1%). All other sentiments occurred rarely in comparison to the previous three, often as low as zero replies or less than 1% of replies. Tables 10-14 show all categories and number of responses based on sentiment.

Examining the targets of sentiment shows that many of the Negative and Forceful replies were geared towards the Account category or Ukraine. Looking at each category separately, this was exemplified most prominently in the Politician category. See Figure 6. Most Negative and Forceful replies were aimed specifically at the Politicians themselves (48.6% of Negative and Forceful replies in the Politician category). The Ukrainian Government and Accounts received the most Negative Thoughts (30.9% and 29.3%). Forty percent of Positive Thoughts were aimed at Ukraine, and 32.8% at the

Table 10: Responses to Politician Accounts

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	1,256 (64.0%)
Negative Thoughts	181 (9.2%)
Negative Passive	19 (1.0%)
Negative and Not in Control	9 (0.5%)
Positive Lively	5 (0.3%)
Positive Thoughts	131 (6.7%)
Quiet Positive	7 (0.4%)
Reactive	41 (2.1%)
Suspended	126 (6.4%)
Other	188 (9.6%)
Total	**1,963**

Table 11: Responses to News Accounts

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	1,087 (67.3%)
Negative Thoughts	170 (10.5%)
Negative Passive	48 (3.0%)
Negative and Not in Control	27 (1.7%)
Positive Lively	10 (0.6%)
Positive Thoughts	82 (5.1%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	0
Suspended	63 (3.9%)
Other	129 (8.0%)
Total	**1,616**

Table 12: Responses to NGO Accounts

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	57 (57.0%)
Negative Thoughts	21 (21.0%)
Negative Passive	2 (2.0%)
Negative and Not in Control	1 (1.0%)
Positive Lively	0
Positive Thoughts	4 (4.0%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	0
Suspended	5 (5.0%)
Other	10 (10.0%)
Total	**100**

Table 13: Responses to Government Accounts

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	95 (77.2%)
Negative Thoughts	3 (2.4%)
Negative Passive	1 (0.8%)
Negative and Not in Control	0
Positive Lively	0
Positive Thoughts	8 (6.5%)
Quiet Positive	0
Reactive	0
Suspended	5 (4.1%)
Other	11 (8.9%)
Total	**123**

Table 14: Responses to Other Accounts

Sentiment	Number of Replies
Negative & Forceful	247 (59.5%)
Negative Thoughts	40 (9.6%)
Negative Passive	11 (2.7%)
Negative and Not in Control	8 (1.9%)
Positive Lively	4 (1.0%)
Positive Thoughts	42 (10.1%)
Quiet Positive	2 (0.5%)
Reactive	5 (1.2%)
Suspended	30 (7.2%)
Other	26 (6.3%)
Total	**415**

Accounts. However, it is important to remember that the overall quantity of Positive Thought replies was much smaller than Negative and Forceful. Any positive sentiment was very few and far between. Within the Politician category it made up only 6.7% of all replies, compared to 64% of Negative and Forceful replies.

Within the News category, Negative and Forceful sentiment consisted of 67.3% of replies, and though it was still aimed mostly at Ukraine (32.4%), the rest of the responses were more evenly spread between Russia, the International Community, and General, fixing at around 17% for each target. Similarly, still within the News category, Negative Thoughts focused on the International Community (34.7%) with the rest spread somewhat evenly between all the other targets. Russia received the most Positive Thoughts (40.2%) and Ukraine received the second largest number of Positive Thoughts (30.5%). See Figures 7 for more detail.

Within the Other category – Figure 10 – Negative and Forceful (50.2%), Negative Thoughts (37.5%) and Positive Thoughts (31.0%) were all aimed at the Account target.

