

Analogical Reasoning: Historical Parallels and Metaphors in the 2022 War Narratives in Ukraine and Russia

YULIA KURNYSHOVA*

University of Bremen, Germany

Abstract: Analogical reasoning is a discursive strategy often used by decision- and policy-makers, think tankers, academics, and cultural producers to either justify actions or learn lessons from references to events in the past. This comparative essay conceptualizes the drastic distinction between the functioning of analogical reasoning in Russian and Ukrainian discourses during the current war. The author argues that the asymmetry between the two modes of analogical reasoning is glaring when it comes not only to the interpretation of history, but also to the drastically dissimilar emotional modalities, understandings of ontological security and rationality, justice and many other concepts shaping Ukraine’s and Russia’s international agency.

Keywords: analogical reasoning, Russia’s war in Ukraine, political discourse, political using of past, historical parallels

Introduction¹

Analogical reasoning is a discursive strategy often used by decision- and policy-makers (Houghton 1996), think tankers, academics, and cultural producers to either justify actions or learn lessons from references to events in the past. As an analytical concept, it has been used in many disciplines, including foreign policy analysis (see Dörfler and Gehring 2021), to understand how new public and professional narratives pop up at the intersection of different parallels and comparisons, connecting the current developments with historical antecedents (Macagno, Walton, and Tindale 2017). This approach is particularly useful in the context of the Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which has initially intellectually immobilized a significant part of the scholarly community due to the much-discussed irrationality and brutality of the invasion, as well as a lack of clarity regarding its ultimate goals.

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* *ikurnyshova@gmail.com*; ORCID: 0009-0006-5717-4804.

As seen from the perspective of competing analogies (Angstrom 2011, 225), narratives as cognitive tools always include a comparative juxtaposition of similar cases, which, according to this viewpoint, the human mind is more ready to recognize than identify distinctions between cases. This explains ubiquitous references to the selectively memorialized past as justifications for contemporary policies, as well as frequent projections of historical events into today's politics (for instance, a new "Cold War" and a new "iron curtain"). Traumatic components of historical thinking and knowledge are particularly instrumentalized as models and metaphors of injustice and human suffering. Through constructing similar reference points in our discourses, we establish connections with – and thus are dependent on – events and concepts of the past (for example, containment and deterrence), which creates a framework for cyclical interpretation of international politics that tends to, even if indirectly, mirror and imitate the previous patterns and paradigms.

This comparative essay seeks to conceptualize the drastic distinction between the functioning of analogical reasoning in Russian and Ukrainian discourses during the current war. I argue that Russian mainstream narratives use historical parallels for normalizing and rationalizing aggression by discursively deploying it in centuries-long traditions of Russian colonial rule. As for Ukraine, analogical reasoning is by and large a communicative tool for building and enhancing the much-needed discursive liaisons with the Euro-Atlantic security community.

Kremlin's Historical Imagery

On the Russian side, analogical reasoning was one of major triggers of the war, including manipulations with historical facts and circulation of narratives directly or indirectly supportive of the invasion. The main point was to misrepresent the Ukrainian government as a Nazi-type of regime, which – in the imagination of the Russian ruling elite – makes today's Russia an analog of the Stalinist Soviet Union fighting the fascist Germany. This type of analogical reasoning was initially designed for ostracizing Ukraine internationally and on this basis attempting to find a common anti-Ukrainian platform with major Western powers, yet ultimately it ended up predominantly addressing Russian domestic audience, as exemplified by a patriotic installation constructed at the Red Square in November 2022 and meant to recreate the gloomy and militaristic atmosphere of the Great Patriotic War.

The historical imagery dominant in the Kremlin denies meaningful normative and institutional changes occurred in world politics since the middle of the past century, and reproduces antiquated patterns of power-based geopolitics (Budraitkis 2022a). This is what explains Putin's performative self-placement in a historical chain of Russian leaders such as Peter the Great (Kharatyan 2022). This type of analogical reasoning not only deploys Putin's Russia within a predetermined and inevitable pattern of path dependence, but – even if indirectly – denies the very idea of political choice as a backbone of state's subjectivity. Moreover, this manipulative strategy deprives Putin of political responsibil-

