Conflict Dynamics as a Narrative Process: The Evolution of Competing Conflict Narratives between Russia and Ukraine and the Narratives of the International Human Rights Bodies between 2014 and 2022

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Abstract

Drawing on the studies on narrative processes underlying conflict escalation, this article examines the constitution and evolution of conflicting narratives between Russia and Ukraine as expressed in their foreign policy discourse and key political pronouncements between 2014 and 2022. Furthermore, it compares Russia's and Ukraine's official narratives with those developed by the international human rights community using the example of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) created by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in March 2014. This comparative analysis aims to understand the differences between discursive elements constituting narratives of the parties in conflict and of an international body aiming to achieve accountability for human rights

violations as a basis for reconciliation, which could serve as entries for peacebuilding. Finally, the theoretical framework of conflict escalation as a narrative process proposed by Sara Cobb is used to understand the dynamics of conflict escalation from 2014 to 2022. The mapping and analysis of narratives undertaken in the article show the key issue of contention between Russia and Ukraine during the studied period was the interpretation of the legitimacy of the use of force. The key consequence of the discursive attribution of conflict escalation and violence became the evolving political legitimisation of the use of force fuelling conflict escalation and protraction.

Introduction

While acknowledging that intractable conflicts 'which may last decades or even centuries, involve disputes over real issues, including territory, natural resources, power, self-determination, statehood and religious dogma', Bar-Tal (2013: 1) holds that they are 'accompanied by intense socio-psychological forces which make them especially difficult to resolve'. Similarly, Ramsbotham (2010: 7) sees violent conflicts as 'conflicts of belief' that involve '[c]onflicting perceptions, embattled beliefs, hardened attitudes, opposed truths, segmented realities, contrasting mental worlds, antithetic ideological axioms, incompatible ideological beliefs, alternative mental representations, differing views about reality, divergent discursive representations, different discourse worlds [and others]'.

In the last decade, there has been a growing body of research across several fields such as social psychology (Bar-Tal 2007, 2013, 2020), conflict studies and international relations (Jackson 2009; Ramsbotham 2010; Cobb 2013; Jackson & Dexter 2014; Kaufman 2015), critical terrorism studies (Wilhelmsen 2017) and others focusing on narratives and other discursive aspects underlying mobilisation and collective identity construction in conflict escalation, protraction and transformation. Drawing on the studies on narrative processes underlying conflict escalation, this article examines the constitution and evolution of conflicting narratives between Russia and Ukraine as expressed in their foreign policy discourse and key political pronouncements between 2014 and 2022. Furthermore, it compares Russia's and Ukraine's official narratives with those developed by the international human rights community using the example of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) created by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in March 2014. This comparative analysis aims to understand the differences between discursive ele-

ments constituting narratives of the parties in conflict and of an international body aiming to achieve accountability for human rights violations as a basis for reconciliation, which could serve as entries for peacebuilding. Finally, the article asks the question of what the analysis of narrative structure evolution and narrative processes reveals about the nature of conflicts and conflict transformation during the studied period.

Scholars studying the role of narrative patterns in conflict escalation highlight a normative aspect in the study of the way in which conflict discourses are constructed and reproduced. As argued by Jackson (2009: 182), '[a]t the very least, revealing the mechanisms by which agents and structures construct and reproduce conflict discourses provides important clues for conflict resolution practitioners about how to counteract, deconstruct and ultimately transform such discourses and patterns of behavior'. Similarly, Cobb (2013: 99) holds that the analysis of narrative patterns of conflict escalation could play a role in conflict transformation: 'This matters because, if we could refocus our attention on narrative patterns and not find ourselves, as analysts, mired in the game theoretic discourse of "needs" and "interests" or "rights," we might be able to track the process of conflict escalation as a function of narrative and contribute to the transformation of the conflict narrative, thus interrupting the escalatory process and generating new, less dangerous narrative patterns.'

The first part of the article provides an overview of narrative theories of conflict escalation, the corpus of data selected for analysis and the methods of thematic mapping and narrative analysis used for data analysis. The analysis section is structured chronologically around several key episodes of contention between Ukraine and Russia such as the change of government in February 2014, the annexation of Crimea, the protests and the violent conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Different sections of the analysis section study the evolution of key narrative structures and narrative processes between 2014 and 2022. In the last part, the theoretical framework of conflict escalation as a narrative process proposed by Cobb (2013) is used to discuss the evolution of key narrative processes from 2014 will 2022.

Narratives and conflict dynamics

In the last years, there has been a growing interest in narrative research applied in a number of areas including foreign policy (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2014; Faizullaev & Cornut 2019) and conflict transformation (Bar-Tal 2007, 2013, 2020; Jackson 2009; Ramsbotham 2010; Cobb 2013; Jackson & Dexter 2014). Scholars have highlighted the identity and practice-constituting role of narratives or stories for individuals, groups or organisations (Cobb 2013; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2014; Faizullaev & Cornut 2019; Bar Tal 2020).

According to Cobb (2013: 32-33), '[n]arratives are material. They are not only mnemonic in nature, reflecting the world as experienced, but they are constitutive of identity, relationships, and institutions, as well as of the practices associated with these.' The definitions of narratives encompass their particular structures and roles. Bar-Tal et al (2014: 663) define a narrative as 'a story about an event or events that has a plot with a clear starting point and endpoint, providing sequential and causal coherence about the world and/or a group's experience'.

A separate field of study across several disciplines has concerned the role of narratives during violent conflicts. As noted by Bar-Tal (2020), narratives provide justification, explanation and rationalisation for the outbreak of conflicts and feed their continuation. According to Bar-Tal (2013), societal beliefs formed during violent conflict include several key themes. They justify the outbreak of the conflict and the course of its development, present one's own goals as just and justified, present a positive image of the in-group and delegitimise the opponent, present one's own society as the victim of the opponent and encourage patriotism to promote attachment and solidarity with the in-group, promote the need for unity in the face of the threat and the vision of peace as the ultimate desire of society. If conflicts remain unresolved, with time social beliefs formed during conflicts shape the very nature of social identity and became expressed in 'language, societal ceremonies, symbols, myths, commemorations, holidays, canonic texts, and so on' (Bar-Tal 2007: 1443).

In taking stock of constructivist research on conflict escalation and resolution, Jackson (2009: 181) identifies key elements in conflict discourses and social construction of conflict that underpin legitimisation of political violence including 'the construction of exclusionary and oppositional identities; the invention, reinvention or manipulation of grievance and a sense of victimhood; the construction of exaggeration of a pervading sense of threat and danger to the nation and community; the stereotyping and dehumanization of the enemy "other"; and the legitimization of organized pre-emptive and defensive political violence'. In addition to the reconstruction of identities that make conflict possible, another key condition in conflict escalation is the role of elites mobilising identities and narratives for war (Jackson 2009; Jackson & Dexter 2014).

