Legitimizing Support and Condemning Aggression: President Andrzej Duda's Discourse on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract
This article examines the discursive framing of the Russo-Ukrainian war by the former President of Poland, Andrzej Duda. Employing methods from corpus linguistics, the study identifies recurring patterns in President Duda's discourse, interpreting it through the lens of the Discourse-Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies and a modified van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework. The findings reveal that the President unequivocally legitimized support for Ukraine, portraying Ukrainians as heroically defending both their sovereignty and the security of Poland. Duda also invoked the romantic myth of Poland as the 'Christ of Nations', presenting Poles as a people who have historically and unconditionally stood with the oppressed. The study highlights a notable shift in the Polish government's discourse on Ukraine: from a previously polarizing stance to a more unifying one. Furthermore, the clear rejection of Russian narratives marks a significant departure from the positions adopted by many Central European leaders. Situating these findings within a broader social context, the study highlights a notable shift in the Polish government's discourse on Ukraine: from a previously polarizing stance to a more unifying one.
Key words: legitimization, political discourse, presidential discourse, corpus linguistics, Russian invasion of Ukraine, Discourse-Historical Approach

1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an unprecedented event in 21st-century Europe. By 30 September 2024, about 4.2 million non-EU nationals fleeing Ukraine had received temporary protection within the EU (European Commission, 2024). Poland has been particularly affected: since the war began on 24 February 2022, over 17 million people crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border, with around two million Ukrainians finding shelter in Poland (Długosz 2023), and over one million expected to stay long-term (Knapik et al., 2024). Sociological research shows broad Polish support for free medical care and education for Ukrainian refugees (Babicki, Kowalski, & Mastalerz-Migas, 2023), with more than 60% the population having voluntarily helped refugees in some form (Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2022: 137–138). A meta-analysis found that admiration for Ukrainians' resilience has resulted in greater acceptance of refugees (Babińska et al., 2022, p. 55). A quantitative discourse-oriented study found that national newspapers across the political spectrum expressed solidarity with Ukrainians and generally fostered a positive image of Ukrainians (Zawadzka-Paluektau, 2023). Although support has somewhat declined over time (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022), attitudes remained predominantly positive throughout the first years of the invasion (Hargrave, Homel & Dražanová, 2023: 24–26). This marks a notable shift from pre-war perceptions, which were largely negative due to unresolved historical tensions, including contested memories of WWII events like the Volhynia massacres and the 1947 forced resettlement of Ukrainians.

The full-scale war on Poland's eastern border is a crucial factor shaping Polish political discourse. How the conflict is portrayed in speeches and official statements significantly influences public perceptions of government policy and the main social actors involved. This study examines President Andrzej Duda's[1] discursive

[1] Andrzej Duda was President of the Republic of Poland from 6 August 2015 to 6 August 2025.

construction of the key actors in the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. As President, Duda was generally viewed favorably by Poles, consistently ranking high in trust surveys (Polskie Radio, 2023; Cybulska, 2024), and was elected president twice (2015, 2020). Despite Poland's political polarization and Duda's notable opposition, his disapproval rates remained lower than those of other prominent politicians, such as Prime Minister Donald Tusk or Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski. Moreover, as Poland's highest constitutional representative and international face, Duda's discourse on the war shaped its perception domestically and abroad.

President Duda's discourse has been analyzed in several studies. Avar (2023) highlights that Duda viewed NATO as crucial to European security and emphasized Central Europe's commitment to peace and democracy, and to strengthening Poland's military in coordination with NATO. Researchers examining his inauguration speeches note their dynamism, frequent historical references, and symmetrical compositions (Rusin Dybalska, Budyzńska-Daca and Rawski 2019; Suska 2019; Mazur 2021). Dudek-Waligóra (2022) conducted a rudimentary rhetorical analysis of Duda's speech on the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, identifying devices such as rhetorical questions, anaphoric references, repetition, and the inclusive "we." In turn, Szczyrbak, Tereszkiewicz, and Ushchyna (2024) analyzed his address to the Ukrainian Parliament (22 May 2022), focusing on gestures expressing emotion and on the values the politician mentioned, which helped build Duda's image as a firm opponent of Russian aggression. Avar (2023) also notes Duda's view that Russia's actions challenge NATO, urging member states to revise their Eastern policies. Overall, while existing scholarship has provided valuable rhetorical snapshots of individual addresses, it lacks a comprehensive, data-driven overview of how the Polish presidency systematically reshaped national identity and foreign policy over the first years of the conflict. Furthermore, despite the wealth of sociological data on Polish support for Ukraine, there remains a significant gap in understanding the systematic linguistic mechanisms used to sustain this support over time. This study addresses this gap by employing a corpus-linguistic approach to analyze President Duda's war discourse. By doing so, it clarifies how a 'unifying' narrative was constructed to navigate historical tensions and legitimize a shift in Polish foreign policy, providing a roadmap for how political leadership manages national identity during an existential regional crisis. The paper also contributes to research on presidential war rhetoric, which has so far focused predominantly on American leaders (Franch, 2018; Oddo, 2011; Cap, 2006), leaving European social actors understudied.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the analytical approach, employing a political linguistic and constructivist framework that sees meaning as shaped by language and context, with an emphasis on discursive (de) legitimation strategies. Next, the research material is introduced, with justification for the selected speeches. The analysis then reconstructs and interprets President Duda's discursive portrayal of key social actors using methods from corpus linguistics. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings and situates them within the wider context of Polish-Ukrainian relations and right-wing discourses in Poland and Europe.

