Transitivity Analysis of Newspapers' Headlines Depicting the Russian Attack on Ukraine

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Abstract

The current study analyzes international newspapers headlines depicting the Russian attack on Ukraine. Different newspapers worldwide were chosen to highlight the embedded ideologies by applying a descriptive research method and Halliday's transitivity system as a research instrument. The researcher analyzed the lexical choices and the linguistic devices used in headlines to represent Putin and Russia in the war between Russia and Ukraine. He investigated the way language is used in newspapers' headlines to create emotional impacts on the part of the readers and to influence the common public opinion about the crisis. The study highlights the hidden ideologies conveyed through the choice of lexical devices and the way the same event can be represented differently. The results show that international newspapers depict Vladimir Putin, as a person rather than a leader of a state, as the one who claims responsibility for this war out of his personal desire.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a distinctive human behavior. People use language to communicate and voice out the ideas they have in mind. Only through a structured use of grammar, lexis, and sounds can people make themselves understood by others. Since there is not a single opinion or view of the world, language can also be used in different ways to depict different versions of the world. The way language is used shows the way one understands the world around her/him. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857) developed the constructionist approach to the study of language and representation. He considers language a system of representation governed by rules and conventions to create meaning. Nothing holds meaning unless we associate some linguistic features to make it meaningful. Since there are various linguistic devices to describe a certain event, there exist multiple versions of the same event. Newspapers as part of media use different linguistic features to report the same events, thereby creating different versions of

reality. Matheson (2005) claims that media do not only communicate the world events using language, but they also 'mediate society' through the way language is used.

Media has the power to shape and reshape reality. By using language in a certain way, newspapers can direct public opinions to adopt desired beliefs and attitudes. In fact, the language of the news is a social construction of reality (Luckman & Berger, 1976 cited in Conboy, 2010). It creates a public discourse through the selection of the content of the news along with the language used to present this content on the one hand, and it derives from the culture in which that language exists on the other hand. Therefore, as any other form of language, the language of the newspapers encompasses some emotional and cultural loadings. In this context, Reah (2002: 55) states that "if a particular culture has little respect for certain groups, concepts, or beliefs, then the language for expressing ideas about those groups, concepts, or beliefs will reflect that attitude. Therefore, when these things are written about, people reading the text will have their attitudes reinforced by the way the language presents these things to them". The advancement of technology, visual culture, and the run-profit newspapers have pushed newspapers to look for new ways to use a catchy language. The latter is used to earn profit and directed by the desires and goals of those who use it (Bloor & Bloor, 1995). Fowler (1991: 4) says that: "each particular form of linguistic expression in a text-wording, syntactic option, etc-has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing, and they are not random, accidental alternatives. Differences in expression carry ideological distinctions and thus differences in representation". Therefore, the way language is used in newspapers stories or headlines creates different representations of reality and serves multiple functions.

The current study uses Halliday's transitivity system to analyze newspapers' headlines to investigate the way Russia and Putin are represented in war between Russia and Ukraine. It aims at investigating the way international newspapers depict this war in their headlines and which part to claim responsibility. The rationale behind this study is to develop a kind of critical thinking on the part of the newspapers' readers to raise their awareness to the way language can be used to create a distorted version of reality and thereby creating a common attitude towards a certain event.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Newspapers' headlines have been an area of interest of many studies and researchers (Reah, 2002; Bell, 1991; Conboy, 2010; Van Dijk, 1998). Conboy (2010) and Reah (2002) looked at newspapers' headlines from stylistic and syntactical perspectives. Since the main objective of a headline is to catch attention and create suspense, its language is characterized by clarity and

