Chapter 4. Conflict Escalation: Of Methods and Methodologies

> "Methods can enable scientific research to surprise itself. This requires interruption of the direct continuum of reality and knowledge initially assumed by society." (Luhmann 2012[1997]: 37)

As the preceding chapters propounded, the meta-plot of this research project is to contribute to closing the gap between the complex assumptions of Luhmannian systems theory in its world societal variant and empirical conflict research in IR/PCS. This undertaking is aimed at gaining new analytical insights into the process of conflict escalation that may help to develop innovative practical approaches in dealing with (violent) conflict.

Conflict and peace are essential paradigms (i.e. reference frames) in IR and, of course, in PCS. In contrast, empirically dealing with forms of armed conflict and war or, more general, with organised collective violence is not a genuine field of activity for sociological systems theory (see Schlichte 2007; Stetter et al. 2012). However, as portrayed in chapter 2, sociology has brought forth seminal works in conflict theory that sustainably echoed way beyond its disciplinary borders in the broader field of social sciences. Since PCS represents an interdisciplinary field of research by birth, here it is argued that, in the wake of the recent rapprochement between systems theory and IR (see chapter 3), PCS offers an adequate baseline to develop a systems theoretical approach to conflict escalation.[1]

As discussed earlier, conflicts do not obviously speak for themselves but are given various attributes by most diverse observers, such as journalists, policymakers, activists or analysts. Upon this, conflicts earn specific labels and get qualified as, for example, political, economic, ethnic or religious; also, they are characterised as being conflicts over

1 As the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF) puts it, PCS "shall generate research-based knowledge about the conditions contributing to the escalation of social conflicts into violence and about the possibilities and means to prevent such dynamics with peaceful measures" (DSF 2013). In this context, PCS has always been an interdisciplinary field of research characterised by the participation of two or more distinct academic fields using a more or less common language to describe common problems (see Bonacker 2011: 65–67; Zick 2012).

power, natural resources, norms, or identity; even more abstract, conflicts are commonly delineated as contrastive pairs: symmetric/asymmetric, antagonistic/non-antagonistic, legitimate/illegitimate, informal/institutionalized, consensual/dissensual, constructive/destructive, divisible/indivisible… Indeed, scientific communication about conflict, be it within the context of PCS or beyond, draws on an elaborated vocabulary to differentiate and categorise social conflicts. Though, as much cited and prominent works in the field reveal (see e.g. Crocker et al. 2015), although researchers have developed sophisticated concepts dealing with conflict, there seems to be no root concept in sight that convincingly gathers (violent) conflict as a central and, at the same time, everyday aspect of social life in a globalising world.[2]

Given these shortcomings at the intersection of theoretical and empirical conflict research, chapter 4 offers an option to bridge the gap between the systems theoretical world society perspective outlined above and empirical conflict research by translating the abstract theoretical framework into an empirical research programme. To this end, it goes beyond the idea of scientific *methods* understood as more or less neutral and technical tools of the trade that can be used to select and analyse empirical data in most diverse research processes (Risse 2003: 103–104). Rather, it frames a *methodology* that specifies the relation between this study's epistemological interest and the practical approach to empirical phenomena and data in the research process.[3] As this chapter shows in detail, the present research project's methodology is based on a logic of reconstruction that focuses on documenting the making-of and change of intersubjectively shared meanings in (linguistic) communication (see also Franke and Roos 2013: 11–23; Cienki and Yanow 2013).

Chapter 4's first section ("The Point of Departure: Constructivist Conflict Research") outlines the epistemological basics of constructivist empirical research, particularly concerning interpretative and reflexive approaches. Based on that, the second section ("Doing Case Studies within a Systems Theoretical Framework") presents the idea of case study that underlies this contribution. In this context, selecting and approaching cases does not follow a strict methodical framework by using procedures of systematic comparison. Rather, section two unfolds this study's dealing with specific cases not in terms

2 Exemplarily, the state-of-the-art publication of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), *Managing Conflict in a World Adrift*, indeed provides a "sobering panorama of contemporary conflict" around the world, ranging from global power shifts to climate change to demographic structures (Crocker et al. 2015). However, efforts to identify common features out of the empirical diversity of conflicts and thus to bring together diverse empirical conflict research with a view to broader theoretical considerations, e.g. regarding a conflict theory of world society, remain limited. Nevertheless, in contrast, Webel and Galtung (2007) or Bonacker and Weller (2006) provide inspiring work concerning the development of an integrative theoretical perspective vis-à-vis the rich empirical picture of conflicts.

3 These remarks on the concepts of method and methodology refer to an ongoing debate in the theory of science: Broadly speaking, one position holds that methods of research can be seen as completely independent from research topics, whereas the opposite position points out that methods are not neutral control devices for research processes but variable and unavoidably subjective ways of approaching the phenomena in question (see particularly Herborth 2011: 137–145; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 15–24; Mayer 2003: 47–51). As chapter 4 shows, this project's approach to empirical data adheres to the second position.

of predetermined procedural requirements but as the result of this researcher's individual approach. The third section ("A Reconstructive Approach: Putting the Cart before the Horse") expounds the concept of reconstruction, which can be located in the larger context of constructivist methodologies. Finally, chapter 4's last section details the work plan of this study. Therefore, it explains how empirical material was treated in those stages of research that preceded the present contribution, particularly concerning the genesis of the analytical narratives presented in the case study chapters 5 and 6 (for the concept of 'analytical narrative' see particularly chapter 4.3).

4.1 The Point of Departure: Constructivist Empirical Conflict Research

> "We must be careful not to confound map with territory."
> *(Luhmann 2013[1997]: 178)*

Rationalist approaches to conflict research in IR and PCS are generally characterised by conceptualising conflict as a 'completed' result of latent social structures that existed before. These structures, in turn, go back to given actors that interact according to cost-benefit analyses. Based on this kind of consequentialist thinking, a bulk of empirical research seeks for 'causes' and 'conditions' that are, in a strict sense, seen as being external to the phenomenon of conflict itself. Thus, conflicts are understood as 'products' of specific sets of factors that can be analysed. Empirical conflict research, in this rather mechanical view, is concentrated on collecting, scaling and correlating specific indicators and data that are believed to mirror an objectively existing social structure within which already existing actors act according to their obvious interests. Therefore, conflicts are considered as objectifiable and virtually clinical topics of research; they can be fully captured by systematic methods; they consist of more or less self-evident components (issues, parties, environment); and, based on robust data, they can be classified, for example as *ethnic* conflicts or conflicts *over resources*.[4]

In contrast, having regard to constructivist research, conflicts are understood as phenomena that are deeply embedded in the social world and thus come up within the framework of discursive constructions of reality. With this, constructivist approaches point out that any observation is performed on the basis of different understandings of the social world. In other words,

> "Constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world. […] Identities, interests and behavior

4 Against the background of this rationalist understanding of conflict see examples from quantitative empirical research on conflict, e.g. Collier et al. (2005), Wallensteen (2007), Vasquez (2012) or Schneider (2015). This paragraph pointedly depicted the features of a rationalist approach to conflict studies. For a rather prosaic comparison of rationalist and constructivist essentials see Fearon and Wendt (2002) or Adler (2013).

> are constructed by collective meanings, interpretations and assumptions about the world." (Adler 1997: 322, 324)

Going beyond this rather general constructivist position, the present study refers to the perspective of *reflexive* constructivism. In this context, as Weller (2005a: 97–100) puts it, perceptions of 'reality' do indeed depend on *how* the world is observed *by whom*. Modes of observation are thus understood as constitutive parts of any analysis of social phenomena. In this sense, scientific ways of observing the world are no exception (see e.g. Renn 2012: 19–21). They represent just one way of observation amongst others. In short, different modes of observation give rise to different constructions of reality. Based on that, reflexive constructivism asks for why observations, and thus constructions of reality, turned out in a certain way and not differently.

With reference to the empirical study of social conflicts, taking up a reflexive constructivist's perspective means accepting that each communication referring to the context of conflict (from single statements to reports to larger narratives) represents an expression of a certain worldview. The present study's 'objects of investigation' are thus constructions of conflict. Their examination is based on the following guiding question: *How* do participants observe *their* world of conflict? Or, more general, how does it happen that social groups perceive their interaction as a conflict? How do patterns of observation look like referring to perpetrators or victims of violence? How do third parties, e.g. bystanders, negotiators, mediators or reporters come to the conclusion that they (have to) observe a 'conflict'? Even though all these constructions of conflict maybe articulated as stand-alone facts or, to refer to the introductory quote, as different 'maps of conflict', they are not independent from each other but interconnected in a common "field of relational references" (Nonhoff 2011: 101; own translation). In this sense, for example, voices from the rapidly mobilising civil society opposition in Kyiv (from October/November 2013 on) observed 'the conflict' as being about Ukraine's orientation (west vs. east) and about the right to freedom of expression whereas the government observed 'the conflict' as being about seizing power and implementing regime change.[5] On that note, different constructions of conflict develop with reference (or in distinction) to one another and, at the same time, constitute (and are constituted by) a common reference frame within a discursive field or, according to this contribution's theoretical background, within a *social system*.

Hence, constructions of conflict necessarily involve (or consist in) processes of socialisation and identity formation. As mentioned above in Chapter 2, this crucial insight already played an important role in the earlier stages of conflict theoretical thought.[6] Likewise, as it has been elaborated in Chapter 3, a systems theory understanding of conflict essentially relies on the process of identity formation: In their social dimension, conflict systems provide meaning by processing the central differentiation of identity, i.e. the one between alter and ego. According to Luhmann (1984: 426–436), identities in social systems can be regarded as "stable structures of expectation". Following this, conflict

5 See MMIC (2.12.2013a) and GovUkr (4.12.2013a). For the detailed presentation of the text data corpus and its sources see chapter 5 and Appendix A.1.1.

6 See e.g. Simmel (1992[1923]), Coser (1956), Tajfel and Turner (1979), or Cook-Huffman (2009).

systems represent structures of negative reciprocal expectations, or, to put it bluntly, 'systems of mutually repeated noes'. During the evolution of a conflict system, expectations towards alter and ego increasingly stabilise by getting attributed to different 'identity layers', such as persons (i.e. individuals), their roles (e.g. as societal groups), programmes (e.g. interests, strategies), and norms (i.e. ideas, values, moral concepts).[7] Again coming back to the Maidan protests, under the header of "government", the case study reveals an emerging conflict identity. As an increasingly stable structure of expectation, "government" thus not only served as a reference for those formally belonging to the state but also for social groups attributing themselves (or getting attributed) to the authorities' side, supporting certain interests and strategies (esp. maintenance of power for the ruling elite, orientation to the east), and sharing a certain set of norms behind (esp. strong political leadership, nationalism, economic protectionism).

As both case studies show (Chapter 5/6), this study's way of conducting constructivist empirical conflict research attaches major attention to the social dimension of conflict development and thus to the process of identity formation (see Jackson 2009: 176–182). Following the guidelines of operative constructivism, i.e. asking for how observed observers observe (Luhmann 2002: 140), does not only bring forward findings about certain modes of distinguishing/ designating social phenomena but also includes a lot about the dynamic of emerging identities. Often, conflicts are understood as pathological deformations of social relationships or even as complete breakdowns of communication between actors (see Albert et al. 2008: 49). Yet, recalling the systems theoretical impulse of this work, phenomena in the social world do not consist in actions or actors in the first place but in communication. Based on that, Chapter 3 conceptualises conflicts as self-referential social systems having an inherent tendency to claim more and more communicative resources from their environment. To trace this dynamic, constructivist conflict research, as presented here, draws on empirical material that mirrors the collective construction of a conflict over time. Accordingly, within the framework of the case studies below, a range of documented observations (mainly in the form of accessible text data) have been selected to systematically track the interplay between different discursive constructions of conflict.

4.2 Doing Case Studies within a Systems Theoretical Framework

> "The case-oriented approach places cases, not variables, center stage. But what is a case? Comparative social science has a ready-made conventionalized answer to this question: Boundaries around places and time periods define cases." (Ragin 1992: 5)

7 In a more conventional constructivist perspective, these four layers from Luhmann's definition of identity could be subsumed under the header of subject positions (e.g. Diez et al. 2006: 565). In this view, a conflict consists of an incompatibility of subject positions that is observed and articulated.

What is a case?

