Whose War, Whose Fault?
Visual Framing of the Ukraine Conflict
in Western European Newspapers

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Images play a key role in modern mediatized conflicts, promoting particular ways of understanding those conflicts, what they are about, and who drives them. This article examines the visual coverage of the Ukraine conflict in *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Helsingin Sanomat* in terms of three dominant frames: the Ukraine conflict as national power struggle, as Russian intervention, and as geopolitical conflict. Focusing on four key events in the conflict between February 2014 and February 2015, and combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the framing analysis highlights the need to examine news images' textual content and layout and broader cultural and political contexts. We argue that the interplay between visual and textual devices is central to the production of hegemonic meanings, particularly when shaping public perceptions of key actors and their roles in international conflicts.

Keywords: Ukraine conflict, visual framing, newspapers, news images, conflict reporting

As political conflicts are defined and, indeed, often enacted in the media (Cottle, 2006; Eskjær, Hjarvard, & Mortensen, 2015; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010), images are powerful carriers of meaning, influencing what we know and how we feel about a conflict (Butler, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2015). The suggestive power of photographs in particular relates to their perceived authenticity and to their ability to evoke an emotional response in the viewer (Barthes, 2000; Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Indeed, research on the effects of visual framing suggests that news images tend to shape reader and viewer perceptions of the reported issue more effectively than textual content (Geise & Baden, 2014; Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, & Vanman, 2014; Powell, Boomgaarden, de Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). Clearly, then, the images produced and disseminated by multiple actors to influence public perceptions of a conflict and its relevant parties play a crucial role in modern warfare (Roger, 2013).

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The prolonged conflict in Ukraine has heightened geopolitical tensions, with potentially long-term repercussions for relations between Russia and the West. At the same time, this conflict has become highly mediatized, and both government sources and various nonstate actors have struggled to control the public's interpretation of events and the legitimacy of the conflicting parties' actions (e.g., Bolin, Jordan, & Ståhlberg, 2016; Galeotti, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015). National and international news media have therefore become key sites in the Ukraine conflict (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015), and news professionals must interpret events for their audiences within a highly contested set of narratives (or framings) of the causes of the conflict.

Focusing on three such political framings—the Ukraine conflict as national power struggle, as Russian intervention, and as geopolitical conflict—the present study examines how these are visually reproduced in news images. Analyzing visual coverage in *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Helsingin Sanomat*, the article demonstrates how Western European newspapers use images to represent events and how this coverage influences political interpretations of the conflict.

News Images in the Framing of Conflicts

Modern conflicts are characterized by the efforts of warring parties and their noncombatant supporters to shape public perceptions of events in ways that legitimize their actions and positions (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010; Tumber & Webster, 2006). The power of mainstream news media to reach wide audiences positions them as central to such conflicts. Despite increasing access to Internet and social media platforms that enable protagonists to produce and disseminate their own messages, large national audiences still obtain most of their information about foreign conflicts through legacy media (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015). News journalism arguably remains the primary interpreter of international conflicts for the general public and a key gatekeeper of contested views.

Like other actors in mediatized conflicts, news providers actively frame events, constructing "interpretive packages" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3) and "sensible definitions" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7) of situations. By selecting and emphasizing one aspect of reality to the exclusion of others, journalists influence how audiences make sense of what is at issue, who the central actors are, and where responsibility lies (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980). Photography can be conceived of as the primary visual component in the multimodal process of news framing (Geise & Baden, 2014; Powell et al., 2015). While a news story's textual content—most notably, its headlines and captions—often informs the interpretation of images (Coleman, 2010; Wilkes, 2016), visual elements may also generate autonomous framing effects.

In print media, images are used to highlight the importance of a news story, grabbing the reader's attention and communicating the central argument (Griffin, 2004; Zillmann, Knobloch, & Yu, 2001). Like verbal framing devices, visuals are used to make certain aspects of the reported events more noticeable, memorable, and affective (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Moreover, because images communicate nonverbally and are often processed unconsciously by the reader, they can be used to gradually normalize certain points of view and interpretations of the issues, or to subtly affect impressions of the actors involved (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011; Messaris & Abraham, 2001).

Recent research has increasingly acknowledged the influence of news images in the interpretation of wars and conflicts (e.g., Butler, 2005; Roger, 2013; Zelizer, 2004). While often narrating conflicts in terms of the associated civilian distress and suffering, emphasizing the human cost of war (e.g., Fahmy, 2010; Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015), images also inform more political interpretations of what is driving the conflict and who should be held responsible (Parry, 2010). We are primarily interested in the political aspects of news coverage of the Ukraine conflict, and we examine them in terms of two interrelated aspects of visual framing: the identification and representation of actors and the reproduction of broader political narratives of the conflict. To this end, two research questions are addressed.

RQ1:   *Which actors are visualized in news coverage of the Ukraine conflict, and are they presented in a negative or an empathetic light?*

RQ2:   *How and to what extent does visual coverage of the conflict reproduce competing narratives?*

RQ1 considers two dimensions of framing: salience and representation. Images determine salience by making visible the presence of certain actors as major players while ignoring others (Roger, 2013; Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015). Second, images can create favorable or unfavorable representations of individuals or groups by depicting them in certain circumstances, activities, and relationships with other actors (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). This approach overlaps with the notion of media bias in asking whose side the media are on, whose perspective they favor, and which actors are positively or negatively represented. Studies of conflict-related imagery suggest that although visual news coverage commonly offers several alternative and even contradictory readings, patterns often recur that serve to privilege certain viewpoints at the expense of others (Fahmy, 2010; Pantti, 2013). In general, events involving violence, destruction, death, and suffering often produce imagery in which one party is repeatedly presented as an aggressor and the other as a victim (Bayulgen & Arbatlib, 2013; Parry, 2010).

