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Visual Political Communication on Social Media
How the seven political groups of the 9th European Parliament
visually communicate on Instagram about the invasion of
Ukraine in 2022

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Abstract

Wie gehen politische Fraktionen mit einschneidenden Ereignissen wie einem Krieg auf visueller Ebene um? In dieser Masterarbeit soll die visuelle politische Kommunikation der sieben Fraktionen des 9. Europäischen Parlaments in den ersten zwei Monaten nach der Invasion Russlands in die Ukraine am 24. Februar 2022 analysiert werden. Mit Hilfe der Bildtypenanalyse nach Grittmann und Amann (2011) wurden sechs Hauptbildtypen und sieben Unterkategorien identifiziert.

Im Allgemeinen haben die Fraktionen des 9. Europäischen Parlaments während der ersten zwei Monate des Krieges in der Ukraine unterschiedliche Strategien in ihrer visuellen Kommunikation auf Instagram angewandt. Der am häufigsten identifizierte Bildtyp war die Positionierung, die es auch erforderlich machte, diese Bilder in Unterkategorien zu unterteilen, um die Unterschiede stärker hervorzuheben. Die Personalisierungsthese wurde teilweise von zwei Gruppen unterstützt, aber definitiv nicht von dem Bildkorpus dominiert. Vorbestehende Sympathien gegenüber Russland könnten die visuelle Kommunikation insofern beeinflusst haben, als dass es weniger Output und eine leichte Divergenz bei den visuell angesprochenen Themen gab.

How do political groups deal with major events like a war on a visual level? This paper aims to analyse the visual political communication of the seven political groups of the 9th European Parliament in the first two months after Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February in 2022. With the help of the image type analysis after Grittmann and Amann (2011) six main image types as well as seven subcategories have been identified.

Overall, the political groups of the 9th European Parliament have applied different strategies in their visual communication on Instagram during the first two months of the war in Ukraine. The most identified image type was *Positioning* which also required to distinguish these images into sub-categories to highlight the differences more. The personalisation thesis has been backed partially by two groups but definitely not dominated the image corpus. Pre-existing sympathies towards Russia might have influenced the visual communication to the extent that there was less output and a slight divergence on topics visually addressed.

1 Introduction

The 24th of February 2022 marks a transformative moment in geopolitical history. Since the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, there had been (a perceived) policy of peace in Europe, a circumstance that changed abruptly with Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Sill, 2022). Because of the ubiquity of the internet, one now has the feeling of participating in the events worldwide at close quarters; on many social media platforms written testimonials, photos and even (live) videos of bombings, explosions, destroyed buildings and injured people are shared in an instant. Especially the first days after the invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine all platforms seemed to be overflowing with said content (Trouillard, 2022). From Ukrainian teenagers on TikTok sharing their daily routines living in a bomb shelter or on their way to security, to an ever-growing fan-base for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, to heads of states sharing their views on the war on their channels: seemingly everybody was communicating and commenting on the conflict no matter if private individuals, political actors, organisations, fan sites or else (Trouillard, 2022).

The convergence of global conflicts with the advancements in communication technologies offers a unique lens through which we can analyse such a historical event like the war in Ukraine. It also offers an ideal test case for how war impacts political communication and strategies employed by political groups in this modern age, since amongst the human tragedy, the invasion also comes at a time when political communication is meant to have undergone a remarkable transformation. The advent of social media, and particularly channels like Instagram, is meant to entail that individual politicians are in the centre of communication, not parties; *“Politicians are presented as private individuals, their personal characteristics and lives [on Instagram]”* (Farkas & Bene, 2021, p. 6). However, does this mean that parties have become irrelevant for communication? Are parties and party identities still central to political communication over this war?

These developments will be the core research topic of the present master thesis. Namely how the political groups in the European Parliament visually communicated such a big mediated political event like the 2022 war in Ukraine. The thesis will therefore look into how the war was depicted on the social media platform Instagram

and what strategies were used to communicate the political parties' stance on the war and its belligerents. Furthermore, the thesis will examine how the rise in personalisation on social media has influenced political parties' visual communication.

The authors Farkas and Bene hypothesise: *“a non-personalized visual communication would predominantly draw upon imported visual materials and pictures on parties or other political actors”* (2021, p. 4). Would this mean that political groups such as the ones represented in the European Parliament (EP) would only communicate with imported visual material such as graphics, symbols, screenshots, or statements or would they still use individualisation by spotlighting single politicians?

Moreover, comparing the strategies employed by the political groups and examining their relationship with Russia and Ukraine will add a secondary interest layer in order to contextualise the results. Historically, far-right wing parties for example tend to have ties or relations with the Kremlin (eg. Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016) and recent data is suggesting, that *“the parties that take a softer and more sympathetic stance towards Russia tend to come from the far-left and far-right of the political spectrum”* (Fox, 2022). Can one therefore observe a difference in the visual communication depending on their pre-existing sympathies towards Russia?

The same data set has also suggested that countries act differently in their assertiveness towards Russia – therefore this question can be expanded by investigating how the political groups are constituted in terms of European Union (EU) Member States in order to achieve another level of explaining visual communication strategies of the political groups.

Overall, the political groups of the 9th European Parliament have applied different strategies in their visual communication on Instagram during the first two months of the war in Ukraine. The most identified image type was *Positioning* which also required to distinguish these images into sub-categories to highlight the differences more. The personalisation thesis has been backed partially by two groups but definitely not dominated the image corpus. Pre-existing sympathies towards Russia might have influenced the visual communication to the extent that there was less output and a slight divergence on topics visually addressed.

1.1 Research questions, choice of case and material

Deriving from these considerations, the following main research question has been formulated to guide through the present thesis:

How did the seven political groups in the 9th European Parliament (EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ID, ECR, the Left) communicate about the war in Ukraine on Instagram in the first two months after the Russian invasion?

The European Parliament and its political groups have been chosen firstly due to the geographic proximity and direct impact the war in Ukraine has on the EU member states and the EU as a whole. Ukraine, sharing a border with four out of the 27 EU member states and Russia being the neighbouring country of three further member states, brings the armed conflict figuratively and factually to the doorstep of the EU. Energy prices, food affordability, supply chains, mobility of people and goods and economic activity severely altered since the invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 (European Council, 2023).

The 705 MEPs divided into seven political groups and non-attached members are representing 447.7 million inhabitants (Eurostat, 2022). Since the focal point of the thesis is not the individual communication of politicians but rather the conglomerate of views, opinions, and essentially visual communication, which is guided by the political group line, the so called Non-Inscrit (NI) Members of European Parliament (MEPs) are excluded from the analysis.

Being a directly elected parliament, the MEPs and their political groups must appeal to the voters in order to get re-elected. As discussed more in-depth in the following chapters, social media has been playing an enormous role in recent years, in the private citizen's life but also in the public and political sphere as well as a tool to reach one's constituency and market themselves for (re-)election. Consequently, it can be noted that with the rise in visual communication on social media, politics, political communication, and campaigns adapted. Hence, examining Instagram as a primarily visual platform and political actors' usage of it will provide fruitful academic results.

Although there is a long history preceding the conflict, the actual start of the war is set on February 24th 2022 when Russian president Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin deployed 200,000 soldiers into Ukraine (Kirby, 2021). This also marks the beginning of the examination of the content for this thesis. The aim of this research was to find the visual communicative reactions and strategies to a shock geopolitical event such as the invasion of a sovereign country. The war – so far – has had many turning points and events that might have resulted in a heightened visual communication from both media outlets and political groups (for example Walker, 2024). Looking at an initial period of two months however allows for a raw and unprompted visual communication line which was probably not pre-planned to the extent that other visual communication on Social Media might be. The author of the cited quote (Parusinski, 2022) also argues that *“earlier phases of the war were arguably the most engaging, diverse and visually stunning footage of a 21st century conflict”*. Therefore, the analysis will provide an immediate and midterm overview of visual communication strategies of the political groups in the 9th European Parliament.

Consequently, the main aim is to gain insights into *“selection and representational routines”* (Grittmann 2012, 135) of (strategic) visual communication of the examined content of the political groups. Therefore, a second research question has been formulated:

What visual communication strategies are applied, which patterns can be found and how do they relate to the personalisation thesis?

Scholars in European Studies have found *“that decision-making in the European Parliament is largely orchestrated, first, by national party delegations and, second, by European party groups, and that the main dimension of political confrontation is the traditional left–right ideological divide”* (Yordanova, 2011, p. 599). Therefore, it might be worth looking at the national parties constituting the political groups when identifying patterns of visual communication. Moreover, it is expected that groups that have priorly had sympathies towards Russia visually communicate differently than groups that did not display such relations. Hence this additional question to provide a

further layer of examination and possibly contextualising results of the image type analysis has been formulated:

How does the visual communication vary depending on the one hand on pre-existing group sympathies towards Russia, and, on the other, what member states are prevalent in the respective groups?

These three research questions will provide an underlying guide for the thesis and will finally be answered in chapter 7 discussed in chapter 8 and interpreted in chapter 9.

2 Historical contextualisation

The following chapters have been composed as to understand the relations between (Soviet-) Russia and Ukraine as well as the war that broke out on 24th of February 2022. It is however not an exhaustive historical analysis since this would go beyond the scope of the thesis and would redirect the scientific focus to historical happenings instead of aiding the chosen research process. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to outline the historical context of the war that shape and define the meanings that are embedded in the visual material analysed later on.

A historical embedding about present day Ukraine and the path to the invasion of Russia in 2022 will be the focus in the next chapters. This will help give a historical context to the collected material corpus. It will also aid in understanding the visual communication of the political groups in the EP about Ukraine further. The focus of this chapter will lie on Ukraine since the conflict is carried out on Ukrainian soil but one cannot disregard the historical relationship with Russia (and the Soviet Union as a whole) to do so. As the Ukrainian political sciences professor Taras Kuzio postulated *“understanding independent Ukraine is impossible without an appreciation of the deep influence of Soviet history and the continued impact of Soviet culture on Ukrainian politics, economics, and national identity”* (2015, p. 2).

Building upon Kuzio's postulation about the deep impact of Soviet history in Ukraine, Anna Reid, a former Kyiv Correspondent for the *Economist* and author of a book outlining the History of Ukraine suggests that Vladimir Putin and the current Kremlin

believe that “the West” has historically been a bad influence over Ukraine over the years:

“From Poland in the sixteenth century to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century and the Nazis in World War II, they have periodically coerced Ukraine or led it astray. In this reading, Kyiv’s pro-Western outlook over the past decade is only the latest form of external interference – this time by the European Union and the United States – aimed at dividing Russia against itself” (Reid, 2022, p. 54).

She moreover paints the picture that for Putin, Ukraine and Ukrainians *are “naturally part of Russia, they don’t even exist”* (2022, p.54). Looking into historical processes might help to understand such thought patterns that contributed to the invasion in February 2022. However, to give a full picture of Russia-Ukraine relations as well as deep reaching cleavages thereof, one would have to start during the Middle Ages, raiders, traders, the proto-state Kyiv, going through the Polish-Lithuanian Period or the Cossak Era (Reid, 2022, p. 56; Subtelny, 2009). Hence even though this is not a history-centred thesis, a superficial retelling of main turning points starting from the 19th century and supposed underlying reasons for the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 will be summarised in the next chapters.

2.1 Ukraine, National Awakenings, and Foreign Influences

Throughout history, the modern-day territory of Ukraine has been under different reigns and (foreign) influences. A sort of national awakening and identity was developing in Ukraine within the 19th century while it *“was located within the boundaries of two multinational empires: the Russian Empire and the Austrian Empire. This political division was to remain without substantial change until World War I”* (Magocsi, 2002, p. 38). Throughout this period, historians (e.g. Magocsi, 2002, p. 40) characterized Ukrainians as an *“underdeveloped agrarian society divided between two multinational empires”* Scholars calculate that by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been under Russian rule for 300 years (Reid, 2022, p. 55). Parallel to today’s attribution as Europe’s grain chamber (Schneider, 2014), Ukraine has served the empires and later on the Soviet Union with their rich soil and massive agricultural

land. The leading US American Historian Timothy Snyder, titled by the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* as “one of the best and most argumentative experts on Ukrainian history” even claims that „Ukraine was the most important Soviet republic beyond Russia“ (Snyder, 2021). “Soviet Ukraine was an integral part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union, formed in 1922 after years of revolution, civil war, and a Ukrainian struggle for independence” (Berkhoff, 2004, p. 6). While most of Ukrainians were farmers and working in the agricultural sector, the big cities were inhabited by other ethnic groups: “the Russian census of 1897 revealed that only 5.7 percent of Ukrainians lived in urban areas, while up to 81.1 percent worked in agriculture or as day laborers and servants” (Magocsi, 2002, p. 39).

Slowly but surely, Ukrainians developed a sense of identity with the so called “*Intelligentsia*” aka leading thinkers, scholars, opinion leaders in culture, language, societal and intellectual life acting as catalysts.

“Confronted by the unresponsiveness and even obstructionism of the government, the intelligentsia gradually moved from simply formulating proposals for change to organizing itself and attempting to mobilize society to implement these proposals by revolutionary means if necessary” (Subtelny, 2009, p. 279).

In the 1930s, the leader of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin has driven Ukraine and its people into a period of severe famine called *Holodomor* which was described as “killing by hunger – a program of forced deportations and food and land requisitioning aimed at the permanent emasculation of Ukraine’s rural population as a whole. Rolled out in parallel with a purge of Ukraine’s urban intelligentsia, it resulted in the deaths of nearly four million Ukrainians” (Reid, 2022, p. 58). Even decades later, *Holodomor* is not considered as a genocide by the Russian government but the history has been rewritten in a completely different light (Reid, 2022, p. 60):

“In 2006, the Ukrainian Parliament recognized the events in question as a genocide. In 2008, the Russian Duma responded with a resolution that provided a very different account of the famine. Even as Russian legislators seemed to acknowledge the catastrophe, they turned it against the main victims. The

resolution stated that ‘there is no historical proof that the famine was organized along ethnic lines,’ and pointedly mentioned six regions in Russia before mentioning Ukraine” (Snyder, 2021).

The country was moreover scarred by a takeover of Nazi-Germany who not only “*waged a colonial war from 1941 to 1945 to control Ukraine*” (Snyder, 2023) but essentially carried out a targeted genocide by systematically killing “*Jews, Roma, psychiatric patients, real and imagine partisans*” and other opponents of the system (Berkhoff, 2004, p. 41). Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, recapitulates that Ukrainian nationalists were welcoming the German forces as they were viewed as liberating forces (Yad Vashem The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, 2024). Comparingly, Karel Berkhoff a dutch history professor named this a sense of liberation from “*Jewish Bolshevism*” and “*Muscovite*” domination. Soon civilian Nazi rule arrived [...] Many Soviet civilians, if only because they lacked accurate knowledge about the Nazis, were glad to see the Soviet regime go” (Berkhoff, 2004, pp. 2–3). All referenced sources mention the collaboration of Ukrainian locals with the *Einsatzgruppen* of Nazi-Germany (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024). This historical circumstance has been continuously used in the present-day conflict since Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed he would “de-nazify” Ukraine and therefore protect the population by invading the country in 2022 (Ripp, 2022).

The common denominator of all foreign rules and dominations of the nation was that Ukrainian culture, language, intelligentsia and people in general were heavily repressed (e.g. Reid, 2022, p. 60). Nevertheless, a certain understanding of statehood and Ukrainian culture kept developing strongly among the population. For example, between the years 1917 and 1919, under the Bolshevik rule, Ukrainian governmental institutions have been established as well as first constitutions and a declaration of independence: “*These moves, however, were essentially a tactical response to the demonstrable challenge of rising Ukrainian nationalism*” (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2017).

By 1933 however, this rise in Ukrainization had been forcibly halted and a new wave of Russification was ongoing (Kuromiya, 1994, p. 330). Russification was not a new

phenomenon, and the concept has been historically interlinked with the long history of Russian imperialism, as suggested Boman (2023, p. 2). This interlinkage persists into the present day, as highlighted by the Ukrainian scholar Zaporozhchenko, *“modern Russia, as the successor to the long history of Russian imperialism, repeats the logic of the geopolitical behavior of its predecessors [...] it is a continuation of the geopolitical spiral of the Soviet Union; that is, it attempts to consolidate authoritarian political regimes around the idea of opposing democracy and capitalism, that is, the idea of a “Collective West” (Zaporozhchenko, 2023, p. 1).*

As a result of this complex history, relations between Russian and Ukraine continue to be characterised by both a post-imperial paradigm and a discourse that denies Ukraine’s unique identity as a justification for that post-imperial paradigm:

“Since Ukraine was until 1991 part of the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that relations with that country’s proclaimed successor, Russia, would be the most complex [...] For many Russians it is simply inconceivable that Little Russia – Ukraine – is no longer a part of the Russian body” (Magocsi, 2010, p. 729).

2.2 Millennia, Elections, and the West

Viewing “the West” as an adversary remains a core element of modern Russia’s policy and ideological framework. This is in part reflected in, in part driven by, the background of its current president Vladimir Putin who has been Russia’s dominant political figure since the turn of the millennium. It is broadly accepted that Putin’s worldview and policy choices continue to be marked by his past career as a foreign intelligence agent in Russia’s foreign intelligence and domestic security agency KGB. Combined with the Russian imperialistic tendencies previously discussed, these factors have shaped modern Russia’s and Putin’s foreign policy, with significant repercussions for its neighbouring countries, particularly Ukraine (eg. Boman, 2023; Magocsi, 2010; Zaporozhchenko, 2023). *“A central component in Russia’s great power vision is the right to have a sphere of “privileged interests” in its Eurasian neighbourhood” (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 483).* Moreover, already in 2008, *“Putin warned [...] that Ukraine was an artificial and failed state, two denigrations that are staples of Russian nationalist thought” (Kuzio, 2018).*

For Ukraine, the years in between the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the change of the millennia have been shaped by a new found path of freedom and democratisation of the country shifting from a single party dictatorship to a pluralized party system within *“which the president and parliament would be elected through freely contested elections”* (Magocsi, 2010, p. 53). These freely contested elections are also considered a main turning point in Ukraine-Russia’s modern-day relations.

What has to be mentioned at this point is that in post-Soviet Ukraine, the country has been struggling with economic transformation and political reforms. Corruption has been (Leipnik & Kyrychenko, 2013) and reportedly still is a big problem which not only undermines the political system and democratisation process but is closely interwoven. In 2023, the NGO Transparency International released data that Ukraine has been on place 104 out of a 180 measured countries in terms of corruption – albeit improving by three points since 2022 (Transparency International, 2024). Corruption in Ukraine however cannot be looked at independently without also looking at the emergence of an oligarchical system under the reign of the first post-Soviet Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma (1994-1999): *“As in other post-Soviet countries, in Ukraine the need to carry on sweeping economic reforms, aimed at liberalizing the market and reducing the state presence in the economic sector, coincided with a process of democratization and state-building, in which the pre-existing ruling elite played a controlling role”* (Puglisi, 2003, pp. 99–100).

Sparked by the presidential elections of 2004, the Orange Revolution received its name due to the predominantly orange coloured clothing the countless protestors wore in support of the pro-European presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko who used orange as his campaign colour. During the election campaign, Yushchenko was unsuccessfully poisoned during a dinner with government officials (Subtelny, 2009, p. 636) *“After Yushchenko survived the attack [...], the vote was blatantly falsified instead. Sporting orange hats and ribbons, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians poured into the streets in protest and stayed there until the electoral commission conceded a rerun, which Yushchenko won”* (Reid, 2022, p. 61). It is stated by Reid (2022, p.61f) that for the Russian Kremlin – which was openly backing Yushchenko’s direct competitor, the oligarch Viktor Yanukovich – *“the poisoning was not ‘enough’ ”*

hence also the voting outcome was manipulated. The following uprisings against these happenings were then referred to as *“a plot orchestrated by the West”* by Putin and the Kremlin (Reid, 2022, p. 61). After a recount of the votes however, it became apparent that Yushchenko won by an 11% lead (Subtelny, 2009, p. 636) and he went on being Ukraine’s president between 2005 and 2010 (Magocsi, 2010, p. 735).

“For Russia and especially Putin, the Orange Revolution represented a resounding defeat. Not only was it a point where Ukraine and Russia seemed to embark on different paths of development but it engendered in the Kremlin the fear that it too might have to face a similar demonstration of people power” (Subtelny, 2009, p. 639).

Throughout Yushchenko’s term as president, Ukraine focussed more on relations with “the West” even aiming at a membership of the NATO as well as the European Union rather than strengthening ties with Russia (‘Profile’, 2010). In 2010 however the tides turned and the Russia-centred Viktor Yanukovich became president mostly because *“the hopes and expectations of the Orange Revolution were not, however, to be realized”* (Magocsi, 2010, p. 736).

2.3 Euromaidan and Crimean Crisis

Even though Yanukovich was Russia’s dream candidate for the job, the relationship between the two countries as well as between Ukraine’s president and Russia’s president Dmitry Medvedev was not as smooth as expected, albeit the implementation of *“all of the demands in President Medvedev’s August 2009 open letter”* (Kuzio, 2018, p. 468) as well as the suspension of an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2013 by Yanukovich (Nankobe, 2021, p. 3). Kuzio (2018) moreover argues that this as well as the high gas prices set by Russia for Ukraine foreshadowed the problems which would arise in 2014. Within this time, the Europe and the West became concerned about Ukraine as it has been described by Subtelny (2009, p. 643): *“From a country of peripheral interest to the West, it moved to the forefront of its concerns. For Russia, its importance, always great, became even greater”*.

Protests against Ukraine's government and presidency demanding the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU arose in late 2013, known as the Euromaidan. This agreement would have meant an anchored orientation towards Europe and the West more than Russia which underlying tension and history were reflected in the policies of the past two presidents (Diuk, 2014). Hundred thousands of protestors assembled on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv over months, which also have been violently broken off by police brutality – intimidations, beatings and killings were executed by governmental forces (O'Connell, 2017). Bushak (2014) argues that the protests became so much bigger than “just” the initial dissatisfaction about the non-signing of the EU Agreement as it became a symbol for the country's relationship to Russia, human rights such as freedom of speech, thought and peaceful protest.

Eventually, Yanukovich was: *“ousted from power by pro-EU protesters in Kiev”* which *“angered Russian President Vladimir Putin and he decided to send Russian armed forces to take over control of Crimea from Ukraine”* (Nankobe, 2021, p. 3).

