

Comparing Presidential Rhetoric in the Ukraine War: A Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis of US and Russian Media Discourses and Public Attitudes (2022)

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

Abstract

This study examines the role of presidential rhetoric and media discourse in shaping public opinion during the Ukraine War of 2022, using a post-structuralist framework. It compares the narratives of U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, analysing their speeches and the media's reproduction of these discourses through CNN and RT. Biden's rhetoric emphasized Russia's aggression, sovereignty violations, and global security threats, employing provocative language to frame Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim. Conversely, Putin's rhetoric invoked historical revisionism, nationalist appeals, and existential threats, portraying Ukraine as a Western proxy and justifying Russia's actions as defensive measures. Media outlets amplified these narratives, with CNN reinforcing the United States' perspective of Russia as a critical threat and RT echoing Putin's claims of Western hypocrisy and aggression. The study highlights how elite rhetoric and media discourse seek to construct public opinion, revealing a convergence between official narratives and public attitudes. Polls from Levada and Gallup demonstrate increased approval for Putin and heightened American support for Ukraine, reflecting the influence of discursive framing. The analysis underscores the power of language in legitimizing foreign policy

Tasawar Hussain is Associate University in Department of Social Sciences, at Iqra University Islamabad.

Kashif Mehmood is an Independent Researcher.

Aisha Younus is an Assistant Professor at School of Politics & IR at Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad.

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

actions, shaping identities, and reinforcing antagonisms. This research calls for a critical reassessment of the interplay between rhetoric, media, and public opinion in foreign policy, emphasizing the need to challenge hegemonic discourses and their implications for global security.

Key Words: Political Rhetoric, Critical Discourse, Media, Public Opinion, Ukraine War, Kyiv, United States, Russia

Introduction

The relevance of public opinion in foreign policy is a widely debated issue. For example, mainstream positivist theories either assign little to no importance to public opinion in foreign policy (e.g., realism) or, conversely, attribute central importance to it (e.g., liberalism). Unlike these mainstream theories, poststructuralism considers public opinion as a discursive reality and reflection of its own making. From this perspective, public opinion on foreign policy is systematically constructed via elite rhetoric and media discourses. Literature on the convergence and divergence of elite and media discourse on foreign policy issues offers diverse positions and demands careful analysis.

The present study on ‘Ukraine War 2022’ is analyzed in a relatively less explored context of ‘post-structuralism’ and post-structural discourse analysis. In doing so, we have analyzed two major players in the case of Ukraine: Russia and the US. The study draws a comparison between elite political rhetoric on the ‘Battle of Kyiv’ and its appearance in media discourse on the one hand, and the relevant public opinion, on the other hand. The study argues that discourses facilitate war, and by virtue of alternative discourses, it may also be avoided.

Through a critical analysis of key presidential addresses in the month of February 2022, we have reached a conclusion about how these discourses framed the conflict; how media such as CNN and RT diffused the rhetoric and influenced public opinion;

and how the latter contributed to a favorable public attitude towards war on both sides. This article answers one main question: How is the Russian war on Ukraine, and the U.S. support to counter the intervention, a social and discursive reality rather than a material one? Divided in three main sections, the first section offers an analysis of presidential political rhetoric on the issue of Ukraine in the US and Russia; the second section delineates the reiteration of political rhetoric in the mainstream media; and the last section offers evidence of both political rhetoric and media discourses on public attitudes towards Ukraine war.

Case-A: The United States of America

The US presidential rhetoric on the Ukraine war has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in tone and approach towards the conflict. As the conflict escalated post-2014, particularly after the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022, President Joe Biden's rhetoric took on a more assertive and confrontational tone towards Russia. A detailed scrutiny of his speeches from Jan 31 to Feb 14, 2022, illustrates a rhetorical instrumentalization of words and phrases. Biden's speeches included words and phrases that were pugnacious or provocative, such as "aggression," "violation of sovereignty," and "threat to global security" (Biden, 2023). These terms signaled a shift towards a more robust approach in response to Russian actions in Ukraine. President Biden employed strong and aggressive language in his official speeches and remarks when addressing Russia and President Putin.

In a speech in 2022, as Shear (2022) wrote in The New York Times, Biden, referring to Putin, expressed his sentiments as such: "this man cannot remain in power", although the White House later clarified this statement. Additionally, in February 2022, Biden condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "brutal assault" and emphasized that Putin was the aggressor

who chose the war and will bear the consequences (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, 2022). Furthermore, in a video address to the United Nations next year, Biden urged the international community to stand up to Putin's "naked aggression" against Ukraine (MSNBC, 2023). Reports also indicate that Biden referred to Putin as a "crazy SOB" (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2024), a "murderous dictator and pure thug" (Guardian News, 2022), a "butcher" (Daily Mail World, 2022), and a "war criminal" (Guardian News, 2022) showcasing a confrontational and aggressive tone towards the Russian president. This was condemned by Kremlin as disgracing and as Biden's attempt to appear like a "Hollywood cowboy" (Al Jazeera English, 2024). These instances highlight Biden's use of forceful and provocative language in condemning Russia's actions and criticizing President Putin directly.

President Biden, in his remarks on the passage of H.R. 815, emphasized the importance of supporting Ukraine against the "brutal dictator Putin," highlighting the direct national security interest of the United States in preventing further Russian aggression and potential escalation that could lead to a direct attack on a NATO ally (Biden, 2024). He stressed the historical significance of the moment and the critical role of the US and NATO in supporting Ukraine to maintain security and prevent further destabilization in the region. Words like "security" and "preventing Russian aggression" are fraught with deep-seated consequences and the potential of unleashing aggression.

By labeling actions as "aggression" or highlighting "violation of sovereignty," discourse constructs a narrative that positions one party as the aggressor and the other as the victim, establishing power dynamics and justifying responses. American scholarship is fraught with two alternative conceptions of sovereignty (Sinclair & Byers, 2007). It can be interpreted as violation of people's rights as well as state sovereignty. But shielding words within the *ignis fatuus* and refusing to provide a clear

conception, these terms not only necessitate actions but also assign moral judgments and power imbalances, influencing how individuals view the conflict. Moreover, labeling Russia as a "threat to global security" through various reports invokes a sense of urgency and collective responsibility, framing the situation as a global issue that requires a unified response (Dickinson, 2022).

