

ТЕОРІЯ ТА ПРАКТИКА ЖУРНАЛІСТИКИ

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THE IMAGE OF POLES IN UKRAINIAN MEDIASPACE DURING THE WAR

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This article explores the image of Poles in the Ukrainian mediaspace during the Russo-Ukrainian war, focusing on the period from 2022 to 2024. Using qualitative content analysis of Ukrainian regional media, the study examines how Polish-Ukrainian relations have been framed in the context of war, humanitarian aid, historical narratives, and geopolitical alliances. The research identifies dominant themes in media discourse, including Poland's role as a key ally in Ukraine's resistance, a provider of refuge and humanitarian support, and a long-standing historical partner. Additionally, the study analyzes the persistence of historical stereotypes, variations in coverage across different media outlets, and the influence of political and economic factors on the portrayal of Poland and its people.

The findings suggest that the war has significantly reshaped the media representation of Poles, reinforcing positive narratives of solidarity and cooperation while also reviving complex historical discourses. Moreover, economic and political issues – such as Poland's support for Ukrainian refugees, trade relations, and diplomatic tensions – have played a crucial role in shaping media attitudes. The study highlights how shift in economic cooperation, political negotiations, and policy decisions influence the perception of Poland in Ukrainian media. While the spread of misleading information, both in Ukrainian and Polish media spaces, has contributed to moments of diplomatic tension and public skepticism. By amplifying divisive issues and fueling misinformation, Russian propaganda seeks to undermine the strong partnership between Ukraine and Poland, which has been crucial during the war.

By providing insights into media discourse during a time of crisis, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how international relationships are mediated through public communication, particularly in times of geopolitical and economic upheaval.

Keywords: media, attitude, Poles, Ukrainians, influence, disinformation.

Introduction. Against the background of the unprovoked aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, cooperation between the two countries of Central Europe (CEE), Ukraine and Poland, is gaining special importance. Taking into account the socio-economic, military and humanitarian potential, these two European states are of strategic importance for the region. The collective potential of Ukraine and Poland

strengthens the subjectivity of the CE, because it is based on European traditions and culture, corresponds to the national interests of the states, in particular in the field of security on NATO's eastern flank [1]. At the same time, the successful development of relations between the states depends on the level of awareness of Ukrainian and Polish society about the socio-cultural values and traditions of both nations, understanding of what is the axis of their identity. The development of institutions of modern Ukrainian and Polish society, European integration and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine depend on the state of strategic communications, media, culture and education, their interpenetration and influence. There is a growing demand among Ukrainians to learn about Polish culture.

According to the results of a survey by the Myeroshevsky Center, the citizens of Ukraine called the Polish culture the most attractive and interesting among European cultures. If before the Russian-Ukrainian war, the percentage of positive attitude of Ukrainians towards Poland was 50–55 %, then in the fall of 2022, 86 % of respondents positively perceived the image of Poland and Poles [2]. Ukrainian-Polish humanitarian relations, their current state, indicate a historical opportunity to form opposition to Russian imperialism, which purposefully provokes conflicts between Poles and Ukrainians on cultural, everyday, historical and political grounds. Instead, intensifying humanitarian cooperation between Kyiv and Warsaw in such areas as education, culture, art, and media will avoid unwanted confrontations. The so-called “Polonization of Ukraine” and “Ukrainization of Poland”, the development of cultural diplomacy will prevent the political circles of the two countries, as well as Russian propaganda, from speculating on separate, rather sensitive, moments of the common history.

Formulation of the problem. Currently, the knowledge of Poland and its culture faces a number of problems. In particular, on television, according to 74 % of surveyed Ukrainians, there is an insufficient number of films and TV series produced by Poland. 55 % of respondents point to a lack of study of Polish culture in the school curriculum. This is provided that after the large-scale invasion of Russia, 27 % of Ukrainians became more interested in the culture of the neighboring country, 34 % – in recreation and tourism in Poland, 36 % more often buy goods of Polish origin. As a result, awareness of Polish culture among Ukrainians is moderate. For example, 51 % of respondents cannot name a single famous Polish cultural figure [3]. So the aim of the article is to find out, what attitude have Ukrainians to Poles through the prism of the Russian-Ukrainian war as well as how different political, economic, social factors influence on public opinion in Ukraine towards Poland and Poles.

