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## Non-Western coverage of local crises in the societal-security perspective\*

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**Abstract.** The article considers a small segment of the non-Western-centric world to understand how a selection of Bangladeshi news media covers the Russia-Ukraine conflict, i.e., the authors focus on the mass media coverage rather than how the Bangladeshi government may influence the news production. The research is based on two questions: *RQ1*. How do Bangladeshi newspapers frame the Russian Ukrainian conflict; *RQ2*. Which variables seem to impact the conflict coverage by Bangladeshi newspapers. The article begins with a literature review that briefly summarizes the current state of knowledge about the mass media coverage of armed conflicts. The second section presents the theoretical tools used to interpret the collected data on media framing, the third section — the research methodology, the fourth section — the case of the daily Bangladeshi newspapers coverage and framing of the Russian Ukrainian armed conflict. This study of two major daily newspapers in Bangladesh and their coverage of the Ukraine crisis and the Special Military Operation (SMO) represents a Non-Western mass media content analysis. The Ukraine crisis represents a major newsworthy topic in the Global North (the collective West), which is very deeply politicised as a form of information warfare against Russians and Russia's interests. Therefore, the authors make use of a media framing as a theoretical basis in this qualitative study of the SMO news content of *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune*. The results of the study are interesting and controversial: the Bangladesh mass media framing of the news stories resembles that of the Global North. However, there are some specific national features determined by the country's history and active pursuit of a balanced and neutral foreign policy towards the Global North and the Global South, which creates a nuanced understanding of Russia's security concerns and dilemma as legitimate, since Bangladesh's foreign policy philosophy is based on the idea of being no one's enemy and a friend to everyone. However, this philosophy leads to obvious contradictions and dissonance described in the paper.

**Key words:** Bangladesh; mass media; framing; Russian Ukrainian conflict; journalism; news production; content analysis; conflict media coverage

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Global media information flows, including coverage of armed conflicts, tend to be dominated the Western news organisations and Western standards of journalism, thus, interpreting and framing news with Western values and geopolitical priorities [43; 46]. Therefore, there are often geopolitical biases in news framing based on the Western discourse. Wars are very newsworthy and attract attention of the media and audiences; the news media create relationships between news makers and news consumers through interpretation and representation of armed conflict [36]. Although, truth is the first casualty of war [25], this is an arena for war correspondents to be seen as heroes and act as mythmakers, while the mass media act as an instrument of war [32].

There is an increasing gap between Western-centric and non-Western-centric worlds, which can be seen in the mass media news coverage, giving an insight into the quality and nature of not only journalism but also the country's cultural and political life. Changes in the mass media content and its framing are closely linked to changes in the wider society [26]. While Western audiences tend to be aware of mainstream political and media coverage of conflicts, there is less awareness of the non-Western-centric media which have another set of values and frames when covering the same conflict. Government and media framing can encourage a specific exchange of ideas and perceptions between the government, mass media and mass public [16].

Connections, dependencies and relationship between the mass media and wars have been established after more than a century of retelling battles and shaping public perception. War stories are selected or ignored by the mass media, retold in such narratives that justify the past or prepare for future wars, creating empowering myths of heroism of the “just” and of barbarism of the “unjust”. The mass media representation and interpretation of war have changed the way in which war stories are told and in which wars are fought [2]. This situation facilitates the politics of warfare driven by activities and flows in the information realm and affecting perceptions and conclusions in the cognitive realm. Hoskins and O'Loughlin [21] argue that war is diffused through an intricate mesh of the everyday media, which can both facilitate and contain the power and presence of the “enemy”, hostile “other”. This situation has destroyed the conventions of warfare through the interconnectedness and accessibility of war in the physical realm.

Journalists (war correspondents) convey the “reality” of contemporary armed warfare, playing a key role in the simultaneous information war within the physical war. They present a spectacle for global audiences that do not experience the combat of wars first-hand [40], thus influencing and shaping their perception and opinions. Military conflicts have political and cultural dimensions, and in the contemporary global information environment, the resulting interrelationships between conflict and media has changed and intensified [18] through narrating and constructing. “Newsworthy” events

(including warfare) are covered by instant global communications 24/7, providing audiences with numerous texts, images and videos, the nature and quality of which are influenced by political, cultural and professional factors that can blur information with entertainment in media representations [12; 39]. In terms of Western politics and culture, even though warfare is represented otherwise, warfare contradicts the central values and principles of democracies [11], which creates complex problems waging wars, requiring information-cognitive solutions. The strategic and cognitive environment is altered by the media in terms of how actors of war and politics change the way in which they act and interact: linear strategic interactions no longer dominate, since there are also mediated interactions [13]. This changing nature of warfare and the mass media contribution to this change determine tensions and expectation gaps regarding the role of media in conflicts.

