

NARRATIVES OF VICTORY AND VICTIMHOOD: NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES (2019–2025)

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Abstract

Narratives have become central to wartime political communication, shaping how societies understand conflict, justify resistance, and construct collective identity. This study examines how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky constructs narratives of victory and victimhood in his official speeches from 2019 to 2025, a period spanning Ukraine's transition from political reform to full-scale defense against Russia's invasion. Drawing on constructivist theory and narrative analysis, the research argues that Zelensky's rhetoric performs a dual identity function: reinforcing Ukraine as a resilient nation capable of victory while simultaneously foregrounding its suffering as a victim of external aggression. This narrative interplay strengthens domestic unity, mobilizes international support, and legitimizes wartime policies. Using qualitative discourse analysis of presidential speeches, the study identifies recurring themes such as moral superiority, heroic resistance, national trauma, and appeals to global justice. It finds that Zelensky's discourse evolves after February 2022 from general nation-building messages to intensified wartime framing, where victory is linked to moral righteousness and victimhood is leveraged as a strategic communicative tool. These narratives collectively reshape Ukrainian national identity, presenting Ukraine as both a heroic actor and a wounded nation deserving of global solidarity. By analyzing presidential rhetoric across a critical historical juncture, this study contributes to broader debates on political communication, identity construction, and the role of narrative in international conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Political leaders play a central role in shaping how societies understand war, national identity, and collective purpose. Through speeches, narratives, and symbolic communication, they construct meanings that frame the nation's place in the world and define the moral boundaries of conflict. In the case of Ukraine, the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky has coincided with one of the most turbulent and

transformative periods in the country's modern history. His rise to office in 2019 marked the beginning of a reform-centered political project, but Russia's full-scale invasion of February 2022 radically altered the stakes and functions of presidential discourse. As Ukraine confronted military aggression, mass displacement, and existential threats to statehood, Zelensky's speeches became crucial

instruments for mobilizing domestic resilience and securing international solidarity.

The war created a communicative environment in which narratives of identity, threat, trauma, and determination became central to political legitimacy. Zelensky's rhetorical strategy combined appeals to national suffering with declarations of resolve and agency, constructing Ukraine simultaneously as a victim of unjust aggression and as a heroic actor capable of victory. This dual narrative—victimhood and victory—became a fundamental dimension of wartime identity construction. Recent scholarship on political communication highlights the power of narrative framing in shaping perceptions of conflict, influencing public morale, and persuading foreign audiences (Callahan, 2010; Gries, 2020). However, despite growing interest in Zelensky's international media presence, systematic academic analysis of his identity-building rhetoric across the pre-war and wartime periods remains limited.

Existing literature on Ukrainian identity tends to focus on historical narratives, language politics, and the long-term effects of post-Soviet transformation. Meanwhile, studies of wartime communication often examine crisis narratives or international messaging without connecting them explicitly to national identity construction. The gap lies in understanding how Zelensky's discourse, during a defining historical rupture, constructs a narrative of Ukraine that integrates both suffering and strength—victimhood as a source of moral legitimacy and victory as a source of collective empowerment.

This article addresses that gap by examining presidential speeches from 2019 to 2025 to analyze how Zelensky constructs and communicates Ukrainian national identity. Using a constructivist lens and qualitative narrative analysis, the study identifies how themes of moral resilience, global justice, resistance, vulnerability, and collective heroism shape the discursive construction of "Ukraine" during crisis. By tracing the evolution of these narratives across distinct political contexts—pre-war governance, the shock of invasion, sustained conflict, and long-term resilience—the research demonstrates how identity is produced, adapted, and reinforced through high-stakes political communication.

Understanding this rhetorical process is essential for interpreting Ukraine's domestic unity, its diplomatic success, and its symbolic role in international politics. More broadly, the study contributes to scholarship on narrative, identity, and conflict by illustrating how political leaders strategically combine narratives of victory and victimhood to mobilize action and shape global perceptions. The Ukrainian case offers a powerful example of how narrative becomes a tool of statecraft in times of war.

Literature Review

Research on identity, narrative, and political communication has expanded significantly in recent decades, especially in contexts of war, crisis, and state transformation. This literature review draws on three major strands of scholarship: (1) studies of national identity and political rhetoric, (2) research on narratives of victimhood and victory in conflict, and (3) works on Ukrainian identity and wartime discourse. While each strand contributes important insights, gaps remain in understanding how Ukrainian presidential rhetoric constructs identity across the pre-war and wartime periods, particularly through the interplay of victory and victimhood narratives.