Metaphorical dehumanization of the enemy is the sinew that provides justification for one's own aggressive actions (Oeser, 2016). Poststructuralist discourse analysis reveals how these words are fraught with hidden meanings that go beyond their surface definitions. They carry historical, cultural, and ideological connotations that shape perceptions and justify certain actions. The use of such terms constructs a reality where violence may be seen as a legitimate and "extraordinary response" to "extraordinary circumstances" and perceived threats, reinforcing power structures and hierarchies (Jabri, 1996).

Case-B: Russia

In examining the rhetoric used by Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding the Ukraine conflict, a concerning pattern of language emerges that can be deemed dangerous, pugnacious, and potentially justifying Russia's aggression. Putin's speeches and statements are replete with historical revisionism, nationalist appeals, and threats that serve to escalate tensions and provide a pretext for military action.

One of the central themes in Putin's rhetoric is the notion of Ukraine and Russia as a single, "fraternal" nation (Putin, 2021). In his article which he wrote an year prior to the war, Putin (2021) asserted that "Russians and Ukrainians were one people" and that the formation of an independent Ukrainian state was "comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us." This sentiment was echoed in his 2022

speech announcing the annexation of Ukrainian territories, where he claimed that Kyiv's policies are aimed at the complete "dismantling of historical Russia," aided by "the West," which now faces "new challenges" (Putin, 2022a). Such language not only denies Ukraine's sovereignty but also paints any resistance to Russian influence as an existential threat.

Creation of binaries is one way to justify aggression as discussed earlier. Putin's rhetoric is replete with binaries of good and bad, evil and noble, naïve and dishonest, just and unjust. In his address on February 24, 2022, he alleged that the west is unjust and hypocritical. To quote him, "Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around" (Putin, 2022b).

Putin has also invoked historical grievances to justify Russia's actions. In his article, he accused the West of "exploiting the Ukrainian issue" and "turning it into a foothold against Russia", harking back to the expansion of NATO and the West's support for the 2014 Euromaidan protests (Putin, 2021). He describes the current conflict as a "continuation of the policy of containment of Russia, which has been carried out against our country for many years", framing it as a defensive measure against Western encroachment (RAND Corporation, 2022). In his address to the nation, he purported the view that, "United States promised the Soviet leadership that NATO jurisdiction or military presence will not expand one inch to the east (Putin, 2022c)."

Notably, Putin has not shied away from using explicitly aggressive language. In his 2022 speech, he warned that Russia would use "all the means at our disposal" to protect its interests, adding that "this is not a bluff" (Putin, 2022d). Such rhetoric, coupled with the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of additional troops, has been interpreted as a direct threat of nuclear escalation.

Putin's rhetoric has not been limited to public speeches and statements. In private meetings and interviews, he has expressed even more extreme views. According to reports, Putin has referred to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "drug addict" and a "Nazi", further dehumanizing and delegitimizing the Ukrainian leadership (The Guardian, 2022). Putin has constantly referred to the Ukrainian government as "Hitler's accomplices," who carried out "genocide" in the Donbass area after seizing power in a "coup d'état" in 2014 (Putin, 2022c).

The Kremlin's official website and Putin's own writings provide ample evidence of this dangerous rhetoric. In a 2021 article, Putin wrote that "the formation of an independent Ukrainian state on Russian historical territories is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us" (Putin, 2021). In the same article, he explained how Ukraine issue is a cog in the larger machine of injustices against Russia. Such statements not only deny Ukraine's sovereignty but also suggest that Russia may view the existence of an independent Ukraine as an existential threat.

In a 2022 speech, Putin (2022d) claimed that "the West has been exploiting Ukraine and turning it into a foothold against Russia ... tearing apart Russia," echoing the narrative of Western encroachment and justifying Russia's military intervention. In his address on February 21, Putin (2022c) alluded to some European states as being used against Russia while they are complacent and helpless: "the Americans simply used them to carry out a clearly anti-Russian policy". In his address on February 24, he suggested that there is strong evidence indicating that "for the United States and its allies, it (the war) is a policy of containing Russia" (Putin, 2022b).

Furthermore, Putin has repeatedly referred to Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi regime" and accused it of "genocide" against Russian-speaking Ukrainians. These inflammatory claims serve to

dehumanize the Ukrainian government and provide a pretext for Russia's military actions. During the signing of the treaties on the accession of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to Russia, Putin (2022a) blurted out that the Ukrainian military had carried out "eight long years of genocide, shelling, and blockades," while claiming that members of the Ukrainian government who "threatened schoolteachers and women" were "neo-Nazis".

By invoking Russian opposition to Nazi Germany during World War II, this well-chosen rhetoric delegitimizes the Ukrainian administration while mobilizing Russian support for the conflict. Additionally, Putin (2022a) uses these historical parallels to criticize the US and the West, alleging that they seek to establish a "neo-colonial system" in order to "plunder" the entire world. He warned that Russia would use "all the means at our disposal" to protect its interests, adding that "this is not a bluff" (Putin, 2022d). This statement was widely interpreted as a direct threat of nuclear escalation.

During the annexation of newly occupied territories, Putin (2022a) referred to the Russian-speaking people as "compatriots" to evoke a sense of historical belonging. This denial of Ukraine's sovereignty and distinct national identity is a recurring theme in Putin's rhetoric. Overall, the analysis of Putin's speeches, statements, and writings reveals a concerning pattern of language that can be deemed dangerous, pugnacious, and potentially justifying Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The Kremlin's official sources and Putin's own words are replete with historical revisionism, nationalist appeals, and threats that serve to escalate tensions and provide a pretext for military action.

Comparison of Russian and US Discourses on the Ukraine Issue

A comparison of Russian and US discourse on Ukraine issue reveals a grim situation. The two countries are poles apart on the

issue. The United States of America sees Russia as an aggressor and its leader as a megalomaniac. The media discourse surrounding the crisis in Ukraine is usually a vilification campaign of Russian leadership. It views Ukraine as a victim of the Russian oppression. The war in Ukraine is viewed as an excess by Russia. Ukraine's effort to part way with Russia is viewed as an effort to liberalize and democratize itself.