Thus, when the Western mass media are perceived as failing to be an objective guardian of public interest, there is a backlash of criticism that politics and media misled the public and society [6; 44; 46]. Thus, the mass media become an instrument of war, which is in part the result of the increasing politicization of warfare that needs a selective and careful framing to meet geostrategic goals [32]. This is evident in how the Western mainstream media frame the current Russian Ukrainian conflict. The mainstream Western orthodoxy of knowledge (group consensus on the “reality”) insists that Russia carries sole responsibility for launching the military invasion, Ukraine is a helpless victim, the “international community” must support Ukraine as saviours, and Ukraine is to win. These assumptions and projections are deeply Western-centric, descriptive and lacking context. On the contrary, the US’s geostrategic goal of weakening Russia shall ultimately fail, and Russia will continue to build closer relations with the non-Western world. Thus, more and more articles question the represented moral basis of war and the choice of the further path — more war or a shared responsibility to end the war; the Western mass media are criticised for failing to report true but unpleasant news; media framing still plays a key role in how audiences understand and react to mediated events, especially warfare. The production and communication of news is not coincidental: news of a certain nature and timing is intended to ensure public consent [7], i.e., the construction and presentation of news determine how the audience understands it, which in turn have cognitive effects (opinions and perceptions) that are also politically managed and regulated.

Framing is a means to project power relations to mass audiences, which is especially important in foreign and security policy. Framing implies “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” [16. P. 5]. There are different types of frames such as a narrower focus and procedural frames that suggest a political actor’s legitimacy but does not allow an audience

to be motivated and ready to engage in a meaningful political action [16. P. 6]. There are three different classes of objects in the mass mediated news framing — political events, issues and actors [16. P. 22]; certainly, warfare has been and is still a deeply political act [32]. Frames are not uniform across the mass media; there are differences across editorial and political lines. For instance, in the media framing of the Syrian war by CNN and Antiwar.com, there were significant ideological differences: CNN's frames supported the policy and armed intervention against the Syrian government, while Antiwar.com's frames reminded audiences of the past government deceptions and disasters in the “humanitarian warfare” [1]. Frames can vary under the presence of foreign international media in the national media market: thus, Russia Today in Germany used different frames for the Ukrainian compared to the German public service media mostly reflecting the German government position, challenging the legitimacy of German policy [27]. Media frames can create binary ethical or moral dichotomies as a hierarchy of “worthy” actors and circumstances [10]. Framing can change after crossing international borders, since “news production is shaped by competing influences, including cultural values” [31. P. 1].

The authors conducted a qualitative framing analysis to identify non-Western framing patterns [17] for the Russian Ukrainian conflict. Two English language newspapers — *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune* — were chosen, since this is an international crisis. In Bangladesh, all newspapers are private, and urban readers prefer primarily English language newspapers. *Daily Star* was established in 1991, after the fall of the autocratic regime of General Ershad. Due to objective journalism and commitment to freedom of the press, *Daily Star* became one of the most trustworthy English news media in the country. Today this is the largest English-language daily in the country, with professional journalists working 24/7 in both print and digital formats [37]. *Dhaka Tribune* is the fastest growing English newspaper in the country, which was established in 2013 and is famous for diverse range of opinions in editorials by contributors from Bangladesh and overseas.

Almost a three months' time frame was selected — from February 22 to April 7, 2022 — as the initial phase of this conflict. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine to liberate the Donbass region, where the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk were under regular attacks from Kiev's government. In early April 2022, the conflict moved to the South and East of Ukraine. A total of 52 news reports were selected — 42 from *Daily Star* and 19 from *Dhaka Tribune*: a random sample method was applied after the search based on the relevant key words (like crime, Ukraine, Russia, conflict, etc.); editorial and opinion articles were not included. The collected articles were divided into several sub-themes and later three dominant themes were identified in the conflict coverage. NVivo Software was used for coding and interpretation; findings are organized according to the research questions [42].

