

Armed to the Tweet. Social Media and the War in Ukraine: Shaping Narratives of Self-Understanding and Self-Determination.

Abstract

All wars create narratives that give societies the ability to imagine and be imagined. In the ongoing war in Ukraine, such narratives have been a crucial component of self-identification, justification, motivation and defiance in the current battle for Ukraine. Moreover, the war in Ukraine illustrates how social media influences those narratives, and how the war is reported on, experienced and understood. The metanarratives of greater powers, i.e., of the West and Russia on who has the right to control post-soviet space of Eastern Europe, on the enforcing of neutrality or on the possible solutions to the war, do not prioritise the interests of Ukraine. This article explores the narratives of Ukrainian Twitter users, activists, journalists and academics. Data were collected by gathering Twitter posts, at a few points in time shortly after the start of the war, resulting in the collection of over 3,000 Twitter messages. The analysis draws a picture of Ukrainians' self-understanding and self-determination in this historical moment and seems to act as a response to those who deny Ukraine the agency to define its own vision for its future.

Keywords:

Ukraine, self-understanding, self-determination, Twitter, Russia's war against Ukraine, postcolonialism,

Introduction

Geopolitics reveals itself in the form of meta-narratives that govern our thinking as they provide simpler explanations for complex problems (Agnew 2003). The dominant narrative on the conflict in Ukraine depicts it merely as a struggle between Russia and the West, two imperial forces that fight for their sphere of influence and world domination. This narrative

gives Ukraine no civilizational choice, framing the country as a pawn that needs to await the effect of the power struggle when one of two alternative visions for its future will be decided: democracy or dictatorship, sovereignty, or subordination, European or Russian (Surzhko-Harned and Zahuranec 2017). Wars, however, undermine the geopolitical status quo that rests on the pillars of the narratives and create new ones. Certainly, the war Russia is waging in Ukraine is doing just that (Butcher 2022). When the framings of narratives disintegrate, there is a demand for new interpretations, for alternative discourses that would frame new geopolitical narratives (Murphy et al 2004; Bachmann and Moisio 2020). However, geopolitical narratives often ignore the perspectives of the actors and people who experience the geopolitical forces. In this article, we focus on a particular group of Ukrainian voices that are articulated on Twitter, expressed within a dialogue with its Western public/Twitter users. We bring their reflections on the new emerging narratives on self-understanding and self-determination of these Ukrainian voices as they respond directly to the dominant geopolitical discourses. We build on postcolonial theory as it provides a lens to see more clearly a specific dynamic in the conversations with the Western counterparts (Bhabha 2014) – and we focus on the postcolonial demand to shift the epistemology from its Eurocentric location to non-Western localities and resistance to the power imbalances in knowledge production and dissemination.

Postcolonial scholars have stressed how Western dominance was built on the crucial assumption that modernity is an unique Western concept and rooted in a particular historical and geographical context (Mayblin et al 2016). It anchored knowledge production as the bedrock of social and political thought, separating Europe from the rest of the globe and making some civilizations be seen as "behind", stuck in the past, or just not modern (Bhabha 2007; Müller 2020). Scholars from different, often formerly colonized contexts, analysed forms of inequalities, extraction and domination in knowledge production and representation (Bhabha et al., 2018; Holmwood 2011; Shilliam 2016; Tilley 2017; Freire 2014 [1968]; Hooks 1994).

Writing about the Eastern-Western tensions in knowledge production, Buchowski (2004) noted that the field of postsocialist studies is mainly a product of Western scholarship, in which Eastern intellectual traditions are completely dismissed, while a set of discursive practices are used to shape the perception of Eastern Europe: *‘This hierarchical dichotomy between the two, and its continuous perpetuation, demonstrates the powerful cultural hegemony at play. Discursive entrenchment allows more powerful groups to define those that are less powerful’* (Buchowski 2004:12). This evokes intellectual domination of the West, the perpetuation of hierarchies of knowledge, and the creation of a one-way street in the flow of ideas (Buchowski 2006, Tlostanova 2015). These Eastern-Western dynamics in academia continue to be at play when Eastern European scholars supply data and local insights, while Western scholars theorize them and subsequently produce the knowledge (Ishchenko 2022). The current 'decolonization' moment and the unexpected attention paid to Ukraine provide an opening for reevaluating this connection (Ishchenko 2022).

