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Russia's framing of North Korean soldiers' participation in the Russo-Ukrainian war

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When Russia engaged North Korean troops to fight the Armed Forces of Ukraine during Ukraine's Kursk offensive, this became a major turn in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. The events showcased strong escalation on Russia's side and internationalization of the war, once again proving Russia to be a negative actor within the system of international security. There is currently a lack of detailed picture of how Russia communicated (framed) the deployment of North Korean soldiers to mitigate the reputational damage. This paper is focused on providing practical insights for understanding Russia's strategic communication by highlighting how its framing of this issue evolved. Qualitative frame analysis based on Entman's approach is used to interpret Russia's communication concerning involvement of the North Korean troops. Frames are induced from the chronological analysis of messages issued by Russian officials between autumn 2024 and spring 2025. Five key frames are identified, varying from labeling news about North Korean troops as "informational canard" to emphasizing the "glorious rightful alliance" between Russia and North Korea. It is implied that Russia's communication regarding North Korean troops gradually became more explicit in blaming its enemies (like Ukraine, NATO, or South Korea), more defensive, and more direct in recognizing North Korean troops' engagement on the battlefield. The study indicates that Russia was adapting its strategic communication depending on the overall geopolitical context to support its strategic goals and public image. The paper provides deeper evidence-based understanding of Russia's strategic communication, including attempts at flexible communication in the information warfare.

Keywords: mass communications, strategic narratives, strategic communication, framing, Russo-Ukrainian war

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Російський фреймінг участі північнокорейських військових у повномасштабній російсько-українській війні

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Коли Росія залучила північнокорейські війська для боротьби зі Збройними Силами України під час Курської наступальної операції України, це стало важливим поворотом у повномасштабній Російсько-українській війні. Ці події продемонстрували сильну ескалацію з боку Росії та інтернаціоналізацію війни, що вкотре підтвердило репутацію Росії як негативного актора в системі міжнародної безпеки. Наразі бракує детальної картини того, як Росія комунікувала (фреймувала) розгортання північнокорейських солдатів для пом'якшення репутаційної шкоди. Ця стаття зосереджена на наданні практичної інформації для розуміння стратегічної комунікації Росії, зокрема через висвітлення еволюції фреймінгу Росії щодо залучення північнокорейських військових. У дослідженні для інтерпретації комунікації Росії використовується якісний фреймовий аналіз (на основі підходу Ентмана). Фрейми отримані з хронологічного аналізу повідомлень, опублікованих російськими офіційними акторами між осінню 2024 року та весною 2025 року. У дослідженні пояснюється, як російські фрейми були залучені до цього процесу. Загалом, визначено п'ять ключових фреймів, від називання новин про північнокорейські війська «інформаційною качкою» до наголосу на «славетному законному союзі» між Росією та Північною Кореєю. У роботі з'ясовується, що комунікація Росії щодо північнокорейських військ поступово ставала більш явною у покладанні провини на своїх ворогів (як-от Україна, НАТО чи Південна Корея), більш оборонною та більш прямою у визнанні участі північнокорейських військ на полі бою. Дослідження вказує на те, що Росія адаптувала свою стратегічну комунікацію залежно від загального геополітичного контексту для підтримки своїх стратегічних цілей та публічного іміджу. Стаття пропонує глибше розуміння того, як стратегічна комунікація Росії працювала в контексті повномасштабної Російсько-української війни. Вона також пропонує перспективи для подальших досліджень подій навколо участі північнокорейських військ та спроб Росії мати гнучку стратегічну комунікацію в інформаційній війні.

Ключові слова: масові комунікації, стратегічні наративи, стратегічна комунікація, фреймінг, російсько-українська війна

Direct engagement of North Korean troops on the battlefield in 2024 could be considered, perhaps, one of the major events in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. At that time, to weaken Russia's own offensive operations in Ukraine, the Armed Forces of Ukraine had launched a successful offensive in the border areas of Russia's Kursk region in the summer of 2024, surprising Russia and capturing several settlements. With Russia's own armed forces being scattered all along the frontline in Ukraine, Russia requested direct military assistance from North Korea, based on then-recent Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The deployment of North Korean soldiers was widely covered in the media and discussed primarily in the context of international relations, security, and escalation of the war. The media also focused on Russia's reaction to the information about the DPRK's troops. Yet, there has been little analysis on how Russia framed this topic.