Research methods. This study employs a qualitative content analysis to examine the representation of Poles in Ukrainian media. The research is based on a selection of news articles, opinion pieces, and media reports from major Ukrainian online and print media outlets over a period of 2022–2024 years. To ensure a balanced analysis, the study selects a representative sample of media sources, including national and regional news websites, newspapers, and television reports. The selection criteria include media reach, influence, and political orientation. The research focuses on publications from 2022–2024 years to capture recent trends in the portrayal of Poles in Ukrainian media. Relevant articles and media materials are collected using keyword searches related to Poland, Polish people, Polish-Ukrainian relations, and specific historical or political events influencing the image of Poles. The sources are retrieved from official media archives, online databases, and media monitoring services. The collected media texts are then analyzed thematically to identify recurring narratives, frames, and discursive strategies used in portraying Poles. The analysis considers the tone of coverage (positive, negative, or neutral), key themes such as historical relations, political cooperation, cultural exchanges, and economic ties, as well as the presence of stereotypes or specific framing techniques. Additionally, linguistic and visual representations, including the use of particular words, images, and metaphors, are examined.

Analysis of recent research and publications. At the beginning of the XXI century the Republic of Poland has started active targeted activities in the field of national brand formation, with the aim of improving the image of the country and its population in the international arena. Undoubtedly, the process of branding territories is a long, complex and multifaceted process, however, with the end of the first decade of

the 21st century, some interim conclusions can be drawn. The topic of national branding of the Republic of Poland was studied by Y. Zapala-Wiench and L. Kolyarska-Bobinska [12], in whose papers the peculiarities of the formation of the Polish brand, the role of individual structures and organizations, and the achieved results were studied. Valuable materials for studying the topic are the results of practical studies of the international image of Poland, which were conducted to solve practical problems in tourism [10, p. 12], economy [5, p. 275], and directly national branding [4]. The authors of the aforementioned works studied the formation of the national brand of the Republic of Poland, mainly in the context of political and economic sciences.

Results. Moscow's aggression creates prerequisites for the displacement of Russian culture from the Ukrainian educational and information space. Its place can be taken by Polish culture, the demand for knowledge of which on the part of Ukrainians is growing. It is significant that 69 % of Ukrainians tend to support the idea of replacing 732 works of A. Pushkin with works of A. Mickiewicz in educational programs, 22 % are against such a replacement [3]. In turn, Ukraine strengthens its international and domestic subjectivity by means of cultural diplomacy, and increases recognition abroad. For example, the efforts of the state organization "Ukrainian Institute", subordinate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are aimed at the presence of Ukrainian narratives in the international information field, ensuring the participation of Ukraine in events and projects in the fields of culture, education, science, creative industries, popularizing the Ukrainian language and culture border, in particular in Poland [6]. Thus, the "Ukrainian Institute" participated in the publication in Poland of a special edition of the jazz magazine "Jazz Forum", dedicated to the Ukrainian jazz scene, and the Ukrainian film and culture festival "UKRAINA! Festival Filmowy", etc. [10, p. 2]. Non-governmental organizations also make a significant contribution to the development of humanitarian cooperation between Ukraine and Poland: PAUSI, Education for Democracy Foundation, Casimir Pulaski Foundation, Stefan Batory Foundation, Institute of Eastern Initiatives, Robert Schuman Polish Foundation, European Institute for Democracy, Foundation of Information Society Development (FRSI) [7]. The integration of Ukraine into European structures, in particular educational and scientific, requires reforming the educational process and creating opportunities for Ukrainians to receive education abroad, for example, in Poland. And for Polish students in Ukrainian educational institutions. The Government of Ukraine is considering the possibility of including the Polish language in the list of subjects for which independent external evaluation (EXE) is conducted. In response, Poland is ready to include Ukrainian as a foreign language in the list of educational subjects [8]. Obviously, in the short- and medium-term perspective, Ukrainian-Polish educational projects will be relevant and popular.

The results of content-analysis of topics that shape the image of Poles and Poland in the Ukrainian media give an opportunity to outline the key topic and narratives. The first is that Poland understands Russia's threat to itself, so it helps Ukraine and strengthens its defense capabilities. I am quoting Zahid.net from March 27, 2023. The military leadership of Poland will soon install HIMARS near the Kaliningrad region. Warsaw is strengthening its borders with the Russian Federation in order to prevent the invasion of the aggressor country, the Polish Minister of Defense said Mariusz Blaszczak¹ "We Poles are aware of how dangerous the empire of evil is, what the Russian Empire is – how many wrongs, how many crimes the Russians committed when they occupied Polish territory. Therefore, our task is to build such a strength of the Polish army that those who are rebuilding the empire of evil today do not dare to attack our homeland," said the Minister of Defense of Poland Mariusz Blaszczak. The second key topic is assistance in the military sphere to Ukraine and not only with weapons, but also with personnel. Polish special forces guaranteed the safety of representatives of Ukraine at the negotiations in Brest, Belarus, at the end of February and the beginning of March 2022².