Finally, within the NGO and Governmental responses, Figures 8 and 9 respectively, Ukraine was again the recipient of the most Negative and Forceful sentiment (42.1% and 24.2%). In the case of Governmental organizations, this percentage was tied with Account. Negative Thoughts were aimed at the International Community (42.9%) within the NGO section. All other sentiment was expressed very infrequently.
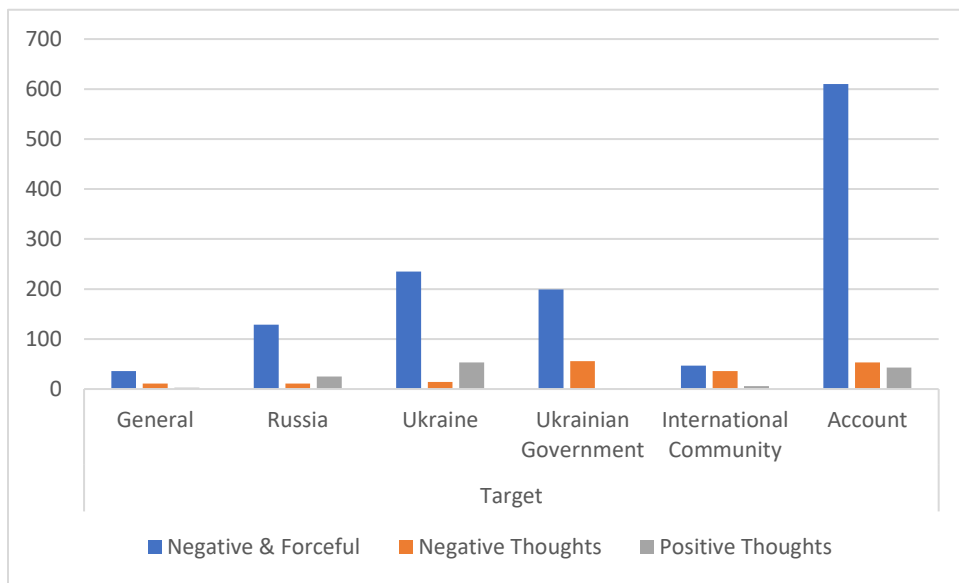
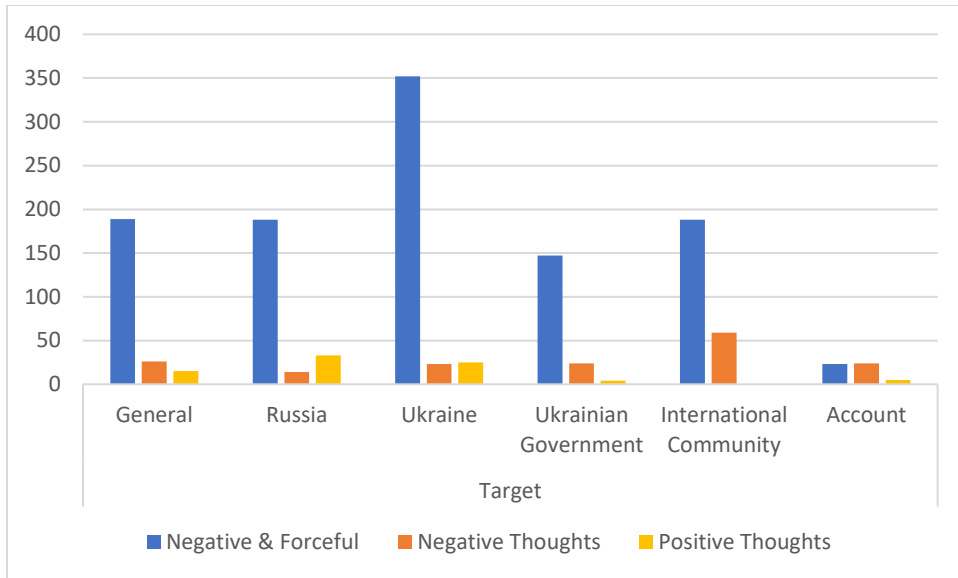