On February 28th 2014 Putin deployed military to the naval base on the Black sea, the Crimean Peninsula - therefore sovereign Ukraine. One of the main narratives used to back this military invasion and the subsequent referendum was *“the alleged repression of Russian speakers following Euromaidan revolutionaries coming to power in the third week of February 2014”* (Kuzio, 2018, p. 463). Timothy Snyder, Professor of History at Yale University and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna called the orchestrated referendum of the status of Crimea an electoral farce:

“Referenda cannot be held under military occupation. Referenda cannot have two options that have essentially the same meaning. Referenda cannot be held when all of the propaganda is generated by the state. Referenda cannot be held when the local television stations are closed and journalists are beaten and intimidated” (Snyder, 2014)

Parallel to the annexation of the peninsula, Russia generated unrest on the Ukrainian mainland and especially in the eastern Ukrainian Donetsk Basin and set up two unrecognized artificial states, the “Donetsk People's Republic” and “Luhansk People's Republic” (Von Essen & Umland, 2022, p. 283). The time after the proclamation of the

republics and the recapturing and losing of strategic points such as Mariupol, Kyiv started negotiating with Moscow the so-called Minsk I and a year later the Minsk II protocols. However instead of peace and a ceasefire the agreements focussed more on the Russian narrative questioning the sovereignty of Ukraine (Von Essen & Umland, 2022, p. 285). Ukraine agreed to the protocols under massive coercion, since Moscow deliberately increased military pressure on Kyiv before the signing and Ukraine dreaded even deeper Russian advances into Ukrainian territory. Von Essen & Umland (2022, p. 285) stipulate that *“this allowed the Kremlin to publicly define and purport to resolve the conflict in the signed documents”*. In their paper, they also outline the years between 2014 and 2022 which have been coined by international negotiations, coercions, different models, and protocols (e.g. the Frank-Walter Steinmeier model in 2015 tried to find a solution to the conflict but defined the regions based on the initial situation at that time meaning the Russian occupied parts).

“Meanwhile, Russia posed as a mediator on the global political stage, constantly trying to turn the international conflict into a domestic one and to capitalise on the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Moscow used the two "people's republics" as instruments to undermine Ukraine's internal stability and foreign relations” (Von Essen & Umland, 2022, p. 289).

Russia's pursuit of wanting to play a bigger geopolitical role especially in post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine would not be realised through the Minsk protocols. Von Essen and Umland argue that these protocols even intensified the conflict between both states (Von Essen & Umland, 2022, p. 290). Additionally, Snyder (2023) outlines the importance of Ukraine becoming more democratic as *“it would look better than Russia. And that would be a real problem for Putin. Given that he can't make things better in Russia, he tries to make the West look worse, beginning in Ukraine, in the minds of Russians, but also in reality”*. Albeit security experts have warned of an escalation, countless indications have been ignored on an international level throughout the past years such as a *“build-up of Russian forces near Ukraine”* to carry out *“training exercises”* in 2021 as well as rhetoric employed by Putin that *“Ukraine is an integral part of Russian history and has a puppet regime managed by foreign powers”* (Aloisi & Daniel, 2022). All this would eventually lead up to a full-scale invasion veiled as *“special military operations”* in 2022 (Aloisi & Daniel, 2022).

2.4 24th of February 2022

In the early morning hours of February 24th Russia started its attack on Ukraine, invading the country with a full-scale military operation that has been anticipated on international level looking at both, reactions from state's secret services as well as at the speeches Putin gave the days leading up to the attack (Watson, 2022).

“The invasion started with about 100 missiles fired from both land- and sea-based platforms, and then with ground incursions on three main axes of assault: in the north, from Belarus down towards Kyiv; in the east, from western Russia down towards Kharkiv; and in the south, from Crimea up to Kherson” (Watson, 2022)

The main argument Putin and the Kremlin gave to back the invasion was framed as *“a special military operation’ to protect people, including Russian citizens, subjected to “genocide” in Ukraine [...] And for this we will strive for the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine“* (Zinets & Vasovic, 2022). The protection of Russian people in Ukraine has already been a main narrative employed in 2014, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The other big narrative – that Putin wanted to de-nazify Ukraine – has been proven groundless by many sources, backed up by the 2.15% of votes a united far-right party conglomerate received during the last parliamentary elections in 2019 besides the fact that there has not been totalitarian (fascist) regime in power before the invasion (Wesolowski, 2022). Corresponding to the historical tensions described in the previous chapters, studies showed that the Kremlin and the *„national security establishment in Moscow perceived Ukraine’s drift toward the West as a major threat to both Russia’s security interests and its status as a great power“* (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 483).

According to the UN, within the second month of the war *“far more civilians were killed in Ukraine in March than in any other month of the war”* (Bigg, 2023). Up until the first anniversary of the invasion in February 2023, *“U.S. and European officials estimated that Russian casualties in the war were approaching 200,000 killed or wounded. Ukraine had 100,000 killed or wounded in action, along with at least 30,000 civilian*

deaths, according to the estimates" (Bigg, 2023). Shortly after the invasion, millions of Ukrainians fled to neighbouring countries such as Poland, Hungary, Belarus or relocated to safety within Ukraine. In September 2023, 6,199,700 Ukrainian refugees have been recorded globally by the United Nations Refugee Agency out of which 5.8 million have been recorded in Europe (UNHCR, 2023). The proximity as well as economic and security impacts made the invasion a wider European issue. A detailed timeline of the happenings in Ukraine and respective response by the European institutions can be found on this website³ provided by the European Commission.

The most prominent figure on the Ukrainian side from the very beginning of the war has been its president Volodymyr Zelensky. Media outlets, especially in the initial stages of the war, reported about his high popularity ratings amongst the population: he exchanged his presidential suit with olive-green military shirts and constantly informed the population with short (video) messages of encouragement (Körber, 2022). Körber (2022) moreover reported that *„sceptics would never have expected the "clown" to become a leader“* referring to Zelensky's previous career as an actor and comedian. The author of his biography Wojciech Rogacin however reviewed this former career as a strength *"Zelensky uses his experience and talent as an actor, the fact that he feels very comfortable in front of the camera"* (Baumann, 2022). Outside communication, rhetoric, and symbolism seem to have been a focal point of the Ukrainian leadership. For example: PR consultants pushed the image of the brave Ukrainian people with a strong figurehead namely Zelensky on the forefront (Schocher, 2022) resulting in tactical statements such as: *"I don't want a picture of myself as president in your offices. The president is not an icon, not an idol. Instead, hang up photos of your children and look at them when you make a decision"* (Weiss, 2022) or that he needed *"ammunition and not a lift"*, in response to a question by the US government of whether he wanted to leave the country after the Russian invasion (Körber, 2022).

The media, PR and (rhetorical, objective and pictural) symbolism have always been on the front lines of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. For instance, when Russia

³ European Commission, "EU Solidarity with Ukraine" https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/index_en

annexed Crimea in 2014 and fuelled local reservations in the east of the country against the new government in Kiev. It was indicated that a media campaign, which had been going for years, reached its climax (Schocher, 2022). Further examples of this circumstance and how the internet and social media come into the mix will be explored in the next chapter.

2.5 The war (on Social Media)

Pictures have always played an important role in war times, looking at pre-photographic pictorial journalism when war artists and reporters with pencils captured the scene more or less abstractly, in order to later transfer them into triumphant battle paintings (Müller & Knieper, 2019, p. 156). Scholars pinpoint the importance of war images to their urgency of life and death, their extreme attention grabbing amongst the public as well as their potential to shape public perception and opinion (Griffin, 2010, p. 7). It is therefore undoubtedly worthwhile for political parties to communicate visually.

In the 20th century images of war have mostly been distributed and reproduced through classic mass media such as print and TV. Image reporting nowadays is increasingly shifting towards the online sphere which is sometimes even dominating the visual reporting (Müller & Knieper, 2019, p. 151). This new sphere also brought a new way of creating content due to the emergence of new image producers and distributors through having smartphones with cameras and internet connection almost ubiquitously. Scholars call this new type of image producing “prosumers” since they are producing and consuming at the same time in the world of online media. In this respect, a turning point has occurred, characterized by digitalization, virality and globalization of information flows, but also by the democratization of the means of image production (Müller & Knieper, 2019, p. 151). Through this development, the gatekeeping as well as agenda setting characteristics mass media have displayed for decades are being softened up or are even fully annihilated (Knieper & Müller, 2005, p. 152).

These developments can be perfectly observed when looking at the media reporting of the Ukraine war in 2022. Körber (2022) talks about a new era of unfilteredness due to the instant distribution of war images on social media:

“Especially in the first few days, images of destroyed and burning Russian tanks, shot-down helicopters and captured Russian soldiers, who claimed in front of phone cameras that they had not known they were being sent to war, became more frequent”.

It has never been so easy as to access Impact of war and on-battlefield videos as well as pictures as in the advent of visual social media platforms. Generally, this war has been named the first *“commercial space war, the first full-scale drone war, and the first AI war”* which underlines the importance of technology as well as digital communication within the conflict (Söderström & Franke, 2023). Söderström and Franke moreover point out that *“the hyperconnectivity of social media Information warfare has always mattered, but the immediacy of social media has created a new environment”* in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Söderström & Franke, 2023).

Therefore it is unsurprising that on the social media platform Instagram, the Hashtags *#ukrainewar #ukrainewarfootage #ukrainewar2022 #westandwithukraine #stopwarinukraine* have been used thousands of times (Instagram, 2022). One could argue that there is a weird mixture of emotional involvedness through seeing the footage (almost) live, paired with emotional detachment because of the overwhelming amount thereof. Müller and Knieper (2019, p. 163) explain this duality that *„too many cruel and tragic visual impressions can turn from proactive empathy into ‚empty empathy‘ which can lead to emotional bluntness among viewers“.*

Next to visuals, narratives and storytelling are an important factor in building an image. Not even a full day after the beginning of the invasion – on February 25th Ukraine's president Zelensky posted his first selfie video statement on Instagram, in fact he never stopped communicating via social media platforms as mentioned before, but used it as his main form of communication with the people of Ukraine (Adler, 2022).



Figure 1 President Zelensky surrounded by his cabinet of ministers (Source: Hopkins 2022)

In the selfie video⁴ the president and other important state figures from his cabinet such as head of his office and prime minister addressed the Ukrainian people with a clear message: we are all here [in Kyiv] and we will stay here to defend our independence. At one point the prime minister held up his phone to show the time stamp on it in order to display the time of the recording of the historical video (Adler, 2022). *“The ordinariness of the scene, belied by the terrifying urgency of the message – ‘We are here, our soldiers are here, the citizens of our country are here’ – underscored the authenticity of his appeal”* (Susarla, 2022). As a former comedian and entertainer, Zelensky understands how to effectively disseminate messages with a broad reach by storytelling and creating urgency yet humanizing / personalising the message. In a newspaper article, (Bauder & Noveck, 2022) Zelensky is compared to Winston Churchill of the internet age: *“He walks through the streets and holds his cell phone up, and he talks to people. His off-the-cuff remarks, with no time to prepare a*

⁴ Find the full selfie video with English subtitles here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=wqCNKhtZYks&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=WFAA

long speech, add to the genuine nature of his presentations, he and others say, and resonate with a younger generation.” The ETH security expert Masuhr said in an Interview with *St. Galler Tagblatt*: *“Zelensky gives people in Ukraine a face. This works particularly well via social media, because these [social media] per se suggest that you are closer to a person than it is actually the case”* (Kuster et al., 2022).

On the first day after the invasion, one particular story and sentence made it to headlines and social media channels worldwide: *“audio has emerged that is purported to have captured an exchange between Ukrainian border guards on Snake Island and an approaching Russian navy vessel, in which a Russian officer told the Ukrainian forces on the island to “lay down your weapons” while the Ukrainian border guard Roman Hrybov answered: “Russian Warship go fuck yourself”* (Visontay, 2022). This quickly went viral on numerous social media channels and *“the phrase became a rallying cry for Ukraine’s defenders and was commemorated in a postage stamp by the Ukrainian postal service”* The virality of this sentence was moreover reinforced by the fact that Hrybov received a medal for his services by the Ukrainian ministry of defence after discovering that many soldiers on the island were taken hostage as opposed to killed by the Russians as previously assumed.

Another narrative that caused virality and huge ripples in internet fora was that of the *Ghost of Kyiv*. While the Ukrainian air force was vastly outnumbered by Russian fighter jets, one Ukrainian jet was said to have taken down numerous Russian planes singlehandedly (Peter, 2022). The story has rapidly disseminated through social media even though the name of the pilot was unknown which probably helped the mystery heroicism of the story. The Ukrainian military historian Mikhail Zhironov categorised the story as *“propaganda for raising morale [...] It’s essential to have this propaganda, because our armed forces are smaller, and many think we can’t be equal to them [the Russians]. We need this in wartime”* (Peter, 2022).

Ukrainian heroism has been a widely distributed narrative since the beginning of the war across many media platforms worldwide. A video of a Ukrainian man smoking a cigarette while relocating an anti-tank mine with his bare hands went viral on the platform X as well as Ukrainian farmers stealing Russian tanks and civilians of all ages preparing Molotov cocktails in order to defend themselves from the Russian invasion

(e.g. Der Standard Redaktion, 2022; Gant, 2022; Kuster, 2022). The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari underlines stories such as the aforementioned as crucial for nation building since: *“Nations are ultimately built on stories [...] In the long run, these stories count for more than tanks”* (Harari, 2022).

To summarise, Ukrainian and Russian history and their relations are highly complex and thoroughly intertwined. The Russian invasion into Ukrainian territory on the 24th of February 2022 is preceded by the weight of the mentioned and many more historical, ideological and ties. (Outside) communication, stories, symbolism and especially images have been very present, both in the current conflict and historically. Also, the connexions to the “West” and the European Union provide a good basis for this master’s thesis.

3 Political Groups of the 9th European Parliament

To proceed with the introductory chapters, it is vital to examine the second big part of the research questions namely the political groups of the 9th European Parliament. Scrutinising political parties rather than for example national parties represented in the EP stems from the finding that there is a growing cohesion within the party groups in face a decline in the importance of national parties (Hix et al., 2007). On the other hand, studying the online communication of political groups poses an interesting case since political communication scholars postulate that social media is more focussed on a personalised communication style as described in chapter 0.

The 9th legislature of the European Parliament was officially constituted on the 2nd of July 2019 in Strasbourg, with 751 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) and seven groups which is one less political group than the previous term (*Constitution of the 9th Legislature of the European Parliament*, 2019). The Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) groups were right populist groups in the 8th term. Since the EFDD was predominantly constituted by members of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and some Italian Movimento 5 Stelle members, the group was not resurrected in the 9th term due to the impending leaving of the United Kingdom in February 2020 (Crum, 2020, p. 56). The Movimento 5 Stelle party was therefore left without a group and their MEPs are now Non-Attached Members (NI). In the 9th term of the EP “*the Europe of Nations and Freedom group was brought under the new banner of ‘Identity and Democracy’ (ID)*” (Crum, 2020, p. 57). The Brexit also influenced the number of MEPs in the Parliament since after January 2020 it shrank from 751 to 705, relocating 27 of the 73 seats that the United Kingdom and the rest being “*kept in reserve for potential future enlargements*” (European Parliament, 2020).

In the following chapters the seven groups of the 9th European Parliament are portrayed. On the EP Website the formation of a political group is described as:

“25 Members are needed to form a political group, and at least one-quarter of the Member States must be represented within the group. Members may not

belong to more than one political group. Some Members do not belong to any political group and are known as non-attached Members” (European Parliament, n.d.-c). Furthermore “Members may form themselves into groups according to their political affinities. Parliament need not normally evaluate the political affinity of members of a group. In forming a group together under this Rule, Members concerned accept by definition that they have political affinity. Only when this is denied by the Members concerned is it necessary for Parliament to evaluate whether the group has been constituted in conformity with the Rules” (European Parliament, 2009).

Since the paper focusses on the communication of a political body such as a political group is employing, members who are non-affiliated (NI) to any of those seven parties are ignored in the research process of this paper.

It must be noted that MEPs can choose to join or drop their membership in political groups therefore it shall be advised to check the current data on the respective group websites or the website of the EP.

3.1 European People’s Party

The European People’s party (EPP) is the largest political group in the 9th European Parliament. Out of 705 seats 176 fall into the conservative group’s hand. It is also the oldest group since it has been re-established after every election, from the first direct elections of the European Parliament onwards in 1979 (*Parliament Group Priorities*, 2019). In January 2022 a new leadership of the parliament was voted on, shortly after the death of the standing president David Sassoli (S&D). The vote of the new Parliament president was already scheduled before the passing of Sassoli since the role of EP President has been set on 2.5 years with one possible renewal (European Parliament, 2019). Roberta Metsola is the first EP President from neither one of the biggest countries in the EU nor one of the founding members such as the Netherlands but from the EU’s smallest member state Malta (De La Baume, 2022b). Moreover, she is the youngest EP President at 43 years old and only the third woman to hold the title. *“She was elected with 458 votes out of the 705 MEPs in Parliament” (De La Baume, 2022a).*

Three out of the 14 Vice Presidents belong to the EPP, with Othmar Karas an Austrian politician from the ÖVP as first Vice President, the Polish Ewa Kopacz and the Rainer Wieland from Germany (European Parliament, 2019). Manfred Weber is the president of the EPP group in the parliament, he was elected Vice-Chair of the EPP Group after the 2009 European elections, before becoming Chair in 2014 (EPP, n.d.).

3.2 Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, short S&D group is the second largest group in the European Parliament represented by 145 MEPs across 26 EU countries and positioned to the centre-left on the political spectrum (Socialists and Democrats, n.d.). *“The S&D Group stands for an inclusive European society based on principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, diversity and fairness”* (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, n.d.). Until his death in January 2022 the socialist politician and former reporter David Sassoli held office of the president of the 9th European Parliament (Herszenhorn & De La Baume, 2022).

Due to a deal before the elections between the biggest political groups, five out of the 14 Vice Presidents belong to the S&D group since January 2022: German Katarina Barley, Italian Pina Picierno, Portuguese Pedro Silva Pereira, Luxembourgish Mac Angel and Austrian Evelyn Regner (European Parliament, 2019). The Spanish Iratxe García Pérez is the acting chair of the group and has served as MEP in the Parliament since the 6th term in 2004 (European Parliament, n.d.-a)

3.3 Renew Europe

The third biggest group in the parliament called Renew Europe includes 103 MEPs from 25 countries. Their self-description on their website reads as: *“the pro-European and centrist political group in the European Parliament”* (Renew Europe, 2022b). In the previous terms since the founding in 2004 the group was called ALDE – Alliance of Liberals and Democrats of Europe until in 2019 after the European Parliament elections the national delegation leaders of the group decided to rename it to Renew Europe following the slogan used in the 2019 campaign (ALDE, 2019). After the 2019 elections, the Renew group got the biggest share of new parties (Crum, 2020, p. 58). Renew has three Vice Presidents including the Czech Dita Charanzová, Slovakian Michal Šimečka and German Nicola Beer.

During the 9th Parliamentary legislation, the Renew group had a triple changing of leadership since the first president of the group, the Romanian Dacian Cioloş returned to national politics in 2021, who then was followed by the French Stéphane Séjourné (De La Baume, 2021) but he also went back to France in 2024 to become a minister (Goury-Laffont et al., 2024).

3.4 Greens/EFA

With 71 MEPs across 16 member state countries, the Greens/EFA are the fourth largest group in the EP. Having been constituted in 1999, the group includes actually two political party families namely the Greens and the European Free Alliance hence the name. This means, politicians from Green parties, Pirate parties, independent MEPs and “*MEPs from the European Free Alliance (EFA) representing stateless nations, regions and minorities, standing up for the right to self-determination*” are included in this group (Greens/EFA, 2022). The main topics and focal points lie within climate and environmental protection, peace, human rights and social justice as described on their website. On the political spectrum, the Greens/EFA can be found on centre-left to left-wing. The Finnish Heidi Hautala is the only Greens/EFA Vice President of the European Parliament.

An interesting aspect is the composition parity in this group: 35 female and 36 male MEPs constitute the Greens/EFA group lead by a gender-balanced Co-presidency Ska Keller and Philippe Lamberts (Greens/EFA, 2022).

3.5 Identity and Democracy

With 65 MEPs across 10 member state countries, the Identity and Democracy (ID) group constitutes the fifth largest group in the EP. The majority of the MEPs (24) in the ID belong to Italian *Lega*, closely followed by France’s *Rassemblement National* (19) and Germany’s *AfD* (9) (Identity and Democracy, 2021). The president of the group is the Italian Marco Zanni.

The ID group is the only political group in the EP who does not have a Vice President nor a Quaestor (*responsible for administrative and financial matters*) (European

Parliament, n.d.-b)) which could be attributed to the fact that there is a *cordon sanitaire* established in the Parliament. For over a decade this practice has been in place which essentially shuts out the extreme right MEPs from influential positions within the house (Radosavljevic & Fox, 2019) even though „*the ID group is less outspokenly right-wing than its predecessor, the ENF*“ (Crum, 2020, p. 61). Radosavljevic (2019) calls this practice understandable since „*their ideological predecessors are wreckers, not reformers in the EU institutions – but the optics are not great*“.

3.6 European Conservatives and Reformists

The second smallest political group is called European Conservatives and Reformists, short ECR. The ECR was founded in 2009 (ECR, n.d.). With only one less politician than the ID group 64 MEPs constitute the ECR who describe themselves as a centre-right political group (ECR, n.d.). 19 national parties from 15 different countries are part of the group led by Ryszard Legutko and Raffaele Fitto. The Latvian Roberts Zīle acts as one of the Vice Presidents of the EP. The leadership of the group is carried out by two men: Polish Ryszard Legutko and Italian Nicola Procaccini.

Even though 19 parties are represented in the group one country particularly stands out: „*Poland dominates the ECR — its delegation comprises over 40 percent of the group*“ (Bayer et al., 2021). This will be taken into consideration when examining if the composition of the political groups might influence their visual communication about the war in Ukraine.

3.7 The Left

The smallest political group in the EP is The Left with 39 MEPs from 13 member state countries. Throughout the years the group had different names, from *The Communists and Allies Group*, *Gauche Unitaire Européenne (GUE)*, *European United Left* to *Confederal Group of the European United Left (GUE)* to *Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left*. For simplicity in this thesis the group will be referred as The Left or GUE/NGL. With the Greek Dimitrios Papadimoulis the leftist group is represented in the EP's Bureau through one Vice President. Like the Greens/EFA the Left has a gender balanced Co-presidency carried out by the German Martin Schirdewan and the French Manon Aubry (The Left, n.d.-b).

On their Website they describe themselves as standing up for “*for workers, environment, feminism, peace & human rights*” since “*EU policy is too frequently based on a radically market-oriented logic of competition both within the EU and towards the rest of the world*” (The Left, n.d.-a).

The specificities of the groups will help in the analysing chapters of this thesis to understand certain choices in their political communication revolving around the war in Ukraine.

4 Political Communication

One could argue that political communication stands at the core of the political process. It is in the interest of the political actors to communicate the happenings and activities to an audience in the best case their potential constituency, along the lines of the saying: “*do good and make it known / Tue Gutes und rede darüber*”. Ultimately, one of the fundamental goals of a political actor is to acquire and hold office and/or power (eg. Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005).

Different disciplines define both politics and communication differently therefore different emphases are set accordingly, depending on whether it is described in the context of politics as shaping (policy), confrontation (politics) or order (polity) (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 22). However, it is a fact that politics cannot operate without communication and communication cannot operate without politics (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 15ff). “*According to Stanyer (2005), without information and communication technologies political parties would find it difficult to mobilize their supporters and persuade the undecided voters to support them*” (Harris & Harrigan, 2015, p. 254).

