

A critical study of group-defining categories in the discursive construal of national identity

Nina Shtok

Vistula University, Poland

Abstract

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. The beginning of this war marked a significant turning point with far-reaching consequences for the countries involved. Russian political discourse has responded swiftly to the conflict with a marked increase in nationalist rhetoric. This surge underscores a renewed emphasis on national unity and a collective sense of purpose, alongside a growing imperative to safeguard Russian integrity and sovereignty. The discourse has increasingly framed the war as a battle against external threats, positioning Russia as a defender of traditional values and a bulwark against perceived Western encroachments. This nationalist narrative, actively promoted by the government, serves to mobilise public support for its policies. Official speeches by the head of state play a central role in disseminating this ideology. Accordingly, this paper sets out to analyse selected addresses by the Russian President delivered during the conflict's initial year to uncover the discursive mechanisms shaping Russian national identity. It relies on a discourse-historical approach, which provides effective tools for advancing this endeavour.

Keywords: national identity, discourse, discursive strategies, discursive themes

1. Introduction

The concepts of 'nation' and 'national identity' have consistently held a prominent place in discourse studies. Their significance has grown, particularly since the commencement of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war on 24 February 2022. During that period, nationalist sentiment, which emerged prominently in Russian political discourse in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, reached its peak. This sentiment has been strongly promoted by the Russian political apparatus to solidify domestic support for what was stated as protecting 'our country', 'our historical future as a nation', 'the very existence of our state and its sovereignty' (Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 24 February 2022; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>). Political speeches, state-controlled media,

cultural events, educational materials, and various other potential channels and tools for propaganda have been actively exploited to construct and reinforce national unity.

While the conflict in Ukraine continues to escalate and patriotic fervour has intensified in Russia, to date there has only been limited research on the discursive mechanisms used to establish or reconstruct the Russian nation. This particular issue is considered in the given paper, which aims to investigate the national group-defining elements formulated in Russian political discourse, along with the discursive and linguistic strategies employed in their creation. These elements serve as conceptual constructs delineating a collective as a nation: ‘fundamental categories that codify the ways people define themselves and others as group members’ (van Dijk 1998: 151). They encompass diverse categories such as territory, language, history, as well as more abstract concepts like values, culture, and patriotism. Collectively, these elements shape individuals’ understanding and perception of what constitutes a nation and foster a sense of self-identification with it. This research purpose logically leads to two research questions that the study aims to address. The first question probes which exact membership or group-defining elements of the Russian nation are constructed in the Russian war-related discourse. The second question pertains to the discursive and linguistic strategies employed to construct these national continuity elements.

The methodological framework of the study was shaped by the Discourse-Historical Approach, which offers a conceptualization of the key notions the study relies upon, as well as a discourse-analytical toolkit to analyse the discursive construction of national identity. It was developed by the Vienna School of Discourse Analysis and was initially applied to the study of antisemitic discourse during the 1986 Austrian presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim (Wodak, et al. 1990). Further research extended to areas such as racism, discrimination against immigrants, and nationalism. The most influential study within the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) focused on the discursive construal of national identity in Austrian public, semi-public, and semi-private discourse (Wodak et al. 2009). In the given study, this analytical framework will be applied to analyse the speeches delivered by the Russian president during the first year of the conflict, specifically those addressing the ongoing war.

The research also draws on numerous studies that have emphasized the pivotal role of political discourse in the formation of various national identities. There is a specific focus on those incorporating data analysis methods framed by discursive strategies, including the construal of national identity in Austria (de Cillia et al. 1999, Wodak 2009, 2022,), in Poland (Krzyżanowski 2008), the discursive construction of European identities in institutional and non-institutional contexts of European Union countries (Krzyżanowski 2010), the construction of Palestinian national identity (Amer 2012), French newspaper representations of nationalism (Costelloe 2015), and thematic analyses of discourse (van Dijk 1980, 1998, 2014; Krzyżanowski 2010; Billing 1995; Anderson 2016). The present research aims to expand upon the existing body of literature by examining the discursive themes and strategies employed to define the elements of the Russian nation.

2. Theoretical background of the study: nations and national identities in political discourse

There is no need to reiterate how complex the notions of ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ are, given their long history and the numerous definitions proposed in various academic fields. However, for the purpose of this research, it is essential to establish clearer boundaries for these concepts, starting with the term ‘nation’ which forms the foundation for a national identity.