Figure 6: Responses to Politician Accounts by Target
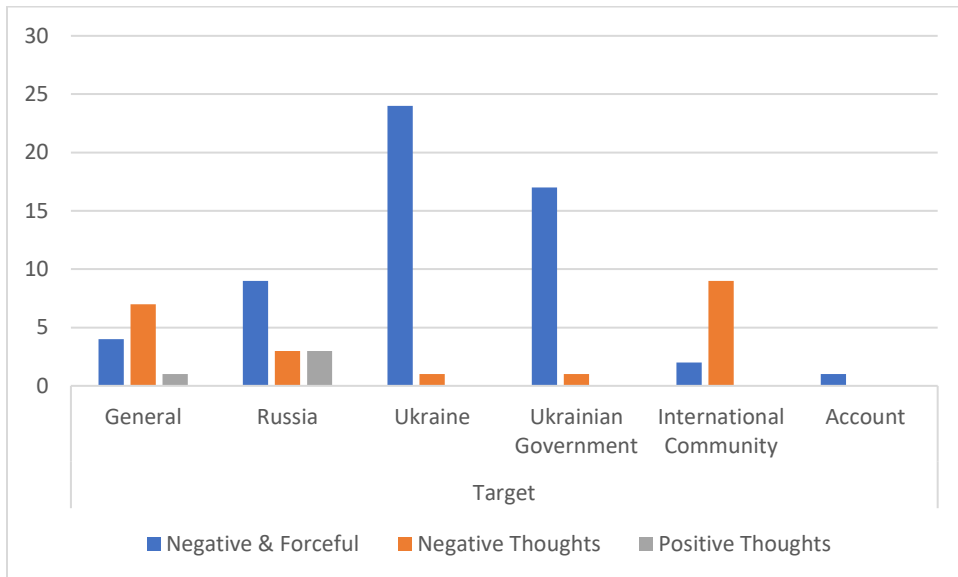
Figure 7: Responses to News Accounts by Target
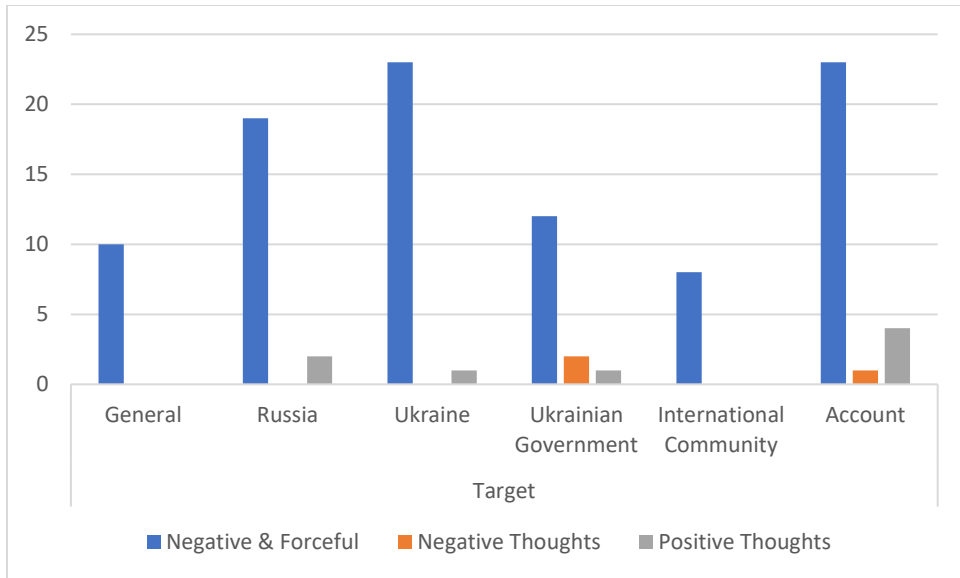

Figure 8: Responses to NGO Accounts by Target
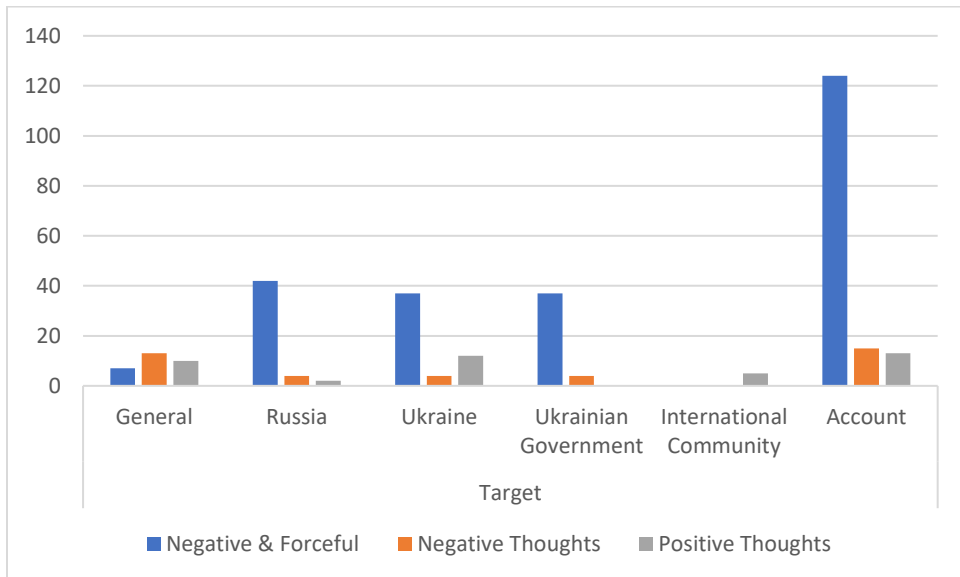
Figure 9: Responses to Government Accounts by Target

Figure 10: Responses to Other Accounts by Target

Very few reply tweets expressed a concrete reason for their sentiment, regardless of whether it was negative or positive. However, there were a few common expressions that are worth mentioning. Regarding negative sentiment towards Ukraine and the Government, mentions of deliberate provocation on the part of Ukraine and illegally crossing the border into Russia were made. Sometimes this was associated with an attempt to maintain power by the government and cancel the upcoming election, other times it was suggested that it was done on the behest of, or as a purposeful ploy to get help from the West. Anger was also expressed that the Ukrainian government knowingly put young sailors in danger for their personal gains. Otherwise, contempt for the state of the Ukrainian navy was also expressed, frequently in meme form. One example of such was a chicken floating a in a metal bucket with a caption for the Ukrainian navy. When news articles showed footage or described people coming out to protest Russian actions in the sea or to express support towards Ukraine, at least a few comments would question how much the government paid them to come out, or emphasized the seemingly small numbers. Footage of the ramming used as proof of Russian aggression was dismissed as fake, irrelevant, or that the Coast Guard should have used more force.