This paper is based on the pre-assumption that Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war attempts reinterpretation of events that might depict Russia as a negative actor. Russia is considered to have used certain strategic narratives and framing to legitimize the invasion of Ukraine, promote the image of a peace maker, a leader of the free world, and even

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explain attacks on civilian infrastructure (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Fridrichová, 2023; Kuzmenko, 2024a; Snigyr, 2023). Russia's engagement of North Korean soldiers to fight the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Kursk region was positioned as severe escalation and internationalization of the war in international media, comments by government representatives, NATO leadership, and the officials of international organizations like the United Nations¹. Therefore, it could be argued, that deployment of North Korean troops could undermine Russia's strategic narratives of being on the right side of history (Herd, 2022) and being dedicated to reaching peace (Bradshaw et al., 2024).

This article approaches the framing Russia conducted to interpret the involvement of North Korean troops. The aim of this paper is to highlight how the framing evolved between autumn 2024 and spring 2025 in the context of Russia's strategic communication in wartime. Accordingly, the research goals are:

- 1) to highlight the frames used by Russia to interpret the involvement of the North Korean soldiers,
- 2) to synthesize a chronological table of those frames,
- 3) to induce the key tendencies in how the framing changed,
- 4) to provide the interpretation of frames and the tendencies of their change in a relation to the context of Russia's strategic communication, situation on the battlefield, and geopolitical activities related to ending the war (negotiations).

Method

This research relies on the frame analysis of Russia's strategic communication concerning the involvement of North Korean troops (further in this text, they may be referred to as "NK troops"). The sample design is based on a purposeful sampling approach and engages criterion sampling – specifically, criterion-i sampling in Palinkas et al.'s (2015) terms. Criterion sampling's logic is "to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2022: 238). For this paper, messages that fulfill two requirements could be selected:

- these are messages from the statements of Russia's public officials (like the president, government spokespersons, or other government representatives) – the direct communicators within Russia's strategic communication (Kuzmenko, 2024b),
- they concern (comment on, confirm, deny, explain etc.) the participation of North Korean soldiers in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, primarily in the Kursk region of Russia, where Ukrainian Armed Forces have been holding certain territories, and bordering territories in Ukraine.

Russian government officials have commented on North Korean soldiers participating in the war only on a few occasions since autumn 2024. Hence, it would be reasonable to use all the comments that fulfill the requirements for the empirical base. Overall, nine messages issued between October 19, 2024, and May 11, 2025 were analyzed.

The frame analysis itself follows Entman's (1991; 1993) approach and highlights the four elements of framing: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations. Therefore, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 3). Also, a frame "must include only those elements of the message that are critical to its presumed impacts on information processing" (Entman, 1991: 8).

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/10/24/war-in-ukraine-the-north-korean-escalation_6730330_23.html; <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-korea-russia-ukraine-war-called-huge-escalation-risk/>; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_229661.htm?selectedLocale=en



Accordingly, frames are induced from the nine selected messages, and each of them is reviewed in a deductive logic using Entman's (1993) approach: for each frame, its problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations are deduced. Then, the chronological framing table is established to track how the frames of NK soldiers' participation changed over time and to highlight the key tendencies. Finally, the interpretation of these changes is provided by viewing the frames in the context of Russia's strategic communication, the situation on the battlefield and geopolitical activities relating to ending the war.

Results

One of the first comments from Russia's government officials was issued by the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov on October 10, 2024. When he was asked about North Korean soldiers aiding Russia on the battlefield, Peskov claimed that the information was fake²:

"This looks like another informational canard"

"Canard" is a slang word and a metaphor which essentially means "fake [news]". The initial **"informational canard" frame** denies that North Korean troops were deployed to participate in the war on Russia's side. The causal interpretation is not provided explicitly, yet the frame implies negative connotation of the "canard" and discreditation of Russia (hence, negative moral evaluation is implied). The implicit recommendation within this frame is not to believe what Russia would consider anti-Russian fake information.

However, on October 21, 2024, another response by Peskov was spread by the Russian media. On that occasion, Peskov shifted his rhetoric towards ambiguity³:

"We see a lot of contradictory information, South Koreans state one thing, then the Pentagon state that they have no confirmation to such statements, so there is a lot of contradictory information. Perhaps, that is how it should be treated"

This frame, which could be labeled as "**unfriendly contradictory information**" implies that South Korea and the US (causal interpretation) generate messy interpretations (problem definition). Contrary to the previous message, Peskov's statement thus makes a larger and more precise emphasis on the actors that create the problem (from Russia's perspective). The message does not provide a vast moral evaluation. However, a generally negative evaluation and criticism of the unfriendly countries' "contradictory" communication could be implied. Finally, Peskov's statement also puts the treatment recommendation straightforwardly: the information concerning North Korean soldiers should be treated as contradictory information generated by unfriendly states.