The topic of Ukrainian refugees is also of crucial importance. How Ukrainians can receive payments, reimbursement for medicines. Such information is always accompanied by data on how much money Poland

¹ Source: (<https://zaxid.net/news/>).

² The same.

has already spent on supporting Ukraine refugees [11, p. 15]. And also here is a quote from Ukrainian regional media Lviv Portal: *Note that Ukrainians who arrived in Poland after the war started have the same access to medical care in the country as its citizens.* Such information clearly creates a positive image of Poland and Poles in Ukrainian media.

Economic topics. The main idea is that Poland defends its economic interests. And there are two subtopics here. The first is that Poles invest and actively work in the banking sector. For example, “Sens Bank” is negotiating with a Polish investor to buy the bank from Russians. The Polish investor has to buy back the shares of four Russian shareholders, etc. The second subtopic, which is much more complicated and not so unambiguous, is the transit of Ukrainian grain. For example, the title of the article on the website 24 and the broadcast of TV channel 24: *Poles again do not allow Ukrainian grain trucks (April 12, 2023).* This material shows a lack of understanding of the situation and the reasons why Polish farmers are blocking roads to prevent trucks from Ukraine from passing through. At the same time, in the following materials under the heading *“Poland banned the import of grain and products from Ukraine: why did the Poles take this step”* there is an explanation of this fact and quotations from experts: *“There is nothing surprising in the fact that Poland has banned the import of grain and other food from Ukraine”*. “Europe highly values and protects its national agricultural producers. This is a big challenge for our authorities, which must negotiate with Brussels and the agrarian lobby and seek compromises so that no one's rights are oppressed”. The situation is also clarified by the video material on Hromadske television under the title “Is it possible to establish relations with the Poles and continue grain deliveries?” In the material, it is explained in particular, in a quote: *“when the grain went through Poland, it turned out. both Ukrainian and Polish “baryghs” who wanted to make money from it, and as a result of the 3 million tons of grain that went along the corridor through the Baltic, a lot of them remained in Poland and this affected the Polish market. Everyone took advantage of this situation, first of all, the Polish opposition and the Russian agents”*.

The grain crisis has become a significant factor affecting Ukrainian-Polish relations, introducing economic and political tensions between the two historically allied nations. The issue emerged as a consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted global agricultural supply chains and forced Ukraine to seek alternative export routes for its grain. With Black Sea ports blocked or operating under threat, Ukrainian grain exports were redirected through European countries, including Poland. However, the influx of cheap Ukrainian grain into the Polish market sparked backlash from Polish farmers, who argued that it was undermining their livelihoods by driving down local grain prices.

In response to these concerns, Poland, along with other Central European countries, imposed temporary import bans on Ukrainian grain in 2023, despite Ukraine's insistence on maintaining open trade channels. The situation escalated when the European Commission decided to lift the restrictions in September 2023, but Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia unilaterally extended the bans, triggering diplomatic disputes between Kyiv and Warsaw. Ukrainian officials criticized these measures as politically motivated and harmful to European unity in the face of Russian aggression, while Polish authorities defended their decision as necessary to protect domestic farmers.

The grain crisis has also influenced political rhetoric and public sentiment in both countries. In Poland, the issue became a key talking point ahead of national elections, with politicians appealing to agricultural communities by taking a tough stance on Ukrainian grain imports. This shift in discourse temporarily strained the previously strong partnership between Kyiv and Warsaw, which had been marked by Poland's extensive military and humanitarian support for Ukraine. Ukrainian officials expressed disappointment over Poland's position, arguing that trade barriers contradicted the spirit of solidarity between the two nations.

Beyond economic concerns, the crisis has provided an opportunity for Russian propaganda to exploit divisions between Ukraine and Poland. Disinformation campaigns have sought to amplify tensions, portraying Poland as betraying Ukraine or fueling anti-Ukrainian sentiments among Polish farmers. These narratives risk undermining the broader strategic partnership between the two countries, which has been crucial in countering Russian influence in the region.

Despite these challenges, both governments have continued diplomatic negotiations to resolve trade disputes while preserving their strong security and political cooperation. The grain crisis highlights the complexities of balancing national economic interests with geopolitical alliances, demonstrating how economic tensions can impact broader bilateral relations, even among close partners. Moving forward, a compromise on agricultural trade policies will be essential to maintaining the resilience of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the face of ongoing external threats.