The authors analysed news stories with the qualitative thematic approach to show how the global media agendas and local narratives interact to influence public discourse about international crises [14; 22]; the media framing reflects Bangladesh's political, economic and humanitarian concerns [33]. Thus, the Bangladeshi media framed the Russian Ukrainian conflict primarily with two conflicting narratives — Russian military aggression and Ukrainian resistance [8; 30] — also shaped by the geopolitical context, particularly Bangladesh's Non-Western perspective and historical ties with Russia and other nations, by the media's relationship with Western and Russian narratives, and the global political and economic landscape.

Both newspapers presented the Russian army as an aggressor and the invasion of Ukraine as an unprovoked military operation that posed a threat to the global stability, particularly in Europe [45]. When describing Russia's actions, the media used phrases consistent with the representation of Russia in Western publications, for instance: "Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion... killing dozens and forcing thousands to flee for their lives". On the other hand, Dhaka Tribune published an article on "The Russian invasion of Ukraine is justified, says Myanmar junta": by highlighting international support for Russia from countries such as Myanmar, the newspaper reiterated the typical Western governments' condemnation. This framing emphasized the global split and the consequences of conflict for both regional and international peace [15], since the media consistently reported losses among both civilians and defence forces in Ukraine [5].

On the contrary, Ukraine's resistance was presented as a valiant and resolute effort against insurmountable challenges: both media emphasized the valour of the Ukrainian people and the government's appeal for global assistance. The determination of Ukraine was highlighted by reports of civilians enlisting for military service and the pervasive solidarity throughout the nation. This framing created a narrative of a small yet resolute nation opposing a formidable attacker, echoing bigger themes of sovereignty and self-determination. Both newspapers continuously reported on the escalating humanitarian catastrophe stemming from the armed conflict by focusing on civilian losses and the refugee situation (mainly families escaping violence and the devastation of infrastructure) — the portrayal of the war's effects on civilians intensified the narrative of Russian aggression [20]. The relocation of millions of Ukrainians made a frame of the humanitarian crisis, which led to both *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune* reporting on the diplomatic initiatives aimed at de-escalating the violence: involvement of international organizations and politicians striving to escalate peace was to contrast the view of Russia as the principal aggressor. For instance, *Dhaka Tribune* stated that "the Bangladesh government has abolished consular fees for Bangladeshi nationals seeking to return from the distressed country", and many articles

discussed the implementation of sanctions against Russia, encompassing the cessation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the immobilization of assets (a prominent aspect of the coverage was the international reaction).

There are various aspects in the framing of the Russian Ukrainian conflict in Bangladeshi media: the country's historical and geopolitical connections and settings; the media's comprehension and ties to both Western and Russian narratives [9]; the global political and economic environment [29]. Both newspapers agreed with international condemnation of Russia's invasion, yet they endeavoured to balance the narrative by acknowledging Russian grievances, including NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's security concerns about Ukraine's prospective NATO membership [19]. This was mainly because Bangladesh strives to maintain a neutral position (friend with everybody, enemy to no one) in international crises [24]. For instance, *Daily Star* stated that "Putin told his security council it was necessary to consider an appeal from the leaders of two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine for Russia to recognise them as independent". This shows Russia's perspective (including separatism in Ukraine and Russia's perceived security threat from NATO expansion), which was often presented in Bangladeshi media. There was also the news that "Putin says Moscow's interests are 'non-negotiable'", which captures Russia's inflexible position on its security and its desire to prevent Ukraine's NATO membership, a factor that both the Western and Bangladeshi media acknowledged as part of the geopolitical dynamics influencing the conflict. Moreover, there were media statements reflecting Bangladesh's understanding of the geopolitical importance of maintaining relations with both the West and Russia [28]. Thus, Bangladesh preserves a longstanding position of neutrality in significant international disputes while acknowledging national sovereignty.