On October 23, 2024, two days after the previous comment, another comment was provided by Russia's foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova. On that occasion, she was asked to confirm or deny the involvement of North Korean troops in the war during a session of questions from the media.

*"It is not clear why South Korea raised such buzz. As we see, these are not only public statements by the officials, but it is also colossal work in mass media on the **propaganda level**. [...] Russia's interaction with DPRK in the military segment and other segments, firstly, follows the international law and does not violate it and, secondly, does not cause any harm to South Korea. [...] Having tracked the sequence of events, it is not hard to notice who and with what intentions initiated these **information throw-ins, noise, information waves**. The initial reports on this topic emerged in Ukrainian*

² <https://tass.ru/politika/22089309>

³ <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/987742>



*English-language media. Next, [South Korean] intelligence picked it up, publishing its «research». Then, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte requested a phone call with the Republic of Korea's president Yoon Suk Yeol, with whom he discussed response actions, including the activation of tripartite agreement between the Republic of Korea, Ukraine, and NATO*⁴

Zakharova's vast comment represents the “**anti-Russian propaganda noise**” frame. The problem definition implies that Russia (and DPRK) act in accordance with the law and do nothing wrong at least regarding South Korea. Yet, NATO, the South Korean government, and Ukraine are defined as the troublemakers (causal interpretation) whose aggressive actions are based on groundless accusations towards Russia (moral evaluation). The frame also “recommends” tracking the side that is responsible for anti-Russian propaganda – Russia’s rivals.

During the BRICS summit, on October 24, 2024, Russia’s president Vladimir Putin responded to NBC News reporter’s question regarding satellite images that show North Korean troops participating in the war. Putin’s response was considerably different from the previous comments by the Russian representatives⁵:

“Images are a serious thing. If there are images, they reflect something [...] As for our relations with Democratic People’s Republic of Korea...As you know, as far as I am concerned, our treaty on strategic partnership was ratified just today. There is Article 4 there. We have never doubted that North Korean leadership takes our agreements seriously. But how and what we do within this article is our business. Initially, the respective consultations concerning the implementation of Article 4 of this Treaty must be conducted. But we are in contact with our North Korean friends and we will see how this process will develop”

Putin’s ambiguous statement imposes the “**none of your business**” frame. The interpretation of the problem states that the only problem is the attempts of Russia’s geopolitical enemies (namely the US) to take down Russia and influence what it considers self-defense. Russia’s enemies are defined as the force behind the problem. The moral evaluation is promoted as “whatever is happening (if it’s happening at all), is lawful on Russia’s side, and Russia does not own any explanations to its enemies.” Accordingly, the frame suggests that Russia’s enemies should stop aggressive actions against Russia and should not interfere in Russia’s affairs.

Finally, on April 26, 2025, during the report to Vladimir Putin, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov described the involvement of North Korea’s forces on the battlefield⁶:

“Particularly, I would like to note the participation of the [DPRK’s servicemen] in the liberation of the border areas of the Kursk region, who, in accordance with the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between our countries, provided significant assistance in defeating the wedged group of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Soldiers and officers of the Korean People’s Army, while conducting combat missions shoulder to shoulder with Russian servicemen, demonstrated high professionalism, showed fortitude, courage, and heroism in battle during the repelling of Ukraine’s invasion”

Gerasimov’s statement could be considered the first occasion when Russian state officials confirmed the detachment of North Korean servicemen as explicitly. His words also highlight the transformation of previous messages into the explicit “**glorious rightful alliance**” frame.

⁴ https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/brifingi/1977268/#013

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6dSQRTASDg>

⁶ https://t.me/news_kremlin/5550



On the same day, NK troops' involvement was re-confirmed by Russia's foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova in a comment for the Russian media kp.ru⁷:

"[North] Korean servicemen took part in the operation to liberate the Kursk border area in accordance with Article 4 of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed in June 2024 during the visit of Russia's President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to Pyongyang. The solidarity shown by our Korean friends is a manifestation of the high, practically allies-level of our relations. We are confident that our ties will continue to strengthen and develop in accordance with the agreements of the leaders of our countries"

Zakharova's comment reaffirms the «glorious rightful alliance» frame. Though, even greater emphasis is made on the claimed legitimacy and lawfulness of NK troops involvement, as well as on the general development of international relations between Russia and DPRK.