Russia, on the contrary, views the war in Ukraine as being perpetrated and necessitated by the west, especially the United States of America. Russia has cited historical grievances which necessitated its "special military operation in Kiev" (Putin, 2022b) to "denazify" and "demilitarize" (RT, 2022a) Ukraine. Russia cites the failure of the United States to fulfill the promises it made at the end of the Cold War, when the "greatest catastrophe of the 20th century" unfolded (NBC News, 2005).

The official narrative invokes invectives to address the Ukrainian counterparts, viewing them as proxies. The people of Ukraine are viewed as Russian of the near abroad (Putin, 2021). This paper has sought to demonstrate that words and phrases used on both sides are completely paradoxical to each other. The media discourse, which is a reproduction of the presidential rhetoric is based on reviling the United States as a global evil. The next section deals with Media discourse on Ukraine issue.

Media and the Ukraine War: RT and CNN Programs on the Ukraine Issue

This section applies the qualitative discourse analysis to the selected data; the presidential discourse is further compared with selected TV shows that appeared during the same time. On the Russian side, RT's show 'Cross Talk' whereas on the US side, CNN's 'Fareed Zakaria GPS' is selected for the purpose of this research. The data covers continuous media coverage of the issue in the selected programs in both countries from January 31 to February 14, 2022.

The criteria for selecting CNN and RT are authenticity and viewership in the case of the former, and availability in the English language in the case of the latter. Although the viewership of RT in Russia is very low compared to that of CNN in the US, it is assumed that, broadly, RT reflects the Russian perspective as other Russian TV channels like Channel One, etc. CNN and RT are also preferred for the study because of the archival availability and accessibility of the required data. In addition, the selected TV shows are the most relevant, top-ranked in terms of viewership, and comparatively impartial and authentic.

A. RT

On January 31, the ‘Cross Talk’ was sub-titled as ‘Panic in Kiev’ and the host of the show Peter John Lavelle purported the view that the west is an aggressor while highlighting that “US and UK want confrontation” (RT, 2022b). During his appearance on the program ‘Cross Talk’ on January 31, 2022, Patrick Henningsen—a writer, filmmaker, global affairs commentator, editor, and creator of the independent news website ‘21st Century Wire’—openly criticized the United States for its “duplicitous” and “bad faith” actions (RT, 2022b). The host also posited that the state department was responsible for the 2014 regime change in Ukraine. To quote specifically” “they did it in 2014, they might do it again” (RT, 2022b).

The third speaker, Maxim Suchkov, an academic, based his arguments on the binary of the rational and the irrational, portraying the U.S. as “irrational” (RT, 2022b). The tag line of the show was that the alliance is acting in “differing—even contradictory ways” (RT, 2022b). It was also postulated that the “west has always been interested in destabilizing Ukraine” (RT, 2022b). The show also reminded the public of the years-long “genocide” of Russian speakers and of the support provided by the U.S. and the U.K. to keep the region in a state of turmoil.

This and Putin's address on February 21 were mutually reinforcing. It appears that this served as an impetus for agenda-setting. Parallels can be drawn between the role of RT in setting the stage for the Russia–Ukraine war and that of CNN in the days leading up to the invasion of Iraq.

In the February 02 episode of 'Cross Talk', subtitled as "Misinformation", the host claimed that in west-dominated world order, anything spoken against the western discourse is denounced as "misinformation" (RT, 2022c). The show used jargons such as "subsidized western media", "oppressive governments", "machinery of propaganda", "censorship" and "hiding truth" (RT, 2022c). The host also argued that the "misinformation on WMDs, Russiagate and Covid is all coming from Legacy Media," hinting at CNN and others western media outlets (RT, 2022c).

On February 04, the show subtitled as "Ukraine Roulette", was again fraught with agenda-setting discourse. The host Peter Lavelle opened with his classic admonishment of the west and exaggeration of the split within the NATO on the Ukrainian crisis, going so far as to suggest that NATO is "fragmented" (RT, 2022d). The host also propounded the view that "Ukraine is just a symptom of a larger disease" (RT, 2022d). This was also the crux of one of Putin's articles that he penned in 2021 (Putin, 2021).

On February 07, the debate on 'Cross Talk' was much captivating. Glenn Eric Andre Diesen, a Norwegian academic and political scientist, professor at the School of Business of the University of South-Eastern Norway, tongue lashed the US for dividing the world among binaries or "democratic and authoritarian states" (RT, 2022e). He also fulminated NATO for threatening Russia's security with their missile technology installed near Russia. He derisively, and with a smirk, accused the U.S. of "reneging on pan-European security arrangements

previously agreed upon and of weaponizing Europe to ‘protect a couple of democracies’” (RT, 2022e).

George Szamuely, a senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute, was the second guest at the show. He also chastised the US, the UK and France for “pushing their forces towards the Russian border,” thus, creating a sense of urgency (RT, 2022e). He further insisted that the US increased its “geopolitical” advantages at the “expense of Russia” (RT, 2022e). He censured NATO for violating treaties and then calling Russia “paranoid,” when it voices its opprobrium (RT, 2022e). He insisted that it is not Russia but the US, which “endangers Ukraine” while Russia is just addressing its “security concerns” (RT, 2022e). Such fulmination of the US and its allies is in complete coherence with Putin’s rhetoric. All this media discourse is akin to setting up the stage for conflict.