ity for the decisions that he made in 2014 and 2022 (Budraitskis 2022b) as alleged reactions to the immanent Western “Russophobia”. Putin’s analogies between the Borodino battle against French troops in 1812, the German invasion of 1941 and the current war in Ukraine (Spektr Online 2022) as a justification of permanently ill-intended Europe attest to deeply anti-European crux of the official analogical reasoning. It reaches peak in an attempt to misrepresent Russia as a victim of Western colonialism, and therefore to plug into post-colonial discourses with their strong Western-sceptic underpinnings particularly shared in the Global South (see Dharmaputra 2023, contribution to this Forum). This performative (and very much trans-ideological in Braghiroli 2023 sense, contribution to this Forum) rebranding of Russia from empire to an anti/de-colonial power is a follow-up to the previous record of opportunistically re-defining key concepts constitutive for Western political vocabularies, such as security, sovereignty, freedom or human rights.

Yet ultimately, attempts to rationalize and normalize military force projection through historical analogies produced a necropolitical effect duly noticed by some scholars: as Maksim Hanukai puts it, in today’s Russia “ghosts of the dead threaten to displace the living... (which – Author) testifies to the emergence of spectral practices that ask the living to act as surrogates for the dead” (Hanukai 2020, 802). Other authors see an eschatological framing of the war, with the rhetoric of the Final Battle, atomic Apocalypse “and destruction for sinners, and deliverance and redemption for true believers... Putin had completed his ideological radicalization process towards the final stage of invoking his subjects to sacrifice themselves and obtain radical redemption for the Russian nation” (Drost and Graaf 2022, 42).

Ukraine’s “Rhetorical Pragmatism”

In the Ukrainian case analogies are basically meant to construct a type of discourse to resonate within Euro-Atlantic political community and ultimately accept the Ukrainian narrative as a legitimate frame for security assistance and institutional partnership. In this regard, Ukrainian analogical reasoning might be qualified as “rhetorical pragmatism” in search for “working truth” and “useful knowledge” (Kornprobst 2007, 34). It plays a role of “cognitive road maps” for defining “who is part of the ingroup and who is not” (Hemmer 1999, 270).

Ukraine does not need to waste time for finding analogies to justify its military resistance for domestic audience. The Ukrainian society is highly consolidated on the basis of national identity and ready to keep withstanding Russian invasion till the full de-occupation of the country (Ilko Kucheriv 2023). Therefore, in Ukraine analogical reasoning is much less a component of different ideological platforms within the political establishment or an element of intra-elite discussions, and much more a communicative tool that serves the purpose of constructing a war-time narrative understandable for and resonating among Ukraine’s Western partners. Analogical reasoning therefore becomes a factor of political communication and change in Ukraine’s relations with the Euro-Atlantic West. This com-

municative function so far is not duly reflected in the foreign policy analysis literature that primarily focuses on major powers whose resources and geopolitical weight allow them to choose and swap strategies, as well as impose their policies on other states (Hehir 2006). Much less is known about the usage of analogical reasoning by countries that became victims of foreign aggressions and desperately need international solidarity, compassion and help. In this respect Ukraine is an important case that diversifies our knowledge about historical references for defensive purposes in a situation of external invasion.

In Ukraine, analogical reasoning is, on the one hand, a specific form of discursive bordering vis-a-vis Russia through portraying Putin's Russia as a new edition of the Soviet Union; on the other hand, it is a de-bordering vis-a-vis the West through a search of common normative denominators, a shared language and consonant meanings as the dominant factors for Ukraine's prospective integration with the EU and NATO. Therefore, analogical reasoning was instrumental for drawing parallels between the Russia-initiated war and the Nazi aggression of 1941–1945 (Mind 2022), which solidified the mass-scale armed resistance to Russia's intervention. The most evident examples of analogical reasonings in public discourses are similarities between Putin's and Hitler's visions of geopolitics, which makes possible looking at the war in Ukraine through the lens of the Nazi Germany's annexation of Sudetenland and the Anschluss of Austria. President Zelensky, for instance, pointed to similar tactics used by the Nazi Germany and today's Russian army targeted to destroy the infrastructure and execute civil population (RBC.UA 2022).