Cobb (2013: 88-99) suggests considering conflict escalation as a narrative process and notes five narrative processes during conflict escalation. They include the reduction of narrative complexity and increase in narrative closure leading to identity closure, ignorance or denial of claims to legitimacy to the Other made in response to delegitimisation, externalisation of responsibility, inversion of the meaning of the Others' narrative in an effort to cancel it altogether and silence as a response to denied legitimacy, subjectivity and existence that can lead

to violence. Furthermore, Cobb (2013: 96) defines key narrative processes that lead to the legitimisation of the use of force against the Other: 'The construction of the Other as having evil intentions leaves the speaker of that story will [sic] little option except to retrain or kill the Other. "Evil intent" as a construction has three features: first, it presumes that Others want to kill or harm the speaker or their group; second, it presumes that that the evil or bad intention is persistent, independent of circumstances or context; and third, it presumes that the Other either will not listen (i.e., speech and talk are not possible), or that they will pretend to listen as part of their strategy to harm.'

Several studies focused on the Crimea standoff and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine have examined the role of narratives in foreign policy. In the case of the Crimea annexation, Faizullaev and Cornut (2019) examine divergences between narratives and practices by the UN, Ukraine, Russia and some Western countries (the USA, the UK and France). Furthermore, Miskimmon (2017), drawing on his earlier work on 'strategic narratives' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2014), studies the strategic narratives of the EU and Russia on the conflict in Ukraine by focusing on identity, system and issue narratives. There are also other studies of narratives of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Fisher 2019). The article adds to this research by using the lens of narrative processes and structures underlying conflict escalation and de-escalation reviewed above and by tracing the development of narratives over a longer period of time.

Data and methods

The corpus of data analysed in this article includes the key political statements by political leadership, statements by diplomats and other official policy instruments, international normative documents (such as resolutions) and reports by the HRMMU and OHCHR. For Russia, the article analyses key political statements that became constitutive of Russian actions (Kremlin.ru 2014a, 2014b, 2021, 2022a, 2022b), statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russian diplomats. Furthermore, it examines the investigations of human rights violations that were produced by Russia in parallel to the investigations by the international human rights bodies such as 'The Tragedy of Southeastern Ukraine. The White Book of Crimes' by the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (Investigative 2015) and the White Books 'On the Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law Principle in Ukraine' (Ministry 2014a, 2014b) published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first White Book covered the period from November 2013 till March 2014 and appeared in April 2014. The second one covered the period from April till mid-June 2014 and was published in June 2014.

For Ukraine, the article examines the pronouncement of Ukrainian diplomats, the texts of Ukraine-promoted resolutions adopted by international or-

ganisations and statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. The evolution and entrenchment of the official narratives before the 2022 escalation is studied using the statement called '10 Facts You Should Know about Russian Military Aggression Against Ukraine' developed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 2019 (Ministry 2019) and the three constitutive texts (Kremlin.ru 2021, 2022a, 2022b) by Russian President Vladimir Putin legitimising the Russian attack against Ukraine. Furthermore, I analyse the reports produced by the HRMMU and OHCHR that provided recommendations to the Government of Ukraine, de facto Crimea authorities and the Russian Federation. Each HRMMU report included a separate section on the violations of human rights in Crimea and on the investigations related to human rights violations during the Maidan protests, the 2 May 2014 violence in Odesa and the Rymarska case (a shooting between pro-federalism and pro-unity supporters on Rymarska street in Kharkiv on 14 March 2014) and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The first report produced by the OHCHR after the initial visits to Ukraine in March 2014 and on the basis of the materials gathered by the HRMMU highlighted the importance of objective information on the situation in Ukraine: 'Without an independent, objective and impartial establishment of the facts and circumstances surrounding alleged human rights violations, there is a serious risk of competing narratives being manipulated for political ends, leading to divisiveness and incitement to hatred' (OHCHR 2014a: 5) and 'Impartial reporting on the human rights situation can help not only to trigger accountability for human rights violations, but it also aims at the prevention of manipulation of information, which serves to create a climate of fear and insecurity and may fuel violence. This is especially important with regard to eastern Ukraine' (OHCHR 2014a: 10). Furthermore, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted the centrality of its work for reconciliation: 'There is need for accountability for the crimes committed. Indeed, no matter who the perpetrators or the victims are, every effort must be made to ensure that anyone who has committed serious violations of international law is brought to justice. That is essential in order to overcome divisions and pave the way for reconciliation' (United Nations General Assembly 2014: 5).

In terms of data analysis approaches, I use thematic analysis and narrative analysis. According to Roller and Lavrakas (2015: 299), '. . . the focus in narrative research is not only on the content of a story . . . but also *how* the story is told and *why* it is told in particular manner [emphasis in original]'. Thus, according to them, narrative analysis needs to focus both on the sequential and consequential elements of the story. Riessman (quoted in Roller and Lavrakas 2015: 299), highlights the selective nature of narratives as the events are 'selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience'. Gibbs

(2018: 83) suggests several practical steps in undertaking narrative analysis such as the identification of events, experiences (images, feelings, reactions, meanings), accounts, explanations, excuses and narrative. The latter means 'the linguistic and rhetorical form of telling the events, including how the narrator and audience (the researcher) interact, temporal sequencing, characters, emplotment and imagery'.

The analysis of narrative processes undertaken in the article involves three key steps. In the first place, the mapping and categorisation of the key elements of divergence between Ukraine's and Russia's narratives is undertaken. Then the stance of the international human rights community on key issues of divergence is examined. In the second place, the question of what narratives are 'doing' and narrative structures developed by Russia and Ukraine are studied. The article undertakes the analysis of the sequential (emplotment) and consequential elements of the narratives. Finally, following Cobb (2013), the evolution of narratives is studied by analysing the narrative elements that persisted and changed between 2014 and 2022, before another period of conflict escalation with the Russian attack against Ukraine.

Diverging narratives on the annexation of Crimea

After undertaking a thematic mapping and analysis of official pronouncements and various foreign policy instruments produced by Russia and Ukraine in 2014-2015, several key issues of contention have been identified. They include the violations of law and of human rights during the Maidan protests in 2013-2014, the legality of the change of government in February 2014, the creation of paramilitary organisations, the legality of the annexation of Crimea, the legality of the use of force by Russia, the nature of protests following the change of government in February 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, the legality of the 'anti-terrorist operation' and the role of Russia in protests and the evolving conflict (summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below). Drawing on research on narrative processes in conflict escalation (Jackson 2009; Cobb 2013; Bar-Tal 2013), several key mechanisms and narrative structures used in the construction of conflicting discourses have been identified. They include framing of legality of the use of force and violence attribution, threat framing, delegitimisation of the other and the use of narrative emplotment to project consistency of past behaviour and desired future. In this part of the article, I analyse the episode of the annexation of Crimea and in the next section the protests and the eruption of violent conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The first step undertaken by the presidium of the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) and the Russian authorities on the way to annex Crimea was the announcement about the illegitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities in order to legitimise their own claims. During the period from

21 February to 4 March 2014, Russian officials commented on the violation by the opposition of the 21 February agreement between the Yanukovych government and the opposition (Lavrov 2014) and made public the letter solicited from Viktor Yanukovych that declared the change of government in Ukraine as a 'coup d'état'. The presidium of the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC issued a statement on 27 February 2014 on the 'unconstitutional coup d'état' in Kyiv only after the armed persons in uniforms without insignia captured the buildings of the Council of Ministers and the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC during the night of 26 to 27 February and announced that the Verkhovna Rada of the ARC 'assumes full responsibility for the fate of the Crimea' and aims to organise a nationwide referendum on the status and powers of the autonomy (Krymskaya pravda 2014).

