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Crisis Leadership: Language, Power, and the Construction of Legitimacy in War Narratives

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Abstract: Focusing on wartime narratives, this study demonstrates how language functions as a tool of power and legitimacy, revealing discursive

patterns that operate not only in politics but also in corporate and institutional contexts.

Using a qualitative CDA approach, the paper analyses how political leaders employ language during crises to justify decisions and manage military operations. Through comparative analysis of recent scholarship and our examination of speeches and statements by top political figures involved in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the study identifies conflict framings, recurring themes, linguistic choices, and rhetorical devices used to legitimise "Us" and delegitimise "Them". The findings indicate that crisis leaders rely heavily on the victim–savior dichotomy, constructing "Us" through themes of victimhood and moral superiority, and depicting "Them" through savagery, and moral decline–compounded by marked evaluative lexis, specific syntactic patterns, and frequent rhetorical devices.

The paper argues that understanding how leaders construct wartime narratives to justify violence can enhance awareness of analogous discursive strategies in organisational crisis contexts and support more ethical, transparent, and responsible communication practices.

Keywords: narratives, framing, crisis leadership, "Us vs. Them" dichotomy, wartime political discourse

Introduction

The relationship between language, power and politics is deeply intertwined, particularly in times of crisis. Large-scale conflicts, whether driven by political, social, religious, or territorial motives, are waged with words as much as with weapons. History shows that wars are frequently preceded by verbal confrontations over values and claims to status, power, and resources (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024), which ultimately erupt into physical aggression. During wartime, political and military leaders continuously engage in verbal interactions; once violence subside, they again turn to language through negotiations to resolve the issues that sparked the conflicts.

Politicians use language as their primary vehicle for articulating ideas, intentions, and sentiments. Political discourse thus becomes an instrument capable of sustaining peace or provoking conflict (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). In wartime, it serves purposes far beyond information exchange—it shapes public consciousness, guides collective perception (Gomaa, 2023), reinforces national identities, constructs enemies and legitimizes military operations (Bouka, 2025). As Lehman & Grint (2024: 8) note "rhetoric is not simply a tool for persuasion but a mechanism through which leaders and followers jointly create meaning".

Unsurprisingly, much research has examined how official representatives employ language to justify wars. These discursive practices constitute a form of crisis leadership, in which political actors must construct legitimacy, manage public emotions, and sustain collective resolve. Although operating on a more consequential scale, this logic mirrors communicative practices in organizational settings, where leaders also use narratives to frame crises, allocate responsibility, and mobilise coordinated action. Succinctly put, "the use of language in institutional contexts is related to power and serves the interests of those who hold it" too (Lehman, 2024: 3). Leaders, in general, are engaged in social practices and are concerned with the same vital concepts for achieving effective communication—meaning and framing; reflexivity and moral accountability (ethics), and relationality and dialogue (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, in Lehman, 2024). Recognising and foregrounding this parallel can amplify the need for ethical crisis communication and responsible leadership overall.

This study examines political discourse in two major ongoing military conflicts: the war in Ukraine and the war in Gaza. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study investigates how high-ranking political leaders construct wartime narratives to legitimise decisions, sustain group identity, and justify military actions with far-reaching human consequences.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background outlines the analytical framework, briefly introducing CDA, the concepts of framing and narratives, and the "Us vs. Them" legitimisation strategy. The subsequent sections present the research methodology, contextual information on the two conflicts, and an analysis and a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with key insights and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical background

The analysis of political discourse in contemporary studies shows that CDA remains the dominant analytical framework. CDA examines the hidden meanings embedded in discourse by considering power relations and the socio-political contexts in which discourse is produced. Its central concern is to reveal how politicians use language to construct social realities, and how these realities, in turn, shape political discourse (van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 1995). Much research on political discourse draws on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, which includes: (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice, and on van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach which, similarly, links the microstructure of language use (lexis, grammar, discourse strategies) to the macrostructure of culture (power, dominance, and inequality). The Ideological Square proposed by van Dijk's (2006) is particularly relevant for identifying positive self-representation and negative other-representation strategies ("Us vs. Them" polarization), whereby political actors highlight "our" good actions and "their" bad ones, while downplaying unfavourable information about the in-group and the positive actions of the out-group. This "Us vs. Them" polarization which is employed to portray the in-group as moral, defensive, or humane, while the out-group as aggressive, illegitimate, or threatening is, in fact, one of the primary strategies used in political discourse for legitimising war (Oddo, 2011). Politicians 'build' this strategy through carefully selected lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices, designed to provoke emotional reactions such as fear, anger, hope, or pride (D'Ambrosio, 2022, in Serafimovska et al., 2024), which, in turn, can trigger public behavior which is aligned with their political agendas (Serafimovska et al., 2024).