And continuing the topic of the Russian agency – there are many fakes spread by Russian propagandists about Poland. In particular, Russian propagandists write a lot as if Poland is planning to occupy Lviv region and Volhynia. He said, they are already preparing for this: they pass the necessary laws and send mercenaries. For example, propagandists spread fake, allegedly on Polish television they showed a map of Poland with a part of Ukrainian territories. Actually, an image edited the propagandists themselves did not show such a map on Polish television.

All this in order to create an image of the “hostile West” so that sow distrust to Ukraine’s partners, in particular to Poland. For example, propaganda media spread information that the Ukrainian refugee was allegedly sold to authorities in Poland [13, p. 280]. They refer to the words of the man’s “close friend”, who says that he became a donor for four Poles. In fact, the woman in the video did not report about “selling organs”. Instead, she stated that the Ukrainian was seriously ill, fell into a coma and died. Advertising the sale, purchase or mediation in the sale of organs is punishable in Poland by law

Propagandists also spread false information that refugees from these regions came to Poland or other EU countries only to live for free. They seem to demand luxurious living conditions, but they themselves behave terribly and spread Nazism, corruption, diseases and create problems in society. This propaganda can be spread among Ukrainians in order to make them hate their own people more.

But, despite these narratives, the image of Poles and Poland in the Ukrainian media sphere is unequivocally positive. And even sensitive economic topics, which are perceived quite acutely at first, soon receive explanations in the media and promote understanding.

Conclusions. So, the image of Poles in Ukrainian media is in general positive. Nevertheless, political and economic affairs have strong influence on the relationships between two neighboring countries and their residents. Fakes, disinformation and Russian propaganda contribute to the worsening of Polish-Ukrainian relationships [9, p. 475]. In order to avoid manipulations, it would be promising to create mass media, on the pages of which common political, economic, and humanitarian interests would be formed and ways of their implementation would be discussed. Among the tasks facing Ukraine and Poland is to form a common Central European narrative that will become an effective alternative to the imperial narrative of the Russian Federation.

The integration of Ukraine into the Western geopolitical and humanitarian space will take place with the assistance of partner countries from the European Union and NATO, primarily with the help of Poland. If at the current stage Kyiv and Warsaw managed to establish military-political and economic cooperation, then the humanitarian direction needs special attention. Among the prospects of Ukrainian-Polish humanitarian cooperation, the following should be noted: deepening of mutual humanitarian integration, investments in public and cultural diplomacy, joint educational projects, film industry, book publishing, media, strategic communications, neutralization of the Kremlin’s imperial narratives.

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Мар'яна Кіца

ІМІДЖ ПОЛЯКІВ В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ МЕДІАПРОСТОРІ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ

У цій статті досліджується образ поляків в українському медіапросторі під час російсько-української війни, зосереджуючись на періоді з 2022 по 2024 роки. Використовуючи якісний контент-аналіз українських регіональних медіа, дослідження викоремлює, як польсько-українські відносини виглядали в контексті війни, гуманітарної допомоги, історичних наративів і геополітичних альянсів. Дослідження визначає домінуючі теми в медійному дискурсі, зокрема роль Польщі як ключового союзника в опорі Україні, який забезпечував притулок та гуманітарну підтримку, а також є давнім історичним партнером. Крім того, дослідження аналізує стійкість історичних стереотипів, варіації у висвітленні в різних ЗМІ та вплив політичних та економічних чинників на зображення Польщі та її народу.

Отримані дані свідчать про те, що війна суттєво змінила медійну репрезентацію поляків, посилюючи позитивні наративи солідарності та співпраці, водночас відроджуючи складні історичні дискурси. Крім того, економічні та політичні питання, такі як підтримка Польщею українських біженців, торговельні відносини та дипломатична напруженість, відіграли вирішальну роль у формуванні ставлення ЗМІ. Дослідження підкреслює, як зміни в економічній співпраці, політичні переговори та політичні рішення впливають на сприйняття Польщі в українських ЗМІ. Тоді як поширення оманливої інформації (як в українському, так і в польському медіапросторі) сприяло виникненню дипломатичної напруги та суспільного скептицизму. Посилюючи розбіжності та підживлюючи дезінформацію, російська пропаганда прагне підірвати міцне партнерство між Україною та Польщею, яке залишається вирішальним під час війни. Надаючи розуміння медіа-дискурсу під час кризи, це дослідження сприяє ширшому розумінню того, як міжнародні відносини опосередковуються через публічну комунікацію, особливо в часи геополітичних та економічних потрясінь.

Ключові слова: ЗМІ, ставлення, поляки, українці, вплив, дезінформація.