A nation is perceived as a discursive, politically affiliated formation, the construal of which serves various purposes, including garnering support for the government and its leader, gaining approval for political agendas, justifying military conflicts, and ultimately maintaining absolute power. As Malešević argues (2006: 27) nations ‘do not and cannot exist on their own. They emerge as specific group labels in a particular moment of time and with a particular social and political reason’. This perspective, which underscores the dynamic nature of nations and their flexibility in adapting to the will and aims of political actors, is central to the current study.

Nations are also ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1988), with the vast majority of their members having never met and likely never will. However, the idea of belonging to the same community and sharing its constituting elements permeates the minds of many people. It is logical to question why this happens. If these communities are imagined, why are they so adept at instilling a sense of belonging among their believers? Wodak, et al., argue that the answer to this question lies in the discursive nature of such communities: ‘it is constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture’ (2009: 22).

Thus, the construction of nations frequently involves the intentional crafting of a national culture. The process serves as a unifying force within a community, shaping its shared values and nurturing a sense of a common elevated goal. Nations often ‘ideologically cling on the notion of culture, whether as an anthropologically understood lived culture (culture as a distinct way of collective existence) in ethnic relations, or a socio-political understanding of high culture (culture as civilisational refinement expressed in artistic excellence) in nation-formation’ (Malešević 2006: 27). As such, the study approaches the notion of nation as a ‘mental construct’ (de Cillia, et al. 1999: 153) that is discursively constituted through ingrained cultural and social doctrines.

Elucidating the concept of identity also proves to be a complex task. Our identity or ‘mental self-presentation’ (van Dijk 1998) is partially defined by our affiliations with different groups (collective identity), where a nation is one of them. Thus, a collective identity is a ‘mental representation of self as a collection of group memberships, and the identification processes that are related to such membership representations’ (van Dijk 1998: 120). National self-identification builds on membership concepts (group-defining elements) embraced by a nation which are not limited to a cognitive realm of shared opinions, attitudes, beliefs or cultural and social doctrines. They also involve ‘a complex array of typical or routine practices, collective actions, dress, objects, settings, buildings, monuments, prominent historical events, heroes and heroines, and other symbols’ (van Dijk 1998: 123). These are also

flags, uniforms, social structures, organisations and many other tangible membership categorisations (van Dijk 1998: 123-125).

In the context of the formation of national identity, the study adheres to the approach of Wodak (2001, 2009, 2022) and Krzyzanowsky (2010, 2017), defining it as a discursive construct which is produced, reproduced and transformed by discourse. The construct becomes particularly pronounced during times of crises or wars when an 'ideological consciousness of nationhood can be seen to be at work. It embraces a complex set of themes about 'us', 'our homeland', 'nations' ('ours' and 'theirs'), the 'world', as well as the morality of national duty and honour' (Billing 1995: 4).

3. The methodological paradigm

3.1. Research Data

The primary sources for this research are transcripts of speeches delivered by the President of the Russian Federation during the first year of the war. These speeches can presumably offer valuable insight into the construal of the elements defining the national collective in Russian war-related political discourse, given the prominent role of the President in shaping it. Putin, as the head of state and its most representative member, acts as 'the voice of the nation' and 'a person generating identity and integration' (Wodak 2009: 72). His speeches reflect and reinforce dominant national narratives, shaping the perception of national identity.

The transcripts were sourced from the official Kremlin webpage, including both its Russian (<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/speeches/page/7>) and English (<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/page/45>) versions. A total of 63 transcripts of speeches were analysed in this study. They span a diverse range of topics, including those directly related to the ongoing conflict, speeches commemorating significant dates in the Russian calendar, greetings, addresses to different professional groups, speeches given during various meetings, and more.

This cursory examination of the extensive dataset facilitated the selection of the corpus for further in-depth analysis. Thirteen speeches were chosen based on their relevance to the specific discourse - the war in Ukraine (Special Military Operation in the analysed discourse). Some of them marked landmark events in the course of this war (announcement of the war or partial mobilization), some commemorated past victories (the Great Victory Day, Anniversary of Crimea's reunification), and others were dedicated to a seemingly non-military event (such as New Year, for example). However, they all centre around one topic: the war. These are speeches in which nationalist sentiment is particularly pronounced, and thus, they provide the data that best suit the research purpose and questions. Moreover, these are speeches addressed to the entire nation, which also makes them highly relevant to the study of national identity construction.