Additionally, research on political discourse relies extensively on two closely related concepts—framing and political narratives. Framing refers to how political actors present information selectively, emphasising certain aspects of an issue while obscuring other aspects, thereby shaping what becomes salient in a public debate (Serafimovska et al., 2024). Frames in political discourse are important as they "guide perception, decision-making, and behavior"

(Goffman, 1974, in Serafimovska et al., 2024). In Foucault's terms (1976/1979), discourse not only shapes thought but also frames certain claims as "truths", marginalizing alternative perspectives (in Lehman & Grint, 2024). Entman (1993) defines framing as selecting particular aspects of a perceived reality to promote a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation.

Political narratives, on the other hand, present a much more detailed political account of an event which involves characters positioned in time and space (Van Hulst, 2025). Narratives are not simply the telling of facts; they may include elements of history, ideology, or cultural values as well as politicians' own perspectives, values, and interpretations (Shenhav, 2006). Politicians with their narratives aim to persuade and mobilize the public, influence the understanding of reality, shape public opinion, legitimize political agendas and alter relationships between social groups and individuals (Shenhav, 2006). Political narratives are very efficient in engaging emotions and can be used to persuade people towards positive goals such as justice, equality and sustainability, or, conversely, towards negative goals such as terrorism, authoritarianism and violence (Braddock & Hogan, 2016, in Serafimovska et al., 2024).

Research Methodology

The primary goal of this study is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between politics, power, and language, and to identify recurrent rhetorical strategies in political discourse during military crises, regardless of differing social, cultural, historical, or geopolitical contexts. The key research questions guiding this study are: (1) What frames do political leaders employ in their narratives to justify turning to arms in times of crisis? and (2) What themes and discursive means—linguistic and rhetorical—do politicians use to legitimise "Us" and delegitimise "Them"? Gaining insight into these mechanisms can also contribute to a broader understanding of crisis communication and leadership in organisational and institutional contexts, where leaders, too, "must skillfully

navigate ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logic) to align individual goals with broader organizational objectives … to resolve conflicts, articulate visions, and foster relational cohesion" (Lehman & Grint, 2024: 8).

Drawing on CDA, more specifically, on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and on van Dijk's Ideological Square (2006), this research compares and contrasts the political discourse of the highest-ranking officials involved in two ongoing military conflicts: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the war in Ukraine, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and key Hamas representatives in the war in Gaza. The analysis combines two complementary data sources. First, it draws on the findings of recent mostly CDA-based studies that examine the political discourse of these leaders. Specifically, the studies of Alnwihe & Al-Abbas (2023), Bouka (2025), Soukni (2025), Minawi (2024), Shalev (2025), and Klein (2024) provide insights into the discourse surrounding the Israel–Hamas war, while the works of Babatunde & Onmoke (2025), Abbadi et al. (2024), Gomaa (2023), and Hasan (2025) analyse discursive strategies used in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Second, this study conducts its own CDA of political statements and official addresses delivered by Putin, Zelenskyy, Netanyahu, and Hamas representatives from the onset of each conflict and throughout its progression. These primary texts were selected through purposive sampling based on their political relevance, official nature, and impact on public understanding of the conflict. Analysing this corpus alongside the findings of existing scholarship allows for a more robust identification of shared rhetorical patterns and conflict-framing strategies across different geopolitical contexts.

The analysis unfolds in three main stages. First, concise background information is provided on the circumstances that led to the outbreak of each conflict, as understanding the context in which political discourse transpires is of paramount importance. Second, the narratives constructed by political leaders at the onset and throughout the progression of the conflict are examined, with attention to how military action is discursively justified. Third, the study identifies recurring themes that underpin these narratives, including existential threats, selective historical references, appeals to religion, moral superiority, fear, collective identity, etc. Particular focus is placed on how crisis leaders construct

the "Us vs. Them" legitimisation strategy through specific linguistic (lexical and syntactic) and rhetorical (e.g., metaphorical language) devices to shape public perception and mobilise support during wartime. Lastly, the study highlights the importance of drawing analogies between political crisis management through linguistic means and the strategies employed by leaders in organisations and institutions to legitimise high-stakes decisions, influence group behaviour, and reinforce hierarchical authority.