On February 11, guest commentator Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the Peace in Ukraine Coalition, asserted that the only path to diplomacy lies in allowing Russia to be heard, citing her own article in which she wrote, “For Russia, diplomacy is spelled M-I-N-S-K” (RT, 2022f). Dr. Marcus Papadopoulos, a leading British historian, analyst, and author specializing in Russia and the former Soviet Union, was also among guests on the show. He went a step ahead and proposed that “NATO is a criminal organization” catering to the whims of the US at the expense of others (RT, 2022f). He suggested that “Russia is the only country in the world that can limit American Aggression” (RT, 2022f). He also asserted that Ukraine’s absorption into NATO would mean “isolation for Russia” along its western border and would serve as the missing piece for the U.S. in its “geostrategic puzzle” (RT, 2022f). He further claimed that the “2014 coup” was orchestrated by the U.S. (RT, 2022f). He reverberated his initial stance: “a Ukraine in NATO would pose tremendous threat to Russia” (RT, 2022f).

It is all in line with Putin's assertion that Russian security is antithetical to Ukraine's NATO membership. The same point was emphasized by Putin on February 21, when, in response to a reporter's question, he remarked: "In 1990, when German unification was discussed, the U.S. said that NATO would not move one inch to the east..." (Putin, 2022c). Such discursive constructions of an immediate threat is meant to emphasize the necessity of war (Hodges, 2013).

On February 14, Peter Levelle, the show host, opened with censuring the US, projecting it as "crying wolf" and the global efforts to prevent the war as "fake shuttle diplomacy" (RT, 2022g). George Szamuely, who appears regularly on the show called National Security Advisor of the US, Jake Sullivan "master of hoax" feigning Ukraine invasion to advance their geo-strategic goals (RT, 2022g). Dmitry Babich, a Russian political analyst, was the second guest on the show. He purported that the west was "demonizing Putin ... the Russian leader," when in fact, he was also demonizing the US for being a warmonger (RT, 2022g).

Such vilification of the enemy can sway public opinion in favor of the aggressor. Ukraine was portrayed as a "liar" committed to "Russophobia" (RT, 2022g). It was mentioned that the history Americans are taught by "CNN" and "Friedman" is fraught with "twisted lies" (RT, 2022g). Thus, Reinforcing the binaries of good and bad also dupes the public into committing to the presidential rhetoric.

B. CNN

The Western media's portrayal of the situation in Ukraine is likewise a reproduction of the official rhetoric. The media constantly demonizes Russia and President Putin while conveniently ignoring the legitimate security concerns that have led Russia to take these measures. Fareed Zakaria's GPS segments on the Russia-Ukraine conflict present a nuanced

perspective, distinct from the most overtly biased narratives seen in some other media outlets. Zakaria acknowledges the strategic military posturing employed by the Biden administration. On Jan 30, Zakaria's opening statement, "Only one person knows whether the Ukraine crisis will lead to war, the man who started it, Vladimir Putin," immediately frames the narrative with the presumption of Russian culpability (Zakaria, 2022a). This aligns with the Western media's tendency to portray Russia as the aggressor, neglecting the complex historical and geopolitical factors that have contributed to the crisis.

Likewise, the assertion that the Biden administration has reacted "intelligently" with a mix of "deterrents and diplomacy" could be perceived as a veiled criticism of Russia's actions (Zakaria, 2022a). It suggests that the U.S. is the rational actor, while Russia is the instigator of conflict. Zakaria's reliance on Owen Matthews' essay to argue that Putin "lost Ukraine by annexing Crimea" is a simplification of a complex issue (Zakaria, 2022a). While it is true that Ukrainian nationalism has surged, it is crucial to acknowledge the role played by Western interference as well as support for anti-Russian elements within Ukraine. Similarly, the claim that Putin's aim is to "make Ukraine weak and more dependent on Russia" aligns with the Western narrative of Russia as an imperial power seeking to control its neighbors (Zakaria, 2022a). However, from a Russian perspective, these actions can be seen as necessary to protect Russian-speaking populations and ensure regional stability in the face of perceived Western encroachment.

The focus on NATO's revitalization due to the "Russian threat" reinforces the Western perception of Russia as a menacing force (Zakaria, 2022a). This narrative overlooks Russia's legitimate security concerns regarding NATO's eastward expansion and its military presence near Russia's borders. The mention of European countries mobilizing military assets in response to the Russian threat could be seen as a portrayal of the western unity

against the aggressor. This, on the contrast, could also fuel a sense of encirclement and reinforce the narrative of a "besieged fortress" that is often used in Russian political discourse (Lipman, 2015). Zakaria's reference to young Russians' lack of enthusiasm for war further supports this perspective, emphasizing the absence of popular support for their government's actions.

Furthermore, Zakaria's analysis of NATO expansion reveals a bias towards the Western perspective. While acknowledging the unlikelihood of immediate Ukrainian membership, he asserts that the US should not rule out the possibility of future accession (Zakaria, 2022a). This statement disregards Russia's legitimate security concerns and perpetuates the narrative of NATO as a purely defensive alliance, despite its history of eastward expansion and intervention in non-member states. The discussion of Nord Stream 2 further exposes Western bias in the discourse. Katrin Bennhold, Bureau Chief NYT Berlin, was a commentator, who implies that Germany's reluctance to cancel the pipeline is driven by a desire to maintain economic ties with Russia, rather than a legitimate concern about the energy security of Europe. This narrative conveniently ignores the fact that Germany has been a vocal critic of Russia's actions in Ukraine and has supported sanctions against Moscow in the past. Calling Germany a "weak link" alludes to the rhetoric that staying neutral is akin to being enfeebled.

On February 6, Fareed Zakaria's introduction to the segment titled "Are Russia and China Forming a New Axis of World Power?" demonstrates the Western media's proclivity for sensationalism and framing complex geopolitical relationships through a Cold War lens (Zakaria, 2022b). The very use of the term "axis" evokes memories of the World War II alliance between Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, immediately casting Russia and China as potential threats to the established world order. This rhetorical tactic serves to manipulate public opinion

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

by creating a sense of fear and urgency, thereby justifying increased military spending and aggressive foreign policy measures. Its historical connotations of wartime alliances, immediately paints Russia and China as potential adversaries, thus shaping public opinion towards a more confrontational stance.

By focusing on negative aspects of China's domestic policies and its relationship with Russia, Zakaria creates a distorted image of a monolithic and threatening alliance. The discussion between Fareed Zakaria, Gideon Rachman, and Cindy Yu regarding a potential Russia-China axis exemplifies the Western media's tendency to frame international relations through a lens of rivalry and threat. Rachman's analysis of the Russia-China rapprochement focuses on their shared desire to "make the world safe for autocracy... and autocratic regimes" and their perception of a weakening America (Zakaria, 2022b).