2. Theoretical framework

Political linguistics (*Politolinguistik*) is a dynamic, transdisciplinary approach within political science that emphasizes the linguistic dimension of political discourse, integrating insights from sociology, political science, and contemporary linguistically oriented discourse studies (Reisigl, 2022). Introduced by Burkhardt (1996: 76) to cover 'public communication on political issues,' political linguistics began formal systematization mainly in the 1990s, though linguistic analyses of political language

date back to the early 20th century (Niehr, 2022: 4–9). It is an empirical approach that combines pragmatic-rhetorical traditions with social, political, and historical contextualization (Cedroni, 2010: 221–222). Thus, *Politolinguistik* assumes that political discourse shapes public perceptions by using language as a key instrument in the social construction of reality. As Oberhuber (2008: 277–278) demonstrates, scholars who represent draw inspiration from political linguistics, focusing on the social construction of reality and how institutional meanings and justification are conveyed through language, offering a linguistic dimension to investigations of issues traditionally discussed by political scientists. This situates political linguistics within the constructivist paradigm of discourse studies, where discourse not only reflects but actively constructs social order. In this paradigm, discourse produces representations, identities, and power relations, creating a reciprocal dynamic in which discourse both shapes and is shaped by society (Wodak, 2024: 32).

The social construction of reality requires continuous justification through discursive argumentation to achieve legitimacy, defined as a concept that 'explains what is seen as appropriate, normal, or accepted in social and societal life' (Vaara, Aranda & Etchanchu, 2024: 2344). Within the discussed constructivist paradigm, legitimization, the process of obtaining legitimacy, involves political actors explaining and justifying their motives to gain public support (Reyes, 2011: 782). It pertains to imbuing statements with evidence and authority to inspire confidence in their validity (Chilton, 2004: 23). Following constructivist theorists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Holzner, 1972; Saward, 2010), legitimization is seen not as giving an objective account of reality but as an effort to sustain or challenge a socio-political order (Amossy, 2022). Conversely, discourse scholars also analyze the inverse of legitimization, delegitimization, which is understood as 'discourses that discredit the appropriateness of social practice' (Osisanwo, 2025: 165) and assigning a negative image to the other. Through such polarization, delegitimization not only undermines opponents' credibility but also reinforces the speaker's own political or ideological position within the broader struggle over meaning and power (Szabó & Szabó, 2022: 255–256).

In political discourse studies, van Leeuwen's (2007: 93) framework is frequently cited. He identifies four dimensions of legitimization: authorization (appeal to authority, including individuals, traditions, or law), moral evaluation (appeal to value systems), rationalization (appeal to institutional goals and functions), and mythopoesis (legitimization through narratives, often moral or cautionary, that reward legitimate actions and punish illegitimate ones).Van Leeuwen's model has served as a foundation for subsequent studies, which have expanded or modified it (see e.g., Martín de la Rosa & Lazaro, 2022; Zhu & McKenna, 2012; Reyes, 2011). This article builds on van Leeuwen's approach by adopting Bennett's (2022) reinterpretation of mythopoesis, which shifts focus from general storytelling to legitimization through historical narratives: stories accepted as truth and embedded in a group's identity (Bennett, 2022: 371). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes mythopoesis as references to, or reconstructions of, historical narratives and political myths rooted in Poland's socio-political context. These narratives evoke collective emotions and function as perceived 'true' accounts of events, widely accepted as valid and foundational by the social group or nation (Flood, 2002: 44).

To operationalize and subsequently analyze linguistic forms used for strategic (de)legitimization, this study adopts the concept of discursive strategies, defined as 'a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices including discursive practices adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic goal' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 44). Discursive strategies include: nominalization (means of referring to social actors and phenomena), predication (ascribing positive or negative qualities to them), argumentation (rules of reasoning and making claims), perspectivization (the point of view of the speaker), and intensification/mitigation (modifying the illocutionary force of utterances). They are

the primary analytical categories of the Discourse-Historical Approach, a branch of Critical Discourse Studies that pays particular attention to socio-political contexts, allowing the researcher to go beyond the linguistic dimension and interpret the findings in their broader historical frameworks (Barakos, 2016: 30–32).

To identify the discursive strategies outlined above, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a primarily qualitative analysis of discursive legitimization with a quantitative corpus linguistic method. Corpus linguistics, the study of language using large collections of real-world texts (corpora) analyzed with computational tools, enables the systematic and empirical identification of recurring linguistic patterns (McEnery & Hardie, 2012: 1–2). The integration of discourse analysis with corpus methods is commonly referred to as Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (Vessey, 2013). It has frequently been applied to the study of political discourse, especially in comparative research involving large datasets (e.g., Baker et al., 2008; Bednarek & Caple, 2014; Maneri, 2025). Consequently, in the present study a selection of methods pertaining to corpus linguistics was implemented:

a) Frequency lists: Words ranked by frequency, including not only individual terms but also lexical bundles: repeated multi-word sequences;

b) Concordances: Display target words in context, helping to interpret frequent terms that may otherwise be inflated by citations or set phrases;

c) Collocations: Show words that frequently appear together, revealing patterns, such as negative adjectives with specific nouns (e.g., *utter* nonsense), that shape meaning and perception.

To confirm the statistical significance of results, collocation strength was measured using Log Dice, which assesses how likely two words co-occur relative to their individual frequencies in a corpus. With a maximum value of 14, Log Dice avoids favoring rare word pairs, unlike other measures (Yi, Man & Maie, 2023: 5–6). Additionally, Word Sketch, a feature of Sketch Engine software, was employed to analyze lexico-grammatical relations of key parts of speech and to aid visualization.

To recap the research procedure: for each of the three main social actors (Poland, Russia, and Ukraine), the study first identified which of the four dimensions of (de)legitimization (van Leeuwen, 2007) featured in President Duda's portrayal. Then, at the micro-level, specific discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) employed in the speeches were reconstructed and analyzed. This two-tiered analysis was supported and enhanced by the tools and methods of corpus linguistics. By working with large data samples and applying a rigorous methodology, the study effectively addressed common critiques of discourse studies related to biased interpretation and unrepresentative sampling (Breeze, 2011). Finally, in line with the principles of DHA, findings were discussed in their broader socio-political contexts.