In this context, the claim to reach an anonymous electorate makes political advertising a necessary tool for political elites (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 22). In times of elections and electoral campaigns, arguably the purest form of political communication takes place. These times are seen as particularly condensed communicative situations between political actors, media and the citizens or constituency. Parties and political

actors actively seek to convince citizens of their positions in order to maximize their votes (Geise, 2011, p. 140).

Within social structures and relationships and the shaping thereof, political communication can be understood as an instrument of problem solving: Symbolic acts are used to ensure approval for political projects, to enforce binding decisions and, at the same time, to reduce conflicts in implementation as much as possible (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 22).

In political communication literature (e.g. Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 21f) one can find a distinction into three waves of political communication since the end of the second world war. First, there was a clear dominance of party politics and political actors predominantly communicated through traditional communication channels or staged events such as official statements, speeches and written press releases. In the case of Austria, *“politics was largely exercised behind closed doors [...], press conferences appeared as often as a total moon eclipse, journalists barely got politicians on the phone and ministers invited only a handful of journalists and media to background talks”* as Journalist Eva Linsinger put it in her book *“Alles nur Fake”* (Linsinger, 2019). Throughout the 1960s the dominance however shifted towards new forms of media since with the spread of TV, political actors had to accept a new and more personalized media appearance. Suddenly, sound bites⁵ as well as image bites (see chapter 4.1) became powerful tools of getting the political actor’s messages across to an audience. The length of the ‘perfect soundbite’ continuously shrunk over the years (Bucy & Grabe, 2007, p. 653) . Within the internet, this has certainly become more extreme since there is a *“limit of time and space”* (Francisco, 2014, p. 121) and the competition with countless other content online.

The third and current phase entails an intensified competition of public attention due to the amount of multimedia channels and general diversity through which (political) messages can be distributed (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 22). Arguably there have never been more channels and ways to reach larger audiences than in the 21st century.

⁵ *“speaking in brief, complete statements that are easily incorporated into media accounts and support the candidate’s objectives”* (Schill, 2012, p. 120)

While the second phase of political communication was already shaped by professionalization (e.g. sound and image bites) it became a central role in the third wave. Political communication has transformed itself by and through five main trends: 1) increased pressure of professionalization, 2) increased competitive pressures, 3) anti-elitist populism, 4) centrifugal diversification, and 5) a general shift in the way people perceive politics (Blumler, 2016, p. 23). Oswald (2018, p. 10) however takes it even further as he posits the thesis that this third phase of political communication has been disrupted through the sheer chaos the internet causes: *“Rules, control and even the question of truth became relative, at least in some spheres - and also those of human control”*. Especially the ubiquitous spread and growth of social media influenced backs this claim (read more on social media and political communication in chapter 4.2). Blumler (2016, p. 26) brings up the idea of a fourth phase of political communication which where complexity and multi-layeredness dominate and *“its crux must be the ever-expanding diffusion and utilization of Internet facilities – including their continual innovative evolution – throughout society, among all institutions with political goals and with politically relevant concerns and among many individual citizens”*.

Circling back to the mutually dependent relationship between media and politics, and the fact that political actors aim at visibility and being seen through their communication, the question should arise *what* we see in (social) media spheres of political actors (eg. Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 11). To get to the bottom of this argument, the next chapter aims at explaining the significance of visual communication.

4.1 Visual Communication

To understand the subject of visual communication, one has to firstly define what visuals are. For this, it is crucial to understand the differences between different terms such as images, and pictures. In the English language there can be a distinction made between the terms image and picture, unlike in for example German where *Bild* can be used for both. Generally, one can use the word picture for material images, whereas the term image is used for immaterial images (Lobinger, 2012, p. 47; Müller, 2009, p. 192). However, even in English and despite the general distinction, both terms are also used synonymously because they do overlap (Lobinger, 2012, p. 47f). Immaterial

images are images constructed in people's minds – spiritually so to say – while a material image (or picture) can be touched, such as for example a photograph, a sculpture, or a painting. In this thesis, both concepts will be used and examined, on the one hand we have the material pictures that have been posted onto Instagram, on the other we have the immaterial image that is being constructed by the political actors and perceived by the users.

While Lobinger's (2012) work provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and main schools of thought within the subject of defining images, Müller (2009) draws an intriguing parallel between the packaging of ephemeral products like politics and perfume: *“Both politics and perfume are ephemeral products that are difficult to represent as such in the image. Their packaging - in the case of perfume, the bottle - in politics, usually the person embodying a political office - is only a visual sign that refers to the advertised product, but without being able to represent it itself”* (Müller, 2009, p. 185).

In this thesis, I would argue that visual communication and political communication go hand in hand since *“visuals have always been part of political communication; they have just become even more important with technological advances”* (Farkas & Bene, 2021, p. 120). However in political sciences disciplines this was not always the case since images and visuals have been overlooked while textual components and rhetorical strategies, framing or the usage of linguistic symbols constituted the core of political communication research (Griffin, 2001; Schill, 2012, p. 119). Within the 1990s, a so called *pictorial turn* or *iconic turn* has become apparent which indicates at a more intense consideration of visuals and their role in in the construction of meaning and knowledge in German political sciences academia (Lobinger & Venema, 2019, p. 2). Following this belated development, it is unsurprising that visual communication as a part of communication and media sciences is a relatively young discipline in German speaking sphere. It has however been able to develop significantly and establish itself institutionally, particularly since the late 1990s. Visual communication was officially institutionalized in Germany in the year 2000, when it gained the status of a specialist group within the German Society for Journalism and Communication Studies (DGPK). (Lobinger & Venema, 2019, p. 3).

Unlike political sciences disciplines, politics and political advisors quickly understood the importance of not only delivering catchy sound bites on radio but aiming to do the same on a visual level – therefore creating image bites or images since *“these visuals can convey evidence for verbal arguments, provide heuristic cues for cognitive elaboration, or serve as arguments via association, connotation, and juxtaposition”* (Schill, 2012, p. 120).

In an era, that some scholars call the *“post truth era”* (Keyes, 2004) visuals have a high importance when it comes to communication. Visuals are being called the *“lingua franca of politics”* since visual representations of political actors are ubiquitous in today’s day and age (von Sikorski & Brantner, 2019, p. 183). Even though there are many visual manipulation / enhancement / alteration programs and even if consumers are aware of them, visuals have a special standing in communication (Lilleker, 2019, p. 38) since *“we believe our own eyes, but know well that people are manipulative, we tend to be verbally sceptical and visually gullible”* (Joo et al., 2014, p. 217). The so called *“picture superiority effect”* concept pushes it so far that pictures can be memorized better than textual information (von Sikorski & Brantner, 2019, p. 184). There is an underlying *“reality effect”* since pictures as well as video recordings of (political) events not only serve to convey the message, they also guarantee the authenticity of the event or its presentation (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 12).

Due to the large-scale impact pictures can have as they can make or break a political actor’s medially constructed image, many high ranking politicians surround themselves with specially designated communication specialists whose main job is to *“control the politician’s dress and facial expression, lighting, setting, backdrop, and other elements in the visual frame”* (Schill, 2012). There might even be an adaption of techniques used in the marketing of celebrities to orchestrate and stage events (e.g. applications and waiting lists for a press event) in the political sphere (Street, 2004, p. 438). Photo-ops and professionalised staged communication through political actors influence the gatekeeping and selection-hegemonial characteristic of news media: if the situations to which journalists and media have access are already highly orchestrated and staged, so is the output. In an interview with German media, visual political communication scholar Petra Bernhardt explained that these images take a specific and ideal perspective on politics as they present the political actors in the *“best*

light". A more in-depth analysis of constructing images and strategies to do so can be found in chapter 4.2.

When orchestrated material is directly adopted by news outlets then journalistic reporting is adopting the same perspective (Govedarica, 2020). This can be viewed as highly problematic since media and journalistic practices are seen to be the fourth estate or fourth power in a democracy (Van Aelst et al., 2008). The media are viewed from the outside as well as self-define it as their job to not to present the position of a politician or a party, but to report as objectively as possible (Linsinger, 2019, p. 30).

With visuals, the communicator can also make use of the concept of repetition and what is called by German speaking scholars as "*Schlagbilder*" – images whose meaning can be decoded by the viewer effortlessly and almost immediately (Bernhardt et al., 2009, p. 13). Taking into account Lilleker (2019, p. 40): *„images that break conventions can be surprising, shocking and even repulsive, depending on how the context is read; familiarity can be comforting while also unremarkable“* a dynamic style of combining the familiar with the new appears to be an effective strategy for visual communication.

To conclude, the ultimate goal of visual communication research is to make processes of visual production, communication and reception transparent, trying to explain said processes (Müller & Knieper, 2019, p. 150).

4.2 Social Media and political communication

As already mentioned, several times in the last chapters, the rise of social media also disrupted the traditional processes of political communication. *“In recent years, social media and digital networked communication more broadly have radically influenced the way politics are enacted and communicated”* (Pauwels, 2019, p. 75f). There are different scholastic models on social media's influence on political participation, forming political networks, collective behaviours and opinion forming (Baek, 2015, p. 12) which however will not be discussed in depth in this thesis.

The political usage of the internet started in the early 90s in the United States of America since especially running up to elections political candidates were posting content on the internet. According to Oswald (2018, p. 13), extreme right actors have been the first ones to sporadically use this newfound platform to network and propagate their opinions. Through the development of networks and alliances between thinktanks as well as grassroot organisations and conservative media, the importance of individualised forms of political communication increased (Oswald, 2018, p. 14). Barack Obama and his campaign team however were the first ones in the United States of America to broadly use of this new form of electronic campaigning. They were disseminating ads to join for protest marches, e-mail campaigns and social media fundraising as well as expressing private opinions via personal blogs or visually through platforms such as YouTube (Oswald, 2018, p. 14).

“Obama’s campaign was the first to truly understand and harness the power of sharing and communicating using social media to engage, involve, and empower voters because it enabled trust to be taken to a level rarely seen in politics [...] the Obama campaign used social media technology to organize supporters on a scale that would in the past have required an army of volunteers and paid organizers on the ground” (Harris & Harrigan, 2015, p. 258).

This emerging new way of reaching large audiences is an advantage for political actors in many respects, primarily as it is very cost effective, and the internet has developed to be a central component of societies’ everyday life. According to Carey & Elton (2010, p. 308) the integration of mobile phones into social life occurred much faster than most previous communication media (Messaris, 2019, p. 18). Nowadays the smartphone is indispensable, wherever you go and whoever you observe in the public sphere, the majority has their phones almost glued to their hands. The rise of the smartphones also triggered the development of always carrying a camera on oneself – titled as the *“age of ubiquitous photography”* (Messaris, 2019, p. 18). In the past, taking pictures and photographs was something rare, expensive and special since it took a significantly longer process to take, develop and distribute photographs.

One cannot look at the developments of political communication on the internet without mentioning the darker sides of this phenomenon. *“While there are many examples of*

social media platforms opening up new arenas of political participation, they are not necessarily better or more democratic than traditional mass media, but they are different in their formats and hence logic” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1253). Suddenly, previous consumers of traditional media also become creators and publishers and the gatekeeping role of traditional media is omitted if not annihilated (Knieper & Müller, 2005, p. 152). Nowadays, it is not only journalists or media houses deciding which kind of news are spread and which stories are shared but it is also in the hands of common people.

Another factor that influences the visibility of communication is the fact that personalisation technology more precisely algorithms running social media sites decide over what will be shown and in what order (Kitchens et al., 2020, p. 1620). Consequently, concepts like filter bubbles and echo chambers come to mind:

“Echo chambers and filter bubbles are potent metaphors that encapsulate widespread public fear that the use of social media may limit the information that users encounter or consume online, thus failing to promote a shared experience of free-flowing information. Specifically, the concern is that social media algorithms combine with tendencies to interact with like-minded others to create an environment that predominantly exposes users to congenial, opinion-reinforcing content to the exclusion of more diverse, opinion-challenging content” (Kitchens et al., 2020, p. 1619).

Numerous papers and scientific research projects have tried to examine and understand the effect social media has on opinion polarisation, populism and radicalisation of discourse (e.g. see Hameleers, 2020, p. 331). A central concept of populism is the us-versus-them dichotomy which is fuelled by the way filter bubbles and algorithms function. By the way social media platforms are constructed, the user is inclined to see more content that is closer to their own preference and opinions than opposing ones. Although social media platforms are widely free, the users pay with their data as well as their attention (eg. McNamee, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). Attention is money in the world of unlimited content. This highly addictive design of social platforms also influences the way we consume content. With the amount of news and pictures that constantly penetrate our (sub-)conscience and fight for our attention, certain images can *“leap out – have an immediate emotional impact and lead to hot cognition,*

the ‘wow that is important’ moment” (Lilleker, 2019, p. 41) According to Lilleker (2019, p. 41) images that elicit desire or disgust will be more likely to capture one’s attention and therefore stored into one’s memory. Especially while being on social media, constantly confirming one’s own opinion, seeing likeable content and drawn into the “infinite scroll” consumption of content (Koss, 2021). Discussing such concepts makes apparent that political actors and parties can easily take advantage of the design of social media platforms and concepts of dependency as well as constant opinion confirmation through filter bubbles.

However, it is also crucial that political actors are *“able to use the tools efficiently, conveying an up-to-date, tech-savvy image”* (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 23) otherwise, their online communication can also massively backfire. If something is unintendedly going viral, people communicate on a less favourable angle or political actors are made fun of through, for example, memes (find a working definition in chapter 0), it can make a political communicator’s job very tricky. Memes are widely used in online communication, and one could argue they posit as a counter format to the carefully constructed *photo-op* discussed above. Visual material is taken out of a context and through applying sarcasm or funny captions put into a new context. Meaning that if political actors communicate something one way, it can easily happen that online it will get spread in a different light and internet users are taking active part in shaping a political discourse.

Correspondingly, citizens may *“pay undue attention to matters that may not be particularly germane to a politician’s actual effectiveness in office”* (Messaris, 2019, p. 31). For example, in 2017 a political staffer of the president of the United States at the time Donald Trump was photographed sitting on the couch in the Oval Office with both her feet tucked under her, during a meeting between Trump and heads of historically black colleges and universities. This “behind the scenes” picture received more attention online than the meeting itself (Messaris, 2019, p. 19).

Circling back to the social media induced polarisation mentioned above, scholars are postulating the “fragmentation thesis. This thesis assumes that through the rise of social media and consequently filter bubbles as well as echo chambers, online political conversations are often divided into groups along ideological lines, which leads to

polarization due to the a lack of exposure to diverse viewpoints (Bright, 2018, p. 17). While this trend raises concerns about a breakdown of democratic norms and interaction, it also presents an opportunity for a more personalized approach to political communication. Social media platforms have developed sophisticated algorithms that can tailor content to individual users' interests and preferences, allowing them to engage with political issues on a more personal level. These developments are outlined in the next chapter.

Professionalisation, Mediatisation and Personalisation

The relationship between individually produced and professionally produced content on the internet and social media is a complex one, as noted by Esser and Strömbäck (2014, p. 11). However, some scholars have sought to better understand this relationship by analysing the underlying principles of modern political communication. According to Unger (2012) three key principles - professionalisation, mediatisation, and personalisation - have emerged as central to the way political actors use online platforms to engage with the public.

Professionalisation can be understood as the ever-increasing importance of advertising and media agencies, communications specialists, campaign consultants, and spin doctors (Geise, 2011, p. 141). As mentioned above, it has become normal that politicians – with the help of their communications staff – set the scene for journalists and media outlets. Simultaneously, in Austria, a topic that periodically pops up in public discourse is the amount of money the government spends on PR experts and communication staff (e.g. Winter & Zwins, 2023).

Mediatization refers to the trend towards the dominance of media logic over political logic, which has been amplified by the rise of new forms of media such as social media. The fundamental concept underlying the media logic and political logic is that media and politics are distinct institutional systems with different objectives, characterized by unique actors, regulations, processes, and interests (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014, p. 14). As a result, political actors are increasingly required to engage with these platforms to reach and engage with their target audiences.

Lastly, one can observe a clear trend towards personalisation and a candidate-centeredness in nowadays' political communication. Some scholars even see a trend towards „*personality over issue, style over substance*“ (von Sikorski & Brantner, 2019, p. 182). This goes hand in hand with research of *“individualization (i.e., focus on the politicians' political work) and privatization (i.e., focus on politicians' personality and personal background) dimensions of personalization”* (Farkas & Bene, 2021, p. 120). Scholars have also referred to a number of related concepts in this context, including *“celebrity politics”* (van Zoonen 2006), the *“mediatization of politics”* (Meyer 2001), and *“politainment”* (Brantner and Lobinger 2014), which involves the merging of popular culture and political discourses (von Sikorski & Brantner, 2019, p. 182). In the next chapter we will dive further into strategies and mechanisms of such image management.

Image and Image Management

As mentioned in chapter 4.1 the word *image* is often used in the context of an immaterial image. This can be anticipated since the word is derived from the Latin term *imago* which means *image/imagination* (Müller & Geise, 2015b, p. 35). Primarily, it would be defined as a visual imagination or mental projection. In the context of politicians or celebrities, it can also be understood as *“a mental construct of a person (or an object) which is created on the basis of both, consciously and unconsciously perceived (media) images, facts, associations, experiences or evaluations by the recipient”* (Müller & Geise, 2015b, p. 35). These mental constructs about people are often highly subjective and can also be ambiguous, depending on the opinions, views and interpretations of the viewer. And since the interpretations are varying from viewer to viewer and are ambiguous overall, Müller and Geise (2015b, p. 36) rightly point out that *“to understand images, it is crucial to understand the difference between reality and illusion that they create. The material images, which are the basis for the immaterial or mental images, can be used by visual communication research as initial points of reference for approaching the study of images”*.

Politicians and their lives are closely observed, necessitating careful consideration of how they wish to be perceived in the public sphere. Hence a strategic approach is beneficial to construct a favourable image. In this process, politicians often rely on predefined roles they seek to embody (Simons, 2019, p. 311). Portrayals of power and

those who wield it are limited. Simons names the following: “*empire builder, a restorer (after time of troubles), national father and a moderniser* (Simons, 2019, p. 310).

Nevertheless, these roles have evolved over time. Historically, visual presentations aimed to portray leaders as distant figures exuding toughness and strength. Hitler and Mussolini for example consistently gazed into the camera with a sinister expression, which reflected a familiar historical depiction of a resolute and dependable ruler. However, this portrayal gradually lost its prominence after the Second World War (Bruhn, 2009, p. 142). While previously, it was crucial to be perceived as a symbol of power, projecting strength and perfection, the image has gradually shifted towards a “managerial figure” who is capable of organizing a policy field, government or even the entire state as a whole (Bruhn, 2009, p. 138). Nowadays, being relatable to the people is increasingly relevant (Klemm, 2011, p. 191) and the image of the “*common man*” is becoming more popular as a result.

As explained above, it is a high priority for political actors to gain a favourable image among a majority of their constituency, as this can increase the likelihood of obtaining votes and stay or get into power. It is therefore not surprising, that an increase in image management measures in professionalised political communication can be noted. This is the attempt by political actors to create a certain impression on others as part of their strategic communication. Already in 2008, De Landtsheer (p. 222) highlighted the importance of images and stated in a publication: “*Politicians are performers, and the best performer wins the crowds*”. Or as Ronald Reagan was quoted: “*Politics is just like show business*” (Street, 2004, p. 435). In terms of their impact, stagings and visual representations share a common goal of consciously shaping and modelling an intended image. Stagings are a consciously designed reality. The question that arises in a democracy is, in particular, how transparent these design processes are (Müller & Geise, 2015b, p. 34).

Two examples of politicians who nearly perfected staging and image control are Justin Trudeau in Canada and Sebastian Kurz in Austria. Both politicians are attributed to control their images meticulously, from start to finish. Trudeau perfected this by constructing a reality with the help of photo-ops (see for example Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019): “*Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has had about one official photo-op*

for every weekday he has been in the business of governing [...] He has become an international celebrity, even appearing on a comic book cover” (M.-D. Smith, 2016).

This ties in closely with the concept of “*celebrity politics*” meaning a political actor making use of “*elements of celebrityhood*” in order to appeal to the public (Street, 2004, p. 437). Such elements could be the linkage of staged meet-ups and photo opportunities between politicians and celebrities, winning famous people over to take part in a political campaign, showcasing talents and unexpected skills of the politician on a bigger stage or applying techniques of movie star agents during interviews and rallies such as accrediting journalists beforehand, allowing only a set of pre-agreed questions as well as little time with the candidate and waiting lists for an event (Street, 2004, p. 438).

Trudeau has also been called “*selfie prime minister*” as well as the first federal prime minister of the Instagram era or “*selfie king*” and not without good reason: “*He is very active on Instagram in order to circumvent traditional media intermediaries and reach out directly to publics in Canada and internationally in highly personalized ways*” (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, p. 889f).

In Austria, Ex-chancellor Sebastian Kurz spent a lot of resources and attention into a carefully constructed, mediated image. This perfected concept of his – message control – is now known by many politically interested citizens of Austria. His former spokesperson Gerald Fleischmann even wrote a 300-page book about similar methods in political communication. The Austrian Broadcaster summarised the outlined tactics of the book such as the:

“ ‘dead cat strategy’, which involves throwing the proverbial dead cat on the table, which displaces the topic originally under discussion. Or the ‘Nirvana tactic’ - named after the grunge band - which can be used to win over fans of two opposite camps. ‘SNU’ in turn stands for ‘strategically necessary nonsense’, which is spread on social media and is also intended to distract from other topics (ORF at, 2023).

To classify and categorise the visual output of these strategies, visual self-framing academia has developed several master frames (by for example Grabe and Bucy, 2009), to classify visual imagery released by political actors themselves or media outlets.

The *ideal candidate* frame for example is constituted through elements of *statesmanship* which comprises visuals that depict power, control, and dynamic leadership (e.g., images of elected officials, influential people, patriotic symbols, entourage, campaign symbols, formal wear etc) and *compassion* which encompasses images that convey warmth and kindness (e.g., pictures of the politician with children, family associations, admiring women, affinity gestures like a thumbs-up, physical embraces etc).

The second big frame they identify is the *populist campaigner*. Since populism in political sciences is broadly defined as one ordinary group of people against an elite⁶, visual communication of populism relies on two dimensions: mass appeal and ordinariness. Mass appeal is represented by images showcasing the candidate's popularity and public approval, such as celebrities, large audiences, approving crowds, and interactions with people. Ordinariness is depicted through candidates wearing informal, casual, or athletic attire, engaging with everyday individuals, and participating in physical activities (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297).

These elements will be kept in mind while conducting the image type analysis in this thesis, to help explain the communication strategies employed by the political actors. In summary, political communication can be viewed as a highly strategized, thought-through way of contacting and communicating with the electorate by political actors. Often such strategies revolve more around media logic, than political logic, include celebrity tactics or other strategies to persuade the public of a certain image.

