Little Green Men?

A Frame Analysis of the Ukraine Crisis

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Word count: 9065
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0. Abstract

In this paper I set out to explore the concept of framing and framing contests, as modelled by scholars of international relations Krebs and Jackson in their model of rhetorical coercion. I proceed to conduct a frame analysis on the case of the Ukraine crisis, using statements made by Russian President Vladimir Putin and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen concerning the events. I do this by a research method known as content analysis, more specifically its qualitative version. Qualitative content analysis is an established method in the sub-discipline of international relations, and combining it with frame analysis provides an interesting analysis of this case. In line with Krebs and Jackson’s theory, I find that without a common frame among the actors, the debate is indeed fundamental and wide-ranging, with Russia and NATO not only having different positions on issues, but first and foremost speaking about different issues altogether concerning the Ukraine crisis. Lastly, while I find qualitative content analysis satisfactory in analysing framing contests, other areas of their model of rhetorical coercion is lacking, more specifically that their description of the causal relations in rhetorical coercion is inapplicable on the international dynamic of politics, and suggest that a new causal model be created by integrating qualitative content analysis and foreign policy analysis.

Keywords: Ukraine crisis, Russia, NATO, content analysis, qualitative content analysis, framing, framing contests.
1.0 Introduction

When Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych cancelled a planned signing of an EU association agreement, citing pressure from Russia, protests that gathered thousands of Ukrainians erupted on the streets of Kiev in November 2013\(^1\). When Yanukovych fled into exile as parliament impeached him in February the next year, the crisis was far from over. On the 27\(^{th}\) and 28\(^{th}\) of February, anonymous armed men in green combat uniforms appeared on Crimea, supposedly Russian soldiers without insignia (“little green men”)\(^2\), and on the 18\(^{th}\) of March, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an act incorporating Crimea into the Russian federation, after a disputed\(^3\) referendum on joining Russia was held in the autonomous republic\(^4\). As of yet, Crimea still remains a \textit{de facto} part of the Russian federation, although this is disputed by Ukraine and the accession of the Crimean territories was not recognised by the UN General Assembly\(^5\).

Meanwhile, scholars and observers have discussed the causes and consequences of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine for the post-Cold war order and its relationship to NATO and the West. Famous realist John Mearsheimer argued that the crisis was essentially the fault of the West, blaming liberal delusions that provoked Putin\(^6\). Others have argued that Russia is now a revisionist power aimed at re-creating a Russian empire and overthrow the Western-led international order, pointing to Russia’s war in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea as steps toward this\(^7\). Yet another concern for observers is the implications of the Ukraine crisis for the relationship between NATO and Russia and the security of Europe. Karl-Heinz Kamp argues that Russia has readjusted itself in the international system as an anti-Western power.

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\(^1\) Ukraine protests after Yanukovych EU deal rejection \textit{BBC} 30.11.13 (received 08.06.17)
\(^2\) “Little green men” or “Russian Invaders”? \textit{BBC} 11.03.2014 (received 12.06.2017)
\(^3\) Backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity, UN Assembly declares Crimea referendum invalid, \textit{UN News Centre} 27.03.2014 (received 18.11.2017)
\(^4\) Ukraine crisis: timeline \textit{BBC} 13.11.2014 (received 08.06.2017)
\(^5\) Backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity, UN Assembly declares Crimea referendum invalid, \textit{UN News Centre} 27.03.2014 (received 18.11.2017)
explicitly opposing NATO, defining NATO as an opponent to Russia, a label the alliance has been careful to avoid in the past\textsuperscript{8}.

Whatever the case, the significance of the Ukraine crisis is hard to overstate. But the meaning and interpretation of the crisis is not necessarily so easy to precise. This demands scientific investigation. The Ukraine crisis provides not only a relatively recent and highly significant case of international affairs, but also an ideal case for the study of framing by political actors. The contested issue over the very meaning and consequences of the many events in Ukraine during 2013, 2014 and afterwards provides an excellent example of disagreement among stake-holding actors who wish to further their own interest, over meaning of the events in question. Was the Maidan a popular revolution that led to the downfall of a corrupt leader, or a violent coup with nationalist or neo-Nazi undertones that overthrew a democratically elected president? Was the \textit{de facto} accession of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian federation an armed annexation in conflict with international law and principles of legitimacy, or a democratically induced reunification based on ethnic and historical relations? In this paper, I suggest that qualitative content analysis be used in the study of political rhetoric, and proceed to do just that in the case of the Ukraine crisis. As such, the research question of this paper reads: \textit{how has NATO and Russia respectively framed the issue of the Ukrainian crisis?}

The study herein takes the form of a case study. A case study is delimited to a specific event, and aims to explain the outcome of the case in question, in contrast to e.g. comparative studies which aim to compare two or more cases. One of the greatest weaknesses of case studies is the limited degree to which the findings of single case-studies can be used to explain other cases, one of the key aspects of scientific research. However, case studies are often comparative in nature: it may compare two actors who were both responsible for the outcome in a single case, or two periods in a single process of events. It is both a theory consuming and developing study, in the sense that it applies previously developed theory, but with an ambition to do this with novel methods and develop the theory further. This study delimits itself to look at a specific concept of Krebs and Jackson’s theory of rhetorical coercion, namely framing contests, seeking to explore this phenomenon further.