3. Materials

The corpus is comprised of 28 speeches (33,488 words; 38,169 tokens) by President Andrzej Duda on the Russian invasion of Ukraine during its first two years. Delivered in Polish or English, all speeches were sourced from the official website of the President of Poland.

While President Duda has spoken on the Russian invasion of Ukraine on multiple occasions, this study focuses on 28 key speeches for two main reasons. First, these speeches correspond to major events related to the war, including the address on the invasion day (24 February 2022), the speech at Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada (22 May 2022), or the Royal Castle address (21 February 2023). The selection prioritized speeches aimed at broad, international audiences rather than exclusively Polish ones. Additionally, using an English-language corpus improves accessibility for non-Polish readers, particularly when analyzing lexical-grammatical data. As these speeches are professionally translated and published on the official website of the President of

Poland, they represent the authoritative English versions of President Duda's speeches.

Overall, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: How does President Duda discursively construct Poland's identity and position on the war, and how does he explain this stance?

RQ2: How does President Duda discursively construct Russia, and what arguments does he use to condemn Russian aggression?

RQ3: How does President Duda discursively construct Ukraine, and how does he portray it as a state with both the right and duty to defend its independence?

4. Analysis

Poland

Authorization

In his discursive portrayal of Poland, President Duda employed the strategy of authority, particularly expert and role model authority (van Leeuwen, 2007: 94–97). He highlighted Poland's historical awareness of Russian threats, citing past conflicts to position Poles collectively as experts on Russian aggression. Duda criticized the West's inaction during Crimea's annexation, framing Poles as morally and politically resolute against evil. Using collectivization (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 48) and inclusive language ('we'), he unified Poles across political divides against a common threat. While subtly contrasting Polish unity with Western naivety or self-interest, he avoided direct negative criticism or negatively loaded nominalizations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 51–52). Drawing on argumentative topoi of reality and history (Wodak, 2021: 76), Duda argued Russia must be stopped due to its broader regional threat, asserting the West should have acted earlier given Poland's long-standing recognition of Russia's patterns. Poland is thus presented as the most knowledgeable state on Russia, deserving to guide Western policy. Overall, despite critiques, Duda maintained a positive depiction of NATO and the EU, emphasizing Poland's active role and strong public support for EU membership.

> As early as 2014 we knew that Russia would not stop in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. In a broader view the aim of the Kremlin is to regain control over the so–called post–Soviet zone and destroy the current world order. For Putin the West was weak and disunited. There were a few reasons of that assessment. The major ones were political and economic factors. The West was afraid that a strong reaction might cause big turbulences in political relations. Moreover, many states were concerned about losing lucrative contracts with Russia (23 May 2023).
>
> For years Russia had not only been treated as a "normal" country, but much had been done to ensure that it holds an honorable place in the numerous international bodies that decide the future fate of the world. It is with very bitter satisfaction for me to say that Poland was not among the countries who were shocked. We had been warning and predicting such a scenario for many years (19 April 2024)

In addition, President Duda's argumentation assumes that not only did Western countries fail to see through Putin's plan (about which Poland had warned about since for many years) but it never had any colonies and would *always* help those in need. In the discourse of President Duda, Poland's history is special: marked by various tragedies, while never harming other nations. Thus, its legitimacy with regard to Eastern policy is unparalleled. Overall, President Duda portrayed the imperative to help Ukraine as part of Polish identity and a natural instinct. The discussed identity was presented as centered around supporting the weak and fighting for the greater good.

> Poland has never had colonies, the fact of which we are proud. We emphasize it on all occasions. Instead, my home country was many times brutally attacked, destroyed, and used by the neighbors with their imperial ambitions. For 123 years, Poland disappeared from the maps of the world. That is why we understand very well the countries that suffered colonialism, and the challenges they need to confront. Wherever the international community is in need, Poland is always ready to respond to the call, and without any hesitation. We provide assistance in many corners of the world (19 September 2023).

In invoking role model authority, President Duda frequently referenced the legacy of Lech Kaczyński, Poland's president from 2005 to 2010 and former Law and Justice party leader, who died in the Smolensk air disaster. Having served as Undersecretary of State in Kaczyński's Chancellery (2008–2010) and as a long-time party member, Duda frames his own presidency as a continuation of Kaczyński's legacy. Discursively, he employed the strategy of professionalization (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 51), emphasizing Kaczyński's political and academic credentials to reinforce his authority. He also used personalization, referring to Kaczyński as 'a great friend of Ukraine' to evoke emotional appeal and credibility. Through the topos of history, Duda constructed Kaczyński as a visionary, an early critic of Russian ambitions whose warnings about Ukraine were overlooked by the West, thereby legitimizing current policies as both morally grounded and historically vindicated.

Positioning himself as a disciple of President Kaczyński, Duda bolstered his own authority by framing his vision as correct and judicious. For a domestic audience, references to Kaczyński signaled that Poles should support the continuation of his Russia policy and, implicitly, Law and Justice – without ever naming the party. This subtlety avoided explicit party-political alignment (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 51), allowing Duda to present himself as a unifying figure above political divides, thereby strengthening his authority as an expert and role model.

> Professor Lech Kaczyński, the President of the Republic of Poland, was the one who understood this perfectly well. That is why he championed the cause also for the countries of our region. We all remember how he fought for the right of Ukraine and Georgia to become members of NATO and the European Union. Before the 2008 summit of the Alliance, he sent a special letter to the leaders in which he recalled the circumstances of the admission of the Federal Republic of Germany to NATO in 1955 (11 March 2022)
>
> Support for a free and independent Ukraine was, is and will remain beyond political dispute in our country. Regardless of whether the left or the right is in power in the land on the Vistula. This was the case during the Orange Revolution, when then President Aleksander Kwaśniewski was one of the leaders of support for Ukraine. It was so during the presidency of President Kaczyński. It was so during the Revolution of Dignity, when in Kyiv, at the Maidan of Independence, there was unanimous support for your struggle, both from the representatives of the then ruling factions and from the opposition (5 April 2023).