Table 1: *Corpus of Texts*

Addresses of the President of the Russian Federation	
Date	Topic
24 February 2022	Decision to carry out Special Military Operation
18 March 2022	The anniversary of Crimea's reunification
09 May 2022	Victory parade on Red Square
22 August 2022	Video address on National Flag Day
21 September 2022, 09:00	Decision on partial mobilization
21 September 2022, 18:00	Gala concert devoted to the 1160th anniversary of Russian statehood
30 September 2022	Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia
27 October 2022	Valdai International Discussion Club meeting
20 December 2022	Ceremony for presenting state decorations
31 December 2022	New Year Address to the Nation
2 February 2023	Gala concert for 80th anniversary of defeating German Nazi forces in Battle of Stalingrad
22 February 2023	Glory to Defenders of the Fatherland
23 February 2023	Congratulations on the occasion of Defender of the Fatherland Day

Due to the constraints of word limit within this paper, it is unfeasible to comprehensively analyse all the envisaged research data. However, the research in its subsequent stages aims to integrate data from media and private discourse.

3.2. The research methodology

The study relies on the approach developed within the paradigm of Critical Discourse Studies. It incorporates data analysis methods framed by discursive strategies (Krzyżanowski 2008, 2010; Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Wodak 1999, 2001, 2009, 2022) and thematic analysis (Krzyżanowski 2010; Billing 1995; Anderson 2016).

The thematic analysis aims to unveil the major thematic topics, which are seen as summarising propositions indicating the importance of information within the text (van Dijk 1991). In this sense, topics or themes formulate the representational group-defining elements of a nation which rely on 'the most precious resource of the nationalist, thus, is on the one hand, 'our land', territory, etc., and on the other hand the symbolic resources of 'our' culture,

language, etc.’ (van Dijk 2008: 201). They are the foundational categories that construct the ideological framework of a nation. This part of the research relies on inductive analysis, which involves ‘decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into the list of themes and sub-themes’ (Krzyżanowski 2010: 81). Hence, this phase of the research aims to address the first research question.

These categories are introduced into the discourse through various discursive strategies – ‘a more or less intentional plan of practice (including discursive practice) to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal’ (Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 33). Thus, several discursive strategies have been borrowed and adapted from the empirical studies on the discursive construction of national identities conducted by de Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999), Wodak (2001), Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2016), Reisigl (2017), and Wodak and Rheindorf (2022): construction, predication, perpetuation or justification, transformation, mitigation, and intensification.

Thus, the construction or referential strategy shapes membership in the given national collective by naming persons, objects, phenomena, and events related to this group. Its primary aim is to create and reinforce intra-national unity, solidarity, inward sameness, as well as inter-group differentiation and heterogeneity. Predication strategy is essential in positive self-presentation and negative other presentations, ascribing positive and negative qualities to ingroups and outgroups, respectively. The perpetuation strategy serves to create and reproduce a threatened national identity, and legitimation strategy is one of its types. It refers to the ways in which discourse is used to legitimise or justify certain actions, policies, or ideologies, presenting them as valid, acceptable, or just within a given political context. The transformation strategy is employed to bring about transformations of a national identity or its components into another identity, as well as changes in social, political, or cultural practices. Mitigation strategy aims to reduce the force of an assertion – making it less direct or moderating potential negative effects. Conversely, intensification strategy amplifies the impact, emphasising the significance or emotional weight of an assertion.

This analytical stage is also conducted sequentially, proceeding sentence by sentence through the text. It involves scrutinising the text to identify discursive strategies that shape the nation-forming elements in the discourse as well as linguistic forms in which they are realised. This method allows for a detailed observation of how language, rhetorical devices, and argumentation schemes contribute to the portrayal and establishment of key elements crucial to the formation of national identity in Russian political discourse. It is employed to explore the second research question.

4. Research findings

4.1. Core elements of Russian national identity

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns in the data – *discursive topics* (Krzyżanowski 2010, 81) which specify elements essentially defining a collective group as a nation. The study has identified two categories of these themes. The first category revolves

around state-forming elements or concrete attributes associated with a nation-state (the state as a legal entity), such as the country and its borders, its constituent entities, governmental bodies, president, constitution, and the military. The other category of discursive topics corresponds with more abstract concepts intrinsic to a nation: motherland/fatherland/homeland, history and cultural heritage, values, traditions, symbols, religion, social norms, heroes.