While these factors may play a role, this narrative conveniently overlooks the legitimate security concerns that have driven both countries closer together. Russia's concerns about NATO expansion and China's worries about US containment policies are dismissed as mere paranoia, reinforcing the Western narrative of these countries as irrational actors. Calling Putin a "new czar" reverberates the rhetoric instrumented by official quarters in the US particularly the POTUS (Zakaria, 2022b).

On February 13, Fareed reiterated to the audience that only Putin knows if there is going to be an invasion (Zakaria, 2022c). His assertion represents an effort to strip the situation of the many intricate factors contributing to the conflict—including the United States' long-standing involvement in Ukraine—reducing it instead to Putin's personal desire for war. Zakaria also portrays Russia as a divided entity: on one hand, there are those who oppose invading Ukraine, calling Ukrainians "their brothers,"

and on the other, a government committed to vilifying the Ukrainian leadership.

The narrative is reinforced with phrases like "drumbeat of war," "invasion of Ukraine," and "imminent," which create a sense of impending doom (Zakaria, 2022c). The repetition of these phrases throughout the show solidifies the narrative of an aggressive Russia poised to attack a vulnerable Ukraine. The show also employs a binary between the West and Russia. The West, portrayed as rational and diplomatic, is seeking to de-escalate the situation, while Russia, depicted as unpredictable and aggressive, is intent on continuing war. This binary opposition is evident in the contrast between the U.S. government's warnings of an imminent invasion and a French official's statement that there is no indication from Putin that he will invade.

Political Rhetoric, Media, and Public Attitudes Towards the Ukraine Issue

A poststructuralist discourse perspective challenges traditional views of public opinion and foreign policy. It highlights the role of language, power, and identity in shaping both public opinion and policymaking. By understanding how discourse operates, we can better understand how public opinion is formed and how it can be mobilized to support or oppose foreign policy initiatives.

Public opinion is not simply a reflection of individual preferences; rather, it is shaped by dominant discourses circulating in society. These discourses can be disseminated through various channels, including the media, political speeches, and educational institutions. For example, the discourse of "national security" or "civilizational security" can be used to justify a range of foreign policy actions—from military intervention to trade restrictions (Persaud, 2020). The formation of public opinion is not a neutral process; instead, it is a site of power struggle. Different actors compete to promote

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

their preferred discourses and marginalize alternative perspectives. This contestation of discourses is evident in the media's framing of foreign policy issues; the debates between political parties; and the activism of social movements. In the next section, we will analyze how public opinion polls remained at the disposal of political rhetoric and media discourses.

Leveda and Gallup polls between January 01, 2022, to March 01, 2022

Polls and surveys reveal the performance of the discourse at play. These polls demonstrate that public approval of the president and government actions has increased since the February mayhem. In this section, the Levada and Gallup polls will be examined as indicators of the rhetoric's effectiveness and its reproduction in the media.

A. Russian Public's Attitude Towards the Ukraine Issue

The Levada Center, an independent Russian pollster, has consistently tracked public opinion in Russia on Presidential and Government activities. Their surveys provide valuable insights into the evolving sentiments of the Russian public.

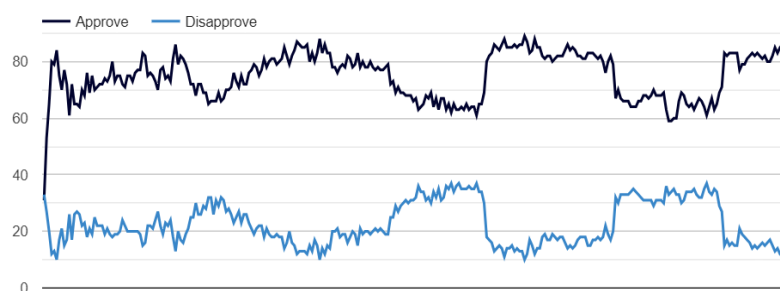


Figure 6.3.1: Levada Poll on Approval and Disapproval of President Vladimir Putin (Levada Center, n.d.)

The above poll on “Approval and Disapproval of V. Putin” shows an upward trend in Putin’s approval ratings during and after February 2022. The same data indicate a corresponding decline in disapproval of the president during this period. In

Comparing Presidential Rhetoric...

November 2021, 35 percent of Russian citizens disapproved of Putin's presidency; three months later, that number had fallen by half. Interestingly, a similar pattern was observed after the Crimean crisis, when Putin's approval ratings skyrocketed and disapproval followed a downward trajectory.

Table 6.3.2: Levada Poll; Government Activities Approval and Disapproval (Levada Center, n.d.)

	10.2021	11.2021	12.2021	01.2022	02.2022	03.2022
Approve	50	48	49	53	55	70
Disapprove	48	49	49	44	42	27
No answer	2	3	2	3	3	3

When asked the question regarding their approval of "government activities," Russian citizens replied in the same trend (see figure 6.3.2). Approval for Government activities rose from 53% in January 2022 to 70% in March 2022.

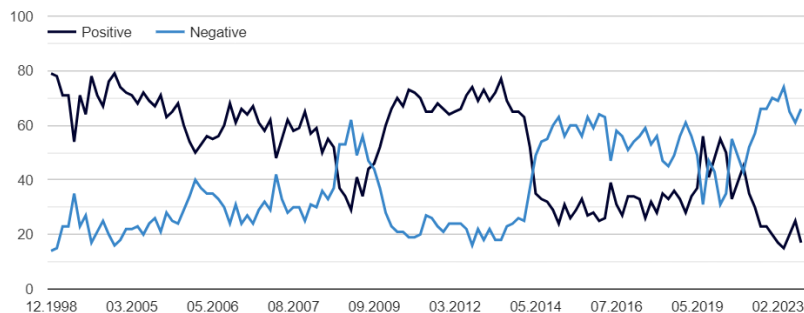


Figure 6.3.3 Levada Centre Poll on Russians Attitudes towards Ukraine (Levada Center, n.d.)