While President Duda mentioned Lech Kaczyński only six times, these references appeared during significant events, such as his address at the Royal Castle in Warsaw (preceding Volodymyr Zelensky's speech), the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the 78th

UN General Assembly General Debate, and the 'Transatlantic Security in the Shadow of Russia's Long War' seminar in Vancouver. This suggests that Duda invoked Kaczyński primarily at moments of historical importance, broadcast globally to both Polish and international audiences. He also emphasized that supporting Ukraine has been a consistent element of Polish presidential policy, transcending political affiliations. Notably, Duda praised former president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, which may be seen a surprising move given Kwaśniewski's unpopularity among Law and Justice supporters (Dąbrowska, 2019: 101). In evoking Kwaśniewski, President Duda underscored the need for unity and cooperation across political divides.

Mythopoesis

In terms of mythopoetic legitimization, President Duda emphasized the shared experiences of Poles and Ukrainians, framing Poland's support for Ukraine as rooted in similar histories of oppression by Russia. This aligns with the enduring Polish national myth of Poland as the 'Christ of Nations,' dating back to the 1830s after the third partition and the failed 1831 November Uprising. Polish Romantics portrayed these events as a crucifixion, with Poland's suffering and resistance seen as a path to sovereignty (Sokolewicz, 1990: 128–129). Suffering has been described as a 'constant historical determinant of Poland' (Chrostowski, 1991: 1), deeply embedded in Polish messianism and collective identity well beyond Romanticism (Zubrzycki, 2011: 27–28). The myth evolved through Adam Mickiewicz's (Poland's most renowned Romantic) concept of Poland as *antemurale Christianitatis*: the bulwark of Christianity (Pekacz, 1995: 421). In its modern form, Poland positions itself as the defender of "traditionally European" values rejected by Western Europe (Zubrzycki, 2001: 641). Although President Duda never explicitly called Poland the 'Christ of Nations', his speeches referenced multiple tragic events from Polish history. He mentioned Polish soldiers fighting alongside the Allies in World War II, focusing less on victories and more on the massive civilian deaths and destruction. Vivid, dramatic language, such as Warsaw being 'razed to the ground' and soldiers' brutally murdered', served to intensify the discourse through hyperbole and metaphor. Further, the word 'solidarity' appeared frequently (47 times) and mainly referred to *Solidarność*, the independent trade union pivotal in the fall of communism (Mason, 1987: 489). Duda used this legacy to legitimize aid to Ukraine, presenting Poles as heirs to solidarity's ideals and morally obliged to assist unconditionally. This invoked the topoi of history and savior (Wodak, 2021: 55), urging Poles to learn from the past and act again as leaders in supporting Eastern European sovereignty.

> Poland is a country of freedom and solidarity. It is known worldwide for the great Solidarity movement which not only stood for workers' rights but also for freedom and fundamental values. The movement which brought together millions of people, courageously defied the evil and changed the course of modern history bringing about the fall of communism. We are extremely proud of our Solidarity. Upon Russian aggression on Ukraine, the Poles have once again illustrated that solidarity is not only a great history, but that Solidarity lives in Us (19 September 2023).

Russia

Moral evaluation

President Duda's portrayal of Russia was unequivocal: Russia is an unlawful aggressor attacking an innocent country, flagrantly violating international law. This delegitimization was central to his discourse, reflected in the frequent use of strongly negative nouns such as 'aggression' (85 occurrences), 'crime' (50), 'law' (42), 'aggressor' (27), and 'attack' (24). Except for 'law', these are negative nominalizations tied to criminalization and militarization strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 51–

52).Regarding aggression, its strongest collocations were 'Russian' (12.38 LogDice), 'against' (11.85), 'Ukraine' (11.05 LogDice), 'victim' (10.91 LogDice), 'crime' (10.73 LogDice), 'Russia' (10.63 LogDice), 'barbaric' (10.08 LogDice), and 'brutal' (9.97 LogDice). Similarly, 'against' and 'Russian' were the two most relevant collocations of 'aggressor' (10.83 and 10.52 LogDice, respectively).

President Duda consistently framed events in Ukraine as illegitimate and brutal aggression, deliberately avoiding neutral terms like 'conflict' that might imply share responsibility. His use of strongly negative adjectives underscored Russia's lack of morality and clear role as the aggressor, while Ukraine was portrayed as defending its territory. These choices exemplify the strategy of primitivization, which depicts Russia as civilizationally backward (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 50). The term 'victim' further emphasized Ukraine's innocence in contrast to Russia's unjustified violence. This framing was reinforced by repeated use of words such as 'occupation' 'terror', 'assault', and 'invader', which signaled an illegal violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Notably, 'occupation' and 'terror' also invoked historical parallels to the Soviet occupation of Poland during World War II, linking past and present under the broader theme of Russian/Soviet imperialism. Overall, President Duda employed the strategy of relationalization, constructing a clear "us vs. them" binary that positioned Russia firmly as the adversary (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 52).

As Figure 1 illustrates, President Duda's use of the adjective 'Russian' consistently invoked negative connotations. Russia was portrayed as acting unlawfully (e.g., 'invader', 'attack', 'occupier', 'criminal'), in ways unbefitting a civilized state ('barbaric', 'brutal', 'onslaught', 'captivity'), and as seeking to revive Soviet-era dominance ('imperial', 'imperialism'). Additionally, Russia was depicted as a source of large-scale misinformation ('propaganda', 'lie', 'cynical'), with both its violence and deception described as widespread ('massive', 'full').