Results

Background information on the two conflicts

Ukraine and Russia share a long and complex history shaped by their coexistence within the Soviet Union. Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the two countries pursued diverging geopolitical orientations: Ukraine increasingly aligned itself with the West, while Russia continued to view Ukraine as part of its historical and cultural sphere of influence (Bouka, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Tensions escalated with the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the outbreak of the conflict in Donbas, where pro-Russian separatist groups, assisted by Russia, started fighting for independence from Ukraine. The current phase of the war began in February 2022, when Russia, first, recognized the independence of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and, then, launched a "special military operation" framed as an effort to "de--Nazify" and "demilitarize" Ukraine (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Russian political discourse often portrays Russians and Ukrainians as "one people", a narrative that, as Mankoff (2022) notes, implicitly challenges Ukraine's sovereignty and historical identity. By contrast, Ukrainian leaders frame the conflict as a struggle to defend their territory, independence, and right to exist (Abbadi et al., 2024; Hasan, 2025).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is rooted in decades of territorial and political contestation, often traced back to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent displacement of Palestinians, which triggered a protracted

circle of violence over land and predominance. On the other hand, although Gaza has been formally recognized as "autonomous" since 2005, following Israel's withdrawal, its borders remained largely under Israeli control (Bouka, 2025). The most recent escalation began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas, the militant wing of the religious nationalist group governing Gaza since 2006, launched the "al-Aqsa Flood Operation" as a sign of resistance, killing approximately 1,200 people and taking over 250 hostages. Israel responded immediately by declaring war on Hamas, aiming to dismantle its military and governing structures, and secure the release of hostages. The ensuing large-scale military operations, which included airstrikes, ground incursions, and a blockade, produced a severe humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. International criticism has focused on the disproportionate use of force by Israel, while Hamas has been condemned too for attacks on civilians and for embedding military infrastructure in densely populated areas. As of late 2025, the conflict is still largely unresolved, with significant humanitarian, political, and geopolitical implications (Elmali, n.d.).

The framing of the conflicts in the political narratives

Putin vs. Zelensky

The analyses of Putin's public speeches and statements since the war began point to several recurrent frames. The first presents Russia not as an aggressor but as a savior, engaged in a defensive, liberating mission. He labels the invasion as a "special military operation", claiming that it is intended to protect the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine and to overthrow the "neo-Nazi" Ukrainian regime. Putin frames the invasion as necessary, arguing that inaction would constitute a betrayal of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). He repeatedly uses the terms "de-Nazification" and "de-militarization", implying that Ukraine's government is a neo-Nazi military dictatorship, guilty of humiliating and committing genocide against the people of Donetsk and Luhansk:

> The purpose of the operation is to protect people subjected to abuse and genocide by the Kyiv Regime for eight years. We will strive to clean Ukraine from Nazism and militarism and bring to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.

Thus, he places responsibility for the war on the Ukrainian government (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024) and asserts that, as a nation that once fought against Nazism, Russia has a duty to continue that struggle today (Bouka, 2025). His use of the terms "de-Nazification" and "special military operation" is interpreted as an attempt to soften the harsh reality of the war (BBC News, 2022, in Hasan, 2025).

The second related frame in Putin's narrative casts Russia as a victim of Western aggression: "the conflict… instigated by the West" (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). Russia's military operation in Ukraine, according to Putin, is a response to NATO's expansion into Ukraine. In his view, Western liberalism, individualism, and secularism are fundamentally incompatible with Russian values rooted in tradition, collectivism, and Orthodox Christianity (Bouka, 2025). Hence, he portrays the growing influence of the West and NATO in Ukraine as an orchestrated attack on Russia. Thus, he shifts the blame for the conflict away from Russia (Hasan, 2025) and accuses the "collective West" of trying to "put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us". This narrative suggests that Russia's sovereignty and survival are under an existential threat, and Russia's 'operation' in Ukraine is a defensive necessity (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024).

Research on Zelensky's narrative and framing has shown that from the first Russian attack onwards, in all his public addresses, Zelensky construes a narrative that is strategically designed to transcend national boundaries (Hasan, 2025; Gomaa, 2023). The central frame of his narrative is that Ukraine is a victim of an unprovoked assault by a more powerful neighbour and that it is fighting for survival: "Russia attacked us. Attacked, taking advantage of its military force" (Hasan, 2025). By framing Russia's actions in a hostile light, Zelensky seeks to invoke a sense of urgency and alarm ("If our lives, our freedom,

our children are attacked, we will defend ourselves"). Zelensky's narrative reflects the fear, pain, and trauma experienced by the Ukrainian people in the face of military hostility (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025), and simultaneously serves as a call for international support (Hasan, 2025). Interestingly, this call for support is not framed as an appeal for charity, as Zelensky skillfully frames Ukraine as a defender/savior of universal principles—democracy, safety, justice, and sovereignty, arguing that Ukraine is defending not just itself but democratic "European values" at large (Hasan, 2025).

Netanyahu and Hamas

Netanyahu's narrative frames Israel's military response in Gaza as a defensive and morally justified reaction to an existential terrorist threat. The predominant frame in his narrative depicts their military operations as a defensive response to an existential threat coming from savage terrorists: "Citizens of Israel, we are at war. Not an operation, not a round [of fighting,] at war! … The enemy will pay an unprecedented price" (Netanyahu, 2023). Thus, in his political narrative, the war is considered a necessary move and a moral obligation on the part of the Israelis (Bouka, 2025; Soukni, 2025). Just like Putin, Netanyahu also reinforces his narrative by bringing the Nazism and the Holocaust to the foreground. He draws parallels to the immense tragedy experienced by the Jews during WWII and the tragedy of the October 7 attack.