Another key narrative process used in official Russian discourses was threat construction using the means of violence attribution to legitimise the use of force by Russia and by the local self-defence forces. In a statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council on 3 March 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov legitimised the decision on the use of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine by the need to protect Russia's 'nationals', 'compatriots' and the staff of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine and the request by 'the legally elected authorities' of Crimea to the President of Russia. Lavrov described the actions of the Yanukovych government as 'absolutely legitimate' and put the responsibility for 'aggressive forceful actions' during the Maidan protests on the anti-government protesters supported by the West. Furthermore, he detailed violations of law committed by the 'armed national radicals'. According to Lavrov, '. . . threats of violent action on behalf of ultranationalists, who endanger the life and legal interests of Russians and the entire Russian-speaking population' legitimised the local self-defence forces in Crimea '. . . created by the people, who had to prevent the attempts at forced occupation of administrative buildings in Crimea and the entry of weapons and ammunition into the peninsula' (Lavrov 2014).

The press conference by Russian President Vladimir Putin on 4 March 2014 and the address to the Federal Council on Crimea on 18 March 2014 became the constitutive speech acts by the Kremlin that defined the meaning of the ongoing events (Kremlin.ru 2014a, 2014b). Putin delegitimised the new Ukrainian government calling the change of government 'an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power' supported by the West. This was achieved with the use of several narrative structures. First, violence and 'illegal, unconstitutional' actions during the 2013-2014 Maidan protests were fully attributed to the pro-Maidan militias, and the use of force by the Yanukovych government was framed as being fully within the limits of legality. The Berkut special forces were framed as victims of pro-Maidan paramilitaries 'who have not broken any laws and acted in accordance with their orders'. Furthermore, Putin delegitimised Ukraine as

a viable state and nation. He described Ukraine as a persistently unviable state characterised by corruption, accumulation of wealth, social stratification and a government irresponsiveness to popular demands and expectations. He contrasted Ukraine with the self-image constructed as prioritising legality and constitutional order and more responsive to the popular demands. The use of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine was legitimised by 'a direct appeal' from the 'legitimate' President Yanukovych and 'a humanitarian mission' 'to protect the people with whom we have close historical, cultural, and economic ties' from 'uncontrolled crime' and 'the rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces' (Kremlin.ru 2014a).

Furthermore, as in other conflicts from Georgia to Syria in which Russia got involved, Putin constructed the threatening image of the West looming behind conflicts. He highlighted the doubtful international legitimacy of the US actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Furthermore, he legitimised the annexation of Crimea by the right of nations to self-determination fixed in international law, the precedent of Kosovo and the right of people to define their own future. While accusing the new Ukrainian government of the violation of the 21 February agreement between Yanukovych and the opposition that stipulated demobilisation of all paramilitary organisations, Putin only problematised pro-Maidan paramilitary organisations and legitimised Crimean 'self-defence' (Kremlin.ru 2014a).

Putin's address on 18 March 2014 following the 'referendum' in Crimea became the key statement providing the reasons legitimising the annexation of Crimea that elaborated further key arguments made during the 4 March press conference. In comparison with 4 March, the 18 March address provided a more elaborate legitimisation of annexation combining the historical and emotional, international law, historical precedents and popular legitimacy arguments. As earlier, key discursive mechanisms in reconstruction of the 'self' and the threatening 'other' included the delegitimisation of the new government in Ukraine as a 'coup d'état' and the legitimisation of the annexation as a humanitarian mission to protect the local population from threats.

In terms of threat framing, the speech defined the US-led West as the threatening Other and a destabilising factor in the international system. For Putin, the post-Cold War bipolar world was characterised by the degradation of international institutes and the preference by 'our Western partners led by the United States of America' not for international law but by the rule of force. Putin depicted the West as a threatening Other by connecting past episodes of the use of force framed as illegitimate into a coherent narrative aiming to suggest constancy of behaviour. He described the use of force and interventions by the Western states in 1999 in the former Yugoslavia followed by Afghanistan, Iraq

and Libya and 'managed colour revolutions' that brought 'chaos, outbreaks of violence, a series of coups' instead of democracy. Then Putin's narrative linked episodes that aimed to demonstrate that the West acted throughout history treacherously manifested in the expansion of NATO to the east, the deployment of military infrastructure at Russian borders and threats with sanctions that constituted the centuries-long policy of containment of Russia.

As in the 4 March speech, the key element in the 18 March speech was the delegitimisation of the Ukrainian government to legitimise the annexation. It was done by attributing violence only to the pro-Maidan militias supporting the government change and presenting the government as a pure puppet of the hostile West. The change of government was described as a coup d'état with the use of terror, murder and pogroms carried out primarily by the 'nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites' and 'the Ukrainian ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's henchman during World War II' and referred to the new government as 'the new so-called "authorities"', '"politicians"' [both authorities and politicians put in inverted commas to deny them legitimacy] managed by 'foreign sponsors' and 'curators'.

Furthermore, the speech delegitimised not only the post-February 2014 government but the Ukrainian state as such presenting it as discriminatory versus national minorities and a permanently unstable state while presenting the righteous self-image. Ukraine was projected as discriminating against national minorities, as a state that attempted to 'deprive Russians of historical memory, and sometimes of their native language, to make them the object of forced assimilation', the entire period of independence was framed as 'constant political and state permanent crisis', a state characterised by corruption, ineffective state management and poverty with self-serving political elites ignoring popular needs and demands. The speech act projected the righteous image of Russia as a state that over centuries had preserved cultural specificities of all ethnoses populating it, the only state capable of providing 'strong, stable sovereignty' to Crimea and a peace-loving and friendly country '. . . sincerely striving for dialogue with our colleagues in the West' that consistently strived to do 'everything necessary to build civilized good-neighborly relations' (Kremlin.ru 2014b).

In comparison with 4 March, Putin made much more ample use of historical and emotional arguments as means of legitimisation and the use of what can be referred to as popular legitimacy. He reconstructed the notion of homeland by referring to the south of Ukraine and Crimea as 'historical territories of Russia' and projecting Crimea and Sevastopol as key symbolic locations for Russian history and the symbols of 'Russian military glory' and in popular consciousness remained 'an inseparable part of Russia'. Furthermore, Putin claimed that Crimea and Southern and Eastern Ukraine were incorporated into Soviet Ukraine with

violations and without consultations with the people and this constituted an 'historical injustice'. After defining Crimea and Southern and Eastern Ukraine as part of 'historical Russian territories', Putin framed the annexation of Crimea as 'the desire of the Russian world, historical Russia to restore unity' (Kremlin. ru 2014b).

