

The Beginning of the Occupation

The City of Mariupol in Media Reports (Spring 2022)

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The city of Mariupol has been occupied by Russian troops since 20 May 2022 and remains the largest occupied city of the Russo–Ukrainian War. Yet, when this territory of Ukraine will be liberated and de-occupied, how will Ukrainian society greet the citizens of Mariupol, who are currently under occupation? And how do these occupied people appear to those outside of the city during the war? The media holds the decisive role in predefining the answers to these questions. The military conditions and their consequences in Mariupol limit information access for those both in and outside of the city and result in a lack of communication, information isolation, propaganda distortions, and information restrictions by the military state. Thereby, an understanding of the events in Mariupol and their participants can mainly form based on media reports. Accordingly, the messages of these reports will be the basis for the postwar reintegration of Ukrainian society.

So as not to get lost in the many information narratives currently present, I isolated specific periods when the attention paid to the occupation of Mariupol was at its highest. I made this selection using the Google Trends web application, which shows the frequency of a particular search term compared to other search queries. Periods when the level of this indicator reached its maximum value are significant. This suggests that an audience's attention was highest at this time, and the presented media interpretations of events were the most widespread. Additionally, the events mentioned at these points were the most important, and their participants received the most attention.

A search of data over several years (starting in 2004) suggests that the leading indicators connected to Mariupol were in March 2022. I carried out this investigation in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Although the dynamics of the popularity of search terms in the different languages vary, in March and April 2022, all three languages reached their highest level. Searching over the last 12 months gave me a more detailed and differentiated picture. The maximum index of the Ukrainian-language search appeared in the week of 13–20 March, the Russian-language search a week earlier, on 6–13 March, and the English-language search on 10–17 April. I carried out this data fixation through Google Trends on 3 November 2022, using the

following Google Trends search options: all over the world, in the last 12 months, all categories, and internet search.

The following paper is an overview of media reports in Ukrainian, Russian, and English published during the above-mentioned periods and still available online through Google search. The reviewed reports give three perspectives of the events: two from countries that are direct participants in the war and one from 'external' observers. To focus on these perspectives, I excluded from this analysis translations of reports from, for example, Ukrainian mass media into English, Russian into English, Ukrainian into Russian, or English into Ukrainian or Russian. In the text, I name the three perspectives as Ukrainian-speaking, Russian-speaking, and English-speaking, corresponding to the data that I analysed. Each language is separated into its own section of the text. Stylistically, these sections function as collages made from the main news stories. I have provided quotes or information from the news sources in the text, while writing the details of the sources in the footnotes.

I associate the Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking perspectives with public discourses on the war in the respective countries, although the definitive argumentation of such a connection requires further research. Linking English-language messages to specific official or ideological discourses also requires more research. This study of the three language-based perspectives is relevant when considering the average media consumer. Lacking the capacity for multilingual communication and access to independent analyses of information, many consumers of internet news, and those using Google in particular, fall into the space of a certain language, where the 'political', the 'ideological', and the 'sociocultural' exist as part of an indistinguishable naturalised whole.¹ The English-language perspective, for instance, has changed during the war. Or, more specifically, the official positions of European countries have shifted. It is, however, essential to record what these positions were initially. That is, which events news stories paid attention to and which actors they highlighted in the said stories.

The focus of such stories in my research is Mariupol. Located on the northern coast of the Sea of Azov, before the war it was the tenth most populous city in Ukraine (with about 440,000 inhabitants). It is known primarily for its metallurgical and machine-building industries (e.g., the Ilyich, Azovstal, and Azovmash plants) and the seaport, which played a significant role in Ukrainian exports of industrial and agricultural products. In the 16th century, Zaporizhian Cossacks founded a settlement at the mouth of the Kalmius River on the territory of present-day Mariupol (starting with the Domakha Fortress) as a stopping point on their trading route running

1 For more on the concept of naturalisation as a cultural mechanism of power, see: Yuliia Soroka, "Denaturalisation of Collective Identities within pro-Euromaidan Discourse (on field of Facebook Representation)", *Władza Sądzenia (Judicial Power)* 8, 2016, 42–54.

from the Dnipro River to the Black Sea. The settlements around the fortress focused on agriculture, crafts, and trade. Through these industries and the Russian imperial policy of settling the northern Azov region (in particular, the resettlement of Orthodox Greeks from Crimea) at the end of the 18th century, the county town of Mariupol appeared, officially founded in 1778.² In the contemporary inhabitants' imagination, the commercial and industrial achievements of the city (e.g., the Azovstal Metallurgical Plant, a flagship of Soviet industrialisation) often overshadow Mariupol's cultural distinctiveness and ethnic diversity. The city has also always been in the shadow of Donetsk, the oblast's centre, while simultaneously having a competitive advantage over it – namely, a seacoast with beaches within the city's limits and connected to nearby villages. In 1948, the city was renamed Zhdanov, in honour of Joseph Stalin's associate, Andriy Zhdanov, who was born there. In 1989, a civil movement pushed for the return of the city's historical name.³ This movement can be seen as a part of the larger sociopolitical tectonic shifts that preceded the declaration of independent Ukraine.

