The Ukraine Crisis and the Impact of Discourse, A Conflict for some, a War for Many?

By Caroline Ackermann and Lea Merkel

"Who told you that there is a war between Ukraine and Russia? There is no war between Russia and Ukraine, tell me one international organization that uses the term war." Maria[6], a Russian state official, sits at the head of the table. Her arms are crossed in a somewhat defensive manner while she looks at her colleagues who record the meeting. A photographer frantically jumps around the table to document the conversation in real time. If there is no conflict, why would Ukrainian protesters attack the very building she, a Russian State Representative, works in? "These people may have many different reasons. How would I know?"

The depth of a discursive division along the lines of how to describe the situation in Ukraine becomes increasingly visible during the interview with Maria - is it Russian aggression? An ostensibly frozen conflict? Gathering information from trustworthy sources becomes an issue in conflict coverage, if information is increasingly distorted, corrupted or bent to fit a certain narrative. It can be dangerous to dismiss some accounts as 'fake news', considering that seemingly no one in Russia calls the situation a war, everyone in Ukraine deems it a war and outside actors tiptoe around the proper label. We are faced with a conflict riddled by different narratives – We take a closer look at three and showcase why language matters.

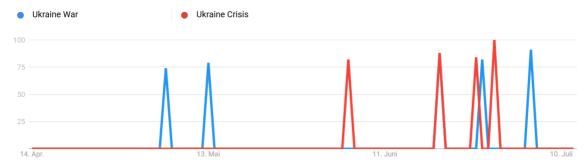## The "Frozen Conflict" Narrative

When the 'Frozen Conflict Narrative' is engaged in the media and manifests itself in public discourse, it refers to the stagnant process that is visible in negotiations as opposed to the actual combat, shelling and other military operations still taking place. The fighting along the conflict line has in fact not stopped, but in order to be able to continue negotiations with both sides, Western actors seem to have favored a more neutral narrative. Western European states have acknowledged there is a conflict between Ukraine and the country who must not be named, otherwise risking the suspension of all negotiation efforts permanently. Attached to this narrative is the dangerous endorsement of a false reality: unless the daily reports are analyzed rigorously by the public, people perceive the conflict as something it is clearly not: on halt.
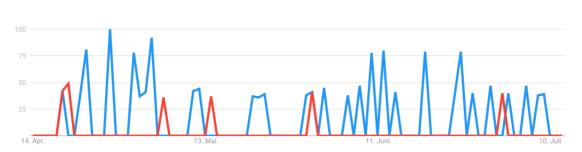
The "Civil War" Narrative

What other narratives come to mind when thinking about Ukraine? Labels such as war or international conflict imply the involvement of at least two actors. This is precisely why these terms are avoided by some to describe what is happening in the Ukraine, looking at dominant narratives in Russia. Even the highest officials, those sent to represent Russia on the international stage, deny any Russian involvement. This narrative characterizes the unrest in Eastern Ukraine as an internal conflict be-

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[6] Name changed

tween Ukrainians, firmly denying any Russian involvement – and thus refusing to accept responsibility for any human suffering.

Google search trends in Russia in the past three months are indicative of the way the situation in Ukraine is viewed.

Google Trends in Ukraine in the past three months.

The "War" Narrative

In the international system it is difficult to call it as you see it – unless it directly poses a threat to you and your survival. The term 'war' is not only used by Ukraine, but by its neighboring states and states bordering Russia elsewhere. Countries such as Poland or Lithuania have shown support for Ukraine by clearly portraying the situation as an ongoing act of Russian aggression. Countries feel either due to geographical or historical reasons connected to the Ukrainians, employing a narrative that this war is to be taken seriously, knowing that if this conflict is not properly resolved, this could set a dangerous precedent for the future.

A Conflict for Some, a War for Many? The Situation on the Ground

83,047 ceasefire violations recorded by the OSCE'SMM in the first 3 months of 2019. Civilians who want to cross the 500 km border which separates the occupied territories from Ukraine are often old women and men, who have worked their whole life in Ukraine and need their pensions. They have no choice but to risk injury or even death in attempt to get to the other side. 12,000 civilians have been killed and 30,000 injured. Civilian casualties are primarily caused accidentally by shelling and mining.

The way in which narratives about ongoing violent conflicts, crisis or war are framed naturally has an impact on the process of solution-finding. Different actions are

needed for solving an ongoing war – in contrast to a frozen conflict. A "Frozen Conflict" narrative results in the dehumanization of the people who are on the ground, suffering the dire consequences of a war which has been going on for nearly five years now. When putting the truly abysmal conditions on the ground in abstract terms, audiences fail to take into consideration the human dimension - although it is the human dimension after all, which should guide the crisis management processs.