brevity. Headlines writers adopt different techniques to make the reader eager to read the whole story. They omit words, commas sometimes, use shift class vocabulary, homonyms, homophones, and the readers' awareness of sounds and other common saying or proverbs to create an oral-like style seeking animation, comprehension, and to "produce an echo of the rhythms of colloquial speech" (Crystal & Derek, 2013: 184). As they are the first item the reader gets in touch with, headlines reflect the agenda and the discourse of the newspaper. Van Dijk (1998: 252) mentions that "the discourse of newspapers headlines can be looked at from the position of the headline, the boldness of the headline, the vocabulary used, the use of punctuation, the syntax of the headline, the number of occurrences on the same event and above all the power of the presenter". Therefore, newspapers reporters make use of different lexical items in different ways and positions to depict a certain image about an event for the readers also to direct their attention to develop some attitudes about the issues covered.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bloor and Bloor (1995) look at language as the expression of meaning; language holds meaning in it and the way a person uses that language determines the meaning s/he wants to convey. People use certain patterns of language to represent the world around them. Newspapers also employ some linguistic features to create a desired version of the events being reported. Therefore, the analysis of the language patterns of headlines reveals the implied representations, discourse, and ideologies hidden. To this end, transitivity is believed to be one of the objective and effective tools for the analysis of the embedded messages and ideologies in media texts. It is regarded as the foundation of representation (Fowler, 1991); it analyzes the language of clauses to find out the happenings, participants, and the circumstances regarding a certain event (Abbas & Talaat, 2019).

Transitivity was first introduced by Halliday in his conceptualization of functional grammar. Functional Grammar is concerned with the functions of the linguistic structures and their meaning in context. According to Halliday (1994: 18), "Functional Grammar is a study of wordings, but one that interprets the wording by reference to what it means, and the meaning is encoded in the wording as an integrated whole". It is concerned with the way grammar is used to convey meaning. Therefore, Halliday believes that grammar is a meaning making resource. Halliday approached language from the outside to study the relationship between structures and their functions in the social context, thereby introducing Systemic Functional grammar (SFG). SFG studies language functions in the social context; what we write or say depends heavily on what message we want exactly to convey. According to Halliday (1985), language has three main functions: the textual, the interpersonal, and the ideational. The fist is concerned with the use of language to signify discourse. It deals with the grammatical

structures that construct a message. Halliday (1994) mentions that textual meaning is an interpretation of the clause in its function as a message. The second function deals with the use of language to establish and maintain social relations. It involves who is communicating with whom. Halliday (1994: 21) states "interpersonal meaning is an interpretation of the clause in its function as an exchange". The interpersonal function signifies that people do not use language only to talk about something, but to talk to and with other interlocutors to maintain social relationships with them and influence their opinions and behaviors. The third function (the ideational) is concerned with the use of language to communicate information and content. It is related to human experiences and the means by which we make sense of reality. According to Thompson (1996) "ideational meaning is the using of language to talk about the experience in the world, including the worlds in the minds, to describe events and states and entities involved in them". The ideational function includes two sub-types: 1) the logical meaning and 2) the experiential meaning. The latter refers to the structures chosen by the speaker to make meaning about the world. The experiential meaning is concerned with how the world is represented by the interlocutors in a conversation rather than their purpose.

Table 1: The Conceptual Framework of Functional Grammar
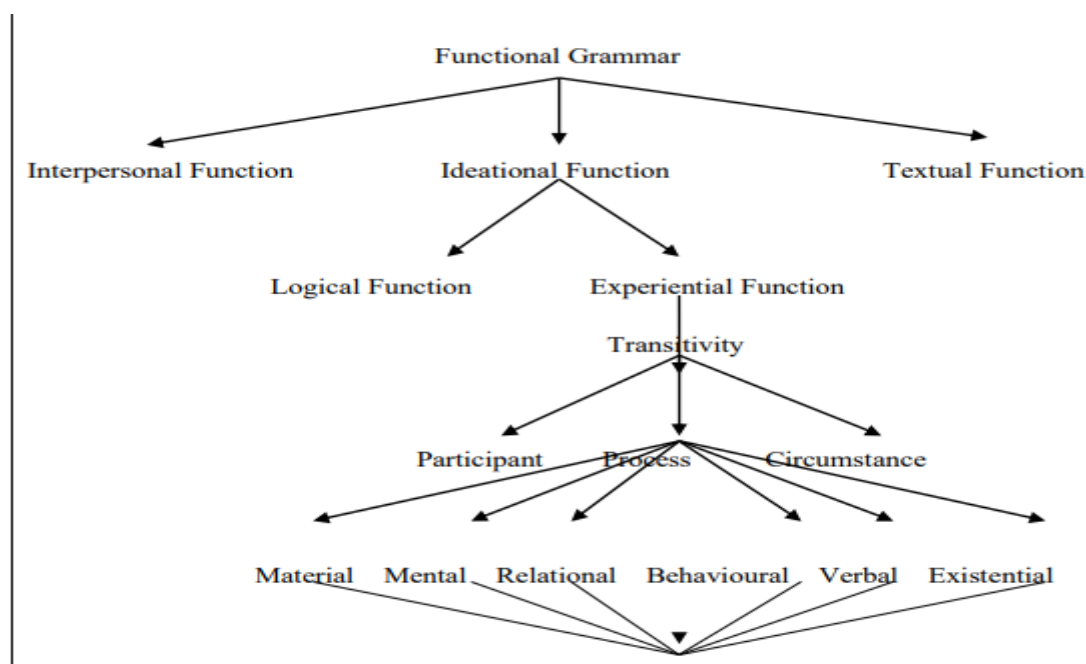
The analysis of text from the experiential function angle then, requires the probing into the grammatical structure of *transitivity* (Marbun, n.d).