\textsuperscript{8} Kamp, Karl-Heinz. ‘From Wales to Warsaw: NATO’s Future beyond the Ukraine Crisis’, \textit{American Foreign Policy Interests} vol. 36/no. 6, (2014), p 362.
Hereafter, the paper is sectioned as follows: first, a guide in various theoretical discourse of framing and content analysis; second, how I intend to implement it in my analysis; third, a section containing the results, analysis and discussion and lastly a suggestion for how to develop the theory of rhetorical coercion further.

2.0 Theory and Previous Research

Framing as a Weapon of International Politics

In their article “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms”, Krebs and Jackson note that rhetoric is central to politics, giving the example of the Iraq war, in which the Bush administration was nearly as pre-occupied with the portrayal of the war as the actual fighting of it, preferring to use terms such as “coalition forces” instead of “American forces”, and “liberating Iraq” rather than “invading Iraq”. Political competition is often marked by rhetorical competition, and Krebs and Jackson intend to develop an analytical framework designed to explain the dynamics and outcomes thereof.9

Krebs and Jackson argue, in contrast to the materialist view of rhetoric as epiphenomenal, that rhetorical interplay itself can explain outcomes. An important analytical premise that distinguishes their theory from some other constructivists’ is that rhetoric does not function as a means of persuading actors to a desired behaviour. Not only is this rare, they argue, but also methodologically intractable, since science cannot read human minds. Their theory avoids asking questions about causal relation of actors’ “true” motives, questions that are inevitably unanswerable. Instead, Krebs and Jackson propose a model of rhetorical coercion, meaning that rhetoric can prove critical to political success, even when the target have not internalised the values promoted.10

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10 Ibidem. p. 36
The model of rhetorical coercion put forth by Krebs and Jackson seeks to accomplish that which others have failed with: the causal relationship between rhetoric and political outcomes. In their view, rhetoric serves as a tool to rob one’s opponents of the rhetorical material necessary for them to craft a rebuttal of one’s arguments. Rhetorical coercion is thus seen as a political strategy.\textsuperscript{11}

Their model describes a situation with three actors in play: claimant (C), opposition (O), and public (P). C is the actor that begins by pitching an argument against O, whose defining feature is resistance to the outcome proposed in C’s argument. C’s argument can analytically be dissected into two parts: a frame (a set of terms used to describe the issue), and a set of implications (the desired outcome or outcomes of the issue in question) that C claims follow from the frame.\textsuperscript{12}

Krebs and Jackson illustrate the model with a hypothetical example. A student rally (C) protesting a war waged by the national government (O) in view of the public (P), describes the war as unnecessary (frame) and call for an end to hostilities and the pull-out of forces from the war zone (implications). O can now respond to C by accepting or rejecting both or either of the frame and implication. This creates four possible outcomes and predicted consequences:\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Table 1: stylised model of rhetorical contestation.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Accept Frame</th>
<th>Reject Frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accept Implications</td>
<td>1: policy change</td>
<td>2: mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject Implications</td>
<td>3: implications contest</td>
<td>4: framing contest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{11} Ibidem, p. 42
\textsuperscript{12} Ibidem, p. 43
\textsuperscript{13} Ibidem, p. 43
In case 1, O accepts both the frame and the implications of C, yielding a lasting policy change. In case 2, O changes policy according to C presented implications, but does so for other given reasons than C has presented in their frame. This is a partial victory, as C’s policy goals have been achieved, but not secured, given that O may reverse their policy at any time. In case 3, O accepts C’s understanding of the issue at hand (if only superficially) but does not agree on the proposed solution. Unlike case 1 and 2, which represent relatively stable outcomes in the short to medium run, 3 presents a scenario of continued contestation over the issue.  

Like case 3, case 4 is also a scenario of continued political contestation, but in a far more chaotic way. Here, as neither party can agree on either frame or solution, both seek to advance their own frame in hopes that the other will accept it and the proposed implications. Without a common frame holding together the debate, such a scenario far more fundamental and wide-ranging than the others. This is what is termed a framing contest. In either an implication or framing contest, C strives to alter the rhetorical milieu, limiting the number of possible options for O, thereby enforcing C’s preferred outcome.