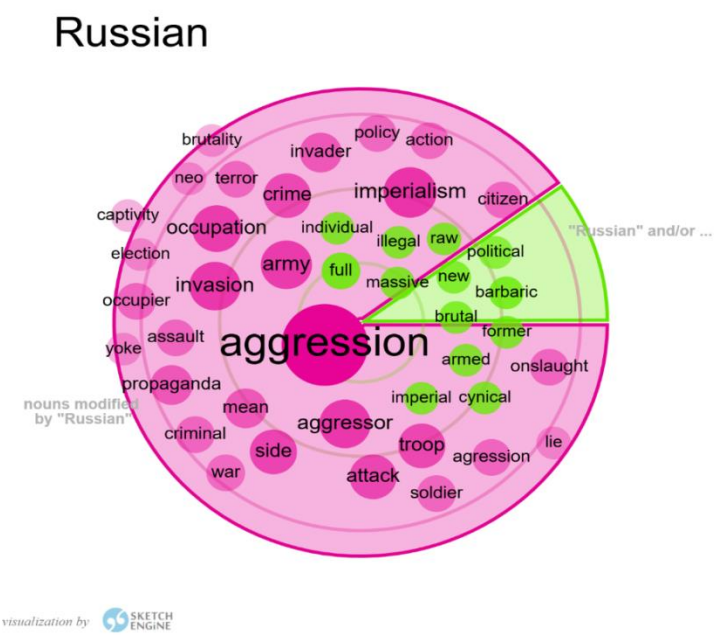


Figure 1: Lexico-grammatical relations of the adjective 'Russian'

Rationalization

President Duda would also make references to the dimension of rationality; in particular, instrumental rationality, which involves legitimization by reference to the ends, means and effects of the practices concerned (van Leeuwen, 2007: 100–101). In the discourse of the politician, as Russia committed reprehensive acts of violence, one should indisputably consider it to be the aggressor. Moreover, since international law should be obeyed, instances of breaching it should be punished accordingly. President Duda would make that point very clearly, as evidenced by the strongest collocations of 'law' – 'international' (13.00 LogDice), 'violation' (12.25 LogDice), 'rule' [of law] (11.54 LogDice), 'respect' (11.38 LogDice), 'humanitarian' (11.17 LogDice), 'fundamental' (11.07) 'violate' (10.91 Log Dice). Further, underscoring the illegitimate and immoral character of Russia's can be observed on the example of the collocations of the word 'crime', as they involve 'humanity' (12.29 LogDice), 'commit' (12.07 LogDice), 'war' 11.72 LogDice), 'against' (11.65 LogDice), 'genocide' (11.57 LogDice), 'aggression' (11.43 LogDice), 'unpunished' (11.27 LogDice), 'tribunal' (10.80 LogDice).

Additionaly, President Duda consistently portrayed Russian actions as heinous crimes, equating them with some of the gravest atrocities against humanity. As previously noted, he emphasized that the perpetrators must be held accountable: an appeal to legitimization through rationality: for a civilized world to function, justice must prevail. Discursively, this reflects the topoi of reality and usefulness; the latter asserts that if an action is beneficial from a certain perspective, it ought to be taken (Wodak, 2021: 76). In Duda's framing, prosecuting those responsible for the war would symbolize a triumph of Western civilization over Eastern barbarism.

Mythopoesis

Mythopoetic delegitimization strategies were observed in the instances in which President Duda portrayed Russia as the heir to the Soviet Union. In general, the USSR was shown as not belonging to the democratic society of the West that abides by the rule of law, but to be a prime representative of a different civilization, which does not respect basic civil rights and uses violence in attempts to establish its illegitimate order.

> Today what is at stake is the very dignity or disgrace of the international community. Vladimir Putin by unleashing this cruel warfare has directly invoked the heritage of the Soviet Union, to 'the evil empire' as it was once termed by the US President, a great friend of Poland, Ronald Reagan. What Russia does in Ukraine demonstrates that it continues to be 'the evil empire', that it was never consigned to the past, and today again it rears its ugly head! (11 March 2022)
>
> I fear that when we start treating Russian bestialities as something normal, it will be equivalent to the victory of the idea of the 'Russkiy mir', meaning brutality, aggression, war, poverty and death. In other words, the victory of anti–values against which we have agreed to cooperate in order to build a Europe and a world where individual freedom and human life are respected, where everything is done to ensure that people live in the best possible, decent conditions, where all problems are resolved through negotiation, without recourse to violence (1 December 2022)

One key delegitimization strategy involved recontextualizing the political doctrine of 'Russkiy mir', which asserts Russia as the center of the East Slavic world, uniting Russian-speaking peoples under the Kremlin and Orthodox Church (Pabst, 2021: 120–121). This discursive construct is used by Russian elites to dominate public

communication and shape narratives around Russian socio-cultural, geopolitical, economic, educational, and religious identities (Kozdra, 2018: 62–63). Originating in the 1990s, 'Russkiy mir' quickly became a flexible tool for Russian political elites to justify aggressive foreign policies toward states in their perceived sphere of influence (Suslov, 2018: 333). Notably, Vladimir Putin invoked the protection of 'Russkiy mir' to legitimize the annexation of Crimea (Pieper, 2018: 8–9) and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Meienberger, 2023: 19). In addition, the concept has been described as a propaganda tool, serving to promote a skewed version of reality (Orzechowski 2024; Yurkova 2018).

In President Duda's speeches, 'Russkiy mir' was depicted as antithetical to a civilized society: an expression of Russian imperialism used to justify the invasion of Ukraine. The term 'Soviet' was often charged, modifying nouns like 'troops' and 'domination', with 'destroy' as a prominent collocate (11.34 LogDice). Consequently, both 'Russkiy mir' and the Soviet Union were framed not as unifying concepts but as symbols of Russian crimes and oppression. Recontextualizing Ronald Reagan's label of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', Duda applied it to Putin's Russia, portraying it as hostile to Ukrainian sovereignty and a threat to Western values.