⁶ Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>

4.3 (Online) Communication on War

Fittingly to the topic of visual communication during war times in this thesis, the first war photographs have been taken during the Crimean war in 1853 to 1856. Compared to the artistic war paintings, these first photographs from the battlefields appeared rather faint. Exposure and film quality only allowed the depiction of motionless landscapes and cannonballs, did however not show any horrors of war (Müller & Knieper, 2019, p. 156). In a written interview, Pelfrey, a Ph.D., professor in the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs told Forbes Magazine that in the past, portrayals of war in the media were typically sourced from the military, making them less likely to reflect the true reality. Alternatively, they were based on unreliable and illicit materials that were obtained covertly (Suciu, 2022). In the 1930, the Spanish civil war was pictorially reported and an independent, personal and uncensored reporting was developing in the 1960s and the Vietnam war (Griffin, 2010, p. 7).

The rise of social media has not only impacted how media outlets and political communicators operate, it has of course also impacted the pictures and news we get to see from the site of a conflict or war. *“The real time nature of high-quality video provided from any cell phone, anywhere, anytime, broadcast on an always-on social media network with rapid re-tweets or sharing, means that people anywhere can virtually experience some of the elements of combat”* (Suciu, 2022).

The digital world offers openings as well as challenges for war correspondents and people on site. Social media provides the opportunity for faster news, a wider range of sources, new dynamics in the newsroom and the ability to avoid censorship and restrictions on the supply of information (Williams, 2019, p. 181).

“Ordinary citizens and combatants are usually the first on the scene and social media has increased their ability to set the agenda for the reporting. They present an extra inducement to get closer to the action which contributes to the higher casualty rates” (Williams, 2019, p. 179). Pelfrey in this regard also outlines, that the profound destruction, the first-hand experience of the victims, and the visual documentation of real-time warfare might be transforming our understanding of war. It is often said that history is shaped by those who emerge victorious. However, in this context, perpetrators of war crimes and violence, would be unable to manipulate the historical narrative when the events are being live streamed (Suciu, 2022). It is also interesting

to see a development of war reporting on social media platforms such as Instagram since prior research suggested that users of the platform tended to share positive updates with a light-hearted and happy tone, while being less inclined to share negative content (Manikonda et al., 2021).

Talking about communication during war times also triggers the topic of disinformation, sometimes also wrongly used as a synonym with misinformation. The OECD defines dis- and misinformation as the following:

“Disinformation is the false, inaccurate, or misleading information deliberately created, presented and disseminated, whereas “mis-information” is false or inaccurate information that is shared unknowingly and is not disseminated with the intention of deceiving the public” (Bacio Terracino & Matasick, 2022, p. 3).

Newspaper articles even months after the start of the war against Ukraine mention the ongoing disinformation campaign carried out by the Russian government. According to Stanford Internet Observatory Research Manager Renee DiResta in a Bloomberg Interview (2022), Russia was aiming its online communication on their own channels on its own citizens, aiming at finding broad approval of the war domestically. While doing so, they did not shy away from spreading disinformation. According to the OECD: *“systematic information manipulation and disinformation have been applied by the Russian government as an operational tool in its assault on Ukraine”* (Bacio Terracino & Matasick, 2022, p. 1). There have been so called deep-fake videos of Zelensky asking the Ukrainian soldiers to lay down their weapons, rumours spread that the president fled the country or so-called *typo squatting* which means “registering websites with deliberately misspelled names of similarly named websites” of for example bigger news outlets to spread misinformation on there (Bacio Terracino & Matasick, 2022).

The use of social media by Ukrainian government officials such as ministers and the president Zelensky, was and is remarkable according to DiResta. Ministers personally were constantly on social media platforms such as X and Telegram, Zelensky broadly streamed his nightly speeches across different channels. This, according to her can

be seen as a pushback against Russia's attempt of misinformation (*Social Media's Role in Times of War.*, 2022).

4.4 Instagram

The social network platform *Instagram* was developed in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in San Francisco, California (Glantz, 2014, p. 694). It allows users to upload pictures and videos to an account aka a personal space and is intended to give the impression of a digital photo album (Glantz, 2014, p. 694). After launching it in October 2010, by December 2010 1 million and by September 2011 a reputable 10 million accounts have been created (Instagram, 2020). The name was meant to represent a connection between *instant* dissemination of (pictorial) *telegrams* (Glantz, 2014, p. 694). After the firstly only mobile-based app was acquired by Facebook Inc. (now called Meta (Meta, 2021)) in 2012 for 1 billion Dollars (Rusli, 2012), web profiles were also unlocked, allowing access to the platform via a computer (Glantz, 2014, p. 694). Since then, several new functions like being able to post Videos (in 2013) Stories that only appear for 24 hours (2016), live streaming options (also 2016) and a shopping option (2019) have been added to it and the application as such has been constantly enhanced and redeveloped (Instagram, 2020).

In terms of active users, Meta is overall globally dominating the social media market with three out of the top five platforms belonging to the company (We Are Social et al., 2023). Its biggest competitor on the market nowadays is the Chinese app *TikTok*. TikTok is a video streaming platform that is owned by *ByteDance* one of the largest tech companies in China which has a history of subsuming to the country's communist regime (Roose, 2020). Recently, Instagram has announced updates that will transform the former picture sharing app into a version of its competitor; videos will be pushed more than before, Reels (introduced to Instagram in 2020) aka short vertical videos like on TikTok will be the new default. Users as well as celebrities have called upon Instagram to stop imitating TikTok (Clarke, 2022). There are two other, bigger, primarily photo driven social medias: *Flickr* and *Pinterest*, however neither of them are as popular in their use or known for being used by a number of political communicators.

Starting from the original concept as a photo sharing platform, communication on Instagram is distinctively different to other social media platforms since it is mainly based on its “own aesthetic” (Leaver et al., 2020) or “evolving aesthetic” (Rogers, 2021, p. 3). This aesthetic is described as to “create and record beautiful forms and appearances in a way that enables building (and maintaining) a following, evidenced by overall follower count and likes per post” (Rogers, 2021, p. 3) The author of this paper also emphasises on the fact that Instagram users do expect staging of the posted content rather than believing in candid pictures (Rogers, 2021, p. 3f).

One way that politicians and political organizations use Instagram for political communication is by sharing visually appealing content that highlights their policy positions, personal stories, and campaign messages. They can use Instagram's visual features such as filters, captions, and hashtags to create content that resonates with their target audience. The platform even gives users the option of editing the pictures within the app itself, with basic editing features such as brightness, contrast, structure, warmth, highlights, shadows, vignette and black point (Glantz, 2014, p. 694). In addition to images, there is also the option to post short videos, Graphics Interchange Formats (GIFs for short i.e. animated images) and boomerangs (i.e. fast-forwarding and rewinding videos). Since February 2017, it is also possible to post ten photos in one post instead of just a single photo (‘Share Up to 10 Photos and Videos in One Post’, 2017) In this thesis, the images were not treated as bundles if they were posted as such, but as individual image units, since the image motif and the actual meaning within a post can be different.

To give written context to the posted visual content, one can also add captions in the maximum length of 2.200 characters (Zote, 2021). However, only 125 characters are initially shown underneath each visual, the consuming user has to actively click to enlarge the caption to its full length. Even though the maximum length of the added caption is longer than on for example the primarily textual social media X (280 characters) and text is usually added to the visuals, visuals are still on the foreground and more important than textual elements.

Due to the outlined reasons above, Instagram is the best platform to examine visuals since it can be treated as an online image book used by big portions of citizens and political actors alike.

5 Method

The most fitting method to examine and categorise a big body of pictures seems to be the *Quantitative Image Type Analysis* as developed by scholars Elke Grittmann and Ilona Ammann (2011) and shaped by Marion Müller and Stephanie Geise (2015) in the German speaking visual political communication research sphere. Visual presentation – may it be self-representation, photo reporting or media visuals – of politics *“is condensed to a repertory of visual imagery which is constructed by selection and, thus, attribution of meaning”* (Grittmann, 2012, p. 142; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 18). Therefore, types and repetitions of typical motifs can be found in published images of political actors which is the underlying purpose of this paper. As a reminder, the research questions *“How did the seven political groups in the 9th European Parliament (EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ID, ECR, the Left) communicate about the war in Ukraine on Instagram in the first two months after the Russian invasion?”* as well as *“What visual communication strategies are applied, which patterns can be found and how do they relate to the personalisation thesis?”* and *“How does the visual communication vary depending, on the one hand, on pre-existing group sympathies towards Russia, and, on the other, what member states are prevalent in the respective groups?”* will guide through the analysis.

5.1 Quantitative Image Type Analysis

It makes sense to start off with a clear definition and description of a quantitative image type analysis before starting the analysis process itself. The method combines the grounded content analysis of social sciences with an art-historical approach called *Iconography* which is grounded on the idea that image contents cannot be combined completely freely, but that specific, culturally transmitted combinations of representations develop (Müller & Geise, 2015a, p. 211). To give an example, there is not an infinite number of how you are able to portray politicians, therefore repetitions and recurring patterns of motifs will emerge. News media cannot come up with an infinite number of political pictures they publish in their outlets: although the topic, politicians and people in power might change, the classification of visual depiction remains. These patterns are the specific forms of depiction through which themes, ideas, or events are visualized and which then can be classified as types by researchers in an objectively comprehensible way (Müller & Geise, 2015a, p. 212).

Visual communication scholars call these topic domains archetypes (see for example Bucy & Grabe, 2009; Grittmann, 2007, 2012; Müller 1997; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 18). Through working out these patterns, and looking at the choice of image motifs in particular it also allows conclusions to be drawn about the photographers or journalists, as it unmasks a *"conscious act of selection"* (Grittmann & Ammann, 2008, p. 302). Within these selection processes, one should not disregard the cultural influences as well as aesthetic conventions of the published content (Grittmann & Ammann, 2008, p. 302). However, focusing on recurring patterns does not only unmask journalistic routines and selection choices but *„the image type analysis may also be applied to strategic visual imagery of politicians in order to make statements on routines and selection criteria in the choice of imagery“* (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 18).

Methodologically one could argue that the image type analysis even though it often times is called *quantitative* image type analysis, is a mixed method approach since it *"follows a two-step approach: where conclusions on patterns and strategies are drawn, a quantitative approach is required whereas the analysis of meanings and symbols calls for a more qualitative procedure"* (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 165). Image types also condense complex political contexts, since the gathering of similar motifs and classification into image types takes it to another level of abstraction since the image types reduce meanings of individual image motifs to their central image message (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 165).

Translated into the methodology of image type analysis, type building in the first step consists of the researcher's search, guided by the research question, for recurring similarities and differences in the content and/or form in the analysed corpus. *"The image material is to be examined to see whether there are similar (not identical!) images that depict this topic, so that one can speak of an image type"* (Grittmann & Ammann, 2009, p. 148). Firstly, the image content is determined, the image motifs are examined and typified, so the analysed material is thus classified according to certain characteristics. The purpose here is that the characteristics within one image type should be as similar as possible, for example demonstrate internal homogeneity, while the image types themselves should differ as much as possible from one another therefore representing external heterogeneity (Müller & Geise, 2015a, p. 215). The

most important goal of the typification is to abstract the central meaning of the individual image motif and thus reducing it to the essential statement (Müller & Geise, 2015a, p. 215).

This analytical process is based on the German communication scholars Grittmann and Ammann (2009, 2011) who developed it as well as Müller and Geise (2015a) who substantially shaped it in the last years in the German speaking visual communication academia.

An image type analysis is schematically carried out as follows: First of all, the boundaries of the research as well as the material corpus must be defined. Since the method is heavily interconnected with the material one works with, there is no point in blindly copying or adopting pre-identified image types from existing literature. However, it is important to have a good knowledge of such already existing image types since it will make the following analysis steps easier and image types might be identified faster.

Secondly, the image types identified on the basis of a partial sample of the material corpus and their formal and content-related characteristics are translated into (image) content-analytical categories within the framework of a codebook. With the help of this codebook, the entire material corpus is analysed in a standardised manner. The base of these steps is the art-historical iconological-iconographical interpretation according to the qualitative three-step method shaped by Erwin Panofsky in the 1920s and 1930s (Müller, 2011, p. 32f). This method found its interdisciplinary origin based on the *strata of meaning* developed by sociologist Karl Mannheim (Müller, 2011, p. 32). Following this logic, there are three levels that must be considered when interpreting a picture: *“the objective meaning, the expressive meaning, and the documentary meaning”* (Mannheim 1952, cited in Müller, 2011, p. 32). Those three levels can be identified and examined through three steps: a pre-iconographic description, an iconographic analysis, and an iconological interpretation (Panofsky, 1972)

In the first, pre-iconographical description it is important to describe the content of the image as neutral and free of interpretation as possible. Grittmann and Amann (2011, p.166) describe this as the primary and natural Sujet. For example, if a picture portrays

a person, the researcher should describe the superficial characteristics that catch the eye like appearance and maybe their approximate age and gender. Moreover, in this step of the analysis it is important how the image is composed, what objects are in it and where they are placed as well as which prominence the depicted objects or people have. Throughout the second step, the iconographic analysis, which can also be called secondary or conventional sujet, the researcher is supposed to give meaning to the previously described content. Now it is time to identify the used concepts, themes, references etc. In this step, the portrayed person can be identified as a politician for example. The third step is more research intensive as it requires a broad knowledge of conceptions, social conventions and worldviews. Thus, with the help of other sources and knowledge the content can be interpreted on an even more precise level (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, pp. 165–167).

After having conducted the analysis of the aforementioned steps on a sample, the rest of the corpus needs to be analysed and categorised quantitatively with the help of the codebook. In this case, the codebook was a simple spreadsheet within which the following divisions have been made: file path, the caption of the Instagram post, the link to the post, the content of the Instagram post aka the image, the image type and two extra analysis characteristics namely whether the image includes the colours blue and yellow and whether a politician of the group is portrayed. The goal of this is to unmask underlying patterns in order to come to conclusions about the selection process, strategies, social context or situation of the communicator (Müller & Geise, 2015a, p. 215f).

An important distinction must also be made between image types and individual image motifs. They differ in terms of the degree of abstraction, as the meaning of the individual image motif is reduced to the central image statement (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 170). This central statement or central meaning can help understand complex political contexts as image types condense such contexts and relations. Grittmann/Ammann (2011) have described this, for example, using the example of the image type "shaking hands," which shows more than two politicians shaking hands: *"The handshake is a political gesture and stands for loyalty, solidarity, or the affirmation of promises and the conclusion of contracts"* (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011).

6 Analysis

Once basic constraints such as corpus of material and period of analysis were established, the pictures were downloaded, sorted and thoroughly examined over and over again. In order to identify an image type, it is necessary to have precise knowledge about the underlying material corpus, i.e., the images. The typification was not exclusively inductive but oriented on the existing research literature on strategic visual communication of political actors (see Grittmann & Amann, 2011; Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017; Müller & Geise, 2015). It should be noted at this point that image types cannot simply be adopted from analysis to analysis or directly taken from existing literature, since different material corpora have different characteristics and thus also revealing different image types. Since this material focusses on a specific political situation, it was clear that distinctions had to be made and extra attention laid on the communicative situation as well as historical developments. Throughout the process repetition is key since at each stage the image types can be intentionally changed and adapted. The classification is developed during this process, changed and enhanced throughout the analysis. It is important to ensure that the image types are categorized and described in such a way that they would also be categorized in the same way by a different researcher or coder at a later point in time. This is important to secure the reproducibility of this research.

6.1 Corpus

As has thoroughly been outlined before, this thesis focuses on the visual communication of all political groups in the European Parliament on the war in Ukraine. The starting point of the analysis and securement of the material corpus was the 24th of February 2022 until the 24th of April 2022. As mentioned, the 24th of February marks the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, therefore also a possible starting point of the political group's visual communication on Instagram. The aim of this research was to find the visual communicative reactions and strategies to a shock geopolitical event such as the invasion of a sovereign country. The war – so far – has had many turning points and events that might have resulted in a heightened visual communication from both media outlets and political groups (for example Walker,

2024). Looking at an initial period of two months however allows for a raw and unprompted visual communication line which was probably not pre-planned to the extent that other visual communication on Social Media might be. The length of 2 months also allows for the groups to – in addition to the unprompted reactionary visual communication – get planning and strategize their communication line. Therefore, the analysis will provide an immediate and midterm overview of visual communication strategies of the political groups in the 9th European Parliament.

User comments underneath the pictures were excluded from the analysis since the focal point of the research were the posted pictures and motifs were the analysis unit. The posting texts that were accompanying the pictures, also named captions, were defined as a contextual unit, in case the motifs were not expressive enough or might have fit into multiple categories. On Instagram, the maximum character length of a caption is 2,200 characters (Zote, 2021) and therefore a limited way of contextualising the posted pictures.

The category *Non-Ukraine content* has also been excluded from the image type analysis but will be discussed in the next chapters. While not an image type, it will be measured to assess the proportion and frequency of posted visual content that relates to Ukraine relative to content that does not.

The research is based on the seven official Instagram accounts of the political groups represented in the 9th European Parliament. The follower as well as numbers of posts are based on the date of the recovery of the entire material corpus on July 26th, 2022.

Table 1 Summary of data of the political group's Instagram accounts

Group	Instagram Handle	Followers	total # of posts	# of pictures posted during research period
European People's Party	@eppgroup	26.8K	2,385	168

Socialists & Democrats	@socialistsanddemocrats	33.4K	1,406	75
Renew Europe	@reneweurope	24.2K	968	31
Greens/ European Free Alliance	@greensefa	23.6K	1,043	30
Identity and Democracy	@idgroup	1231	293	33
European Conservatives & Reformists	@ecrgroupeu	3080	236	49
The Left	@theleft_eu	9971	637	50

Source: own data visualisation

Looking at the absolute numbers, it is interesting that although the EPP has the most seats in the 9th parliament and therefore received the biggest share of votes during the last elections, they have significantly less followers than the second biggest group the S&D. Also looking at the absolute number of posts that have been posted by the accounts, the fact that the EPP has published a good thousand posts more than the S&D while being 6,600 followers behind is surprising. This might have something to do with the audience that the content is targeted at and / or the voters of the respective parties, since usually younger people are using social media and younger people also tend to vote for the S&D (Schminke, 2019).

The images were downloaded automatically using a program called *4kStogram* which saved all posted content directly from the chosen Instagram accounts. The program saved a lot of time compared to manually backing up every picture through screenshots. After that, the images had to be inserted individually into a spreadsheet. They were sorted into *file path, caption, link, image, image type, blue and yellow?, Politician?*.

The unit of analysis in the thesis encompassed all images contained within a single post. In some cases, there were multiple pictures in a single post, as Instagram permits

a maximum of ten pictures to be posted simultaneously. (Meta, n.d.). The text contained in the post aka the caption of the image including the hashtags, were used to contextualise the image in case the central message was not clear within the visual material alone. Videos were excluded from the analysis since for Videos the *image* type analysis is not fitting and would trigger a separate analysis. Since 2016, the social network has allowed users to upload so-called *Stories* aka content that is merely visible for 24 hours and then only accessible to the creator (Instagram, 2016). It would be worth conducting an examination and research based on the function of *Stories* – so essentially political content that is only visible for 24 hours – in order to be able to comprehensively explore and understand this phenomenon in the context of political communication.

The total amount of posted pictures on all seven Instagram accounts of the political groups within the research period of two months (24.02.2022 – 24.04.2022) was $n = 436$. The exact distribution of postings per account as well as identified image types will be presented next to lay the basis for the result discussion. In the results chapter, the image types will be illustrated, sorted by political groups, and in-depth examples of the most interesting findings will be provided. Presenting one image per group per image type would be illogical, as not all political groups shared images that can be subsumed under every image type. Synonymously, certain groups, such as the ID group, scarcely posted about the Ukraine war.

6.2 Positioning

To subsume the posted content under image types, the types firstly have to be outlined as the one image type combines characteristics and the central message of the motif. Therefore, the image type *Positioning* was defined as (mostly) using photo-text combinations through which a variety of topics are highlighted to convey a political position, that can be a statement, demand, opinion or similar. Many of the *Position* image types are either graphics, stock photos or mood images which are rather held in the background while the message is conveyed through text or colours. During the first round of coding, 192 pictures fit the *Positioning* image type description, making up 44% of all examined content.

To further categorise the large number of *Positioning* type posts, sub-categories were created to examine the different ways of portraying the *Positioning* image type with more specificity. The features within an image type should be as similar as possible, exhibiting internal homogeneity, whilst the image types themselves should differ from each other as much as possible, thus representing external heterogeneity (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 215). Therefore, creating sub-categories is merely adding an extra layer of possible examination while not disregarding this core principle of homogeneity vs. heterogeneity in the image type analysis.

Overall, seven sub-categories of image types have been created that can be subsumed under the above-described *Positioning* type.

Positioning: Putin

The first sub-category that has been created is the image type: *Positioning Putin*. Pictures of this image type use the imagery and persona of Putin to convey a message. This sub-category taps into the personification aspect of social media, using the face of the president of the Russian Federation rather than objects, visuals, or graphics. Overall, this image type was found in 27 cases across all parties.

Positioning: Quote

The second sub-category of the *Positioning* image type is *Quote*. It differs from other *Positioning* types because the main motif of the image is text that is a written-out quotation by a person and is often accompanied by their picture as well as their name next to it. The message is therefore conveyed using text, may include quotation marks (“ ”), and includes clear citation. This technique also utilizes the personification aspect of social media since the positioning is conveyed through the opinion of a single person instead of a general position or a party statement.

Positioning: Symbols

Symbols make up the third *Positioning* image type. To understand how the image type was being used by the groups, one must first understand what a symbol means in a political context. Essentially, “a symbol is a human invention and arises from the process of attributing meaning to an object [...] The signifier, is imbued with a rich diversity of meanings, values and significance” (Revillet, 2021b, p. 5).

The main motif of this image type is the portrayal of flags, institutions, emblems, buildings objects or other symbols connected to EU, Ukrainian, and Russian culture, history, and similar significant narratives. *“The use of symbols is one of the most effective ways to put one’s message across in a most condensed form. They also contribute to conveying an (over)simplified message easy to grab and remember and whose emotional force could never be equated by a rational discourse”* (Revillet, 2021a). Fifteen posted pictures were classified as *Positioning: Symbols* image type. All of these were published by the EPP.

Positioning: Screenshot

The fourth *Positioning* image type is similar to the *Quote* type. However, *Screenshot* type images show the content of a digital display without putting the emphasis on the person who published them. This type is mostly used to depict text posted or published on a different platform. In most cases, the other platform the screenshot was taken from is X (formerly known as Twitter), a microblogging and social networking service that allows users to post short 280 characters long written texts. This image type however also includes the screen capture of letters or longer written statements. This image type has been found 12 times and was only posted by the EPP (10), once on the S&D and once on the ID channel.

