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Crisis as a populist tool: Marine Le Pen and the Russo-Ukrainian War in French politics

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Abstract

A crisis can be a powerful tool for populist actors, especially during elections. This paper analyzes how Marine Le Pen used the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a discursive tool to promote crisis narratives on national and international levels in her Twitter communication during the 2022 French presidential campaign. It argues that the Russo-Ukrainian War served as a source of crisis performance in Le Pen's political communication, framed as an external threat that reinforced internal antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" to deepen polarization in French society. Drawing on Wodak's theoretical framework, this study identifies key discursive strategies for the construction of war discourse in Le Pen's Twitter communication. Nomination, predication, and argumentation emerged as predominant strategies, enabling Le Pen to identify in- and out-groups among political actors as well as to construct and promote her leadership. By shifting focus away from Russia's role as the aggressor and downplaying Ukraine's agency, she presented the war as a geopolitical struggle between major powers, while emphasizing its domestic economic consequences, such as rising prices. Her presentation of self-other relations shifted depending on the target audience – French, European, or international – allowing her to adapt her messaging to different contexts. The findings highlight the relevance of understanding how populist actors utilize international crises to advance political agendas. It provides insights into the mechanisms of crisis discourse, polarization, and the strategic construction of narratives in populist communication.

Keywords

Twitter communication, crisis discourse, discursive strategy, critical discourse analysis, Russo-Ukrainian War

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Introduction

We are currently living in the times of global polycrisis which "occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (Lawrence et al., 2022: 2). This term signifies that we are simultaneously contending with multiple interrelated crises on various fronts. These encompass global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, global food security, climate change, environmental problems, economic disparities, and threats to international security. These issues, highly mediated and amplified by new and old media, trigger emotional responses of the people, feeding numerous political movements based on the politics of fear (Wodak, 2015).

Crises within the context of populism refer to pivotal and disruptive junctures characterized by the rise and proliferation of populist ideologies and movements. Populist actors capitalize on discontent and disillusionment among certain segments of the population, exploiting grievances and portraying themselves as champions of the people against perceived elites or external threats. Populist rhetoric during crises and times of uncertainty tends to simplify complex issues and offer seemingly straightforward solutions to multifaceted problems. The appeal to emotions and identity-based narratives, coupled with an "us versus them" dichotomy, enables populists to mobilize support from dissatisfied groups and galvanize a sense of collective identity and solidarity (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2023; Caiani and Di Cocco, 2023). Consequently, such "emotional" crises with division between an "us" and a "them" often lead to the polarization of societies and exacerbate existing divisions.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is often described as a crisis due to its complex geopolitical implications and the humanitarian challenges it posed. The crisis began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by a protracted armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine between Ukrainian government forces and separatist groups supported by Russia. This conflict led to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Many scholars and researchers call this conflict a crisis in itself (Portela, 2023), the war in the midst of multiple crises (Moaveni and Nagarajan, 2022, 15 March), and a crisis that leads to other types of crises, such as, humanitarian (Portela, 2023), or economic (Kilfoyle, 2023, 7 December). It is also widely regarded as a crisis with far-reaching implications, that reshapes not only international relations, but also changes the power balance in Europe and influences global perceptions of security and conflict (Coles et al., 2022; Dzhus and Golovach, 2023; Mchugh and Wiseman, 2023; Negri and Dincă, 2023; Prohorovs, 2022; Vicente et al., 2023).

It is not surprising that the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War also impacted populist movements in Europe and beyond, changing the level of support for the populist right in Europe. In 2022, some researchers suggested that Ukraine's successes in resisting Russian aggression might lead to image losses of Russian leadership and consequently weaken nationalist and right-wing populist parties' support in Europe (Fukuyama, 2022, n.p.). However, as the conflict continues, academics are concerned that the economic consequences of the war, the energy crisis, and the flows of refugees that the EU is facing as a result of Russian aggression may even increase support for right-wing politicians across Europe and open new opportunities for political mobilization and polarization (Dudik and Hornak, 2022; Praet, 2023).

It is worth noting that prior to the beginning of Russia's full-fledged war, many scholars had already pointed to the close ties between the Western, or more precisely, the European, far-right parties and the Kremlin's regime (Futàk-Campbell, 2020; Rochac, 2017; Wallner, 2023).

According to Futàk-Campbell, the connections between European right-wing populists and Russia are ideational and functional at the same time, as they share sympathy to traditional values, anti-migration politics, but also "anti-Brussels agenda" and moreover they "provide each other with legitimacy on the political stage" (2020: 30). Vladimir Putin's "strong and decisive leadership" (Rochac et al., 2017: 2) was admired by many populist leaders in Europe and beyond. As Rochac et al. argue, "Europe's populists routinely channel subversive Russian propaganda and help erode Europeans' trust in the EU, NATO, and liberal democratic politics at large" (Rochac et al., 2017: 1). However, how has the war impacted these discourses? How do right-wing populists verbalize the Russian war against Ukraine? How do they instrumentalize the discourse of war? To answer these questions, this paper analyzes the Twitter communication of one of the EU right-wing populist leaders after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. More precisely, it focuses on the analysis of Marine Le Pen's main discursive strategies to reveal the discursive construction of the Russo-Ukrainian War in her political communication. The paper argues that the Russo-Ukrainian War serves as a source of crisis performance in Le Pen's political communication, which is verbalized as an external threat that helps to build internal antagonism between the people and the elite to create polarization among French society. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper investigates Marine Le Pen's discursive tools of construction and instrumentalization of war and studies the role of the discourse of war in verbalizing the current French government's unsuccessful attempts to avoid full-scale invasion and underscoring France's failures in diplomatic conflict resolution.