RQ2 approaches frames as culturally shared "organizing principles" (Reese, 2001) that guide journalistic decision making, but that can also be used strategically to locate events within a preferred political narrative (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). From this perspective, images can be understood as "potent resources for constructing narratives" (Wells, 2007, p. 55) about the causes of the conflict and those responsible (Parry, 2010). To the extent that images shape the political interpretation of wars and conflicts, then, they interact not only with contemporary reporting of that conflict but also with longer-term historical narratives of international relations in the political and cultural contexts in which news media operate (O'Loughlin, 2011; Reese, 2010; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Our aim is to analyze how, in their use of images, newspapers both draw on and contribute to contested narratives of the Ukraine conflict. To begin, the next section outlines three political interpretations of the conflict that inform public debate in the West.

Three Western Framings of the Ukraine Conflict

Given its profound implications for the European Union's enlargement process, economic and political relationships between Russia and the European Union, and Europeans' sense of security, the military conflict in Ukraine has been the subject of intense public debate in Western European countries.

Most observers agree that the decision by Viktor Yanukovych (Ukraine's former president) to abandon an association agreement with the European Union in November 2013 mobilized antigovernment opposition in the form of the Maidan movement, marking the beginning of what has come to be known as the "Ukraine conflict." Beyond this, however, both political and academic observers have advanced widely differing interpretations of the nature of the conflict, and these public framings have significant political and ideological consequences.

The first of these accounts emphasizes the domestic roots of the present conflict (e.g., Ishchenko, 2014; Sakwa, 2015). It locates the conflict within the postcommunist era of state building, marked by a contested national identity, differing visions of a multicultural society, and a broken political system dominated by rival oligarchs, contributing to deepening rifts within Ukrainian civil society (Ishchenko, 2015; Wilson, 2009). Yanukovych advanced the interests of Eastern oligarchs and was voted into power largely by eastern Ukrainians, who traditionally favor a multicultural vision and strong ties with Russia, but the present regime has actively pursued closer economic ties with Western Europe, advocating a monocultural vision of Ukraine that is clearly distinct from Russian culture and identity (Sakwa, 2015). This view of the conflict suggests that the ousting of Yanukovych had the effect of radicalizing anti-Maidan groups in the eastern Donbas region, who were encouraged by Russia's annexation of Crimea to mount a militant insurgency against the new regime in Kiev (Gessen, 2014). In summary, this domestic account frames the present conflict as essentially the continuation of a long-term national power struggle that has descended into civil war.

A second perspective explains the Ukraine conflict in terms of the Russian government's actions and interests. According to this narrative, political and economic pressure from the Kremlin forced Yanukovych to reject the EU deal (Haukkala, 2015). Russia has further exacerbated the conflict by occupying and then annexing the Crimean Peninsula and by mounting a highly sophisticated "hybrid war" against Ukraine that includes a military campaign in eastern areas of the country (Galeotti, 2015). This account frames the conflict in terms of Russian intervention in Ukraine (e.g., Motyl, 2015).

A third account portrays the Ukraine conflict in terms of a clash between Russia and the West, framing it as a geopolitical conflict (e.g., Rutland, 2015). According to the geopolitical narrative, the Ukraine conflict is the outcome of longstanding disputes between Russia and Western powers over the economic and military alignment of countries that were formerly socialist and Soviet states. In Ukraine, Russia's reaction to the eastward spread of both the European Union and NATO has been to protect its military and economic interests by creating a counter-pole to a unipolar Europe (dominated by the European Union) and a unipolar world (dominated by the United States; Haukkala, 2015; Sakwa, 2015). In this view, the conflict has been precipitated by these rival geopolitical powers, forcing Ukrainians to choose between two mutually exclusive paths of political and institutional development—that is, between the United States and the European Union on one hand and Russia on the other—both with drastic impacts on the country's economic development and foreign relations.

Each of these dominant narratives in the Western debate captures particular aspects of the crisis, and the three are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, when operationalized in journalism to interpret unfolding events, it becomes clear how they selectively attribute responsibility to the conflict's

various parties, offering divergent political interpretations. The national power struggle frame highlights the role of Ukrainian political leaders, oligarchs, civil society groups, and armed insurgents while downplaying the presence and role of foreign powers. In contrast, the Russian intervention frame focuses attention on the actions of the Kremlin as the ultimate driver of events, portraying Ukrainians as victims of foreign aggression. Finally, the geopolitical conflict frame interprets the crisis as essentially a "proxy conflict" in a "new Cold War" between superpowers (Haukkala, 2015; Legvold, 2014), focusing on the actions of the European, U.S., and Russian governments as active drivers of the conflict and disregarding the independent agency of Ukrainian leaders, civil society groups, and the Donbas insurgents.

Materials and Method

Four national daily newspapers were selected for the purposes of the study: *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, *Dagens Nyheter (DN)*, and *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*). Ranking among the top three quality dailies (in terms of circulation) in the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Finland, respectively, all four are national agenda setters and as such exert significant influence on the reproduction of popular understandings of the Ukraine conflict. For this study, we confined the material to be used from the selected publications to four specific periods in the evolution of the Ukraine conflict. Each of these periods related to a highly publicized incidence of violence or armed battle of particular relevance to the overall framing of the conflict. Such dramatic occurrences of death and suffering tend to induce strong emotions, highlighting issues of guilt and responsibility and asserting the sense of a moral obligation to act (Chouliaraki, 2008; Parry, 2010).