According to George and Bennett (2005: 17), in the context of case study research in social sciences, a case represents "an instance of a class of events". Referring to this definition, Rohlfing (2012: 24) similarly conceptualises a case as "a bounded empirical phenomenon that is an instance of a population of similar empirical phenomena". Following this, a case is characterised by two bounds: a "substantive" bound, i.e. a theoretical or analytical perspective that defines the class the observed instance is attributed to; and a "temporal" bound, i.e. the observation of a case as a set of historical (temporal, geographical) issues that jointly represent an instance. These definitions are part of a rather rationalist approach to empirical research that essentially concentrates on testing or developing theories, which are understood as "general statements that describe and explain the causes and effects of classes of phenomena. [Theories] are composed of causal laws, hypotheses, and explanations" (van Evera 1997: 8; see also George and Bennett 2005: 19–22; Thomas 2011: 512–513). Notwithstanding its constructivist and systems theoretical orientation elaborated earlier, this contribution's understanding of case study research on conflict partly makes recourse to similar criteria (as to "substantive" and "temporal bounds" mentioned above), albeit from a more fundamental perspective.

As introduced in Chapter 3, here, conflicts are understood as social systems that increasingly claim attention and thus communicative resources from their environment. Besides journalists, policymakers, activists and others, this process, sooner or later, may drag in scientific communication (i.e. attention of research) as well. Indeed, as the many databases, concepts and theories suggest, works in different disciplines address the phenomenon of conflict extensively. The bulk of these works deal with conflicts *ex post*, i.e. in the aftermath of a cluster of social phenomena that are observed as a 'completed' entity or as a conflict that is 'over'. In this sense, even before the research project behind the present contribution started, the armed conflict in Mali (2011/2011) or the Maidan protests in Kiev/Ukraine (2013/2014), were already observed as 'instances of a class of events', or, in other words, as cases of escalation to organised collective violence. To put it in even more systems theoretical terms: Obviously, there are many conflict systems that succeed in irritating the environment and thus in expanding (see 3D conflict model in section 3.1). More precisely, they are able to attract attention (i.e. communicative resources) not only, for example, from the media or politics but also from sciences. In this context, Mali and Ukraine have frequently been observed as 'cases' in IR and PCS research, though against different theoretical backgrounds.[8]

Indeed, regarding that what is referred to as escalation to organised collective violence, there is a huge "population of similar social phenomena" (Rohlfing 2012: 24). Thus, at this point, an explanation of this study's case selection or sampling, i.e. the decision to observe a certain cluster of social phenomena and none other, is needed.[9] Simply put, the

8 As indicated earlier, for synoptic views (including different theoretical approaches) on existing case study literature see Lecocq et al. (2013) on Mali and Onuch (2015) on Ukraine.

9 Nota bene: Even though there are some similarities (see engagement with the practical aspects of grounded theory below), case selection in this study is not to be confused with a common understanding of "theoretical sampling" in terms of approaching an empirical field within a process of

case studies here have the function of empirically illustrating the appropriateness of the theoretical framework outlined above for test purposes, or, in Eckstein's (1975) words, as "plausibility probes".[10] In this sense, they are intended to demonstrate that systems theoretical eyeglasses are particularly useful to look at the complex world of conflict. More precisely, the case studies are supposed to settle the theoretical claim that the proposed way of conflict research enables to discern *more* of a conflict's development. However, this does not explain why Mali and Ukraine were chosen as case studies. To answer this question, the next section goes back to the early phases of the research project: Based on its systems theoretical impetus, it started with an effort to structure the empirical field of conflict. For this purpose, Messmer's (2003; 2008) conceptional work on conflict was used as a heuristic tool of exploration.

Messmer's conflict model

Based on Luhmann's concept of meaning dimensions (see chapter 3.1), Messmer (2003) offers a substantiation of a systems theoretical understanding of conflict. More precisely, he developed a model of conflict stages by means of empirical case studies.[11] Each stage thus represents an ideal type of conflict that is characterised by one dimension of communication being at the forefront (i.e. either factual, temporal or social/relational). In detail, Messmer's model proposes four stages of conflict (see Messmer 2003: 91–95, 275–315): The first stage is defined as an isolated and reciprocal articulation of a contradiction, i.e. 'a no' that corresponds to a rejected offer of meaning. According to the model, this kind of factually and temporally 'limited' contradiction is considered as a simple everyday bagatelle or as a *conflict episode*.

The second stage of conflict is characterised by a specific topic or issue that shows high connectivity, which means, in this case, that factual communication easily links up and perpetuates. In suchlike *issue conflicts*, participants repeatedly articulate contradicting offers of meaning and therefore, without feeling personally affected, experience the conflict as an exchange of valid arguments and as a matter of mutual competitive persuasion.

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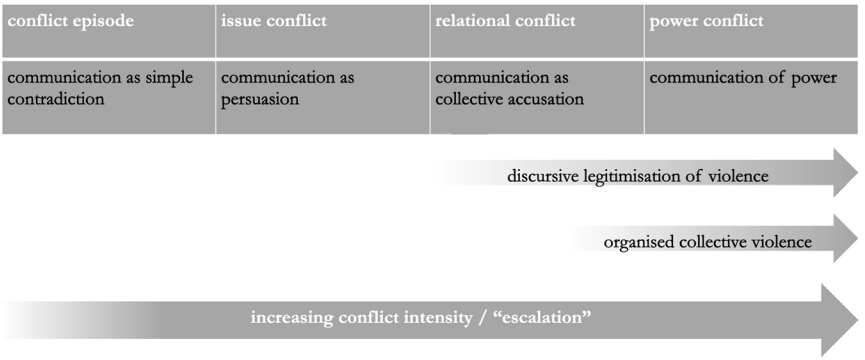
iteratively gathering data and refining theories on a rotating basis (see Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 173–182). In fact, the present research project started by assuming a systems theoretical worldview as its basic theoretical orientation. Within this framework, this study indeed refined its hypotheses on escalation by gradually exploring empirical material (and thus proceeded similar to grounded theory).

10 According to Eckstein (1975: 110), case studies conducted as plausibility probes play a crucial role in hypothesis-testing or theory-developing contributions, since they are seen as a kind of "pilot study" to refine the theoretical and methodical apparatus even before the proper research study is carried out. In contrast, this study adopts a rather pragmatic understanding. Here, the case studies are regarded as studies of applicability to probe the plausibility of a methodological approach in concrete empirical research settings (see also Roos 2010: 88–90; Bergmann and Niemann 2013).

11 In one of the central case studies, Messmer analyses "communicative events" prior to World War I. Methodically, his model is based on conversation analysis/ethnomethodological analysis of radio and TV interviews, publicly accessible communication from legal and political domains as well as private correspondence (see Messmer 2003: 252–266).

Figure 3: Messmer's Stages of Conflict



(Own graph)

Messmer's third stage of conflict features the superposition of the (initial) factual matter by other topics. In this context, the conflict is no longer seen as an "issue conflict" but rather as a conflict diffused into other communicative spheres and thus being a substantial part of social relationships. In a *relational conflict*, contradictions that used to be observed as issue-related are projected on the relational level of alter vs. ego. In other words, the totality of communication gets attributed according to an either-or-principle: Either a respective communication is perceived as strengthening the collective identity, or it is seen as compromising or contradicting the same. Hence, at this stage, the responsibility for the conflict (and the social situation as whole) is completely attributed to the respective counterpart, which ultimately culminates in collective accusations. In this vein, the reciprocal demarcation gets consolidated, and the self is increasingly observed as threatened by the other. Conflict identities are thus clearly apostrophised as antagonistic conflict parties.

Finally, according to Messmer, at the stage of *power conflict*, communication of power dominates all domains of social relations, which means that the potential and actual use of physical violence has become the favoured strategy of asserting (collective) positions.[12] Issue-related dissent then has completely made way to perceiving the counterpart as an opponent or even life-threatening enemy who has to be encountered with force, coercion, repression and threats. To render any perceived potential of resistance harmless and to break the alleged will of the opposing side, the option of collective violence not only comes into the conflict parties' horizon of acting but also gets normalised.

12 In Messmer's rather narrow understanding, escalation refers to the transition from stage 3 to 4, i.e. from a conflict stage that is characterised by a non-violent dispute to a conflict marked by physical violence (Messmer 2003: 249–250). In contrast, this study, as introduced in chapter 2, operates with a broader concept of escalation that covers the whole process of conflict development from its beginning. In this sense, each step of conflict intensification can be regarded as a part of the overall escalation process (see Pruitt and Rubin 2003[1986]; see also 'key points' in chapter 2.4). As clarified below, Messmer's elaborated model does not address these processual issues in detail.

At first glance, Messmer's types of conflict seem to be designed as clear-cut analytical units. However, the four stages neither follow a strict linear logic nor a chronological one; they are conceptualised as ideal types.[13] In other words, the model represents an

> "effort to reduce the phenomenological diversity of conflict dynamics in the course of differentiating social conflict to its elementary forms." (Messmer 2003: 92; translation R.B.)

Even though presented as a process model dealing with a conflict's communicative differentiation, it does not explicitly elaborate on how the 'evolution' of conflict proceeds in detail. Indeed, Messmer's model describes structures of expectation in conflict (represented in communication) that create a kind of stable social order. However, it does not explain how these structures and orders change: Sequential processes of conflict intensification within and between each stage largely remain black boxes since, for example, the relation between phases of identity formation, the legitimisation of violence and the execution of violent strategies is not particularly addressed.

Nonetheless, Messmer's model enables a distinct mode of observing the empirical landscape of conflict in world society or, to put in more traditional IR/PCS terms, of armed conflict and war. In view of all the representations of conflict in scientific, medial, or political communication, it serves as a conceptual heuristic that allows differentiating communication according to the kind of social order it (re-) produces. With this in mind and based on respective data and studies, it can be stated that scientific communication about Mali in 2010 shows much evidence indicating an issue conflict (about political representation in society as a whole), whereas in the beginning of 2012, based on different kinds of sources, the situation in Mali could be described as a power conflict. The same applies to the situation in Ukraine in summer 2013 and in spring 2014 respectively (see case study chapters 5/6 for details). To sum up: Although Messmer offers a beneficial model of conflict types based on systems theoretical considerations, it remains incomplete since it does not spell out its built-in potential to provide a strategy of empirically "tracking" communication, for example, in between the above-mentioned points in time concerning Mali and Ukraine. This represents a principal desideratum that brought the present study to the scene.

Researchers select cases – or do cases select researchers?

> „The primary criterion for case selection should be relevance to the research objective."
> *(George and Bennett 2005: 83)*

Indeed, long before the first thoughts about this study were conceived, Mali and Ukraine have been observed as relevant cases in the context of a broad range of concerns and ques-

13 For an empirical 'application' of Messmer's four-stage-model see e.g. Diez et al. (2008): The authors utilise the model as an analytical substructure in order to do research on the process of European integration and its transformative influence on (different types of) conflicts in EU's neighbourhood.

tions in IR/PCS research. So, how can the selection of these two cases among a myriad of other potential cases be explained?

The question of how researchers get to 'their' research topics and/or case studies can certainly not be answered in a brief and concluding way. Notwithstanding major efforts to make selection transparent and intersubjectively verifiable (e.g. Bennett and Elman 2008; Rohlfing 2012), ultimately, in each selection, there will always be a moment of contingency (see basic considerations on observation and communication in chapter 3.1). Against this background, the present study holds that selection is not only about researchers more or less deliberately and systematically choosing cases. The other way round, it is also about cases catching attention and thus 'picking' researchers. To put it in a systems theoretical wording: Obviously, conflict systems, from time to time, succeed in including researchers (as a further group of conflict observers) into the system's communication. In the following, this issue will be clarified by reference to three interrelated factors that informed this project's case selection: (1) cycles of research, (2) the pragmatic factor, and (3) the individual moment.

(1) "Whatever we know about society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media." (Luhmann 1996: 9) Indeed, research has particularly considered the question of whether mass media influences the agenda of foreign policies or world politics in general.[14] In this regard, reciprocal relations between the media, public opinion and politics have been analysed in detail (see e.g. Weller 2002; 2004). For example, research on the "CNN-effect" has illustrated that decisions concerning military intervention are intimately linked to media coverage on "humanitarian crises" (see notably Robinson 2002; see also Weller and Bösch 2015: 7–9). With regards to sciences, it can be stated that researchers, too, are affected by changing cycles of media attention for certain events, especially concerning armed conflicts and wars.[15] Obviously, this kind of 'CNN-effect in sciences' cannot be discussed in detail here. However, against this background, case selection within the present study can be viewed in a different light.