In the meantime, parallels with the Second World War are instrumental for boosting West's self-confidence in opposing Moscow's aggression. It is through this lens that one ought to interpret Zelensky's analogies between Ukraine's Armed Forces fighting Russian army and US soldiers in Europe in 1944 (CNN 2022). Similarly, Zelensky refers to the de-occupation of Kherson as a success story through comparing it with the Normandy operation during the Second World War (Zelensky 2022d). The pro-western imagery includes references to post-war reconstruction for Ukraine as a new Marshall Plan. This systemic usage of analogical reasoning by key Ukrainian decision makers is the direct opposite to Moscow's interpretation of the Great Patriotic War as a justification for blurring the lines between Western democracies and the Stalinist regime.

Through historical analogies Ukraine also promotes its understanding of normative justice, which includes reparations and exclusion of the aggressor from international organizations. Experience of the defeated Germany (the Nuremberg metaphor) and analogies with war crimes in the Balkans (the Hague metaphor) look pertinent at this juncture (Zelensky 2022b). Another good example is the reference to Russian military atrocities in Ukraine as genocide that has been a key part of Ukrainian narrative since the de-occupation of Bucha (Diskusia 2022) and ultimately transformed into political qualifications – for example, in the resolution of the Estonian parliament. Having addressed the Kneset, President Zelensky drew parallels between the lexemes of “the ultimate resolution of the Ukrainian question” nowadays and “the ultimate resolution of the Jewish question” decades ago (Zelensky 2022a).

The characterization of Russia's war-by-proxies in Ukraine as terrorism (Evropeiska Pravda 2022), with the ensuing semiotic references to the war on terror, is another discursive move that fits in a communicative strategy of "rhetorical pragmatism". This discursive frame refers to the official characterization of the war in Donbas during the Poroshenko presidency as an "anti-terrorist operation", and in 2022 was reinforced by parallels between the city of Mariupol destroyed by Russian invaders and Srebrenica (Gordon 2022), or Aleppo (ZN.UA 2022). The trope of "missile terror" (Zelensky 2022c), with all due understanding of its journalist connotations, semantically refers to the phenomenon of terrorism as a potential common denominator and a point of convergence of Ukrainian and Western narratives of security.

Worth mentioning in this context is variability and multi-dimensionality of analogical reasoning in Ukrainian discourses. A good illustration would be different modalities of referring to *Holodomor* for making political arguments. Thus, the narrative of distancing from Russia as Ukraine's radical Other includes references to what might be dubbed domestic colonization, and more particularly to centuries-long practices of forceful expropriations of harvests as repeated acts of genocide from the times of Ivan the Terrible to *Holodomor* (Yermolenko 2022). When it comes to boosting Ukraine's reputation as a reliable and trustworthy partner in solving war-related crises, *Holodomor* features as a constitutive reference point for launching a program named "Grain from Ukraine" and aimed at teaming up with the EU for alleviating food insecurities in the Global South (European Commission 2022).

Conclusion

This comparative analysis might be a helpful contribution to academic discourses that aim to debunk the remnants of Russo-centric conceptualizations of Russian–Ukrainian relations, and to identify antagonistic gaps and cleavages between the predominant state of minds in both countries. The asymmetry between the two modes of analogical reasoning is glaring when it comes not only to the interpretation of history, but also to the emotional modalities, understandings of ontological security (see Hosaka 2023, contribution to this Forum) and rationality, justice and many other concepts shaping Ukraine's and Russia's international agency.

Importantly, the two discourses have different audiences. Russian speech acts of analogical reasoning might resonate in countries of South East Asia and Latin America that seek to remain neutral and avoid taking sides (see Tabosa 2023, contribution to this forum), yet are becoming irrelevant even among Putin sympathizers in the West (see Braghiroli 2023, contribution to this forum). By and large, the Kremlin-produced narratives are mostly targeting Russian domestic viewership and readership, while Ukrainian leadership utilizes the semiotic potential of analogical reasoning for cementing existing partnerships with liberal democracies and paving the way for further integrating into the Euro-Atlantic West. By the same token, President Zelensky's speech at the G20 summit held in Bali in

November 2022, along with the launching of the “Grain from Ukraine” program supported by the EU seem to indicate Ukraine’s intention to evoke a sense of solidarity in countries of the Global South that went through similar ordeals of decolonization and state building.

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