In the following section of the article, an analysis of the discursive strategies employed to transform these elements into ideological constructs of Russian national identity will be conducted. However, due to formal requirements regarding the article's length, it is not feasible to analyse the discursive construal of every element. Therefore, the analysis will focus only on those which are most prominent in the analysed data.

4.2. Constructing nation-constituting elements through discourse

4.2.1. State-based elements

The thematic analysis revealed that a common territory, defined by geographical boundaries, holds a central role in the analysed data. Hence, the first group-defining element is 'our' territory, secured by national borders – our country, Russia. This element is formulated within the discourse through a constructive strategy that primarily utilises toponyms for its realisation, such as *Россия* (Russia), *Российская Федерация* (the Russian Federation). The linguistic means also include nouns that reinforce its sovereignty, for example *границы* (borders), *государство* and *страна* (country), *суверенитет* (sovereignty). The possessive pronoun *наш/а* (our) plays a significant role as well. It consistently modifies almost all references to the national territory in the selected presidential speeches. Therefore, it becomes 'our territory', 'our land' or 'our country'.

In all of the analysed addresses, Putin consistently emphasises the threats to the state's integrity and sovereignty, which can be interpreted as a direct threat to the nation itself. The perpetuation strategy emerges as the most effective means to 'support and reproduce a national identity perceived to be under threat' (Wodak, Rheindorf 2022: 26). It is presented linguistically through abstract nouns such as: *угроза* (threat), *опасность* (danger), a variety of noun phrases with an adjective premodifier like *фундаментальные угрозы* (fundamental threats), *абсолютно неприемлемая для нас угроза* (absolutely unacceptable thereat), *реальная угроза* (real threat), *ядерный шантаж* (nuclear blackmail) or *атомная катастрофа* (nuclear disaster). Additionally, numerous verb phrases are employed to present the threat to the country: *ослабить и развалить Россию* (to weaken and break up Russia), *раздробить наше государство* (to divide our state).

NATO, America, the West, or the collective West are consistently constructed as the source of these threats. In this case, the perpetuation strategy is implemented through the use of three tropes: metaphor, personification, and metonymy:

- (1) *Невероятно – невероятно, но факт: нам снова угрожают немецкими танками Leopard, на борту которых – кресты..*
 However incredible, it is a fact – we are again being threatened with German Leopard tanks with crosses on board. (02 February 2023)

Perpetuation is metaphorically realized through German Leopard tanks with crosses on board, which symbolise the perceived military aggression. It evokes a strong historical connotation to the terrors of the Great Patriotic War, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The threat also emanates from America and Western countries/the West/Collective West, which are personified linguistically through terms like ‘агрессор’ (aggressor) and ‘колониалисты’ (colonialists). Metonymy is also employed to represent the aforementioned organization and regions as threats to the national identity through political regimes of dominance which are assumed to exist there (political regime for country): ‘гегемония’ (hegemony), ‘диктатура’ (dictatorship), and ‘деспотизм’ (despotism).

A legitimization strategy – a specific type of perpetuation – is also utilised in the discursive construction of this nation-state element. The realisation of this strategy relies on a simple scheme of argumentation: ‘if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them’ (Wodak 2006: 75). This framing justifies the military attack on a neighbouring country as an act of self-defence, deemed inevitable:

- (2) *Россия дала упреждающий отпор агрессии. Это было вынужденное, своевременное и единственно правильное решение.*
 Russia launched a pre-emptive strike at the aggression. It was forced, timely and the only correct decision. (09 May 2022)

The linguistic resources employed to establish the legitimacy of this attack are attributive adjectives such as ‘упреждающий’ (preventive), ‘вынужденный’ (forced), ‘неотложный’ (urgent), ‘неизбежный’ (inevitable), ‘своевременный’ (timely) as well as adjective phrases like ‘абсолютно необходимый’ (absolutely necessary), ‘единственно возможный’ (the only possible), ‘единственно правильное’ (the only correct). These are most commonly used in combinations with euphemisms presenting the military offensive as ‘защита’ (defence), ‘решение’ (decision), ‘самозащита’ (self-defence), ‘шаги’ (measures/steps), and related expressions.