In 2012, when the project behind this study was in the very early stages of its development, the armed conflict in Mali broke out (see brief summary in chapter 1/Introduction). Since the representation of the Malian conflict in the (world) media and its reception in world politics began to increase, attention in sciences, particularly in IR and PCS, joined

14 According to systems theory, there is a permanent structural coupling between the systems of mass media and politics. To be able to observe and address an audience, political communication refers to public opinion, which is produced in mass media. In turn, mass media observe the political system as a renewable source of information (see Fuhse 2003: 136). In a narrower sense, within the framework of the present study's case studies, mass media refer to those locally based mass media whose publications were selected for the text corpus. In a broader sense, of course, mass media point to "[…] all those institutions of society which make use of copying technologies to disseminate communication." (Luhmann 1996: 10)

15 However, having knowledge of changing cycles of media attention may also lead to an 'inverted CNN-effect', i.e. the idea of reducing the imbalance of media attention by dealing with those conflicts which are not that much recognised in the media (see references to "forgotten conflicts" in IR/PCS; e.g. blog "forgotten conflicts", a project of CONIAS Risk Intelligence, at https://conias.com/vergessene-konflikte, accessed November 19, 2022. Also, as Beck and Werron (2013) show, it is the deliberate and increasing use of force in violent conflicts that is often meant to ensure the attention of international observers in the first place.

this trend sooner or later.[16] Towards the end of 2013, this research project reached a point where a definite determination regarding the case studies had to be done in order to get the empirical analysis started in the next step. Besides the ongoing conflict in Mali, at that time, the protests on Maidan Square in Kiev began (in October/November 2013). Therefore, given the theoretical purpose of this study on the one hand (understanding conflict escalation) and given the landmark of the project at the time on the other hand, the Maidan protests represented a welcome opportunity to deal with a very special and exceptionally convenient case of a conflict system, or, in other words, a spatially and temporally condensed microcosm of conflict development. This leads over to a pragmatic factor, which plays a role in procedures of case selection more or less explicitly.

(2) As presented earlier in chapter 3.1, from a systems theoretical understanding, communication of meaning can be defined as the processing of selection and, hence, as the unity of three selections: information, utterance and understanding (Luhmann 1995: 140, 147). Against the background of this broad definition, empirically, communication represents way more than linguistic communication, which is based on intersubjectively shared characters, rules, and meanings of languages. Thus, a full capturing of communication would have to take other symbolic and non-verbal communication into account, such as music, visual arts and, ultimately, forms of body language (for a comprehensive review on this see Müller 2014).

Evidently, it is beyond the scope of this (and probably any) study to cover the totality of communication referring to conflict in a certain reference frame. Therefore, the case study design here represents a kind of approximation procedure, which is concentrated on a single layer of communication: text-based linguistic communication.[17] In this context, it was a pragmatic decision to concentrate on documented text-based communication since this kind of discursive representation of conflict was relatively easy to cover in terms of searching for and accessing sources. In the case of the Maidan protests, catching this author's attention was facilitated by the fact that communication referring to the conflict was not only available in Ukrainian or Russian but also in English. In other words, the attribution of communication simultaneously ensued in three languages and thus enabled the inclusion of anglophone 'international' observers.[18] Likewise, in the case of

16 Although there was no systematic analysis of publications in IR/PCS within the framework of this study, random tests on the basis of journal archives confirm the assumed trend. See e.g. *Security and Peace*'s special issue on Mali (Brzoska et al. 2014) that was prepared in early 2013. See also increasing references to Mali in 2012/2013 in various journals (e.g. *International Journal*, *Security Dialogue*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Journal of Peace Reserach*; cf. Sage Journals).

17 Against the background of a potentially endless field of discursive representations of 'the conflict', this case study design could, in principle, be extended to even more text data or to other layers of communication beyond text-based linguistic analysis, such as visual and tonal language in arts or music. For an account on routines and practices in news and documentary photography in conflict contexts see, for example, Koltermann (2017).

18 Even though Ukrainian and Russian are the official languages in Ukraine, official government documents as well as documents issued by the political opposition, civil society movements or major journals were published in English (at least during the investigation period). In other words, the conflict discourse simultaneously operated in Ukrainian, Russian and English. Therefore, the analytical procedure was neither dependent on any previous translation work nor put at risk of translation biases on the part of this researcher. In total, the analysed corpus of texts involves 575

Mali, French functioned as the conflict system's uncontested lingua franca – a language that made it possible to include the author of the present study as a further observer.[19] The pragmatic factor – i.e., here, the tendency to rather turn to those cases whose empirical representations are more approachable and accessible – is certainly linked to the last point, the indivudal moment of case selection.

(3) In (social) sciences, a good argument can be made that decisions made during research processes, e.g. on designs, methods, case studies etc., are not only influenced by intentional and rational considerations. They are also due to a more or less explicit scientific socialisation that speaks from theoretical beliefs and empirical experiences of a researcher. In fact, contrary to the rather positivist view that a researcher's individual experience represents a potential source of biases that has to be equilibrated methodically, it is argued that all kinds of prior knowledge should be handled openly and can be seen as an important source of inspiration or even as a necessary condition "to be able to decode the meaning of recorded traces of social actions" (Roos 2010: 85; own translation; see also Herborth 2011).

In addition to that, at least within the context of the present work, biographical incidences do indeed give a hint why key research choices were made just so and not differently: in secondary school, one of this researcher's main subjects was the French language; moreover, the author of this work not only spent an academic year in Paris but also, during the studies (in Political Science/IR), worked as an intern with an international civil society organisation in francophone Mali for several months.[20] Finally, this author was part of a research project dealing with regional integration and conflict management in West Africa, whereby the Malian development played a crucial role as a case study.[21] It can hardly be denied that these circumstances justify a certain individual moment of case selection. Similarly, in the first phase of this author's studies, due to the

documents (for a detailed overview of all documents and sources see chapter 5.1 and Appendix A.1.1).

19 In Mali, there are 13 indigenous languages having the status of 'national languages', including e.g. Bambara, Dogon, and Moorish. Half of these languages are not only spoken in Mali but also in a number of neighbouring countries in West Africa. However, since Mali's independence in 1960, when the language of the former colonial power was determined as the only official one, French has increasingly become the language that enables (linguistic) connectivity in the multilingual and multi-ethnic Malian context (see Konaté et a. 2014; see also Appendix A.3.2 for a map of ethnic groups in Mali). In the Malian case study, the analysed corpus of texts involves 689 documents (for a detailed overview of all documents and sources see chapter 6.1. and Appendix A.1.2)

20 At the time of the internship with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Bamako, Mali was regularly cited, both by local and international observers, as an outstanding example of a peacefully developing democracy in West Africa. Although there were smaller insurrections observed as being linked to economic problems and social cleavages nobody expected a destabilisation of the country as a whole (see e.g. Plate 2006). Hence, the drastic change of the Malian situation in 2010/2011 was all the more surprising and gave rise to a number of scientific issues.

21 In its pilot phase (September 2012-June 2013) the project "Si vis pacem, para integrationem? The Economic Community of West African States from a Peace and Conflict Studies Perspective" was funded by the University of Augsburg. By following a 'reconstructive' approach the project focused on ECOWAS' decision-making processes concerning its reactions and strategies concerning violent conflicts in West Africa (2006–2012) to understand the role of ECOWAS in promoting norms of civil conflict management (see Bösch 2013).

Orange Revolution in 2004[22], Ukraine became an important focus of Peace and Conflict Studies and thus entered respective university courses this researcher was personally interested in (e.g. on post-Soviet transition, on democratisation theories, on social movements etc.). Evidently, the epistemological interest in both cases studies cannot be fully understood without this personal background. The fact of having recourse to own (working, travelling, scientific etc.) experiences, contacts (e.g. resource persons) and familiar sources (e.g. data bases) made it more likely to choose Mali and Ukraine, which were already booming topics in the media at times when this project's case studies were to be determined.

Besides the above-mentioned path dependencies resulting from cycles of research, pragmatic factors and a certain individual moment, case selection here also follows an inner scientific logic: Given the above-presented systems theoretical framing to approach processes of conflict escalation prior to violent conflict, the present case studies represent plausibility probes that are considered appropriate to show that the proposed approach enables to understand conflict development from a more holistic point of view. Therefore, to increase the probes' connectivity regarding the broad empirical field of conflict research, this study addresses tricky cases: On the one hand, from a rather conventional perspective, the Maidan protests (i.e. a domestic and increasingly violent phenomenon concentrated on Ukraine's capital) and the Malian conflict (according to an old-fashioned reading: a conflict within the context of an independence movement that resulted in a 'civil war') create the impression that the case studies refer to completely different realms. On the other hand, however, both cases have a substantial common ground: they both show that neither different explanatory models for internal armed conflict nor approaches based on IR theories nor sociological approaches to conflict are alone sufficient to pin down the broad range of empirical phenomena that appear in various discourses on conflict. In other words, both cases intrinsically challenge approaches and theories that are associated to clearly defined empirical fields or, more precisely, to single levels of analysis (see e.g. Demmers 2012: 5–12).

In summary, the procedure of case selection within the framework of this study, as outlined above, once again spells out the systems theoretical principle of contingency: Against the background of the idea that, in each selection, the pressure to make a decision goes hand in hand with an endless number of options, some observations become cases, others do not. In this research project, two cases were selected from among a larger number of cases that had already been referred to as 'tricky' in various contexts (especially in science, media, and politics). However, having said that, Mali and Ukraine were not only selected because they had been awarded a high potential of scientific irritation in research literature, they were also chosen because this author has a special relation to

22 On November 22, 2004, the so-called 'Orange Revolution' began (proponents wore orange as a party symbol); as the case study confirms, it plays an important role in the collective memory of Ukrainians; it began with a national strike and developed into a series mass demonstrations that emerged after the presidential elections criticised for voter intimidation and electoral fraud on both sides; the bloodless Orange Revolution lasted for more than two months (for further details, particularly concerning the relation between the Orange Revolution and the Maidan protests see case study chapter 5; see also e.g. Kappeler 2014).

both situations and has thus developed a particular personal *and* scientific interest to get to the bottom of both conflicts and thus to reconstruct conflict escalation. The next section will now consider the concept and method of reconstruction, which plays a crucial role for this project's case study approach.

4.3 A Reconstructive Approach: Putting the Cart before the Horse

> "Ex post: based on analysis of past performance; opposed to ex ante; Latin origin: from what lies behind, according to what lies behind" *(see Dictionary.com)*

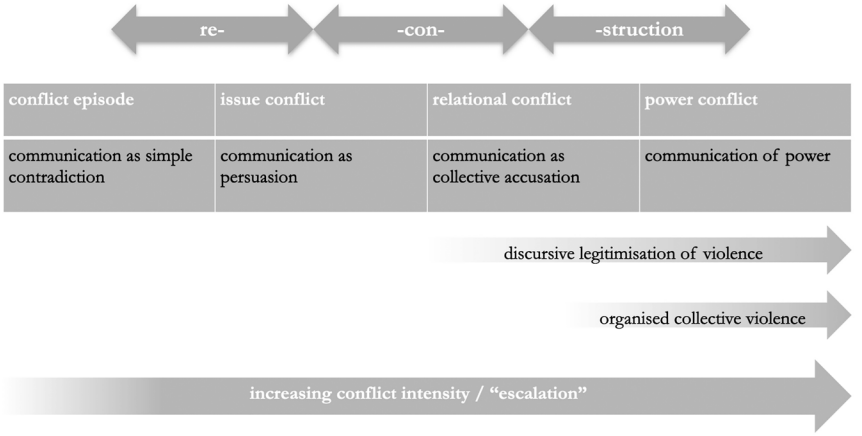
Preliminaries I: some working principles

As the etymological components of the word indicate, 're-con-struction' relates to an operation performed in the aftermath of something that has already been constructed. Or, in a social science phrasing, it refers to a particular *ex post* research perspective on social phenomena: broadly speaking, a researcher drawing on the method of reconstruction retells a story by systematically interpreting other stories that have already been told (and, at best, documented) within a common reference frame. In this regard, against a plenitude of meaning embedded in communication, reconstructive research intends to unfold processes of collective attribution of meaning and thus to reveal intersubjectively shared meanings (see Roos 2013: 11–23).

As expounded earlier, this study takes a systems theoretical model of conflict development as a basis. Taking up again the '3D conflict model' introduced in chapter 3.1, a conflict system evolves along a factual, temporal and social dimension. Metaphorically, it corresponds to a communicative maelstrom that urges its discursive environment to take a stance. This process consists of circular articulations of contradiction, whereby the mutual refusal of offered meanings becomes a rule, or, in other words, a generalised expectation.

As Messmer's pioneering work has illustrated (see Messmer 2003; Chapter 4.2), a 'conflict career' can be empirically studied against a systems theoretical background and thus be portrayed as a process in stages. Though, Messmer's conflict model leaves a few pending questions about the transition between the four ideal type stages behind: How do simple contradictions transform into an ongoing argument? How does factually oriented debates begin to include the personal level? How do verbal accusations evolve into violent conflict? This is where the reconstructive approach comes in.