Figure 2: Lexico-grammatical relations of the noun 'Russia'

To broaden the portrayal of Russia, an analysis of verbs with 'Russia' as subject reveals many negatively-valenced actions, reinforcing President Duda's framing of Russia as violating international law and committing unjustified crimes against Ukraine. Examples include: '**Russia is deliberately destroying** Ukraine's agriculture in breach of international law' (20 September 2022); 'An imperialistic **Russia is discrediting** itself as a member of international community' (20 September 2023); 'Ukraine is not the only area where **Russia is pursuing** a policy contradictory to the

rudimentary principles of the OSCE' (1 December 2022); and 'when **Russia is occupying** internationally recognized territories of other countries' (23 August 2022). These verbs present Russia as a purposeful agent violating legal and moral norms. The constructions serve as clear condemnations of Putin's actions, positioning Russia as an enemy of democratic values.

Moving on to the adjectives, one should note 'Soviet', 'tsarist', 'imperialistic', and 'imperial', which further detach Russia from the Western civilization. Finally, the genitive forms underscore the full responsibility of Russia for the war and the reprehensible character of its actions: '**Russia's war of attrition** against Ukraine' (23 August 2022); '**Russia's brutal aggression** brought immense global problems in its aftermath' (19 September 2023); 'Poland's leading role in response to **Russia' s invasion** has been unprecedented' (29 March 2023); 'I have no doubt that a possible agreement which would in any way grant or tolerate **Russia's wartime territorial gains**, would in fact be a ticking bomb planted under the European security system that would sooner or later explode' (1 December 2022); 'It is in those regions [Africa and the Middle East] that the famine caused by **Russia's assault** of Ukraine will be most visible' (20 September 2022); 'In the face of **Russia's unlawful actions**, we should learn a lesson for the future' (20 September 2022). Overall, unlike other prominent Visegrad Group politicians, such as Robert Fico, Václav Klaus, or Viktor Orbán, who normalized Russia's attack on Ukraine through victim-blaming, drawing parallels to U.S. interventions, or adopting a 'pacifist' stance to justify reluctance to send arms (Kazharski 2023: 40–42), President Duda took a clear and unequivocal position against Russia's aggression.

Ukraine

Moral evaluation

On a macro level, President Duda employed evaluation and positive comparison (van Leeuwen, 2007: 97–98). He portrayed Ukrainians as morally justified in defending their independence, praising the courage and sacrifice of President Zelensky and Ukrainian soldiers. In contrast, he depicted Russia as the immoral aggressor, framing Ukraine's actions as part of a just cause.

> The barbaric aggression of Russia against Ukraine violated all norms, principles and values on which international order is based. The heroic struggle of Ukrainians to defend their own country is also a struggle for the future of Europe. That is why our united support to Ukraine is of crucial importance. We need to commit here to upholding our solidarity with Ukraine as long as it takes (17 May 2023).
>
> Poland pledges to continue its support for Ukraine in order to stop Russian neo–imperialism. We will also continue our support to democratic Belarus. Ukraine has never been and will never be alone in its fight. Because Ukrainians are fighting for all of us (29 March 2023).

Moving to a micro-level of analysis, verbs with 'Ukraine' as the object clearly show that President Duda was portrayed as the innocent victim of Russian actions, further exacerbating the observations made in the previous section. For instance, 'the Russians think they can just come and **occupy** Kyiv, conquer **Ukraine**' (5 April 2023); 'the Russian Federation, which **invaded** Ukraine and is currently **demolishing** Ukrainian houses, **destroying** Ukrainian industry, **taking away** Ukrainian crops and **killing** Ukrainian people' (22 May 2022); 'Virtually the whole territory of Ukraine **was shelled**, and in particular the border areas, namely the Lviv region and the Volhynian region, also **came under fire**' (16 November 2022); 'As of recently, they have been going as far as to **threaten** not only Ukraine, but the whole world, and for the most part Europe' (20 September 2022).

On the other hand, Ukraine was consistently presented as defending its sovereignty, legitimizing the countries actions by presenting them as morally justified: 'Ukraine **is defending** its freedom, repelling the Russian aggressors' (24 August 2022); 'Ukraine **has shown** the entire world that **it is capable of confronting** a neighbouring power, a state, much bigger and theoretically much more powerful' (5 April 2023); 'Russia not only has an obligation to withdraw to the February 23 line, but must also reckon with Ukraine's **right to liberate** all its territory, including Crimea' (23 August 2022). This contrasting portrayal is particularly striking when comparing the strongest collocations of 'Russian' (cf. the previous section) and 'Ukrainian'. The latter include 'people' (12.08 LogDice), 'city' (11.03 LogDice), 'nation' (10.81 LogDice) 'soldier" (10.81 LogDice), 'refugee' (10.40 LogDice), or 'success' (10.27 LogDice). Thus, President Duda framed the actions of Ukrainians as successful and undertaken solely in self-defense, which legitimized them as morally acceptable. In terms of relationalization, President Duda framed Ukrainians as people and soldiers, while depicting Russians as barbaric and brutal invaders. This clear 'us vs. them' distinction signals whom he supports in the conflict. Notably, 'support' ranked as the fourth strongest collocate of 'Ukraine' (11.24 LogDice), following 'have', 'Russian', and 'against', highlighting the emphasis on aid to Ukraine as a key element in Duda's speeches.

Finally, Duda's personal bond with President Zelensky reinforced the positive portrayal. He frequently used Zelensky's first name, 'Volodymyr' appeared 24 times and 'Zelensky' just 10 times, and highlighted his courage, heroism, and leadership. Both Zelensky and the Ukrainian nation were called 'friends', adding a personal dimension to Polish-Ukrainian relations.

