

## IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN GLOBAL CONFLICT: CORPUS-BASED CDA OF ENGLISH MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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### Abstract

*The Russo-Ukrainian conflict, one of the most significant geopolitical issues of the 21st century, has drawn considerable attention from global media. This study investigates how the conflict is framed in the news reports of Tehran Times and The New York Times, focusing on the linguistic constructions of pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian stances. The research is based on the premise that media discourse is shaped by underlying ideological biases, influenced by the social, political, and economic contexts in which media outlets operate. The study draws on an eclectic framework combining Van Leeuwen's socio-semantic model, Halliday's Transitivity model, and Van Dijk's Ideological Square to interpret the ideological implications of these linguistic choices. The findings indicate that The New York Times and Tehran Times media representation of Russo-Ukrainian conflict is biased. It reveals that Tehran Times adopts a pro-Russian stance, foregrounding Russia's military actions and frames them positively as strategic, coordinated, or expected, rather than aggressive. It backgrounds Russian forces as recipients as being repelled, or fought off against Ukraine. Whereas, Ukraine is consistently framed as a Western proxy, with its forces depicted as instruments of NATO and U.S. interests rather than independent actors in the conflict. On the other hand, The New York Times takes an anti-Russian stance, by consistently portraying Russia as the sole aggressor and invader, foregrounding Ukrainian victimhood. Thus, the present study demonstrates how linguistic choices in media discourse not only reflect but also reinforce ideological biases. It underscores the role of media in shaping public perception and geopolitical alignment through linguistic framing of the global conflicts.*

**Keywords:** *Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, Media Bias, Corpus Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Socio-semantic Categorization, Transitivity Analysis, Ideological Square Analysis.*

### Introduction

News coverage of major international conflicts is seldom a straightforward or impartial account of events. As Edward Said argued in 1997, what appears in the media is neither entirely spontaneous nor unconstrained; stories do not simply emerge from raw reality, nor do images and interpretations flow directly into public consciousness. Instead, outlets adhere to established conventions and structural constraints that profoundly influence the content delivered—often more than the events themselves (Said, 1997. p. 48–49).

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, now approaching its fourth year following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, exemplifies this dynamic. Far from being merely a regional confrontation, the conflict embodies deeper geopolitical rivalries, particularly between Western powers aligned with NATO and a counter-alignment that includes Russia and Iran.

This research examines how two prominent news outlets with contrasting geopolitical positions construct narratives around the war: The New York Times, a flagship American publication that broadly reflects Western viewpoints, and Tehran Times, an English-language Iranian newspaper that typically echoes perspectives critical of U.S. and Western dominance. Each outlet operates within a distinct national and ideological context—the United States as a key supporter of Ukraine, and Iran as a strategic partner of Russia, including through military cooperation—which inevitably shapes their selection of facts, allocation of voice, and overall framing.

Preliminary analysis of coverage from 2024 to late 2025 reveals stark contrasts. The New York Times routinely depicts Russia as the clear initiator of aggression, describing its military actions with terms such as “invasion,” “brutal assaults,” and “ferocious bombardment.” Reports highlight Ukrainian civilian suffering, infrastructure devastation, and the heavy human cost of the fighting, while presenting Ukraine as a resilient defender of democratic values. Ukrainian officials, particularly President Zelensky, receive prominent platforming, with emphasis on calls for continued Western assistance amid persistent Russian missile and drone attacks.

By comparison, Tehran Times tends to characterize the situation as a “crisis” or “conflict” precipitated by NATO expansion and American policies, aligning closely with official Russian interpretations. Its reporting often critiques Western powers for escalating tensions through proxy support for Ukraine, questions the sustainability of Western commitment, and frames the broader confrontation as part of a struggle against perceived U.S. hegemony. Scholars have long recognized the substantial power of news media to mold public understanding and even influence governmental decisions (Cohen, 1994; Bell, 1991; Hackett, 1984). Rather than functioning as neutral transmitters of information, media organizations serve as ideological actors that selectively construct reality through linguistic choices and narrative framing.

Adopting a social constructivist lens (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Fairclough, 1995), this study treats media discourse as an active force that shapes, rather than merely reflects, social and political realities. It applies corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover specific linguistic mechanisms—including lexical selection, collocation patterns, framing techniques, and the inclusion or exclusion of particular voices—that expose underlying ideological commitments.