Another reason for negative sentiment was the idea of "why not before?" which could also be interpreted as too little, too late. This was in reference to calling the event Russian aggression, as Russia has been playing a role in the Ukrainian conflict for years at that point, even if not directly under the Russian flag. Thus, some comments questioned why so much attention was being drawn to the event if Russia had been attacking Ukraine in some capacity for several years. Other times it was questioning why

martial law was suggested only now, as opposed to when tension first boiled over in the Donbas region or when Crimea was annexed. Still others expressed anger that the Ukrainian sailors seemingly did not fight back in an adequate manner, and that the government in general needs to do much more than it has done thus far to combat the Russian threat.

Negativity towards the International Community was generally presented as doubt that other countries would do anything useful to help the situation. Ukraine has been on its own throughout the conflict and the only response from the other nations had been concern. The expectation was that a similar response will happen in this case, with expressions of concern not amounting to concrete help or lasting change.

Other than anger towards Russian actions, negativity towards Russia was also sometimes expressed as a desire to do more, to attack or to completely sever all ties with the country.

Some of the positive thoughts towards Russia would describe the situation as Ukrainian sailors trying to get away to the safety of Russia. That Russia will feed them, clothe them, keep them warm and give them a job. Positivity towards Ukraine was expressed as pride for the country, that people support Ukraine and the captive sailors.

However, these kinds of responses overall were infrequent. For the most part, the Negative and Forceful comments were primarily made up of uncivil language, with vitriol expressed towards different actors, the Ukrainian president being the most frequent recipient of harsh language. Name-calling and death threats were present, with mentions of a fascist, or Nazi regime in power in Ukraine. The president was infrequently

portrayed as a Russian traitor for not cutting all ties with Russia, and as a Western traitor for selling out Ukraine to the West.

The comments were made in several different languages, with Russian making up 65%, Ukrainian 23%, and 12% of responses were in other languages. See Figure 11.

The next chapter discusses these findings and what they suggest regarding the narratives about the case study, both official and public.
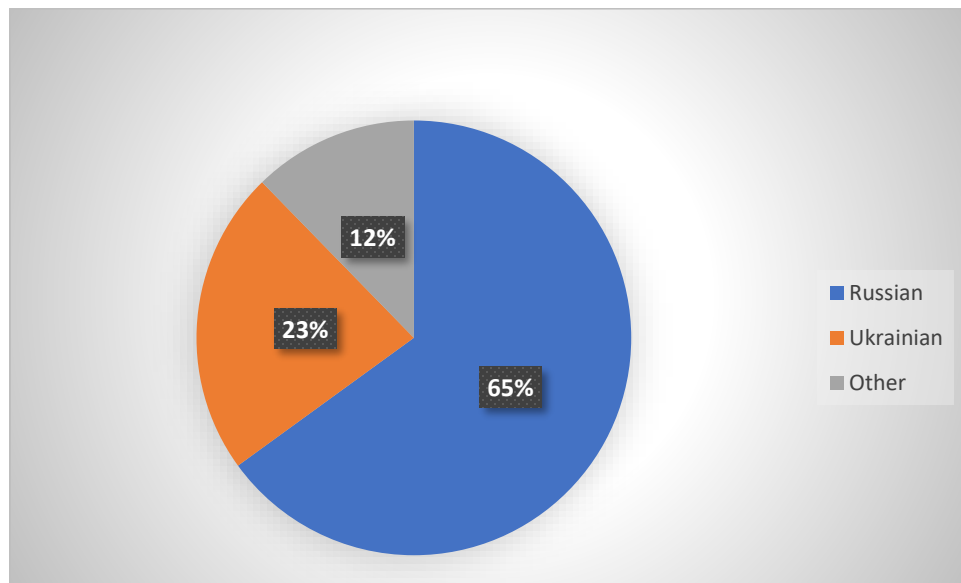

Figure 11: Distribution of languages found in comments

CHAPTER 6: ON THE (FAILED) RALLY ROUND THE FLAG EFFECT: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Based on the data presented in Chapter 5, this chapter interprets the findings and discusses some of the reasons for public presentation and audience perception of the issue. The chapter begins with an examination of the most followed accounts on Twitter and how the naval clash was framed by them, followed by what the public concerns and narratives were and their implications.