Theoretical framework and method

In the academic literature, there is no unified definition of the crisis since this notion can be found in different spheres of science. Every definition includes subjective judgments and elements of gradation, with some emphasizing the significance of perception, thereby enabling diverse interpretations. For example, according to James and Gilliland, crisis is a perception or experiencing of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person's current resources and coping mechanisms (James and Gilliland, 2001: 26–27). Coombs defines it as the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generates negative outcomes (Coombs, 2007: 2–3). According to Falkheimer and Heide, "a crisis is a crisis due to the fact that different groups, interested parties and institutions perceive and experience it as crisis".

Scientists recommend a broad definition in which a crisis means that the normal order in a system is destabilized, which creates considerable uncertainty and requires rapid intervention (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010: 514). Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2008: 6) widely understand crises as disruptive moments of history. Having analyzed many sources, Antoon De Rycker and Zuraidah Mohd Don state "crisis events influence, and are influenced by, what is said or written; these texts in their turn will lead to new texts, even new genres, which will then co-create new discourses or reinforce/subvert existing ones; the discourses then may produce certain (un)intended non-discursive outcomes". They also listed common elements present in many definitions of a crisis. According to the list, crises are negative: they pose a significant threat to the survival of the organization involved, disrupt an existing order, upset an existing internal equilibrium; recurring; abnormal, extraordinary; unpredictable/sudden but not unexpected; preventable; requiring important decisions/appropriate and immediate response; highly

ambiguous/uncertain; involve extensive damage; may be accompanied by distress (De Rycker and Zuraidah Mohd Don 2013: 3, 8–9).

Within the context of populism, a crisis is regarded as both external and internal to populism. Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b) is among the researchers who advocate for linking a crisis to populism. For Laclau, "the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse, which in turn is part of more general social crisis" (Laclau, 1977: 175). In other words, according to Laclau, the emergence and success of populism relies on the presence of a crisis that prompts its formation. Chantal Mouffe (2005a, 2005b) shares this position and associates populism with a state of political representation in crisis. Kenneth Roberts also stands for linking populism and crisis. According to Roberts (1995: 113), populism "surges most strongly in contexts of crisis or profound social transformation, when pre-existing patterns of authority or institutional referents lose their capacity to structure the political behaviour and identities of popular sectors." Aslanidis (2021) advocates for the interconnection between populism and crisis, viewing populism as a phenomenon that appears in various forms within diverse political environments.

The polar position is found in the works of other researchers, who reject linking crisis and populism. According to Alan Knight (1998: 227), such a connection "is at best a rough tendency or correlation". Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 186) argues that viewing a crisis in the context of populism restricts the analysis to, as he calls it, a "liberal approach to populism".

To sum up the views of the above-mentioned authors, according to those researchers who advocate for linking crisis and populism, crises are viewed as creating a favorable environment for populist leaders to utilize their charismatic influence, showcase their power, and engage in substantial and impactful transformations, aiming to introduce a fresh societal structure. They assert that a crisis is a fundamental prerequisite, or at the very least, a highly conducive circumstance for the rise of populism. At the same time, researchers who advocate against linking crisis and populism, view a crisis as an external phenomenon that limits the analysis.

The impact of war as a crisis extends beyond the borders of the nation where it unfolds, posing risks and threats not only to the affected country but also to other nations due to interconnected international relations and various forms of collaboration. There exist studies assuming that persistent populist sentiments are reliably linked to apprehension concerning the future prospects of a collective or nation, accompanied by sentiments of indignation, dissent, uncertainty, and a pervasive negative outlook regarding the societal condition (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Jay et al., 2019). Every politician prioritizes the welfare of their own country, a stance that is expected. However, populist politicians manipulate public sentiments by dividing "the people" and those who are responsible for the crisis, present simple solutions to the crisis, and legitimate their own strong leadership as a way to stave off or bring about an end to the crisis (Moffitt, 2015: 198). Populist actors often adopt various strategies to enact and amplify the perception of crises, thereby shaping their political narratives and garnering support. This performative aspect of populism involves a deliberate orchestration of events, rhetoric, and symbolic gestures that serve to emphasize the existence of a crisis and position the populist leader as remedy. By skillfully manipulating public perception and exploiting grievances, populist actors seek to validate their leadership while mobilizing popular sentiments toward their political agendas. In this intricate interplay between populist strategies and crisis portrayal, the performative dimension becomes a central feature of contemporary political discourse. There are various methods by which populist actors perform crises. Maher et al. (2022) suggests that actors use emotional sentiments that appeal to fear, glory, hope, and despair, whose

attitudes are related to nostalgia in performing a crisis. Widmann (2021) shares the idea of emotions, which political actors strategically and flexibly use to appeal to populism. Aiolfi (2018) argues that the verbal means populists perform crisis using strong emphatic terms to bring an emotional dimension to their performance of crisis, giving binary choice, drawing an apocalyptic portrayal of the possible future, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the crisis, using anaphora, and linking personal characteristics to the broader context of a societal crisis.