Content Analysis as a Method of International Relations

Content analysis is a method that systematically analyses the content of communication. Any medium that conveys message can be analysed by the method, including articles, websites, diaries, speeches, letters interviews and beyond. Content analysis can study any aspect of these materials, both manifest and latent. Three properties make content analysis a distinct method. First, content analysis focuses primarily on what is said, rather than why or how, making it a descriptive method first and foremost. Second, content analysis reduces communication systematically, restricting the investigation to pre-determined themes, concepts or terms of interest, thereby condensing communication to relevant and manageable

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14 Ibidem, p. 43f
15 Ibidem, p 44.
pieces of data that can be more thoroughly understood. Third, content analysis settles on one interpretation of the material even if several are possible.\textsuperscript{17}

Content analysis can be divided into two types: qualitative and quantitative. The main difference between these is that qualitative looks at latent meaning of the materials while quantitative at manifest meaning. Central to qualitative content analysis is interpretation, and focusing on latent meaning demands a greater attention to the communication and background of it, including context, authors and recipients than its quantitative counterpart. Quantitative content analysis on the other hand, with its focus on manifest meaning is best suited to looking at the “what” rather than the “how” and “why”, while qualitative analysis can be used to answer all three of these questions.\textsuperscript{18}

Content analysis entered the field of international relations as early as in the 1940’s. It first used predominantly in quantitative terms, but this came under criticism for being too simplistic to deal with the complex issues of international relations that require more detailed analysis. While content analysis continued to be used after this, the discussion on in became increasingly rare within the international relations sub-discipline. Still, quantitative analysis was the main method of operation, but attempts at compensating for its weaknesses were made by supplementing it with qualitative types of analyses as well, such as discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis has notably flourished in Germany since at least the 1970’s, even leading to the development of various sub-types of the method there.\textsuperscript{19}

\section*{3.0 Methods and Material}

As previously mentioned, this paper seeks to combine a theory of framing in international relations, with the method of content analysis, specifically qualitative content analysis.
This is a method used to analyse text, and has a long history going back to 18th century Scandinavia. Qualitative content analysis can be defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”\textsuperscript{20} The goal of qualitative content analysis is provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study. Research using qualitative content analysis examine language as communication, focusing on the content and contextual meaning of it. The purpose of the method is to classify text into a number of categories that represent similar meanings, representing either explicit or inferred communication\textsuperscript{21}. A conventional content analysis derives its analytical categories from the data, avoiding to use preconceived categories derived from theory. Instead, the relationship between findings and theory or previous research is discussed afterwards in the discussion section, including a summary of how the finding contribute to the knowledge in the area of interest, with suggestions for future research. The advantage of conventional content analysis is the ability to gain direct knowledge from the material without imposing preconceived categories. A challenge for this type of analysis is that the researcher might fail in capturing a full understanding of the situation, thus failing to capture the whole context.\textsuperscript{22}

The results encompass a sample selection of speech acts, i.e. public statements. In this analysis, a broad definition of speech act was used, using only two defining criterions: first, it must be from the respective leadership of each actor, and second it must be in connection to the situation in Ukraine. This led to the incidental consequence of all material ultimately coming from the very leaders of NATO and Russia, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. The speeches are analysed in the form of transcripts received from the official website of NATO and the President of the Russian federation, respectively.

\textsuperscript{20} Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, and Sarah E. Shannon. ‘Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis’, \emph{Qualitative Health Research}, vol. 15/no. 9, (2005), p. 1278. 
\textsuperscript{21} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibidem.
A sample may seem an odd type of selection for this sort of analysis. Because of the sheer amount of available analytical units, a smaller, more realistic selection was used, with utmost care having to be taken not to dilute the discourse. In the case of NATO, a simple search on their website for speeches and transcripts with the keywords “Russia, Ukraine” from the 18th of March 2014 (when Crimea was formally annexed into Russia) until November 2017 yields almost 400 results. Of these, not all entries treat the issue of Ukraine and Russia as their main subject, and as a result do not describe the crisis events comprehensively enough to lend themselves well to qualitative analysis. Considering this, it is far more effective to choose a smaller, more qualitative sample based on topic in which categories can be identified.

The materials were not delimited to any particular time period. Instead, speech acts were delimited based on topic. There were two reasons for this. First, the conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing in the sense that it is unresolved. Indeed, there has been a number of attempts to settle the rebel conflict in Eastern Ukraine and reduce violence, which have met with more, or rather less, success. Also, while Crimea and Sevastopol is still not recognised by Ukraine and the larger international community as Russian, it remains de facto part of the Russian federation and is thus a source of unresolved conflict between both Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the wider international community. The second reason is that the material tended to delimit itself. Officials were eager to paint their own picture of the ongoing events while they were still hot, but interest in Ukraine has since faded, and as such the substantive statements were given early. Therefore, delimiting material by topic was effective enough not to need to delimit it on a time axis.