Furthermore, the speech claimed that the referendum was 'in full compliance with democratic procedures and international legal norms', 'peaceful, free expression of will', strive for freedom and independence comparing them to the US Declaration of Independence and post-1989 reunification of Germany. Furthermore, it represented the right to self-determination with historical precedents of Ukraine declaring independence in 1991 and Kosovo. Finally, 'the will of the people' as expressed in the referendum was presented as a supreme principle, Putin also claimed popular legitimacy coming from constantly held popular beliefs that 'Crimea is a native Russian land [iskonno russkaya zemlya], and Sevastopol is a Russian city' and 'the will of millions of people, all-national unity and support of the leading political and social forces' (Kremlin.ru 2014b). This type of legitimacy expressed in overwhelming support of the population was directly borrowed from the communist period.

The analysis of post-16 March statements and publications by Russia shows the consolidation of key narrative elements such as the consideration of the 'referendum' '. . . an expression of the free will of Crimeans' fulfilling the right to self-determination conducted without outside interference (United Nations 2014a), focus only on the violations of law committed by the pro-Maidan radical groups and legitimisation of the actions of the Yanukovych government during the protests, consideration of the change of government at the end of February 2014 as a 'coup d'état' supported by the West and the legitimisation of the post-February anti-government self-defence forces.

The White Books 'On the Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law Principle in Ukraine' (Ministry 2014a, 2014b) and 'The Tragedy of Southeastern Ukraine. The White Book of Crimes' (2015) and regular presentations on the human rights situation in Ukraine organised by the Russian mission at the UN focused only on human rights violations committed by the pro-Maidan groups and post-February 2014 Ukrainian authorities. They fully attributed violence during the Maidan protests to the radical pro-Maidan protesters and used the enumeration of human rights violations in Ukraine to advance political claims that the 'seizure of power with the use of force and anti-constitutional coup d'état' took place in Ukraine (Ministry 2014a: 3). Other phrases used to claim the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian government included the 'de-facto' and 'self-declared' 'Kyiv authorities' (Ministry 2014b: 3) 'de-facto authorities in Kyiv who overthrew a legally elected and acting president V. Yanukovych as a result of a coup d'état and

a seizure of power with the use of force' (Ministry 2014b: 9). The White Books implicated the EU and USA in supporting 'the violent overthrow of the regime' in Ukraine. The first book claimed that the 'Euromaidan was orchestrated by the US State Department through the NGOs and private funds controlled by it' and Western states legitimised the new illegitimate government which came to power as a result of a coup d'état in February 2014 (Ministry 2014a: 29, 31). By supporting the Euromaidan, the book claimed, 'the EU supported and accepted the illegitimate rise to power of opposition in Kyiv and directly contributed to the destruction of the constitutional order in Ukraine' (Ministry 2014a: 31).

The key efforts of Ukrainian diplomacy were directed at the adoption of statements at the international level reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and defining the actions of Russia in Crimea as illegitimate. After Russia blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Crimea, the UN General Assembly resolution 68/262 on the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine adopted on 27 March 2014 (United Nations 2014b) stated that the 16 March 2014 referendum in Crimea had 'no validity': 'the referendum held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on 16 March 2014, having no validity, cannot form the basis for any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea or of the city of Sevastopol.' This resolution became the basis for other resolutions proposed by Ukraine and often referenced in various statements by Ukrainian diplomats. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019) stated that the Ukrainian territorial integrity was reaffirmed in a series of UN documents as well as by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and other international organisations.

In their interventions at the international bodies, Ukrainian diplomats referred to the referendum as '[t]he so called "Crimea referendum" . . . a political farce orchestrated by the Russian Federation' not recognised by Ukraine nor the international community (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014d). Russian actions in Crimea were described as '. . . the overt military invasion of the Russian Federation in a breach of the UN Charter and the applicable international law' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014a) and underlying the illegal entry of the Russian armed forces on the territory of Ukraine: '. . . a large grouping of the Russian armed forces which illegally entered the territory of Ukraine under far-fetched pretext of protecting the Russian-speaking community' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014b).

On the contentious issue of the Maidan protests and government change, the Ukrainian diplomacy referred to the Maidan protests as '[p]eaceful protests in Ukraine' that turned violent due to the 'brutal use of force by the previous authorities' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014c) and claimed that the post-

February 2014 Ukrainian government was 'fully legitimate' and committed to 'bringing all perpetrators to justice' for crimes committed during the protests (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014c) and referred to it as '[t]he new "government of technocrats" – not the "government of winners" . . . endorsed by more than constitutional majority of members of Parliament . . .' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014b).

During the UN Human Rights Council debates, Ukraine and Russia exchanged mutual accusations of violations of human rights. In its interventions, Ukraine referred to the facts of violation of human rights by Russia in Crimea gathered by international bodies (for example, Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014h). At the same time, Ukraine used reports by the international organisations to support its own claims about the lack of evidence on violations of human rights in Ukraine. For example, during the Interactive Dialogue with the Independent Expert on Minority Issues on 19 March 2014, Ukraine stated that 'As it was repeatedly witnessed by international experts, including the UN system, there is no credible evidence of Russian minority rights violations in Ukraine', while the rights of the Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar and other groups in Crimea 'are violated under the Russian occupation' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014e). Furthermore, Ukraine claimed its readiness to investigate crimes and violations of human rights committed in Ukraine since November 2013 and 'bring all responsible to accountability' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014f).

While Western states accepted the new Ukrainian government as legitimate, the OHCHR did not make a statement about the legality of the ousting of President Yanukovych in February 2014 and the change of government. The first OHCHR report on 15 April 2014 only stated the facts without pronouncing itself about the legality: 'After President Yanukovych's departure from Kyiv, on 22 February, the Parliament decided that he had "withdrawn from performing constitutional authorities"' (OHCHR 2014a: 6). The second OHCHR report called the 16 March '"referendum"' [in inverted commas in original] 'unlawful' following the General Assembly resolution 68/262 (OHCHR 2014b: 4).

The HRMMU reports focused on both indiscriminate and disproportionate violence committed by law-enforcement bodies during the Maidan protests and violations of law and human rights committed by the pro-Maidan paramilitary groups and called for the investigation of violence committed by the Right Sector. The 15 April report held: 'While there has been no confirmed evidence of attacks by the "Right Sector", including any physical harassment, against minorities, there were numerous reports of their violent acts against political opponents, representatives of the former ruling party and their elected officials. The role of the group during the Maidan protests was prominent; they were often in the first line of defence or allegedly leading the attacks against the law enforce-

ment units. Their alleged involvement in violence and killings of some of the law enforcement members should be also investigated. However, according to all accounts heard by the OHCHR delegation, the fear against the "Right Sector" is disproportionate . . .' (OHCHR 2014a: 19). The 15 April report also detailed ' ... a significant raise of propaganda on the television of the Russian Federation', for example portraying Ukraine as a 'country overrun by violent fascists' and 'disguising information about Kyiv events, claimed that the Russians in Ukraine are seriously threatened and put in physical danger, thus justifying Crimea's "return" to the Russian Federation' (OHCHR 2014a: 17).