Figure 4: Conflict Stages according to Messmer & Reconstruction



(Own graph)

To specify reconstruction both as an abstract perspective and as a method in practice, the systems theoretical idea about a conflict system's increasing intensity is put into play as a quasi-blueprint. In this context, to begin with, one of the main working principles of the reconstructive approach is to think of the analytical process as a process of a continual formation and refinement of hypotheses about the research topic's properties based on empirical material (see Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 182–183). In this sense, the assumption that a conflict represents a particular social system, a conflict system, constitutes an initial basic hypothesis, which is evidently enshrined in the comprehensive systems theoretical worldview behind this project. The reconstructive approach in this work aims at uncovering and substantiating this rather general and abstract hypothesis by iteratively formulating new and more specific hypotheses (e.g. on the legitimisation of violence during conflict escalation) based on the many discursive references embedded in communication. Therefore, conflict systems are understood as relational entities that are indeed not physically visible as such but reconstructable (see Vogd 2005: 295). This, in turn, can be implemented within the framework of a constructivist methodology (see chapter 4.2 above) that does not primarily ask for *what* is observed but for *how* observers observe:

> "An observer is a recursive and bounded network of observations. […] Observers are observers *of* the world *in* the world, located in particular networks of self-similar and related observations." (Fuchs 2010: 82)

Based on that, reconstructive research on conflict here draws upon a second working principle according to which a scientific analysis of conflict systems ought to be conceived of as "second-order observation" (see Luhmann 2002: 128–152; Weller 2005b: 316–321). As mentioned earlier, this kind of analysis approaches the social construction of conflict by observing observations. Reconstructive work thus includes scrutinising modes of observation or, more precisely, patterns of selection 'behind' communicated

observations, particularly those that discursively co-produce a conflict via contradictory normative expectations.

Preliminaries II: some bounds

This study's approach to reconstruction and its handling of empirical data (see in detail chapter 4.4 below) shares some common characteristics with what is frequently referred to as 'discourse analysis'.[23] In this context, in order to be able to describe what constitutes conflict as a social phenomenon or, as introduced earlier, as a social system, this contribution draws on terminologies like *discursive field*, *-arena*, *-space*, *-representation*, *-cluster* and others. In general, research about discourse distinguishes between 'discourse theory' and 'discourse analysis' while both are linked to each other. The former involves a genealogy of intellectual concepts that deal with a theory-oriented problematisation of power and knowledge in linguistic, cultural, social, or political orders; the latter represents the more practically 'grounded' approach to empirical discourses which aims at analysing linguistic material related to a social praxis (see Angermüller 2014: 21–28; Herschinger and Renner 2014: 11–12).

As far as its parallels to discourse analysis are concerned, this study shares the understanding that social reality is communicatively constructed. Thus, the production of meaning represents a socially framed and situational praxis that can be studied on the basis of text data, i.e. particularly "protocols of natural statements" (see Keller 2010: 259) in order to bring out empirically grounded hypotheses to answer the research questions raised. However, contrary to the basic (theoretical) impetus of discourse research, this study is not primarily interested in unveiling power relations or hegemonic structures in society as a whole. Here, the definition of discourse is rather pragmatic and thus bounded: it is understood as a specific empirical field of communication, e.g. as conflict-related communication or as conflict discourse; in this context, it is particularly seen as a space where processes of subject/identity formation are linguistically performed and have a structuring impact on conflict development (see Wrana et al. 2014: 7–8).

The idea behind the reconstructive work presented here is to enable readers to understand how modes of observation develop and interact in the process of a conflict system's discursive constitution over time. As the case study chapters below will show, the reconstruction of modes of observation represents a fine-grained work, which requires a close examination of communication. Even though this reconstructive approach aims at unfolding processes of collective attribution of meaning, is does not claim to provide an absolute procedure. Therefore, it does not suggest being able to decode intersubjectively shared meaning in communication (see Roos 2013: 12–13). Such an ambition would insinuate, at least partly, that there is a hidden and fixed meaning out there, in discourse, waiting to be discovered by smart researchers operating from a objectivated standpoint.

23 In an interdisciplinary dictionary of discourse research, discourse research is described as a theoretically *and* empirically consolidated broad field of research. Therein, the key concept of discourse can be broadly defined as "a linguistically or, more general, semiotically performed social practice in a context of knowledge and power" (Wrana et al. 2014: 7; own translation).

Rather, when analysing recorded discursive traces of the social, a reconstructive procedure is about systematically and transparently reading those traces to develop a distinct *analytical narrative*. An analytical narrative thus consists of a set of iteratively gained hypotheses that have been bound together in a consistent overall story. However, this story is told in the knowledge that it represents one possible reading among others. Against the background of the above-mentioned working principles and bounds, the next section backtraces important sources of this study's reconstructive method within empirical social research.

Reconstruction all the way down: Grounded Theory and Documentary Method

In empirical social science literature, there are various methodological approaches that combine an epistemological orientation with a clear-cut methodical procedure. Concerning the broad constructivist 'pool of methods', notably two approaches show parallels to the initial idea of reconstruction outlined above and its systems theoretical background as a whole: *Grounded Theory* (GT) and the *Documentary Method* (DM). In the following, this section briefly presents four spots where both strands converge – a circumstance that has been relevant for developing a proper empirical working procedure within the framework of this study.[24]

(1) To begin with, it can be stated that GT and DM are most notably inductive approaches, which means, broadly speaking, that they are both dedicated to work very closely along empirical data.[25] Based on that, in GT, reconstructive research is understood as a permanent process of exchange between data collection, analysis and making theoretical statements (see Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 194–195); in DM, it is further understood as a process of "opening up" the object of research in as many facets as possible, which means to force oneself to look very closely on the empirical material (see Vogd 2010: 122). Likewise, even though a systems theoretical worldview was taken as a basis[26], the present work pursues an inductive approach inasmuch as inferences about conflict escalation in Mali and Ukraine are strictly drawn on the basis of text data that has been produced in the discursive contexts of both conflict systems. In other words,

24 It would certainly go beyond the scope of this section to provide a complete introduction to history, evolution and recents developments of both GT and DM. For this reason, this section restricts itself to explain why certain parts of both approaches were incorporated into this study's own method of handling empirical data. In doing so, it essentially draws on a number of key reference works including Corbin and Strauss (2008), Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2008: 183–310), Roos (2010: 48–110), Franke and Roos (2013: 7–30), Thronberg and Charmaz (2013), Vogd (2005, 2007, 2011), and Bohnsack (2010, 2014).

25 This author is well aware of the fact that, particularly in GT, the reconstructive research process is understood as a triad of induction (simplified: inferences from cases to hypotheses), deduction (inferences from theory/hypotheses to cases) and abduction (review of existing/formulation of new hypotheses) (see e.g. Franke and Roos 2013: 13–15). However, when labelling the present approach as an *inductive* one, this author intends to emphasise that the examination of empirical data is in the very centre of attention.

26 As a proponent of DM, Vogd (2007: 298; own translation), states, "There is no cognition without theory." For GT, see also Roos (2010: 89; own translation): "Since it is impossible to fade out one's theoretical knowledge and beliefs, any research is always deductive."

although existing deductively oriented literature on both case studies was taken note of, the newly assembled text corpus (including texts that have been attributed to the conflict discourses) was the major guideline for formulating hypotheses.

> "All is data." (Glaser 2001: 145)

(2) According to this much-quoted Glaser dictum, there is manifold potential empirical material that represents the social world linguistically or, more general, symbolically. However, GT and DM have particularly developed as approaches dealing with documented traces of the social in the form of text analysis: By means of a highly structured text interpretation procedure, DM intends to reveal "collective structures of meaning" and "orientation frameworks" behind various social phenomena.[27] GT, too, aims at developing 'grounded' concepts, categories and hypotheses out of text data in order to be able to give abstract answers to research questions raised, especially concerning social change (see e.g. Roos 2010: 18–21). Picking up this empirical orientation towards text analysis, the present study sets out to give an answer to the question of how social reality in a conflict system is (re-) produced. At this point, DM and the systems theoretical understanding of conflict developed in this study show striking parallels: Both indeed intend to figure out the "modus operandi behind the unfolding of statements" (Vogd 2010: 124). Or, to refer to this study's systems theoretical framing, both try to identify patterns of observation that structure the discursive field of conflict (see chapter 3.1/4.1). Hence, the present reconstructive method foregrounds the "genesis of meaning" (Vogd 2010: 126) and thus operates on the level of second-order observations.

(3) Another overlap between GT and DM that underpins the reconstructive approach of this study refers to the aspect of change. Most often, social phenomena are not static but dynamic research topics. Evidently, conflict escalation, for example, requests being analysed as a process over time. Both GT and DM attach importance to the immanent changeability of social phenomena and, by proposing a sequential analysis, take it into methodical consideration. The interpretation of text material thus follows a chronological procedure that preserves time structures of data relations, e.g. release dates of statements referring to preceding statements in communication about conflict.

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27 Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) is considered to be one of the intellectual forefathers of DM (see e.g. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to The Sociology of Knowledge*, 1936). Mannheim proposed to think of the social as a duality of two layers of knowledge: "conjunctive" and "communicative" knowledge. The former describes implicit or tacit knowledge that is rooted in collective social experiences and serves as an intuitive practical orientation (e.g. personal experiences of conflict on a personal level or delivered collective memories of violent conflict in the past). The latter refers to generalised or standardised knowledge that finds its expression at different levels of theorising the social (e.g. about a conflict's composition, i.e. role models, legitimacy of violence etc.). Based on that, the interpretation of text data in DM knows two main steps of interpretation at different levels of meaning production. As outlined below in greater detail, "formulating interpretation" is about systematically analysing the topical structure and thus approaching the explicit/immanent meaning; "reflecting interpretation" implements the transition from asking what to asking how: it aims at identifying frameworks of orientation behind the topics dealt with (see Bohnsack 2014: 217–225; Vogd 2010: 126, 128–137).

> "The meaning of a single utterance is determined by its relation to the context of other utterances which sequentially take place. In the case of the interpretation of texts, the relation between utterances and on the one hand and their context on the other hand is a *sequential* relation, a relation between utterances and the succeeding ones." (Bohnsack 2014: 224)

Related to this, the comparative element plays a crucial role: Both in GT and DM, opening up (text) data happens against the background of permanent comparison of data (within its respective timeline). Accordingly, reconstruction means constantly contrasting data, revising inferences, hypotheses, categories, concepts etc. In GT, this process is implemented in coding procedures. According to Thornberg and Charmaz (2013: 156),

> "Coding is about naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each peace of data. […] By coding, researchers scrutinize and interact with the data as well as ask analytical questions of the data. They create their codes by defining what the data are about."

Similarly, while repeatedly "zooming through the material" (Vogd 2010: 130), asking questions and relating parts of data to one another, DM intends to structure the empirical field and thus to iteratively refine findings (i.e. hypotheses, typologies) on a rotating basis.[28] It can be stated that the reconstructive procedure within the framework of this study, too, proceeds by sequential analysis and systematic coding that seeks to substantiate hypotheses, e.g. on specific turning points during conflict escalation, based on the innermost tracks of empirical data.

> "Methods generate data from other data." (Vogd 2010: 123)

(4) Since GT and DM can be ascribed to the extensive reservoir of constructivist method(ologie)s, they both lay value on the reflexivity of the research process.[29] In this context, according to Roos (2010: 84–90), GT suggests that reconstruction is essentially about a researcher's ability "to let oneself be surprised by one's results". In other words, each inference (i.e. "data from other data": hypotheses, concepts, categories formulated during processes of analysis and interpretation) has to be considered as falsifiable, or, at least modifiable, while already analysed data as well as newly gathered

28 Generally, DM is presented as a method consisting of three to four successive and more or less separate steps (see e.g. Bohnsack 2014: 224–230). Besides formulating interpretation (step one; tag: topical structure) and reflecting interpretation (step two; tag: frameworks of orientation) briefly introduced earlier, DM includes a "comparative analysis" (step three) comprising the abstraction of identified orientation frameworks as compared to respective results beyond the actual case. Finally, after having collected/analysed further data and cases, various cross-case findings on the societal formation of orientation frameworks can be paraphrased in form of a "typology" (step four). However, in this study, the four steps are not seen as strictly separate, but rather as coinciding principles that help structing the analytical procedure within a single case study (see also Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 296–299).