To summarise, I will use conventional qualitative content analysis to dissect and categorise what is said in these speech acts into categories that I call frames. Unlike Jackson and Krebs, and in line with conventional frame analysis, the analysis will identify categories from the material, rather than trying to mould what the actors say into pre-conceived analytical categories derived from theory or concepts, something that their theory is inadequate in providing anyway. I delimit the speech acts used as materials to speeches and interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin and NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen.
4.0 Results and Analysis

Russia

In the Russian source materials, one can distinguish six main themes, or *frames*, discussed by Putin in relation to the Ukraine crisis. They are outlined below in table 2:

**Table 2: Russian frames of the Ukraine crisis.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the historical relationship between the Russian nation and the Crimean peninsula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maidan frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the Ukrainian Maidan revolution of 2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Soviet frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the Post-Soviet international order and events since the fall of the Soviet union, in regard to Western countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the role and expansion of NATO.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimea frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the events on the annexation of Crimea in 2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Ukraine frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the war in Eastern Ukraine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hereafter follows a description of each of these frames, as well as a discussion of how and why each frame is interesting.
Historical Frame

The historical frame is Putin’s own narrative of the historical and cultural connection between Russian and Crimea. Putin held an address on the 18th of March, 2014, the day after the disputed referendum on independence was held in Crimea, announcing the results and substantively discussing the historical relation between Russia and the peninsula. Putin called Crimea “an inseparable part of Russia” and referred to significant events in Russian history that have taken place on the peninsula, such as the baptism of Prince Vladimir and the foundation of the Russian Black Sea fleet, naming Crimea a place symbolising valour and military glory for Russia. Putin described the formal separation of Crimea from Russia that took place during the Soviet era, when Secretary Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian soviet republic to the Ukrainian, which at the time was nothing else than a formality within a single sovereign state. When the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 90’s, Russia and Crimea became separated by an international border, an event Putin described as “Russia realised it was not simply robbed, it was plundered”, and called the separation an “outrageous historical injustice”. Putin also referred to the fact that a majority of the Crimean population are either ethnic Russians or Ukrainians who consider Russian their native language, and went on to claim that the Russian nation is one of the world’s largest ethnic group divided by borders. Furthermore, Putin claimed that ethnic Russians living in Ukraine have been subjected not only to attempts at forced assimilation and deprivation of their historical memory, but also to a political crisis that has been rocking the country during the last 20 years of Ukrainian independence.

It is obvious that the Historical frame directly purports to legitimise the accession of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian federation. While the place of Crimea in Russian culture and history in undeniable, it is doubtful whether or not this frame appeals to people of other cultures and countries than Russia, who may not understand this relationship, or, perhaps more importantly, will disregard it’s relevance in the greater scheme of things in the case of the Ukraine crisis. For these reasons, it’s at best uncertain and at worst unlikely that this frame

24 Ibidem.
26 Ibidem.
can serve to persuade or coerce other concerned players on the international arena to accept Russia’s annexation of the peninsula, even though it may be effective on Putin’s home front.

**Crimean frame**

A closely related theme to the Historical frame is what might be called the “Crimean” frame. Although it also focuses on Crimea, this frame differs from the Historical frame in the sense that it focuses on interpreting the act of Crimea’s supposed secession from Ukraine and Russia’s role in it, rather than the historical reasons for this.

On the previously mentioned address from the 18th of March, Putin offered the following interpretation. He said that the referendum was conducted “in full compliance of democratic procedures and international norms”\(^\text{27}\). He denied any form of Russian intervention, saying that Russian forces on Crimea were already there in line with an international agreement, which were enhanced, albeit below the limit set by an already existing international agreement, in order to create the conditions necessary for Crimea to be able to peacefully express their free will regarding their own future. Furthermore, Putin denied that any Russian aggression has taken place on the basis of the fact that there were no human causalities on Crimea. It is notable that Putin, in spite of admitting that Russia increased its military presence on Crimea, did not admit that the “little green men” were Russian soldiers, but instead implied that they were a local Crimean self-defence force that took the situation under control\(^\text{28}\). Putin had previously, on the 4th of March, claimed that Russia did not use its armed forces to deal with the tension there, as the tension simply died down, noting that not a single shot was fired or causality sustained on the peninsula. He did admit however that Russia “enhanced” its military facilities on Crimea.\(^\text{29}\)


\(^{28}\) Ibidem.

Moreover, Putin interpreted Crimea’s referendum and declaration of independence as legitimate, referring to the Kosovo precedent and United Nations charter. He compared Crimea’s secession from Ukraine with several historical examples, among others, Ukraine’s secession from the USSR, Kosovo, the United States’ independence from the British Empire and the German re-unification. He called Crimea and Sevastopol’s admittance into the Russian federation a “re-unification”.

On the 1st of July that year, Putin said that their “compatriots” – Russian people – as well as peoples of other ethnicities were at threat. He also says that he had no right to abandon the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol to “nationalist and radical militants”. He said that Russia will continue to protect the rights of Russians using the full range of means available under international humanitarian law and the right to self-defence. Furthermore, Putin had in his 18th of March address stated that those who opposed the “coup” (the Maidan) were threatened with repressions, first in line of which were the Crimeans, who Putin said turned to Russia for help. Putin went on to say that he could not leave this plea unheeded, that this would have constituted betrayal on Russia’s part.