Positioning: Activism

The fifth sub-type of the *Positioning* image type is called *Activism*. The main motifs in this category are portraying the act of campaigning by an actor, for example by holding up signs with messages. The setting however is not in a demonstration scenery with a collection of people, rather singular acts of active engagement. Across all examined Instagram accounts, this image type has been found 11 times and was almost exclusively used by the EPP (n = 10), while it has only been used once by the Greens/EFA.

Positioning: Infographics

Coming to the second to last sub-category of the *Positioning* type, the *Infographics* type subsumes illustrated graphics that present facts, statistics, and figures to underline a political message. It is important to differentiate between this type and the *Screenshot* images: images of the *Infographics* type convey messages through

graphics showing figures, charts or maps, instead of just written text. The goal of this image type is to break down the message in easily comprehensible visual and graphical artefacts, so the information is easier understandable and digestible for the viewer of the image. Across all accounts, a total of 12 *Infographic* types of images have been posted within the research period.

Positioning: Memes

A special sub-category of the *Positioning* image type is the *Meme*: motifs that have gone viral on the internet, typically with a humorous or satiric undertone and placed into different context than expected, often with accompanying lettering or graphics. Memes are usually based on current events or popular series and films. These images, words, and videos spread virally across the web at breakneck speed - especially via social networks (Schwan, 2017). A *Meme* often uses humour and well-known imagery to highlight an opinion or position, hence the subordination to the image type *Positioning*. Interestingly, only one group has published content that can be categorized as *Meme*, namely the S&D. Throughout the examination period a total of three images have been posted on the S&D Instagram account.

6.3 Demonstration

A very well-known image type is *Demonstration*. In this thesis it includes pictures that portray a crowd of people protesting on the streets in masses with banners, flags, signs etc. to support or protest a cause. Within the first few weeks after the war in Ukraine started, protests and demonstrations arose around the world, demanding for it to stop. This newspaper article⁷ covered some of them visually (Fidler, 2022). It is important to differentiate these motifs with the *Positioning: Activism* type as mentioned above, since here it includes pictures that have been taken on the streets, there was a collective gathering of people and not individual expressionist actions. The political groups within the European Parliament shared a total of 31 images categorized as the *Demonstration* image type. The S&D group (n = 10) and the EPP group (n = 12) demonstrated a comparable number of images within this category. The Greens/EFA

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2022/mar/06/ukraine-protests-around-the-world-in-pictures>

group (n = 4) and the ECR group (n = 5) had a relatively smaller number of images classified as such.

6.4 Impact of war

The image type *Impact of war* has been inductively created within this research process. The motifs that are being subsumed under this image type are pictures taken on site in Ukraine, picturing the war, destruction and casualties. War pictures and war photography has been undertaken since the 19th century as mentioned in chapter 4.3.

“In war photography [...] danger hovers at the edges of all such images; the passions they record are always the most extreme. The possibility of dying that is their subtext, for their subjects as much as the photographer, means they make urgent claims on our attention, allowing us both to feel a sense of our own mortality and to hold that sense at bay” (Brothers, 1997).

24 times was *Impact of war* content posted across all examined accounts. The most images that can be assigned to this category have been posted by the EPP (n = 20) and four were published by the S&D. The majority of the images posted by EPP include bombed buildings, Ukrainian people hugging each other or masses of people walking somewhere to find shelter. Even though the image content at the first look seems to be quite heterogeneous, the motifs and central messages of this image type appear to be the same; to visually update the followers about the happenings in Ukraine at the moment, the destruction and the suffering the war is causing to the Ukrainian people as well as to use Ukrainian faces to display emotion, loss and damage of the war.

6.5 Political Speech

The *Political speech* is a very classic image type that can be found in visual communication research literature (eg. Müller & Geise, 2015b, p. 213). In this image type, a politician is shown to be giving a political speech, there might be microphones, a lectern, or a stage. Grittmann (2012, p. 142) claims this image type to be one of the most central ones in visual political communication. In the research period and across the examined accounts, 22 images have been published that can be subsumed under

the *Political speech* image type. The EPP posted 15, followed by the ECR with five and two that were posted on the Greens/EFA account.

6.6 Media interest

This last image type that covers Ukraine content combines all pictures that show a political actor who is being interviewed by (news) media – cameras are pointing towards the interviewee, in or outside of a studio. The images often feature journalists, backdrops, cameras or microphones. Curiously, solely one account has shared content that can be categorized as *Media interest*. The ECR group has posted eight pictures that show their politicians in interview settings or in touch with media outlets, inside or outside of studios. The majority of these pictures had to be included into the examination due to the contextualisation through the caption, since from the posted picture alone, hardly any connection could be made to the war in Ukraine.

6.7 Non-Ukraine content

This last category called *Non-Ukraine content* is not an image type. As mentioned in chapter 6.1 whenever a picture or accompanied posting text was not referencing the war in Ukraine, the picture has been immediately disregarded for the quantitative image type analysis. The following description is purely for contextual purposes.

Within the examined period, 154 pictures out of 436 have been posted across all parties' Instagram accounts which did not mention the war in Ukraine visually or in their accompanying posting texts. Hence it accounts for slightly more than one-third of all content posted during that period, which can be classified as *Non-Ukraine content*. Since the focus of this research paper is the war and the visual communication about it, these 154 pictures have been excluded from the analysis. Notably however, the fact that both The Left (84%) and ID (85%) have the highest percentage of *Non-Ukraine* image motifs opens up another layer of interpretation which will be carried out in chapter 8.3.

7 Results

In the following chapters, the results of the research will be presented. The in-depth analysis of the results per groups will be outlined in order to then talk about applied strategies by the groups and analysing the findings from a strategic, political, and potentially even historical perspective.

Throughout the chapters of the image types employed by the respective political groups, additional layers of the examination will be discussed in order to provide a broader and more in-depth analysis. For example, the visual communication style (i.e. if a posting is just an ostensibly non-edited photograph versus a highly edited graphically illustrated collage) or the usage of colours will add another layer of examination that might be enriching to the image type analysis since

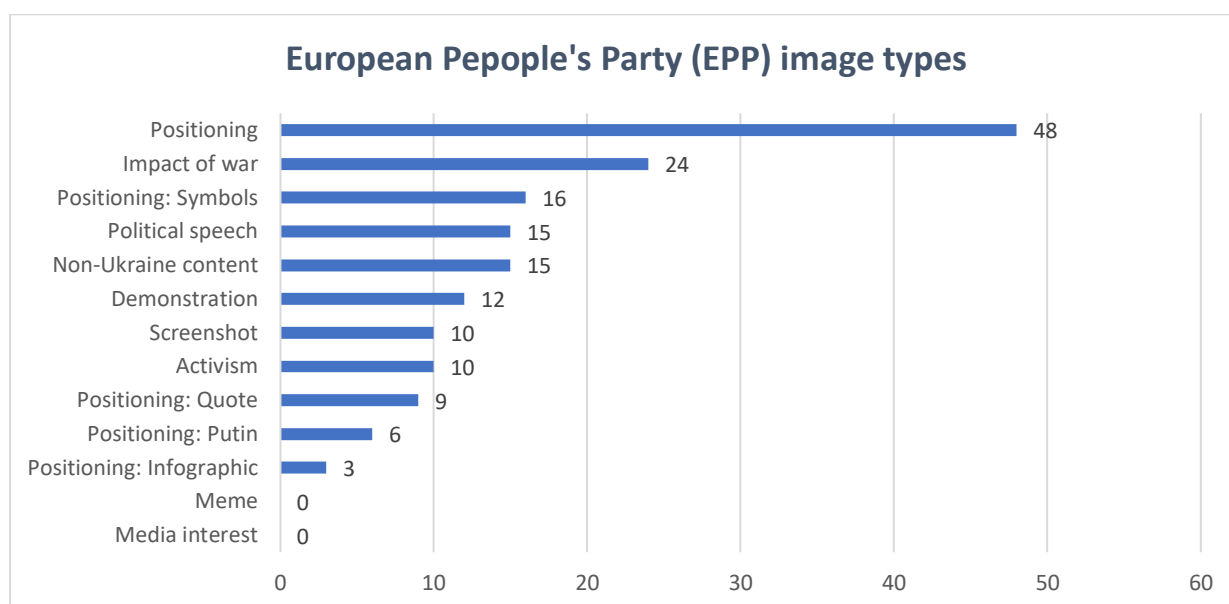
“psychologically, colours may attract attention, carry specific meanings and communicate information, evoke certain emotions or motivations, and stimulate our memory, thought and experiences. [...] People experience psychological change when they are in contact with different colours. Colours can stimulate, excite, and invoke different emotions. Each colour may result in a different psychological reaction”(Zailskaite-Jakste et al., 2017, pp. 1373–1374)

With these extra considerations, conclusions can be drawn in terms of obscure communication strategies that might not be unravelled through the image type analysis alone. Hence why there was an additional examination of the colours yellow and blue employed during the process.

7.1 EPP Image Types

The *@eppgroup* account was updated on a regular basis throughout the entire researched period and as shown in Table 2. With a total of 168 pictures, it was also the account with the most pictures posted out of all political groups in the EP. Around 60% of all posted content by *@eppgroup* can be classified as *Positioning* image type and its subcategories. Noteworthy is also the little amount *Non-Ukraine* content which makes up only 9% of images that have not mentioned the war in Ukraine.

Table 2 Image type frequencies of the European People's Party



Source: own data visualisation

The group positions itself extremely clearly on the side of Ukraine since in the majority of the *Positioning* type images, the central message to the user is the support and assistance of the EPP group to defend Ukraine, debunk Russian disinformation or motivational messages towards the citizens of Ukraine. A central message within the images, across image types, is the emphasis on solidarity and a common will to defend democracy in Ukraine which would also mean defending democracy in wider Europe. For instance, on the 3rd of March 2022, the group has posted a picture⁸ with the lettering: “*This is a war against all of us*” or on March 4th 2022 a picture⁹ of Manfred Weber speaking into a microphone with white lettering in the foreground of the image stating “*The fight of the Ukrainians is our fight as Europeans*”. Figure 2 which was posted on the 10th of April 2022¹⁰, can be classified as a typical *Positioning* image type. It displays a large white lettering reading “*Set up a Marshall-like Plan fund to rebuild Ukraine after the war*” which takes over the entire image. To emphasise the message, the lettering is put on top of a blue and yellow background, schematically representing the flag of Ukraine. In the right lower corner, the logo of the political group has been placed. This has been a standard practice in their visual communication, the majority of the images posted on @eppgroup were marked with this logo.

⁸ @eppgroup posted on 3rd of March 2022: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CapjElitbQW/>

⁹ @eppgroup posted on 4th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CarSn7GOTEG/>

¹⁰ @eppgroup posted on 10th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcKYbYyKvaa/>

Unlike other groups, the EPP has used their elected officials in their visual communication more than any other group has. This supports the personalisation thesis and therefore the second main research question of this thesis. In line with this trend, the political group strategically employed the faces of their group members, including both the group presidency and “regular” Members of the European



Figure 2 EPP example of a "Positioning " image type

Parliament, across various image types. A brief examination of the total number of depicted politicians indicated a lack of distinct differentiation between regular members and the group presidency, such as for example the president Manfred Weber, as well as the absence of a clear preference for any individual among the showcased politicians.

This is also shown in the third most represented image type in their communication about the war in Ukraine: *Political speech*. *Political speech* has been identified as one of the most central image types in visual communication literature (e.g., Grittmann 2012, p. 142) which makes this observance particularly noteworthy. Within the context of the Ukraine war, this image type portrays the EPP politicians speaking to an audience to not only actively take part in the conversation but at the same time being in the centre of communicative happenings. This demonstrates that the group and its politicians have meaningful contributions to make and are not just passive observers on the side-lines. Many of the *Political speech* images that have been posted by

@eppgroup have been pictured in a demonstration setting, tapping into the strategy that their politicians are – like the rest of the people are pictured – on the streets, approachable and in “the thick of things”. Politicians who might have not been depicted in such a setting, may have been visually represented while participating in activist endeavours or by sharing a quote pertaining to the events alongside their photograph.

While the trend of personalisation has been employed heavily by the EPP looking at the absolute number of pictures that featured either politicians of the group or Ukrainians, comparingly the image type *Positioning: Putin* has not been found as often. A total of six images were shared featuring Putin as the primary motif. With the exception of one image, which displayed him in colour against a black and white background, all the other images depicted Putin in a black and white tint. These visuals were further enhanced by a red backdrop and white lettering, serving to emphasize the intended visual message.

Another noteworthy aspect is the notable difference in the number of images featuring Ukrainian individuals between the EPP group and other political groups. In fact, the EPP group has shared a total of 31 images depicting refugees or individuals affected by the war, with a particular emphasis on highlighting women and children. This observation becomes significant when viewed through the lens of visual framing theory, which suggests that by incorporating images of children, embraces, and emotional displays, the visual communicator aims to evoke a sense of empathy and compassion within the viewer. Such deliberate framing choices likely seek to foster a deeper connection and understanding of the human impact of the conflict, invoking a call for empathy and support. This claim is also backed up by Müller (1997) who has outlined that political actors make use of an emotional strategy. The emotion strategy encompasses two main approaches: the utilization of images that depict the emotions of the political actor themselves, as well as images strategically designed to evoke emotional responses in the viewer (Müller, 1997, p. 237). For instance, on the 1st of March, a picture¹¹ of a wounded women has been posted, wearing a white, blood-stained head bandage, her face is almost entirely covered in blood as well as dirt and the bandage is covering half of her right eye. Despite the clear wounded state of her

¹¹ @eppgoup posted on 1st of March 2022 https://www.instagram.com/p/CaifQY_gGVw/

body, she appears to be smiling absently yet calmly into the camera. This example can be attributed to the emotional strategy as outlined by Müller (1997).

What moreover particularly stands out with this group is the use of symbols in their visual communication as main motifs. As the singular political group within the European Parliament, the EPP strategically employs symbolism encompassing elements such as flags, buildings, signs, flowers, and colours as central motifs on Instagram. Shanafelt (2008) defines symbols as *“the simple act of lifting aloft a symbolic token (any symbolic token) is a gesture whose meaning is easily grasped both within and across political domains”* (Shanafelt, 2008, p. 16). Nine times out of the fourteen posted pictures that have been subsumed under the image type *Positioning: Symbols*, the central objects of the image have been the flag of the European Union and the Ukrainian flag. This finding aligns with the notion that the EPP endeavours to exhibit a sense of unity between the European Union and Ukraine. In this context, the act of hoisting flags assumes a heightened symbolic significance. As Shanafelt (2008, p. 16) posits, flags, when raised high above the ground and above people's heads, carry an inherent display of power. This dynamic interplay of symbolism and political stance reinforces the EPP's commitment to stand with Ukraine, highlighting their solidarity and allegiance to the Ukrainian people in their struggle.



Figure 3 EPP example of an “Impact of war” image type

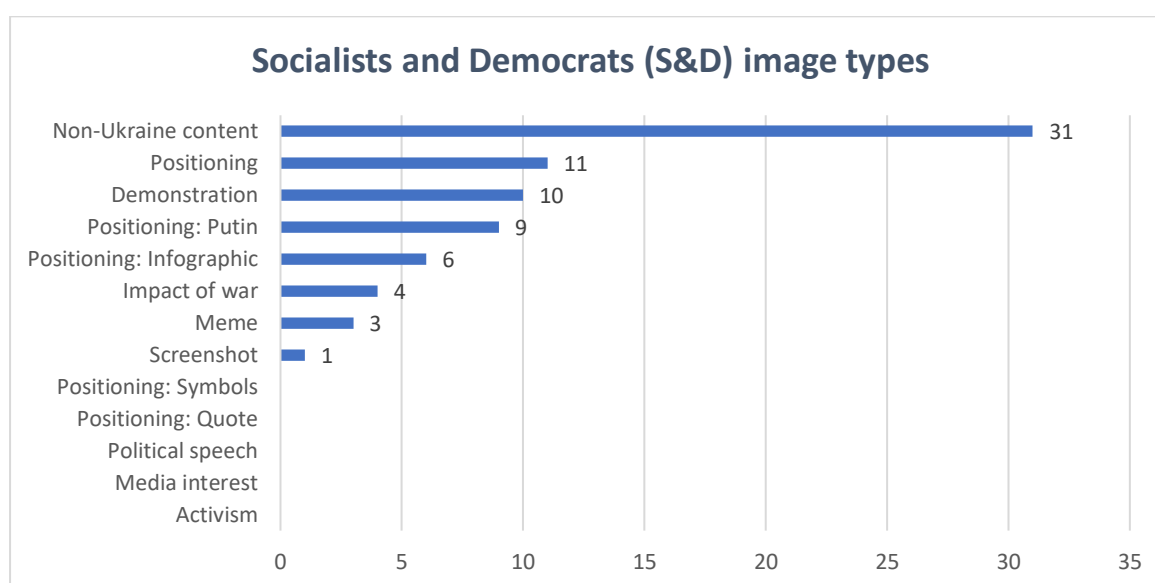
In terms of frequency *Impact of war* images placed second in the communication of the EPP group. These are pictures taken on site in Ukraine, picturing the war, destruction, and sometimes even human casualties. Next to the EPP, only the S&D has worked with such images. Figure 3 pictures four burned down vehicles that are taking up most of the space of the image. In the background one can spot a handful of people, on the left half of the image one can see a man dressed in dark green colours, protective vest, and a gun holster on his hip, taking photos of one of the destroyed cars with his cell phone. The sky has an intense blue colour, with only a light layer of clouds at the end of the horizon. The usage of this image type can be tied to the fact that pictures of war and destruction are highly attention grabbing and “*offer viscerally exciting and voyeuristic glimpses into theatres of violence that, for most viewers, are alien to everyday experiences*” (Griffin 2010, p. 8). Griffin (2010, p. 9) moreover argues that viewers are naturally drawn to potential threat or danger which is also heightening their attention. Grabbing and holding attention in times of the “infinite scroll” as described in chapter 4.2 can be seen as the goal of visual communication on social media.

Looking at the displayed image types by the EPP group, one could draw conclusions that the attempted transported image is that of active politicians, being involved in the happenings of the war, speaking out against it, being strong in their information and positioning messages but also using symbols to underline these positions. Moreover, the EPP has focussed on portraying the suffering in the war zone. This strategy seems to be employed to evoke feelings and emotions in the viewer as well as grab and holding their attention with such images, playing with voyeuristic attitudes and basic sentiments of shock, sadness, or anxiety. Summarised they employed a “*personalised emotional strategy*” aiming to evoke emotions and solidarity with the cause.

7.2 S&D Image Types

Within the examined period the S&D has posted 75 images out of which 41% were not referencing the Ukraine war. Just as for the EPP, *Positioning* was the most used image type, closely followed by *Demonstration* and notably the image type *Positioning: Putin*.

Table 3 Image type frequencies of the Socialists and Democrats



Source: own data visualisation

One particular *Positioning: Putin* image has to be analysed at this point. Figure 4 has been published with the same frontal depiction of Vladimir Putin and addition of the words “war criminal” by the groups EPP (24th of February 2022¹²), Renew (1st of March 2022¹³), S&D (1st of March 2022¹⁴) and ECR (16th of March 2022¹⁵). All four groups have used a portrait picture of Putin with a stern facial expression and included the respective group logo even though branding their visual communication might not be a standard practice for all groups. Moreover, the edit of the portrait must be noted. Every group has altered the colour scheme or let Putin appear in black and white as can be seen in Figure 4 which was posted on the 3rd of March 2022¹⁶. In this case, the same red has been used which is found in their group logo to add a lettering reading “war criminal”.

The utilization of this motif draws inspiration from “mug shots” which are linked to the documentation of criminals by law enforcements. By employing this visual technique, the political groups therefore create a deliberate association of Putin and criminality. This strategic visual communication contributes to a visual narrative that seeks to frame Putin as being deserving of universal scrutiny and condemnation.

¹² @eppgroup on 24th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXTqN4oRB2/>

¹³ @reneweurope on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cajkc1ZK56H/>

¹⁴ @socialistsanddemocrats on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Caj9v5OKn6T/>

¹⁵ @ecrgroupeu on 16th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbKcdUJtNoL/>

¹⁶ @socialistsanddemocrats on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Caj9v5OKn6T/>



Figure 4 S&D example of a "Positioning: Putin" image type

Comparing to the EPP, the Social Democrats have also shared content on their Instagram account depicting demonstrations and protests on the street against the war in Ukraine. However, it is noteworthy that none of the ten posted images from the S&D feature Members of European Parliament. Unlike other political groups, the S&D group has chosen not to visually communicate their politicians directly through these images. Nevertheless, this does not imply a complete absence of the portrayal of individuals in the group's visual communication. Specifically, when it comes to the *demonstration* image type, the S&D group has portrayed ordinary citizens, symbolically wrapped in flags, holding signs, and standing side by side, solidarity. With this, by focusing on the collective, the political group seeks to convey a message of unity and activism rather than centring the attention on individual politicians within their visual narrative. Many of these images feature individuals who exhibit intense emotions, like for example through their facial expressions, body language or actions.

These images aim to evoke empathy and solidarity, urging viewers to recognize the concerns and grievances. By capturing and disseminating these motives the S&D such as the EPP, aim to evoke strong emotional responses in their audience. In scholarly research, evoking emotions through pictures is an important act in order to influences people's opinions and decision making processes (see for example Dahmen et al., 2019) which in turn is vital for political groups.

In other image types, the S&D did picture politicians, however not their own. The way they did this was to “name and shame” famous politicians or MEPs of other groups. Tingley and Tomz (2022, p. 445) describe this practice as occurring “*when some actors publicly denounce others for doing something wrong*”. Mostly, they were focussing on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy



Figure 5 S&D example of a "Meme" image type

Matteo Salvini, or other famous members of the far-right such as French Marine LePenn since all of them have had sympathies for the Russian government in the past. “*Le Pen has even publicly declared Russia’s 2014 invasion and seizure of Crimea to be legitimate*” (Futàk-Campbell, 2020, p. 30). These shaming acts were mostly carried out through either the image type *Position* or *Meme*. Figure 5 which was posted on the 22nd of March 2022¹⁷ is the perfect example of a *Meme* since it is referencing a current political context while catering a well-known viral image called *Distracted Boyfriend*. This picture originated within a “*stock photo series in which a man looks at the backside of a woman walking by while another woman, presumably his romantic partner, looks on disapprovingly*” (*Distracted Boyfriend* | Know Your Meme, n.d.). As used by the S&D, the role of the distracted boyfriend has been portrayed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán since the head of the original picture was replaced by the Hungarian politician’s. While Orbán is supposed to be walking hand in hand with the EU since his country is part of the Union, he is looking back to the girl dressed in a bright orange shirt, visually representing Russia. Throughout their visual communication on Instagram¹⁸, the S&D has employed this exact approach to criticise

¹⁷ @socialistsanddemocrats on 22nd of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbZzLzKq3eC/>

¹⁸ @socialistsanddemocrats on 9th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4m-rbNKAt/>

other politicians, particularly emphasizing their connections to Russia. They aim to shed light on these links and seek to raise awareness among their followers thereby shaping the discourse surrounding political alliances and influences. By using memes, they also show a sense of pop-cultural knowledge as well as their capability of correctly using internet trends. Moreover, using memes is also tied to evoking a humoristic side and evoking feelings within the viewer. Like this, the S&D tries to catch the viewer's attention and provoke reactions.