Halliday (1994) moved beyond the traditional concept of transitivity which looks at whether a verb takes a direct object and how many objects it can take, to a new version which looks at

transitivity from a perspective which describes the whole clause rather than the verb and its object. According to Halliday, there are three basic elements to the structure of transitivity: the process itself, the participants, and the circumstances underlying the process. The process refers to the events being described in the clause, the participants designate the elements involved in the process of the clause -actor, goal, sensor, Sayer...etc.-and the circumstances attempt to answer how, when, what, where, and why of the process (see the tables below). Transitivity analysis therefore shows how and by whom an action is performed (Abbas & Talaat, 2019).

Table 2: Processes, what they include, and the participants (Abbas & Talaat, 2019: 402)

Process Type	What they construe?	Participants
Material (Happening of an event & Doing of an action)	drive, push, melt, cook, kick, play, jump, etc.	Actor, Goal, Range, Beneficiary
Behavioural (Physiological & Psychological)	Behaving—like breathing, dreaming, snoring, smiling, hiccupping, looking, listening, watching and pondering	Behaver & the Behaviour
Mental (Perception, Affection & Cognition)	Feeling—like feel, see, etc. Thinking—like know, hear, see, etc.	Sensor, Phenomenon
Verbal (Saying or Signaling)	Saying—like asking, commanding, offering, stating, showing, indicating, etc.	Sayer, Receiver, Verbiage
Being - Relational (Attributive & Ideational)	Construing attribute Construing identity	Carrier, Attribute, Token, Value
Being – Existential	Existing	Existence

Table 3: Circumstance and their categories (Bustam, 2011: 30**)**

Type	Category	Examples
Extent	a) Distance b) Duration	a) He walks <u>for seven miles.</u> b) She stayed <u>for two hours.</u>
Location	a) Place b) time	a) we work <u>in the kitchen</u> b) I get up <u>at six o'clock.</u>
Manner	a) Means b) Quality c) Comparison	a) My mother went <u>by bus.</u> b) It was snowing <u>heavily</u>. c) It went through my head <u>like an earthquake.</u>
Cause	a) Reason b) Purpose c) Behalf	a) <u>For want of</u> a nail the shoe was lost b) <u>For the sake</u> of peace. c) I'm writing <u>on behalf of</u> Aunt Jane.
Accompaniment	a) Comitative b) Additive	a) Fred came <u>with Tom</u>. b) Fred came <u>instead of Tom.</u>
Matter		I worry <u>about her health</u>
Role		I am speaking <u>as your employer</u>

4. DATA DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH METHOD

The method adopted for this study is a descriptive one. It is an objective and a neutral methodological framework aiming at describing how reality is; it keeps a distance from

forming hypotheses or developing theories (Van der Voort, 2002). The researcher analyses the clauses of headlines along with the roles of the processes, participants, and circumstances underlying the event.