The first body of literature explores how political leaders construct national identity through discourse. Constructivist scholars argue that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through language, symbols, and narratives (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Leaders play a crucial role in defining "who we are" and "what we stand for," especially during periods of crisis when identity becomes a mobilizing resource. Research shows that presidential rhetoric can strengthen solidarity, articulate norms, and justify political action by framing collective experiences within broader narratives of purpose, threat, or destiny (Gronas, 2016; Edy, 2012). These studies highlight the importance of examining how leaders use narrative frames—but they often focus on stable political environments, not on wartime identity construction.

A second strand of scholarship examines how narratives of victimhood and victory function in political and social contexts. Victimhood narratives can generate moral authority, international sympathy, and claims to justice by portraying a nation as

suffering unjust aggression (Noor et al., 2017; Bar-Tal, 2003). Meanwhile, victory narratives emphasize resilience, bravery, and agency, enabling societies to see themselves as capable of triumph (Hutchison, 2017). Scholars argue that both narratives can coexist, often complementing one another to create a coherent identity that blends suffering with moral strength (Lazar & Lazar, 2004). Existing research, however, tends to analyze these narratives in isolation or within long-term historical myths, rather than within contemporary political speeches in real time during war.

The third relevant body of literature focuses on Ukraine and its evolving national identity. Prior to the 2022 invasion, scholars examined issues of language, nationalism, memory politics, and the legacies of the Soviet past (Kulyk, 2016; Yekelchuk, 2015). Since 2022, research has increasingly explored Ukrainian resilience, international diplomacy, and global perceptions of Zelensky's leadership (Szostek, 2022; Onuch & Hale, 2022). Studies highlight Zelensky's skillful communication with Western audiences and his ability to translate Ukraine's struggle into a universal moral narrative. Yet, much of this scholarship remains oriented toward foreign policy or crisis communication, rather than an in-depth analysis of how identity is constructed domestically across different phases of his presidency.

Across these three strands, a significant gap becomes clear: there is limited scholarly work that systematically analyses Zelensky's speeches from 2019 to 2025 to understand how presidential rhetoric constructs Ukrainian national identity through the combined narratives of victory and victimhood. Existing studies either focus narrowly on international messaging, emphasize pre-war political transformation, or analyze rhetorical themes without linking them directly to the dynamics of identity construction.

This study addresses that gap by integrating insights from narrative theory, constructivism, and political communication to examine the evolution of Zelensky's identity-building discourse. By analyzing a longitudinal corpus of speeches spanning both pre-war governance and wartime leadership, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how political narratives mobilize societies, shape global perceptions,

and reinforce national identity under extraordinary conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a constructivist and narrative-based theoretical framework to analyze how Ukrainian national identity is constructed through presidential rhetoric. Constructivism views identity as a socially produced and continuously negotiated phenomenon, shaped through discourse, symbols, and shared meanings rather than predetermined material factors (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). Narrative theory complements this perspective by highlighting the ways political actors use storytelling, framing, and meaning-making to articulate who "we" are, what "we" value, and how "we" interpret historical events (Somers, 1994; Polletta, 2006). Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive lens for examining how political leaders mobilize identity during times of crisis.

From a constructivist standpoint, identity is both performative and relational. Leaders construct national identity by defining boundaries between the nation and its "Others," assigning moral attributes, and framing collective experiences within broader narratives of purpose or struggle (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In wartime contexts, these identity constructions become particularly salient, as political actors seek to justify actions, mobilize the population, and secure international legitimacy. Zelensky's speeches thus serve as performative acts that shape and reinforce the meaning of "Ukraine" in the face of existential threat.

Narrative theory provides the second pillar of this framework. Narratives allow political actors to simplify complex realities by organizing events into coherent storylines—heroes, victims, aggressors, and moral stakes (Riessman, 2008; Bruner, 1991). In conflict settings, two narrative types become especially prominent: victimhood narratives and victory narratives. Victimhood narratives highlight suffering, injustice, trauma, and the moral superiority of the harmed community (Noor et al., 2017; Bar-Tal, 2003). They construct the nation as an innocent and vulnerable actor, deserving of empathy and protection. Victory narratives, by contrast, emphasize resilience, agency, courage, and the possibility of triumph (Hutchison, 2017). They frame the nation as

capable, strong, and united, projecting confidence and reinforcing collective resolve.