The 15 April 2014 report expressed concerns about '. . . the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred by some political parties, groups and individuals', 'nationalistic rhetoric' witnessed during the Maidan protests, lustration laws and the violations of the rights of the Russian minority in Eastern Ukraine (OHCHR 2014a: 4). It held that 'Ukraine is largely a bilingual society, as was confirmed by stakeholders met by the delegation throughout Ukraine. Consequently, nationalistic rhetoric and hate speech may turn the ethno-linguistic diversity into a divide and may have the potential for human rights violations' (OHCHR 2014a: 15). The report also critically assessed the representation of national minorities at the national level after the change of government in February 2014 (OHCHR 2014a: 15). However, the report claimed that the '. . . attacks against the ethnic Russian community . . . were neither systematic nor widespread' (OHCHR 2014a: 4). Finally, the OHCHR noted the illegality of all paramilitary forces, such as the Crimean self-defence, and called for their disbandment (OHCHR 2014a: 23).

Table 1 summarises the positions of Russia, Ukraine and the international human rights community on the key issues of contention.

Diverging narratives on the anti-government protests and armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine

In relation to the evolving protests in Southern and Eastern Ukraine following the change of government in February 2014 and the emergence of violent conflict, the key conflicting issues between Ukraine and Russia included the nature of protests following the change of government in February 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, the legality of paramilitary mobilisations and the 'anti-terrorist operation' and the role of Russia in protests and the evolving conflict. The table below summarises the positions of Russia, Ukraine and the international human rights community on the key issues of contention.

The Russian narratives in relation to the anti-government protests and the beginning of the violent conflict in Eastern Ukraine included several key narrative structures: the statement about the legitimacy of demands by the anti-government protesters and the initially peaceful nature of protests, the legiti-

Table 1. Summary of positions by Russia, Ukraine and the international human rights community on key issues of contention

	Russia	Ukraine	International human rights community
Violence during the Maidan protests	Consideration of the use of force by the Yanukovych government as legitimate and violence attributed to the pro-Maidan paramilitary groups	Consideration of protests as peaceful and the attribution of responsibility for violence escalation to the Yanukovych government only	Violence committed both by the Yanukovych government and protesters; accountability for all violations of human rights
Change of government in February 2014	Coup d'état and illegal new government	Legal new government	No statement
Legality of the use of force by Russia	Legitimised by a 'humanitarian mission' and the request by the 'legitimate' authorities	Illegal and framed as 'Russian invasion'	No statement
Annexation of Crimea	A set of discursive means to legitimise the annexation of Crimea	Illegal confirmed by the UN General Assembly resolution 68/262	Illegal confirmed by the UN General Assembly resolution 68/262

Table 2. Summary of positions by Russia, Ukraine and the international human rights community on key issues of contention

	Russia	Ukraine	International human rights community
Nature of anti-government protests and paramilitary mobilisations	Legitimate protest against 'illegitimate' government; legitimisation of self-defence units created by protesters	Referring to protesters and then armed groups as 'terrorists', 'separatists', 'illegal armed groups' assuming their illegitimacy; paramilitary groups created in violation of law	Use of neutral terms to refer to protesters and armed groups; considering all paramilitary groups created in violation of law and calling for their disbandment
Legitimacy of the 'anti-terrorist operation'	The operation framed as 'criminal' and illegitimate; framed as 'karatelnaya operatsiya' [punitive action]	The operation framed as 'rightful and legitimate'	The question of legitimacy not raised; focus on the need to comply with the international humanitarian law
Role of Russia in protests and the evolving conflict	Denial of the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine and Russian 'military intervention'	Protests and armed rebellion framed as armed and supported from Russia	Acknowledgement of the presence of protesters from Russia and of the movement of arms and fighters across the Ukrainian-Russian border

misation of the creation of paramilitary and self-defence forces by them and the criminal nature and illegitimacy of the 'anti-terrorist operation' launched by the Ukrainian authorities in Eastern Ukraine. Another key element in Russian narratives was the denial of interpretation of Russian actions as 'military intervention'.

While Russian official narratives framed the Pravyi sektor as militants [boieviki], the other side paramilitary organisations were described as fighters [boitsy] of the People's Militia of Donbas and 'peaceful protestors' who supported the idea of federalisation in Donetsk (Ministry 2014a: 19). Other terms used were 'protesters in the east of Ukraine' (Ministry 2014b: 9), 'fighters of the People's militia [narodnoie opolcheniie] of Donbass' (Ministry 2014b: 10), 'supporters of federalization of Ukraine' (Ministry 2014b: 11) and 'manifestations of peaceful civilians' (Ministry 2014b: 14).

The emplotment of events constructed in official Russian narratives (using Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation 2014) included an 'unconstitutional armed coup d'état' supported by Western states as a result of which 'nationalist radical elements' came to power that constituted a threat to 'russkoye naseleniye' [Russian population] of Crimea and eastern regions. The narrative focused only on the human rights violations and violence committed by the 'boyeviki-natsionalisty' [militants-nationalists] supporting Maidan. While framing pro-Maidan paramilitaries as a threat, Russia legitimised the paramilitary mobilisations by the anti-Maidan protesters. It stated that 'Under these conditions, Russia will support the people's self-defence units that have risen to protect the population from extremists'. At the same time, Russia denied the interpretation of its actions as 'military intervention': '. . . Russia did not undertake any 'military intervention' in the Crimea or in other regions of Ukraine, as the Kyiv authorities and their patrons would like to present' (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation 2014). Finally, Russia continued to frame Ukraine as a deficient state and advanced its demands to in order for it to return to 'the condition of a normal, stable state' including the provision of cultural and linguistic rights of the multinational people of Ukraine, federalisation and the adoption of a federal constitution, a neutral military-political status, the state status of Russian and the recognition of the 'free' choice of Crimea in accordance with the 16 March 'referendum' (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation 2014).

For Russia, the key reason of conflict escalation was the use of force and repressions by the new Ukrainian government against protesters and the use of 'pro-Maidan militants' 'to intimidate opponents of the Maidan' (Investigative 2015: 8). Furthermore, Russia blamed the initiation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine fully on the Ukrainian authorities referring to the conflict as a 'terrible fratricidal war unleashed by the nationalist regime in Ukraine' (Investigative 2015: 6). The

White Book referred to the 'anti-terrorist operation' as an '[a]nti-terrorist, in fact punitive [karatelnaia] operation' (Ministry 2014b: 3). The monitoring of human rights violations in the Second White Book was used to claim that 'The facts cited in the White Paper testify to the criminal nature of the "anti-terrorist operation", as a result of which civilian objects are treacherously shelled, Ukrainian civilians, including women, old people and children, are killed' (Ministry 2014b: 79). Furthermore, Russia framed the 'anti-terrorist operation' as 'the deliberate extermination of the Russian-speaking population in entire regions' thus assuming deliberate targeting civilians and the Russian-speaking population (Investigative 2015: 5).