6.1 Popular Twitter Accounts

As can be seen in Table 2, the most followed accounts on Twitter were primarily political, whether news, politicians, or large political organizations. Twitter use in Ukraine really took off in 2014 due to the Euromaidan protests (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017), which would explain the popularity of political accounts. Furthermore, as Twitter can be used for gathering news updates and the country is still in a state of unrest, it is logical that many of the most followed accounts are news accounts.

As Table 3 shows, for the most part only the previously political accounts discussed the naval clash. This suggests that the most prevalent messages were official, coming directly from the government about the situation, or news reports that reprinted or discussed official statements. Thus, on Twitter, the most dominant messages were created by the government and by the news. It should be noted, that although there was low engagement with news articles, it is likely that more comments and responses could be found on the website of the news account, instead of on Twitter.

Despite relatively low engagement on Twitter compared to the engagement found in other parts of the world, a large portion of those on Ukrainian Twitter still do get exposed to messages presented by those most followed accounts. If not directly from the source itself, then from someone who retweeted or shared the message. Online public opinion is shaped by those that create new ideas and those that disseminate them (Gökçe et al., 2014). In this case, the function of the most popular accounts was the creation of ideas, but dissemination occurred by those that retweeted, liked and shared those ideas. Future studies could focus more on dissemination to understand the true reach of the ideas presented by the most popular accounts.

6.2 The Situation As Presented by Ukrainian Twitter

Looking at the tweets from the most followed accounts presents a very clear narrative of what happened between Russia and Ukraine on November 25th. As was predicted, Ukraine was presented in a positive light, and Russia as the clear aggressor. More specifically, Russia acted aggressively towards Ukraine, attacked Ukrainian vessels, and captured the crew and ships illegally. This all occurred in neutral waters and Ukrainian ships were following the letter of the law in sailing across the Strait. This narrative was consistent across all accounts, with almost no deviation. Even politicians who disagree on issues on a regular basis repeated this narrative.

As framing theory suggests, frames are developed by underlining and omitting specific information to create a message (Entman, 1993). This can be seen in how tweets would underscore information about the clash and completely disregard other information that would create doubt about the narrative presented. This narrative frame was constructed by continuously emphasizing that Russia attacked Ukraine and reinforcing it

with different types of proof. This included showing how the entire world supported

Ukraine and condemned Russia. Not only world leaders, but footage of regular people

coming out and showing support was presented. The Russia attacked narrative was then

legitimized by showing the support expressed towards Ukraine and condemnation of

Russian action by regular people. Thus, "everyone" agrees that Russia attacked Ukraine

and it was wrong. Furthermore, user-generated content such as the recordings of

conversations and videos of the ramming were used as further proof of the legitimacy of

this narrative. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin discuss, mediatization in the digital age means

that governments can utilize content like user-generated information – such as the video

footage of the ramming – to reinforce the legitimacy of their messages (2015). If frames

tell people what to think and how to think about it, then in this case the universal official

stance is that Russia is the villain that attacked Ukraine.

The Anti-Ukraine or Pro-Russia frames were almost completely ignored, very few

tweets mentioned the Russian version of events at all. There is an argument that Western

liberal views of free speech and the importance of expressing every viewpoint is one of

the reasons Russian propaganda has been so pervasive and difficult to fight against

(Yurkova, 2018). In other words, Russian information warfare is presented under the

guise of the other viewpoint, instead of disinformation, which makes it more difficult to

dismiss outright. Most likely, this is the reasoning behind not focusing on the Russian

version of events, to not give voice to that narrative at all and potentially create doubt

about who was at fault during the altercation. Thus, largely a single narrative was

presented, with only a few tweets depicting a counternarrative. The Anti-Russian frame

was clearly the dominant narrative presented on Twitter, although the online public response was very different.

6.3 Interpreting the Online Public Response

To sum up, the online public response on Twitter was very angry and full of contempt. The hypothesized public reaction to the events in the sea was a rally around the flag effect. For this to occur, the expected response would be largely positive sentiment towards Ukraine and/or negativity towards the aggressor – Russia. Taking into account that the official narrative, the frame presented by a large portion of accounts on Twitter, was primarily anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian, with not many counter-narratives the replies were expected to be fairly uniform. This was not the case.