The comparative design illuminates how outlets embedded in opposing geopolitical spheres interpret identical events in fundamentally different ways, demonstrating the pervasive influence of national interests on public discourse.

### Research Statement

The central premise of this research is that **media discourse is inherently biased and influenced by political, economic, and social contexts**. The study acts as a **corpus-based contrastive analysis** exploring how dominant political ideologies influence the news representation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in agencies hosted by countries with opposing political stances

### Research Questions

1. What are the salient **keywords** and common **semantic macrostructures** used to refer to the two conflicting sides?
2. What are the most recurrent **collocational features**?
3. How do these linguistic manifestations contribute to **media bias**?

### Research Objectives

- To explore how **dominant political ideology** influences news coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict
- To investigate how reports are **linguistically constructed** to fit the political stances of host countries.
- To bridge the **empirical gap** caused by a lack of comprehensive corpus linguistic analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.
- To provide a **comparative framework** that moves beyond the typical "East versus the West" template by including a **Iran's perspective**

### Research Significance

The importance of this study is closely linked to its main goals, which aim to uncover the

hidden language patterns of media bias in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. By connecting its findings with these goals, the research has significance in several ways:

- **Challenging Traditional Comparative Templates:** One major goal is to offer a comparative framework that goes beyond the usual "East versus the West" model. The study stands out by including a Persian perspective through the Iranian Tehran news media. This offers a unique view of the conflict from the Eastern view, which is often overlooked or ignored in previous literature studies.
- **Exposing Ideological Influence in "Independent" Media:** The research examines news agencies like NYT and Tehran Times, which claim to be independent and neutral. By analyzing how their reports are put together to align with the political views of their countries, the study helps to raise public awareness about how language is manipulated and how media discourse shapes public opinion.
- **Methodological Innovation via Corpus based CDA:** By combining the quantitative strength of Corpus Linguistics with the qualitative insights of Critical Discourse Analysis, the research enhances objectivity. This methodological integration is significant because it reduces the analyst's bias and ensures that the patterns found are statistically meaningful, rather than being selective.

In summary, the study serves as a lens for examining media language. Its goals are to uncover media biases, and its significance lies in the accuracy and depth with which it shows how political ideologies influence the reporting of global conflicts.

### Literature Review

The literature review in the provided paper focuses on recent research studies regarding the media representation of global conflicts, with a specific emphasis on the **Russo-Ukrainian conflict** through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The studies cited explore how different international media outlets employ linguistic strategies to frame the conflict according to their respective political and national interests.

The following table summarizes the literature review regarding media representation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

No	Study	Content	Linguistic Feature Patterns
1	Latif et al. (2024)	Analyzed <b>Western media</b> ( <i>The New York Times</i> , <i>The Guardian</i> ) during the first month of the war.	Framed <b>Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim</b> to align with geopolitical narratives promoting democracy.
2	Pavlichenko (2022)	Investigated polarization in <b>British and American press</b> coverage.	Identified discursive strategies such as <b>labeling, evidentiality, and hyperbolism</b> to create a dichotomy between in-group and out-group.

3	<b>Xu and Tao (2023)</b>	Compared the <b>Russian outlet TASS</b> and the <b>Ukrainian outlet UKRINFORM</b> .	TASS portrayed Ukraine as a <b>security threat</b> ; UKRINFORM aligned Ukraine with <b>Western nations</b> and stigmatized Russia.
4	<b>Alyahya (2023)</b>	Compared <i>The Washington Post</i> and <i>The Moscow Times</i> at the outbreak of the war.	<i>Washington Post</i> emphasized <b>negative aspects</b> and critical views of Russia; <i>Moscow Times</i> offered a <b>nuanced perspective</b> with positive actions from both the U.S. and Russia.
5	<b>Selvarajah and Fiorito (2023)</b>	Focused on the media's role in shaping opinion on <b>International Criminal Court (ICC)</b> investigations.	Media coverage reinforced the <b>legitimacy of the ICC</b> and influenced public understanding of accountability and international law.
6	<b>Mohammed (2023)</b>	Analyzed news reports from <b>CNN and Russia Today (RT)</b> .	<i>CNN</i> focused on themes of <b>anti-violence and human rights</b> ; <i>RT</i> emphasized <b>manipulation and alternative narratives</b> .
7	<b>Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2022)</b>	Explored how <b>Russian major newspapers</b> construct narratives.	Used media as a tool to <b>legitimize Kremlin actions</b> , framing the war as a defense against " <b>Western threats</b> ".
8	<b>Pomerantsev (2023)</b>	Conducted a corpus-driven analysis of the Russian paper <i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i> .	Employed strategies to <b>discredit the Ukrainian government</b> and used historical memory via terms like " <b>nazi</b> " and " <b>fascist</b> " to demonize the West.