On 29 August 2014, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement (in Investigative 2015: 31) that blamed Western states and international organisations for the failure to condemn the violations of the international humanitarian law in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and asked why they 'continue only to admonish the Kiev government to use the "proportionate" warfare instead of denouncing these criminal acts'. It framed the actions of 'militias in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions' as defensive: 'When Kiev declares that negotiations will only begin after the capitulation of those it calls "separatists", the militias are left with no choice but to defend their homes and families' (in Investigative 2015: 31).

Addresses by Russia at the UN human rights bodies and other instruments of foreign policy (Ministry 2014a, 2014b; Investigative 2015) selectively focused on the violations of the international humanitarian law and of human rights committed by 'Ukrainian military [siloviki] and mercenaries [nayemnicheskiye bataliony] that, according to Russia remained uninvestigated and regretted that '. . . our Western colleagues, for political reasons, prefer to remain silent about violations of human rights and international law by the Ukrainian authorities and security forces' (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation 2015). Finally, Russia claimed that there was no alternative to a peaceful conflict resolution and called upon Ukraine to 'start a real political dialogue with the representatives of Donetsk and Lugansk on all aspects of the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis' (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation 2015).

The official statements by Ukraine used the following terms to refer to the protesters and armed groups in Eastern Ukraine that assumed their illegitimacy: 'terrorists' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014f; Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014i), 'heavily armed separatists and criminals' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014g), 'illegal armed groups supported by Russia' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014i) and 'terrorist armed groups operating in eastern Ukraine' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014j). For Ukraine, the root causes of the crisis were linked to the role of Russia – '. . . occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and conflict in Donbas still fuelled, despite the Agreements reached

in Minsk, by the neighboring state' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2015a). Also most of the violations of human rights in Ukraine '. . . resulted from Russian aggression . . . starting from the illegal occupation of Crimea and followed by backing, arming, training and commanding illegal armed groups in certain parts of Donbas' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2015b). Another key element was the statement that the protesters and armed groups were directed and armed by Russia (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014d). Russia was blamed for 'aggressive subversive and destabilization activities in the Eastern regions . . . including direct support of terrorists with arms, training and supply of militants' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014f); 'heavily armed separatists and criminals, extensively supported and coordinated across the Eastern border . . .' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014g). Later on, Ukraine deplored the entry of 'the regular troops of the Russian Federation' to support 'terrorists' on 24 August 2014 that was described as a 'Russian invasion' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014i).

The framing of legitimacy of the 'anti-terrorist operation' became the most important conflicting issue between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine framed the operation as 'rightful and legitimate' the purpose of which was '. . . securing sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and restoring law and order in the face of interference into Ukraine's internal affairs across the Eastern border. The anti-terrorist operation is conducted in a proportionate and measured approach as it was recently assessed by the G7 leaders' (Permanent Mission of Ukraine 2014f).

The HRMMU reports used neural terms such as 'anti-government protestors' (OHCHR 2014a: 16), 'well-organized armed persons in eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk region, which in some towns are forming so-called "self-defence" units' (OHCHR 2014b: 21), and 'armed and unarmed opponents of the Government' (OHCHR 2014b: 26). Furthermore, it stated a variety of demands made by the protesters without assessing their legitimacy: protests reflect 'a variety of demands, some supporting the unity of Ukraine, some opposing the Government of Ukraine, and some seeking decentralisation or federalism, with others looking at separatism' (OHCHR 2014b: 11).

The HRMMU did not raise the question of legitimacy of the 'anti-terrorist operation', it only consistently highlighted that it had to be to comply with the international humanitarian law: 'The Ukrainian security operation, referred to as an "anti-terrorist operation" (ATO), aimed at regaining control of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk held by these armed groups, involves the army, the military police (National Guard), the National Security Service (SBU) and volunteers' battalions. In any law enforcement operation security forces must act proportionally to the threat and must at all times respect the right to life. In addition, in the conduct of hostilities all those involved in the hostilities must

comply with principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions. This is particularly important in an environment in which armed groups and civilians are inter-mingled' (OHCHR 2014d: 3).

The HRMMU consistently called for the investigation of all violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed by all sides in the conflict and the disarmament of all paramilitary groups and integration of volunteer battalions under the command of official ministries (OHCHR 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f, 2014g; OHCHR 2015). The HRMMU reports registered the existing perceptions about the presence of protesters from Russia: 'Some protesters allegedly come from the Russian Federation, according to information received from local authorities and confirmed by the central authorities' (OHCHR 2014a: 16) and 'There are also numerous allegations that some participants in the protests and in the clashes of the politically opposing groups, which have already taken at least four lives, are not from the region and that some have come from the Russian Federation' (OHCHR 2014a: 4). The second report called the takeovers of public and administrative buildings in Eastern Ukraine and the proclamation of 'self-declared regions' illegal: '[t]hese illegal take-overs of administration buildings (such as the Donetsk Regional State Administration and the Regional Department of the Security Service of Ukraine in Luhansk) by both armed and unarmed persons were done so with political demands for regionalisation, and at times reportedly separatism' (OHCHR 2014b: 21). It called for the disarmament of all armed groups and for 'Those found to be arming and inciting armed groups and transforming them into paramilitary forces must be held accountable under national and international law' (OHCHR 2014b: 32). The August 2014 report found evidence that the Ukrainian armed forces were responsible for at least some targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure: 'Targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as indiscriminate attacks are violations of international humanitarian law and more must be done to protect them. Responsibility for at least some of the resulting casualties and damage lies with Ukrainian armed forces through reported indiscriminate shelling' (OHCHR 2014e: 3). Finally, the HRMMU reports consistently represented the impact of hostilities on civilians and advocated for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements as a basis for sustainable peace.

Evolution of conflicting narratives before 2022

In this section, I examine the evolution of key narrative processes and structures identified in the above analysis and use the theoretical framework of conflict escalation as a narrative process proposed by Cobb (2013) to discuss the evolution of conflict narratives from 2014 till 2022. The comparative analysis shows that the key elements and emplotment structures in conflicting narratives remained

unchanged and some elements such as threat perception and delegitimisation of the Other became radicalised.