Blame games serve as one of key populist strategy to simplify complex issues, provide straightforward explanations, and foster unity among "the people" by identifying scapegoats such as immigrants, elites, or institutions (Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016; Hinterleitner, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2023). It is important to note that while blame games can be effective in the short term for rallying support, they may also have long-term consequences for social cohesion and democratic institutions. They can contribute to a divisive and polarized political climate, making it challenging to address complex issues through constructive and collaborative means. For example, the Brexit campaign blamed the EU for economic and sovereignty issues, leading to a divisive referendum and long-term economic and diplomatic challenges.

Moreover, populist leaders may use the specter of war or conflict to rally their followers, portraying themselves as strong and decisive leaders who will protect the nation from external threats. This discourse can be highly nationalistic, emphasizing the importance of defending the homeland and preserving national identity. It often involves framing the conflict as a struggle between "us" and "them" (Oddo, 2011; Hodges, 2013, 2015; Baysha, 2023). War discourse can exploit fears and insecurities, portraying the nation as under siege and in need of a strong authoritarian leader to restore order and security. Furthermore, populist actors may employ war discourse to divert attention from domestic issues or bolster their own image as defenders of the people. The performative tactics utilized by populist actors to perform crises extend their significance to the realm of discourse analysis. This critical approach delves into the intricate mechanisms through which populist narratives shape and manipulate public perceptions of crises. By examining the linguistic strategies, framing techniques, and semiotic cues employed by populist leaders, critical discourse analysis unveils the intricate relationship between language, power, and crisis construction. This transition highlights the pivotal role that critical discourse analysis plays in decoding the underlying mechanisms that propel populist actors' crisis performances and their subsequent impact on public discourse.

Taking into consideration the complexity of the topic, the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis have been selected due to the wide range of possibilities for analysis it provides. Within the examined body of literature, CDA lacks a singular theoretical foundation. Presently, various distinct types of CDA exist, characterized by both theoretical disparities and analytical distinctions. For instance, when considering critical discourse analysis in the context of conversation analysis or news analysis, notable differences arise between these methodologies. Fairclough (1995) defines critical discourse analysis as an interdisciplinary approach to studying discourse that analyzes language as a form of social practice. Van Dijk (2015) describes CDA as a type of discourse analysis research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts. He emphasizes that discourse is not only a reflection of society but also a tool through which social structures are constructed and maintained.

Discursive strategies as part of CDA constitute a pivotal aspect of communication, encompassing a diverse array of techniques and linguistic maneuvers that individuals and entities employ to convey and shape their messages. These strategies involve deliberate

selection of words, phrases, and rhetorical devices to influence the interpretation and reception of information. Analyzing these strategies unveils the underlying mechanisms that drive effective communication and sheds light on how language functions as a powerful tool for conveying meaning and influencing perceptions. Wodak (2009: 94) defines discursive strategies as "a more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices), adopted in order to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic goal".

Wodak (2009: 95) suggests five discursive strategies: referential/nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, framing, or discourse representation, intensification/mitigation. The objectives of the strategies are to investigate the discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/ events, and processes/actions; justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness; positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance; and modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances.

Equally significant is the notion of a social actor, intricately associated with the subject matter. Most scholars characterize social actors as individuals engaged in social practices. However, van Leeuwen (1996), a pioneer in social semiotics and the originator of the term "social actor", presents a distinctive viewpoint. According to van Leeuwen, a social agent can encompass not solely human beings but also textual representations of the concepts "self" and "other" – both in their individual and collective forms. In this perspective, the term "self" can encompass an individual entity as well as a collective assembly to which the entity relates itself. Similarly, "other" can denote a specific individual or a collective unit positioned as the antithesis of the "self".