These studies collectively demonstrate how discourse strategies reflect broader political agendas and play a critical role in constructing the social realities of the conflicting nations. In these studies, Russia has been framed negatively in Western media often emphasizes its own geopolitical perspectives, whereas the alternative media mostly portrays it neutrally.

#### Methodology

#### Data for Corpus Analysis

The aim of this study is to examine how the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is portrayed in online news media discourse; the data are collected from two news media sources that reflect distinct political orientations towards the conflict. The first *New York Times* headquartered in New York, and the other is *Tehran Times*, an Iranian online media headquartered in Tehran. On one hand, *New York Times* is a major American independent news organization and on the other hand *Tehran Times* is Iran's one of the major independent media systems. Therefore, the selection of these two news media sources fulfills the purpose of examining how reality is framed. The comparative data of this study will enable the identification of patterns of representation and give a strong foundation for analytical discussion.

### **Data for Critical Discourse Analysis**

The choice of the sample texts to be used for the critical discourse analysis is guided by the corpus-based analysis of the both *Tehran Times* and *The New York Times* news corpora. The news reports (texts) are then selected through purposive sampling, which according to Seale (2012) are chosen on the basis of possessing a substantial connection to the subject matter or topic of the research (p. 237). The sampling preserved the following criteria:

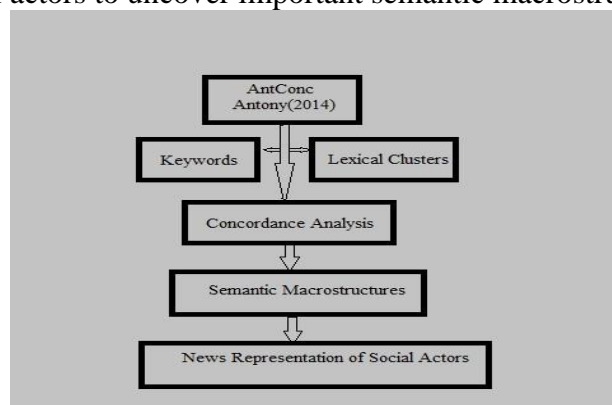
- 1- The news reports chosen must cover the issue of Russo-Ukrainian conflict.
- 2- The sampling period remains between 2022 to 2025. The reports are however chosen based on the reports that are published within the escalation period of the conflict.
- 3- The average size of the reports that were chosen must be between 700-850 words.

### **The analytical method**

The research is based on a multi-methodological approach that involves both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. The data is quantified on the principles of corpus-based approach to determine the frequency of the input data and to access the pattern of linguistic choices that are developed with the intention to interpret the news framing of each opposing side individually. The CDA eclectic model is used for the qualitative approach.

### **Micro-Level Quantitative Analysis**

Figure below illustrates the use of AntConc software at the micro-linguistic level. To explore the keywords, lexical clusters, collocations and their concordances related to the social actors to uncover important semantic macrostructures.



*Figure 1 Micro-Linguistic Level Approach*

### **Macro-level CDA Qualitative Analysis**

The analysis at this stage will focus on the polarized news coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. An eclectic Critical Discourse Analysis model will be used to do



qualitative analysis of the data. The model is illustrated below in figure.