29 On reflexivity and constructivist analysis see particularly Weller (2005c: 36–39).

data are subject to a process of continuous revision.[30] Similarly, DM proponents declare the need to systematically control and reflect on the contingencies of data interpretation in order not to read findings and knowledge into the empirical material that the researcher has already seen and known before (see Vogd 2007: 310). Following this, DM argues for reflecting on the 'situatedness' of knowledge and thinking, which not only relates to "common-sense constructions" represented in empirical material but also to "scientific knowledge" itself (see Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2008: 274–277). In this sense, the present reconstructive approach follows both GT and DM in their ambition to take researchers' (and each observer's) situatedness[31] into account: Systematically comparing and contrasting empirical material from different origins played a crucial role in the process of formulating hypotheses (and the analytical narrative as a whole). This leads over to the next section that gives an account of the sources of the empirical material analysed in both case studies and illustrates the discursive working levels that have been put in place as analytical auxiliary constructions.

Reconstructing the development of conflict systems: discursive working levels

Reconstructive conflict research, as presented here, draws on empirical material that mirrors the discursive construction of conflict over time. To this end, this approach documents and compares patterns of observation that are considered as constituting a conflict. Hence, it systematically deals with knowledge of different observers and their collective realities of conflict. But who or what is an observer, empirically? How does research get hold of them, on the level of concrete data collection?

As stated earlier, observers represent networks of observations; they do not need to be understood as human beings (see Preliminaries I; Fuchs 2010: 82).[32] Within the context of a conflict – and this is an elementary figure of thought in the present study – various networks of observations are concentred around a common reference frame understood as a conflict system. The knowledge of observers about the conflict or, in other words, the reservoirs of meaning embedded in observations can be found in the totality of communication within the discursive context of conflict. Here, the reconstruction of both conflict systems is based on analysing conflict communication that is transparently documented and accessible. In the beginning of this research project's empirical

30 In this context, as mentioned earlier, GT emphasises the role of *abductive* inference, i.e. "explain new and surprising empirical data through the elaboration, modification, or combination of pre-existing concepts." (Keller 1995: 34, as cited in Roos 2010: 86).

31 To recall a fundamental perspective on the situatedness of this author see again chapter 4.2; cycles of research, pragmatic factors and individual moments do indeed not only play an influential role in case selection but also during data collection and analysis.

32 It ought to be stated that a human being as such does not represent an analytically relevant entity within the framework of systems theoretical thinking. Indeed, human beings do exist. However, according to Luhmann, "A human being may appear to himself or to an observer as a unity, but he is not a system. And it is even less possible to form a system out of a collection of human beings." (Luhmann 1995: 40) The individual human being, following systems theory, represents a conglomerate of different systems: while the body represents a biological system, consciousness represents a psychological system or "a person", which, in turn, can be a part of different social systems.

part, text data collection started with single texts that were identified because of their explicit and nominal references to conflict. In other words, texts were selected according to signal words and catchphrases and thus taken as first-order observations containing relevant distinctions and indications about the respective perception of conflict.[33] During the course of this, the three dimensions of meaning (see 3D conflict model) as well as Messmer's stages of conflict functioned as a heuristic in order to recognise characteristics of communication in its factual, temporal or social dimension and thus to identify and assess further text sources. In this way, the initial run-through of texts reveals references to other text sources that are to be followed, and so forth. In this sense, since the conflict system with all its networks of observations is already in place, the text corpus gets extended by moving hand over hand from text to text (in a potentially endless field of relational references; see Nonhoff 2011), thus searching for texts as if using a kind of snowball system.[34] Exemplarily, this can be illustrated on the basis of the following 'chain of texts'. For the purpose of illustration, assuming that the compilation of the text corpus starts with the following texts (here excerpts; own translations from French original):

> "The capital of the new region of Ménaka was attacked by an armed group, Tuesday, at daybreak. […] The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) could be behind this attack, since this secessionist movement had been founded there, in November 2011." (GovMali 19.01.2012a)

Based on this segment published within the framework of regular government announcements (i.e. "Actualités"), the office of the president states that there is an obvious adversary (i.e. the MNLA) adopting violent means in order to implement clear plans (i.e. secession). In the phase of text data collection, the reference to MNLA's founding in November 2011 directly entailed searching for further first-hand documents from this period, which lead to the following text:

> "It has been decided to create a new political organisation called 'National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad' (MNLA) to take the place of the 'National Movement of Azawad' (MNA). This movement aims at leading the people of Azawad out of the illegal Malian occupation of Azawad's territory." (MNLA 16.10.2011)

In this statement, on the one hand, the MNLA confirms its role as adversary of the Malian government and clarifies its analysis of the political situation (i.e. the Malian occupation of Azawad). On the other hand, however, the MNLA's declaration arouses an interest to ask for the reasons to create a new organisation and thus to ask for the differences

33 Nota bene: This procedure includes that texts are entirely read in the first place (and not selected because of the headlines only), even if they are not selected ultimately. Hence, the interpretation of text data and thus the analytical work already begins at the stage of *prima vista*.

34 As the overview of the text corpus shows (see Appendix A.1/A.2), text data collection also took the origins and circumstances of the genesis of the texts into account. Evidently, when a preliminarily selected press release of the government was assessed as relevant, other preceding/succeeding press releases from the same source were also looked through.

between MNA and MNLA. For text data collection, this means to look for the founding statement of the MNA, which has been published a year before:

> "Today, we are declaring the birth of the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) which is a political organisation of Azawad that defends and approves a peaceful policy in order to achieve legitimate goals." (MNA 1.11.2010)

Evidently, there are differences in tone and content concerning the founding statement of the MNA (in November 2010) and the first declaration of the MNLA (in October 2011). As the founding statement and other statements in the same context suggest, at that time, there was no intention to necessarily question the Malian state as such. So, what did Malian authorities announce in reaction to the first founding statement, if there was a reaction at all? How did the government's statements on the situation in northern Mali and towards MNA/MNLA change over time? And how was the communicative 'ping-pong' between Malian authorities and MNA/MNLA picked up by the media and presented to a larger public (see an exemplary reaction to MNA's founding statement below)?

> "In plain terms, there is actually no point of view that can justify a new rebellion. The creation of a new movement is possibly nothing but blackmailing. In the future, the government has to be firm concerning all questions of security, rebellion and banditry." (Le Combat/Maliweb 4.11.2010a)

As these text examples show, this study's reconstructive procedure resembles a kind of exploration of the conflict discourse. By following hints and references in texts already read and thus literally going back and forth within the conflict discourse, the text corpus gets gradually thicker.[35]

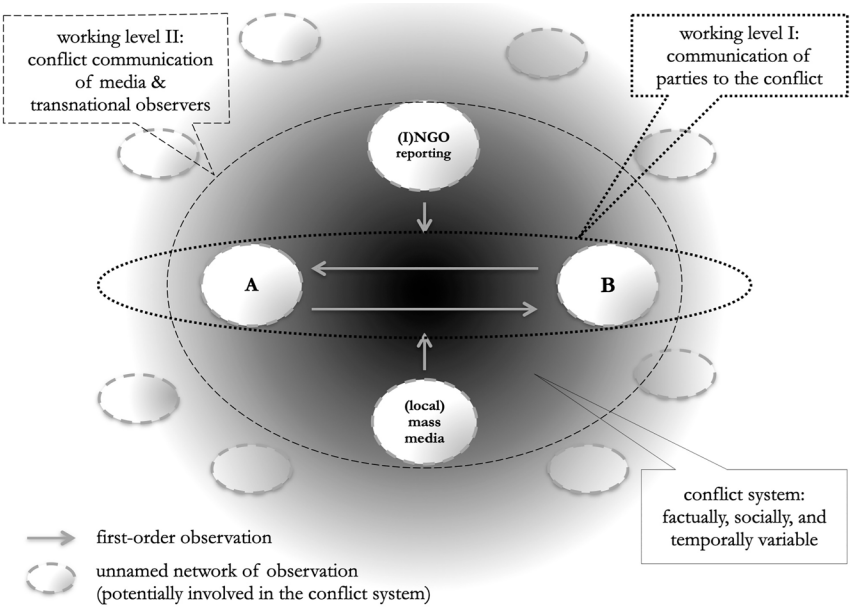
To recapitulate: In the beginning, this procedure started with text data that had been previously identified as communication of self-proclaimed parties to the conflict. In other words, at a high level of escalation, conflict parties could be recognised by means of their characteristic of power communication (see Messmer's heuristic above).[36] In subsequent steps, text data gathering consisted in exploring the conflict system by criss-cross searching for other observers or networks of observers articulating themselves with reference to conflict (i.e. its parties, issues or special events) and, therefore, being part of the same discursive field. In this context, media coverage and reporting of non-governmental organisations, be they international and/or domestic, became important foci of interest. The gradual emergence of this study's text data corpus and its sources

35 In retrospect, building up the text corpora in this way was one of the time-consuming parts of the research project. Seen from a more practical perspective, rather than getting the text corpus gradually thicker, this task is about reducing an endless field of potentially meaningful discursive representations to a manageable size.

36 This is not to say that conflict identities (i.e. conflict parties) represent absolute and immutable entities. Indeed, it is their changeability during the process of conflict escalation that is focused here. Referring to 'conflict parties' in the same way as it is usually done in conflict research is just a starting point of an analysis that aims, to a certain extent, at deconstructing and denaturalising the seemingly constant observation of a static conflict party.

can be visualised by means of a 'conflict observation map' that reflects two discursive working levels.

Figure 5: Conflict Observation Map with Discursive Working Levels



(Own graph)

As the figure is intended to show, the discursive (re-) production of a conflict system, which is factually, socially, and temporally variable, takes place at different levels.[37] Again drawing on the maelstrom metaphor, an escalating conflict system is characterised by the increasing incorporation of communication from its environment. While expectations of a repeated no begin to stabilise, certain communicative paths become a habit, and conflict identities emerge (see idealised parties A and B), other surrounding networks of observation (unnamed grey or half grey spheres) are sooner or later stimulated to react to the contradiction in question.[38] Some show up in particular, which means in evident and regular ways, such as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and locally based mass media. Based on the textual empirical material produced by the aforenamed networks of observation or, in other words, based on this kind of first-

37 The present visualisation picks up the '3D conflict model' presented earlier: the conflict system is thus represented by the weakening grey tones from the centre to the edge of the graph and thus corresponds to the spherical image in Chapter 3. Both figures emphasise that conflict escalation is understood as a permanent process of demarcation between the system (conflict communication) and its environment (any other communication).

38 Nota bene: In principle, networks of observation are not clearly definable (see dashed edges in figure above); their identity and thus actorness is permanently (re-) constituted within communication in terms of attributed persons, roles, programmes, and norms.

order observations, this study aims at identifying regularities behind perceptions, interpretations and descriptions expressed therein. It therefore provides a second-order observation of a conflict system.[39]

Hence, the map illustrated above embodies a systems theoretical model of conflict observation. Therefore, visualisations (spheres, colour gradients, arrows etc.) serve as practical work aids. In a practical research perspective, these work aids, particularly the distinction of two discursive working levels, can be understood as working hypotheses that came up during the first steps of the present study and consolidated later on: Working level I focuses on communication attributed to institutions, organisations, or groups that refer to themselves as conflict parties, express a contradiction, and thus take part in the collective discursive making-of of the conflict. In this context, press releases, speeches and other official statements represent relevant constituents of communication between the self and the other addressing the self with permanent contradiction and vice versa.

Nevertheless, during the process of conflict development, the relationship between contradicting parties does not remain an isolated communicative realm. Transnational observers, e.g. INGOs, and (local) mass media particularly observe this relationship and, at the same time, make the conflict accessible, 'connectable' and thus meaningful in a broader (world) societal context.[40] In both case studies, working level II is focused on local print media coverage and INGO reports, which produce, for their part, first-order observations of the relationship of parties to the conflict and thus become a part of the conflict system themselves. In anticipation of the cases studies (chapter 5/6), it can be stated here that each case study chapter, to concretise the discursive working levels, provides a detailed overview of data sources including their significance within the text corpus. This leads over to the work plan that instructed the case studies.

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39 Hence, readers of the present work (and of any other scientific work) face two options: On the one hand, this study in itself represents a second-order observation that can be adopted as such and productively 'applied' for own research purposes. On the other hand, readers can, for their part, undertake a second-order observation of this study with all its more or less implicit distinctions and indications (e.g. concerning research design, selection of sources and cases etc.).

40 In the present study, 'transnational observers' relate to networks of observation which are also referred to as "producers of knowledge about conflict" (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014: 545) or "rationalized others" (Nabo and Stetter 2012: 191). The International Crisis Group (ICG), for example, whose short reports are parts of the text corpora in both case studies, is commonly regarded as a non-governmental and cross-border expert group on conflict development worldwide. In communication about conflict in world society, or, as Bliesemann de Guevara (2014: 545) puts it, "in the conflict-related knowledge market", transnational observers (e.g. ICG, HRW, AI etc.), first of all, are ascribed a relevant actorhood; they represent "rationalised others" because they are attributed an objective intention "to search for the 'rational core' of conflict parties and follow an inclusive approach of taking the opinions of all conflict parties into consideration" (Nabo and Stetter 2012: 206). In this context, by shaping narratives about conflict settings, they function as special observers at the interface, or, in other words, as part of the structural coupling of political and mass media communication. As Beck and Werron (2013) demonstrated, the attentiveness of transnational observers is particularly affected by conflict parties using violent means.