Decolonial or postcolonial perspectives are entangled in Ukraine. Over the last 30 years, Ukrainian politics reflected the struggle for decolonization. Examination of Ukrainian history shows colonial subjection and cultural suppression by the imperial centres and illustrates the struggle between victims and oppressors - the Mongol-Tatar, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and now the Russian Federation (Sakwa 2015; Charron 2018). This history of colonization and oppression has left profound wounds in the region and impacted Ukrainians' identity. The Maidan Revolution of 2013-2014 and the events that ensued revealed the struggles of a decolonized state to establish autonomy in opposition to its former metropole. Maidan as a new era of liberation from foreign hegemonic power and communal traditions, marked by self-sacrificing heroes, collaborative improvisations, and clever self-organization in Ukraine, is seen as a new beginning of hybrid identities (Gerasimov 2014). Dynamic hybridity, underdeveloped by postcolonial theory

(Bhabha 2005; Bhabra 2007; Spivak 1988), offers a practical political solution for a diverse and multidimensional society like Ukraine, not framed by an essentialist, nation-centred fixed identities from the twentieth century (Gerasimov 2014).

Our study's **first research question** investigates how this new dynamic hybridity shows up in the discourse of a group of Ukrainian Twitter users when they write about their self-understanding at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We followed Brubaker & Cooper (2000) and focused on 'self-understanding' as a socially and culturally organized imagination of being, and connected this with the significant body of scholarship devoted to the topic of Ukrainian identity, that explores shifts within national, ethnic, linguistic, and regional identity construction, at critical junctures or historical moments of mobilisation (Kulyk 2016; Onuch, Hale & Sasse; Penkala, Lietaert & Derluyn 2020; D'Anieri 2022 Barrington 2022; Nedozhogina 2021; Sereda 2020; Sasse & Lackner 2020)). **Subsequently**, we consider the **second question** of *who is allowed to speak* in order to assert self-determination, a question directly exploring the power relations and engaging with the knowledge production and the postcolonial critique of Eastern/Western relationships. Self-determination we understand as the agency and the right to determine the course of life and to pursue own values and interests, as an individual and as a nation.

Methodology

To answer these questions above, data was gathered by collecting tweets from Ukrainian activists, journalists, and academics involved in conversations and dialogue with thinkers, politicians and the general public in Western Europe and the USA. Many researchers have turned to studying social media to understand processes unfolding in Ukraine, happening at neck-break speed amidst the war (Democracy Reporting International 2022; Gaufman 2022; Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017), building on existing scholarship on the role of social media

during and after the Maidan Revolution (Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017; Onuch 2015; Wijermars & Lokot 2022).

Twitter was chosen because it is considered a key element of digital infrastructure in the West, and therefore, serving as a platform for Ukrainian journalists, politicians, activists, organizations, and government institutions to broadcast their message and spark discussion, delivering real-time coverage and comments of online events, and also acting as a virtual town hall (Pew Research Center 2015; Klein 2022). Twitter may not be the most popular platform for Ukrainian engagement, but it does function as a forum for Ukrainians to engage with the Western public at large, and therefore, a space where ideas about self-understanding and the right to speak are voiced towards this audience. This platform offers a range of other advantages, such as its horizontal structure, speed and ability to bring attention to important issues. It also provides users with the opportunity to track and analyze what other people are sharing, giving valuable insights into the relevancy and credibility of information (Barnard 2018). Its limitations refer mostly to Twitter's success model - it is driven by views and clicks, with algorithms carefully crafted to display content that is most likely to grab the user's attention, leading to difficult topics being discussed poorly, mostly because a message becomes most popular when it attracts both, positive and negative attention (Salmon 2018; Klein 2022). Information from Twitter became quickly an accessible source to those all around the world, who wanted to know how the war in Ukraine is unfolding, and how it is experienced by Ukrainians. Analysts and traditional news outlets alike relied heavily on data collected from social media posts (Opora 2022; Democracy Reporting International 2022). Twitter also served as a forum for framing issues and for witnessing a social change in a historic moment, while the official media and elite sources couldn't operate as they did before the war (Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec 2017).

For data collection, we employed the technique of purposive sampling, the deliberate selection of informants based on their interactions and engagement with the topic (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Sheppard 2006). Data were collected at a few points in time shortly after the start of the war in Ukraine, from 24 February, 2022 until 30 April, 2022; from 1 June, 2022 until 30 June, 2022; from 15 August, 2022 until 15 October 15, 2022.