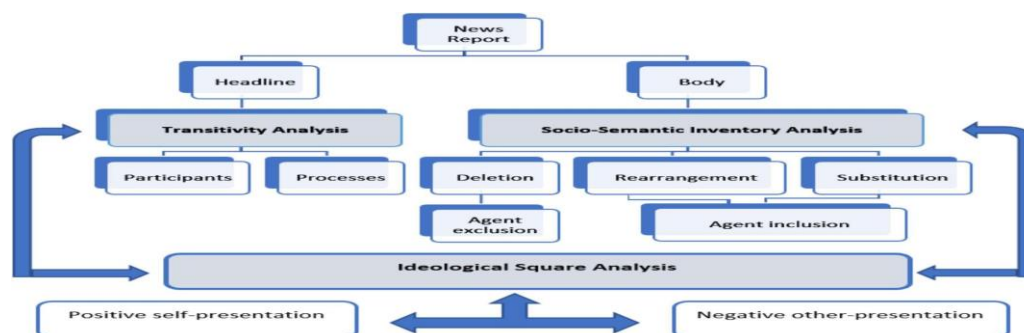


Figure 2 Macro-level CDA Qualitative Analysis

## Results and Discussion

This Research has presented a detailed analysis of the two corpora—the Iranian Tehran Times and the American The New York Times.

### A Comparative Discussion of Bias Reflections at the Micro-Level

The keyword analysis reveals *ideologically meaningful differences* in the way the two news sources construct social actors. The following diagram (Figure 3) is intended to illustrate these contrasts, showing how each corpus prioritizes and foregrounds different lexical fields, thereby reflecting divergent ideological orientations in their coverage of the conflict.

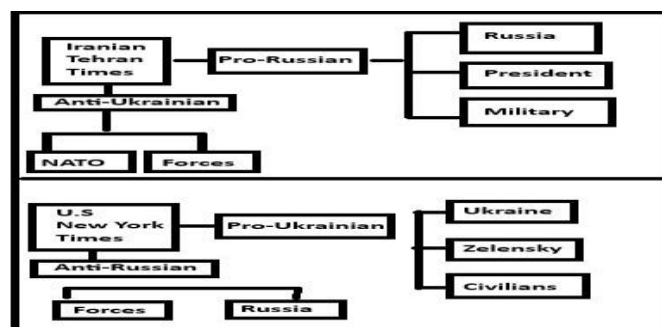


Figure 3 Variations in the keywords used by T.T. and NYT to represent the two conflicting sides.

The analysis in Figure 3 highlights how the Tehran Times (T.T.) and New York Times (NYT) use lexical strategies to frame social actors in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, revealing pro-Russian bias in T.T. and pro-Ukrainian sympathy in NYT. T.T. consolidates Russia, its President, and Military into a unified "semantic block" emphasizing authority and defense. This cohesive portrayal portrays Russia as a singular, strong entity.

Ukraine, however, links narrowly to NATO and Ukrainian Forces, framing it as a Western proxy. This minimizes Ukraine's agency, shifting blame to external provocation and omitting political leaders, civilians, or diversity—erasing Ukrainian autonomy and suffering.

### Contrasting NYT Strategies

NYT differentiates Ukrainian actors distinctly: Ukraine as sovereign state, Zelensky as unifying leader, and Civilians as humanitarian focus. This layered approach humanizes Ukraine, emphasizing legitimacy and conflict's human cost.

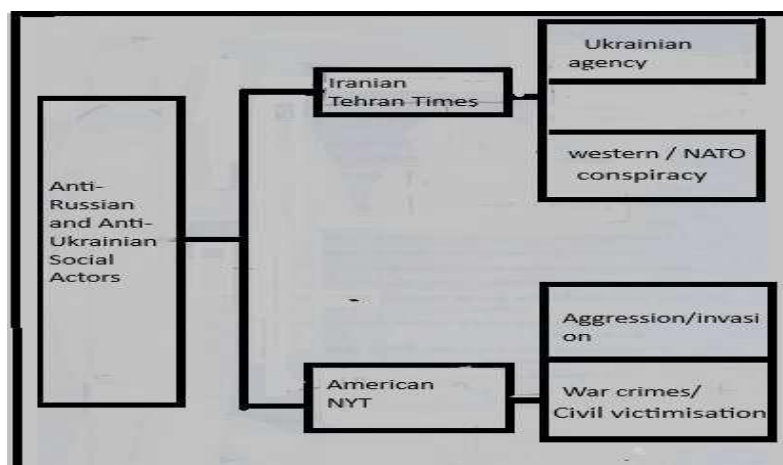
Russia splits into state and "Russian Forces," distributing blame across political and

military spheres. This constructs Russia as aggressively responsible, with institutional complexity underscoring dysfunction.