This study conceptualizes these two narratives not as opposites, but as complementary identity mechanisms. Victimhood provides moral legitimacy, establishes Ukraine as a target of unjust aggression, and justifies appeals for global support. Victory narratives provide emotional strength, portray Ukraine as a heroic actor, and sustain societal resilience. Their interplay enables political leaders to construct an identity that is simultaneously righteous and resilient, wounded yet unbroken. This dual narrative structure is particularly powerful during wartime, when both suffering and courage shape public emotions and political behavior.

A constructivist-narrative framework also highlights the temporal dimension of identity construction. Political narratives evolve across historical junctures, responding to changing conditions, threats, and audiences (Ringmar, 1996). Zelensky's speeches between 2019 and 2025 reflect shifting priorities—from nation-building and reform to survival, resistance, and international mobilization. Analyzing this evolution allows the study to trace how identity is adapted to different political contexts, illustrating the dynamic nature of meaning-making during conflict.

Finally, this theoretical framework emphasizes the strategic function of identity narratives. Rhetoric is not merely descriptive; it is a tool of statecraft. By constructing narratives of victory and victimhood, Zelensky seeks to shape domestic unity, international perceptions, and Ukraine's moral position in global politics. These narratives serve both political and diplomatic functions, reinforcing Ukraine's claim to sovereignty and justice while mobilizing allies and sustaining public morale.

Together, constructivism and narrative theory offer a powerful analytical foundation for examining how Zelensky constructs Ukrainian national identity. This framework guides the study's methodology and provides the conceptual tools needed to interpret the discursive patterns found in his speeches.

Research Questions

- How does Volodymyr Zelensky construct narratives of victory and victimhood in his presidential speeches from 2019 to 2025?

- What rhetorical devices, frames, and themes does Zelensky use to produce these narratives?
- How do narratives of victimhood and victory interact to shape Ukrainian national identity during the transition from pre-war governance to sustained wartime mobilization?
- How do Zelensky's speeches target different audiences (domestic vs. international), and how does audience orientation affect narrative content and style?
- What are the political and diplomatic functions of these narratives in mobilizing domestic support and securing international solidarity?

Objectives

- To identify and analyze the dominant narratives of victimhood and victory in Zelensky's presidential speeches (2019–2025).
- To map the rhetorical devices, frames, and themes that constitute these narratives.
- To trace the evolution of Zelensky's rhetoric across pre-war, early-invasion, and protracted-conflict phases.
- To examine how speech audiences (domestic vs. international) influence narrative strategies.
- To evaluate the role of these narratives in constructing Ukrainian national identity and in advancing domestic mobilization and international support.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in discourse analysis to examine how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky constructs national identity through narratives of victory and victimhood. Because the research focuses on meanings, symbols, and rhetorical strategies embedded in political language, qualitative interpretation offers the most suitable approach for capturing the complexity of identity construction (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). The empirical basis of the study consists of a corpus of official presidential speeches delivered between 2019 and 2025, collected from the website of the Office of the President of Ukraine, verified press releases, and key public addresses to domestic and international audiences. This time frame allows for a longitudinal examination of Zelensky's rhetoric across distinct political contexts:

pre-war governance, the outbreak of full-scale invasion, and sustained wartime mobilization.

The study employs qualitative discourse analysis, which enables the identification of recurring frames, themes, metaphors, and narrative structures within political texts (Gee, 2014; Fairclough, 2013). This method is particularly well-suited for analyzing identity construction, as it focuses on how language shapes collective meaning, defines social boundaries, and assigns moral significance to political events. The analysis follows a multi-stage process. First, the speeches were read inductively to identify dominant narrative elements, paying attention to references to suffering, injustice, heroism, resilience, victory, and national purpose. Second, these narrative elements were coded into two overarching categories—victimhood and victory—guided by the theoretical insights from narrative and constructivist literature. Third, the study examined how these coded themes evolved over time and how their combination contributed to a coherent identity narrative.