4.4 Reconstructing Conflict Escalation: A Work Plan

Based on the methodological foundation of the concept of reconstruction and drawing on the conflict observation map with its discursive working levels outlined above, this section further explains the work plan at the bottom of the case studies.

As a preliminary point, it is stressed here that the case studies neither provide an extensive introduction to the Ukrainian and Malian history nor a systematic account of analytical literature. Accordingly, the case studies refrain from deducing explanations about conflict escalation from a detailed chronology of historical events, which are more or less loosely attributed to the more recent developments in question. So, for example, when the Orange Revolution in 2004 gets addressed in the case study chapter on Ukraine later on, it is not because this study necessarily or standardly considers any major event in recent Ukrainian history in order to understand the protests on Maidan by every trick in the (history) book.[41] Rather, as the systematic analysis of conflict communication has gradually brought to light, it shows up because it has been picked up as an important discursive reference during the respective period of investigation. In other words, this procedure is based on the assumption that all kind of meaningful information is supposed to forge ahead in manifold ways within the given discursive frame of conflict communication.

As developed in the preceding sections, within the scope of its case studies, this contribution reconstructs two sequences of conflict-related observations or, in other words, two discursive clusters that emerged around a common conflict reference. Following the remarks on case selection, in text data collection, too, there is an ineluctable moment of contingency since a potentially endless amount of text data gets reduced to a necessarily limited text corpus. In this context, however, even though the case studies' text corpora have been structured according to different discursive working levels, particular groups of data sources are not as such in the focus of attention. Rather than portraying the evolution of group-specific programmes and norms, the case studies are supposed to show the development of the conflict system as a whole, including its intensification, its processing of violence as a topic and its dynamic boundaries.

Following the points of intersection between GT and DM sorted out earlier (in section 4.3), hypotheses can only be formulated based on the text corpora. To figure out the modus operandi behind the unfolding of statements, the reconstructive approach presented here proceeds by sequentially analysing and systematically coding and contrasting text material in order to substantiate hypotheses (e.g. on turning points during conflict escalation). During the phase of data collection, as the text corpora had become increasingly larger, it was decided to continue the project with the help of computer-as-

41 In this context, even without explicitly mentioning Ukraine's history of revolutions, referring to "Maidan" or the "Maidan protests" (see particularly chapter 5.2) already represents a historical and thus political pointer or, in more analytical terms, an initial hypothesis among others that has been substantiated during the research process, namely the following: The protests cannot be seen as just any protest. They are to be mentioned in the same breath with past protests in Ukrainian history that had an enduring effect on the Ukraine's independence and future.

sisted qualitative data analysis. The next section briefly introduces this kind of research tool that plays a crucial role in handling empirical text data material.

Working with qualitative data analysis software: MAXQDA

According to Kuckartz (2010: 12–15), qualitative data analysis (QDA) software can support research processes in many regards (even beyond qualitative research designs), including the following functions and features[42]:

- a simultaneous management of a project's texts (quick access to each single text);
- organising texts in form of subgroups and user-defined criteria;
- defining categories/ a category system;
- attributing categories to selected text segments;
- compiling all coded text segments within a category;
- clustering/visually illustrating categories in networks and hierarchies;
- drafting/attaching memos to each text segment, code, or category;
- searching for words, word combinations/ expressions within text corpora;
- teamwork and consensual coding procedures.

Against the background of this heavy but non-exhaustive list, it should be emphasised that QDA software serves as a 'technical' support in research processes, especially concerning the organisation of empirical text data and its structured interpretation. As a matter of course, it cannot enable researchers (and has not been developed to do so) to conduct any kind of automated analysis or interpretation. Also, it does not limit researchers to a specific theoretical orientation. Whatever the methodological approach may be, at each point in time, text data treatment, i.e. interpreting, comparing, reflecting, is under the control of the researcher.[43] Therefore, QDA software simply offers a toolbox in order to implement a systematic and transparent analysis of (text) data.

Within the framework of this project's case studies, text data has been analysed with the help of MAXQDA.[44] Following its developers, MAXQDA, one of the pioneers in computer-assisted qualitative text analysis, enables importing, organising, analysing, visualising, and publishing of all forms of data that can be collected electronically (see MAXQDA 2012). Furthermore, it has a focus on mixed methods research, "not least to bridge the conventional qualitative versus quantitative divide." Turning to the present research project: Against the background of the large text corpora in both case studies,

42 The following list is based on Kuckartz's template (2010: 12–13; translation R.B.), although some points were condensed here. For a brief valuation of QDA software in qualitative research contexts see also Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2008: 190–191).

43 A common critique towards QDA software in interpretative research holds that there may be theoretical assumptions inscribed in software features and thus determining a certain style of analysis. In contrast, MAXQDA (see below), for example, shows that programmes indeed offer room to match them with (different) individual research interests.

44 Although an updated version 12 of MAXQDA was released in late 2015, MAXQDA's version 11 (first applied at the beginning of 2015) was used throughout the case studies' analytical procedure for pragmatic reasons.

MAXQDA proved to be a useful support to keep track of both text data and inferences (i.e. codings, memos, categories, hypotheses) from data. In particular, MAXQDA provides an open and clearly structured four-window user interface (see screenshot taken from the Ukrainian case study below) that literally enables researchers to keep tabs on key functions, such as archiving, exploration, coding, or categorisation.[45]

Figure 6: Screenshot/MAXQDA Four-Window User Interface

(Own screenshot/MAXQDA 11)

The prelude: organising the text corpora

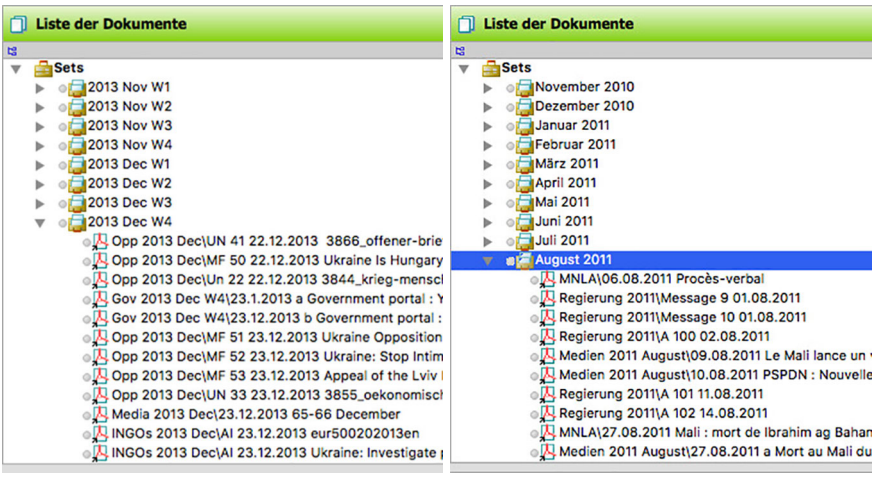
As mentioned earlier, the analysis of the text corpora proceeds in a *sequential order*, which means that texts were analysed according to their date of publication to reveal a chronologically founded development. In Appendix A.1.1 and A.1.2, the texts are organised like a usual bibliography, showing authorship and date of origin. Also, they are classified according to the discursive working levels and, therefore, to groups of sources. In MAXQDA, for the purpose of conducting a sequential analysis along respective analytical units, the lists of texts were reassembled in weekly sets (Ukraine) and monthly sets (Mali). In other words, to manage the large text corpora, the analysis was prepared on a week by week/month by month basis.[46] Technically, documents were pooled in

45 Since the following sections will draw upon it, here is a brief description of the interface: the window in the top left corner shows an overview of all analysed documents, which can be organised in folders and subfolders; the window in the top right corner contains a document browser, where the (initial) coding procedure essentially takes place; the window in the bottom left corner shows the code system that gradually grows and branches out in the course of the analysis; finally, the window in the bottom right corner can be used to display selected sets or (combinations of) codes in order to substantiate hypotheses that 'emerge' during the process of interpretation.

46 Nota bene: These temporal graduations have no analytical value as such. They can be understood as auxiliary constructions, which mirror considerations on the efficient use of resources regarding the quantity of text data and the respective period of investigation. Similar to a picture's resolution,

respective chronological subfolders (see examples from both case studies in figures below).

Figure 7: Screenshots/Lists of Documents and Sets Ukraine (left) and Mali (right)



(Own screenshot/MAXQDA 11)

Starting with initial coding

In a strict sense, approaching the text material begins with *open* or *initial coding* of the documents to create an overview in form of a schematical outline. Inspired by the concept of *formulating interpretation* (see DM above), the text material gets explored, i.e. accurately read, which aims at identifying and documenting the thematic content and its stratification in form of topics and subtopics. Here, a number of questions are asked vis-à-vis the empirical material (see main questions below):

- When does a topic appear?
- How does an issue evolve (and, possibly, supersede another issue)?
- Are there cycles of topics, i.e. 'booming'/disappearing topics?
- Is there a ramification of topics (e.g. into subtopics, side topics etc.)?
- Are there cross-references between issues?

Having these questions in mind, initial coding is technically implemented by assigning codes to text passages and recording these codes within a list of codes that, while increasingly growing, gets continuously restructured. In doing so, the codes, i.e. particular notions or paraphrases, are taken from the texts themselves ("in-vivo coding") since they were rated as representing a relevant topical content. As the example of the code 'terror'

one can imagine approaches that are more or less fine-grained, depending on the capacity and the fine-tuning of the photo camera.

shows (see sample text passages below), in-vivo coding has been implemented across the entire text corpus, thus including the different discursive working levels and groups of text data sources respectively:

> "Cynicism and amorality of the *terrorists* came to the point that they threw [sic] Molotov cocktail in people and young guys – our children too – light up with the fire! […] And tonight, *terrorists* from Maidan had broken into hotels, they captured dozens of citizens, whom they consider their opponents and brutally beat them." (GovUkr 22.01.2014a)

> "[The regime] has unashamedly seized power in the country and has blocked all ways of a constitutional and democratic solution of the social and political conflict. The regime behaves like a *terrorist* taking hostages and threating them by holding a knife to their throats." (UkrN 25.01.2014c)

> "But blackmail and threats are also some of the favorite tactics of Yanukovych. […] Under Yanucovych's watch, *terror* is common. In EuroMaidan, police [sic] have acted with hired thugs to clear protesters off the street and *terrorize* peaceful demonstrators." (KyivPost 31.01.2014)

To recapitulate: Since "terrorist(s)" and "terrorise" appeared in these text passages, all three were assigned with the code "terror".[47] In view of the questions listed above, the text passages illustrate the following: According to the analysed text corpus, in January 2014, references to "terror", i.e. attributions that qualify observed actions or actors as terrorists, appear for the first time and, from then on, increasingly supersede other terms, such as "political rival", "opponent" or "protestor". Furthermore, as it turned out during the analysis, "guerrilla tactics" or "guerrilla fighting" appeared as being used in a subsidiary relation to "terror" or, in other words, as its subtopic.

Following the way of working illustrated by the examples outlined above, initial coding leads to, in the literal sense of the word, a *topographic* map of the discourse's thematic content. Thus, oscillating between expansion and summing-up, an increasing number of codings get developed into a thematic catalogue. During this process, new umbrella terms or, in other words, conceptual codes set by the researcher find their way into the catalogue, as the example of "blaming" shows.

47 Nota bene: When there were relevant references, many text passages were multiply coded. Exemplarily, the three text passages were also assigned with the code "attributions of violence" under which all qualifications of actions as violence in discourse were recorded. In this sense, all text passages coded as "terrorism" are coded as "attributions of violence", too. But the other way round, not all passages coded as "attributions of violence" are coded as "terrorism".

Figure 8: Screenshot/Code System/Subcode 'Blaming'

(Own screenshot/MAXQDA 11)

As illustrated in the case of "terror", a broad range of codings ("devaluation of opponents", "losing control", "anti-European" etc., see figure above) are attributed to a discursive setting where the responsibility for a situation that is generally assessed as worsening gets assigned to the respective opponent ("blaming"). Now, by selecting sets that are chronologically assembled, it is possible to comprehend the sequence of the discourse's changing topographic map. This, in turn, is already part of the next analytical step (see following section), which, rather than being understood as separate, is implemented in parallel to previous steps.