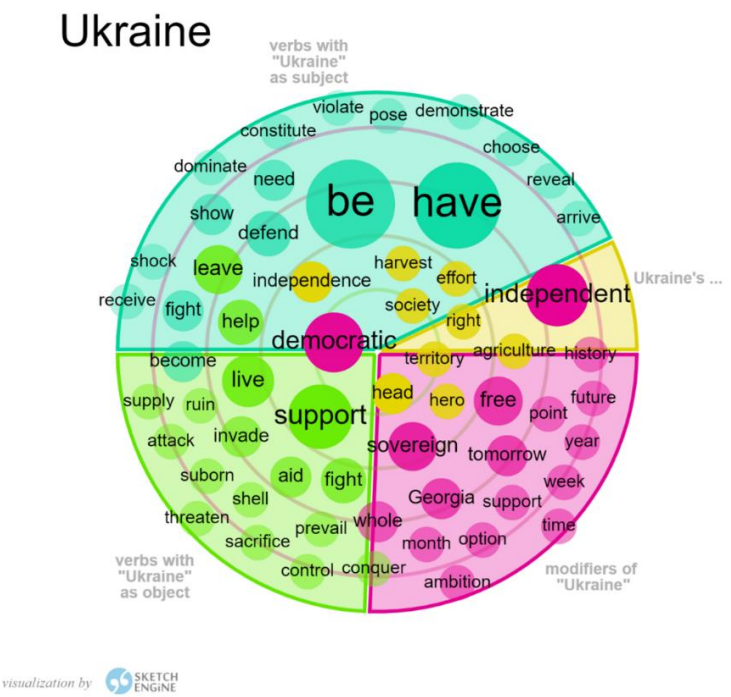


Figure 3: Lexico-grammatical relations of the noun 'Ukraine'

Rationalization

Beyond moral arguments, President Duda's discourse also carried a pragmatic dimension. The politician emphasized defending Ukraine's independence, often using modifiers like 'democratic', free', 'sovereign', and 'independent', frequently grouped at the end of his speeches. He framed support for Ukraine as vital to Polish security, exemplified by the reference to 'Georgia' in Figure 3. This alludes to Lech Kaczyński's 2008 speech in Tbilisi opposing Russian aggression: 'Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic states, and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland'. Duda invoked this to legitimize his political stance and highlight that the security of post-Soviet states is essential to Poland's sovereignty. Moreover, Duda portrayed Ukrainians as heroes fighting not only for their independence but also for Poland's and Europe's security, realizing the topos of advantage/usefulness, as their struggle benefits the broader region and thus warrants support.

Mythopoesis

A key element in legitimizing support for Ukraine was portraying Poland and Ukraine as close allies despite a difficult shared history. President Duda framed divisive historical events as the result of external forces beyond the control of either nation. Current efforts to reignite tensions were similarly attributed to vague 'enemies', implying that withholding support for Ukraine would serve these hostile interests and harm both countries. This framing likely reflects the historically strained Polish-Ukrainian relations: while 51% of Poles expressed sympathy toward Ukrainians in 2023, that figure was much lower in previous decades: just 9% in 1994, and it did not surpass 35% until 2020 (CBOS, 2023: 2–4).

A major source of tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations has been the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia (1943–1945), during which an estimated 60,000 Poles were killed by Ukrainian nationalists, often with extreme brutality: victims were reportedly hanged on their entrails, mutilated, or beheaded with scythes or axes (Naleźniak, 2013: 45–46). In 2016, the Polish parliament officially recognized these events as genocide and established 11 July as the National Day of Remembrance for the victims. Previously, the events had been described as "ethnic cleansing with hallmarks of genocide" (Adamski, 2017:6), making the 2016 resolution a significant discursive shift. The term genocide, defined as acts committed 'with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group' (Tatz, 2003: ix), is typically reserved for crimes such as the Holocaust, the Great Ukrainian Famine, the Rwandan Genocide, or the Srebrenica massacre (Simon, 1996).

To mitigate bilateral tensions, President Duda emphasized the long and complex shared history of Poles and Ukrainians. He deliberately avoided assigning clear blame for past conflicts, employing mitigation strategies such as the passive voice and first-person plural forms (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 82). Instead, he attributed historical misunderstandings to external forces that had long sought to divide the two nations. Drawing on the topos of history, he linked these past influences to present-day Russian actions and underscored that mutual cooperation is in both countries' interest. While acknowledging difficult historical topics, Duda insisted they should not disrupt current Polish-Ukrainian relations, warning that doing so would play into the hands of Putin's Russia. This represents a significant shift in his rhetoric; previously, he had been accused of using emotional, populist discourse and of fueling Polish-Ukrainian tensions over the Volhynian massacre for political gain (Rysicz-Szafraniec, 2021: 503–504).

> Poles and Ukrainians are linked by a centuries–old, shared history. A wonderful history, but on many occasions strewn with difficulties and painful experiences. We made many mistakes together, for which we paid a dramatically high

price. The partitioners and occupiers often tried to divide us and turn us against each other according to the 'divide and rule' logic (5 April 2023)

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study reconstructs and deeply analyzes the discursive framing of the main social actors in the Russian-Ukrainian war, enhanced by corpus linguistics methods. While linguistic elements are central, the socio-political context is crucial for substantiating the analysis. Notably, President Duda mitigated historical conflicts between Poland and Ukraine, framing them largely as the result of external hostile forces. This reflects a significant discursive shift. Previously, Law and Justice representatives often portrayed migration from African and Middle Eastern war zones as a security threat, depicting refugees as potential terrorists or welfare opportunists (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2021; Cap, 2018). At that time, cultural and civilizational differences were emphasized, with discriminatory rhetoric prevalent among high-ranking politicians and in the mainstream media (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Balicki, 2021). In contrast, Duda's speeches emphasize solidarity with Ukrainians and support for war refugees, marking a departure from fear-mongering and divisive rhetoric toward a more statesmanlike approach. Thus, the politician departed from demagoguery, fear-mongering, and the us-versus-them dichotomy, taking on the role of a statesman.