Examining Table 5 and Figure 1, it can be seen that of the 2,742 tweets that were coded as Negative and Forceful, only 14.1% were directed at Russia. The majority were oriented towards Ukraine, the Government and the Accounts posting the original tweets. Positive sentiment of any kind was rarely expressed – only 267 tweets were coded as Positive Thoughts – and even though Ukraine received the most positive tweets (91), it was vastly overshadowed by all the negative responses. Many of the accounts that were the recipients of the most anger were ones belonging specifically to politicians, or the government in general (see Figures 6 and 10), meaning that the Ukrainian government was the recipient of the most negativity. Most replies simply expressed anger and contempt, with many uncivil comments directed at the president specifically. Thus, it can be concluded that the original hypothesis was incorrect and despite the military crisis of an attack on Ukraine by a foreign state, a rally round the flag effect did not take place. There could be several explanations for this: this event was not enough incentive to

overcome polarization in the country; distrust in the government outweighs the possibility of rallying together; although the official narrative was Russian aggression, it does not represent the dominant narrative found on Twitter; or the way comments sections are structured make them another arena for disinformation.

In order for a rally round the flag phenomenon to occur, the public needs to band together behind a single identity. Ukraine is still a relatively new democracy, and as was discussed in Chapter 4, consists of people whose identity shifts between Russian and Ukrainian. Duvanova et al. suggest that a country that is too deeply divided, like Ukraine, simply might not be able to rally together behind one identity (2016). As such, five years of conflict have not decreased polarization or unified people into one identity. Instead, the mixed Twitter replies seem to suggest an even deeper wedge has developed in the country.

The sentiment expressed towards the Ukrainian government could also show that the distrust and anger towards the government outweighs any single narrative coming from official statements. Although few tweets gave an explanation for the sentiment expressed, the ones that did could provide some insight into overall attitudes. One common expression was the dissatisfaction with the government, that it was useless, or that it did not do enough for the Ukrainian people. When the conflict in Ukraine first began in the form of a protest movement, one of its goals was to weed out the pervasive corruption that was found within the government (Anthony, 2015; Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017). However, despite some improvements, the level of corruption within the public sector did not change much in the years since the revolution (Transperancy International, 2019). Moreover, despite the promises made by the new government

installed shortly after the Revolution of Dignity, the Crimean Peninsula is still occupied by Russia, and parts of Donbas are still separated from the rest of Ukraine. Together, this presents a picture of a corrupt government that is ineffective and that broke its promises, and some of the online comments reflect that perception. Thus, this latest act of aggression will lead to the same ineffective response, and there is no point in rallying together, so to speak. It should be noted, it is more likely that this line of thinking would produce a Negative and Passive response, not Negative and Forceful. Nevertheless, this could explain some of the negativity towards the government.

It is possible then that overall negativity towards the government outweighs any kind of military crisis and commenting on tweets discussing the naval clash was not about the clash itself, but simply an avenue to express general anger towards the government, which could also explain the overabundance of uncivil comments. More studies would need to be conducted examining what the comment sections are like for some of these accounts on a regular basis and then compared to make a definitive claim. Nevertheless, looking at results from accounts that were not dominated by negativity towards the accounts themselves and were not affiliated with the government – see Figures 7 and 8 for responses to news accounts and NGO accounts – still show overwhelming negative and forceful sentiment towards Ukraine and the Ukrainian government. More likely then, the Negative and Forceful response signified that parts of the public simply did not believe the official narrative that Ukraine was attacked by Russia. Indeed, some of the Negative and Forceful comments expressed the idea that the incident in the strait was Ukraine's fault, that the Ukrainian vessels crossed the Russian border.

This is further reinforced by the fact that much of the negative sentiment towards Ukraine was conflated with anger towards the Ukrainian government. Some Twitter replies even suggested that this was a desperate attempt by the president to implement martial law and cancel the presidential election to maintain power. This was also the narrative presented by the Russian government ("Sea Clash Staged by Ukraine, Says Putin," 2018). Framing an argument does not mean that it will have the desired influence, or that it will be interpreted in exactly the way the sender originally intended (Entman, 1993). As such, the responses on Twitter suggest that the Anti-Russian frame did not influence a large portion of the commenters to take a stance against Russia. The other option is that other frames about the clash found on other parts of the Internet were simply more dominant and more influential. Which suggests that overall the Russian narrative was the more dominant frame on social media regarding this incident. Thus, it could be argued that years of Russian influence and propaganda have been effective, resonating with large parts of the Ukrainian population, casting doubt on any actions taken by the Ukrainian government. It also reinforces the idea of a deeply divided nation that struggles with identifying a single narrative about the conflict. To further articulate this point, some of the Twitter replies clearly convey Russian narratives: that Ukraine caused the provocation, that the provocation is a ploy to cancel the election, that Ukraine is fascist, that Western states are the masterminds behind the conflict, etc. some of which are known examples of Russian propaganda (Yurkova, 2018). See also Chapter 4.