The threat to the country, and consequently, to the nation, purportedly emanating from the policy of the collective West towards Ukraine, perceived as directed against Russia, is consistently intensified in Putin’s speeches. This is where we can observe the efficiency of the intensification strategy realised through hyperbole: ‘to modify illocutionary force of utterance in respect of their epistemic or denoting status’ (Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 44).

- (3) *А для нашей страны – это в итоге вопрос жизни и смерти, вопрос нашего исторического будущего как народа. И это не преувеличение – это так и есть. Это реальная угроза не просто нашим интересам, а самому существованию нашего государства, его суверенитету.*
 For our country it’s a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration. It’s not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and its sovereignty. (24 February 2022)

Other components of the nation-state revealed in the analysed speeches encompass the subjects of the Russian Federation or their people, including those considered ‘newly-attached’. These elements are presented through toponyms: ‘Луганская Народная Республика’ (Lugansk People’s Republics), ‘Донецкая Народная Республика’ (Donetsk People’s Republic), ‘Запорожская и Херсонская области’ (Zaporozhye and Kherson regions), ‘Крым’ (Crimea). The unequivocal ownership of the territories and people living there by deictic usage the modifier ‘наш/и’ (our) is systematically emphasized in the analysed speeches:

- (4) *Хочу, чтобы меня услышали киевские власти и их реальные хозяева на Западе, чтобы это запомнили все: люди, живущие в Луганске и Донецке, Херсоне и Запорожье, становятся нашими гражданами навсегда.*

I want the Kiev authorities and their true handlers in the West to hear me now, and I want everyone to remember this: the people living in Lugansk and Donetsk, in Kherson and Zaporozhye have become our citizens, forever. (30 September 2022)

Given the perceived threat to the country, the military inevitably emerges as another prominent discursive topic. The army is particularly praised and admired in Putin’s speeches delivered a day before and on Defender of the Fatherland Day. A nomination strategy is employed to construct this element, named as militarisation in Van Leeuwen’s classification of social actors (van Leeuwen 1996: 38-41). It is implemented through a wide array of military vocabulary: ‘солдаты и офицеры Вооружённых сил России’ (soldiers and officers of Russia’s armed forces), ‘Вооружённые силы России’ (Russian armed forces), ‘солдаты и офицеры’ (soldiers and officers), ‘добровольцы’ (volunteers), ‘воинские части Донецкой и Луганской народных республик’ (military units of the Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics) and similar items.

Transformation strategy is also actively employed with the ‘aim to transform a relatively well-established national identity and its components into another identity the contours of which the speaker has already conceptualised’ (Wodak 2009: 33). Thus, the army becomes more than a conventional military force. It embodies a unified collective of courageous and committed sons and brothers:

- (5) *И лучшим подтверждением тому является то, как воюют, как действуют наши ребята в ходе этой военной операции: плечом к плечу, помогают, поддерживают друг друга, а если надо, то как родного брата прикрывают своим телом от пули на поле боя.*

The best evidence of this is how our fellows are fighting and acting in this operation: shoulder to shoulder, helping and supporting each other. If they have to, they will cover each other with their bodies to protect their comrade from a bullet in the battlefield, as they would to save their brother. (18 March 2022)

In these examples, a strong emphasis is placed on intra-national unity and solidarity through kinship nouns. It is also another instance of metaphor when soldiers are presented as brothers to each other. Moreover, the Russian noun ‘(наши) ребята’ does not exactly mean ‘(our) fellows’ as suggested in the official translation. This informal term is commonly used in everyday conversations when addressing a group of people in a friendly or familiar context, typically children. The familial terms aim to create an emotional bond – a sense of closeness, care, and personal connection – that extends beyond the soldiers’ roles as military personnel.

4.2.2. Cultural and social elements

The other category of national themes encompasses more abstract notions of father/motherland, religion, cultural heritage, national societal norms, values and traditions. Homeland seems to be the most strongly foregrounded element in the analysed data. It is ‘our’ special place, sacred and essential. It serves as a powerful symbol, representing not just geographical territory but a deeply emotional and cultural connection to the collective identity of the nation.