Additionally, like Zelensky, Netanyahu expands the frame of his narrative by claiming that Israel fights in defense of the global moral and democratic values, i.e., Israel is a defender/savior of the rest of the civilized world (Soukni, 2025): "Yes, we're defending ourselves, but we're also defending you against a common enemy" (Netanyahu, 2024). By shifting the blame to Hamas completely, he is also attributing the terrific loss of civilian lives and humanitarian crisis in Gaza to Hamas using its own people as a "human shield" and operating from densely populated areas.

In the aftermath of October 7, Hamas too, undertook a deliberate discursive effort to legitimize their actions through an official document titled *Our Narrative—Operation al-Aqsa Flood* (Our narrative… Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,

n.d.). Through the narrative laid out in this document, Hamas attempts to reframe itself as a rational political actor rather than as a terrorist organization driven by religious extremism (Klein, 2024). Central to this narrative is Hamas's portrayal of October 7 as an act of resistance against a prolonged colonial occupation ("In light of the ongoing Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and as our people continue their battle for independence, dignity and breaking--free from the longest-ever occupation..."). The group situates its actions within a historical continuum of anti-colonial struggle, arguing that Zionism displaced Palestinians from their homeland and that Israel's ongoing blockade of Gaza, expansion of settlements, and rejection of Palestinian statehood have forced them to violent confrontation ("Over these long decades, the Palestinians have suffered all forms of oppression, injustice, expropriation of their fundamental rights and the apartheid policies"). In this framing, violence becomes reactive rather than aggressive, or even a moral necessity aimed at self-defense and liberation, aligned with the international laws (Klein, 2024). Also, in this document, Hamas attempts to distance itself from anti-Semitism and civilian harm during the 7 October attack, framing unintended deaths as chaos caused by the sudden and total collapse of the Israeli defense system(Klein, 2024; Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023).

However, the public statements of a number of Hamas officials, released prior and after October 7, reveal another more absolutist frame in Hamas's narrative—their holy fight is not just for overthrowing the oppression of Israel, but for destruction of the Zionist state. Thus, they claim they would free not just the land that rightfully belongs to the Palestinians but the world at large of an entity which has caused a lot of sufferings and misfortunes globally. As stated by Islamic scholar Hussein Qasem: "The Jews are not the enemies of the Palestinians alone—they are the enemies of humanity as a whole..." (Shalev, 2025). Framed like this, the narrative suggests that Hamas representatives too, perceive themselves as saviors of the Palestinians and the world at large.

Political leaders' use of framing in their narratives closely mirrors the mechanisms described in transformational leadership theory. In organisations and institutions, transformational leaders shape how followers perceive situations by projecting compelling visions and their interpretations

of reality in order to guide employees to "see" an issue through a particular prism (Tyssen, et. al., 2014, in Johansson, 2015). This, understandably, alleviates the process of decision-making and managing an institution. Similarly, politicians strategically frame crises or conflicts to construct preferred meanings and to secure public alignment with their goals both at home and abroad.

"Us vs. Them" legitimisation strategy

Putin vs. Zelensky

In moulding "Us", Putin depicts Russia as a bastion of traditional values, a morally and culturally superior nation, a defender of peace, truth and family. The positive lexis used to describe "Us" is evident from his first address after the start of the war. In this speech, aimed primarily at Russian soldiers and a divided domestic public, he deliberately uses expressions such as "dear compatriots", "comrade officers", and "citizens of Russia, friends" to foster nationhood, patriotism, and collective solidarity (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). He commends the Russian soldiers for their patriotism and professionalism ("I am confident that the soldiers and officers ... will professionally and courageously fulfil their duty"). Through this strategy, Putin projects stability and control, suggesting that military actions are motivated not only by orders but also by shared nationalistic spirit. In crafting "Us", he praises the entire Russian military apparatus for its technological superiority, using expressions such as "no means of countering such weapons today", "one of the most powerful nuclear states", etc. This invocation simultaneously functions as a threat, aimed at creating fear in the "Other": "Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen..." (Hasan, 2025).

Conversely, in "Othering" Ukraine, Putin primarily targets the Ukrainian political elite ("the Kyiv regime") depicting them as "puppets" of the West, and "criminals" who plunder and humiliate Ukrainians. Notably, he avoids targeting the Ukrainians and instead urges them to oppose "the Junta"—the Ukrainian

government (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024; Bouka, 2025). The "Other" also subsumes NATO and the West, which in Putin's narrative are portrayed as hypocritical, deceitful, hostile, morally corrupt and imbued with expansionist aspirations (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Bouka, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024), threatening to degenerate and destroy 'Us': "...over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement ... In response ... we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail..." (Bouka, 2025). Putin's positively laden expression "patiently trying" implies reasonableness and willingness to negotiate, which is contrasted with negative lexis used for the out-group—"cynical deception", "cheating", "lies", "blackmail", "deceived", "conned", for the purpose of demonization and accusation (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024).