A permanent task: asking questions, comparing, combining, and reflecting

While being engaged in a fine-grained analysis of the text corpora, the overall research question serves as a permanent orientation guide. *How do conflicts escalate?* Against the background of this fundamental question and the growing topographic map of the text corpus, the analytical procedure also includes paying attention to linkages and references between codings. Inspired by the concept of reflecting interpretation (see DM above), this analytical step intends to, bit by bit, get to the bottom of text production. The latter is understood as a manifestation of observations, whereby observers select what is worth being articulated from their perspective and, at the same time, make recourse to articulated observations already existing in the discourse. Thus, to identify generic patterns behind text data, a second set of questions is used, shifting from, broadly speaking, *asking what* to *asking how*:

- To what extent does the coded text passage include explicit/implicit differentiations and indications?
- How does the coded text passage actually or potentially connect/refer to other text passages and/or codes?
- How are features attributed to communicative addresses?
- How do persons, their societal roles, their programmes (i.e. interests, strategies) and norms (ideas, values, moral concepts) appear and change in communication?

- How is the present, i.e. the difference between before and after, ordered in/by communication? How is the present extended into the past and/or the future?
- To what extent does the analysed sequence refer to different aspects of conflict? What is presented as known, what is not?
- How does the coded text passage at hand can help answering the overall research question?

When directing these questions to empirical data, texts, as it was introduced in groundwork Chapter 3, can be thought of as solidified observations. In this sense, observations are not random; there are models of perception regulating what is being observed in the first place and then articulated. In this context, each text includes *explicit* (i.e. articulated/written/spoken) and *implicit* (i.e. a reservoir of alternative/unuttered) communication. In other words, each piece of the present text corpus or, in other words, each documented communication represents the result of an assessment that is embedded in a specific discursive setting, namely a conflict system. To understand how this process works, the present research project's work plan for the case studies makes use of the concept of second-order observations.

Communication, as it is analysed based on the text corpora at hand, takes place within frameworks of orientation or, to put in more systems theoretical terms, as a result of modes of observation. In this context, what is articulated oscillates between a positive horizon ('seeking for') and a negative anti-horizon ('turning away from'), which mark idealised side rails opening room for alternative options of communication (see Bohnsack 2014: 217–225; Vogd 2010: 126, 128–137). Collective frameworks of orientation point to roles, programmes, and norms within a discourse. Thus, the case studies' aim is to approach and to identify these structures behind the topics dealt with. In doing so, the second set of questions (introduced above) is intended to help explicating and interpreting the topographic map that resulted from previous analytical steps.[48] In reference to the following sample paragraph from the text corpus the direction of impact of these questions will be illustrated:

> "Representing the people of Azawad, the MNA appeals to the Malian people and to the authorities of the Republic of Mali to simply recognise its rights that have been ridiculed for 50 years. The people of Azawad is politically isolated, socially marginalised and economically paralysed. For five decades, its soul has been gradually dying. Now, the people of Azawad decide to wage a peaceful and merciless combat against the occupation." (MNA 15.07.2011; translation R.B.)

48 In parts, this method is inspired by an approach in text data analysis that focuses on differences (see Titscher and Mayer 1998). In this context, analysing explicit (i.e. outspoken) and implicit (i.e. within the framework of the discourse potential but not mentioned) differences leads to an assessment of negative and positive horizons within which social roles, norms and programmes develop. Practically, revealing those differences is implemented by addressing appropriate questions to the texts. For an example of working along a similar set of questions against the background of DM see Moser (2015: 163–184).

Proceeding from the text passage above[49], an exemplary sequence of reflecting interpretation and its preliminary results look like as follows (here in parts, taken from the case study/chapter 6):

Table 3: Exemplary sequence of reflecting interpretation

explicit form	**implicit difference**	
original citation	**articulated side (paraphrase)**	**unuttered (opposite) side**
"[…] the people of Azawad […] MNA appeals to the Malian people"	population of northern Mali (Azawad) and the Malian population as separate ethnic entities	the Malian population as a whole being at the basis of the Malian nation-state
"Representing the people of Azawad, the MNA […] to the authorities of the Republic of Mali […]"	MNA as legitimate representation of the population in northern Mali; Malian state as disputble authority concerning the northern part of the country	MNA as a player among others in Malian society, participating in the Malian political systems with justifiable interests
"[…] simply recognise its rights that have been ridiculed for 50 years."	population of northern Mali has naturally given rights, especially the right of a people to self-determination; deliberate violation of international law since independence of the Malian state (50 years ago)	history of rapprochement between (ethnic) groups in Mali since independence, both with setbacks and successes
"[…] the people of Azawad decide to wage a peaceful and merciless combat against the occupation."	(again) Azawad as a separate people; declaration to pursue agenda without violence but also without any restraint; depiction of the Malian state's power as unlawful "occupation"	option of carrying out the conflict with open violence/ declaring war; understanding the Malian state as souvereign and thus as guarantor of law and order and holder of the state monopoly on violence

(Own table)

Based on this sequence illustrating elements of reflecting interpretation and others from the Malian case study, analytical conclusions could be drawn and later on be con-

49 Nota bene: As it was explained in previous sections, the present work plan includes different steps of analysis and interpretation. Thereby, comparison plays a key role in spotting linkages in the text corpus, e.g. concerning intersections between codes and categories. In this way, hypotheses (or: answers to the overall research question) are generated, iteratively tested, and reshaped with respect to the sequential composition of the text corpus. Against this background, a single text passage cannot be viewed in isolation. Any analytical statement on a selected text passage stands in the context of other analytical statements made hitherto.

solidated: First, in MNA's perspective, the population of northern Mali and other parts of the population in Mali are considered to be separate entities.

Second, as this short piece of the text corpus shows, the MNA is presented as the only legitimate representation of the population in the north. Against the background of various ethnic groups living in the north, the statement does not only suggest that the MNA is able and willing to pick up interests and claims of all parts of the population in north but also that it could do so with the consent of the people.

Third, the struggle for independence of the Malian nation state in the 1960s is not seen as a success story for the population in northern Mali but as a historical fallacy. It is suggested that the history of the nothern population as a whole up to the current situation is one of discrimination and marginalisation in each societal realm. The narrative is presented as a history of suffering and conveys the idea of an injured and unfulfilled identity. What is not represented in the narrative ("blind spot"), on the other hand, are episodes of successful and consensual development and cooperation between different ethnic groups and the Malian state.

Finally (but without claiming to be exhaustive; see chapter 6), the efforts to overcome the given situation are perceived as a "combat", thus at least rhetorically exceeding the field of non-violent political contest. At the same time, it is declared that this combat is conducted "peacefully", which is a reference to an existing norm of non-violent resistance behind. As it becomes clear later, the declared commitment to non-violent political action can be seen as a pointed reference to the violent history of Tuareg rebellions and bloody crackdowns. In this sense, despite this history of suffering and in contrast to earlier endeavours, the MNA choses the way of non-violent resistance to pursue its goals. However, the political combat is supposed to be fought "without mercy" which opens the rhetorical way towards softening the non-violence norm.

Based on suchlike cumulative reflecting interpretation of the text corpora, the results of the case studies (chapters 5/6) are presented in form of analytical narratives. An analytical narrative can be understood as a 'conflict story' that links up grounded hypotheses on the knock-on effect of certain observations in escalating conflict systems. An analytical narrative thus integrates formulating and reflecting interpretation into a case-based description of a discursive process. Within the framework of the present research project, the analytical narratives offered here rest on a mosaic of codes gained during the first steps of research and structured according to three basic dimensions of meaning presented earlier (see 3D conflict model in chapter 3.1). Therefore, an analytical narrative consists of three paths of reading the conflict with different but overlapping foci (see chapters 5.2/5.3/5.4 and 6.2/6.3/6.4) that are finally brought together in a synopsis (see chapters 5.5 and 6.5). The synopsis offers a discursive reconstruction of an escalating conflict system along a multitude of hypotheses of varying ranges. In doing so, turning points of conflict development that have been identified during the analysis are highlighted. These turning points stand in line with a number of 'escalating moves' of the discourse that could be identified.

Special observation spots: escalating moves, structural couplings, and normative shifts

The concept of an *escalating move* developed based on case study research here refers to, at least to some extent, the concept of "securitizing move", which has been developed in Copenhagen School's securitisation theory (see Buzan et al. 1998). At its core, securitisation theory intends "to explain how an issue evolves (or is made to be) a security issue and how conflicts emerge and escalate due to securitization processes" (Bernshausen and Bonacker 2011: 26). According to Buzan et al. (1998: 25), securitisation can further on be understood as "the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects." Based on that, a securitising move consists of a discursive practice, or more precisely, a set of speech acts asserting an existential threat against the self and, as a consequence thereof, claiming whatever means to encounter that threat (see Bonacker 2007: 16–19).[50]

Similar to the definition of securitising move above, an escalating move refers to a discursive practice, too. However, observing a cluster of speech acts as an escalating move is part of an analysis that aims at understanding how, in communication, an issue or an identity evolves into (or is made to be) a *conflict* issue or identity.[51] Broadly speaking, an escalating move describes a discursive cluster of events whereby parts of communication that were not observed as such before become then observed as meaningful and relevant within a conflict lens. This leads to a discursive expansion of the conflict.[52] Based on the case studies, it can be stated that escalating moves are linked to two discursive momenta, here conceptualised as (1) "normative shifts" and (2) "structural couplings".

(1) As it has been addressed earlier in the context of Luhmann's identity layers (see chapter 4.1), norms can be regarded as quite robust manifestations of reciprocal expectations in social relationships. In a systems theoretical understanding, norms, e.g. intersubjectively shared ideas, values and moral concepts, develop within communication and, at the same time, regulate future communication. Albeit understood as stable structures of expectation, norms can and do change. As the case studies elucidated, escalating moves, on the one hand, are characterised by *normative shifts*. A normative shift represents an analytical figure of observation developed in the context of the present study;

50 It would certainly exceed the framework of this subchapter to give a full account of securitisation theory (for a key reference see Buzan et al. 1998). Having said that, it can at least be stated that securitisation theory and the present study's mode of systems theoretical conflict research share the same roots inasmuch as both rely on the fundamental idea that 'security' and 'conflict' are phenomena fabricated within the social and thus need to be understood as communicatively constructed.

51 Nota bene: Compared to the concept of securitising move, the concept of escalating move does not exclusively refer to the discursive construction of *security* and its consequences concerning conflict development. Also, the observation of escalating moves is not limited to rather late conflict phases that are characterised by the perception of an existential threat against self and other (see Messmer's phase of "power conflicts"). Rather, within the framework of this study, escalating moves can be identified at different points of conflict development, even in its early phases.

52 Even though escalating *move* raises connotations referring to actions (e.g. of indivuals), "move" in this concept rather describes a certain dynamic of the whole discourse or, in other words, of the social systems towards an intensifiying and thus escalating conflict system.

it refers to dynamics entailing new or changed ideas and values that become discursive references and thus deeply shape structures of expectation.

Exemplarily, in the case study on Maidan protests in Ukraine, when more and more actions and groups were declared "terrorist" and the category became commonly accepted, this can indeed be understood as a normative shift since it not only included a fundamental change of opinions and moral judgements between alter and ego; it also discursively triggered off a certain set of measures to be adopted.[53] Likewise, in the Malian case study, evidence suggests that, up to a particular time, there was a clear commitment to non-violent political action. However, towards the end of 2011, this norm was taken over from the idea that political objectives can also be legitimately advanced by means of organised collective violence (see exemplary statements documenting the shift of the discourse below).

Table 4: Exemplary statements/shifting discourse

"Since more than 50 years, the people of Azawad is committed to a *peaceful political struggle* against the occupation to which it is exposed." (MNLA 3.11.2011d; italics added)	"We, the nomadic people of the North, are all united by the certitude that *only the threat of force and violence can bring us what we long for.*" (MNLA 6.11.2011; italics added)

(Own table)

(2) A second momentum characterising an escalating move can be seen in the idea of *structural coupling*. Originally, the terminus comes from Luhmannian systems theory; it refers to a standard kind of relationship between different social systems. Based on to the concept of autopoiesis (see chapter 3.1), social systems feature the ability to reproduce their own constitutive elements and thereby to demarcate themselves from their environment. In the political system, for example, the world is observed in the light of having power or not. Therefore, communication in the political system continuously processes the allocation of power to persons or specific roles, e.g. as to opposition and government. Although, from the perspective of a single social system, other social systems are part of the environment, any social system implements certain adaptations to its given environment since it is permanently exposed to irritations from the outside. Irritations induce a resonance in the inside and, after being 'translated' into the respective system's language, turn into processible information. In so doing, a structural coupling between social systems can develop (see Luhmann 1997: 92–119; Simsa 2002: 149–154).