The first period (February 21–27, 2014) commenced with reports of violent clashes around Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kiev on February 20, which resulted in the death of at least 39 protesters and 17 police officers (Sakwa, 2015). This period (the "Maidan period") also includes the chaotic events surrounding the deposing of President Yanukovych and the first steps taken by Russian forces in occupying the Crimean Peninsula. The second period (May 3–7, 2014) centered on an incident in the city of Odessa in which more than 40 antigovernment protesters died when trapped inside a burning trade-union building on May 2 (see Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Sakwa, 2015). This (the "Odessa period") also coincided with the Ukrainian army's offensive against the separatist rebels in Donbas. The third period (the "MH17 period," July 18–31, 2014), began with the shooting down of Flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, and continued with the efforts of the international community to recover the victims' bodies and to investigate the crash, and the United States' and European Union's imposition of economic sanctions against Russia. The fourth period (the "Minsk period," February 11–22, 2015) began with the meeting in Minsk between the leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine and the leadership of the separatist insurgents to agree on terms for ending the military confrontation. Following the deal, however, fighting continued in eastern Ukraine, including particularly fierce battles for control of the city of Debaltseve.

The four newspapers' issues for the selected periods were manually scanned for images related to news articles that explicitly dealt with the relevant events. As images were often associated with more than one story about the conflict, all image-text combinations laid out on a single page or as a spread were selected as the unit of analysis. Material from *Die Welt*, *DN,* and *HS* was collected from the printed editions. Because *The Guardian*'s print edition was unavailable to us when conducting the study, we

analyzed its online versions.[1] In total, the analyzed material comprised 402 separate image-text combinations from 38 days of coverage: 161 from *The Guardian*, 85 from *Die Welt*, 75 from *DN*, and 81 from *HS*.

We adopted a multimodal approach to the analysis of visual framing, taking into account that textual content (most notably captions and headlines) typically directs the interpretation of news images (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches (see Van Gorp, 2007). As RQ1 (concerning the visual salience and representation of various parties to the conflict) was more quantitative in nature, we coded the material for all actors and actor groups that appeared in the images, including Maidan protesters, Ukrainian soldiers, eastern Ukrainian insurgents, civilians, and Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian political leaders. Drawing on social semiotic approaches to the visual representation of human actors and relations (Jewitt & Oyama, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), we examined how the images depicted actors' specific activities or roles in the reported events (e.g., victim, aggressor, hero, leader, onlooker). In interpreting actors' activities and roles, we also looked for textual cues in the captions and headlines. To simplify the analysis, the various actor roles were then grouped into positive, neutral, and negative representations. For instance, a representation of people in the Maidan was considered positive if the image, caption, or headline portrayed them as peaceful protesters and as negative if it drew attention to armed and far-right elements among the protesters. In the case of political actors, a positive representation would associate them with, for instance, peace efforts, widespread popular support, or a position of authority and influence among other leaders, whereas a negative representation would associate them with aggression, criminality, authoritarianism, isolation, or a position of weakness. If an image and its immediate textual context were noncommittal about the pictured actor or if the visuals and text offered contradictory representations, we coded the representation as neutral. Two researchers coded the material, with a percentage agreement between the coders (Neuendorf, 2002) established at 0.91 on the identification of actors and 0.82 on the tone of representations.

RQ2 involved a more qualitative interpretation of coverage in terms of the three political narratives or frames described earlier. Key decisions in the visual framing process include selecting a scene and perspective (in preference to others), choosing an image for publication, and positioning it on a page (Coleman, 2010; Messaris & Abraham, 2001). We deduced that the national power struggle frame was reproduced when stories focused visually on Ukrainian political leaders, activists, and civil society groups. The Russian intervention frame included images that focused on Russia's presence in the conflict or presented Ukrainians as victims of aggression while attributing violent acts to Russia in images, headlines, or captions. The geopolitical conflict frame focused visually on the presence of international leaders without singling out Russia, undermined the independent agency of Ukrainian actors by associating them with foreign powers (e.g., using the label "pro-Russian" to describe Ukrainian activists or

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[1] Using the daily archive provided by the UK edition of theguardian.com (see http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian), we selected only those online articles that also appeared in the printed edition of the newspaper to ensure maximum comparability with the other newspapers. It should be noted, however, that online versions of articles in *The Guardian* tend to differ from print versions in their length, headlines, and images used. Findings and conclusions concerning those articles are therefore only partly applicable to the printed edition of *The Guardian*.

fighters), or presented Western Europeans as victims of aggression while attributing violent acts to Russia. In cases where none of these three frames was apparent, or if the presence of two or all three made it impossible to select just one, we coded the visual frame as *none/other*. The percentage agreement between the two coders on visual frames was 0.88.

Overall, although representing distinct approaches to visual framing, the two research questions were found to partly overlap in that quantitative findings concerning the salience of actors and how they were represented largely aligned with our observations about the reproduction of political narratives. Nevertheless, the two modes of analysis potentially increased the reliability of our findings and interpretations by providing two slightly different views of the same material. The next section discusses those findings, focusing on each of the three political framings of the conflict in turn.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the number of visual representations of selected actors and actor groups in each newspaper. It also defines the representation score for each actor, calculated by subtracting the number of negative representations from the number of positive representations.