Beyond lexical strategies, Putin employs other rhetorical devises too. In verbally attacking the West, he exaggerates the effects of the USA's 'war on terror' in Libya, Iraq, and Syria, qualifying it as "*fake*" and "sham" and claiming that it has caused a "tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism". Then, he contrasts it with Russia's "peacekeeping" activities in eastern Ukraine, which he associates with safety and stability of the region (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). From the perspective of syntactic structure of sentences, Putin prefers long and elaborate sentences in his addresses, which are occasionally intercepted with syntactically incomplete sentences, used to amplify the persuasive effect of his claims ("Just lies and hypocrisy all around"). Occasionally, he embeds rhetorical questions too, for the same reason ("Where is justice and truth here?").

The "Us vs. Them" dichotomy occupies central position in Zelensky's narrative as well. In his discourse, Ukraine ("Us") is a brave defender of freedom, sovereignty, and humanity, whereas Russia ("Them") embodies a powerful aggressor and violator of international laws (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). In delegitimizing the "Other", Zelensky frames Russia as a bully that leverages its strength against a vulnerable neighbour, engaging in extortionate behaviour and using its nuclear and chemical arsenals to intimidate Ukraine and the world ("Russia is openly blackmailing the world with nuclear and chemical weapons!"). The negatively-laden word "blackmailing" is intended to invoke a strong moral

condemnation of Russia's actions (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). He further erodes the legitimacy of the Russian army by attributing the feature of "lawlessness" to it (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025), and by using strong, emotionally charged, negative lexis to refer to the Russian soldiers—"terrorists", "war criminals", "bloodthirsty", "killers of children" (Gomaa, 2023). He describes their moral decadence in detail ("It is difficult to find a war crime that the occupiers have not committed…"). Like Putin, he avoids attacking the Russian population directly, portraying them as victims driven to poverty by their irresponsible leadership: "And the world of people who have been specially humiliated by their state for decades, specially driven into poverty and lawlessness" (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025).

In constructing "Us", Zelensky uses positive and neutral expressions such as "citizens", "lovers of freedom", "defending each other", "sacrificing their best men and women" to highlight the humaneness and suffering of Ukrainians (Gomaa, 2023). Ukraine is framed as an innocent victim of unprovoked aggression (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025) and a nation committed to peace: "Ukraine did not choose the path of war. But Ukraine offers to return to peace" (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Ukrainian soldiers are firmly part of "Us", and their bravery is juxtaposed with the violence of the Russian army ("Our Armed Forces are doing great… Our troops are fighting fierce battles in the suburbs of Kherson"). These statements, reinforced by parallel syntactic structures ("Today Russia attacked the entire territory of our state. And today our defenders have done a lot"), work to inspire confidence, patriotism, and hope among Ukrainians (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Interestingly, in his appeal to the international community for support, Zelensky expands "Us" to include the democratic communities worldwide, framing Ukraine as an equal partner, not as a passive aid recipient: "we are fighting for the values of Europe and the world…" (Gomaa, 2023; Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). Syntactically, Zelensky often resorts to short simple sentences, and ellipsis to convey a strong sense of urgency:

> You know what defense systems we need… You know how much depends on the battlefield on the ability to use aircraft… To protect your people. Your freedom. Your land. Aircraft that can help Ukraine. That can help Europe (Gomaa, 2023).

He frequently resorts to rhetorical questions to evoke empathy and moral reflection: "What do we hear today? What do we see at this hour?", "How are you going to protect yourself while helping Ukraine so slowly?", "What is this war against Ukrainian children in the nursery? Who are they? Are they Neo-Nazis too?" (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024).

Some of his rhetorical questions implicitly admonish even the international community for failing to act more promptly and diligently ("Are you prepared to dissolve the United Nations? Do you believe that the era of international law has passed?"). The use of metaphorical language is also skillfully embedded in his political narrative. For instance, in this same context in which he mildly and implicitly reprimands Europe for the lack of agility, he uses a synecdoche to ascribe a quality of a silent person who says nothing to the European leaders, when they should actively and urgently respond to the danger at hand ("Silent Europe, we do not see that you will do anything"). He also uses metaphors such as "our weapon is truth", "this land is our truth" to imply that Ukraine has only one option left—to defend its sovereignty by fighting back.