Overall, one can summarise that the S&D has put a particular effort into appearing to a younger audience by making use of images famously used on the internet as well as naming and shaming the political opposition even though the individuals mentioned are not holding office in the European Parliament. Putin has been the motif of many images posted in the researched period, underlining the notion of the S&D trying to portray him a criminal and condemning him for starting the war in Ukraine. Moreover, the S&D has not used their MEPs in any of their postings, therefore not confirming the personalisation thesis regarding their own politicians. With the visuals posted on Instagram, the group has clearly positioned itself as pro-Ukraine and in solidarity with the protestors on the street as well as wanting to shine light onto ties of other politicians to Russia. Their posting strategy and image types used can be subsumed under an *“emotional name and shame strategy”*.

7.3 Renew Europe Image Types

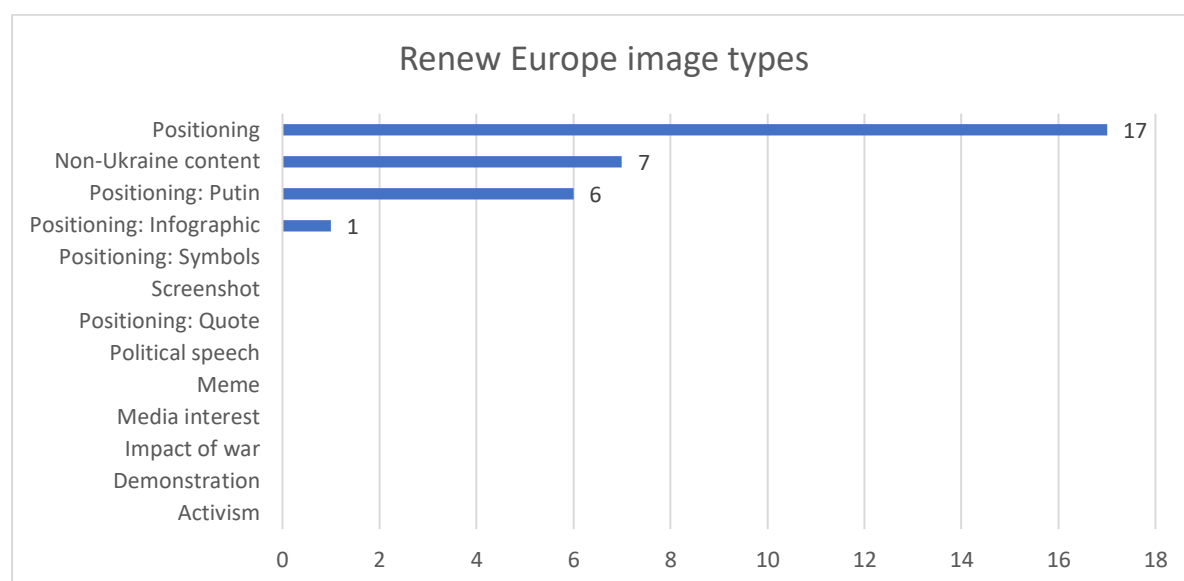
Renew Europe has posted 31 images within the researched two months. Comparing to other groups, a high number of the Liberals' posted content had a connection to the war happening in Ukraine namely 24 out of the 31 in total posted pictures, consequently 70% have been referencing the war.

Albeit Renew being the third biggest political group, there is a significant drop in the amount of posted content compared to the EPP (n=168) and S&D (n=75). The 24

@socialistsanddemocrats on 18th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcfJGcfog3A/>
@socialistsanddemocrats on 19th of March 2022 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbR_X5eKv8z/
@socialistsanddemocrats on 14th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbF2xIFKxol/>
@socialistsanddemocrats on 9th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4m-rbNKAt/>

images have been subsumed under only three image types – all of them falling under the superordinate *Positioning* image type.

Table 4 Image types frequencies of Renew Europe



Source: own data visualisation

What stands out is that next to the S&D, Renew has used a portrayal of Putin to visually communicate a position. In all seven cases, the image of Putin has been used within an illustrated graphic, paired with symbols and edited with flashy colours as can be seen in and in the following postings¹⁹.

As explained in the S&D chapter 7.2, this depiction taps into visually framing Putin as a criminal and underlining the lettering in white and red across his upper body. In the case of Figure 6 which was posted on the 1st of March 2022²⁰, Putin has been set on top of a yellow and blue background which alludes to the flag of Ukraine. The red colour splash covering almost the entirety of his face should signify the blood that was shed in the war. Compared to the other groups, this image is edited in a much more brutalist way than comparable images of accusing Putin to be a war criminal posted on the other groups' Instagram feeds.

¹⁹ @reneweurope on 25th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZV78Glx1j/>

@reneweurope on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cajkc1ZK56H/>

@reneweurope on 3rd of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Capkoq8ob--/>

@reneweurope on 5th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb-qPaioSR5/>

@reneweurope on 6th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcBIV-flZYR/>

²⁰ @reneweurope on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cajkc1ZK56H/>



Figure 6 Renew example of a "Position: Putin" image type

Generally, what can be said about the visual communication of the Renew group is that they rely heavily on graphical elements as opposed to primarily unedited photographs. Throughout the research period no graphically unedited pictures have been posted. All of the 31 images are graphically illustrated and edited, mostly with the groups signature shade of blue within which their website (Renew Europe, 2022b) as well as their logo (Renew Europe, 2022a) are designed. Figure 7 which was posted on the 7th of March 2022²¹, displays said shade of blue as well as the general style how Renew visually communicates on their Instagram account. This is an interesting finding since – although it might differ from different accounts and their audience – social media algorithms seem to favour unedited pictures with no text over graphics with text (e.g. Ayres, 2020). Consequently, to this visual communication style, the group has not used images of any of their elected officials to bring messages across.



Figure 7 Renew example of a "Positioning" image type

²¹ @reneweurope on 7th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cay61uDITk1/>

The style through which Renew is visually communicating might be the exact opposite of the personalisation trend. Every post seems to be designed as 'neutral' as possible, aiming to spread the message ostensibly unambiguously or without the need of further interpreting the content. The type of such visual posts on Instagram is called *share pics* and is widespread among especially news media outlets. *Share pics* are designed to be redistributed and shared like for example, in stories of other users on Instagram in order to increase the reach of the message (Stoffers, 2021).

In the majority of *Positioning* type images that have been posted by Renew group, there have been elements found of protest and demonstration as well as symbols such as flags. They were however not the central motif of the images and were kept in the background.

Within one post which was released on the day of the invasion in February 2022, the group has posted four images²² in the same style, with a wavy blue and yellow background, a political statement in white lettering, a small graphic that fit the political message and the group's logo on the bottom. With posting these four pictures, Renew was the fastest to react to the invasion with four statements and demands pictured on their Instagram.

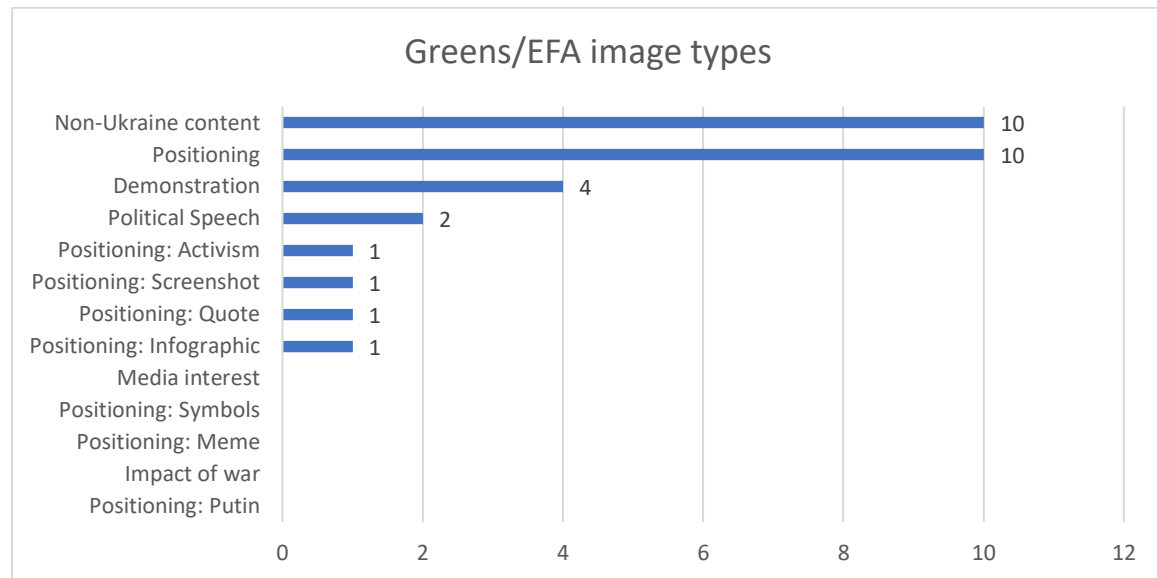
Overall, Renew's visual communication relied heavily on written text and graphically edited images to convey messages. They mostly stayed in their visual identity which encompasses a certain shade of bright blue mixed with striking lettering and bold colours to highlight certain words. As stipulated in the introductory chapter, Renew's visual communication fits the consideration that as a political entity, they mostly communicate with graphically edited material, not focussing on photographs of their MEPs or famous party politicians. Such as the S&D, Renew also heavily featured motives with Putin, yet clearly taking a pro-Ukraine stance and outlining the Russian president as a criminal. Their posting activity can therefore be described as an "*non-personalised educational strategy*".

²² @reneweurope on 24th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXBQmBljuf/>

7.4 Greens/EFA Image Types

The Greens/EFA have been posting 33 images within the research period, ten of which have been not related to the Ukraine war. Like for the previous groups, the most occurred image type is the *Positioning* type with ten posted images.

Table 5 Image type frequencies of the Greens/EFA



Source: own data visualisation

As can be seen in Table 5, the *Demonstration* type was encountered four times, all of which have been taken during the same event and published within the same post. Similar to the EPP, the Greens/EFA seem to have focused their communication on disseminating their stance on the war as well as trying to convey the image of involvedness by posting pictures from demonstrations where their politicians are being depicted on the street, demonstrating with the people. Three of the four pictures clearly depict Green Members of the European Parliament, the fourth is capturing a large group of people where single individuals cannot be identified. Also, most of the people pictured were wearing face masks which adds to the layer of obscurity.

One example of a clear portrayal of the politicians is Figure 8 which was posted on the 25th of February 2022²³. The French Green MEP Mounir Satouri is pictured within a crowd of people, looking focussed towards the left side of viewer. Although no signs are pictured within the image itself, the context and setting give away that the picture was taken at a pro-Ukraine demonstration. If counted carefully, one can make out four or even five Ukrainian flags that are hissed above the heads of the crowd of people. The politician is clearly in the focus of the image since it is only his face that can be identified, but he is placed in the centre of the picture and the only face that is clearly visible. Due to the fact that the picture was taken on eye level, it seems like the viewer is in the midst of the scene, just like the politician. This type of motif, the politician being approachable and in the midst of “common” citizens has been defined in visual communication literature as conveying the “politician of the people” (Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017, p. 162). Posting pictures like these might evoke the idea of a special



Figure 8 Greens/EFA example of a "Demonstration" image type

closeness or proximity to the citizens and their concerns. The act of protesting with the people also shows, like for the EPP, that the Green politicians are “in the thick of things” and standing in solidarity with the protesting people as well as the people of Ukraine. It also suggests that the politicians have no fear of contact even when it comes to a large body of people.

²³ @greensefa on 25th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZZisxss6e/>

When looking at colours used and styles employed with which the groups have communicated visually, the Greens/EFA seem to have the most differing content within the parliamentary groups. Every post seems to stand for itself and not fit into the style of the previous or following postings. Figure 9 which was posted on 5th of April 2022²⁴, depicts one of the *Positioning* types of images that have been published. It stands out by having a minimalist black background, white lettering, emphasising the first words of every sentence by boldening the lettering. Here a textual repetition is the main stylistic paired with the colour black to intensify the message. Interestingly the logo of the group is added very small in the right bottom corner of the image without the usual lettering. This might be indicating that the group was aiming to design a *share pic* (as mentioned in chapter 7.3) – increasing the reach of the message by only subliminally branding it. This might be a strategy to catch users that are not necessarily voters or fans of the political group but that might share similar views and therefore add the *share pic* in their own social media profiles.



Figure 9 Greens/EFA example of a "Positioning" image type

Overall, the Greens/EFA's visual communication is strongly characterised by the *Positioning* image type comparable to the primarily examined groups. Notably however, the majority of the *Demonstration* image types were combined with showcasing their MEPs in the middle of the crowds, underlining the personalisation thesis. Consequently, looking at their larger posting activity and comparing it to

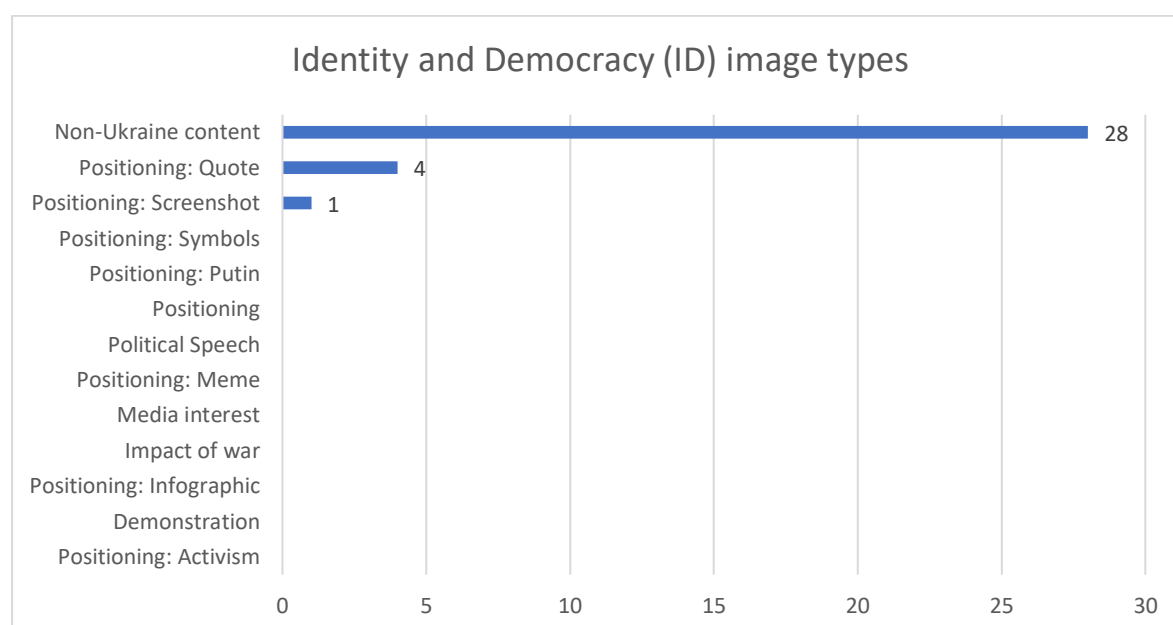
²⁴ @greensfa on 5th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb9m5jHKus7/>

the other groups' images can also be described as having employed a “*personalised positioning strategy*”.

7.5 ID Image Types

A total of 33 images were posted within 24th of February and 24th of April 2022 on the Instagram account *@idgroupep*. Even outside of their communication about the war in Ukraine, the striking majority of their Instagram communication follows one type of visuals: a quote from one of their elected officials in white lettering on a dark/lighter blue or blue and red background paired with a portrait of said MEP and the group logo.

Table 6 Image type frequencies of the Identity and Democracy



Source: own data visualisation

In total 85% of their communication has not referred to the war in Ukraine, leaving only five postings to mention the invasion either visually on the posted picture or within the posting text. On the day of the invasion itself, the group has released content about the Estonian independence day²⁵ and small Member States like Austria keeping their sovereignty²⁶. Only a week later, on the 1st of March 2022, the ID group has posted a

²⁵ @idgroupep on 24th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXGaAgsYef/>

²⁶ @idgroupep on 24th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXZ1mRsUuB/>

Screenshot in which they criticised an internal parliamentary proceeding. In this case it was not a screenshot from X or another social media platform like first statements about the war of other groups have been but a screenshot of written press release. Titled: *War in Ukraine: Dirty tricks in the European Parliament* as can be seen in Figure 10 which was posted on 3rd of March 2022²⁷, the group emphasises its willingness to sign a tabled resolution condemning the war in Ukraine, however not actively denouncing the war but putting the focus on the exclusion of signature by the other groups.



Figure 10 ID example of a "Positioning: Quote " image type

Fourteen days later, on March 14th, the group has posted²⁸ an image with a quote from the head of the Italian ID delegation Marco Zanni as well as a pictural clipping of him on the right side of the quote. In this posting, the war in Ukraine also only plays a subordinate role since it is only mentioned parenthetically in the quote. On the 7th of April, Figure 11 was posted, again in the same visual style as the one on March 14th: clipping of politician on the right, a quote on the left on top of a dark blue, red background and the logo of the group. This time, the content of the quote was European parties' ties to Russia. This quote and image were possibly posted in reaction to the accusations of other political groups as we have seen being overtly

²⁷ @idgroup on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaiyEFqs5hG/>

²⁸ @idgroup on 14th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcDHzn2MLS8/>

conveyed by the S&D in their visual communication. This circumstance of political groups and their ties to Russia is discussed in more depth in chapter 8.3.

Oddly the same two MEPs have always been used in their communication about the war: the Italians Marco Zanni, who also serves as the president of the group, and Marco Campomenosi. Both of them are members of *Lega per Salvini Premier* which – as the name already suggests – is led by Matteo Salvini. Salvini has been called out by the S&D group in numerous Instagram posts during the examined period about his pro-Putin stance. Using Lega politicians in their social media statements might be a direct reaction to this.

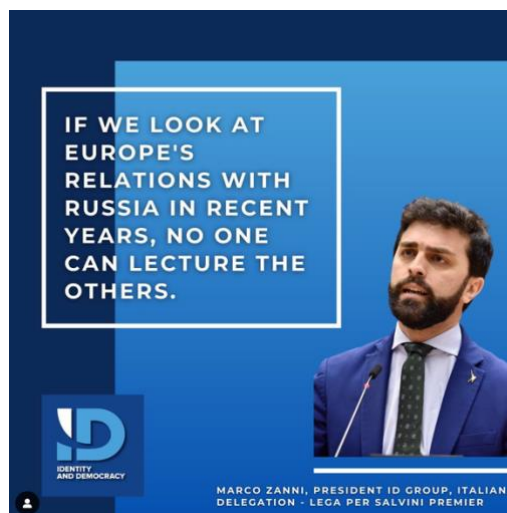


Figure 11 ID example of a "Positioning: Quote" image type

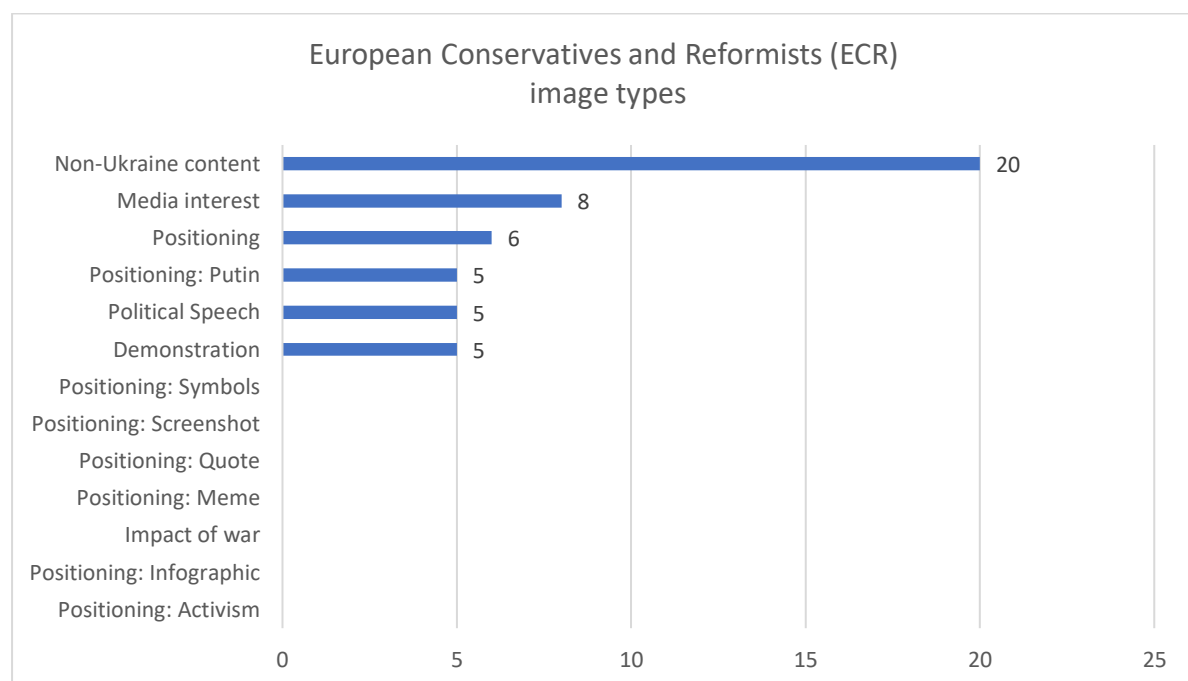
Generally, it is notable that in all their communication they have used the populist principle of “us” versus “them” (e.g., Mudde 2004), and focused more on interparliamentary and procedural happenings than communicating their own stance on the Ukraine war. Visually, the ID group always stuck to graphically created *share pics* that had the same layout. With four postings that mentioned the war, it is however hard to give a comprehensive insight in the group’s overall communication about the Ukraine war. On Instagram at least, they have exhibited the lowest level of visual communication about the war in Ukraine out of all 7 political groups in the European Parliament. Consequently, they have employed a “*personal quotation strategy*”.

7.6 ECR Image Types

In the examined period, the European Conservatives and Reformists have posted 49 images, out of which 29 have been referencing the Russian invasion in Ukraine. As the only political group, the most found image type was *media interest* while *Positioning* and its subcategories were only the second most prevailing types. Overall, the posted content has been subsumed under five image types: *media interest*, *positioning*, *political speech*, *demonstration*, and *positioning: Putin*.

The media interest image type includes visuals depicting political actors engaged in interviews, participating in press conferences, or attending events organised by the media, like for example panel discussions. These visuals often feature studio settings, the presence of cameras and microphones, as well as interactions between journalists and political actors.