These polls also show a declining positive attitude towards Ukraine. It shows an overall decline over two and a half decades but interestingly in the pre-Crimean crisis, the positive attitude has been consistently high since 1998. The 2014 change of government in Ukraine was a watershed moment. If seen in micro-instances, the polls show a declining positive attitude. In November 2021, 45% people had a positive attitude towards Ukraine which plummeted to 20% in November 2022. Attitudes

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

of Russians towards the US and the EU follow a similar trend which are given in below figures (6.3.4 and 6.3.5).

Table 6.3.4: Russians Attitude Towards the United States of America (Levada Center, n.d.)

	11.2021	02.2022	03.2022	05.2022	08.2022	11.2022
Positive	45	31	17	14	19	18
Negative	42	55	72	75	71	73
Difficult to answer	13	13	11	11	10	9

Table 6.3.5: Russians Attitude towards the EU (Levada Center, n.d.)

	11.2021	02.2022	03.2022	05.2022	08.2022	11.2022
Positive	48	37	21	16	23	21
Negative	38	48	67	69	65	68
Difficult to answer	14	15	12	15	12	11

When asked whether they support Russian military actions in Ukraine, the public had a mixed response, but the percentage of those who disapproved Russian military actions experienced a decline. In February, 68% individuals expressed support for Russian military actions in Ukraine, which increased to 80% in March 2022. 15% individuals who expressed a strong disapproval of Russian military actions in Ukraine decreased to 6% in March 2022. Older Russians (aged 40-54 and 55+) showed the strongest support for Russia's military action in Ukraine, with 75% expressing approval. In contrast, support is significantly lower among young people (18-24), with only 58% backing the actions. Among the many reasons, one reason can be that the older generation is more prone to monolithic rhetoric coming from mainstream Russian media. The younger generation, however, has access to means of alternative information.

Comparing Presidential Rhetoric...

Do you personally support the actions of Russian military forces in Ukraine?

As % of respondents

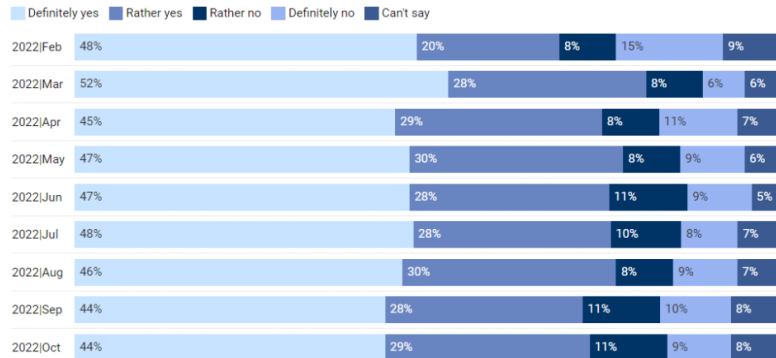


Figure 6.3.6: Levada Poll on Support and Denial of Military Actions in Ukraine (Levada Center, 2022)

B. American Public Attitude Towards the Ukraine Issue

Public opinion towards Ukraine remains favorable in the US; however, general attitude towards Russia observed a negative trend in 2022. The Gallup poll conducted in February 2022 reveals a significant shift in American public opinion regarding Russia and Ukraine. It highlights a growing negative sentiment towards Russia, with 85% of Americans viewing the nation unfavorably, marking a record low in over three decades. This decline in favorability is attributed to heightened exchange of discourse over Ukraine and alleged Russian interference in the US elections.

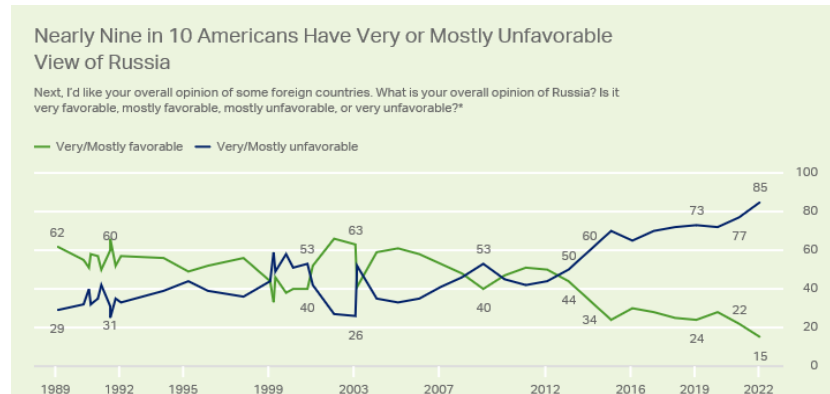


Figure 6.4.1 GALLUP Survey of US Public Opinion of Russia (Gallup, 2022)

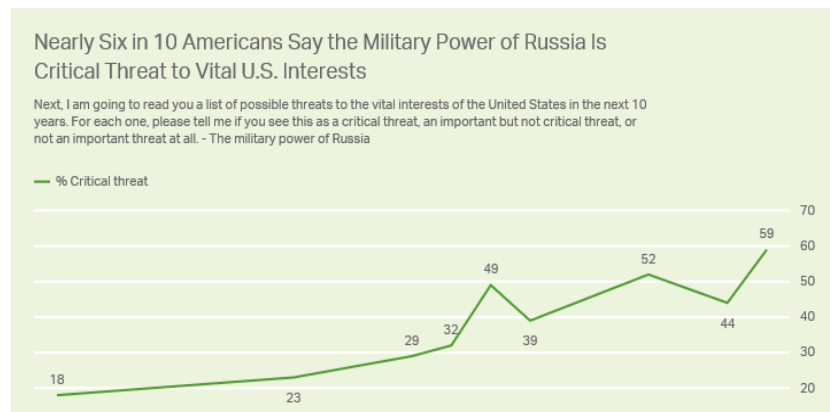


Figure 6.4.2 GALLUP Poll: Russia viewed as a Critical Threat by US citizens (Gallup, 2022)

According to the same polls, perceptions of Russia as a critical threat to U.S. security interests have increased significantly. In 2020, 44 percent of Americans viewed Russia as a critical threat; by February 2022, that figure had risen to 59 percent, according to Gallup. The upward slope on the right side of Figure 6.4.2 attests to the growing polarization fueled by media discourse.