The analysis of the three constitutive texts (Kremlin.ru 2021, 2022a, 2022b) by Russian President Vladimir Putin shows that in comparison with the earlier period for Putin the West became framed as a key threat to Russia with the adoption of new defence strategies that defined Russia as a security threat and the armament and training of the Ukrainian armed forces by NATO. In the 2021-2022 speech acts, Ukraine lost even more subjectivity, was presented as a mere puppet of the West used by it to weaken and contain Russia. The key concern for Putin was that Ukraine was increasingly adopting hostility to Russia as an organising idea of its statehood (discussed in detail in the July 2021 article). The crucial phrase in Putin's framing was the presentation of Ukraine as being taken hostage and armed by NATO against Russia: 'Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance's infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons' (Kremlin.ru 2022b).

In the 24 February 2022 statement announcing the 'special military operation', Putin claimed that the West rejected addressing Russian 'interests and absolutely legitimate demands' for an agreement on 'the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe' and NATO's non-expansion. The US-led West was assigned hegemonic aspirations to global dominance, intention to impose its 'pseudo' values and to contain and weaken Russia. Similar to 2014, instances of the past violation of international law with interventions in Belgrade, Iraq, Libya and Syria were framed into a coherent narrative of constant deviant behaviour and policies based on the use of 'rough, direct force'. Putin assumed an imminent attack by the US against Russia comparing it to the 22 June 1941 attack by Nazi Germany (Kremlin.ru 2022b). He framed the attack on Ukraine as 'self-defence' referring to Article 51 of part 7 of the UN Charter and claiming that Russia was left no other choice (Kremlin.ru 2022b).

The July 2021 article and February 2022 statements by Putin repeated key narrative structures developed in 2014-2015. The change of government described as a coup d'état in 2014 with Western support that was used to claim the illegitimacy of the current government in 2022 framed as an 'anti-Ukrainian junta', a government captured by neo-Nazis and 'Kyiv regime', the Ukrainian state delegitimised as a state that never developed 'stable statehood', characterised by poverty, out-migration, deindustrialisation and a colony with a marionette regime

(Kremlin.ru 2022a). The annexation of Crimea was framed as a 'free choice of Crimeans and Sevastopol of reunion with Russia' and providing the possibility to peoples of Ukraine to freely decide their future (Kremlin.ru 2022b). On Crimea, Putin repeated his key 2014 statements: that the peninsula was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 'in gross violation of legal norms that were in force at the time' (Kremlin.ru 2021).

Similar to 2014, historical memories and narratives were used to present the annexation of Crimea as 'reunification', to delegitimise Ukraine as a viable state and nation, and to describe the ideas of the Ukrainian political community defined in opposition to Russia as the aggressive, unreconcilable and treacherous Other. Another set of messages expressed Russian grievances concerning the rewriting of history in Ukraine. Putin held that 'In essence, Ukraine's ruling circles decided to justify their country's independence through the denial of its past, however, except for border issues. They began to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united us, and refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation. The common tragedy of collectivization and famine of the early 1930s was portrayed as the genocide of the Ukrainian people' (Kremlin.ru 2021). For Putin, the rejection of common history and the definition of Ukrainian statehood and nationhood in opposition to Russia was considered as 'neo-Nazism': '. . . Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism' (Kremlin.ru 2022a).

Putin claimed that the ideologies of radical nationalist groups defined state policies in the post-2014 period such as the legislation concerning the use of the Russian language, on 'purification of power' and the 'indigenous people' that excluded the Russian minority from this status (Kremlin.ru 2021).

He concluded that 'It would not be an exaggeration to say that the path of forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia, is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us.'

Furthermore, Putin repeated the key framing about the conflict in Eastern Ukraine being the illegitimate use of force by the Ukrainian authorities against people who 'did not agree with the West-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014 and opposed the transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy. They are fighting for their elementary right to live on their own land, to speak their own language, and to preserve their culture and traditions' (Kremlin.ru 2022a). He held that 'The people of Crimea and residents of Sevastopol made their historic choice. And people in the southeast peacefully tried to defend their stance. Yet, all of them, including children, were labelled as separatists

and terrorists. They were threatened with ethnic cleansing and the use of military force. And the residents of Donetsk and Lugansk took up arms to defend their home, their language and their lives' (Kremlin.ru 2021). Russia projected itself as supporting a peaceful resolution of the conflict: 'Russia has done everything to stop fratricide. The Minsk agreements aimed at a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Donbas have been concluded.' And accused the Ukrainian government of unwillingness to implement the Minsk agreement and instrumentalising the image of a 'victim of external aggression' (Kremlin.ru 2021). While Russia claimed that it was defending the right to self-determination and the rights of peoples in Ukraine to freely decide their future, it legitimised its own use of force in 'in 2000–2005 we used our military to push back against terrorists in the Caucasus and stood up for the integrity of our state' (Kremlin.ru 2021).

In comparison with the earlier narratives developed in 2014-2015 studied above, before the 2022 escalation Ukraine retained the same narrative about the illegality of the annexation of Crimea by Russia as confirmed by multiple resolutions of international organisations. The refined narrative was that the annexation of Crimea and 'an attempt to destabilize the situation in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine in order to form a quasi-state "Novorossiya"' were part of the same long-term plan by Russia to destroy Ukraine as an independent state and the 'victory of the revolution of dignity' was used by Russia only as a pretext. Furthermore, the ousting of Viktor Yanukovych was irrelevant as the official date of the Russian 'armed aggression' was 20 February 2014. The use of military force by Ukraine was presented as merely defensive: 'Courageous Ukrainian servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, National Guard and other military formations stopped the active phase of the Russian military invasion against Ukraine'. Russia was attributed full responsibility for all the dead and wounded in the conflict, for displacement and economic destruction and for regular violation of the Minsk Agreements. The narrative presented the 'Russian military aggression in Ukraine' as part of 'Russia's standard practice' that included earlier instances of violation of 'territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia' as well as other violations and 'stepping up pressure on [the] Kremlin' was presented as the only way to stop Russian aggression. Finally, 'a democratic and prosperous Ukraine' was opposed to 'authoritarian' Russia (Ministry 2019).

The 2016 OHCHR report on 'Accountability for killings in Ukraine from January 2014 to May 2016' and the most recent report on the violation of human rights of 28 March 2022 noted limited progress in proceedings related to violent deaths during the Maidan protests, 2 May violence in Odesa and a lack of accountability for violations in the context of armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The 2016 report (OHCHR 2016: 11) noted that 'None of the armed groups or the Government of Ukraine has taken responsibility for any civilian deaths caused

by the conduct of hostilities'. Furthermore, the report quoted the statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions who held that 'each side is dedicating its time to documenting in laudable detail the violations of the other side with a view to continuing their confrontation in national or international courtrooms' instead of accepting its own side's responsibility and ensuring accountability (ibid.). The 28 March report regretted that the Constitutional Court in Ukraine refused to review the constitutionality of 'The Law on prevention of prosecution and punishment of individuals in respect of events, which have taken place during peaceful assemblies and recognising the repeal of certain laws of Ukraine' of 21 February 2014 as 'Annulling the law would have opened the way to prosecute individuals who shot and killed 13 law enforcement officers on 18 and 20 February 2014, and would thus contribute to establishing the truth in relation to the Maidan protests' (OHCHR 2022: 12).