Twelve headlines (hereafter H) were collected from different international newspapers about Russia declaring war against Ukraine during the first two days of the happening of the event (February 24 – 25, 2022). The researcher opted for the online versions of the newspapers because of their availability and for time saving purposes. Different well-known newspapers worldwide were chosen knowing that not all countries are looking at the event from the same perspective. The researcher did not consider the number of headings taken from each newspaper. The variety of sources allows the researcher to look at the way different newspapers can depict the same event differently. Each headline will be dealt with separately to identify the processes that exist in the clause, the participants, and the circumstances. The following table presents the data collected:

Table 4: The newspapers and their headlines

The newspaper	Date of publishing	Headings	Statements of headlines
The daily telegraph	February 25, 2022	H1	Vladimir Putin launches 'special military operation' to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine.
		H2	Vladimir Putin declares war.
		H3	Putin invades.
		H4	Russian leader Vladimir Putin declares 'military operation' in Ukraine.
The Guardian	February 24, 2022	H5	Russia force launch a 'special military operation' in Ukraine.
		H6	Putin declares war as Russia invades Ukraine.
The New York Times	February 24, 2022	H7	Russia strikes.
Bangkok Post	February 25, 2022	H8	Russia blitzes Ukraine.
The Sydney morning Herald	February 24, 2022	H9	Putin declares war.
El País	February 24, 2022	H10	'Putin Lanza ataque masivo contra ucrania': Putin launches a massive attack against Ukraine.
The Moscow Times	February 24, 2022	H11	Russia attacks Ukraine.
AL MASAE	February 25, 2022	H12	Russia starts war against Ukraine. (روسيا تشن الحرب على أكرانيا)

5. DATA ANALYSIS

H1: Vladimir Putin launches 'special military operation' to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin	launches	Special military operation	To de-nazify	Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Cir: cause	Cir: location

H1 is taken from the Daily Telegraph newspaper. It shows the effect of the material process by the actor. The actor's identity is revealed by name therefore claiming responsibility for the process and the effect these processes have on the goal. The headline does not address the actor by title -Russia's president for example- thereby it is the actor's desire (Vladimir Putin himself) to do the action. It is not a common agreement of the country or the government in general then, but it is Putin's decision. Thus, the news focuses on the identity of the doer and the action as well. However, the use of words such as *military operation* and de-*nazify* between inverted commas instead of *invasion* has an emotional effect and it highlights the cause of the war. The circumstance itself has another material process 'to de-nazify' and a goal 'Ukraine'. 'To de-nazify' is the cause why Putin launches military operation in Ukraine. It gives a kind of legitimacy to the action done by the actor. Putin is not invading Ukraine for any other purposes except to *de-nazify* it. The latter has a historical background reminding readers of the Nazi Party lead by Hitler. The term *Nazi* reminds people with the non-humanistic acts done by Hitler at the time; thus, giving legitimacy to Putin to eradicate the doctrine of the Nazi party from Ukraine. To this end, the first headline represents Putin as the 'saver' from repression and the Nazi beliefs in Ukraine although claiming his responsibility for the action itself.

H2: Vladimir Putin declares war

Vladimir Putin	declares	war
Actor	Pr: material	goal

 H2 is also taken from the Daily Telegraph. It is an active voice clause in which the actor is foregrounded, and the goal is backgrounded. It also puts emphasis on the doer of the action and the process itself (see H1). One effect of the use of active voice is that the actor appears more prominent. However, the use of the lexeme 'war' instead of 'military operation' has stronger connotation. War is the opposite of 'peace', and it always has effects and damages whatever the causes are. Hence, it is the doer of the action who is responsible for all the outcomes, and it is him who didn't resort to peace instead.

H3: Putin invades

Putin	Invades
Actor	Pr: material

This headline is taken from the same newspaper mentioned before (see H1 & H2). The clause includes only the actor and the process with no goal or circumstances. The goal is omitted here not only for brevity and for saving space (Reah, 2002) but also to direct the readers' attention towards the actor and the process. Addressing the actor by name once again claims his responsibility for the action, and the absence of the goal along with the use of the lexeme 'invades' indicates that the doer of the action has power on the one hand and has an intention to take over other countries not only Ukraine on the other hand. The actor has both the power and the intention to use military forces to assault others without any clear circumstances. The process 'invades' gives a clear vision of the action of the clause indeed.