Table 7 Image type frequencies of the European Conservatives and Reformists



Source: own data visualisation

The *media interest* pictures that have been posted, all originated from one event, where ECR politicians have discussed their views on the war in a TV studio setting. The images could not be assigned to any image type at first glance, as no obvious connection to the Ukraine conflict could be seen visually, the post captions however were more conclusive. Posting pictures of political actors in such situations express a heightened media interest (Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017, p. 157) in the actors since a

politician that has nothing “news-worthy” or “interesting” to say, would not be invited to give TV interviews or have the means to produce a programme themselves. These Instagram posts moreover provide followers of the account with an exclusive perspective from “the other side” that they would not have received without following the social media account.

Positioning has been the image type used second most. In the six images posted, all included a lettering on top of a graphically modified photograph. The topics ranged from safeguarding food security²⁹, ensure energy independency³⁰ to freeing the Russian opposition leader and activist Alexei Navalny³¹. Moreover, the ECR has been the only political group who has visually communicated on Instagram with the image of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. On the 1st of March 2022³², they have posted Figure 12 with the following posting text:

"#Ukraine is defending the border of the civilized world, and God forbid, if Ukraine falls nobody knows where #Russia will stop. The ECR Group's support for #Ukraine's membership to the European Union is clear and unwavering. Today, a historic session and a resolution vote took place. The free world stands firmly and resolutely on Ukraine's side. #StayStrongUkraine" ³³



Figure 12 ECR example of a "Positioning" image type

²⁹ @ecrgroupeu on 22nd of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbZ96FBoBme/>

³⁰ @ecrgroupeu on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca2ufe3tL3z/>

³¹ @ecrgroupeu on 22nd of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbaRGNiopC8/>

³² @ecrgroupeu on 1st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CakindXOAY5>

³³ not including a list of 29 Hashtags. Original post can be found here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CakindXOAY5/>

The enlarged portrait of Zelensky, stern yet faintly looking into the distance and edited almost to a negative suggests strength as well as hope to the viewer. The editing in blue and yellow – the colours of the Ukrainian flag – underlines this statement. Paired with the white lettering and the motivational message, it also conveys a heroic character. This aligns with the general role that Zelensky took upon himself and was assigned by vast media reporting: portraying him as a strong leader who can give the Ukrainians hope. There is undoubtedly a certain “cult of personality” around him as a president in war times (Berry, 2023). Remarkably, whenever the other political groups communicated on something hope and solidarity driven, they have not used a picture of Zelensky rather images of Ukrainian civilians, symbols such as flags and signs or graphically edited visual material.

The ECR group, comparable to the EPP and S&D, made use of Putin as a main motif to position themselves against the war and condemn the invasion. In fact, images with the Russian president were posted five times within the examined period. All five times, he is seen from either his torso up or just in portrait, edited in black and white and in an unflattering, questionable facial expression³⁴. On the 1st of March 2022, the group has posted a similar image to the Conservatives and Social Democrats: an edited portrait of Putin in a “mug shot setting” with lettering that reads *war criminal*. However, this time, they included the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko. In the post caption they compare Lukashenko to Putin’s political puppet:

*" #Putin's attacks on residential areas demonstrate clearly that he and his puppet, #Lukashenko, are capable of barbaric atrocities and war crimes. The free World must support #Ukraine's struggle for peace & freedom with all means at its disposal"*³⁵

In a posting on the 7th of April 2022, the ECR portray Putin as Stalin’s biggest admirer and on the 1st of March 2022 they use the previously discussed motif of a mugshot

³⁴ @ecrgroupeu on 6th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcAl61nIZqK/>
@ecrgroupeu on 16th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbKcdUJtNoL/>

³⁵ not including a list of 29 Hashtags. Original post can be found here:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CakBc6sNr1d/>

with both Lukashenko and Putin – additionally labelled with the lettering “war criminals”. Linking Putin to both Lukashenko and Stalin means linking him to dictatorships, centralised power, erosion of democratic institutions and principles, persecuted political oppositions, suppression of protests, and violated basic human rights. Moreover, this comparison hints to historical expansionism which was pursued by Stalin to extend the territorial control and influence of Russia. Since the ECR is constituted of a big part by Polish MEPs, historical influences might have triggered the political stance and visual communication of the group. *“Scarred by centuries of Russian aggression and occupation culminating in nearly half a century of communist dictatorship, Poland has long warned the EU of the threat from Moscow, especially since the time of Putin’s 2014 invasion of Crimea”* (Henley & Rankin, 2022)

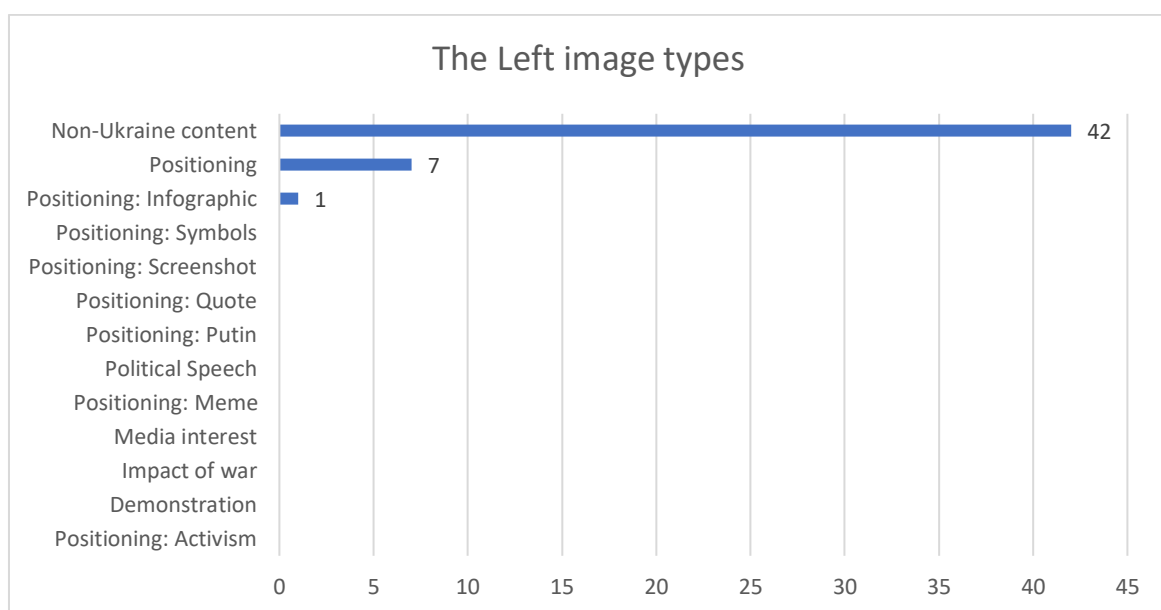
Another prevalent image type within the ECR Instagram has been *political speech*. The group show their MEPs in a talking setting in the European Parliament seat in Strasbourg, talking with Members of the Ukrainian Parliament. With picturing this the ECR do not only convey that they are on one particular side of the warring parties but actually in direct contact with them. The strategy of showing their MEPs in a speech setting highlights the ECR’s efforts to engage in political dialogue and demonstrate their direct involvement in the issues at hand.

Overall, the ECR put emphasis in their visual communication on their Members of European Parliament being important and newsworthy politicians, as well as in touch with the Ukrainian government. Moreover, they used images of Zelensky to portray hope and positive support while using portraits of Putin to condemn the war. This clearly positions the visual communication of the ECR on the side of Ukraine. Many visuals have depicted the person to blame in their eyes which is why their visual communication can be summarised as using a *“personalised name and shame strategy”*.

7.7 The Left Image Types

Within the research period of two months, the Left has posted 50 images on Instagram out of which merely eight have addressed the war in Ukraine. Seven of the posted images have been classified as a *Positioning* image type, one fits into the category of *Positioning: Infographic*. The Left is the smallest out of all the political groups, but it has not posted the least pictures on their account overall. In comparison to much bigger groups such as the S&D (75) Renew (31) and the Greens (32), the Left has kept up a comparable number of images posted.

Table 8 Image type frequencies of The Left



Source: own data visualisation

The first post which can be seen in Figure 13 was posted on the day of the invasion on February 24th 2022. The other posts followed four days later, as well as on the 7th, 25th and 29th of March, 4th, 13th and 21st of April.

Figure 13 which was posted on 24th of February 2022³⁶ is a photograph of the snowy Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, purchased from a stock images company called Getty images and taken by a photographer called Sean Gallup³⁷. The Left has added a large white lettering stating “Russia/Ukraine” and “Stop the war”.

³⁶ @theleft_eu on 24th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXEr36qEAI/>

³⁷ Found on <https://www.gettyimages.fr/detail/photo-d%27actualité/saint-sophia-cathedral-whose-origins-date-to-the-photo-dactualité/1366436380>

In neither of the eight posted images, the group has pictured their MEPs or other politicians of their member parties. In fact, in only one image³⁸ an individual was

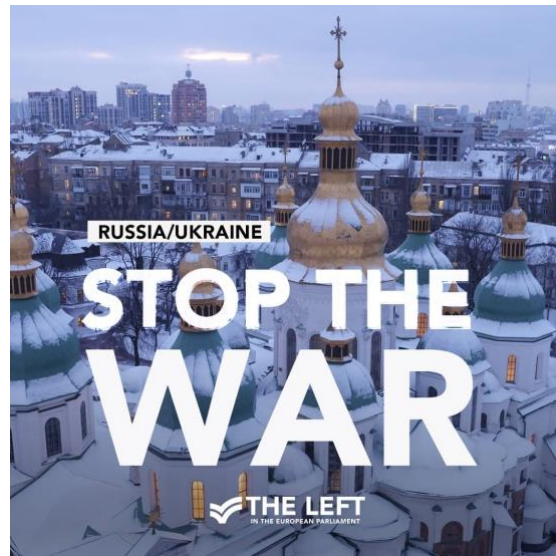


Figure 13 The Left example of a "Positioning" image type

shown. The rest of the images have either been fully graphically designed or photographs of landscapes, schematic outlines of crowds of people or objects such as passports and money have been used. This is surprising because quickly browsing over the *Non-Ukraine* content that has been posted within these two months, The Left has posted many images portraying their MEPs during speeches, acts of activism or other scenes.

All posts have included a lettering on the pictures which has been the main focus while visual elements have been put in the background. By using prominent text, they can ensure that the central idea or statement is immediately visible and easily understood by the viewers.

In terms of topics tackled within their *Positioning* image type, The Left has tackled topics like fleeing³⁹ from the war, food security⁴⁰, peace⁴¹ and so-called *Golden*

³⁸ @theleft_eu on 21st of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcnuQkZoYqJ/>

³⁹ @theleft_eu on 21st of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcnuQkZoYqJ/>

⁴⁰ @theleft_eu on 25th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbioY9TIAA-/>

⁴¹ @theleft_eu on 28th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cah1fcALw8F/>

*European Passports*⁴² that according to them are easily given to millionaires or Russian oligarchs. These topics suggest that they focus their communication on Instagram of the war on humanitarian concerns of the conflict, returning to peace on the European continent and social justice.

In the picture they posted that has been identified as *Infographic*⁴³, The Left mention the same European politicians as the S&D did in their posting pointing out politicians' ties to the Russian government. The reason why this image was not classified as a *Meme* was that the motif was not taken from a priorly well-known piece of internet culture but designed by the party themselves in order to inform the viewer about a – in their eyes – linked piece of information. Similarly, to some posts of the S&D as well, they have not only focussed on one particular politician but made an all-round blow against Le Penn, Orbán and Salvini.

The entirely black *share pic* that was posted by the group on the 4th of April and can be seen as Figure 14 reminds of the image that has been posted by the Greens on 5th of April since both groups use a black background to convey a clear and heavy but short message. Generally, the colour black has been seen in many images condemning the war, which is not surprising since black is culturally often associated with mourning and death. It is however also providing a strong contrast when used in



Figure 14 The Left example of a "Positioning" image type

⁴² @theleft_eu on 07th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Caz5ANct5oO/>

⁴³ @theleft_eu on 13th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcTcnmiqTw6/>

images, making the message more visually striking and attention-grabbing. It can help to draw the viewers' eyes to the image and create a sense of urgency or seriousness.

Overall, The Left's visual communication about the war in Ukraine can be characterised as heavily dependent on lettering while visual elements stay in the background to get political positioning across. There were no MEPs used in their communication but rather stock images from fee-based websites. Albeit overall not posting little content throughout the two researched months, there have not been particularly many pictures referencing the war in Ukraine. In summary, one could categorise The Left's visual communication focussing on humanitarian topics that have been communicated through the *Position* image type, there were no personalisation elements found except for political opposition for one naming and shaming instance. Therefore, one can describe their posting activity as utilising a "*non-personalised humanitarian positioning strategy*".

8 Discussion of Results

The analysis in the previous chapter yielded insightful results concerning the variety of group-specific approaches, but also revealed a number of horizontal features that are worth emphasising. This chapter will examine them in more detail.

First it is worth looking at the most dominant image type *Positioning*. Keeping in mind the research questions, it will be discussed whether the political parties have pictured their politicians in their visual communication on Instagram and whether the personalisation thesis is therefore supported or not. Moreover, as outlined in the third sub research question, it will be discussed whether the national composition of the political groups and their attitudes towards Russia before the war have an impact on their visual communication about the invasion in February 2022.

Moreover, during the process of describing, sorting, and classifying the material, two additional features have stood out that were certainly worth exploring on a secondary basis to help understand the visual communication of the political parties of the EP even more. In the next chapters, the aesthetic choice of using the colours blue and yellow and visual handling of special remembrance days will be touched upon which

are not necessarily part of the image type analysis but are rather visual characteristics to add onto the rest of the analysis to provide further insight into the results.

8.1 Initial Reactions, *Positioning* and logos

A particularly noteworthy aspect was the first reaction to the invasion into Ukraine in February. Almost all groups communicated using a visual that has been categorised as a *Positioning: Screenshot*. In many cases, it was a Screenshot from the platform X (formerly known as Twitter). This may be due to political parties relying to textual statements to first react, reusing what has already been posted on another social media platform or press release and therefore not having to come up with a fitting visual quickly. It might also be the case that writing a short text on X is seen as less effort than agreeing on visual material for Instagram. In fast-moving emergency circumstances like an invasion of a sovereign country, a political reaction should be published fast in order to not get lost in the political landscape.

This might also explain why *Positioning* is the most used image type across all parties, even if they have not communicated much on the topic of Ukraine. Drastic events such as the beginning of a war, not far away from one's own territory triggers the need to take a stand and "position" oneself politically. The EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ECR and the Left have positioned themselves visually clearly on the pro-Ukraine side while the visual communication of the ID was lacking a clear stance, barely covering the war at all.

Something else that stood out was that most of the groups used their logo within the images they posted online. Most times, such visual components were found within the *Positioning* image type, likely to underline and highlight the opinion coming from the group. However, there was significant variation in the prominence given to the logo, sometimes more present and sometimes in a corner, blending in with the rest of the visual. In some cases, the logo was not included at all. This might have been a strategic decision to reach audiences that might usually not identify with the group's other positions. This may have made the visuals more widely shareable and encourage the audience to engage with and be exposed to material produced by the respective group despite not forming a part of its normal electorate base.

Positioning has been the most dominant image type found in the image corpus therefore underlying the importance of taking a stance and communicating views by visualising the political issues and concerns of the political group.

8.2 Picturing the politician

As outlined in chapter 4.2 a central characteristic of political communication on social media can be traced back to a personalisation aspect. According to this, “*politicians are presented as private individuals, their personal characteristics and lives*” (Farkas & Bene, 2021, p. 6). However, as you do not have to be a real person communicating on social media but can be a business, organisation, foundation etc, political communication coming from political parties or groupings could deviate from this principle. Therefore, this chapter aims to carry out an extra layer of examination in addition to the quantitative image type analysis. Referencing back to the second research question posed:

What visual communication strategies are applied, which patterns can be found and how do they relate to the personalisation thesis?

In order to examine the group’s relation to the personalisation thesis a simple side analysis was carried out. After the corpus has been gathered and the pictures posted by the political groups within the examination period have been added to a spreadsheet, a column was added in said spreadsheet named for example “*S&D politician?*”. This allowed going through the material and recognising whether the analysed picture is featuring a politician of the groups. Whenever there were doubts if the politician belongs to the respective group, the website of the European Parliament⁴⁴ or the group’s websites⁴⁵ have been consulted to confirm the identity of the shown individuals.

⁴⁴ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home>

⁴⁵ EPP: <https://www.eppgroup.eu>

S&D: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu>

Renew: <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu>

Greens/EFA: <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/>

ECR: <https://www.ecrgroup.eu>

ID: <https://www.idgroup.eu>

The Left: <https://left.eu>

It must be mentioned yet again that this extra analysis refers only to the communication in the first two months after the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Also, this process was only including the pictures that have been categorised as referencing the war. Pictures in the category *Non-Ukraine* were consequently disregarded. Therefore, statements about the groups visual communication's relation with the personalisation thesis can only be made for the concrete example of the war in Ukraine in 2022. It is therefore possible that higher levels of personalization within the political visual communication of the parties take place outside of these events.

Coming back to the case at hand: the content the political groups of the EP posted within the first two months since the Russian invasion in Ukraine does not exhibit a strong relation to the personalisation thesis. A clear majority of all pictures across all groups have not shown any of the group's elected officials but rather stock images, graphically illustrated images or pictures of events without featuring their MEPs. However, there are some efforts to showcase one's own politicians like it could be seen with EPP, Greens and ID. What has also been found is that groups that might not utilise their own MEPs such as S&D and ECR who utilised portrayals of the political opposition to call them out, make fun of them or express their divergence.

The group that has been showcasing their politicians in their online communication the most is the EPP. In 41 of 168 posted images, the Conservatives have pictured at least one EPP politician which sums up to 24% of all posted content. Unlike the other groups, the EPP has carried out different visual campaigns that included the image of their politicians, sometimes more prominent, sometimes in a supporting less dominating manner to help get a message across. Figure 15 which was posted on 12th of April 2022⁴⁶ shows the Austrian ÖVP member of European Parliament Lukas Mandl. This exact motif, a EPP MEP in front of a dark background, serious face and holding a sign with a Russian sentence, addressing the Russian people, has been published ten times on the @eppgroup account. Due to the reiteration of the same motif over and over again it would count as one visual campaign within the *Positioning: Activism*

⁴⁶ @eppgroup on 12th of April 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcQcc2noaFT/>

image types. Visually coherent campaigns like this one were only identified on the @eppgroup Instagram account but not on any of the other political groups.



Figure 15 EPP example of picturing the politicians

The second group that has pictured their politicians and therefore tapping into the personalisation aspect of social media is the Greens/EFA. 13% of the posted content has shown at least one Greens/EFA politician, such as in Figure 16 the group's German president Terry Reintke in between a group of people at a Demonstration holding a sign that reads "no to Putin's war"⁴⁷. A portrayal of Greens/EFA politicians has mostly been found in the image type *Demonstration* which is picturing the MEPs alongside other demonstrators in large crowds and tapping into the "common man" strategy (Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017, p. 162).

⁴⁷ @greensefa on the 25th of February 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZZjsxss6e/>



Figure 16 Greens/EFA example of picturing the politicians

While the S&D provides the second most MEPs in the parliament, they have not included a single image of their politicians. Next to the Social Democrats, also Renew and The Left have not utilised the faces of their politicians in their visual communication at all. ID has published three pictures featuring their politicians which is however not unusual for them since their overall visual communication style is based on releasing quotes of their most well-known MEPs accompanied by their image, name and position or national delegation. The ECR has likewise posted three pictures of their politicians, all three showing the politician in *political speech* settings and seemingly actively talking.

The EPP, the Greens/EFA and ECR have pictured their politicians in different settings, but this practice was primarily found in image types such as *Positioning*, *Demonstration* or *Political speech* therefore showing solidarity with invaded country and the protesting people as well as being vocal about the war and in exchange – symbolically and literally – with Ukraine.

In summary, less than half of the examined political groups engaged in consistent personalised visual messaging. Of the three groups that made notable use of personalised messaging, two did not use images of their MEPs in the *Positioning* type but only in image types with lower number of images such as *Demonstration*

(Greens/EFA) or *Political speech* (ECR). This clearly indicates that the personalisation hypothesis, established at the beginning of this thesis, has limited power to explain the observed patterns of the group's visual communication on Instagram. This in combination with the high frequency of the *Positioning* image type without featuring their MEP potentially indicates that most of the political groups of the 9th European Parliament perceive limits to the effectiveness of personalised communication, at least in the case of extreme events such as the invasion of Ukraine. The exception appears to be the EPP, which may merit further investigation as to why this group's internal factors or electoral strategy favour maintaining a greater use of personalised communication across all categories of images.

8.3 Relations to Russia

The next chapter aims to contextualise the research question whether the visual communication strategies vary depending on where on the political spectrum the parties are based / basing themselves. At the same time, it is important to also analyse the group's stance towards Russia and Ukraine before the invasion in 2022 to identify whether it influenced the group's visual communication on the war in Ukraine.

The think tank *Political Capital Policy Research and Consulting Institute* conducted a two-year research project that tracked the behaviour of political groups of the European Parliament stand in relation to Russia and the Putin regime. Its findings showed that:

“Member states with large far-left and far-right delegations perform substantially worse on our Kremlin-critical Index (KCI) [...] Both groups voted in support of the Kremlin's interest over 50% of the time. Thus, both ID and GUE/NGL may be considered highly vulnerable to Russian influencing efforts. Besides their votes, they regularly recite pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives in plenaries” (Szicherle et al., 2021, p. 29).

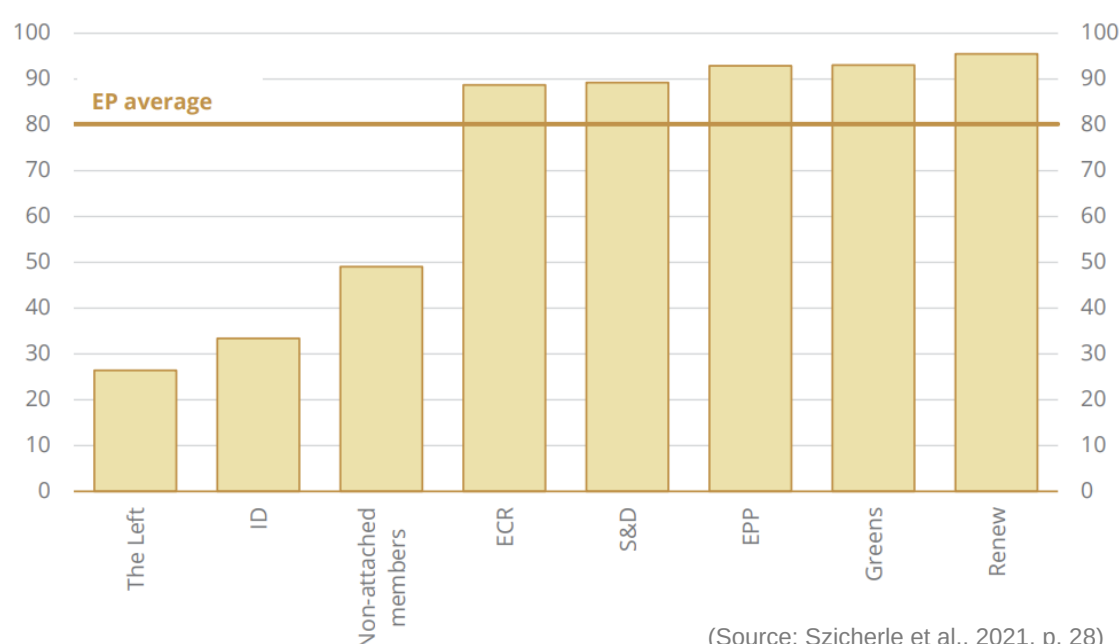
Moreover, they have found that amendments to political resolutions have been tabled, for example by the Irish The Left MEP Mick Wallace, that align with the interests of the

Russian government and used language that can be associated with Russian influence (Szicherle et al., 2021, p. 30).