### Negative Framing

Both outlets negatively frame adversaries, but T.T. builds anti-Ukrainian frames on Western aggression themes, while NYT roots anti-Russian frames in violence and culpability—diverging sharply in thematic foundations.

This demonstrates how keyword clustering shapes ideological narratives: T.T. defends Russia by externalizing threats; NYT legitimizes Ukraine by personalizing resistance.



*Figure 4 Anti-Russian and Anti-Ukrainian thematic frames*

Keyword variations in Figure 3 reveal divergent lexical strategies employed by the *Tehran Times* (T.T.) and *New York Times* (NYT) to construct principal social actors. The T.T. consolidates pro-Russian entities—Russia, the President, and the Military—into a unified semantic block, emphasizing authority and defensive coherence. Ukrainian-aligned actors, however, cluster narrowly around NATO and Ukrainian Forces, suppressing political agency and recasting the conflict as Western provocation rather than interstate rivalry. Notable omissions of Ukrainian leadership, civilians, and diversity further diminish its sovereignty.

Conversely, the NYT differentiates Ukrainian actors into distinct categories—Ukraine (sovereign entity), Zelensky (unifying leader), and Civilians (humanitarian focus)—humanizing them while distributing Russian agency across state and military spheres to underscore culpability and dysfunction.

Figure 4 delineates anti-adversary semantic macrostructures. T.T. anti-Ukrainian frames center on Western/NATO conspiracy, embedding Ukraine as a proxy amid encirclement narratives, and delegitimization of agency via associations with instability and escalation.

Selective absences amplify ideological divergence: T.T. mutes Ukrainian civilian suffering, prioritizing geopolitics; NYT elides Ukrainian escalation, bolstering defensive legitimacy. Thus, shared themes of threat and violence are inverted—outward (West vs. Russia) in T.T., inward (Russian aggression) in NYT.

Figure 5 illustrates pro-actor frames foregrounding legitimacy, strategy, and centrality in both outlets, yet semantic components diverge markedly, aligning with each newspaper's geopolitical orientation and yielding opposing representational logics.

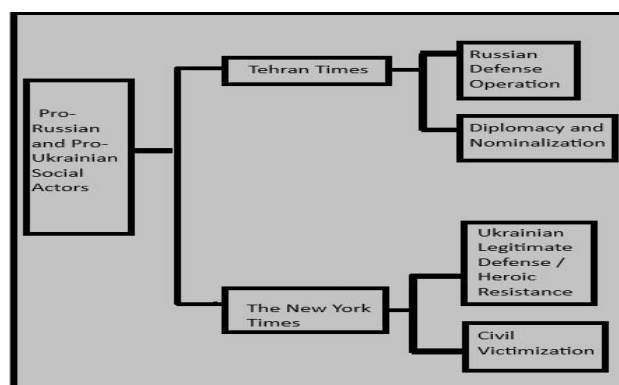


Figure 5 Pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainian thematic frames

### Pro-Actor Thematic Macrostructures

Figure 5 elucidates pro-actor frames foregrounding legitimacy, strategy, and centrality, yet with profoundly dissimilar semantics. T.T. pro-Russian macrostructures cluster around the terms such as *defence*, *operations* and *diplomacy/normalisation*. Defensive discourse lexicalises Russian actions as necessary responses to existential threats, framing military operations as protective restraint via unified leadership portrayals. Diplomatic elements—negotiations, de-escalation initiatives—position Russia as a responsible, solution-oriented actor, yielding a narrative of strategic authority and justification.

NYT pro-Ukrainian frames, conversely, integrate terms such as *legitimate*, *defence/heroic resistance* and *civil victimisation*. Defensive lexical patterns invoke international law, courage, resilience, and Zelensky's democratic resolve to depict Ukraine as autonomously resisting *unprovoked aggression*. Civilian victimisation—*bombardment*, *displacement*, *casualties*—serves as moral axis, framing resistance as imperative survival struggle and elevating Ukraine's righteousness.

These structures embed opposing ideologies: T.T. emphasises Russian *restraint and coherence*; whereas, NYT prioritises Ukrainian *heroism and vulnerability*. These divergent thematic compositions thus shape prioritised aspects, amplified voices, and suppressed counter-narratives.