If the historical frame was so culturally specific as to not be effective outside the cultural sphere of Russia, the Crimean frame probably carries a more culturally universal approach to legitimise the annexation. Putin compares the case of Crimea to historical analogies such as the American independence from the British Empire in the 18th century and German re-unification at the end of the Cold war, which is possibly meant to strengthen the case for Russia’s annexation of Crimea, in the eyes of those two countries, as well as other Western countries. Another argument that Putin makes that can be seen as culturally universal is his portrayal of Russia’s role in the crisis as being the protector of the Crimeans. Lastly, it is obvious that Putin is adamant in not admitting that any Russian military intervention has taken place; it would appear to be a sensitive topic for him, which is not surprising; any such

32 Ibidem.
33 Ibidem.
thing would be universally repulsive. For these reasons, this frame is possibly more suited for rhetorical coercion internationally.

Maidan Frame

The Maidan Frame is the narrative of the Maidan revolution that took place in Kiev in 2014, interpreted by Putin in his own descriptions of the events. On the 4th of March 2014, Putin described what happened in Kiev as an “anti-constitutional take-over, an armed seizure of power” and went on to claim that armed and masked militants were still walking the streets of Kiev. In spite of this, Putin also expressed his sympathies with the Maidan protesters, saying he understands the protestors who wanted change, and talks about the problems in Ukraine with corruption, but is also firm on not supporting what he calls change by other means than constitutional ones. Putin said that the only authority in Ukraine that is legitimate is the parliament, but claimed it is only partly legitimate. Putin spoke of nationalistic and anti-Semitic forces active in Ukraine, and about various barbaric incidents that (he claimed) have taken place, among others that of a governor who was locked up and tortured.

He later said that while he understands those who came out with peaceful intentions to protest what he called “[p]resident[s], prime minister[s] and parliamentarians (…) milked the country, fought among themselves for power, assets and cash flows and did not care much about the ordinary people”, but he also claimed that the Maidan was not driven by these people. He called the Maidan a “coup” executed by neo-Nazis, nationalists, Russophobes and anti-Semites who resorted to terror, murder and riots. He called them the ideological heirs of Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist who cooperated with Nazi-Germany during the Second World War. Putin even went so far as to say that there is no legitimate executive in Ukraine at the moment.

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36 Ibidem.
38 Ibidem.
39 Ibidem.
The Maidan frame is obviously meant to discredit the then-recent change of government in Ukraine and in that way make Russia’s involvement in Ukraine seem legitimate. It ties together with the Crimean frame in the sense that it makes the situation of ethnic Russians particularly precarious in face of this, in Putin’s own words, new radical and nationalistic Ukrainian government. Putin understandably does not seem particularly fond of colour revolutions, as he might fear something similar happening in Russia, and discrediting the Maidan could be a way not only to make his involvement in Ukraine appear legitimate, but also to discourage Russia’s civil population from attempting anything of the sort. It’s hard to defend neo-Nazism and coups whatever one’s cultural identity and painting the Maidan in this way could serve to legitimise Russia’s behaviour toward Ukraine both internationally and domestically.

**Post-Soviet Frame**

Perhaps the most interesting frame used by Putin is what I call the Post-Soviet frame, which interprets the Post-Soviet international order and events in the world, especially in regard to the USA and other Western countries.

On the 18th of March, Putin claimed that there has been a lack of stability in the world since the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet (implying the dissolution of the Soviet Union, presumably), and that international institutions have become weaker since then. He said that Western countries, led by the U.S. prefer the “rule of the gun” in international affairs, rather than international law, forcing resolutions from international organisations to legitimate their behaviour or simply ignoring them when this does not work. He mentioned Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya as examples of this. He had previously, on the 4th of March, stated that Western countries always formulate their own geopolitical interests and follow them

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41 Ibidem.
persistently according to the principle “you’re either with us or against us”. Putin’s examples of this were, again, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.  

Putin later said that what happened in Ukraine was a climax of negative tendencies in international relations, which have been going on for a long time. He called the events in Ukraine the outcome of a deterrence policy with long historical roots that did not end with the Cold war, saying that old contradictions are growing more acute, as international law regrettably is not working and the principle of “all-permissiveness” is gaining ground. He claimed that the unipolar world order never materialised, as peoples and countries favour self-determination and cultural identity, in conflict with the attempts of certain countries to maintain domination, militarily, politically, ideologically and economically. Putin argued that a safety net must be put in place to avoid that cases such as those of Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine – what he calls “unconstitutional coups in Europe, any interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the use of blackmail or threats in international relations or the support of radical and neo-Nazi forces” – do not spread, saying that guarantees of sovereignty, stability and non-interference should deal with this.

The post-Soviet frame is interesting because Putin takes the Ukraine crisis and puts it in the larger context of the post-Soviet world and especially in regard to Western countries. The language he uses is not particularly diplomatic, using such terms such as “rule of the gun”. There is also a hint of nostalgia for the Soviet period, claiming that there has been a lack of stability since bipolarity ceased in connection with the fall of the Soviet Union. It’s tempting to draw the conclusion that Putin is seeking to redefine Russia’s relationship with the United States and the rest of the Western hemisphere, preferring a return to a bipolar world dominated by Moscow and Washington D.C., and in this regard Russia may indeed be called a revisionist power. If so, it could be hinting to Russia’s long term strategy for its relationship to the West and role in the international order.