The political bias of media organisations further shaped media narratives about the Russian Ukrainian conflict. *Daily Star* typically follows the pro-Western storylines and narratives; however, while critical of Russia's invasion, the newspaper adopted a more impartial position, since Russia's geopolitical intentions mirrored the main diplomatic goals of Bangladesh. For instance, *Daily Star* reported that "Western officials were not yet describing Putin's moves as an invasion, but US officials say there is at least a 150,000-strong Russian force poised to launch an all-out assault", and this statement demonstrates how *Daily Star* aligns with the Western coverage. The influence of international media also shaped the representation of the conflict in Bangladeshi newspapers. Both *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune* often referred to the western narratives, including those of the US, EU, UN and news agencies like AP and AF [9]. Not because the understanding of English sources is easier but due to the language barrier regarding Russian narratives. This dependency on Western sources framed the conflict within the context of global geopolitics. For instance, *Daily Star* reported that "Western capitals say Russia has amassed 150,000 troops

in combat formations on Ukraine's borders with Russia, Belarus and Russian-occupied Crimea and on warships in the Black Sea", which shows the connection and understanding of the Western intelligence reports and how global sources affect the narrative of Bangladeshi newspapers. *Dhaka Tribune* published that "US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said yesterday intelligence suggests any Russian invasion of Ukraine would employ a particularly brutal strategy to "crush" the civilian population", which reveals the direct influence of the US intelligence reports on framing Russia's strategy.

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Let us return to the research questions posed in the abstract — *RQ1* and *RQ2*. Several frames in both newspapers were identified. First, "Russia's aggression and Ukraine's defence", which involved moral judgement, concerns about politics of warfare, and ensuring public consent about the constructed reality that resembled the mainstream Western media reporting rather than that of the Global South. Second, "humanitarian crisis and diplomatic efforts and sanctions", which mainly presents the development of the crisis and possible "remedies" to it, although also with some moral judgement to render the named aggressor as passive and reactive in the ongoing information war, to justify the policy and actions of the "victim" and their façade of "legitimacy". Although the general Bangladeshi media framing resembles the anti-Russian Western mainstream media coverage, there are some evident nuances in Bangladeshi media narratives: understanding and recognition of Russia's right to security and protection of national interests; Bangladesh's desire to preserve neutrality that positions it as a friend to everybody and an enemy to no one. Therefore, beyond the narrow vision and frame of the Ukrainian crisis, the mass media in Bangladesh present the broader geopolitical context that is absent in the Western mainstream mass media (the security threat posed to Russia by NATO's continued eastward expansion and the plight of citizens in the Donbas region).

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#### Notes

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## Незападное освещение локальных кризисов в контексте оценки общественной безопасности\*

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**Аннотация.** В статье представлен небольшой сегмент незападноцентричного мира — показано, как несколько бангладешских средств массовой информации освещают российско-украинский конфликт, т.е. авторы сосредоточены на особенностях медиафрейминга, а не на том, как правительство страны могло бы контролировать производство новостей. Авторы провели исследование, чтобы ответить на два вопроса: как именно представлен российско-украинский конфликт в бангладешских газетах с позиций используемых для этого приоритетных фреймов; какие переменные определяют медийное освещение данного конфликта. В начале статьи приведен краткий литературный обзор, суммирующий основные направления и результаты изучения медийной репрезентации вооруженных конфликтов, затем охарактеризованы концептуальные основания интерпретации эмпирических данных при реконструировании медиафрейминга, уточнена исследовательская методология и обоснован выбранный «кейс» — особенности освещения и фрейминга российско-украинского вооруженного конфликта в бангладешских газетах. Авторы считают, что изучение двух основных ежедневных бангладешских газет в заданном тематическом поле (репрезентации специальной военной операции) — своего рода качественный контент-анализ особенностей медиафрейминга в незападно-центричном пространстве. Украинский кризис — наиболее важная новостная повестка на Глобальном Севере (коллективном Западе), которая глубоко политизирована в интересах ведения информационной войны против россиян и российских интересов. Авторы используют теорию медиафрейминга как концептуальное основание для качественного анализа медийного освещения (доминирующих фреймов) специальной военной операции в двух бангладешских газетах — «Дейли Стар» и «Дакка Трибьюн». Результаты анализа интересны и противоречивы: с одной стороны, используемые бангладешскими газетами фреймы повторяют те, что используются Глобальным Севером; с другой стороны, очевидны и национальные особенности медиафрейминга, обусловленные историей страны и ее активными попытками проводить сбалансированную внешнюю политику — нейтралитета в отношении как Глобального Севера, так и Глобального Юга; результат — признание легитимными опасений России относительно своей национальной безопасности. Философия бангладешской внешней политики «дружить со всеми, ни с кем не враждовать» порождает противоречия в медийном отражении важных международных конфликтов.

**Ключевые слова:** Бангладеш; средства массовой информации; фрейминг; российско-украинский конфликт; журнализм; производство новостей; контент-анализ; медийное освещение конфликта

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