Conversely, the poll indicates a more favorable view of Ukraine, with 62% of Americans expressing a positive opinion. This marks an increase from 57% in 2020 observable in figure 6.4.3.

Comparing Presidential Rhetoric...

This increase in favorability underscores a growing sympathy and support for Ukraine amidst escalating tensions with Russia.

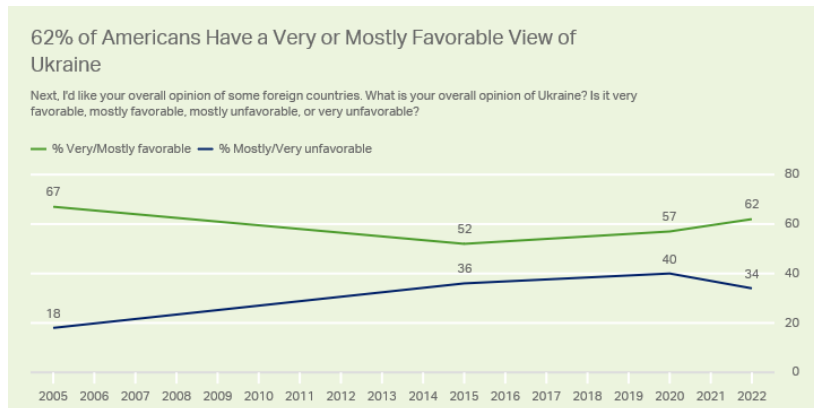


Figure 6.4.3 GALLUP Poll: Americans Opinion of Ukraine (Gallup, 2022)

Comparison of Public Attitude on the Ukraine War with Elite and Media Discourses

The convergence observed between polls, presidential rhetoric, and media discourse is not seen as a natural reflection of shared beliefs but rather as a product of power dynamics and discursive practices. The language of "civilizational threat" and "national security threat" functions as a hegemonic discourse that constructs and reinforces identities and antagonisms, delimiting the boundaries of acceptable thought. The alignment between Russian and American public opinion with their respective official narratives is thus not a sign of consensus but a testament to the effectiveness of discursive power. The language of threat and the media's complicity in its dissemination create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where perceived threats become real through their repeated articulation.

Conclusion

This study has offered a nuanced exploration of how elite rhetoric, media discourse, and public opinion interact to shape the narrative and perceptions surrounding the Ukraine war.

Through a poststructuralist lens, the study emphasizes the performative nature of discourse, demonstrating how language constructs reality, mobilizes public sentiment, and legitimizes foreign policy actions.

The analysis reveals a stark dichotomy between the rhetorical strategies employed by the United States and Russia. US presidential rhetoric, particularly under President Joe Biden, and Trump is marked by provocative language that frames Russia as an aggressor and Ukraine as a victim. Biden's speeches employ terms like "aggression," "violation of sovereignty," and "threat to global security," constructing a narrative that justifies US support for Ukraine and positions Russia as a global menace. This rhetoric is mirrored in the American media, such as CNN, which amplifies the official narrative through binary oppositions—good versus evil, rational versus irrational—reinforcing the US perspective and shaping public opinion. Gallup polls reflect this alignment, showing increased favourability towards Ukraine and heightened negative sentiment towards Russia among the American public.

On the other hand, Russian rhetoric under President Vladimir Putin employs historical revisionism, nationalist appeals, and existential threats to justify its actions in Ukraine. Putin's speeches deny Ukraine's sovereignty, frame the West as a hypocritical aggressor, and portray Russia's military actions as defensive measures against Western encroachment. Russian media, particularly RT, reproduces and amplifies this rhetoric, portraying the US and NATO as destabilizing forces and Ukraine as a proxy for Western aggression. The alignment between Putin's rhetoric and RT's discourse is evident in the framing of Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi regime" and the West as a "neo-colonial" oppressor. Levada polls show increased approval for Putin and the Russian government's actions alongside declining positive attitudes towards Ukraine and the West, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of this discursive construction.

The study underscores the dynamic interplay between elite rhetoric, media discourse, and public opinion. It argues that public opinion is not an autonomous reflection of individual preferences but a product of discursive power struggles. Both the US and Russian elites strategically deploy rhetoric to shape public perception; legitimize their actions; and marginalize dissent. The media serves as a critical intermediary, reproducing official narratives and amplifying their impact on public sentiment. Polls from Levada and Gallup reveal how public attitudes align with elite and media discourses, highlighting the role of language in constructing hegemonic realities.

The article concludes that the war in Ukraine is not merely a geopolitical conflict but also a discursive battle in which language and narrative play a central role in enacting war and shaping its outcomes. The convergence of elite rhetoric, media discourse, and public opinion illustrates the power of discourse to legitimize foreign policy actions and mobilize public support. By exposing the mechanisms of discursive construction, the study challenges conventional understandings of public opinion and foreign policy, urging a critical reassessment of the ways language and power shape global conflict.

Furthermore, the study underscores the dangers inherent in binary oppositions and dehumanizing rhetoric, which can intensify hostilities and justify acts of aggression. It calls for a more critical and reflective engagement with discourse in international relations—one that acknowledges the constructed nature of public opinion and the power relations that sustain it. Ultimately, the article advocates the development of alternative discourses capable of challenging dominant narratives and opening possibilities for conflict resolution and peace.