Netanyahu vs. Hamas

For Netanyahu, Hamas is framed as an existential and perennial threat to Israel (Bouka, 2025). His discourse constructs a sharp moral binary in which Hamas is not merely an adversary but an embodiment of evil that must be eradicated. Netanyahu repeatedly uses negative lexis to describe the "Others" as "terrorists", "inherently violent", "barbaric", and "uncivilized", insisting that they are fully committed to the total destruction of Israel (Soukni, 2025). Following this logic, for Netanyahu, force becomes the only legitimate means to deal with the enemy: "In this battle between good and evil, there must be no equivocation" (Bouka, 2025). In recounting the events of October 7, Netanyahu uses highly negatively loaded language such as "unimaginable atrocities", "savagely murdered", "raped", "mutilated", etc., to arouse fury and disgust and to urge retaliation ("They savagely murdered 1,200 people. They raped and mutilated women. They beheaded men. They burned babies alive... It seems reminiscent of the Nazi Holocaust"). This emotional and evaluative language is further intensified with the use of

a historical allusion to the tragic destiny of millions of Jews in the WWII ("Nazi Holocaust"). The theme of past suffering as a rhetorical tactic aims to embed fear into the collective consciousness of Israelis, as fear in political discourse functions as a mechanism not only for triggering social mobilization but also for silencing critical thought and, in turn, reinforcing state power (Bouka, 2025).

Netanyahu transforms the "Us vs. Them" framework into an existential "Us or Them" binary. Thus, the "Other" is not merely different or hostile but it is constituted as the opposite of everything "we", the in-group, stand for (Yancy et. al, 2024, in Bouka, 2025). Thus, the war against Hamas is one of survival, not choice (Bouka, 2025). The "Other" is demonized to such an extent that it is only logical that it should be expelled from the realm of legitimate life ("They are savages"). To amplify the feelings of fear and moral outrage not just in the Israelis but in the international community too, Netanyahu frequently draws analogies between Hamas and ISIS: "Hamas is ISIS. And just as the forces of civilization united to defeat ISIS, the forces of civilization must support Israel in defeating Hamas" (Bouka, 2025). By using a historical allusion to the tragedy of September 11 in the USA, he is evoking traumatic memories from the past, and transfers past anxieties to the present, positioning Hamas as a global enemy (Bouka, 2025).

Counterposed to the demonized "Other", Netanyahu constructs a morally superior portrait of "Us". Israel and the Jewish people are presented as innocent victims and virtuous defenders. He mobilizes collective identity and loyalty through the inclusive pronouns "we", "us", "our", and expressions such as "our hostages", "we demanded", etc. as well as through historical allusions to the past sufferings of the Jews ("The state of the Jews arose from the ashes of the Holocaust…"). Thus, he does not just cast Israel in a positive light but justifies the uncompromising retaliatory measures they are undertaking in Gaza (Bouka, 2025). He does not shun from employing a blend of historical and religious elements in his legitimation strategy in order to depict "Us" as the only rightful owner of the area ("Don't they know that the Land of Israel is where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob prayed, where Isaiah and Jeremiah preached and where David and Solomon ruled?…"), simultaneously, this strategy casts Palestinians as part of a broader Arab entity with no distinct national identity (Bouka, 2025). In his narrative, simple syntactic structures and ellipsis for a stronger persuasive

effect are noted too, alongside with metaphoric language aimed at threatening not just Israel's "arch enemy" but also all other "potential" enemies: "Once, the Jewish people were defenseless. No longer. … We will exact a price that will be remembered by them and Israel's other enemies for decades to come" (Bouka, 2025).

Netanyahu further universalizes Israel's cause by presenting military operations as defending the "civilized world", using repetitive syntactic structures ("Yes, we're defending ourselves, but we're also defending you against a common enemy…"). This rhetoric encourages international partners to view Israeli actions as protective of global values. He heightens this framing with warnings realized via conditional sentences ("If Israel does not win, they will be next in the chain of barbarism", "if we don't stop them, they will come for you"), intended to invoke fear which, in turn, is expected to mobilize national and international unity through the instinct of self-preservation (Bouka, 2025). By extending the in-group to external allies ("the West", "partners in the Arab world") with positively laden words such as "partners", he implies that Israel's stance carries global legitimacy (Gomaa, 2023; Bouka, 2025). In other words, invoking external authority reinforces the persuasiveness of his speech, and, at the same time, silences alternative narratives: "…And I know in this that we have your support… And I want to assure you, that as we stand together, we will also prevail" (Gomaa, 2023; Bouka, 2025).

Metaphorical language is detected in Netanyahu's rhetoric too, especially in his attempts to vilify the enemy and depict them as merciless and ready to sacrifice their own people unscrupulously using them as "human shields" in order to "fuel its war machine". Netanyahu's rhetoric, however, often fails to make a clear distinction between Hamas and the wider Palestinian population, treating them all as the out-group, most probably in order to simplify his moral calculus and avoid accountability for the shockingly high number of civilian casualties (Bouka, 2025).