To make recourse to a classical empirical example: In various ways, the economic and the political system are structurally coupled since communication from both systems

53 See exemplary text passages above (in subsection "Starting with initial coding"; GovUkr 22.01.2014a; UkrN 25.01.2014c; KyivPost 31.01.2014). On norms in general, it can be stated that they represent intersubjectively shared expectations of behaviour. In specifiable social settings or situations, they do distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behaviour and are shared by a critical number of actors in a respective social realm (see e.g. Weller and Bösch 2015: 5).

can be mutually interpreted within the framework of both system's respective currencies: money and power. For instance, the economic system is able to process the political system's communication, which aims at implementing decision-making power in form of taxes or other binding financial institutions. On the other hand, the political system is able to respond to the economic system's communication in the context of a money-based market meant for organising supply and demand (see Miebach 2010: 275–279).[54] Other examples would be the structural coupling between mass media, public opinion and politics outlined earlier in chapter 4.2 (see Luhmann 1996; Weller 2002, 2004) or between the systems of science and politics (see Luhmann 1990; Martinsen 2006).

Within the framework of this study's approach, the present work plan calls attention on the formation of structural couplings as crucial elements of conflict development. As mentioned earlier, metaphorically, conflict systems correspond to communicative maelstroms that urge their environment to take a stance. In this sense, the essence of a conflict system lies in its ability to successfully irritate and bind its environment, i.e. other social systems. Since conflict systems are "parasitical social systems" (Luhmann 1995: 390), they grow by incorporating host systems so that, henceforth, new communication gets connected in a conflict lens. In other words, based on their inner dynamic, conflict systems are 'extroverted' social systems: they permanently irritate their environment which represents a strong incentive concerning the formation of structural couplings. With that said, the present study pursues a rather pragmatic and adapted empirical approach to conflict systems that identifies structural couplings to be active when communication (from a specific social subsystem) gets articulated, observed and reacted to (by another social subsystem), and, in the course of this, becomes mutually processable, understandable, connectable and contradicted on a regular basis.[55] Two examples from the case study on the Maidan protests in Ukraine can illustrate this (see table 5).

54 Beyond this rather holistic perspective on structurally coupled systems in these general terms, it can be stated here that these systems consist of myriads of 'micro' communications effectuating structural coupling in interactions, organisations, and functional systems as a whole. Against this background, business deals of certain politicians during the Corona pandemic that have been referred to as "mask deals" in the media and, furthermore, political debates referring to a lobby register with the German parliament do indeed represent a facet of structural coupling between political and economic communication (and the media).

55 According to John et al. (2010: 324) "systems theoretical empirical research does not implicate to take Luhmann's entire theory and possible advancements as a basis". Rather, 'using' particular concepts from system theory should be guided by an empirical problem. In this sense, the interpretation of the concept of structural coupling introduced above saves to integrate all aspects from Luhmannian systems theory.

Table 5: Exemplary passages from the text corpus

"Euromaidan – Citizens of Ukraine stand up and try to make their voice heard in Europe which does not end at the eastern border of the EU. They fight for their European future in a united Europe. […] Today, more than ever, Ukrainians need Europe's attention. They need attention and support of the European citizens who already enjoy those European values." (UkrN 24.11.2013)	"Ukraine can never make a sacrifice of economic sovereignty, so the recent Governmental decision of Nov 21 concerning signing the Association Agreement with the EU was adopted in order not to afford social and economic fiasco and achieve more favourable conditions for Ukraine." (GovUkr 27.11.2013e)

(Own table)

Right from the beginning of the Maidan protests in late November 2013, contradictions concerning Ukraine's future model of politics and society and its either western or eastern orientation were not the only topics (see passage above on the left). Apart from political communication about, for example, the organisation of responsibilities and power in Ukraine's transitional society, economic considerations played a central role right from the start. More precisely, in the first phase of conflict development, the conflict system's communication not only turned on a political contradiction about a single foreign policy decision and possible consequences for the perceived (international and domestic) balance of power; it also included reflections on economic rationality (see passage above on the right). In doing so, the decision on the EU Association Agreement was assessed against the background of the logic of the market concerning e.g. the competitiveness of Ukrainian companies or the ups and downs of certain scarce resources and goods. In sum, as the analysis of communication in the first period of investigation (Nov 21–30, phase I; see chapter 5) reveals, the discourse mirrors a structural coupling of political power claims and economic profit and loss accounts with regard to the alternatives raised.

The second example of a structural coupling deals with the first turning point of conflict escalation that has been identified in the case study on the Maidan protests. As mentioned above, phase I, in a nutshell, is characterised by a dispute over Ukraine's 'right way' in domestic and international politics and, in doing so, by a dominance of politico-economic arguments. After the turning point (i.e. the first attempt to 'clean' Maidan square by force), which marks the passage to phase II (Nov 30 – Dec 17; see chapter 5), communication increasingly circles around the question of law and lawfulness of government action.

As the text passages exemplarily show (see table 6), communication in the context of law (e.g. references to "citizen's rights of peaceful assembly and speech" or to "law enforcement"), which has not been referred to before, gets straightforwardly processed and incorporated within the conflict system. In this way, it captures a further reservoir of meaning so that the conflict system's communication gets even more connectable or, in other words, irritating for the system's environment.

Table 6: Communication/context of law

"Unlawful use of force to subdue the EuroMaidan demonstration: President Yanuvovych's brutal and unsparing use of force to quash Ukrainian citizens' rights of peaceful assembly and speech." (MMIC 2.12.2013a)	"On behalf of the government, I'd like to apologize for the actions of our law enforcement agencies on Maidan. Both the president and the Government deeply regret what happened." (Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, speech in Parliament; GovUkr 3.12.2013d)

(Own table)

In summary, it can be said that a conflict system's escalating moves, on closer empirical inspection, are composed of normative shifts and structural couplings realised through and documented in communication. In this context, as introduced in chapter 3.2, conflict systems are understood as arenas of world societal communication. While developing and thus bringing about escalating moves, conflict systems necessarily draw on different communicative reservoirs including existing and just contrary modes of differentiation in world society, e.g. concerning political communication that mainly circles around a still dominant but at least questioned idea of organising power around the nation state; at the same time, there is economic communication suggesting to observe the world as a globalised market (see examples from the case study on the Maidan protests in table 7).

Table 7: Maidan protests/political and economic communication

original text passage	**selected code memos**
"The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine has adopted the resolution on conclusion of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union in accordance with which for the benefit of Ukraine's national security the process of preparing for signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and EU is suspended." (GovUkr 21.11.2013a)	national security as key factor of political assessment rapprochement to EU as a quasi loss of sovereignty
"The young people protesting in the square rejected the game of political tit-for-tat. For them, the EU represents modernity, transparency in political life […]. Young Ukrainians see themselves as part of the global community of youth." (The Ukrainian Week 23.12.2013: 19)	EU as a desirable model rejection of authoritarian exercise of political power
"We must [sic] to take vigorous measures to improve the performance of industrial production. First of all, it depends on the markets and the prices of manufactured goods produced in Ukraine. Unfortunately, we have a long-term decline in demand for our products on world markets." (GovUkr 21.11.2013f)	world market as main benchmark for economic activities

(Own table)

Theoretically, based on the fault lines hypothesis (see Albert 2010: 57), it is postulated that (violent) conflict is a key element of the social within world society. Empirically, as the present case studies are intended to illustrate, the world societal footprint of conflict escalation can be unveiled since the analysis pays particular attention to the world societal horizon in communication (see selected text passages above). In other words, both analytical narratives presented in the case study parts of this contribution also address the aspiration to scan the text corpora for evidence indicating the discursive performance within the broader framework of world society.

4.5 A Method(olog)ical Motto: Taking Communication Seriously!

> "The thesis of operative constructivism does not lead to a 'weltverlust'; it does not deny that there is a reality. However, it does not presume the world as an object but as a horizon, hence, as being beyond reach. Thus, there is no other option but constructing reality and, possibly, observing observers how they construct reality." (Luhmann 1996: 18–19)

In the following paragraphs, the above presented work plan that served as a guideline for the case study research, is summarised by recalling the key tags. At this, the motto "Taking Communication Seriously"[56] can be understood as the golden thread of the work plan. In a nutshell, chapter 4 begins by outlining the epistemological basics of constructivist empirical research, particularly by recapitulating the essence of interpretative and reflexive approaches to conflicts: the discursive construction of conflict collectively happens within communication and, even more far-reaching, the social world as a whole emerges from communication. And sciences/scientists are part of it, not bystanders (chapter 4.1).

Following this focus on communication, the concept of case studies as plausibility probes is unfolded. In terms of case selection, Messmer's conflict model is thereby introduced as a helpful heuristic tool of exploration to get a structuring overview on communication about potential cases in research, media, and politics. However, despite all efforts to keep case selection transparent and systematic, it is worth to bring the principle of contingency in mind: there are path dependencies of case selection, here explained as cycles of research, pragmatic factors and individual moments that shaped the personal and scientific interest in both selected cases (chapter 4.2).

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56 This motto refers to an often-cited article from Andrew Moravcsik (1997) titled "Taking Preferences Seriously". Therein, Moravcsik introduces a 'liberal theory of international politics', which, at its core, claims that state preferences in foreign policy are linked to the assertiveness of domestic actors. In a sense, Moravcsik thus advocates for making IR more oriented towards society (which is not evaluated equally important in other prominent IR theories, e.g. in neorealism). Even though the liberal or realist idea of state behaviour in IR can be seen as superseded in the light of the present systems theoretical approach, it is stated here that Moravcsik's point of taking societal forces more into account is highly significant. In a way, Moravcsiks's considerations find a distant sequel in this study's focus on communication and discourse as sources of the social (albeit from a different meta-theoretical perspective).

In this contribution, the motto of taking communication seriously is furthermore implemented by the concept and method of reconstruction. The working principle behind analysing the recorded traces of the social construction of conflict is the idea of second-order observation, or, as Luhmann puts it in the introductory quote to this subsection, the idea of "observing observers how they construct reality." Practically, as outlined above, this claim is realised by combining elements of *Grounded Theory* and the *Documentary Method* (including systematic coding, comparison, and contrasting of text data and hypotheses; sequential analysis; focus on collective structures of meaning). In this context, text data selection was carried out with the help of a conflict observation map that shows discursive working levels, which represented an orientation for the growing text corpora. Broadly speaking, reconstruction, based on an inductive discovery through text data, is aimed at iteratively gaining hypotheses and, hence, developing an analytical narrative (chapter 4.3).

As the work plan behind the case studies outlined above shows, in order to technically support the methodological proceeding of this project, qualitative data analysis software is used as a tool to organise the text corpora, particularly to prepare text data for a sequential analysis; also, QDA software offers important features to realise a comprehensive coding procedure that not only enables to sketch a 'topographic map' of the discourse's thematic content but also to manage the permanent tasks of asking questions, comparing, combining and reflecting. In doing so, the whole process aims at identifying and understanding the turning points of conflict escalation, which go hand in hand with escalating moves of the conflict discourse (chapter 4.4).

In conclusion, referring to the introductory quote of chapter 4.1 – "We must be careful not to confound map with territory" (Luhmann 2013[1997]: 178) – it is once again emphasised that the analytical narratives offered here, in the form of case study results, do certainly not claim to be the "territory" in Luhmann's quotation. Since observation, in principle, implies an infinite regress, the "last observer" cannot be identified (Luhmann 1996: 210; see chapter 3.1) and, therefore, the "territory" as such can never be looked at. Rather, to use the same metaphor, a case study represents an analytical 'map' that comes into being by a systematic synopsis of other maps.[57] Against this background, the 'story' of conflict escalation that is told in the case studies represents a possible reading among others. Hence, the approach developed in this contribution is not intended to postulate 'what actually happened' in a conflict setting. Being highly sceptical against this kind of essentialist claims, this approach is not about covering a maximum possible number of events or about representativity. Rather, it develops a "reading of readings" (Nonhoff 2011: 101) and offers "analyses of production processes of constructions" (Weller 2005b: 318). Now, by investigating discursive representations with the help of an open methodological proceeding, Part II puts the present approach into practice.

57 This comparison may remind some readers of *Geographic Information Systems* (GIS; see e.g. National Geographic 2017 at https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/geographic-information-system-gis). Indeed, GIS applications do literally work with a myriad of maps, each of them illustrating different main topics. In map overlay processes, i.e. digitally combining selected maps with one another, geographers draw conclusions on relationships, patterns and trends concerning spatial development against the background of respective research questions.