As Table 1 indicates, Ukrainian civilians were the single most frequently depicted actor group in visual coverage of the conflict in all newspapers. Table 1 also indicates that their representations were overwhelmingly positive, as were those of non-Ukrainian civilians. This is because civilians were typically depicted in roles that tend to generate feelings of sympathy (Chouliaraki, 2008; Höijer, 2004): fleeing from their homes (see Figure 4), witnessing the destruction of their personal property (Figure 5), or grieving over human casualties (Figure 8). In the almost total absence of direct depictions of death,[2] the papers often employed images of civilians alongside images of material destruction or symbols such as candles, flowers, crosses, or coffins to illustrate the human cost of the conflict.

Previous research has shown that this humanitarian framing is a prevalent feature of the visual coverage of conflicts in Western media (e.g., Fahmy, 2010; Pantti, 2013; Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015). However, whereas images of civilian life tend to induce compassion, those of more active groups such as protesters, insurgents, and army troops and those of powerful individuals such as political leaders are more often associated with political interpretations of the conflict's driving forces (see Table 1).

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[2] Only 2% of instances included images of dead bodies.

*Table 1. The Overall Number of Visualizations and the Representation
Score of Selected Actors and Actor Groups in Each Newspaper.*

Actor/actor group	The Guardian N	The Guardian +/-	Die Welt N	Die Welt +/-	DN N	DN +/-	HS N	HS +/-	Total +	Total -
Ukrainian civilians	35	+19	20	+12	34	+19	31	+19	120	+69
Non-Ukrainian civilians	22	+7	17	+5	6	+3	7	+5	52	+20
Maidan activists	23	+10	19	+11	14	+5	16	+3	72	+29
Anti-Maidan/proseparatist activists	10	+1	5	+1	9	-2	5	-2	29	-2
Ukrainian army forces	21	+4	13	+1	9	+4	7	+2	50	+11
Separatist forces	28	-10	14	-1	14	-5	8	-6	64	-22
Viktor Yanukovych	2	-2	4	-3	7	-3	2	-2	15	-10
Petro Poroshenko	8	+4	6	+2	2	+1	6	0	22	+7
Ukrainian opposition leaders	9	+6	6	+1	11	+3	6	+6	32	+16
PRD and PRL leaders*	–	–	–	–	1	0	–	–	1	0
Vladimir Putin	26	-9	11	-6	12	-6	7	+1	56	-20
Angela Merkel	6	+1	10	+8	3	+1	5	+5	25	+15
Francois Hollande	5	+1	5	+3	1	+1	2	+2	13	+7
Barack Obama	4	-1	3	+2	2	0	2	+1	11	+2

* PRD refers to the People's Republic of Donetsk, and PRL refers to the People's Republic of Luhansk.

As to political framing, most (60–70%) of the articles in each paper included visual and textual cues that could be interpreted in terms of one of the three political accounts of the conflict. Table 2 illustrates the salience of each of the three frames in the four newspapers, indicating slight differences in their visual framing preferences. The national power struggle frame was slightly more frequent in *DN* (21.3%) and *HS* (21.0%) than in *The Guardian* (16.8%) and *Die Welt* (17.6%); in other words, the two Nordic papers directed more attention to political and social divisions in Ukraine. The Russian intervention frame was most often emphasized by *Die Welt*, where 23.5% of all visualizations directed attention to Russia's influence or Ukraine's victimhood. In contrast, *HS* was notably reticent in this regard, with only 11.1% of its visual coverage clearly reproducing the Russian intervention frame. Geopolitical conflict was by far the most prevalent visual frame in *The Guardian* (27.3%) and *HS* (27.2%), and it also predominated in *Die Welt* (24.7%).

Table 2. The Percentage of Articles Contributing to the
Three Conflict Frames in Each Newspaper.

Visual frame	The Guardian	Die Welt	DN	HS
	N = 161	N = 85	N = 75	N = 81
National power struggle	16.8	17.6	21.3	21.0
Russian intervention	20.5	23.5	18.7	11.1
Geopolitical conflict	27.3	24.7	18.7	27.2
Other/none	35.4	29.5	41.3	40.7

Framing the Conflict as a National Power Struggle

Whenever news images depicted Ukrainians as actively involved in the reported events rather than as passive civilians, captions typically labeled them as members, supporters, or opponents of specific groups. As shown in Table 1, the most visually salient groups included the Maidan activists (comprising both demonstrators and lightly armed self-defense groups) and the anti-Maidan and pro-separatist activists. From the Odessa period onward, Ukrainian army troops and armed separatists were also frequently depicted in news images. The third visually salient group of Ukrainian actors comprised political leaders, including the presidents (Viktor Yanukovych and Petro Poroshenko), and various opposition leaders during the Maidan period.

A significant proportion of the conflict's visual coverage therefore depicted Ukrainian actors in ways that not only directed attention to the existence of conflicting societal interests and aspirations among Ukrainians but also assigned them to two antagonistic camps: those supporting the regime and those opposing it. In this way, the selection of images was both informed by and contributed to the framing of the Ukraine conflict as a national power struggle. At times, the selected photographs and layout seemed to underline this interpretation of the conflict. Figure 1 illustrates two such cases. On the left, *DN*'s report on civil unrest in the Crimean city of Simferopol on February 27, 2014, includes an image that sets two groups of demonstrators against each other. The image's composition assigns the highest salience to the polarization of these two groups and their hostile facial expressions. Similarly, *Die Welt*'s report from eastern Ukraine on May 4, 2014, is introduced by a cover that juxtaposes an image of an antigovernment activist wearing a face mask with an image of a group of smiling protesters waving Ukrainian flags. The layout and imagery not only emphasize the political tensions among Ukrainians but also advance two very distinct constructions of civic activism. In the upper picture, a militant "pro-Russian separatist" is depicted as defying the police with a wild look on his face, and the lower picture represents "pro-Ukrainian demonstrators" as a joyful, peaceful, and unmistakably youthful and modern crowd, one of whose members is apparently browsing an iPad.