For Hamas, fighting Israel is a religiously sanctioned struggle ("jihad"), aimed at liberating Palestine (Janssen, 2009). In other words, Hamas views the Israeli soldiers as terrorists who have occupied their lands, so by fighting against Israel, they defend themselves, i.e. "Us" (Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023).

The spokesperson of Hamas's military wing, Abu Obeida, consistently constructed his war rhetoric around the "Us vs. Them" dichotomy. "Us" represents the Palestinian people, portrayed as long-suffering victims of Israeli genocide and loyal partners in the resistance efforts (Minawi, 2024): "the world is bewildered by the … strength of the people of Gaza" (Full Text of Abu Obeida's Speech, 2023). Hamas is depicted as a force of divine justice, resisting oppression on behalf of the Palestinians. Hamas's fighters are symbols of valor and dignity ("Our fighters are and have been engaged in fierce confrontations and direct clashes"), and are praised for their military achievements, metaphorically as "brave lions". This depiction is intended to inspire and reinforce the collective identity and spiritual endurance of the Palestinians and to vilify and instil fear in the enemy (Minawi, 2024). Overall, in construing "Us", the lexical choices in Obeida's discourse are highly deliberate, emphasizing positively connoted expressions that denote the courage, steadfastness, strength and sacrifice of Hamas fighters and the Palestinian people in general. His use of metaphorical language further strengthens this positive self-representation. Obeida describes the easiness of expelling Israel metaphorically as "sweeping the floor from the dust" and Gaza as a "graveyard" for Israeli soldiers. To underscore the theme of religion, he employs personification in which the blood of the fallen militants will witness the victory ("the blood of the injured or killed during the Gazan War as a witness of the victory"). Even the operation's name ("flood") is intended to metaphorically evoke overpowering terror in the heart of the "Other" (Minawi, 2024).

On the other hand, in his discourse "Them", i.e. Israel and the Jewish people are described as an embodiment of evil and moral corruption (Minawi, 2024). In the process of "Othering", he specifically addresses the Israeli government and soldiers by using negatively connoted terms such as "the Zionist enemy", "the enemy forces", "the Zionist regime":

> Recently, the Zionist enemy began ground maneuvers across multiple fronts… The enemy forces are also present around the Beit Hanoun crossing and the vicinity of Beit Hanoun. The criminal enemy approached these fronts after more than 20 days of bombardment… (in Full text of Abu Obeida's speech, 2023)

and animal metaphors ("pigs") to further heighten the dehumanization of the "Other" (Minawi, 2024).

Apart from Obaida, other Hamas's representatives shared with the world their ideology regarding the war against Israel, both after and prior to the October 7 attack. In their public addresses, they too dehumanise the Jews and present them as enemies of Islam. They use highly degrading and insulting lexis in referring to them ("sons of pigs and monkeys", "apes"). The war against the Jews who are depicted as corrupt, conniving and hostile to Muslims is portrayed as religious and existential in character. Hamas officials make explicit calls to killing the Jews and total destruction of Israel, describing it as a religious duty (in Shalev, 2025):

> "This is the day that you make this criminal enemy understand that its time is up. [The Quran says:] 'Kill them wherever you may find them..." (Mohammed Deif).

> "Israel is a country that has no place on our land ... We must remove that country ... The Al-Aqsa Flood [the October 7th massacre] is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth" (Ghazi Hamad).

> "The Jews are not the enemies of the Palestinians alone—they are the enemies of humanity as a whole... Why shouldn't we be furious? Why shouldn't we burn the ground under the Jews' feet?" (Hussein Qasem).

> "Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews" (Sheikh Hamad al-Regeb).

Unsurprisingly, given that Hamas is an organization based on strong religious foundations, many of the public statements of Hamas's officials are religiously-imbued, and Hamas seeks divine help in carrying out their mission to exterminate the "Other". To maximize the emotional impact, their discursive strategies include imperative sentences ("Kill them wherever you may find

them"), rhetorical questions ("Why shouldn't we be furious? Why shouldn't we burn the ground under the Jews' feet?"), and repetitive syntactic patterns ("Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews").

The strategy of positive self-representation and constructing an inclusive "Us" in political discourse resonates with contemporary approaches to institutional and organizational management, which increasingly move away from "traditional command-and-control management"—now considered outdated—and instead advocate for leadership roles centred on facilitation, dialogue, and collaboration. In these models, the leader is reconceptualized as "a coach and facilitator of dialogue" (Raelin, 2013, in Johansson, 2015: 84), and employees are encouraged to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making, which increases their sense of empowerment (Johansson, 2015). Similarly, political leaders use inclusive "Us" strategy to project an image of shared purpose and participatory engagement, even when actual decision-making remains centralized.