The discursive shift regarding the war in Ukraine extended beyond rhetoric among high-profile Law and Justice figures. For instance, on 15 March 2022, just weeks after the full-scale invasion, then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński, alongside the Czech and Slovenian prime ministers, visited the heavily shelled Kyiv to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine (Tilles, 2022). While some right-wing Polish groups sought to exploit difficult Polish-Ukrainian historical issues for political gain after 24 February 2022 (Turska-Kawa & Stępień-Lampa, 2023: 65–66), such instances remained marginal. The overwhelming political consensus favored supporting Ukraine and condemning Russia, with President Duda among the most active advocates. Although Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians have improved significantly since the invasion (CBOS, 2023: 2–4), unresolved contrasting narratives about World War II and its aftermath continue to provoke tensions (cf. Adamski, 2018; Zhurzhenko, 2013). Despite potential grounds for anti-Ukrainian sentiment amid large-scale Ukrainian migration, President Duda refrained from fueling such divisions, instead calling for solidarity grounded in moral and historical reasoning. Notably, his speeches avoided contentious current issues, such as the dispute over Ukrainian grain exports, which have negatively affected Polish agriculture (Grzelak & Sobczyk, 2024).

When situating mythopoetic legitimization strategies within a broader context, it is important to note that President Duda invoked the tradition of the Polish Romantics to portray Poles as consistently siding with the weak and willing to make sacrifices for a just cause. While emphasizing Poland's historical uniqueness is a well-established feature of Polish right-wing discourse (Kotwas & Kubik, 2022), this strategy is by no means exclusive to Poland, as similar narratives appear in the rhetoric of various right-wing movements across Europe (cf. Wodak 2021: 49–56). It should also be noted that the myth of Poland as the Christ of Nations has traditionally been used as a strategy to emphasize Polish distinctiveness and to present Poland in an unambiguously positive light (Stańczyk, 2013: 131). However, in President Duda's case, the myth in question was not used to deepen social divisions or foster antagonism between groups or nations but rather to legitimize support for Ukraine. Furthermore, the traditional 'Christ of Nations' myth, often employed to underline Polish distinctiveness and foster a positive national self-image, was in this context

primarily utilized to emphasize the moral obligation to aid a neighboring country under attack.

Regarding Russia, President Duda delegitimized key concepts central to Russian propaganda. In his narrative, the Soviet Union was framed as an 'evil empire', while the notion of 'Russkiy mir' was dismissed as a fabricated construct used to justify aggression against Ukraine. Consequently, President Duda consistently depicted Russia as existing on the fringes of civilization and fundamentally incompatible with Western democratic values. His delegitimization of Russia and Vladimir Putin was resolute and unequivocal, employing direct discourse that left no room for ambiguity, clearly identifying Russians as aggressors, invaders, and perpetrators of the gravest crimes. This stance aligns with the longstanding discourse of the Law and Justice party, whose representatives have consistently portrayed Russia as hostile to Western values and to Poland itself (Chojan, 2016). Thus, President Duda's discourse on Russia shares numerous similarities with that of his political formation. It is important to note that Russians have been among the most disliked nationalities in Poland, a sentiment that predates the invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the vast majority of Poles hold a negative view of the Soviet Union (Adamczewski, 2020; Bokszański, 2002). Therefore, the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Russia fits within the broader, enduring Polish sentiment toward the country. This context may partly explain the comparatively positive portrayal of Ukrainians, as Poland and Ukraine share a common adversary (Russia) whose aversion arguably surpasses longstanding Polish-Ukrainian prejudices.

Overall, even if President Duda's motivations were pragmatic, his departure from the fear-mongering rhetoric for which he and his party have previously been criticized (Potulski & Modrzejewski, 2024; Klaus, 2017) is noteworthy. The discursive construction of Ukrainians as a brotherly nation deserving unconditional support has helped foster dialogue between the two peoples, whose relations had been lukewarm for many years. However, recent political shifts suggest that President Duda's legitimization of Ukraine among Ukrainians might not become a wider trend. Duda's recent successor, President Karol Nawrocki, has adopted a more assertive stance against Ukraine, signaling a possible reorientation of Poland's official discourse and raising questions about the durability of the previously conciliatory narrative. Simultaneously, Polish support for accepting refugees and an overall sentiment of Poles towards Ukrainians have faded (Anwer, 2026; Ptak, 2026). The findings suggest that positive representations of Ukrainians were highly contingent upon specific geopolitical and political contexts (e.g., the outbreak of war). This reinforces the importance of contextual embedding within the Discourse-Historical Approach: shifts in political leadership and public mood can rapidly reshape dominant narratives. Furthermore, the transition from a solidarity-based narrative to a more assertive or critical stance indicates that inclusive constructions of the 'Other' may be temporary rather than transformative. This calls for caution in interpreting reconciliatory discourse as evidence of deep-seated attitudinal change.

Critically examining the methodology employed, it is noteworthy that the topos of threat and danger, commonly invoked by radical or extreme political formations to amass support (cf. Wodak, 2021), was virtually absent in President Duda's discourse. Instead, arguments emphasizing adherence to international law and the moral imperative to support a weaker nation were foregrounded. Wodak (2021: 76) identifies several topoi used by President Duda (such as reality, advantage/usefulness, history, and savior) as typical features of 'far-right populist rhetoric'. However, based on this study's findings, it would be difficult to categorize President Duda as representing the far right, despite his reliance on these argumentative topoi. This suggests that right-wing politicians who employ topoi identified by scholars working within the Discourse-Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies do not necessarily engage in polarizing or populist rhetoric. While the approach remains

highly valuable and widely accepted for analyzing political discourse, it appears to carry an implicit negative bias toward representatives of the broadly defined right. This observation underscores the need for analytical frameworks that aim for greater neutrality, allowing for a more balanced and nuanced evaluation of discursive strategies across the entire political spectrum.

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