The Russian language has several synonyms for the word that signifies homeland, some of which are present in the analysed data. Thus, in one of Putin’s speeches, it is our ‘Fatherland’, which is equated to our Father in Heaven and then to Father. These words in Russian share a common root. Consequently, the predication strategy elevates the homeland’s status to that of a divine entity and then to father, effectively presenting this abstract concept into something deserving of any sacrifice:

- (6) *Мы встречаемся с вами в преддверии Дня защитника Отечества. В этом словосочетании, в этих словах есть что-то мощное, огромное, я бы так сказал, мистическое и святое. Недаром одна из самых известных молитв начинается со слов «Отче наш»: «отче» – отец, и в этом есть что-то очень близкое каждому человеку.*

We are having this meeting on the eve of Defender of the Fatherland Day. This phrase, these words have something powerful, enormous, I would even say mystical and sacred in them. No wonder one of the most popular prayers begins with the words ‘Our Father’. ‘Father’ is a word that conveys something very close to every person.’ (22 February 2023)

This predication is substantiated by personification – a type of metaphor which ‘plays a decisive role in animating imagined ‘collective subjects’ – as, for example, ‘races’, ‘nations’ and ‘ethnicities. Their apparent concreteness and vividness often invites hearers or readers to identify or to feel solidarity with the personified entity or against it’ (Reisigl, Wodak: 2001, 58). Thus, the father persuasively represents the fatherland as a ‘powerful’ parental figure whose authority is absolute and unquestionable.

The same mechanism is observed in the subsequent abstract when referring to the homeland as Motherland. Furthermore, it is ‘Родина-мать’, the term which translates word-for-word to ‘Homeland-Mother’ (not reflected in the official translation):

- (7) *Мы ведь говорим тоже и «Родина-мать». Речь идёт о семье, речь идёт о чём-то огромном, мощном и в то же время близком сердцу каждого человека: это и Родина, и семья. А по большому счёту и Родина – это семья: в нашем сердце это одно и то же.*

After all, we also say ‘Motherland’. This is about a family, something huge and powerful and at the same time close to everyone’s heart. It is the Motherland and the family. Ultimately, the Motherland is the family and they mean the same for us in our hearts. (22 February 2023)

In this case, the predication strategy is also realised through personification, attributing the traits and significance of a mother to the territory where people live. Putin again then extends the personification to the family. This rhetorical device can be employed to reinforce the concept of collective responsibility, duty, and sacrifice for the nation.

Simultaneously, legitimation strategy is employed to construct a narrative wherein this war is the defence of the homeland. It is legitimised through very similar lexical means to those of the country:

- (8) *Обращаюсь сейчас к нашим Вооружённым Силам и ополченцам Донбасса. Вы сражаетесь за Родину, за её будущее,..*
Сегодня вы защищаете то, за что сражались отцы и деды, прадеды. Для них высшим смыслом жизни всегда были благополучие и безопасность Родины.
 I am addressing our Armed Forces and Donbass militia. You are fighting for our Motherland, its future...
 You are defending today what your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought for. The wellbeing and security of their Motherland was their top priority in life. (09 May 2022)

History is another element of the national collective. It is constructed in the discourse through a legitimation strategy which finds its expression in the argumentation scheme ‘history teaching lessons’ (Wodal et.al. 2009: 205-207). According to Reisigl, this argumentative scheme can be described as follows: ‘because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to’ (Reisigl, Wodak 2001: 80). To put it simply: history taught us a lesson and we learnt the lesson well. Thus, in his speeches, Putin often refers to the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), claiming, for example:

- (9) *Мы хорошо знаем из истории, как в 40-м году и в начале 41-го года прошлого века Советский Союз всячески стремился предотвратить или хотя бы оттянуть начало войны. Для этого в том числе старался буквально до последнего не провоцировать потенциального агрессора, не осуществлял или откладывал самые необходимые, очевидные действия для подготовки к отражению неизбежного нападения. А те шаги, которые всё же были в конце концов предприняты, уже катастрофически запоздали. (...) Второй раз мы такой ошибки не допустим, не имеем права.*
 If history is any guide, we know that in 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak. To this end, the USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by refraining or postponing the most urgent and obvious preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late. (...) We will not make this mistake the second time. We have no right to do so. (24 February 2022)

The same argumentation scheme applies to the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the ‘Collective West’ blamed for its downfall, and to the Chechen crisis of 1998-2009, where the West was similarly accused of supporting terrorist groups in Chechnya.