Broadly speaking, within our investigation, notions concerning identity hold considerable significance, and one of these concepts pertains to the phenomenon of "self/other". Throughout history, humans have grappled with inquiries into self-identity and the dynamics linking themselves with others. This pursuit remains pertinent even today, evolving in various ways such as its portrayal in the media (Luhmann and Kathleen, 2002) or its examination through lenses such as racism (Du Bois, 1968). Essentially, the "self/other" concept revolves around the idea that the very existence of "others" contributes to the self-recognition of an individual. In essence, this contrast establishes a boundary between the "self" and the "other", serving to differentiate a specific individual from a collective. Within our study, this concept holds relevance in the context of illustrating the crisis expressed by the populist figure Marine Le Pen. Hence, it can be inferred that comprehending discursive interaction is contingent on grasping the concept of social actors. This concept gives rise to the "self/other" phenomenon, which can, consequently, pertain to both in-group and out-group classifications. In the context of our study, we find the blended approach to our research object, entailing the incorporation of elements from critical and discourse analysis, along with Ruth Wodak's five discursive strategies, to be the most appropriate methodology. Therefore, this study examines how Marine Le Pen used the war to propagate crisis discourse on national and international levels through her Twitter communication from January to April 2022. It analyzes her discursive strategies as a populist figure engaging in crisis-oriented discourse and identifies the constructed in-groups and out-groups. Additionally, it investigates how Le Pen framed self/other relations within her discourse.

The data consists of tweets extracted from the Twitter account of Marine Le Pen (@MLP_officiel) over the period January-April 2022, utilizing manual selection. Tweets and retweets were gathered manually. The counting of the dataset showed that among the extracted

1463 tweets and retweets, only 92 are related to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The determination of the relevance of tweets to Ukraine was made by us through the identification of both overt and covert references to Ukraine and its conflict. This connection was observed by finding explicit mentions of Ukraine and war in Ukraine, as well as implicit references embodied in figurative namings such as "Russia's neighbors" and allusions like "the conflict" or "situation in Eastern Europe". At the first stage of the analysis, the selected dataset was organized chronologically and divided into the tweets posted before and after February 24, 2022, which allowed tracking the changes in the discursive construction of the Russo-Ukrainian War in Le Pen's political communication. The data was manually coded by categorizing tweets into several groups, such as those characterizing the states of Ukraine, Russia, France, or the EU, as well as tweets referring to political figures. This classification facilitated an analysis of the nomination strategies employed by Marine Le Pen. At the next stage, tweets containing references to specific issues – such as elections, the energy crisis, security, and migration – were identified. This step enabled a more detailed examination of the argumentation and predication strategies used to construct political stances and justify positions. Finally, tweets involving broader discursive mechanisms, such as blame games were singled out and analyzed to uncover the ideological positioning in Le Pen's Twitter discourse. This three-step approach thus allowed for a systematic reconstruction of the discursive strategies shaping the representation of the war and related political narratives.

The focus of the analysis might be explained by Marine Le Pen's salience in the European political stage. At the core of her populist appeal lies her capacity to employ rhetorical techniques that accentuate the divide between the "people" and the organized political establishment (Bloch, 2022; Dunand n.d.; Ivaldi, 2022; Soffer, 2022). This polarizing rhetoric resonates with those who feel marginalized by mainstream politics and institutions, portraying her as a voice for the "common people" against perceived adversaries. Her communication style, characterized by the use of vivid language, emotionally charged messages, and straightforward solutions, further bolsters her populist image and fuels her connection with her supporters (Grant, 2011; Aiolfi, 2022). In the recent presidential election, Le Pen succeeded in significantly improving the voting result and generating the highest support of her candidacy.

In the second round of the Presidential Campaign (Cokelaere, 2024), Le Pen attained 41.5% of the popular vote, juxtaposed against the 58.5% secured by the centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron. This electoral outcome underscores the efficacy of her populist communication strategies, indicative of their resonance with a substantial segment of the voting populace. It was already singled out that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine played a significant role in shaping the discourses of the candidates of 2022 French presidential campaign (Guillou, 2022; Trippenbach, 2022; Weber and Sallembien, 2022; Bassets, 2023) and its influence on radical right-wing populism in France (Ivaldi, 2023c). However, only a few studies have examined the instrumentalization of the Russo-Ukrainian War in the German political context (Sasse, 2024) and legal discourse (Borgen, 2024). Notably, there is a lack of detailed research on how Marine Le Pen verbalized and instrumentalized the Russo-Ukrainian War in her political communication.

The following section of the paper analyses main tools of Marine Le Pen's Twitter communication, focusing on the predominant discursive strategies she employed to shape perceptions and advance her political narrative. These tools illustrate Le Pen's strategic use of communication to navigate complex geopolitical topics, while prioritizing domestic concerns and positioning herself as an advocate for French interests.

Results and discussion

The analysis of Marine Le Pen Twitter communication in January-April 2022 shows that the war discourse (the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine) was extensively used to perform the crisis and shape the perception of political actors. An overall assessment of the profile revealed the skillfulness of Marine Le Pen in utilizing the social platform. The politician effectively employed Twitter's audiovisual features, composing tweets, incorporating hashtags, links, images, photographs, and videos, as well as engaging in retweets.