### Polarization at the Macro-Level

This section answers RQ B (see Section 1.2), which examines how the Tehran Times and the New York Times reported on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, with a particular focus on identifying the ideological patterns that shaped the representation of Russian and Ukrainian social actors and their respective actions leading to bias in their representation. The findings are organised in accordance with sub-questions B.4, B.5, and B.6, and are interpreted through the analytical lens of van Dijk's (1998) *ideological square* to explicitly portray the underlying biases in each news media.

The discussion begins by comparing the representation of pro-Russian, anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, and anti-Ukrainian social actors across the socio-semantic representational strategies, transitivity patterns, and participant role assignments employed by both news sources. The comparative analysis of the Tehran Times and the New York Time is presented in the following section.

#### 4.1 Ideological Discourse in news Coverage of Tehran Times and New York Times

The representational strategies in the Tehran Times and New York Times (NYT) instantiate van Dijk's (1998) ideological square, polarizing Russian and Ukrainian actors through lexical choices, role assignments, and socio-semantic patterns (see Section 2.2.3).



The Tehran Times legitimizes Russian actors (*Russia, the President, the Military*), by associating them with *strategic defense and diplomacy*, thus projecting coherent authority. Ukrainian actors, conversely, are collectivized under *NATO* or *Western influence*, embedding them in a narrative of *external manipulation and reduced autonomy*.

The NYT inverts these polarities: Russian actors are lexicalized as aggressors (*invaders, forces, attackers*), activated in destructive processes to escalate the conflict. Ukrainian actors gain positive, individualized references (*Ukraine, Zelensky, civilians*), emphasizing their resilience, suffering, and legitimacy to evoke empathy.

#### Comparative Socio-Semantic Patterns

Strategy	Tehran Times (Russia/Ukraine)	NYT (Russia/Ukraine)
Lexicalization	Legitimizing (strategic, diplomatic) / Delegitimizing (NATO proxies, provocation)	Aggression (invaders, attackers) / Positive (resilient civilians, Zelensky)
Role Assignment	Russia: Individualized authority / Ukraine: Collectivized puppets	Russia: Activated destroyers / Ukraine: Individualized victims
	Ukraine/West as instigators / Russia as stabilizer	Russia as aggressor / Ukraine as defender

Socio-semantic choices further establish ideology: Tehran Times collectivizes Ukraine to delegitimize agency, while NYT individualizes Ukrainians for moral elevation. reinforces this—Tehran Times foregrounds Western escalation via Ukraine; NYT highlights Russian aggression. These patterns align narratives with geopolitical commitments, portraying Russia in (Tehran Times) or Ukraine in (NYT) as justified victim against a hostile other, respectively.

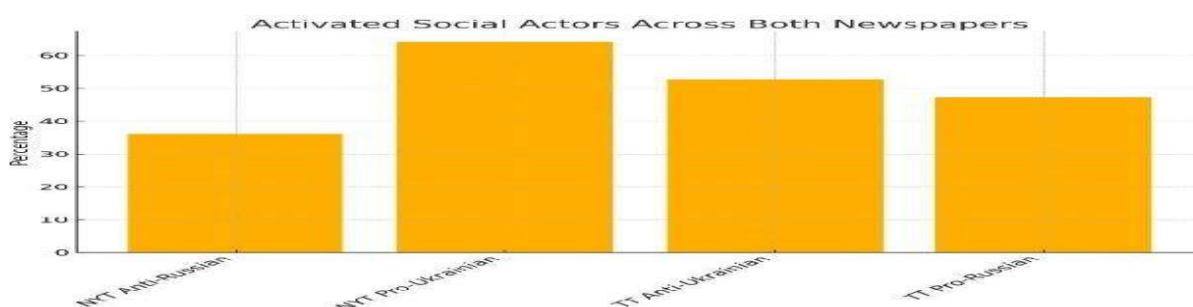
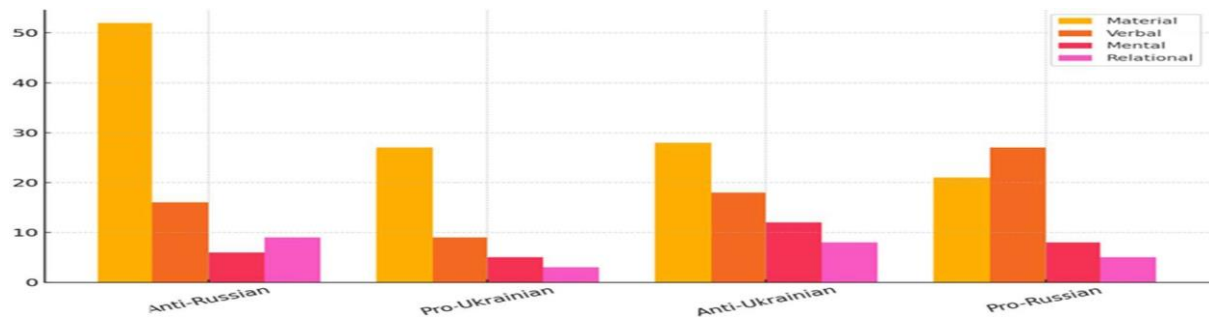