In the analysed data, a prominent focal point emerges concerning the emphasis on values – ‘atomic/decomposable building blocks of the evaluations that are involved in social opinions, as attributes that are predicated of any socially relevant object (people, events, actions, situations, etc.): truth, equality, happiness, and so on’ (van Dijk 1998: 74-75). The discursive construction of this element of national identity revolves around positive self-presentation. Predication, in this case, is the fundamental process of ascribing qualities that make everything that is ‘ours’ seem better, more worthy, deserving more, and superior to what is ‘theirs’:

- (10) *Да, собственно, и до последнего времени не прекращались попытки использовать нас в своих интересах, разрушить наши традиционные ценности и навязать нам свои псевдоценности, которые разъедали бы нас, наш народ изнутри, те установки, которые они уже агрессивно насаждают в своих странах и которые прямо ведут к деградации и вырождению, поскольку противоречат самой природе человека.*

They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. (24 February 2022)

This quote marks the initial mention of values in Putin’s war speeches. It was crucial to label our values as ‘traditional’ and theirs as ‘false’ at the very beginning. The linguistic means of realisation of positive traits include adjectives ‘*традиционные*’ (traditional), ‘*высокие*’ (high), ‘*великие нравственные*’ (great moral). This rhetoric persists throughout the course of the war, where ‘traditional’ primarily refers to the gender composition of a family, with a father being male and a mother being female. It also aligns with an anti-LGBTQ+ predication, which prevails in the current political discourse in Russia. However, ‘traditional’ values extend beyond gender roles to encompass such ‘atomic building blocks’ as, for example, solidarity and the unity of society, loyalty, as well as compassion, truth, fairness, professionalism, courage, love for the homeland, human rights and freedoms, humanity, mercy and compassion. For example, these values were exemplified in a speech delivered just a few hours after the declaration of mobilization:

- (11) *Это верность правде и справедливости, уважение к семье, любовь к детям, это прочная основа традиционных ценностей, таких как милосердие, сострадание и взаимовыручка, готовность добиваться благополучия не для себя одного, а для всех, для всей страны, для всей России и перед лицом общей угрозы вставать вместе, стеной – «за други своя», за Отечество.*

These values embrace loyalty to truth and justice, respect for the family, love for children, a solid foundation of traditional values such as mercifulness, compassion and mutual assistance, and the desire to make life good not just for yourself but for everyone, for the entire country, for all of Russia and, in the face of a common threat, to stand together as one “for one’s own friends” and for the Fatherland. (21 September 2022, 18:00).

These elements, combined with the state-based ones, form a multifaceted depiction of the nation. The identified discursive tools amplify the significance of national attributes, fostering a narrative that aligns with consolidation, unity, and a collective sense of identity.

5. Conclusion

The paper focused on the discursive mechanisms at play in shaping national identity within the context of war-related political discourse in the Russian public sphere. It identified the thematic foundations of Russian national identity and revealed the key discursive strategies employed, along with their linguistic manifestation in the analysed data. The scope of topics related to the Russian nation is extensive, covering various aspects. On one hand, it includes state-related elements such as territory and the perceived threats to it, which are particularly

significant in the context of the ongoing war. On the other hand, there are more abstract cultural and social elements, such as homeland, values, traditions, and others.

The discursive construction of the national territory relies on a constructive strategy, primarily manifested through various referential means, notably toponyms. The same strategic and linguistic means are employed to present the subjects of the Russian Federation, including those that are ‘newly-attached’. The construction of the state’s territory also oscillates between perpetuation and legitimation strategies which are prevalent in the discourse. Together, they contribute to perpetuating a sense of threat to the borders, sovereignty, and integrity of the country, while also fostering the urge to protect it. Perpetuation highlights the threat to the state and, hence, to the nation, using nouns and noun phrases to convey abstract and concrete dangers. Additionally, this strategy produces the source of these threats through a range metaphors, personifications, and metonymies. The legitimation strategy, in its turn, serves to justify the military conflict initiated by the government as an ‘inevitable’ and ‘timely’ response aimed at defending the country. The significance of the military is emphasised in the analysed discourse through a transformation strategy, portraying Russian soldiers as ‘our sons and brothers’ fighting to protect the threatened nation.