The data gathering resulted in the collection of over 3,000 Twitter messages, which were exported and de-identified. Most of the selected messages were written in English language and a small section was written in the Ukrainian language. The messages in Ukrainian were automatically translated by the translation feature within the Twitter application. The quotes appearing in the article were paraphrased to ensure anonymity for Twitter users. Subsequently, these messages were coded and analyzed using the content analysis method (Krippendorff 1980; Fielding & Lee 1999; Hsieh & Shannon 2005) to determine the presence of certain themes and concepts that emerged. Later, the data were analyzed on the basis of the following questions: (1) What do Ukrainian Twitter users say about who they are (2) Who is allowed to speak? This analytical step yielded approximately 600 messages and resulted in identifying narratives about self-understanding and self-determination.

It is only fitting that in writing about the limits of Western-focused knowledge production, the authors would acknowledge their own historical and cultural situatedness that creates assumptions and determines the questions we ask. The first author is originally from Poland, however, lived for several years in Belgium and is embedded within Western academic institutions, a position that reflects an in-betweenness. The second and third authors are Western scholars based in Western academia.

Findings

Narratives of self-understanding – What do Ukrainian Twitter users say about who they are?

We found several popular themes in the narratives of self-understanding: who can belong to the nation, the importance of values in self-understanding, and the denial of ethnic or linguistic claims as the markers of *Ukrainianess*. Most Twitter users rejected historically charged debates with the Russian Federation President Putin's (Kreml, 2021) interpretations of history perpetrated by Russian propaganda, as one of them said:

'I refuse to engage with the claim that a baptism centuries ago determined my national identity and the identity of all Ukrainians. What does it matter?'

History has been weaponized by Russia in the war against Ukraine with the war rhetoric, that pushes the narrative of "brotherly nations", and narratives of "genocide" against Russian speakers in the east of Ukraine, or the need for the "denazification" of Ukrainian politics (Allison 2014, Snyder 2022). The notion that Ukraine is filled with Russian speakers and therefore is filled with Russians who need to be "liberated" was enraging and vigorously fought by Twitter users, one captured the frustration with this exact narrative:

'I have reservations regarding the claims made by foreign experts about the existence of language tensions in Ukraine, particularly in light of the explanations given by Ukrainians themselves, who assert the absence of such tensions. It is obvious that Ukraine is currently undergoing a transformative phase, wherein a significant number of Russian speakers are transitioning to the Ukrainian language. Also, even those individuals who are not involved in this linguistic shift still recognise and value the significance of the Ukrainian language.'

'It is critical for people from other nations to show respect for the procedures happening within Ukraine and the decisions made by our government, as these choices are merely indicative of trends in society. This involves understanding the consequences that result from Ukraine's colonial history and the increasing significance placed upon our native language, culture, and historical heritage.'

As a result of the Russian aggression, since 2014, there has been a gradual shift toward speaking Ukrainian. Twitter users asserted that many Russian-speaking Ukrainians have switched to Ukrainian. Some Twitter users were referring to the Russian language as the “language of the enemy”, announcing their switch from native Russian speaker to the Ukrainian language, but most didn’t declare strong opposition to Russian culture or language, as one user pointed out:

‘I am proficient in both languages, but I am choosing Ukrainian above Russian’.

In online conversations, the respondents referred to something else than ethnicity, language, or history as a marker of their Ukrainian identity. They wrote about the feeling of unity and being in this tragedy together, sharing a purpose as they answered the calls to action to save the country by volunteering in the military service and volunteering in organizations that support the military or humanitarian efforts. This active participation gave the feeling of connection that united them despite the horror they were going through, as illustrated by the following two quotes:

‘What does being Ukrainian entail? It means that you could die at any time: on a bus, in a car, in a shopping mall, in a school, in a hospital, in your flat, at the office or while riding your bike, but you still choose to do what you had planned. As a librarian, archivist, and museum director, you attempt to save or conceal the artefacts documenting Ukraine's history and culture. As a teacher, you report to your school and teach a Europe-wide online class. As a nurse, physician, social worker, and volunteer, you care for people who are ill, disabled, and displaced. Everyone has a purpose, which unites us.

‘It is very difficult to explain the mood of the population in short phrases - this is the pain of betrayal of neighbours’ “friendly” Slavic peoples, and anger at the occupier, and the horror of what is being experienced, and fear of the uncertainty of the future. But, in 98% there is an unshakable faith in victory, in our army, in our own strength.

Few remain detached from these events. Everyone is doing their part. Even the elderly with very little means are donating money to help the cause. Women and children are volunteering (...)'.