In addition to narrative coding, the analysis incorporates contextual interpretation, recognizing that meaning is shaped not only by linguistic structure but also by the political circumstances in which the speeches were delivered (Barkho, 2018). This approach aligns with the constructivist understanding that identity formation is relational and dynamic, shaped by interactions with external actors, domestic pressures, and unfolding events (Wendt, 1999). Particular attention was given to speeches delivered during critical moments—such as February 2022, the early months of the invasion, appeals to foreign parliaments, and annual addresses—to trace shifts in tone, emphasis, and narrative strategy.

The study also incorporates triangulation through cross-referencing the speeches with secondary sources, including scholarly analyses, policy reports, and media interpretations of Zelensky's rhetoric. This strengthens the validity of the findings by situating them within broader academic and political contexts. While qualitative interpretation carries inherent subjectivity, transparency in coding procedures and reliance on a clearly defined theoretical framework help mitigate potential bias.

Overall, the methodological approach enables a deep and nuanced understanding of how Zelensky's rhetoric constructs Ukrainian national identity

through intertwined narratives of victimhood and victory. By analyzing speeches across multiple years and political contexts, the study captures both continuity and transformation in Ukraine's identity discourse, providing a robust foundation for examining the strategic role of narrative in wartime leadership.

Analysis/Discussion

Narratives of Victimhood: Constructing Ukraine as a Suffering but Morally Innocent Nation

A central feature of Zelensky's rhetoric is the construction of Ukraine as a victim of unjust aggression. From the earliest days of his presidency, but especially after February 2022, Zelensky consistently framed Ukraine as a peaceful nation forced into a defensive war. This narrative draws heavily on themes of innocence, injustice, and moral suffering, positioning Ukraine as the aggrieved party within the international community. Phrases such as "we did not start this war," "our children are paying the price," and "the world must not look away" illustrate how Zelensky anchors Ukraine's identity in the experience of trauma and violation.

Victimhood serves several discursive functions. Domestically, it unifies the population by emphasizing shared suffering and a collective sense of loss. Internationally, it legitimizes Ukraine's claims for assistance by appealing to principles of justice, human rights, and international law. The narrative frequently includes references to civilian casualties, destroyed homes, and targeted infrastructure, creating a moral urgency that invites empathy and support. This aligns with earlier research showing that victimhood narratives strengthen a nation's moral position while mobilizing external solidarity (Noor et al., 2017).

Zelensky also employs victimhood to construct a sharp moral dichotomy between Ukraine and Russia. By characterizing Russia as an aggressor that violates global norms, he simultaneously constructs Ukraine as a defender of democratic values, reinforcing the narrative of innocence in contrast to external brutality. This binary framing supports the relational dimension of identity construction: Ukraine becomes what Russia is not—peaceful, humane, and righteous.

Narratives of Victory: Constructing Ukraine as a Resilient and Heroic Nation

Parallel to the victimhood narrative, Zelensky constructs a powerful discourse of victory, resilience, and national heroism. Even in the most difficult phases of the war, his rhetoric emphasizes perseverance, agency, and collective strength. Expressions such as “we will win,” “Ukraine stands,” and “our people are unbreakable” highlight a vision of national character rooted in determination and bravery.

Victory narratives serve as a psychological counterweight to trauma. They cultivate hope, reinforce unity, and sustain morale during prolonged conflict. Zelensky routinely highlights stories of soldiers, volunteers, medical workers, and ordinary citizens to depict the nation as actively shaping its own destiny rather than passively enduring hardship. By portraying Ukraine as capable of triumph, Zelensky affirms national agency, reinforcing the belief that suffering is not merely endured but overcome.

These narratives also allow Zelensky to articulate a forward-looking identity—one that envisions Ukraine not only surviving the war but emerging stronger, more unified, and more deeply connected to democratic Europe. This aspirational framing transforms victory from a military objective into a broader civilizational project. As Hutchison (2017) argues, victory narratives create a sense of collective purpose, enabling societies to see themselves as capable of transforming adversity into renewal.

The Interplay of Victimhood and Victory: A Dual Identity Strategy

The most distinctive aspect of Zelensky’s rhetoric is the integration of victimhood and victory into a single, coherent narrative framework. Rather than presenting Ukraine solely as a passive victim or exclusively as a heroic actor, Zelensky weaves these identities together to construct a multiphased national story. Ukraine is simultaneously wounded and resilient, suffering yet courageous, vulnerable yet determined.