On the other hand, in organizations too, delegitimizing "Them" or othering often emerges—intentionally or not—from relational and bureaucratic tensions, where those with more power marginalize individuals who are vulnerable or dependent on the institution for their survival (Bach, 2005: 259). In essence, assigning someone to the status of "Other" serves to disenfranchise and discount them. Stewart and Logan (1993, in Bach, 2005) outline how this occurs: those who are othered are treated as interchangeable, emotionless, incapable of reflection, and passive or unable to make choices. A similar mechanism operates in political discourse, where leaders—especially in times of crisis—intentionally construct and delegitimize a threatening "Them" to justify their actions and consolidate support from the inclusive "Us".

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the predominant narratives shows that, despite the significant historical, geographical, and socio-political differences, politicians

who have the roles of crisis leaders amidst the two wars in question here, tend to employ remarkably similar framing in their narratives to justify participation in war. Each side portrays itself as a victim rather than an aggressor, even in the case of Russia and Hamas, the parties that initiated the confrontations discussed in this study. Their narrative consistently frames military engagement as a response to an existential threat endangering their people, national sovereignty, freedom, justice, and democracy. This justification is further reinforced through the savior/defender frame, suggesting that their struggle transcends national boundaries and protects not only themselves but others as well. Violence is thus discursively legitimized as serving a greater good.

As to the "Us vs. Them" legitimation strategy, the analysis show that it is deployed in all political narratives in strikingly similar ways. Regardless of who initiated the conflict, each side constructs a positive self-representation grounded in themes of victimhood and innocence, existential threat, moral superiority, altruism, military competence, patriotism, and past suffering. Conversely, the "Other" is associated with the themes of savagery, morally decadence, and global danger. Although the narratives occasionally make selective historical and religious allusions, politicians consistently avoid discussing the deeper roots and causes of the conflicts, foregrounding only selected events that justify the current escalation. None of these crisis leaders touches on themes of guilt, apology, self-criticism, or acceptance of responsibility. A noteworthy difference is that in the Israel-Hamas conflict, the "Us vs. Them" dichotomy becomes more radical, and shifts into an "Us or Them" binary that implies the total annihilation of the irredeemable "Other". Religion here plays a central role, openly sanctifying war as a holy duty. In contrast, in the Russia–Ukraine war, political leaders largely refrain from making religious allusions or from explicitly celebrating the extermination of the opposing population. The findings further indicate that the "Us vs. Them" strategy is carefully constructed through a variety of discursive means such as positively and negatively connoted lexis, repetitive syntactic structures, ellipsis, rhetorical questions, metaphors, exaggeration, contrast, allusions, etc., used for greater persuasive effect. Together, these linguistic and rhetorical devices produce highly emotional and evaluative language aimed at instilling fear in the "Others" in order to deter them from

further fighting and resistance, but also in "Us", as fear strengthens loyalty and suppresses dissent within the in-group. Thus, paradoxically, what political figures in general seem to suggest in their wartime narratives is that violence can only be stopped with more violence, before language and diplomacy are permitted to take center stage, and that "our" violence is somehow "redemptive" and "not-violent" as it serves a greater purpose than "Theirs".

Given that "leadership is not simply about individuals in positions of authority, but a complex social construction continuously shaped through discourse" (Lehman & Grint, 2024: 11), the discursive techniques identified here extend beyond the political sphere. They resonate with organizational and institutional crisis communication, where managers often portray their actions as necessary responses to existential threats to organizational stability, identity, or values. Leaders frequently position their group as defenders of institutional integrity, thereby legitimizing tough decisions such as restructuring, disciplinary action, or strategic shifts. The organizational leaders often craft narratives that emphasize their own integrity and competence while attributing conflict or failure to external actors, previous leadership, or uncontrollable circumstances (Roulet & Pitchler, 2020; Fairhurst, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2004).

Further research is essential to explore other legitimisation strategies used by crisis leaders, and the evolution of the narratives and conflict framings as the conflicts progress and ultimately are put to a halt. The discourse of mediators seeking to bring conflicting parties to the negotiating table likewise merits more scholarly attention. Moreover, given that political communication, and, consequently, organizational communication increasingly thrives on social media nowadays, digital platforms represent a promising avenue for future research. Finally, this line of inquiry could be expanded by examining specific parallels with conflict escalation and resolution in political and institutional environments, particularly how leadership communication shapes conflict trajectories and influences whether disputes move toward negotiation or entrenchment.

Hopefully, the insights gained from this study, which highlight the deliberate use of rhetorical strategies by politicians during wartime, will contribute to a deeper understanding of how crisis leaders' narratives, in general, justify high-stakes decisions. Additionally, they may support the development of more

ethical crisis communication practices that prioritize reducing polarization, avoiding dehumanization of the out-group and preventing conflict escalation, while promoting more inclusive and morally responsible leadership in times of crisis.

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