44 Ibidem.
46 Ibidem.
NATO Frame

A closely related frame to the Post-Soviet frame is the NATO frame that deals with interpreting the role of NATO in the Ukraine crisis. It differs analytically from the Post-Soviet frame in that it treats the alliance and its associated events separately from that of the USA or the West.

On the 18th of March 2014, he criticised NATO expansion and the deployment of military infrastructure near Russia’s borders. He also took issue with the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO, deducing that it would mean having a NATO navy deployed in Crimea, “in this city of Russian military glory”47, as Putin put it. Putin expressed opposition to having NATO “right in our backyard or our historic territory”48. He later expanded on this on the 1st of July that year, saying that the alliance has been expanding ever closer to Russia during the last 20 years without engaging in discussion with Russia on the issue. Putin implied that NATO’s exclusivity conflicts with Russia’s independent position in the world and that the case of Ukraine shows that double standards do not work in relationships with Russia49.

The most interesting feature of the NATO frame is that names the expansion of NATO as a direct cause for the Russian intervention in Ukraine. This may come as no surprise, but rather the fact that Putin explicitly mentions NATO and implies that it is at fault in the crisis is noteworthy. This explicit Russian antagonism towards NATO could have far-reaching consequences for Europe in the future if it evolves into a general perception and acceptance that Russia and the alliance are involved in an intra-continental conflict.

48 Ibidem.
Eastern Ukraine Frame

While Putin have spoken little of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, a few interesting remarks were made by him in the latter stages of the Ukraine crisis.

He said on the 4th of March that he reserves the possibility to protect the inhabitants of Ukraine with “all available means”, should they request it, in the event of uncontrolled crime spreading to the southern and eastern parts of the country. Putin also indicated that this will be military in nature, saying that “the Ukrainian military and the Russian military will not be facing each other, they will be on the same side in a fight”. Furthermore, he later said on the 1st of July that Russia will continue to protect the rights of Russians using the full range of means available under international humanitarian law and the right to self-defence. He went on to say that the Poroshenko – the president of Ukraine – regrettably chose to resume military action. Putin said that the road to secure and stable peace cannot be through war.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this frame is how little attention it has been given by Putin – the war in eastern Ukraine is apparently an issue that he is unwilling to talk about. Secondly, there is a contradiction: first he implied that Ukrainian and Russian military forces could intervene in the southern and eastern parts of the country; later he said that Poroshenko regrettably chose to resume action and that peace cannot be through war. This appears especially hypocritical in face of Russia’s supposed military involvement in the civil war in eastern Ukraine.

NATO

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50 Ibidem.
53 Ibidem.
The frames found in the source materials pertaining to NATO are outlined in the table below:

Table 3: NATO’s frames.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crimean annexation frame</td>
<td>Focuses on the annexation of Crimea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian behaviour frame</td>
<td>Focuses on Russia’s behaviour in international affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian aggression frame</td>
<td>Focuses on Russia’s involvement in the war in Eastern Ukraine</td>
</tr>
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Crimean Annexation frame

NATO’s interest with the Ukraine crisis seems to have begun with the appearance of little green men on Crimea. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen gave two short statements on the events in question. The first was made on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of March in 2014, a few days after anonymous gunmen began to appear on the peninsula, when he said that he condemns Russia’s “military escalation”\textsuperscript{54} on Crimea, calling on Russia to withdraw its forces to its bases and de-escalate tensions. He also expressed concern on the authorisation by the Russian Duma (parliament) to use Russian forces on foreign territory\textsuperscript{55}. The other one was made on the 18\textsuperscript{th} that month, the same day that Russia formally incorporated Crimea and the city Sevastopol. He said then that Russia is continuing down a dangerous path, saying that Russia violates Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. He called the decision to incorporate Crimea an “illegal and illegitimate annexation”\textsuperscript{56}. Rasmussen again condemned and refused to recognise the incorporation of Crimea, calling it an illegal and illegitimate annexation on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June 2014.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibidem.

Rasmussen is very straight-forward in his way of speaking about Crimea. His antagonist in the matter is clearly Russia, and the terms he uses to describe what is going on the peninsula are, although charged, also unmistakable, such as “illegal and illegitimate annexation”.

Rasmussen views the whole affair more from a perspective of international law by focusing on the aspects of sovereignty and territorial integrity, legality and legitimacy. This is in stark contrast to Putin who focused more on aspects of historical and ethnic relations as well as ideological motives for intervention. This contrast is probably due to the nature of NATO as an international organisation with a smaller scope and more specialised role in the international system than a nation state, focusing on international security.

**Russian Behaviour Frame**

On the 21st of March 2014, Rasmussen described the case of Ukraine not as an isolated event, but as following a pattern of behaviour, that of one big country unilaterally rewriting international rules through military pressure and frozen conflicts, mentioning Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia as examples of this behaviour by Russia, what he called “revisionist” behaviour of confrontation that belongs in the 19th century, which he claims poses a threat to the global order based on the values and rules everyone agreed to respect. Rasmussen described the crisis as a “game-changer”. Furthermore he described the event as decisive and dangerous moment, describing the events as a wake-up call for NATO and the whole Euro-Atlantic area. Rasmussen said that the Ukrainian crisis is the most serious crisis in Europe since the fall of the Berlin wall, and that NATO’s vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace has been put in question by the events.