H4: Russian leader Vladimir Putin declares 'military operation' in Ukraine

Russian leader Vladimir Putin	Declares	Military operation	In Ukraine
Actor	Pr: Material	Goal	Cir: location

H4 is also taken from the Daily Telegraph. The clause is in the active voice with more emphasis on the actor who is referred to by name and position as well. The affected target of the material process is used only as a location circumstance. Additionally, the wordings of the headline have less effect on the emotional side of the reader. 'Declares' meaning giving permission to start a 'military operation' does not have the same effects as the use of the lexemes 'invasion' and 'war'. The latter creates a visual effect on the mind of the reader that the 'invader' is the one who starts the action and 'war' is always associated with damage, refugees, death, starvation…etc. To this end, although the actor is made more prominent, the process of his actions does not have a great impact on the emotional side of the readers.

The headings of the Daily Telegraph make use of material processes showing the effect of the action of the actor. They are all active voice clauses in which the actor is foregrounded to appear more prominent. The headings refer to the actor by name and position sometimes to reveal his identity and to depict him as the only responsible for the actions. The lexemes used such as *invade, declares war*…etc. have stronger emotional impacts on the readers who create a negative visual image about the actor. The use of other lexemes, such *as military operation,*

is always put between commas just as quotations from the Kremlin office claiming more objectivity on the part of the newspaper in reporting the news event.

H5: Russia force launches a 'special military operation' in Ukraine

Russia force	Launch	'Special military operation'	In Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Cir: location

H5 is taken from the Guardian newspaper. It is also an active voice clause showing the effect of the material process on the circumstance where it took place. Unlike the previous headings, the actor of this clause is not revealed as a person but as a military force. The lexeme *launch* signifies the desire of the actor to start the action first affecting the location of the process without including any circumstances of cause.

H6: Putin declares war as Russia invades Ukraine.

Clause 1

Clause 2

Putin	Declares	War
Actor	Pr: material	goal

Russia	Invades	Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	goal

This headline is taken from the Guardian newspaper. It has two clauses, and both show the effect of the material processes. Clause 1 helps in showing the effect of the two processes on the goal of clause 2. The latter is affected by the two actions of the actors in clauses 1 and 2. Both processes of declaring war and invasion directly affect the goal in clause 2 which is Ukraine.

H7: Russia strikes

Russia	Strikes
Actor	Pr: Material

H7 is taken from the New York Times. It shows the effect of the material process. The goal and the circumstance are omitted. However, the use of the action verb 'strike' signifies the use of power on the part of the actor of the action. It is a transitive and intransitive verb defined in Oxford Languages dictionary as "hit forcibly and deliberately with one's hand or a weapon or other implement" Soanes, C., & Hawker, S. (2003: 171). Therefore, it is a deliberate action done by the actor using force, and thus affecting the goal though it is not mentioned directly; the context in which this headline was written indicates that the goal of this: material process is Ukraine.

H8: Russia blitzes Ukraine.

Russia	Blitzes	Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	goal

H8 is taken from Bangkok Post. The clause clearly shows the effect of the material process on the goal. It is an active voice clause in which the actor is foregrounded to reveal his identity and make him more prominent. However, the actor here is Russia unlike the previous headings that identified the actor as Putin in person not as the representative of the whole state. The use of the transitive action verb 'blitzes' creates a stronger visual and emotional impact than the use of other verbs like 'invade' or 'declare war', because it indicates that it was an intensive and a sudden attack on the part of the actor. It also signifies that the goal is helpless since it is a sudden attack for which the goal was not prepared.

H9: Putin declares war

Putin	Declares	War
Actor	Pr: material	Goal

H9 is taken from the Sidney Morning Herald newspaper. In fact, 'declare' is a verbal process requiring the verbiage 'war', but in this context (See H2, H4, H6) it is related to an action of starting something. This clause uses active voice also and it refers to the doer of the action by

name to put more emphasis on his identity. It is Putin's responsibility again to start the war and to assume responsibility for its consequences (See H1, H2, H3, H4, H6 above).

H10: 'Putin Lanza ataque masivo contra ucrania': Putin launches a massive attack against Ukraine.

Putin	launches	A massive attack	Against Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Cir: location

H10 is taken from El País newspaper. It is a material process showing the effect of both the goal and the actor on the circumstance. The goal in this clause is not affected by the action of the actor, yet it was started intentionally by the actor to affect the circumstance where the process takes place. The use of the adjective 'massive' and the preposition 'against' depicts the actor as unmerciful and violent.