Figure 1. *Visualizing a divided nation*.
Sources: Dagens Nyheter*, February 27, 2014, pp. 14–15 (photos: Paul Hansen/DN) and* Die Welt*, May 4, 2014, p. 15 (photos: Reuters, Getty Images).*

Die Welt's choice of photographs in this particular case exemplifies a highly consistent pattern across the four newspapers when presenting civil society groups. During the Maidan period, the papers tended to grant high visibility to Maidan activists and opposition leaders, presenting them primarily in a positive light (Table 1). In contrast, representations of anti-Maidan demonstrators and activists who subsequently mobilized against the transitional government were far less favorable.

As Table 1 indicates, there were similar patterns in the selective representation of Ukrainian political leaders. During the Maidan period, political leaders who opposed the Yanukovych government were visually prominent and were represented mainly in a positive light. In particular, the opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, who was pictured greeting jubilant supporters and addressing the crowds at Maidan following her liberation from a prison hospital (Figure 2), symbolized the popular struggle for freedom. Coupled with predominantly negative representations of President Yanukovych, the visual framing of the Maidan events tended to legitimize popular and political opposition against the incumbent regime. In contrast, during the Odessa, MH17, and Minsk periods, President Poroshenko was the only Ukrainian political leader who appeared in news images, and opposition politicians remained unseen. In

this way, Ukraine's internal political struggles were rendered largely invisible after the Maidan period, and aside from a single article in *DN* on July 21, 2014, the newspapers featured no images of the leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Figure 2. Symbolizing a popular struggle for freedom.
Sources: The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/tymoshenko-release-centre-stage-ukraine-soap-opera), February 23, 2014 (photo: Sergey Kozlov/EPA);* Dagens Nyheter*, January 23, 2014, p. 1 (photo: Paul Hansen/DN);* Die Welt*, February 24, 2014, p. 1 (photo: Getty Images); and* Helsingin Sanomat*, January 23, 2014, p. B1 (photo: Kalle Koponen/HS).*

The great majority of newspaper images of Ukrainian civil society groups and politicians appeared during the Maidan and Odessa periods. As a result, the national power struggle frame was particularly prevalent in these early stages of the conflict in all four newspapers. During the MH17 and Minsk periods,

however, activists and politicians (with the exception of President Poroshenko) did not appear in any images, and Ukrainians were now represented almost entirely by civilians, Ukrainian army soldiers, and armed separatist fighters. As discussed below, visualizations of these latter groups often contributed to the Russian intervention or geopolitical conflict frames.

Framing the Conflict as a Russian Intervention

Perhaps the most striking feature of visual coverage of the conflict was the position of Vladimir Putin as the most frequently depicted individual in all four newspapers (see Table 1). As a consequence, the sense of Russia's presence in the conflict was frequently reinforced, along with Putin's implied leadership and therefore his responsibility for events unfolding. In this regard, *The Guardian* and *DN* were particularly active in their use of visuals to direct attention toward the Russian president. Although *Die Welt* published almost as many images of Chancellor Merkel as of Putin, the German paper also deployed visual symbols such as the Kremlin towers, the Russian flag, and even a historical photo of Red Army soldiers marching through Prague in 1968, so alluding to Russia's presence, role, and responsibility in the Ukraine conflict.

Aside from *HS*, the papers generally represented Putin in a negative light. In the most extreme instances, these negative representations derived from a direct visual or textual association between Putin and the violence and human distress in Ukraine (see Figures 4 and 5). Less striking examples of such negative representation depicted Putin next to traditional symbols of power, such as the Russian flag or coat of arms, or associated him with biker gangs or military personnel (Figure 3). Additionally, negative textual characterizations in headlines or captions complemented these visual practices—for instance, *The Guardian*'s headlines included such words as "brutish," "cronies," "paranoia," and "Tsar" alongside images of Putin. Together, images and texts regularly contributed to perceptions of the Russian president as an "autocratic" leader, underscoring his "otherness" compared with "democratic" Western leaders (see also Molchanov, 2015).

In combination, this visual emphasis and the pattern of predominantly negative representations of Putin confirms that these papers' visual coverage was largely informed by the framing of the conflict as a Russian intervention and reproduced that framing. On occasion, the papers' use of visual or textual elements seemed to clearly direct readers toward this interpretation. Figure 4 presents three striking examples. On the left, a *DN* article visually constructs a connection between a shot Maidan protester and the Russian president, and the headline also emphasizes Russia's importance. On the right, a story in *HS* associates an image of Putin with a picture of fleeing civilians. In both cases, imagery reflecting the negative consequences of the conflict is used to assign political responsibility. In the third example, *The Observer*[3] editorial constructs a textual association between Putin and the children's toys found at the MH17 crash site.[4]

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[3] *The Observer* is the Sunday edition of *The Guardian*.