Furthermore, regarding NATO’s relationship with Russia, Rasmussen said that in spite of NATO’s commitment to building a strategic partnership with Russia in 2010, he sees a Russia that is acting more like an adversary rather than a partner. The Secretary General said that

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58 Ibidem.
59 Ibidem.
Europe and America must strengthen their economic and military ties, discontinue disarmament, reduce Europe’s dependency on Russian natural gas and intensify political and military support from the alliance to Ukraine.  

The Russian behaviour frame is perhaps the most interesting frame of NATO, in the long term. The language used by Rasmussen is hardly diplomatic, instead opting to call Russia out on its behaviour for the past years, including its strategy of using frozen conflicts in the near abroad. It’s interesting that Rasmussen puts the Ukrainian crisis in the context of a larger pattern of behaviour from Russia, seeing the crisis as climax of past events, and specifically calling Russia’s behaviour “revisionist”. Rasmussen does not seem reluctant to express his own view of the crisis’s gravity, using terms such as “game-changer” and comparing it to the fall of the Berlin wall. This type of rhetoric could indeed indicate NATO is committed to entering a new period in European security.

Another interesting point is Rasmussen’s expressed discontent with NATO’s partnership with Russia, and his call an end to disarmament and for closer trans-Atlantic cooperation. Combined with the first point of this frame, that of entering a new era of European security, this second point becomes especially interesting, as it indicates that Rasmussen might like to see a new West bloc in opposition to Russia in the east. This type of rhetoric if turned into long-term policy it could have big consequences for European security. It would mean that not only Russia is a revisionist power, but NATO could be labelled as one as well.

**Russian Aggression Frame**

The Russian aggression frame frames the Russian involvement in the civil war in Eastern Ukraine that erupted after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. On the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June 2014, Rasmussen said that Russia must pull back their troops from Ukrainian territory and stop the flow of arms and fighters into Ukraine. He called Russia’s doings an illegal aggression against Ukraine. He also claimed that Russia has used forced against its neighbours, not respecting

\footnote{Ibidem.}
the territorial integrity and political independence of other countries, alluding in part to the case of Ukraine\textsuperscript{61}. The 29\textsuperscript{th} of August that year, Rasmussen again commented on the war in Eastern Ukraine. The Secretary General claims that Russian troops and materials have crossed the border into eastern and southern Ukraine illegally. He said that it’s not an isolated incident but a pattern to destabilise Ukraine as a sovereign country that has been going on for many months. Rasmussen claimed that Russian forces are engaged in military operations inside Ukrainian territory and that Russia has fired onto Ukrainian territory both from outside of Ukraine as well as from inside the country, and that Russia is supplying separatists with military hardware such as tanks, armoured vehicles and rocket launchers. Rasmussen called Russia’s behaviour a violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and integrity\textsuperscript{62}.

The frame I call Russian aggression is perhaps not aimed at presenting a certain view on an issue as much as actually point out the existence of the event in question. While Putin has not admitted to being militarily involved in the war in eastern Ukraine, Rasmussen’s focal point here is to claim the exact opposite, trying to establish a fact, and although he stresses that these acts are illegal, this is not the primary message. It is also noteworthy that he views this as being part of a longer pattern to destabilise Ukraine that had been going on for many months, implying that Russia has a long-term strategy towards the country, which in turn could be connected to the Russian behaviour frame in which Rasmussen spoke of Russia using frozen conflicts in their near abroad to further their interests.

**Discussion**

Comparing Russia and NATO, we find two striking differences. First, Russia has significantly more frames than NATO, describing a greater range of topics than the alliance. This may be consequence of the fundamental differences between Russia, sovereign state, and the NATO leadership, an international organisation. President Vladimir Putin is speaking not primarily to

\textsuperscript{61} Secretary General sets out NATO’s position on Russia-Ukraine crisis, 2\textsuperscript{nd} of June 2014, Website of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_110643.htm?selectedLocale=en (received 27.12.2014).

an international audience, but to a domestic one, which is also the electorate of his country. Perhaps that is why he, contrary to Rasmussen, seemingly has chosen to invest more in political rhetoric. Second, NATO is almost exclusively occupied with Russia and Russia’s behaviour in regard to the crisis, both from a long-term perspective and a short-term perspective, while Putin on the other hand treats a wider range of issues and actors in his speeches and interviews. Again this could have to do with the differences between Russia and NATO as organisations. NATO being a strategic alliance, its main area of interest is security, particularly military security. This is likely the reason why Rasmussen is pre-occupied with the military aspect of the Ukraine crisis. One might also argue that a framing actor benefits from limiting the scope of their frames to invest in a fewer number of issues, as a strategy of delimiting the debate and thereby robbing their opponents of rhetorical materials to further their interests.