H11: Russia attacks Ukraine.

Russia	Attacks	Ukraine
Actor	Pr: Material	goal

H11 is taken from the Moscow Times which is a Russian newspaper. It is again a material process in which Ukraine is the target and Russia is the actor of the process. The actor in this clause is a state -Russia- and not a person. It is not a person's desire to start the action but a whole state attacking for some bilateral issues. The Russian newspaper here does not refer to Putin as the doer of the action, yet to Russia in general. It is a matter of national security pushing the state to attack.

H12: Russia is starting a war against Ukraine: روسيا تشن الحرب على أكرانيا

Russia	Is starting	aWar	Ukraine
Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Cir: location

H12 is taken from one of the famous Moroccan newspapers AL MASAE. It is an active voice clause in which the actor is foregrounded. The material process has no effect on the goal, but on the circumstance. The preposition 'against' shows the effect of the material process on the location where the goal took place. Although the identity of the doer of the action is revealed, it remains vague and the whole state claims responsibility for the action rather than a specific person.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study the researcher analyzed transitivity in newspapers' headlines depicting the war between Russia and Ukraine. The results show that all the headings include clauses that are in the active voice and that hold material processes. The headings H1-H4, H6, H9, and H10 reveal the identity of the actor of the material processes and refer to him by name, thereby representing him as being the person responsible for the war. They represent him as a man having the desire, the intention, and the power to 'assault' another country. In addition, the use of some lexemes and adjectives such as invade, massive, war, and blitz create a visual picture of the material processes. They also have an emotional impact on the part of the reader who develops a sense of sympathy with the goal affected by the actions of the doer. However, the use of the circumstance 'to de-nazify'- which is a circumstance of cause- gives a kind of legitimacy to the actions of the actor by activating the readers' prior knowledge about the Nazi acts. Since the aim of this study is to investigate the way international newspapers depict the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the results show that the language used in newspapers' headlines is neither neutral nor innocent. It serves the agenda of the newspaper itself and conveys the meanings and messages meant to shape the public opinion. Transitivity analysis then, is an objective data analysis technique that reveals the ideologies conveyed by the newspapers. As international policies are against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, newspapers follow the same path and create an image in the minds of readers that it is not a state-to-state war, but a war wanted by Vladimir Putin himself. There are various ways to use language, but the newspapers under analysis opted for specific linguistic items and structures to represent Putin as the 'evil side' in this conflict; a man sacrifices the lives of many people just to serve his own desire of authority and dominance. To this end, transitivity analysis probes into the way many versions of the world can be created using different linguistic structures. This difference manifests in the fact that the Russian newspaper *The Moscow Times* for example, does not depict Putin as the one who claims responsibility, but it is Russia as a state that attacks Ukraine for its own national security. However, the other international newspapers under analysis, represented the whole war as Putin's choice for personal goals with more emphasis on the massive impacts of the invasion.

7. CONCLUSION

The current study aims at analyzing the way international newspapers' headlines depict the Russian invasion of Ukraine adopting Halliday's Transitivity system as a research instrument. The findings show that there is a difference in the way this war is represented in newspapers according to each newspapers' agenda and nation of belonging. Seven headlines out of the twelve headlines analyzed depict the Russian leader Vladimir Putin as man having a desire for

war and blood by referring to the actor of the actions in the material processes by name. the other headlines (H7, H8, H11, H12) do not refer to the actor by name, but they used 'Russia' instead of revealing the identity of the doer. However, the lexemes used in these four headlines create a visual image in the minds of the readers that this war is a massacre against the Ukrainians. Indeed, international policies -except Russia allies- condemn the Russian invasion and they claim that it is Putin himself to claim responsibility for what is happening. Therefore, newspapers create the same attitudes for readers to see the event from that particular angle. Nevertheless, the Russian newspaper *The Moscow Times* represents the actor of the material process as a state defending its borders and maintaining its national security; therefore, defending the Russian invasion and creating an image in the readers' minds that it is not persons' -Putin- desire for blood but it is a national policy of the whole Russian country.

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