[4] Indeed, compared with the print papers, *The Guardian*'s online edition had less scope to use compositional and layout elements as visual framing tools, as individual stories appeared on separate Web pages and typically included only one photo. Instead, its use of visuals to emphasize Russia's role in the

Figure 3. Othering Putin.
Sources: The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/22/eu-plans-further-sanctions-russia-putin-mh17), July 22, 2014 (photo: ITAR-TASS/Barcroft Media);* Dagens Nyheter*, July 24, 2014, p. 4 (photo: Ivan Sekretarev/AFP);* Die Welt*, February 14, 2015, p. 7 (photo: Sergei Chirikov/DPA).*

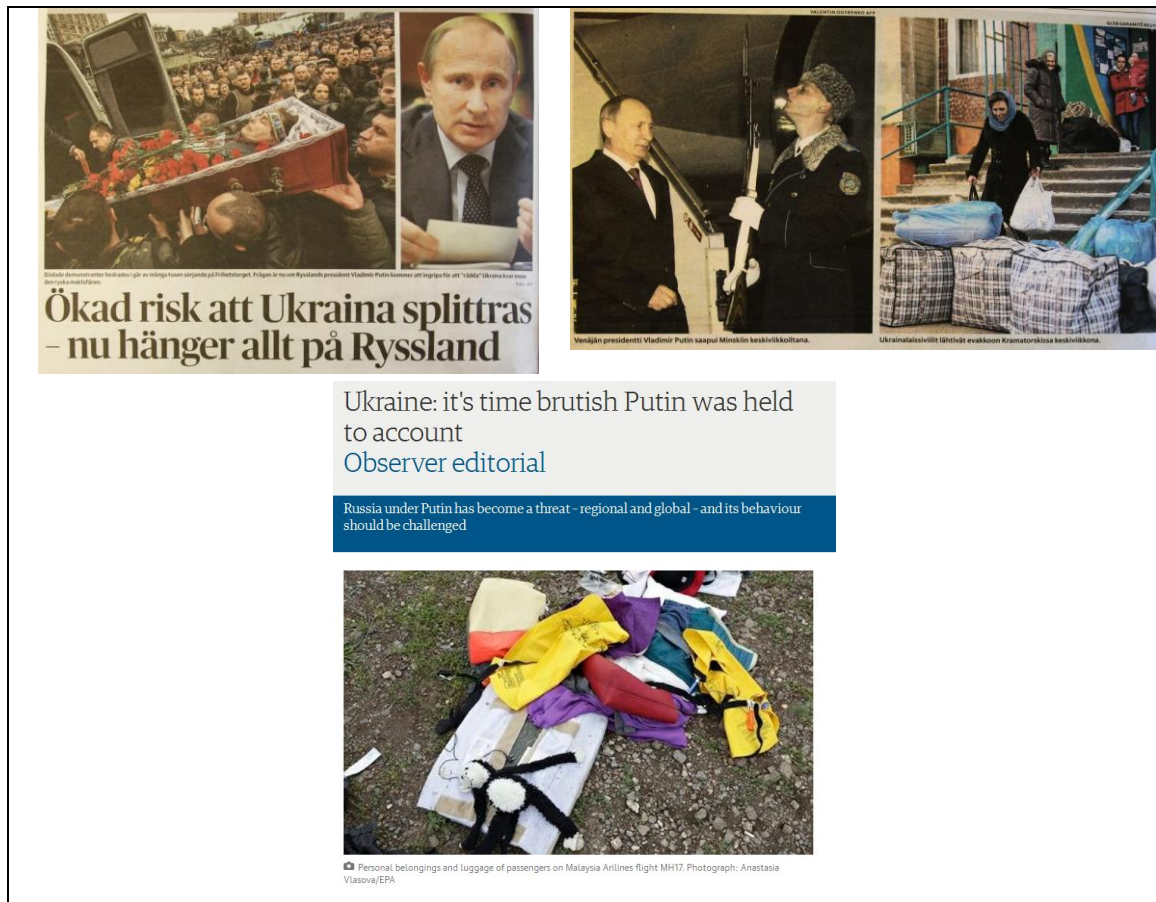conflict commonly involved assigning greater salience to Putin than to any other political leaders (see Table 1).

Figure 4. *Associating Putin with Ukraine's violence and distress.*

Sources: Dagens Nyheter*, February 23, 2014, p. 10 (photos: AFP);* Helsingin Sanomat*, February 12, 2015, p. A2 (photos: Valentin Ogyrenko/AFP; Gleb Garanits/Reuters);* The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/20/observer-editorial-flight-mh17-west-must-challenge-russia-putin), July 20, 2014 (photo: Anastasia Vlasova/EPA).*

On a number of occasions, *Die Welt* also used visual means to imply Russia's responsibility for the conflict. Figure 5 illustrates how the newspaper placed a caricature of Putin between pictures of destroyed property and Donetsk residents in July 2014 and again highlighted Putin as the principal actor in February 2015. In the latter case, Putin's relevance was communicated through the size and positioning of the picture on the right side of the page (see Jewitt & Oyama, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Putin's facial expression, communicating contentment, is also noteworthy. In comparison to the serious demeanor of the other three politicians, this expression invited readers to see Putin as the winner in a political battle and therefore as a dominant actor in the conflict. At the same time, Putin's expression can be seen to imply his indifference to the material destruction and civilian distress registered in other photos in the same spread.