Even though the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine started on February 24, 2022, mentions of then-possible military actions can be observed on January 19, 2022, on the Twitter account of Marine Le Pen. Recognized for her favorable stance toward Putin, Le Pen highlights the importance of preserving amicable relations between France and Russia when addressing inquiries regarding the "Ukrainian crisis" ("*la crise ukrainienne*"). This crisis has posed significant challenges to French and European politics, prompting discussions on potential resolutions if she were to assume the presidency of France: "*We need the same relations with #Russia that we must maintain with the great powers: relations of respect, devoid of principled hostility, and which aim above all to defend the interests of our country*"[1] (@MLP_officiel, 19.01.2022). In this context, a nomination strategy (discursive construction of objects/phenomena/events) can be observed – Le Pen constructs the war using the expression "Ukrainian crisis". By avoiding directly naming the sides of the conflict and failing to acknowledge Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim, Le Pen attempts to portray the Russo-Ukrainian War as a local rather than an international conflict, while simultaneously maintaining a stance of diplomatic neutrality toward Russia. As the aforementioned quote illustrates, Le Pen discourse revolves around concerns for the welfare of the French by addressing European sanctions. Le Pen underscores that these sanctions have primarily impacted France, as opposed to Russia. This dichotomy of "us" (France) and "them" (the USA, Russia, the EU) is also evident in the Twitter communication of Marine Le Pen. The antagonism materializes through the distinction between France and the rest of the world. Le Pen asserts that it is France that has displayed resolute action in the conflict, whereas the USA and EU are engaged in a Cold War stance against Russia: "*For years, France has submitted to a form of cold war with Russia, imposed by a European Union that itself listens very much to the Americans. Economic sanctions are not effective*" (@MLP_officiel, 22.02.2022).

It is noteworthy to highlight that when discussing the potential for a then-possible full-scale invasion, Marine Le Pen avoids direct reference to Ukraine as a sovereign state. She uses a nomination strategy, discursively constructing social actors, by viewing the USA, the EU, and France as involved or responsible sides in the potential escalation. It appears that Le Pen views Ukraine more as the place of the conflict rather than a country under attack, depriving Ukraine of its voice in the international arena. Simultaneously, Le Pen identifies the USA and Russia as the principal opposing sides of the dispute, framing the situation as a geopolitical confrontation. In her narrative, the USA and the EU are positioned as aggressors, waging a "cold war" against Russia, thereby shifting the focus away from the actions of Russia and the plight of Ukraine. In addition, Le Pen systematically shiftes the focus of her communication to emphasize the importance of France prioritizing its own well-being, which allows it to frame the conflict as secondary to France's domestic interests. Such rhetoric creates a paradoxical framing of the war, where the conflict is simultaneously acknowledged as a significant international event with

[1] All translations by authors, unless otherwise noted.

potential consequences to the French state yet verbalized as an issue limited to a very precise locality – the physical territory of Ukraine without mentioning the sides of the conflict.

In the tweets that followed the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Marine Le Pen refrains from directly mentioning Ukraine or using the name of the state. Instead, she focuses her discourse on the construction of Russia, China, the EU, the USA, and Europe as key social actors, purposely excluding Ukraine as a meaningful participant in the conflict. For instance, in her tweet dated March 2022, she states, "*We will have to find ways of appeasement with Russia. If Russia moves away from Europe, it falls into the arms of China: this would be a great danger for Europe*" (@MLP_officiel, 24.03.2022). As one can notice, this statement shifts the focus away from Ukraine and reframes the conflict not as a military invasion of a sovereign state, but rather as a geopolitical issue between larger powers. Similarly, in the next tweet Le Pen focuses on the verbalization of the opposition between European Union and other global powers without mentioning Ukraine: "*The European Union, locked in absurd dogmas and technocratic treaties, has banned all policies of economic patriotism that would have strengthened us against Russia, the United States and China*" (@MLP_officiel, 14.03.2022). Through this framing, Marine Le Pen constructs a dichotomy by distinguishing Russia, China, and the USA as out-groups, while positioning France and the EU as in-groups. This rhetorical strategy reinforces a Eurocentric perspective, further marginalizing Ukraine and reframing the conflict as part of a broader power struggle that diminishes the agency and voice of Ukraine as an independent actor.

Moreover, in her Twitter communication, Marine Le Pen repeatedly frames the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a crisis utilizing blame games, shifting the narrative toward domestic issues, and placing responsibility for the war on both external and internal actors. This strategy benefited her campaign efforts during the 2022 French presidential election. For instance, Le Pen frequently blames Emmanuel Macron, his representatives, and his policies for their inability to manage the geopolitical crises that threaten the well-being of the French nation. This approach is aimed at gaining popularity among the electorate and discrediting the current government. Le Pen holds the view that his performance as president, serving as a representative of both NATO and the EU, has been unsuccessful: "*Emmanuel Macron should not lie: his trip to Ukraine and Russia was for nothing. He obtained NOTHING, because he did not go there as President of the French Republic but as a representative of NATO and the European Union*" (@MLP_officiel, 10.02.2022). By openly accusing Macron of prioritizing his allegiance to international organizations over the interests of his own country, Le Pen aims to undermine his credibility and portray him as an ineffective leader in addressing critical geopolitical challenges. In another tweet she accuses Macron of exploiting the war in Ukraine to promote his national and international leadership: "*Emmanuel Macron transforms the most tragic issues into an indecent communication operation. I believe that the role of a head of state is to conduct discreet and effective diplomacy for peace, as well as to protect the French from the economic consequences of war*" (@MLP_officiel, 12.03.2022). Throughout her online communication, Marine Le Pen extends her critiques to the entire French political leadership, asserting that the cruel war in Ukraine exposed France's vulnerabilities. She attributes these vulnerabilities to weak and misguided political decisions, the consequences of which are being endured by the French population, as evidenced by soaring costs of gas, fuel, electricity, and related factors: "*The cruel war suffered by the Ukrainians highlights the very serious weaknesses of our country, the consequence of erroneous political choices for which the French are already paying a high price. Our energy dependence with the explosion in the price of gas, fuel, electricity and of course fuel which has exceeded 2 euros per liter. Our agricultural dependence also risks leading to inflation in food prices*" (@MLP_officiel, 14.03.2022). Here,