The analysis has revealed numerous cultural and social elements forming a nation. These include, among others, homeland, national history, and values. The construal of the abstract notion of homeland relies on the predication strategy, attributing to it the status of both mother and father, and also elevating it to a sacred and divine entity, likened to ‘our Father in Heaven’. These equations are realised through personifications. The legitimation strategy is actively employed to create a threat to the homeland, delivering a potent message that rationalises military intervention and encourages people to safeguard that which is most dear. National history is also discursively constructed to legitimise the war through an argumentation scheme ‘history teaching lessons’ (Reisigl, Wodak 2000, 80). Putin draws upon historical events like the Great Patriotic War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the Chechen crisis to frame the military attack as an act of self-defence to avoid consequences well-known from the country’s history.

Another element discursively construed as imperilled is ‘values’. From his very first address, Putin draws a clear distinction between ‘our’ traditional values and ‘their’ false ones, portraying ‘our’ traditional values as threatened by ‘theirs’. Predication in this case is employed through descriptive adjectives as well as comparative structures.

Both groups’ components are organized within the discourse to convincingly demonstrate how much the nation is threatened, thereby encouraging its defence by portraying the military attack as an inevitable and provoked means of protecting everything dear to us – the Russian nation. This effect is achieved through the utilisation of discursive strategies that create, perpetuate, transform, predicate, mitigate, or intensify various facets of national identity. The realisation and impact of these strategies will be further explored in subsequent stages of this study, delving into media discourse analysis as well as investigation of a more subjective perspective from individuals residing in Russia.

References

- Amer, M. M. 2012. The discourse of homeland: The construction of Palestinian national identity in Palestinian secularist and Islamist discourses. *Critical Discourse Studies* 9(2): 117–131.
- Anderson, B. 2016. *Imagined communities: Reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Billing, M. 1995. *Banal nationalism*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Costelloe, L. 2014. Discourse of sameness: Expressions of nationalism in newspaper discourse on French urban violence. *Discourse & Society* 25(3): 315–340.
- de Cillia R., M. Reisigl, and R. Wodak. 1999. The discursive construction of national identities. *Discourse and Society* 10(2): 149–173.
- van Dijk, T. A. 1980. *Macrostructures: An interdisciplinary study of global structures in discourse, interaction, and cognition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- van Dijk, T. A. 1991. *Racism and the press*. London: Routledge.
- van Dijk, T. A. 1998. *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: SAGE Publications.
- van Deijk, T. A. 2008. News, Discourse, and Ideology. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen, and T. Hanitzsch (eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 191–205. Routledge: New York.
- van Dijk, T. A. 2014. *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krzyżanowski, M. 2008. Konstrukcja Tożsamości Narodowych i Europejskich w Polskim Dyskursie Polityki po Roku 1989: Analiza Dyskursywno-Historyczna. In A. Duszak, and N. Fairclough (eds.), *Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu*, 267–305. Cracow: Universitas.
- Krzyżanowski, M. 2010. The Discursive construction of European identities: A multi-level approach to discourse and identity in the transforming European Union. Postdoctoral diss., Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.
- Malešević, S. 2006. *Identity as Ideology. Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- van Leeuwen, T. A. 1996. The representation of social actors. In C. Caldas-Coulthard, and M. Coulthard (eds.), *Texts and practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, 32–70. London: Routledge.
- Reisigl, M., and R. Wodak. 2001. *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. London: Routledge.
- Reisigl, M., and R. Wodak. 2016. The Discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak, and M. Meyer (eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed.), 23–61. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Wodak, R., Nowak, P. Pelikan, J. Gruber, H. de Cillia, R., and R. Mitten. 1990. *Wir sind alle unschuldige Täter. Diskurshistorische Studien zum Nachkriegsantisemitismus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Wodak, R. 2001. The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak, and M. Meyer (eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 63–94. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Wodak, R., R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl, and K. Liebhart. 2009. *The discursive construction of national identity* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wodak R., and M. Rheindorf. 2022. *Identity politics past and present: Political discourses from post-war Austria to the Covid crisis*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Cite this article as:

Shtok, N. (2024). A critical study of group-defining categories in the discursive construal of national identity. *LingBaW. Linguistics Beyond and Within*, 10, 215–228.