Figure 5. ***Implying Putin's aggression, power, and responsibility.***
Sources: Die Welt*, July 30, 2014, p. 7 (photos: Ivan Bobersky/DPA; Sergei Supinsky/AFP; Bulent Kilic/AFP) and February 13, 2015, pp. 4–5 (photos: Sergei Grits/AP; Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP; Vasily Fedosenko/Reuters).*

The Russian intervention frame may also have informed depictions of Ukrainian actors that occasionally implied Ukraine's victimhood (Bayulgen & Arbatlib, 2013). The lower image in Figure 5, for instance, depicts President Poroshenko as a somewhat diminished figure; his pensive look and the downward tilt of his head communicate resignation, if not submission, especially as it is juxtaposed with a much larger image of a contented-looking Putin. More notably, all four papers published images of exhausted soldiers after the battle for Debaltseve in February 2015 (Figure 6). The *DN* and *HS* photos focused attention on the facial and bodily expressions of agony and chaotic retreat, and the headlines in *The Guardian* and *Die Welt* described the soldiers' feelings. These images arguably invited the reader to feel compassion for the Ukrainian troops and suggested that Ukraine was the victim in the conflict.

Notably, no such pictures were published of separatist troops. It is also worth noting that the papers customarily labeled the soldiers as "Ukrainian," so denoting the other party as non-Ukrainian. Additionally, images of the soldiers commonly highlighted Ukrainian flags or Ukrainian colors in the soldiers' uniforms or equipment.

Figure 6. Empathizing with Ukrainian soldiers.
Sources: The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/ukrainian-soldiers-share-horrors-of-debaltseve-battle-after-stinging-defeat), February 19, 2015 (photo: Gleb Garanich/Reuters);* Dagens Nyheter*, February 19, 2015, pp. 8–9 (photos: Paul Hansen/DN);* Die Welt*, February 20, 2015, p. 6 (photo: Ross McDonnell); and* Helsingin Sanomat*, February 19, 2015, pp. A20–A21 (photo: Gleb Garanich/Reuters).*

Images directing attention to Russian involvement and Ukrainian victimhood in the conflict were published in all four periods, but they were most in evidence during the MH17 and Minsk periods. In particular, *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, and *DN* seemed to place great emphasis on Russia's role in the conflict (see Table 2). In comparison, *HS* was notably reticent in its visual treatment of Russia's role in the conflict. Moreover, aside from one instance in which images were used to associate Putin with the flight of Ukrainian refugees (Figure 4), the Finnish daily largely avoided negative visual representations of Putin or any direct association between the Russian president and the warfare in Ukraine.

Framing a Geopolitical Conflict

Although images of Putin often served to highlight Russia's role in the conflict, he was not always presented alone. During the Minsk period in particular, he was frequently depicted next to other international leaders, notably Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande. In this way, although significantly less visible in the overall coverage, these two Western European leaders became salient actors in the conflict during the Minsk negotiations. All four newspapers also published images of Barack Obama in their coverage of the conflict (see Table 1). By visually highlighting the presence of these international leaders, these images reinforced a sense of the power and responsibility of other states in the Ukraine conflict and its resolution.

The visuals from the Minsk negotiations tended to represent Western leaders as closely aligned, in marked contrast to Putin's alienation (Figures 5 and 7). Figure 7 illustrates how *Die Welt* and *HS*, in particular, highlighted the close and even affectionate relationship between Merkel and Hollande. Meanwhile, images in *The Guardian* and *DN* implied Putin's isolation from the other three political leaders by using empty space and visual demarcation lines, appearing in the form of a tie (*The Guardian*) and a vertical line on wallpaper (*DN*) (see Jewitt & Oyama, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

The combined emphasis on the presence of international leaders and representational patterns that set the closeness of Western leaders against the isolation of the Russian president suggests that the visual coverage of the Minsk negotiations, in particular, was informed by and reproduced the framing of the Ukraine crisis as a geopolitical conflict. By focusing on superpower rivalry over the future of Ukraine within either the Western or the Russian sphere of influence, this framing downplays the significance and independent agency of Ukrainian actors. Accordingly, the insurgent fighters of eastern Ukraine and their supporters were habitually labeled as "pro-Russian separatists" in headlines and captions, reproducing a problematic generalization about the aims of the antigovernment opposition (see Boyd-Barrett, 2015) and implying their non-independent agency. Similarly, during the Minsk ceasefire negotiations, the official perception of the post-Yanukovych government as "pro-European" was visually supported in *The Guardian* and *DN* by depicting Poroshenko as close to or between Merkel and Hollande, implying his closeness to Western powers (Figure 7).

Figure 7*. **Visualizing Western closeness and Russian isolation.***
Sources: Die Welt*, February 21, 2015, p. 1 (photo: Thibault Camus/AP);* Helsingin Sanomat*, February 13, 2015, pp. A2–A3 (photo: Grigori Dukor/Reuters);* The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/15/angela-merkel-germany-ukraine-putin-obama), February 15, 2015 (photo: Sergei Grits/AP); and* Dagens Nyheter*, February 12, 2015, p. 14 (photo: AP).*

If the newspapers' representation of Ukrainian actors frequently contributed to the proxy war element of the geopolitical conflict frame, their coverage of the MH17 incident set Russia and the West in more direct confrontation. Imagery of the crash site and of the victims of the downed passenger plane, their personal belongings, and the mourners was a recurring visual theme during this period. On average, 45% of stories in the four papers at this time used visuals to focus attention on the incident and its human victims. As the casualties were overwhelmingly Western European, the newspapers' visual coverage of the MH17 incident often worked to present Westerners as victims in the conflict (Figure 8). The presence of "pro-Russian" separatist forces at the crash site was another prevalent visual theme in this period (featuring in 13% of stories on average). In this way, much of the visual coverage of the MH17 period tended to reproduce the geopolitical conflict frame.