Many Twitter users had similar reflections on the connection between people and understanding of what it means to be Ukrainian. This self-reflection built on the experiences from the Maidan Revolution, with its profound and lasting effect on Ukrainian society, and the culture of civic engagement (Onuch 2022; Onuch & Sasse 2016; Burlyuk & Shapovalova 2018). As a result of the revolution, more people became involved in politics and various civil society organizations were formed, many of them dedicated to fighting corruption, advocating for human rights, and providing social services (Gatskova & Gatskov 2016). Now, faced with the existential threat, those networks grew stronger, as did the sense of unity around the idea that everyone has to act. One volunteer at the Center for Humanitarian Aid explained:

'Similar to how I felt at Maidan during the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, I see an incredible network of people, each with their own area of responsibility, doing small things and contributing to a massive collective effort. This is what makes Ukraine so exceptional. People are dynamic, change-agents, and each individual is a drop in the ocean. Everyone has the ability to self-organization and initiative. It is remarkable. Ukraine will triumph due to their efforts!'

The importance of values was another central theme in the messages and testimonials Twitter users shared. People who realised how oblivious they were to the cost of freedom and peace, how much they have learned about it since 2014 and more so since February 24, 2022. The realization that they, Ukrainians, were directly responsible for their country's escape from centuries of Russian tyranny and have actively chosen a democratic European future (Lowell 2021) is seen in the following message, which is one example of many tweets expressing a similar sentiment:

'At this point, we all know precisely what freedom feels like, what it smells like, and why humans require it to live as opposed to merely exist." We have our own language, culture, and history, and we have learned to honour Ukrainian heroes and celebrate our national identity. We are not afraid of missiles, but we are afraid of losing our freedom.'

The awareness of the historic moment was common. The message below is not a singular observation, but this message was shared by many:

'War has granted us the ability to comprehend the range of human emotions, from excruciating pain to incredible pride. This experience is precious in a sense. We are building a new nation.'

For these Ukrainian Twitter users and communicators, this historic experience was shaping their national identities and influencing their future destinies, and agency and activism became binding values. There were also voices present of those who have chosen to be Ukrainian and embraced the new nation and are ready to sacrifice for it:

'Ukraine represents inclusiveness. As someone who does not resemble a typical Ukrainian, I've learned that Ukrainianness is exemplified through sacrifice, hard work supporting Ukraine, living a certain set of values rooted in freedom, and accepting collective responsibility for fellow Ukrainians.'

Narratives of Russians' dependence on a strong, autocratic ruler were often juxta-positioned to the freedom-loving Ukrainians, who were ready to sacrifice for it, as in the following quote:

'If you work hard and sacrifice a great deal for Ukraine today, that is sufficient for me to embrace your Ukrainianness in whatever form it comes; you cannot become a Ukrainian merely by virtue of geography, ethnicity, or language, or by deciding so one day. The birthplace or blood relationship may be a start, but they are not sufficient to

qualify. You must embody Ukrainian values, make significant sacrifices, and work very hard to become on.'

Narratives of self-determination – Who is allowed to speak?

Generally, the meta-narratives that dominated the public and academic discourse showed little regard for Ukraine's self-determination. This was apparent when Western leaders suggested the neutrality of Ukraine and the provision of security guarantees to Russia in the run-up to the war and right after the war began. This realpolitik of geopolitical powers deciding the destiny of Ukraine became a manifestation of presumptuousness and ignited vigorous debates among Ukrainian Twitter users. Those conversations illustrated the perception of self-determination of the group.

'I believe that the reason all Ukrainians feel so uncomfortable in the West is because we know that allowing these "little nuances" to slide and fester leads to normalising narratives that have historically resulted in centuries of oppression for our nation, and we can't let it happen again'.

Ukrainian experts, mostly those who already lived in Western Europe, became present in Western media outlets to speak about the developments in Ukraine. However, as many Twitter users pointed out, they were almost always accompanied by a Western expert that would validate (or not) the message, the analysis provided by the Ukrainian analyst/guest. The Ukrainian speaker was there to convey the emotion and the Western expert was there to bring the analysis. The process of inclusion of *Ukrainian voices* did not restructure the knowledge production and the position of the Ukrainians within diverse Europe. Ukrainian academics were not seen and as one of them expressed it:

‘Ukrainians are not represented; instead, they are used as a token. And we want to tell you that if Russian imperialism continues to exist, imperialism everywhere continues to exist. And this must stop. We have felt the pain of seeing our whole country be invaded by a neighbouring country - a country we, unfortunately, will forever share a border with. We never want anyone else to feel that pain. My only hope for the future is that people who have been ignored for years will finally be heard.’