Marine Le Pen employs a predication strategy by discursively characterizing the war as "cruel" to evoke sympathy for Ukrainian people while simultaneously addressing the drastic consequences for the French population. This empathetic tone aims to align the politician with the suffering population, both foreign and domestic, portraying her as a defender of national interests on the background of the external geopolitical crisis. In addition, Le Pen also uses a perspectivization strategy, expressing involvement by identifying herself with the French through the inclusive use of "our". This helps to further distance herself from the ruling powers and create a more inclusive image of the leader who understands the troubles and suffering of ordinary people.

The utilization of the blame game as a crisis discourse becomes apparent in statements surrounding the culpability of the USA, NATO, and the broader Western collective. As in her communication prior the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Marine Le Pen continues to consistently portray the United States as a central actor in the escalation of tensions, asserting that NATO, under American leadership, has transformed into a vast apparatus for arms trade: "*#NATO, over time, has become a gigantic machine for selling American arms, and an organ under American direction*" (@MLP_officiel, 20.02.2022). In this statement, Le Pen shifts the focus from the conflict itself to the actions of external powers, placing blame for the war not solely on Russia but on the role of NATO and the USA in exacerbating global tensions. Here, the politician uses a predication strategy by discursively characterizing NATO as a "gigantic machine," underscoring its scale and foreign control. In addition, by verbalizing NATO as a tool for American interests, she aims to discredit Western alliances and portray France's position as one of potential victimization in the broader geopolitical struggle. Within this context, Ukraine is implicitly constructed as a tool in global geopolitical games that, according to Marine Le Pen, lead to the destabilization of the internal situation within France.

Throughout her Twitter communication in 2022 Marine Le Pen systematically shifted the focus from the Russo-Ukrainian War to the discussion of internal socio-economic issues, expressing apprehension about the welfare of the French population, primarily attributing the impact to sanctions imposed on Russia, framing them as detrimental to European and especially French people. For instance, Marine Le Pen stands in opposition to sanctions, asserting that they result in severe repercussions for the welfare of the French population: "*Depending on the nature of the sanctions that will be taken against #Russia, there could be terrifying consequences on the purchasing power of the French, particularly in the field of energy, while they are already extremely weakened*" (@MLP_officiel, 25.02.2022). Using a predication strategy, whereby sanctions are characterized as harmful to French citizens, Le Pen portrays them as vulnerable victims in the face of external threats. By doing so, the politician avoids direct discussion of the Russian aggression and focuses on the consequences of the invasion for the European community rather than addressing the underlying causes of the war. This helps Le Pen to strengthen her populist appeal by framing herself as a defender of the French people against external pressures and threats.

Moreover, she references the impact of sanctions imposed in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as evidence of economic consequences and damaged caused to French farmers: "*In 2014, the sanctions against #Russia had the effect of making our farmers suffer, who stopped their exports to #Russia. Today, an increase in the cost of energy or raw materials worries me*" (@MLP_officiel, 25.02.2022). By introducing a retrospective overview of the harmful consequences of previous sanctions and underscoring their negative impact on different sectors of the French economy, Le Pen frames them as ineffective and unproductive, thus implying their unnecessary nature. She deliberately

focused her attention on the internal consequences, neglecting to acknowledge it potential role in weakening the Russian economy or addressing its aggression against Ukraine.

In her other tweets, she continues to focus on domestic repercussions rather than the root causes of the war, using the nomination "conflict in Ukraine" and not directly mentioning Russia as an aggressor: "*The conflict in Ukraine poses the threat of rising energy prices: my proposal to massively reduce VAT on gas, electricity, fuel and fuel oil is more relevant than ever. We must protect the purchasing power of families!*" (@MLP_officiel, 27.02.2022). In addition, Le Pen frequently brings up the negative impact on the French population, employing an intensification strategy by using the verb "to suffer" when referring to the plight of agricultures who suffer from the sanctions: *"In 2014, it was our farmers who suffered from sanctions!*" (@MLP_officiel, 01.03.2022); "*The sanctions against #Russia in 2014 were of zero effectiveness: they hit our industrialists, our farmers first, and what's more, they were so poorly designed that they pushed Russia to completely recreate agricultural sectors*" (@MLP_officiel, 03.03.2022). Thus, by combining different discursive strategies, Le Pen shifts attention away from the roots of the Russian aggression and constructs a discourse that prioritizes French socio-economic concerns amid the "Ukraine crisis." She predominantly focuses on the discursive construction of great political powers such as the USA, China, and EU and French people as victims of external threats, rather than addressing the agency of Ukraine or the accountability of Russia in the conflict.