There are some interesting similarities between the two though. Both have a frame dealing with Crimea’s incorporation into the Russian federation, although the actual contents of these frames are radically different. Rasmussen labels it an illegal and illegitimate annexation, while Putin calls it a re-unification following a legitimate and peaceful referendum and declaration of independence. The fact that both invest in speaking about this issue indicates that the lack of understanding between the parties in this specific issue became the primary rift in the relationship between NATO and Russia, and that resetting the relationship will be very difficult as long as Crimea remains a de facto part of Russia.

Another interesting similarity is the mutual discontent of the pre-crisis relationship. Both are critical of the other’s behaviour in the post-Soviet world. Putin expresses this in his post-Soviet frame and his NATO frame, criticising what he interprets as Western countries’ uncompromising “rule of the gun” and NATO’s expansion, while Rasmussen does this in his Russian behaviour frame, criticising Russia for acting like an adversary and using frozen conflicts to alter the rules of international politics. Both seem to be in agreement in their dislike for the post-Soviet world, and, while not stated explicitly, willing to enter a new period in post-Soviet European security. Perhaps their post-crisis relationship to each other is more familiar to the Cold war and thus more comfortable. If so, both can be called “revisionist”
powers and this could have fundamental consequences for security and international relations in post-Ukrainian crisis Europe.

5.0 Concluding remarks

In this paper, I analysed the frames presented by the leadership of the Russian federation and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the framing contest that took place between these two, analysing both each actor’s frames separately as well as making an attempt to compare their narratives. I used content analysis to explore the concepts of frames and framing contests in a theory from the field of international relations. The ultimate purpose being to provide insight into how framing contests can and perhaps should be analysed, using a recent and relevant case in international affairs.

I found that, in line with Krebs & Jackson’s theory, without a common frame holding together the debate, framing contests are indeed fluid and fundamental. Not only is there a lack of agreement between NATO and Russia on those issues that both frame (as expected) but there is also little overlap in which issues have been framed, making comparison difficult. Because of this, I would argue that qualitative content analysis have served the analysis well in giving a deeper, more substantive understanding of the frames presented by actors in frame analysis, rather than merely observing the use of terms in the debate, as suggested by Krebs and Jackson. Surely, terms need not be neither empty nor cheap, they can carry both magnitude and gravity. But I would argue that they need to be understood in relationship to their context, to the larger, categorical themes or narratives used in the framing discourse, as in here.

As previously stated, the drawback with using a conventional content analysis, as opposed to one where materials are interpreted through the scope of pre-conceived categories derived from theoretical concepts, is that it makes comparison difficult.
There is also a fundamental problem with applying Krebs and Jackson’s theory on the case of Ukraine, namely the anarchic setting of international politics. While Krebs and Jackson seem to understand the causality of rhetorical contest on the international level in the same way as it can be understood on the domestic level in a democratic country, this view is inherently flawed, as the case of Ukraine has showed. While their theory relies on a third actor, “P” to enforce implications following successful rhetorical coercion by either of the framing parties, the hypothetical actor “P” and its causal effect eludes the international context.

The anarchic nature of international politics means actors such as Russia or NATO or the EU can impose the implications of their frames unilaterally, without needing the approval of a common “P”. Russia did not ask NATO for permission before its annexation of Crimea, and the EU did not ask Russia’s permission before imposing sanctions on her. Despite this, as this analysis shows, rhetoric does not seem unimportant to world leaders. Rather, rhetoric must be understood to have another function. My hypothesis would be that world leaders use rhetoric to secure internal support in order to act externally, for example through sanctions or military intervention. Without such justification, which is created rhetorically, actors would find themselves constrained and unable to act.

As my analysis suggests, NATO and Russia were occupied by different issues in regard to the Ukraine crisis because NATO and Russia are inherently different types of actors and organisations. Putin’s primary audience for example was his domestic, not his international. The reason for this, I argue, is that Putin needed to justify his actions domestically to secure the support of his electorate, not primarily that of the international community, to enable himself to intervene in Ukraine. Similarly, Rasmussen needed the support of NATO allies and the wider community of Western nations in establishing a new policy towards Russia that included coercive measures such sanctions. In this in this way, I would argue, that rhetorical coercion takes place.

From my discussion it is obvious that the model of rhetorical coercion in international politics need to be modified in order to function properly in the anarchic international setting. The primary concern is the causal relation of rhetoric. While Krebs and Jackson’s model of
rhetorical coercion may very well be functional when looking at the domestic level of politics, explaining the way that rhetoric is used to coerce other actors in the international setting has to take into consideration other factors.

My suggestion would be to look at instances where national governments or international organisations have failed to secure domestic or internal support for their courses of action, and compare them with cases where international actors have succeeded in mobilising support for coercive foreign policy strategies, such as sanctions or military intervention. Integrating both rhetorical analysis, including qualitative content analysis, and foreign policy analysis to create a new model of causality for international politics, could open up new ways and opportunities for explaining outcomes in international politics.
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