However, this may not adequately reflect reality. As was mentioned previously, Ukrainians are deeply sceptical of any Russian narrative, even in regions that are historically more Russian leaning (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016). If, according to studies,

most of Ukraine does not believe these kinds of statements, then the question arises, who was writing these comments on Twitter? Especially since Russian media has been banned in Ukraine for several years. As Figure 11 shows, 65% of all replies were in Russian, and only 23% in Ukrainian. According to Ukrainian Census data, 67.5% of the Ukrainian population speaks Ukrainian and 29.6% speaks Russian (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001). It was beyond the scope of this project to identify geographical information for every individual who replied to a tweet, which makes it difficult to identify if those posting comments were simply Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Russian citizens. However, it was clear that some of the comments were posted by non-Ukrainians simply because the language used referred to Ukrainians as separate, different from the individual posting the comment. For example, something to the effect of the Ukrainians really outdoing themselves this time, crossing "our" borders.

Compounding the issue was the presence of bots and fake accounts. As with the geographical information, it was beyond the scope of this paper to definitively identify bot accounts or fake accounts. Nevertheless, their presence could be partially detected by the Twitter handle associated with the account name, which consisted of a long combination of letters and numbers not normally seen in typical usernames. Furthermore, as Table 5 shows, 5.4% of the gathered reply tweets were from suspended accounts. Twitter has taken to periodically suspending millions of accounts that the company flags as malicious bot and troll activity (Timberg & Dwoskin, 2018), which implies that at least some of the suspended accounts were fake. On its own 5.4% is not a very large number, but combining this information with the number of Russian replies, the known Russian propaganda narratives, and the suspected bot accounts, it does suggest that there

was a Russian disinformation campaign at work. There is precedent for this idea as well, as it has been previously documented that Russian troll factories were tasked with posting insulting comments about the Ukrainian president online (Chen, 2015). Seeing as many of the replies studied here consisted of vitriolic language aimed at the president, some of it could be the work of Russian trolls.

The presence of Russian narratives and fake accounts could indicate two possibilities. One, the Ukrainian public has begun to emulate Russian narratives. Or two, the comments section is a contested space filled with trolls and bots. Most likely it is a combination of the two, where the narratives presented by the trolls resonate with the individuals in Ukraine that feel disenfranchised by the Ukrainian government. This is inline with previous studies on Russian trolls that show that propaganda can work on at least a portion of a population (Aro, 2016). However, taken together, this means that the online Ukrainian public response studied here may not have been wholly real or wholly "Ukrainian." In which case, as mediatization theory explains, this is another example of "warfare [being] increasingly embedded in and penetrated by media…" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015, p. 1323). In either case, further research needs to be conducted to identify the presence of Russian fake accounts.

Whether the comments were written by Ukrainians or not, they still have several implications that need to be considered. The online comment sections do not represent the full spectrum of a Twitter audience. Not everyone reading posts and the replies to those posts is going to write their own comments. Indeed, there is evidence that if exposed to negative comments, only commenters who have prior negative attitudes towards the subject will also post negative comments, while individuals with positive

attitudes will not post anything (Lee & Chun, 2016). If the focus of online comments is negativity towards Ukraine or the government, then those who do not share the same opinions may simply not express them in the comments. Thus, the negativity is artificially inflated and not representative of all opinions.

Being exposed to online comments may still have an affect on those reading them. Much of the language used in the comments was uncivil. As was discussed in previous chapters, incivility has previously shown to decrease trust in political institutions, and uncivil comments can contribute to issue polarization within the audience (Anderson et al., 2014). This can also lead to doubt about the possibility of deliberation leading to a consensus on an issue (Hwang et al., 2014). There is further evidence that comments have the tendency to dilute the persuasiveness of a message or messenger if comments present a counternarrative to the original message (Greenwood et al., 2016). Consequently, the overwhelming number of negative comments online may start casting doubt on the mainstream narrative about the Kerch Strait clash. Or increase doubt and hostility towards elected officials, which can decrease the credibility of their narratives about the role of Ukraine in the clash with Russia.

Taken on its own, the online public presents a confused and disjointed narrative about the events in the Kerch Strait. There was no consistent interpretation of what happened between Russia and Ukraine during the naval clash. Both sides were blamed for provocation within the comment section, casting doubt on the actions of the Ukrainian government. Reading the Twitter comments creates a reality of distrust and general government and international ineffectiveness. The online public reality is therefore different from the mainstream representation of reality about the conflict. However, there

are doubts about how representative the Twitter replies were of the Ukrainian public. The presence of trolls and bots may have skewed the representation of the Ukrainian public, creating a more negative and doubtful environment than may exist outside of the online world.