However, the results of the visual communications of these groups are only partially aligned with these findings related to their voting patterns and relations to Russia prior to the invasion into Ukraine.

Table 9 The Kremlin-critical scores of EP groups

The higher value indicates a more critical stance.



While the Szicherle et al. (2021) study suggests that The Left has had the least critical Kremlin score out of all the groups, their visual communication in the researched period since 24th of February 2022 did not exhibit clear evidence of an unequivocal influence thereof. The co-presidents of The Left Manon Aubry and Martin Schirdewan immediately released a statement, condemning the invasion: *“We strongly condemn the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops which is an act of war in clear violation of every principal of international law”* (The Left, 2022). As mentioned above, their visual communication on Instagram in the research period has not been primarily focussed on the war since 84% of the posts did not concern the war at all. The 16% which have referenced the war, were mainly *Positioning* image types as well as one *Infographic* type which pictured Russian president Putin. In all *Positioning* types, imported stock images have been used in combination with the logo and lettering to get their message across. Likewise, the lack of using their own MEPs to visually communicate about this

matter shows an anti-personalisation approach which is supported by the lack of clear, identifiable individuals even in their stock pictures. Comparing it to their usual communication in which The Left MEPs have been portrayed raises the question, whether the group maybe focuses on specific humanitarian issues about the war within their *Positioning* image type while not taking a clear unequivocal stand pro Ukraine such as other groups have done. To summarize, while pre-war sympathies might have suggested pro-Russian tendencies, this has not been found in the visual communication. The comparatively little posted content referencing the war in Ukraine, lack of personalisation and sole focus on humanitarian issues might suggest a cautious approach that could be explained by the group's pre-war sympathies. This however calls for further investigation to uncover clear academic results about The Left's visual communication on Instagram, voting behaviour and pro-Russian sympathies.

Similarly to The Left, the right-wing group Identity and Democracy has posted little content referencing the war in Ukraine (adding up to 85% *Non-Ukraine* content). This is hardly surprising looking at the direct relations with Russia and Russian politics the ID member parties have displayed over the years. For years, there have been meetings, conferences and cooperation pacts between these parties and Russian politicians, parties or the Kremlin itself (Kurier, 2022). All four parties mentioned in the following quote are full members of the ID political group in the European Parliament:

„The Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN), Strache's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), and the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have sought a variety of means to put aside pre-existing ideological differences and strengthen connections with Russia. A common agenda that has united European populists has emerged over time; these parties have all come to view Brussels as a common foe and Russia as a common ally“ (Futàk-Campbell, 2020, p. 30).

On a parliamentary level, the ID group remarkably voted in favour of the resolution condemning the Russian military aggression: *“The only ID member to vote against was Marcel de Graaff of The Netherlands; 7 other ID lawmakers abstained”* (Zalan, 2022). There has been a preceding resolution in the EP in December 2021 to call upon

Russia to “*cease its provocations on the Ukrainian border,*” and to *de-escalate*, [which] *was voted down by 26 far right MEPs from the ID group*” (Zalan, 2022). It would be interesting for further research to conduct an extensive study to unearth changes in attitude amongst the group and how the outbreak of the war has influenced their voting behaviour.

Similarly to the other groups of the EP, the ID has released an image the has been identified as *Positioning: Screenshot* in order to first respond to the invasion in 2022. The content of this however was to criticise an internal parliamentary proceeding: Titled: *War in Ukraine: Dirty tricks in the European Parliament* as can be seen in Figure 10, the group emphasised its willingness to sign a tabled resolution condemning the war in Ukraine, however not actively denouncing the war but putting the focus on the exclusion of signature by the other groups. The timing of this post was more than a week after the start of the invasion, suggesting that the group did not put as much urgency to the happenings as the other parliamentary groups.

Taking in mind both the study by Szicherle et al. as well as the national composition of the group and their member parties open ties to Russia, the almost lack of visual communication about the war in Ukraine is unsurprising. If anything, pro-Russian visual communication would have been expected from the group.

This contrasts with the ECR group’s messaging, despite it being identified with the right groupings in the European Parliament. In Szicherle et al. 2021 study, the ECR performed rather well, not suggesting Russian influence in their parliamentary behaviour. This this could be traced back to national composition of the group since the group consists of many Polish politicians which belong to the right-wing populist party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS): “*PiS is hawkish toward Russia, regularly imploring the EU to more aggressively confront a revanchist Moscow. More recently, it was swift to accuse the Kremlin of puppet mastering a Belarus scheme to push thousands of migrants to the EU border*” (Bayer et al., 2021). In an Interview with the news outlet *The Guardian*, Aleks Szczerbiak, a professor of politics at the University of Sussex underlined this argument: “*PiS may be saying: ‘Look, there’s a real dictator out there, waging a real war – that’s all that matters and that’s what we*

should all be concentrating on right now” (Henley & Rankin, 2022). This also explains the comparison of Putin with both Lukashenko and Stalin (More in chapter 7.6)

In summary, pre-existing sympathies and relations to Russia appear to have an impact on how the groups in the European Parliament on the outer fringes of the political spectrum visually communicate about the war in Ukraine, but the primary impact appears to be the relative silence by the two groups with pro-Russian sympathies.

8.4 Colours yellow and blue

Looking at the material corpus with a more qualitative lens, the political groups have employed certain strategic choices that conveyed symbolic support or solidarity with Ukraine. In combination with the high findings of the *Positioning* image type, the usage of the colours blue and yellow was aimed to portray the group’s political positioning.

The Ukrainian flag is horizontally divided into two parts, the upper one in a light blue, the lower one in yellow, representing blue skies over golden wheat fields (W. Smith, 2013). Looking through the material corpus, many political groups have paid homage to this flag by using exactly this colour combination.

As mentioned before, the ID very much sticks with their way of visually communicating on Instagram since they seem to have a strict visual identity. Therefore, as well as looking at the general lack of communicating about the war in Ukraine, it is not a surprise that no blue/yellow colour schemes have been found on their account. This goes hand in hand with the results from The Left since there has not been a usage of the Ukrainian flag colours on their posted content within the examined period. These results tie into the general attitude towards Russia the ID and The Left MEPs have been displaying in the past (see chapter 8.3).

An overwhelming 52% of all posted images that the conservative EPP has posted involved the colours blue and yellow. About half of these have been using the colours to emphasise the textual elements on the image, or to create a separation between



Figure 17 EPP example of the usage of the colours blue and yellow

the visual and the textual elements of the image. Moreover, one must mention at this point that EPP politicians that have been depicted in some of the visuals have worn clothing that resembles the Ukrainian flag colours as can be seen in Figure 17 which was posted on the 11th of March 2022⁴⁸. Hannah Craggs, senior colour editor at the trend-forecasting consultancy WGSN underlines the importance of clothing colours: *“Throughout history, colour has been used as a tool of self-expression and peaceful protest”* (Radin, 2019).

“With social media feeding the influence of imagery, colour will continue to play a key part in fashion activism as a way to bring communities together and spread critical messages across the globe” (Radin, 2019). The EPP is however not alone with using the colours of the Ukrainian flag as a sign of protest and symbolism, high ranking officials from the Commission – most notably Commission President Ursula von der Leyen – and politicians world-wide have practiced the same (Epstein, 2022; Niedzwiadek, 2022). *“It has been something of a trend in recent years for members of Congress to color-coordinate their attire to the high-profile event in order to make a political statement”* (Niedzwiadek, 2022).

Not only clothing was selected to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people, the colours were also projected onto many well-known landmarks such as for example the Eiffel

⁴⁸ @eppgroup on 11th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9bLOMKSc9/>

Tower, the Russian embassy in Lisbon, the Colosseum, Brandenburg Gate and many more (Sarkar, 2022). The European Parliament has also decided to fly the Ukraine flag in front of both official seats in Brussels and Strasbourg as well as “*include visual signs of support for the Ukrainian people*” (European Parliament, 2022). These signs of support have also been visually used by the EPP and have been characterised as the *Position: Symbols* image type.

The group that has used the colours second most frequently in their online communication on Instagram was the Greens/EFA. 40% of all posted content included blue and yellow. Similarly, to how the EPP has used the colours, also in the case of the Greens/EFA they were used in the image types *Positioning* or *Demonstration*.



Figure 18 Greens/EFA example of the usage of the colours blue and yellow

As seen in Figure 19 which has been posted on the 17th of March 2022⁴⁹, the flag of Ukraine has been incorporated abstractly mostly in the background and in the same usage as the meaning of the flag – some sort of yellow coloured (supposedly wheat) field juxtaposed with a blue sky.

Renew has used colours less abstractly and more literally by using the flag visually recognisable as a background⁵⁰. Within roughly 38% of their posted content Renew has been using blue and yellow as a way of visually expressing solidarity with Ukraine. Broadly speaking, all of the images that have been utilising blue and yellow were attributed to the *Positioning* image type and the related sub-categories such as *Positioning: Putin* or *Positioning: Infographic*.

⁴⁹ @greensefa on 17th of March 2022 https://www.instagram.com/p/CbNzh-tL_E8/

⁵⁰ @reneweurope on 24.02.2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXBQmBljuf/>

In 11 of the 49 posted images the ECR has utilized blue and yellow which is 13% of the Ukraine related content posted within the research period. Just like the EPP and Greens/EFA, the posted images with blue and yellow colours from the ECR have been categorised as *Positioning* or *Demonstration* image types.

In comparison to the other groups that have made this strategic pictorial choice, the Social Democrats have used the colour scheme yellow and blue the least, adding up to 13% in their visual communication. The colours have been found across five image types, while within the posted content of the S&D in general seven image types have been found.

Overall, whether or not a group has made the strategic choice of utilising the Ukrainian flag's colours can be traced back to their primary attitude towards Russia, not however to what degree the groups have utilised it.

8.5 Special Days

During the research period, two days occurred that can be considered *special days* that might require statements or communication from political actors in case they identify their political values within those days.

International Women's Day

On the 8th of March, the International Women's Day was celebrated worldwide which "*is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity*" (*About International Women's Day*, n.d.). During this day, four of the seven groups have posted images on their Instagram feeds.

The conservative EPP group has posted six images within one post on the 8th of March, connecting all six images with the Ukrainian war. They pay their tribute in the



Figure 19 EPP example of picturing International Women's Day.

posting text, commending the strength and courage of Ukrainian women [...] fighting for freedom and democracy.

The pictures depict Ukrainian women with children on their arms as can be seen⁵¹ in Figure 19, crying on what seems to be a train platform⁵² or military women holding guns⁵³ or sewing military clothes⁵⁴.

Renew Europe has posed three images on the 8th of March, all three of which are designed in the visual communication style of the group with their typical shade of blue as a background⁵⁵. They have referenced the war in Ukraine by dedicating the post similar to the EPP to the women in Ukraine, with a lesser visual focus on military resistance. The first image of the post contains a collage of three Ukrainian women, the one in the front wearing a yellow and blue coloured flower crown and two women in the back one holding the Ukrainian flag with the coat of arms trident (tryzub) in the middle of the flag and the other one holding a protest sign to “Stop the War in Ukraine”.

⁵¹ @eppgroup on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1c-jKKoUP/>

⁵² @eppgroup on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1c-jKKoUP/>

⁵³ @eppgroup on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1c-jKKoUP/>

⁵⁴ @eppgroup on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1c-jKKoUP/>

⁵⁵ @reneweurope on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1y9MhoBmp/>

The Trident *“reflects heroic events of the past – and it is a stripe of Ukrainian warriors protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine today”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2022).

The ID has posted a picture on and about the 8th of March, but it did not refer to the Ukraine war. It was a white backgrounded graphic with a dark blue lettering wishing a “Happy International Women’s Day 8th of March 2022 from the ID group” accompanied with the logo of the political group underneath and flowers in all four corners of the graphic.

The ECR has released one picture referring to the International women’s day⁵⁶. The picture is also referring to the war in Ukraine since it shows a blond-haired woman in military clothes, a black Barret wearing a gun as well as a camouflage rucksack with a Ukrainian flag patch. The woman is wearing her hair in a loose bun within which two flowers are attached in the same colours as the Ukrainian flag. The picture is supplemented with white lettering at the centre-bottom stating “International women’s day” and the blue group logo of the ECR in the left upper corner.

Unexpectedly so, the S&D, Greens/EFA and The Left have not posted about International women’s day on their Instagram feeds. As a reminder, it does not mean that a political group has not communicated on these special days at all if they have not published a post on the day. However, it could be that they have released a Video, Reel or Story on that day referring to the day. As known, all three of those forms of content are excluded from this analysis.

Trans Day of Visibility

The Trans Day of Visibility is taking place every year on the 31st of March. *“It marks a time to celebrate trans and non-binary people, and to raise awareness of the discrimination faced by the community worldwide”* (Maheshwariaplin, 2022). Transgender is an umbrella term for people *“whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth”* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The widely used colours and flags referring to the transgender community are light blue,

⁵⁶ @ecrgroupeu on 8th of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca1fVb8uZVK/>

white and light pink. The blue stripes represent masculinity, the pink stripes represent femininity and the white stripe represents non-binary, intersex and transitioning people (CSD Deutschland, n.d.). The British LGBT Foundation describes the term transgender as a broad umbrella term which is “*anyone who isn’t cis and is inclusive of a range of identities such as trans woman and trans man [...] Non-binary is used to describe people who feel their gender cannot be defined within the margins of gender binary*” (Non-Binary Inclusion, n.d.).

Throughout the analysing process it became apparent that only one of the groups has used this day to combine their communication about this special day and the happenings in Ukraine.

The Greens/EFA have published one image on the 31st of March referring to both the Trans Day of Visibility and expressing their support for Ukraine. In the posting text as well as in the visual⁵⁷ itself they have used the flags representing the transgender community and Ukraine see Figure 20. Within the posting text the group highlights the dangers the trans and non-binary community faces within as well as outside of the war zones in Ukraine and that trans people need safe routes and support on their journey towards safety.

⁵⁷ @greensefa on 31st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbxCiZftKEG/>



Figure 20 Greens/EFA example of Trans Day of visibility

The use of emojis to convey emotions visually are set to “*improve communication, express feelings, and make a positive impression during socially driven digital interactions*” (Boutet et al., 2021, p. 2).

The Socialists and Democrats have published a series of six images within one post, aka a so-called post carousel. Within those six images⁵⁸ they have used the colours of the transgender flag (light pink and light blue) but have however not referred to the war in Ukraine.

The Left has published one picture commemorating the Trans Day of Visibility, however also not making a reference towards the Ukraine war. They have used the flag colours of the transgender flag as a background and white lettering highlighted with a thick black line stating “*Equality, Dignity, Respect*”⁵⁹.

The EPP and Renew have not posted about the Trans Day of Visibility. It is not unexpected that also both the right-wing (and conservative) ID and the ECR groups have visually not communicated about the Trans Day of Visibility since both groups tend to have critical stances towards LGBTQIA+ issues or even disapprove fundamentally. Seeing as the majority of the ECR is made up by Polish MEPs whose

⁵⁸ @socialistsanddemocrats on 31st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbw97X7t40D/>

⁵⁹ @theleft_eu on 31st of March 2022 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbxdKDZlqi9/>

national party PiS has helped to establish so-called “LGBTQIA+ free zones” (e.g. Ahrens et al., 2021, pp. 8–9; Euractiv & Reuters, 2021).

9 Conclusion and Outlook

Starting from the premise that political images can be shaped through the production, selection, and dissemination of strategic visual material, this thesis examined the use of the social media platform Instagram by political groups. At this point we should look back at the research questions that guided through the process.

How did the seven political groups in the 9th European Parliament (EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ID, ECR, the Left) communicate about the war in Ukraine on Instagram in the first two months after the Russian invasion?

The overall results show trends across the party lines that might hint to a reciprocal influence between the content that gets posted online. Considering that similar visual material has only been posted after one another and not in a coordinated manner, a strategic collusion between the groups can be ruled out. For example, images of Putin branded as war criminal have been posted days apart by different groups but resembled each other in the graphical lay-outing and visual elements such as a big stamp stating “war criminal” or Putin placed in front of a mug shot scene.

There are distinct differences in the visual communication of each political group in the Parliament. Each is using a different style, colours and visual components however the common denominator is the fact that the majority of all posted pictures has been typified as a *Position* image type. Every group has largely focussed their visual communication on bringing political standpoints across on their Instagram.

Considering the analysis, image corpus and identified image types among the different political groups, the following differences were identified: the EPP was making use of their Instagram account by showcasing solidarity through picturing their own politicians with the masses and employing visually connected and symbolically charged position campaigns. Summarised they employed a “*personalised emotional strategy*” aiming to evoke emotions and solidarity with the cause.

The Social Democrats relied on an antagonistic strategy though picturing their political opponents and thereby subjecting them to public scrutiny. Their posting strategy and image types used can be subsumed under an “*emotional name and shame strategy*”.

Renew has primarily focussed their visual communication on graphically edited images which aimed at getting their message across textually, educate their viewers about the ongoings and seemingly doing so as party-politically neutral as possible. Their posting activity can therefore be described as an “*non-personalised educational strategy*”.

The Greens/EFA have used images of their MEPs during protests and demonstrations which taps into the *politician of the people* strategy. They have also relied heavily on graphically designed *Positioning* postings. Consequently, looking at their larger posting activity and comparing it to the other groups’ images can also be described as having employed a “*personalised positioning strategy*”.

The ID has barely visually communicated on the happenings in Ukraine. The content that has mentioned the war relied on the same concept as their general visual communication: quotation cards. Consequently, they have employed the “*personal quotation strategy*”.

The ECR has been posting many visuals featuring their MEPs in news settings or while speaking as well as positioning themselves pro-Ukraine and anti-Putin / Russia. Many visuals have depicted the person to blame in their eyes which is why their visual communication can be summarised as using a “*personalised name and shame strategy*”.

The Left has mainly focussed their visual communication about the war on Ukraine on topics concerning peace and underlined their positions with symbolically charged stock photos. Therefore, one can describe their posting activity as utilising a “*non-personalised humanitarian positioning strategy*”.

What must be mentioned additionally is that this thesis focussed on the visual communication within the first two months directly after the outbreak of the war.

Therefore, image types like for example reception rituals or handshakes - which are found often in visual communication studies - have not been identified in the corpus. If one were to extend the time scope of the analysis, there might be images of reception rituals found since leaders and high-level politicians of the European Parliament such as EP president Roberta Metsola (EPP) only started to visit the war zone from April 2022 (Sheftalovich, 2022) on.

In the introductory chapter, two additional research questions have been raised to guide through the research process and combine the quantitative image type analysis with another layer of research interest namely a rise in personalisation and individualisation on social media and party politics. Research question number two therefore reads as follows:

What visual communication strategies are applied, which patterns can be found and how do they relate to the personalisation thesis?

The authors Farkas & Bene (2021, p. 4) have postulated that *“a non-personalized visual communication would predominantly draw upon imported visual materials and pictures on parties or other political actors”* (2021, p. 4). This premise is clearly confirmed by the results of this master's thesis since political groups such as the ones represented in the 9th European Parliament primarily communicated with imported visual material such as graphics, symbols, screenshots, or stock photographs whenever they were not highlighting their own politicians.

Within the researched period, only the EPP, Greens and ECR have highlighted their politicians in their visual communication on Instagram when communicating on the Ukraine war albeit with slightly different focusses. The Greens/EFA were picturing their MEPs during pro-Ukraine demonstrations, making them seem approachable and in the midst of the public.

The EPP has pictured their politicians more often in a speech setting within the protest or in a social media campaign, holding up signs with positions written on them. Therefore, one can stipulate that with their *Position* images featuring their MEPs the EPP was trying to convey that their politicians are opinion leaders while it can be said

that the Greens focused more on a common man strategy. However, looking at absolute numbers of posted content, both groups have not primarily pictured their Members of the European Parliament but rather utilised imported visual material.

How does the visual communication vary depending on the one hand on pre-existing group sympathies towards Russia, and, on the other, what member states are prevalent in the respective groups?

As expected, based on pre-existing views and relationships on Russia and Putin (as presented in chapter 8.3) the far-right has not actively communicated on the war in Ukraine. The far left – previously also standing out as Kremlin friendly – has released press statements and slightly more visual communication on their Instagram, openly condemning the war and advocating for peace. Relative to their otherwise active and personalised social media presence on Instagram, they have not released too many visuals referencing the war and none featured their own politicians.

However, the right-conservative group ECR has on the first examination surprised by communicating actively and taking stances pro-Ukraine as well as condemning Putin's actions. On second thought, this has been attributed to the composition and member state dominance of the political group. Since the majority of the ECR are Polish members and since Poland is the direct neighbour of the warring territory and therefore also directly affected by the massive influx of fleeing Ukrainians as well as taking into consideration the country's historical animosities towards Russia, this finding can be traced back to the member state dominance hypothesis and is backed by the data of the Kremlin friendly behaviour by Szicherle et al. (2021) study.

Concludingly it can be said that the member state dominance hypothesis has explained the communication behaviour of only one group while it was not seen too relevant for other political groups. Pre-existing sympathies and relations to Russia appear to have an impact on how the groups in the European Parliament on the outer fringes of the political spectrum visually communicate about the war in Ukraine. However, the primary impact appears to be the relative silence by the two groups with pro-Russian sympathies. Member state dominance within a political group seems to be more important than where on the political spectrum they are located.

Overall examining the political groups of the 9th European Parliament has yielded fruitful results which are highly significant for political sciences and communication sciences likewise. This thesis has also sparked interest in more research topics revolving the subject such as examining politicians' voting behaviour in correspondence to their (visual) online communication, comparing different social media platforms or looking at what the political groups communicate on their Instagram "*stories*" which disappear after 24 hours.

Moreover, the results of this thesis raised questions about the self-framing practices political actors are going through when posting on their accounts. Scrutinising a similar image corpus on visual framing techniques could yield relevant results for political visual communication studies as a whole.

In conclusion, it can be said that the use of Instagram by political actors is an important component of political communication research and should by no means be underestimated. In fact, its scholarly relevance is bound to grow further in the future with the universal advent of (visual) social media platforms.

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