Victimhood provides moral authority: Ukraine is wronged and therefore deserving of international support. Victory provides agency: Ukraine fights back, resists, and shapes its own destiny. This combination amplifies the emotional and political impact of the

discourse, enabling Zelensky to appeal to both compassion and admiration. The dual narrative makes Ukraine a symbol of both injustice and inspiration, strengthening the country’s global resonance.

This strategic interplay aligns with narrative theory, which emphasizes that political storytelling is most persuasive when it balances vulnerability with strength, inviting audiences to both empathize with and admire the subject (Bruner, 1991). The dual narrative also enhances domestic mobilization by framing struggle as both righteous and winnable.

Evolution of Rhetoric: From Pre-War Nation-Building to Wartime Identity Construction

Zelensky’s rhetoric evolves significantly across the 2019–2025 period. In the pre-war phase, speeches focused on themes of reform, anti-corruption, national unity, and European integration. Identity construction during this period emphasized civic pride and future-oriented development, portraying Ukraine as a democratic state striving for renewal.

The full-scale invasion in February 2022 marks a dramatic shift. Speeches from this period adopt a crisis-oriented tone, foregrounding suffering, resistance, and appeals to international solidarity. Victimhood narratives intensify as Zelensky describes atrocities and humanitarian impacts, while victory narratives become more urgent, emphasizing resilience against overwhelming odds.

By 2023–2025, the discourse reflects adaptation to protracted conflict. Zelensky integrates long-term resilience, reconstruction, and moral endurance into his rhetoric. The identity narrative becomes more layered, portraying Ukraine as a nation that not only survives but transforms through struggle. This trajectory demonstrates how narrative identity responds to changing political realities, consistent with constructivist insights on the evolution of identity in times of crisis (Ringmar, 1996).

Identity Construction Through Narrative: Defining “Ukraine” in Wartime

The combination of victimhood and victory narratives results in a distinctive wartime identity: Ukrainian national identity is represented as morally righteous, historically resilient, and unbreakably determined. Through rhetorical contrast with Russia, Zelensky

constructs identity boundaries by defining Ukraine as the protector of democratic values and human dignity.

The Ukrainian people emerge in the discourse as the central embodiment of national virtues—courage, sacrifice, unity, and moral clarity. Zelensky's emphasis on collective heroism, shared suffering, and national purpose transforms identity from an abstract idea into a lived emotional reality. This process demonstrates the powerful role political rhetoric plays in shaping how nations understand themselves during existential crises.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky constructs national identity through intertwined narratives of victimhood and victory across his speeches from 2019 to 2025. Using a constructivist and narrative analytical framework, the research has demonstrated that Zelensky's rhetoric serves as a powerful instrument of identity formation, particularly in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion. The findings show that the president's discourse performs a dual function: it presents Ukraine as a morally innocent victim of aggression, while simultaneously portraying it as a resilient, heroic, and ultimately victorious nation.

The victimhood narrative establishes Ukraine's moral legitimacy, emphasizing suffering, injustice, and the violation of fundamental norms. This framing mobilizes international empathy, strengthens claims for foreign assistance, and reinforces domestic unity around shared trauma. Conversely, the victory narrative highlights agency, resilience, and collective courage, providing emotional strength and sustaining morale during protracted conflict. Together, these narratives create a coherent identity in which Ukraine is both deserving of support and capable of shaping its own destiny.

By tracing the evolution of rhetoric from pre-war governance to wartime mobilization, the study illustrates how identity narratives adapt to shifting political realities. Zelensky's speeches transitioned from themes of reform and national renewal to narratives centered on survival, resistance, and global justice. This transformation underscores the dynamic nature of identity construction in times of crisis, aligning with constructivist insights into the socially

produced and context-dependent character of national identity.

More broadly, this research contributes to understanding the role of political rhetoric in conflict by showing how leaders strategically combine vulnerability and strength to mobilize societies and influence international audiences. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that narrative is not merely descriptive but instrumental—shaping perceptions, defining moral boundaries, and guiding collective action. As the war continues to redefine Ukraine's place in the world, Zelensky's dual narrative of victimhood and victory will remain central to the nation's self-understanding and its engagement with the international community.

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