Furthermore, Marine Le Pen repeatedly applies a nomination strategy to unite herself with the French people by using "our" to reinforce a sense of shared identity, while also dividing "us" (the French) from "others": "*It is because we are deeply attached to the sovereignty of our country that we defend the sovereignty of all the countries of the world, that of Iraq in 2003 as well as that of Ukraine in 2022*" (@MLP_officiel, 14.04.2022). She justifies her dissent from sanctions by asserting her primary concern for the destiny of France and its citizens. This stance further underscores her commitment to prioritizing the well-being of the people: "*I try to always defend the interests of France and the French and to plan for the long term. I opposed gas sanctions against Russia because the consequence would be a dramatic increase in energy prices*" (@MLP_officiel, 04.04.2022).

Additionally, Le Pen used claims of truth to emphasize the practical effects of rising energy prices, arguing that these increases threaten the welfare of the French. She pairs this with claims of rightness, framing her position as the most reasonable and aligned with France's national interests, contrasting her decisiveness with the perceived inaction of others: "*Russia-Ukraine: I try to have the most reasonable position possible, and above all one that takes France's interests into consideration. Two thirds of the world's countries are thinking, in relation to Russia, according to their national interests!*" (@MLP_officiel, 05.04.2022). Here, the use of "I try" reflects a strategy of mitigation, softening her assertions while subtly deflecting potential criticism by framing her actions as attempts rather than guarantees. This combination of strategies strengthens her image as a leader both pragmatic and committed to national welfare. While discussing possible resolutions of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Le Pen subtly shifts attention away from the aggressor's responsibility toward emphasizing the diplomatic solutions of the "crisis." She states: "*We must try to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis, to this massive, obvious violation of international law*" (@MLP_officiel, 24.02.2022). Le Pen frames diplomacy as a solution for the peace in Ukraine, thus avoiding again to directly address Russia's culpability in her statements: "*The solution to peace in #Ukraine is diplomacy, not war*" (@MLP_officiel, 01.03.2022). By using such nominations as "crisis", "situation", "conflict in Ukraine" and constantly insisting on the economic consequences of the war to the

French population, she constructs the conflict as a situation requiring negotiation and compromise, not acknowledging Russia as an aggressor and Ukraine as a victim.

Marine Le Pen further deepens the propagation of victimization discourse using a nomination strategy combined with a blame game. By explicitly naming "the Germans," "the Belgians," and "Europe" as actors responsible for Europe's dependency on Russian gas, Le Pen discursively shifts the blame, distancing France from the others who cause the issue. For example, in her tweet she states: "*It is because the Germans or Belgians made the ideological choice to eliminate nuclear power that today Europe is ultra-dependent on Russian gas*" (@MLP_officiel, 13.03.2022). Here, Le Pen frames the decisions of other nations – particularly their abandonment of nuclear energy – as shortsighted, thereby releasing France's responsibility. This move positions France as a victim of the collective failures of Europe, reinforcing the view that others' misguided decisions harmed French interests.

Marine Le Pen uses a nomination strategy to construct NATO as a social actor which is the threat to France, since this organization is, in her opinion, responsible and involved in the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, Le Pen calls for the independence of France from NATO, arguing that *"France is wrong to be in the integrated command of #NATO, because it no longer appears as the arbiter that it always was and that I would like it to become again*" (@MLP_officiel, 09.02.2022). The politician advocates for the withdrawal of the country from the organization: "*It was never a question for me of leaving the Atlantic alliance, but of leaving the integrated command of #NATO. France's autonomy and independence require leaving NATO's integrated command*" (@MLP_officiel, 01.03.2022).

It is interesting to note that Marine Le Pen's stance on Ukrainian war migration is significantly different from her openly anti-migration position toward other national and ethnic groups, as she strategically frames Ukrainian refugees in a more favorable light, emphasizing their European identity and cultural proximity to France. This contrasts sharply with her typical exclusionary rhetoric toward migrants from non-European countries, whom she often portrays as cultural or economic threats (Mozolevska, 2024). This distinction moderates her discourse to appeal to a wider audience while maintaining her core nationalist agenda (Vermersch, 2022; Ivaldi, 2023a, 2023b).