The focus of this chapter has been explaining the results of the overall thesis; the types of Twitter accounts that discussed the naval clash in the Kerch Strait, how they framed the events, and finally what the public response to those narratives was. The following chapter provides the conclusion to the overall work as well as some limitations and further areas of study.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The recent conflict in Ukraine has been plagued by different narratives and different interpretations of events. As the use of social media has become more ubiquitous in everyday life, so has the role of social media in conflict. The focus of this research has been the most recent incident in the tension between Russia and Ukraine, the naval clash in the Kerch Strait in November of 2018. Unlike many of the previous incident between Russia and Ukraine, this was the first time that Ukraine and Russia were in direct, open conflict as opposed to previous altercations. This research aimed to investigate whether a rally round the flag effect was possible in the era of social media. To that end, this paper examined how the Kerch Strait incident was portrayed in Ukraine on Twitter, and whether there was a coherent single narrative about the clash from both the official and public sides.

Mediatization theory argues that just as the world around us changes the media landscape, so does media change how we interpret the world around us (Hjarvard, 2013). To that end, the way conflict is portrayed online legitimizes the way that conflict is understood and interpreted. Using framing theory, this research identified that the incident was framed by the most popular Twitter accounts primarily as a Russian attack on Ukrainian vessels who were operating within the law. Frames are created as a way to construct how the public should think about a problem (Entman, 1993). In that respect, the frame should have influenced the public to think of Russian actions negatively and Ukrainian actions positively. However, the online public response via the Twitter reply section showed that the public was not as unified in this interpretation of events. There was no rally round the flag phenomenon. Instead, the response online was rather mixed,

with a significant amount of negativity aimed at Ukraine and the Ukrainian government. This could be explained by distrust towards the government, the influence of Russian narratives over five years of conflict, deep divides within the country, or that the comments sections themselves are an area of information warfare. Comments sections on social media themselves are a contested space, with different actors purposefully providing different narratives to either decrease the persuasiveness of official statements and to increase the perception of polarization within the country. More research needs to be conducted to arrive at a conclusive answer.

However, this highlights that social media is a space filled with competing narratives. Even though the official and non-official Twitter accounts all posted a clear message that condemned Russian actions, Twitter is not an isolated space. Internet users can find information from a variety of sources and then perpetuate that information on other platforms. The rally effect in the Kerch Strait incident did not work because in the digital age, the Internet provides too many narratives from different actors about an event to successfully unify the public in a way required by the phenomenon. With social media a few voices can be amplified to make them seem louder than they would be otherwise. There is rarely a single, unified narrative about any issue online. Throughout the development of the whole conflict in Ukraine, one striking aspect has been the polarizing representation and misrepresentation of events through media. The media landscape has been described as "information warfare" when illustrating the spread of messages, with Russian media frequently distorting developments as the conflict developed and people becoming both a part of the spread of those messages and a way to counter them (Golovchenko et al., 2018). With Russian messages echoing in comments, this research

reinforces this notion of narrative battles conducted online by both state and non-state actors (Zeitzoff, 2017) and that people become complicit in the spread of disinformation (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017).

Several limitations need to be addressed in this work. Much of this work has focused on public opinion via social media. However, as has been discussed previously, social media opinion is not truly representative of general public opinion. Only a portion of the population frequently accesses Twitter, and an even smaller number actively posts comments online. It is difficult to identify the demographics of Twitter users, as many can elect to remain anonymous, without posting any personal information. Nevertheless, considering the role social media plays in everyday life, this research remains relevant in terms of how information about issues is understood and validated online to represent the offline world. Some of the suggestions and interpretations reached in this research could be more conclusive with more access to Twitter data and by broadening the research parameters. These limitations are also areas that could be explored in the future research.

This project is an exploratory examination of Twitter in the naval clash and presents many areas of potential future study. This thesis contends only with one side of the story, specifically the Ukrainian narratives about the conflict in Ukraine. Future studies could focus on the Russian side and the online responses found there, and then comparing responses found on both. Research could also further expand on the online response by focusing on other online platforms or comparing responses on different types of platforms. Or to see how accurate comments sections are, research could be conducted with fieldwork, surveying and polling Ukrainians about the clash, or other instances throughout the conflict. Most importantly, future research should focus specifically on

identifying the presence of disinformation in the form of bots and troll in online comments sections, and how influential they are.

This study contributes to the knowledge base about the conflict in Ukraine by investigating a more recent flare-up in the conflict and how it was discussed by different sources online. But this research is relevant not only in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, but in terms of social media affecting major events in other parts of the world as well. Social media can unite people, but it can create or enhance divisions as well. The role of disinformation and how issues are understood online are more important now than ever before, especially as more people gain access to the online world. As online narratives intertwine with offline reality, researching these narratives and their influence becomes even more imperative.

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