Siege, Shelling and Bombing, and Humanitarian Hell: Ukrainian-Language Sources

On 13–20 March 2022, Mariupol was already under siege by the Russian Army and the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). This section details the situation in Mariupol based on the Ukrainian-language sources I consulted for this period. On 13 March 2022, *Word and Deed (Slovo i dilo)* and *The Voice of Ukraine (Holos Ukrainy)* wrote, respectively:

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- 2 D. Ya. Telegin, M. Lillie, I. D. Potekhina, and M. M. Kovaliukh, "Settlement and economy in Neolithic Ukraine: a new chronology", *Antiquity* 77/297, 2003, 456–470, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00092528>; V. O. Pirko, *Zaseleattia i hospodarske osvvoennia Stepovoi Ukrainy v XVI-XVIII st. (Settlement and Economic Development of the Ukrainian Steppe in the 16th–18th Centuries)*, Donetsk: Skhidnyi Publishing House, 2004; A. Z. Didova (ed.), *Nashchadky kozakiv u Donbasi: kozatskomu rodu nema perevodu (Descendants of the Cossacks in the Donbas: There is No Substitute for the Cossack Family)*, Donetsk: Donbass, 2005; and Roman Adrian Cybriwsky, "Mariupol: Seaside City", in: *The Ukrainian Panorama: Dispatches from the Road about People, Places, Progress, and Problems*, Kyiv: Dnipro-Podil Books, 2019, 311–318.
 - 3 Yuliia Soroka, "Vid Zhdanova do Mariupolia: pytannia pereimenuvannia mista u publikatsiiakh mistsevoi presy" ("From Zhdanov to Mariupol: The Issue of Renaming the City in the Local Press"), in: O. K. Mikheevoi (ed.), 2010, *Sotsiologia mista (Sociology of the City)*, Donetsk: Knowledge Publishing House, 329–353.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, about 100 aerial bombs have been dropped on Mariupol, and 2,187 civilians have already died. This was reported by the press service of the Mariupol City Council on Sunday, 13 March.⁴

Russian troops took this fortress of the Ukrainian south by storm. They artificially created a humanitarian disaster there: they blocked the “green corridors” to the city, prevented the evacuation of the population, prevented the passage of humanitarian goods, and robbed them. Every day, the blocked city is “ironed” from the air by Russian “liberators”.⁵

In an address on 13 March 2022, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, referred to 100 tonnes of humanitarian cargo accompanied by Orthodox priests, which the Russian occupiers did not allow to enter.⁶ Meanwhile, there was no information about diplomatic actions taken to organise humanitarian corridors.

The Telegram channel of the Mariupol City Council became a vital information source for the media. Quoting it, as done below, the media reported on airstrikes and casualties:

The occupiers cynically and purposefully hit residential buildings and crowds of people, destroyed children's hospitals, and destroyed the city's infrastructure. Each bombardment brings terrible destruction and claims the most important thing – the lives of peaceful Mariupol residents.⁷

At the same time, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine emphasised that the city was heroically defending itself and that the Russian occupiers violated international humanitarian laws.⁸

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- 4 *Slovo i dilo (Word and Deed)*, “Zelenskyy rozrakhovue na dostavku humdopomohy do Mariupolia” (“Zelenskyy Expects Humanitarian Aid to Be Delivered to Mariupol”), 13 March 2022, <https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2022/03/13/novyna/polityka/zelenskyj-rozrakhovue-dostavku-humdopomohy-mariupolya> [accessed: 23.07.2023] [author's trans.].
 - 5 Olha Baulina, “Mariupol stav mistom-muchenykom liutoi viyny, iaka spustoshue Ukrainu” (“Mariupol Has Become a Martyr-City of the Fierce War That Is Devastating Ukraine”), *Holos Ukrainy (The Voice of Ukraine)*, 13 March 2022, <http://www.golos.com.ua/article/357153> [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].
 - 6 *Slovo i dilo*, “Zelenskyy rozrakhovue na”.
 - 7 Novynarnia (Newsroom), “Trahediiia Mariupolia: rosiiany vbyly vzhe maizhe 2200 tsyvilnykh” (“The Tragedy of Mariupol: Russians Have Already Killed Almost 2200 Civilians”), 13 March 2022, <https://novynarnia.com/2022/03/13/tragediya-mariupolya-rosiyany-vbyly-v-zhe-majzhe-2200-cyvilnyh/> [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].
 - 8 Violetta Orlova, “Sproby okupantiv zakhopyty Mariupol zalyshaiutsia bezuspishnymy – Henshtab ZSU” (“The Attempts of the Occupants to Capture Mariupol Remain Unsuccessful – The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine”), *UNIAN*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.unian.ua/war/viyna-z-rosiyeyu-sprobi-okupantiv-zahopiti-mari>

In the city, 80 percent of the housing stock was destroyed. Following damage to civilian infrastructure, there was no access to electricity, drinking water, and gas, and people hid from airstrikes wherever they could.⁹ From 50 to 100 aerial bombs were dropped on the city per day. The mayor of Mariupol reported that the registered number of civilian casualties, whose bodies were found in the streets and buried, was 2,358.¹⁰ Doctors and patients of the regional intensive care hospital, who were hiding in its undamaged basement, were held by the occupiers and could not leave.¹¹

