

(Dis)arming “the people”

Discursive media warfare and people’s response

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The influence of the war against
Ukraine on discourses worldwide

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About the Special Issue: Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

*Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak,
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The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

(Dis)arming “the people”

Discursive media warfare and people’s response

Jens Maesse

This paper reflects on the German public media discourse around the role of “heavy weapons” in the Russian war against Ukraine. In order to illustrate the debate, two competing “open letters” as well as a couple of prominent slogans are analysed. The analysis shows that the German public sphere and political space has transformed from an anti-militaristic, peace oriented consensus to a discourse that accepts warfare a possible reality in foreign policy. In addition to that, the paper shows particular discourse strategies which proclaim a consensus about “common values” but operate with antagonistic implications.

Keywords: Discourses on war and peace, Ukraine/Russia, implication, German public discourse

In the past decades, Germany’s foreign policy was characterised by non-military strategy based on financial participation on US led warfare, diplomacy, rebuilding and creating economic trade relations. Now, a more active participation in direct military interventions becomes more and more likely to happen. How is this change reflected and transmitted by political media debate and people’s response? The media debate in Germany on the Russian war against Ukraine is characterised by a couple of discursive features that have the potential to change Germany’s foreign policy in the long run. In the following analysis, I want to show how the people are cognitively “armed” and “disarmed” by political media discourse.

In order to illustrate this, we will have a look at a prominent media debate constructed around two letters by two different groups of intellectuals as well as a couple of popular slogans circulating in the media space. The letter published on April 29 in 2022 (called “Open Letter to Chancellor Olaf Scholz”) was signed by academics, intellectuals, feminists, comedians, and other prominent figures of German public life. It was presented as reaction to a debate on the war against Ukraine that was conceived by the authors as one-sided in favour of “heavy weapons” seen as “main solution” for ending the Russian aggression. The debate was seen as one-sided because critical and differentiated positions on the role of “heavy weapons” as solution for the war situation were often denounced and marginalised. Yet, the authors explicitly agree on the common view that Russia is an aggressor and Ukraine has full right to defend their country. Let’s have a look at their main points and how they take a position in German public discourse:

“We *share* the judgment of the Russian aggression as a breach of the basic norm of international law. We *also share* the conviction that there is a principled political and moral duty not to retreat from aggressive force without a fight back. **But** anything that can be derived from this has limits in other precepts of **political ethics**. We are convinced that two such boundary lines have now been reached: First, the categorical prohibition of accepting a manifest risk of escalation of this war into a nuclear conflict. The delivery of large quantities of heavy

weapons, however, could make Germany itself a party to the war. And a Russian counterattack could thus then trigger the mutual assistance case under the NATO treaty and thus the immediate danger of a world war. The second borderline is the level of destruction and human suffering among the Ukrainian civilian population. Even justified resistance to an aggressor is at some point unbearably disproportionate to this". (English translation by the authors, all emphases by JM)

As indicated by the markers of solidarity („We (also) share“), the authors adopt to a common framework of “Ukrainian solidarity” and “Russian aggressor” shared by round 80 % of the German population and 100 % of media and political actors. However, the marker “but” indicates an opposition to a certain implication of the “common framework”, represented by the notion of “political ethics”. This “political ethics” relates to two implications that seem to be part of the “common framework”, namely: 1) that some people “accepting a manifest risk of escalation of this war into a nuclear conflict” and 2) a “level of destruction and human suffering among the Ukrainian civilian population” that is rejected as “unbearably disproportionate.”

What we see here is a discursive positioning that can be described as a “yes but” position. The authors of this letter agree on a “common framework” but disagree on a couple of implications that the “common framework” seems to incorporate. Accordingly, the number of “yes but” implications can easily be extended to other areas and more arguments, for example to responsibility for Russian people, economic arguments for European industry, broader global questions of starving hunger in Africa and Asia and so on. Though, the point is that a new logic of opposition is constructed by the “yes but” logic for promoting democratic dispute in a situation of “war of aggression.”

Let’s now have a look at another letter which reacts to the latter. This letter is called “Open Letter” and was published at May 4 2022.

“Anyone who wants a negotiated peace that does not result in Ukraine’s submission to Russian demands must strengthen its defence capabilities and weaken Russia’s war capabilities as much as possible. This requires a steady supply of arms and ammunition to turn the military balance of power in Ukraine’s favour. And it requires extending economic sanctions to Russia’s energy sector, the Putin regime’s financial lifeline.”

“Russia’s attack on Ukraine is also an attack on European security. The Kremlin’s demands for a reorganization of Europe, which were formulated in the run-up to the invasion, speak a clear language. If Putin’s armed revisionism succeeds in Ukraine, the danger that the next war will take place on NATO territory increases.” (English translation and all emphases by JM)

These two quotes represent the two main arguments of this letter. As we can see, the authors of this letter argue for “supplying heavy weapons” to Ukraine as main instrument for ending the war. In the first quote, “negotiated peace” is presented a “common goal” and in the second

quote, “European security” and “peace” (as implication of “the danger that the next war will take place on NATO territory”) are defined as common values. Similar to the first letter, a “common framework” is presented by the discourse suggesting common values shared by all members of the democratic community. And here, too, a couple of implications are presented that delineate differences with respect the main topic at stake in this debate, namely: pro or contra to “heavy weapons.” In this discourse the implication of the common framework is contrary to the first discourse, namely: transferring heavy weapons in order to save the common democratic community.

The conflict around “heavy weapons” is also reflected by a couple of formulations that define the political goal of German/European/Western intervention into the Russian war against Ukraine. Three slogans circulate in German media debate:

- 1) “Ukraine must win the war!”
- 2) “Russia must lose the war!”
- 3) “Ukraine must not lose the war!”

These formulations construct three poles of an emotional debate in the German media as well as political world. The first formula, for example, is preferred by some politicians from the Green party as well as the German Conservatives. The second is presented by some military conservative-western hardliners. And the last slogan is official slogan by the German socialist-green-liberal government. It is the only way how Chancellor Olaf Scholz formulates the goals of German contribution helping Ukraine. These slogans are intensely debated because they introduce to the political debate a couple of unforeseeable implications. Thus, nobody exactly knows what it means to say “Ukraine must win the war” because the Ukrainian government has changed their goals in the course of the war (For example: Does it mean to get back the Crimea?). This formula would restrict the field of possible diplomatic interventions in the future. The same is true for the second slogan. Saying “Russia must lose the war!” can imply a military occupation of Russian territory (as we know from past wars). Therefore, the third formula seems to be the strategy that opens a huge terrain for future unforeseeable options including diplomatic negotiations as well as further conflicts. Yet, what we see in this small example is that the political discourse field is entirely constructed around the idea of “warfare” as political fact that can no longer questioned. Thus, the old German peace movement has no say any longer!

What do we learn from this political media discourse in Germany? First, warfare is a real option and political fact in the German political field accepted by both proponents and opponents of “heavy weapons”. Second, this conflict over “heavy weapons” is in both cases embedded by something like a “common framework” that always includes the discursive other and allows actors for switching to this or that camp. Interestingly, this split is also repre-

sented by the population. While most parties and media argue for “heavy weapons”, the agreement/disagreement for “heavy weapons” among the German population is always moving around 50% for both sides. Third, “arming” people and “disarming” them is not based on “aggressive” or “populist” discourses promoted by charismatic leaders. Instead, it is organised in a more differentiated way based on the logic of “common framework” and contradicting “implications”. In our case, the predominant discursive role of talking about “heavy weapons” in both camps influence the public mind of German society, and this has the potential to change the general direction of German foreign policy for the next decades.