Figure 8. Visualizing Western victimhood.

Sources: The Guardian *(www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/21/dutch-king-willem-alexander-meets-mh17-relatives-utrecht),* July 21, 2014 *(photo: Ever-Jan Daniels/AFP/Getty Images) and (www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/23/parents-of-three-children-killed-on-mh17-living-in-a-hell-beyond-hell) July 24, 2014 (photo: Australian Associated Press);* Helsingin Sanomat*, July 24, 2014, p. A22 (photo: Cris Toala Olivares/Reuters);* Die Welt*, July 21, 2014, p. 4 (photos: Reuters; Vadim Ghirda/AP; Paul Jeffers/Getty Images; Rob Stothard/Getty Images); and* Dagens Nyheter*, July 19, 2014, pp. 10–11 (photos: Phil Nijhuis/AP; Robin Utrecht/AOP; Joshua Paul/AOP; Paul Hansen/DN).*

Discussion

Visual framings of international conflicts can be interrogated both as patterns of representation guided by journalistic conventions and as the presumed intentional use of images to promote a certain interpretation of events. International photo agencies drove much of the visual coverage in all four newspapers: 78% in *The Guardian*, 92% in *Die Welt*, 65% in *DN*, and 60% in *HS* contained images provided by Western photo agencies. As a result, the newspapers shared highly congruent imagery during all of the four analyzed events—highlighting protests, opposition leaders, and the consequences of violence during the Maidan protests; riots, violent confrontations, and armed insurgency in Odessa; the wreckage of the plane crash site, insurgents guarding the site, and people in mourning in the wake of the

MH17 incident; and international leaders and Ukrainian soldiers during the negotiations in Minsk. These largely unintentional patterns of representation—dictated in part by Western photo agencies and the European media's shared news values and professional routines in covering international events (see also Curran, Esser, Hallin, Hayashi, & Lee, 2015)—contributed to the normalization of certain views of the conflict and its participants.

Yet, despite the broad similarities in visual coverage, each period also provided evidence of publication-specific visual framing decisions in which interacting visual and verbal cues were used to highlight particular aspects of events or to suggest a particular interpretation of the conflict. The newspapers arguably drew on the broader political and cultural context of the Western public sphere, dominated by the three alternate framings (national power struggle, Russian intervention, and geopolitical conflict), each of which finds fertile ground in deeply rooted Western views of Russia and Europe's easternmost parts. The national power struggle frame reflects cultural perceptions of post-Soviet states as still underdeveloped economically, politically, and culturally, their transition to liberal market economics hampered by authoritarian leaders and an inability to create a viable multiparty democracy, leading inevitably to winner-takes-all politics and societal instability (Kuus, 2004; Melegh, 2006). The Russian intervention frame is representative of the anti-Russian perspectives prevailing in Western news media coverage of previous international conflicts, such as the wars in Chechnya and the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 (e.g., Bayulgen & Arbatlib, 2013; Heinrich & Tanaev, 2009; Lieven, 2000; Malinkina & McLeod, 2000). This frame tends to equate Russia with the former Soviet Union, characterizing its role in international politics as an aggressor with imperial aspirations. Finally, the geopolitical conflict frame draws on historical Cold War narratives, depicting Russia and the West in a state of perpetual conflict (e.g., Hanson, 1995; Norris, 1995). However, when these frames are operationalized as journalistic representations to interpret unfolding events in Ukraine, it becomes clear how the differing roles they attribute to the main parties in the conflict can be used to advocate contrasting political responses.

The primarily negative representations of Putin in *The Guardian*, *Die Welt*, and *DN* suggest that their visual constructions support tougher policies against Russia. In this respect, *The Guardian* has been a staunch defender of NATO's military preparations as a necessary response to "Russian sabre-rattling" ("The Guardian view on NATO's exercises," 2015), and *Die Welt*'s coverage of the conflict can be read as expressing a committed pro-Western stance within Germany's highly charged political debate (Neukirch, 2014). *DN*'s effective construction of Putin as the "other" can be seen as a strategic choice for a paper that has actively promoted Sweden's accession to NATO (Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2014). Finally, while *HS* plays a similar role in the Finnish debate about Finland's Western (military) alignment, the paper's relatively moderate line on Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict may reflect Finland's traditional foreign policy consensus prioritizing good bilateral relations with the Kremlin (Etzold & Haukkala, 2013).

Conclusion

This exploration of visual framing of an international conflict in newspapers has highlighted how selected actors are rendered more visually salient than others and how their roles in the conflict are presented more or less favorably. It is our contention that any examination of how such political framings are articulated through subtle visual cues should combine a quantitative approach with close scrutiny of

photographs—approaching visual framing both in terms of patterns of visual coverage and at the level of individual images and layout solutions.

Additionally, as news framing is rarely exclusively confined to either verbal or visual elements, the present study highlights the importance of multimodal analysis. This entails an examination of images in terms of both their immediate textual context and layout and the dominant political and cultural frames informing journalistic interpretations of events (see also Reese, 2010). In this regard, the study further illuminates the active role of Western news media in reproducing narratives of the Ukraine conflict that tend to legitimize the actions of Western leaders while assigning blame primarily to Russia (see also Boyd-Barrett, 2015). The deconstruction of these dominant media narratives is especially urgent, as the Ukraine conflict is being used to recreate Cold War divisions and to naturalize superpower interests.

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