This reflects what Spivak (1998) called the act of routine silencing of marginalized groups (‘general, non-specialists, ‘the tribals’ and ‘the other’) an act of ‘epistemic violence’. Dotson (2011) built on this concept and wrote about silencing, calling it ‘testimonial quieting’, contextualizing it to the situation when the crowd doesn’t recognize a speaker as an expert or as someone ‘who knows’ (Collins 2000). Ukrainians, more broadly Eastern Europeans, are not typically thought of as a “marginalized group”. However, they aren’t approached as those who know and whose expertise the Western audience searches after. In a recent publication, Lewicki examined representations of Eastern Europeans in West European political discourses and showed that Eastern Europeans were imagined as a lesser breed, skilled manual workers, a strain on public services, and criminal tricksters but were considered capable of ‘progression’ into West European standards (Lewicki 2023). The narratives of Twitter users indicated that their voices need to be heard by the international audience. The lack of recognition in the Western public debate of the right of Ukrainians to analyze their own war experience, without being told that they are too emotional, conflict-affected, female or civilian without combat experience, so too biased and non-rational for the international audience to receive the message and trust it. This has become a conscious choice and continuous effort for Ukrainians to be engaged in self-expression and the presentation of their own vision for Ukraine’s future as one Twitter user phrased it:

‘Thousands of Ukrainians who are fluent in English and have backgrounds in education, media production, journalism, and other forms of communication spend most of their free time reporting from the ground and making videos like TED talks. People still don't think UA should get help or say "It's not clear." People say Ukrainians are biased while they report 24/7. This is funny because no one would ever say, ‘Oh, you're from this country, so you must be biased’ to a US citizen reporting on the US or a French citizen reporting on France. People will probably say, "Oh, you're from this country, so you must know a few things about it.’

Different sentiments and frustrations were at play when Twitter users referred to a radical misunderstanding of the Ukrainians often referred to in online conversations as brave or *‘badass warriors.’* All those comments were not understood as complements or recognition, but as a deep misunderstanding of Ukraine’s situation:

‘We should think about what makes ordinary Ukrainians into heroes when their tenacity is admired. Is it possible to persuade Western Europeans to fight for their country?’

Ukrainians explained that the collapse of their own state and submission to the Russian occupation would mean torture, rape, filtration camps, forced russification, expropriation, and death. Their assessment was based on what they had seen or witnessed in the occupied territories of Ukraine. What Ukrainians say, why they are defiant:

‘Because we have no choice’.

The absence of Ukrainian voices before February 2022, resulted in an information gap and it was unknown how Ukrainians planned to respond to the Russian aggression and That did not help in comprehending how Ukrainians view themselves and their history.

Olesya Khromeychuk (2022) used the concept of epistemic mistrust when describing the Western public’s attitude towards Ukraine. Epistemic trust, defined as the willingness to

consider new knowledge as trustworthy and relevant (Fonagy 2016), was not offered to Ukrainians before February 2022. Many Twitter users were particularly discouraged by this lack of interest, one quote shows the bitterness shared by many:

'We were to fall within three days. If anyone had any knowledge of Ukraine, they would have realised that we would never surrender.'

The Western admiration of the Ukrainian bravery in the face of Russian aggression highlights the poor understanding of the country, reflecting on what transforms common people into heroes, but hereby miss one important building block that led to it: the Western public seemingly missed the transformational nature of the Maidan revolution as the developmental milestone in the formation of the Ukrainian society (Onuch 2015; Shore 2017; Khomeychuk 2022). All the breakthroughs – incremental changes in the policy of the Western states on the support for Ukraine, sanctions and weapon delivery, followed the unprecedented suffering of civilians – after the attack on Kyiv, Butcha, Irpin, and Vinnicya, coordinated attacks on most cities and the civilian critical infrastructure. As one of the Twitter users stated:

'Every commitment to deliver weapons follows yet another massacre and war crime committed by Russians.' As if we needed to demonstrate with our blood and shock with images of suffering in order to receive defensive weapons.'

This was precisely the epistemic mistrust's effects on the Western states' capacity to engage with Ukrainians. Only after Ukrainians proved they do have the skills and the strong will to fight and defend their country, the delivery of weapons followed. It was marked by the sacrifice of Ukrainians as the 'red lines' and the definition of 'escalatory' have been changing over time.