Finally, on April 28, 2025, Vladimir Putin's statement including a significant praise for the involvement was publicized (for example, the English-language version of the statement was posted by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs)⁸:

"Units of the Korean People's Army played an active role in the defeat of the neo-Nazi formations of the Kiev regime that invaded our territory, in full compliance with international law and in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea of June 19, 2024 – in particular, Article 4 of the Treaty, which requires each of the Parties to provide immediate military assistance in the event of an armed attack against the other. Our Korean friends' decision was guided by a sense of solidarity, justice and genuine comradery. We highly appreciate this and are sincerely grateful, personally to the Chairman of State Affairs, Comrade Kim Jong-un, as well as the entire leadership and the people of the DPRK.

We commend the DPRK soldiers' heroism, their excellent training and dedication displayed while fighting, shoulder to shoulder with Russian soldiers, defending our Motherland as their own. They fulfilled their duty with honor and valor, covering themselves with unfading glory. The Russian people will never forget the heroism of the DPRK special forces. We will always honor the heroes who gave their lives for Russia, for our common freedom, fighting side by side with their Russian brothers in arms"

Putin then praised North Korean troops' participation in the warfare once between May 9-11, 2025. During the «Victory Day» celebration on May 9, Putin personally congratulated North Korean high-ranking officers who were present in Moscow for the military parade, as covered by Russia's TASS media⁹. Russian media Komsomolskaya Pravda cited Putin's words as¹⁰:

"[I wish] Good health to all [North Korean] soldiers! Good wishes and all the best to your armed forces"

⁷ <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27691.5/5080871/>

⁸

<https://www.facebook.com/MIDRussia/posts/pfbid0rNwL8TTta9zrevm4Zzpk0TdP365mrkKjHf1WotPwV9J5hSktBSxW2woHRDuJ6ZS91>

⁹ https://t.me/tass_agency/314262

¹⁰ <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27697.5/5085927/>



Afterwards, during the press conference on May 11 (which concerned the «Victory Day» and negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, and the West), Putin recalled thanking DPRK's officers during the celebrations¹¹:

“I was glad to personally thank the military leaders of the Korean People’s Army, to pass the warmest words to the soldiers and commanders of the special forces units of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, who, together with our fighters, professionally, I want to emphasize this, conscientiously carried out tasks in liberating the border areas of the Kursk region from the formations of the Kiev regime. I emphasize, they showed courage and heroism, acted, I want to say this again, on the highest level professionally, demonstrated good training and preparation”

Overall, this frame implies Ukraine's actions are the problem. The frame omits any implications that Ukraine has been acting in self-defense in the border regions to fight against Russia's full-scale invasion. On the contrary, it positions Ukraine as the aggressor, Russia as the victim and the defending side, and North Korea as the state that gives brotherly military assistance to the «Motherland defenders». The frame also focuses on both legal evaluation and general moral evaluation of NK troops' participation. It is stated that Russia and DPRK act in accordance with the international law and, more importantly, do so in a brotherly, heroic, honorable way by defending Russia's borders together. The treatment recommendation here is that Russia and DPRK should continue to develop their alliance, whereas enemies must be warned that Russia and DPRK will assist each other in case of attack on one of them.

To summarize, five frames were induced from the analysis, as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1.

Chronology and breakdown of Russia's frames of NK troops' involvement, based on the conceptualization approach by Entman (1993)

Framing functions	Frames				
	October 10, 2024	October 21, 2024	October 23, 2024	October 24, 2024	April 26-28, 2025
	Un-friendly informational canard	Un-friendly contradictory information	Un-friendly noise	None of your business	Glorious rightful alliance
Problem definition	No problems on Russia's side, NK troops' deployment is a form of fake news	No problems on Russia's side, but there's some contradictory information	No problems on Russia's side, but there's informational noise from enemies	No problems on Russia's side, but it's none of the enemies' business	Russia is attacked by Ukraine, Russia and DPRK defend Russia's borders (legally and legitimately)
Causal interpretation	-	Un-friendly states generate contradictory information	Enemies (South Korea, NATO, Ukraine) enforce anti-Russian actions, propaganda	Russia's enemies escalate the war and wrongfully demand something from Russia	Ukraine is the aggressor that attacks Russia's bordering regions