Aligning to the massive expressions of solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian war refugees in the majority of EU countries, Marine Le Pen uses a range of discursive strategies to shape the positive image of Ukrainians fleeing the war, at the same time implying discriminatory discourses of differentiation between "true" and "false" war refugees. She constructs the Ukrainian refugees as social actors and uses a strategy of argumentation (claims of rightness), arguing that offering shelter to Ukrainian refugees is entirely reasonable, given that Ukraine is a European nation: "*Ukraine is a European country, it is natural that European countries welcome European refugees*" (@MLP_officiel, 01.03.2022). Such argumentation implies that solidarity is contingent upon the cultural or geographical proximity, thereby differentiating Ukrainian refugees as more "deserving" in contrast to other groups. Simultaneously, in her other tweets, Le Pen distinguishes more explicitly between Ukrainian refugees and other migrants, emphasizing that other migrants often seek economic opportunities, whereas Ukrainian refugees are fleeing the war. She asserts that demonstrating solidarity with the latter group is a natural response, using the claim of rightness as part of an argumentation strategy: "*In #Melilla, there are hundreds of young men who want to cross the border by force: we know the difference between Ukrainian war refugees - with whom it is normal for France to show solidarity - and these #economic migrants*" (@MLP_officiel, 03.03.2022). These

argumentation strategies reflect a selective approach to inclusion and exclusion, creating a binary of "us" and "them". While they may soften Le Pen's public image by portraying her as supportive of war refugees, they simultaneously propagate exclusionary claims toward other migrants, dismissing their motivation for migration as merely economic. This framing oversimplifies the complex realities of migration, reducing it to a moral dichotomy between those fleeing war, deemed worthy of support, and others portrayed as deceivers seeking to exploit France's resources. Moreover, by emphasizing Ukraine's European identity, Marine Le Pen draws a cultural and civilizational boundary between "European" and "non-European" refugees, portraying the last group as not deserving of France's support and solidarity.

While Ukrainian war refugees are framed as a group that deserves the support of the French government and citizens, migration from other countries is portrayed as uncontrolled and chaotic, presenting it as a threat to the nation. Marine Le Pen employs multiple discursive strategies simultaneously to verbalize migration as threat and outline her intended actions against it: "*President of the Republic, I will give you your money back, by increasing your purchasing power and saving our social protection system; and I will give you back your country, protecting you from anarchic and massive immigration and insecurity*" (@MLP_officiel, 14.03.2022). Here, the usage of the adjectives "anarchic and massive" related to immigration is a part of the predication and intensification strategies, as these words intensify the tone of the message. Additionally, Le Pen strategically uses "our" and "your" simultaneously to align herself with the nation, referring to "our social protection system" and then shifting to "I will give you back your country, protecting you from anarchic and massive immigration and insecurity" to demonstrate the leadership skills others can follow. Moreover, by contrasting the solidarity expressed toward Ukrainian war refugees with the depiction of "chaotic" migration flows, Le Pen presents immigration from other countries as a destabilizing force. This contrast reinforces her narrative that Ukrainian refugees deserve support, whereas other migrants pose a threat to national stability. Thus, softening her position toward Ukrainian refugees helps Le Pen not only improve her image but also aligns with the general wave of European support for Ukraine demonstrated in 2022. However, this strategy simultaneously creates contrasting images of "real" refugees deserving support and economic migrants abusing the state system and helps propagate an exclusionary narrative of migration as a threat.

Conclusion

The analysis of Marine Le Pen's Twitter communication has revealed a complex and calculated use of discursive strategies to frame the Russo-Ukrainian War in a way that resonated with her broader political agenda. By strategically shifting the focus from Russia's aggression to the domestic implications of the conflict, Le Pen constructed a narrative that positions France and its citizens as victims of external geopolitical dynamics, particularly the economic consequences of sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. This populist framing allowed her to critique the French government's foreign policy while simultaneously emphasizing her leadership and commitment to protecting French national interests. By focusing on Macron's government unsuccessful attempts to avoid war and underscoring France's failures in diplomatic conflict resolution, Le Pen instrumentalized international issues as a part of the domestic political agenda to deepen the antagonism between the state authorities and citizens.

Le Pen's varied discursive strategies, such as the use of the nomination, predication, and argumentation strategies, helped obscure Russia's responsibility as the aggressor and downplay Ukraine's role as a sovereign state under attack. By portraying the conflict primarily as a

geopolitical struggle between major powers, Le Pen tried to divert attention away from the war's direct impact on Ukraine, thereby undermining the agency and victimhood of the Ukrainian people. Instead, she emphasized France's vulnerabilities and domestic concerns, presenting the war as a secondary issue overshadowed by its economic consequences. In doing so, she reinforced her alignment with France's national interests and fostered a sense of shared identity with the French people.

Furthermore, Le Pen's discourse on migration revealsed a dual strategy. While presenting Ukrainian refugees as deserving of solidarity due to their cultural and geographical proximity to France, she maintained her exclusionary rhetoric toward migrants from non-European countries. This selective framing constructs a binary opposition between "real" Ukrainian refugees and "undeserving" economic migrants, reinforcing her nationalist agenda and creating a moral dichotomy that justified her strict stance on immigration. Her strategic use of the war discourse served not only to critique the French government but also to propagate Le Pen's image as a strong leader, defender of national sovereignty and protector of the French people.

This paper contributes to a broader understanding of how populist actors strategically employ crisis discourse to influence both domestic and international political narratives. Furthermore, it provides a detailed case study highlighting the interplay between discursive strategies in times of conflict.

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