Geopolitics and its meta-narratives allow the West and Russia to express their views but it will be Ukrainians, who will be dealing with the long-term effects of this conflict. Many Twitter users argued that the voice of Ukrainians is essential to be heard but their perspectives were not given the consideration they deserved:

'When people cite Russia's "legitimate security concerns," I urge them to consider the Ukrainian perspective. Now is my opportunity to be dismissed... To them, I am a naive Ukrainian girl who discusses insignificant people.'

Despite the strong support of the West to Ukraine, there were alliances of influential thinkers and politicians in the West (realists, pacifists, left-leaning academics) who suggested that the current conflict stems from the exclusion of Russia from meaningful partnerships since the end of Cold War (Sakwa 2015; Mearsheimer 2022). Russia demanded a version of the Monroe Doctrine, which asserted its own spheres of influence and barred other actors from interfering in its claimed territory. While Western thinkers may have been criticizing past wrongs by pointing to Western expansionism, they have, in fact, been denying Eastern European countries a voice in geopolitics and denying their agency (Mälksoo 2022). The following quote addresses the experience of insecurity:

'People in Eastern European countries live in fear of being wiped off the map; it shapes our daily lives, how we plan for the future, and how we view our place in history.

If security denotes certainty about the existence of the collective Self,' our desire for security cannot be equated to how security is perceived in Russia or the West. Those who characterize this war as a result of NATO encroachment on Russia's sphere of influence completely overlook this. 'Realists' will argue that this is the way the world is. But it isn't. The world is only this way if individuals act on their conviction that it is this way. The argument goes between 'Cold War fighters' on the right and peace activists on the left instead of listening to people in Ukraine who suffer as a result of Russian aggression. Stop 'Westsplaining'.

The calls for Ukraine's neutrality and prompt peace negotiations were effectively negating the nation's right to sovereign choices, according to Twitter users.

'We are putting everything on the line to defend our democratic right to elect our own leaders and live in freedom and peace. The attacked side is pressured to negotiate a ceasefire at any cost and to seek a settlement at an inconvenient time. International law prohibits the use of force and invalidates any treaties imposed under duress.'

Conclusions

Our study shows the shift in the formulation of self-understanding amongst the group of Ukrainian thinkers on Twitter. These findings are insufficient to make statements about Ukrainians in general, or the distribution of attitudes among the Ukrainian population. However, we focused in our study on what happens “in the contact zones”, the interactions of a particular group of Twitter users with the Western public, where images, representations and narratives were reinterpreted. As Bhabha (1994) noticed, the “third space of enunciation”, the space of hybridity offers an interesting vantage point illustrating how the society can see itself, what it decides to focus on and how it reinvents itself. These Ukrainian voices on Twitter expressed a particular image of what it means to be Ukrainian in the time of war. They rejected the idea of ethnicity and language as the only markers of Ukrainian identity and suggested that civic engagement and unity in the historical moment are shaping a new quality in their self-understanding. This dynamic hybridity becomes an intersection of the claims to national culture and the new interruptive and interrogative experiences. It is important to note that this study leaves out a wide range of views on the nature of Ukrainian identity, as it only looks at a small part of the complex prism, however a valuable addition enhancing understanding of the multitudes of perspectives.

Concerning the right to speak, the Ukrainian people have made it abundantly obvious that they feel their voices were not heard. They believed that this is the case for a variety of reasons, including the notion that they are unduly emotional, conflict-affected, or that they are not considered experts. Spivak (1988), in her work on the topic of silencing, criticized the fact

that the privilege of speaking their ideas and opinions was typically given to elites and educated descendants, but not to the people who had first-hand experiences of the events.

The war in Ukraine has also brought to light the record of Russia's heinous imperial practices in Ukraine, which had been neglected by the West. As Ukrainians are quick to point out, the forces that are attempting to prevent them from exercising their right to self-determination are just as active now as they were three centuries ago. Confronting and debating the narratives with the Western public was for them an act of holding the powerful and privileged accountable and a direct response to the dominant geopolitical discourses.

Hence, the narratives of self-understanding and self-determination of the Ukrainian Twitter users provided insights into how they perceive and assert their own identity and choices in the face of geopolitical influences. These Ukrainian voices offer a valuable perspective that allows for a critical examination of academic contributions. When adopting a more reflexive approach to knowledge production, a space is created that prevents those more powerful from defining the experiences of those less powerful.

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