Figure 6 Comparative distribution of activated roles in T.T and NYT

The New York Times (NYT) and Tehran Times construct divergent ideological realities of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict through contrasting transitivity patterns, as evidenced in Figure 6.5. In the NYT, anti-Russian actors dominate material processes, their actions are lexically framed via *bombing, invading, and striking*, which encode inherent aggression and implicitly attribute responsibility for violation and transgression, similarly, relational processes frame Russians as disorganized. On the other hand, Pro-Ukrainian actors are framed defensively such as *resisting, recovering territory*; with Zelensky being made

prominent in verbal processes of *warning*, *appealing* etc. Mental processes attribute perceptiveness to Ukrainians which frames them positively as being aware, rational, and morally engaged.



The Tehran Times reverses this configuration. Pro-Russian actors gain strategic material processes via (*conducting operations*, *defending borders*); whereas, the representation of anti-Ukrainian social actors relies on material processes of provocation such as *attacking* and *shelling* which foreground aggression and hostility. On the other hand, pro-Russian actors are predominantly realized through **verbal processes**, thereby projecting authority, whereas Ukrainians are comparatively **marginalized** in discursive representation.

#### Comparative Process Distribution

Process Type	NYT (Anti-Russian / Pro-Ukrainian)	Tehran Times (Pro-Russian / Anti-Ukrainian)
Material	52 (aggression: bombing, invading) / 27 (defense: resisting)	21 (strategic: defending) / 28 (provocation: attacking)
Verbal	Minimal Russian / 11 (Zelensky: warnings)	18 (Russian officials) / 9 (Ukrainian: undermined)
Mental	Ukrainian perception	Russian rationality
Relational	Russian failure (isolated)	Ukrainian extremism (proxies)
Civilian Agency	Near-zero (passivized victims)	Near-zero (passivized victims)

This bilateral polarization aligns with van Dijk's ideological square in which material processes foreground agency; verbal processes construct authority (Zelensky in NYT; Moscow in Tehran Times); mental/relational encode moral evaluations. Civilians remain discursively effaced, prioritizing militarized narratives over humanitarian realities. These transitivity patterns generate ideologically opposed representations, revealing how each news media constructs a polarized view of the conflicting sides through distinct discursive strategies.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that media representations of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict are deeply shaped by ideological alignments embedded in national and geopolitical interests, rather than by neutral reportage. Through a corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis integrating van Leeuwen’s socio-semantic model, Halliday’s transitivity framework, and van Dijk’s ideological square, the analysis reveals systematic polarization in the Tehran Times and The New York Times. The Tehran Times consistently legitimizes Russian actions through defensive, strategic, and diplomatic framings while delegitimizing Ukraine by collectivizing it as a Western proxy and suppressing civilian suffering. In contrast, The New York Times foregrounds Russian aggression and moral culpability through activated material processes, while humanizing Ukraine by emphasizing civilian victimhood, democratic resistance, and leadership agency. These divergent linguistic strategies illustrate how transitivity patterns, lexical choices, and role assignments function ideologically to construct competing realities of the same conflict. Overall, the findings confirm that media discourse does not merely reflect geopolitical conflicts but actively participates in reproducing and legitimizing ideological narratives, underscoring the powerful role of language in shaping public perception of global wars.

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