¹¹ https://t.me/tass_agency/314511



<i>Moral evaluation</i>	Implied generally negative evaluation	Implied generally negative evaluation: the unfriendly states' approach to information is messy	Enemies (Ukraine, South Korea, NATO etc.) make groundless accusations against Russia	Whatever Russia does or might do is lawful, whereas Russia's enemies are not entitled to any demands for explanations	Russia and DPRK act strictly in accordance with the international treaties and defend Russia's borders from external aggression (heroism, brotherhood, and glory)
<i>Treatment recommendation</i>	Implication that the information should not be treated seriously	To treat news of NK troops' involvement as (somewhat anti-Russian) contradictory information	Audience should be cautious and track down the culprit of anti-Russian propaganda	Russia's enemies should stop fighting Russia and intervening in its affairs	Russia and DPRK should strengthen their relations and enemies must fear this alliance

The development of Russia's framing follows four key tendencies. *Firstly*, the framing switched from the initial denial of North Korean troops' involvement to ambiguity (the principle of "neither confirm, nor deny"), then to non-denial, mockery, and then hints at the confirmation, and, finally, to explicit confirmation. It could be assumed that Russia decided to find an alternative to denial while more hard evidence of North Korea's involvement emerged in the media and while Western governments became more reassured in those facts.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the Ukrainian Kursk offensive has become both a severe military problem for Russia and an «elephant in the room» for Russia's audience. At the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, transitioning of the frontline to Russia's territories could have been perceived as highly unlikely. Hence, after the Armed Forces of Ukraine withdrew from the town of Sudzha and some other areas in the Kursk region, the Russian government tried to position it as a major redeeming victory. Arguably, confirmation of the NK troops' presence is easier if the whole Russian counteroffensive is positioned as a victory.

The shift to confirmation, however, was secured by a concurring intensified justification of Russia's actions (the second tendency). Then, the *second* tendency is that in all cases, the moral evaluation states that Russia did nothing wrong. Yet, the initial position that nothing happened and thus there is nothing to blame Russia has changed to the standpoint that whatever Russia is doing, it is doing the correct thing and is doing it legally. Putin's, Zakharova's, and Gerasimov's statements emphasize that Russia follows international law and acts in accordance with international treaties (including the treaty with North Korea). The coinciding emergence of a more articulate moral justification of Russia's actions allows to move from the denial of evidence to mocking American media and hinting that the satellite images of North Korean troops are true, and to finally confirming NK troops' engagement.

Thirdly, the framing shifted from non-personalized statements about the informational canard and fake news to blaming Russia's geopolitical enemies directly. The causal interpretation has become specifically more aggressive and culminated in positioning the West as the villain. At the same time, the moral evaluation switched from generalized negative evaluation to a defensive position that Russia is doing everything right, contrary to its enemies. This correlates with Russia's general strategic narratives of being on the good side (Herd, 2022; Snigyr, 2023). Hence, the *fourth*



tendency is a common feature across the four frames. This is the preserved implication that there are no problems caused by Russia or its allies – the blame is put merely on Russia's enemies.

Discussion

The case of Russia's framing of North Korean soldiers' engagement in the Russo-Ukrainian war exemplifies Russia's approaches to flexible strategic communication. From a certain perspective, Russia had to conduct double crisis communication: reinterpreting the Ukrainian offensive to Russia's internal audience and explaining the presence of North Korean troops mostly for the international public.

On the one hand, Russia's frames might seem changeable and incoherent with one another. On the other hand, the evolution of those frames might be related to dynamic geopolitical power relations and discourse surrounding the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia has clearly switched to more direct and even boastful confirmation of the North Korean army's presence in the Kursk region when it became strategically useful. In other words, it happened at times when:

1. Russia gathered at least minimal factual grounds to claim that it was victorious in Kursk for its internal audience (despite Russia's and North Korea's large casualties and continued active operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine somewhere around Russia's borders).
2. The Russo-Ukrainian war peace negotiations became more intense, and Russia decided to raise the stakes by threatening the West with its alliance with North Korea.

Also, despite certain inconsistencies, Russia's frames always referred to the same underlying strategic narratives of being the leader of countries fighting for freedom and generally being on the good side (Herd, 2022; Snigyr, 2023).

However, this study has certain limitations that imply prospects for further research. Firstly, at the time of this paper application, the full-scale war continues together with a difficult negotiation process. Hence, it remains to be seen whether there will be new occasions of NK troops' involvement and new corresponding strategic communication. Secondly, this paper briefly mentioned possible determinants of Russia's framing, but the strategic communication could be analyzed in-depth, for example, with greater emphasis on international relations, international security, geopolitical shifts after the 2024 United States' presidential elections, or Russia-Ukraine-US-Europe negotiations.

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