Using the theoretical framework of conflict escalation as a narrative process proposed by Cobb (2013) to discuss the evolution of conflict narratives from 2014 will 2022, on the first narrative process of simplification of narratives underpinning identity closure, short denominators representing opposed interpretations became used by Russia and Ukraine referring to the Maidan protests and the change of government as 'a coup d'état' or the 'Revolution of Dignity', 'reunification' or 'annexation' to the Crimea case and 'ethnic cleansing and the illegitimate use of force by Ukraine' or the 'military aggression of Russia' to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. On the second narrative process of relational delegitimisation, Russia framed Ukraine as a mere puppet of the West used by it to weaken and contain Russia and used historical arguments to present Ukraine as lacking stable statehood and nationhood. Furthermore, Russia delegitimised the West and presented it as a threat by using the narrative emplotment that connected past violation of international law with interventions in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and Syria framed into a coherent narrative of constant deviant behaviour and policies based on the use of 'rough, direct force'. Ukraine presented the 'Russian military aggression in Ukraine' as part of 'Russia's standard practice' that included earlier instances of violation of 'territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia' as well as other violations and 'stepping up pressure on [the] Kremlin' was presented as the only way to stop 'Russian aggression'.

On the third narrative process of externalisation of responsibility, Russia attributed all responsibility for conflict protraction and escalation on the West and NATO (cf. article by Bahenský in this issue and his analysis of the arguments of Western realists) for refusing to respond to 'legitimate' Russian demands for an inclusive European security architecture and putting full responsibility for conflict in Eastern Ukraine and violation of the Minsk Agreements on Ukraine.

Ukraine attributed full responsibility for all the dead and wounded in the conflict, for displacement and economic destruction and for regular violation of the Minsk Agreements to Russia. On the fourth narrative process of reversion of meaning, while Russia saw itself as committed to a peaceful resolution of conflict through the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, it was indignant that it was projected as an 'aggressor state'. There was no silence stage in response to denied legitimacy, defined by Cobb (2013) as the fifth narrative process, as Russia passed to the legitimisation of the use of force against the delegitimised 'Other'.

Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on the studies on narrative processes underlying conflict dynamics, this article examines the constitution and evolution of conflicting narratives between Russia and Ukraine as expressed in their foreign policy discourse and key political pronouncements between 2014 and 2022. Furthermore, it compares Russia's and Ukraine's official narratives with those developed by the international human rights community using the example of the HRMMU that aimed to achieve accountability for human rights violations as a basis for reconciliation. The mapping and analysis of narratives undertaken in the article show the key issue of contention between Russia and Ukraine during the studied period was the interpretation of the legitimacy of the use of force. The key consequence of the discursive attribution of conflict escalation and violence became the evolving political legitimisation of the use of force fuelling conflict escalation and protraction.

For Russia, the use of force by the pro-Maidan militias and the 'anti-terrorist operation' launched by the Ukrainian authorities in April 2014 were framed as illegitimate acts. At the same time, Russia legitimised the use of force by the Yanukovych government, its own decision to use force in Crimea as 'a humanitarian mission' and the anti-Maidan self-defence and armed groups by the right to 'self-defence'. In Ukrainian official narratives, the use of force by the Yanukovych government was framed as illegitimate as well as the use of force by Russia during the Crimea annexation, the Russian support for the self-defence and armed groups in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. During the Maidan protests, the opposition legitimised pro-Maidan militias as 'elf-defence' and then the new Ukrainian authorities legitimised the 'anti-terrorist operation' as a 'rightful and legitimate' restoration of sovereignty and territorial integrity, law and order.

Furthermore, the article analysed the sequential elements in the Russian and Ukrainian narratives and their consequences. The analysis of the evolution of narratives between 2014 and 2022 shows the persistence of key narrative elements and radicalisation of some elements witnessing about conflict escalation

dynamics and a lack of progress in conflict resolution. In Russian narratives, the sequence of events included the 'unconstitutional armed coup d'état' supported by Western states as a result of which an 'illegitimate' government came to power with the help of radical and extremist paramilitary groups. Russia used this framing to legitimise the annexation of Crimea. The root cause of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was the decision by the new Ukrainian authorities to launch an illegitimate operation and use repressions against those who disagreed with the change of government and militias were left with no choice but to defend their homes and families. Russia considered that the conflict had to be resolved in a negotiated way and denied its role in the conflict in providing support to the armed group and intervening militarily. In the Ukrainian narrative, the sequential elements included the legal change of government at the end of February 2014, the illegal annexation of Crimea and a military invasion by Russia followed by Russia's support for the 'illegal armed groups' and an overt Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. In such framings of the root causes of the conflict, both Russia and Ukraine put full responsibility for conflict escalation on the other and for victims and destruction.

The analysis of the evolution of narratives in the last section of the article using Cobb's (2013) framework show radicalisation of discursive elements and threat perception as conflict evolved. Russia framed the US-led West as an threat with the change of Western defence doctrines and arming of Ukraine and enhanced the use of history and memory arguments to delegitimise Ukraine as a state and a nation. Ukraine reframed the conflict as the centuries-long intention of Russia to destroy Ukraine as a state and a nation.

The analysis of HRMMU narratives show how narratives of entities aiming to achieve reconciliation and conflict resolution differ from those of the conflict parties. On the key issues of contention between Ukraine and Russia, the HRMMU did not pronounce itself on the legality of the government change in Ukraine and adopted the international interpretation of annexation of Crimea as violating international law. At the same time, the HRMMU raised law and human rights violations by all sides. The HRMMU reports focused on both indiscriminate and disproportionate violence committed by law-enforcement bodies during the Maidan protests and violence committed by the pro-Maidan paramilitary groups and called for the investigation of violence against law enforcement committed by radical pro-Maidan groups. The HRMMU called for the disbandment and disarmament of all paramilitary forces, monitored violence and violation of human rights committed by all sides and called for investigation, accountability and redress for victims for all cases of violence as means of reconciliation.

Fundamentally, conflict escalation and de-escalation is an agency-driven process. These are the decisions and choices of political actors that shape con-

flict dynamics. All political actors bear responsibility for the lack of progress in conflict resolution before 2022, and the Russian leadership bears responsibility for the decision to use military force against a neighbouring sovereign state, illegal in accordance with international law, notwithstanding how it frames its actions.

The analysis undertaken in the article suggests that discursive structures underpinning conflicting positions need to receive more attention in conflict analysis and conflict transformation beyond the focus on ceasefire and peace agreements. Sealing and entrenchment of narratives underlie the deadlock in peacebuilding processes. The article has undertaken the analysis of official narratives that become dominant narratives in conflict-affected societies (Bar-Tal 2013). The next steps in research need to look how dominant narratives correlate with individual and group narratives and the struggle of groups challenging the dominant narratives of the conflict.

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