References

- Biden, J. R. (2023, February 21). *Remarks by President Biden ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine* [Speech at the Royal Castle, Warsaw, Poland]. The White House. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-ahead-of-the-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-brutal-and-unprovoked-invasion-of-ukraine/> The White House
- Shear, M. D. (2022, March 28). *'I make no apologies': Biden says his Putin comments were an expression of moral outrage.* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/28/us/politics/biden-putin.html>
- U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy. (2022, February 25). *Biden condemns Putin's 'unprovoked and unjustified' invasion of Ukraine.* <https://it.usembassy.gov/biden-condemns-putins-unprovoked-and-unjustified-invasion-of-ukraine/>
- MSNBC. (2023, September 19). *Biden urges U.N. to 'stand up' to Putin's 'naked aggression' | See the full speech* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZrf34bB1BI>
- ABC7 News Bay Area. (2024, February 21). *Biden calls Putin a 'crazy SOB' and takes aim at Trump during SF fundraiser for 2024 election* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13jwQCVqqck>
- Guardian News. (2022, March 17). *Biden labels Putin "a murderous dictator; a pure thug"* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md4jLSLT-6w>
- Daily Mail World. (2022, March 27). *Moment Biden calls Putin a 'butcher' | Russia-Ukraine war* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRYpS_Yt5mk

- Guardian News. (2022, March 16). *Joe Biden calls Putin a war criminal after Zelenskiy speaks to Congress* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOppTeKdzXc>
- Al Jazeera English. (2024, February 22). *Kremlin slams Biden comments on Russia's Putin as disgracing US*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/22/kremlin-slams-biden-comments-on-russias-putin-as-disgracing-us>
- Biden, J. R. (2024, April 24). *Remarks by President Biden on the passage of H.R. 815, the national security supplemental* [Speech, State Dining Room]. The White House.
<https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/04/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-passage-of-h-r-815-the-national-security-supplemental/>
- Sinclair, A., & Byers, M. (2007). When US scholars speak of “sovereignty,” what do they mean? *Political Studies*, 55(2), 318–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00665.x>
- Dickinson, P. (2022, April 27). *Beyond Putin: Russian imperialism is the No. 1 threat to global security* [Blog post]. Atlantic Council.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/beyond-putin-russian-imperialism-is-the-no-1-threat-to-global-security/>
- Oeser, D. R. (2016). *The rhetoric of perpetual warfare: A political discourse analysis of the Obama Administration's legitimation of U.S. drone strikes* (Master's thesis). University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/4013
- Jabri, V. (1996). *Discourses on violence: Conflict analysis reconsidered*. Manchester University Press.

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

Putin, V. (2021, July 12). *On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. Office of the President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

Putin, V. (2022a, September 30). *Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia*. Office of the President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>

Putin, V. (2022b, February 24). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation* [Speech]. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

RAND Corporation. (2022, September 21). *RAND experts react to Putin's latest threatening rhetoric*. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/articles/2022/rand-experts-react-to-putins-latest-threatening-rhetoric.html>

Putin, V. (2022c, February 21). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation* [Speech]. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

Putin, V. (2022d, September 21). *Address by the President of the Russian Federation* [Speech]. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>

The Guardian. (2022, February 25). *Putin references neo-Nazis and drug addicts in bizarre speech to Russian Security Council* [Video]. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2022/feb/25/putin-references-neo-nazis-and-drug-addicts-in-bizarre-speech-to-russian-security-council-video>

RT. (2022a, February 28). *CrossTalk, Home Edition: 'Demilitarize' and 'denazify'* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/550793-ukraine-operation-demilitarize-denazify/>

NBC News. (2005, April 25). *Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>

- RT. (2022b, January 31). *CrossTalk Bullhorns, HOME EDITION: Panic in Kiev?* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/547763-war-panic-ukraine-nato/>
- RT. (2022c, February 2). *CrossTalk, Home Edition: "Misinformation"* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/548004-propagate-liberal-pieties-misinformation/>
- RT. (2022d, February 2). *CrossTalk, Home Edition: Ukrainian roulette* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/548162-ukraine-nato-armed-conflict/>
- RT. (2022e, February 7). *CrossTalk Bullhorns, Home Edition: Stalemate* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/548484-nato-pan-european-security-vision/>
- RT. (2022f, February 11). *CrossTalk, Home Edition: "Shuttle Diplomacy"* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/548879-russia-nato-shuttle-diplomacy/>
- Hodges, A. (2013). War, discourse, and peace. In A. Hodges (Ed.), *Discourses of war and peace* (pp. 3–20). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937271.003.0001>
- RT. (2022g, February 14). *CrossTalk Bullhorns, Home Edition: 'Crying Wolf?'* [Video]. RT. <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/549235-west-war-words-reckless/>
- Zakaria, F. (2022a, January 30). *Ukrainians brace for possible Russian attack; the concern over Germany's response to Russia* [Transcript of television program]. CNN. <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-01-30/segment/01>

Tasawar Hussain, Kashif Mehmood & Aisha Younus

Lipman, M. (2015). *Putin's 'besieged fortress' and its ideological arms*. In M. Lipman & N. Petrov (Eds.), *The state of Russia: What comes next?* (pp. 110–136). Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137548115_7

Zakaria, F. (2022b, February 6). *Are China and Russia forming a new axis of world power?; China's handling of COVID-19; Russia continues military build-up near Ukraine; U.S. raid results in death of ISIS leader* [Transcript of television program "Fareed Zakaria GPS"]. CNN.
<https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-02-06/segment/01>

Zakaria, F. (2022c, February 13). *Is Russian invasion of Ukraine imminent?; Macron leads Europe's diplomatic effort to defuse Ukraine crisis; Interview with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan* [Transcript of television program "Fareed Zakaria GPS"]. CNN.
<https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-02-13/segment/01>

Persaud, R. B. (2020). *Killing the Third World: Civilisational security as US grand strategy*. In R. B. Persaud & A. Walker (Eds.), *Violence and the Third World in International Relations* (pp. 68–85). Routledge.

Levada Center. (n.d.). *Ratings* [Public-opinion indicators]. Retrieved May 25, 2024, from
<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>

Levada Center. (n.d.). *Attitudes towards countries*. Retrieved May 25, 2024, from
<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/attitudes-towards-countries/>

Levada Center. (2022, November 1). *Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022*.

Comparing Presidential Rhetoric...

<https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/>

Gallup. (2022, February 25). *U.S. public sees Russia-Ukraine conflict as critical threat.*
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/390140/public-sees-russia-ukraine-conflict-critical-threat.aspx>