The media reported three more events on 16 March 2022. An airstrike destroyed the Neptune Pool, which served as a shelter for residents around the Ilyich Steel and Iron Works. Pregnant women, women in labour, and children from a nearby maternity hospital were killed in the pool building.¹² In the centre of the city, an aerial bomb was dropped on a theatre. People from the surrounding areas and those who remained in the city centre after the evacuation attempts on 5 March 2022 were hiding in its basement and on its other floors.¹³ “Around 3:30 p.m., the Russian occupiers fired at a convoy of civilians evacuating from Mariupol to Zaporizhzhia with a BM-21 Grad MLRS”.¹⁴

According to various sources (the Mariupol City Council, the Azov Regiment, and the former head of the Donetsk Oblast State Administration, Serhiy Taruta), there

upol-zalishayutsya-bezuspishnimi-novini-vtorgnennyya-rosiji-v-ukrajinu-11742391.html [accessed: 31.07.2024].

- 9 Radio Svoboda (Radio Freedom), “Radnyk mera Mariupolia: killkist zahyblykh u misti mozhe nablyzhatysia do 20 tysiach” (“The Advisor to the Mariupol Mayor: The Death Toll in the City Could Be Approaching 20 Thousand”), 15 March 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-mariupol-zahybly/31752967.html> [accessed: 31.07.2024].
- 10 Kateryna Shapoval, “Liudei khovaiut v bratskykh mohylakh, deiakykh – u svoikh dvo-rakh: Interviu zastupnyka mera Mariupolia pro katastrofu v misti” (“People Are Buried in Mass Graves, Some in Their Own Yards’: Interview with the Deputy Mayor of Mariupol About the Disaster in the City”), Forbes, 16 March 2022, <https://forbes.ua/inside/intervyu-mariupol-16032022-4685> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 11 Tetiana Kotenko, “Rashysty u Mariupoli vziali u zaruchnyky likariv ta patsientiv” (“Ruscists in Mariupol Take Doctors and Patients Hostage”), Hlavkom, 15 March 2022, <https://glavcom.ua/country/criminal/rashisti-u-mariupoli-vzjali-u-zaruchnyky-likariv-ta-pacijentiv-830022.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 12 Suspilne (Society), “Rosiiiki viiskovi z ‘Hradiv’ obstrilialy kolonu avtivok, iaki ikhaly z Mariupolia – shtab ZSU” (“Russian Servicemen Fired at a Convoy of Vehicles Travelling from Mariupol with Grad Multiple Rocket Launchers – Ukrainian Armed Forces HQ”), 16 March 2022, <https://suspilne.media/218279-rosijki-vijskovi-z-gradiv-obstriliali-kolonu-aktivok-aki-ihali-z-mariupola-stab-zsu/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 13 Roman Petrenko, “Rosiianyi skynuly nadpotuzhnu bombu na dramteatr Mariupolia, de khovaiutsia sotni liudei” (“Russians Drop a High-Powered Bomb on Mariupol Drama Theatre Where Hundreds of People Are Hiding”), Pravda (Truth) 16 March 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/03/16/7331956/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 14 Suspilne, “Rosiiiki viiskovi z ‘Hradiv’” [author’s trans.].

were between 600 and 1,200 people in the drama theatre before the explosion; after the explosion, about 130 people survived. About 100 people – that is, everyone in the field kitchen outside the theatre during the shelling – died. Later, a bomb was dropped on an art school in the Left Bank District of the city.¹⁵ A day earlier, representatives of the Red Cross left the city. On the way out, locals also trying to leave saw their cars.¹⁶

We also learn about events in the city from the eyewitness testimonies of Mariupol residents. Occasionally, people got internet access and sent a message or made a phone call. These stories then made their way to journalists from people's friends or relatives. Reporters also managed to talk to people who were able to leave the city and save themselves. On 14 March 2022, an agreement was reached to create a corridor for citizens to leave Mariupol, although, "they [the Russians] did not allow humanitarian aid [to enter]".¹⁷ Further witness testimonies are below.

After the city had been blockaded for one week, Anna, a resident of Mariupol, was miraculously able to make a call, and an audio recording was shared with a newsroom. She said:

Everything is terrible and hard for us today. [...] We're trembling. The floors are all shaking from the [explosive] wave. [...] They're just shooting wherever they can. It flies into the yard. [...] There will be a natural disaster. Everything is on fire. The corpses lie [around]. They bury them in the park. Just bury them. There is no glass [in the windows]. [...] There is no water. [...] 3,000 people are sitting in basements. I don't know what will happen next. But it can't get any worse. [...] There is nothing to hit here anymore. There are just residential buildings. The military isn't particularly visible here. I don't know why they're shooting!¹⁸

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- 15 Khmarochos (Skyscraper), "Mariupol: bomby na shkolu mystetstv, nasylnе vyvezennia do RF, holodomor u susidnikh selakh" ("Mariupol: Bombs Hit an Art School, Forced Deportation to Russia, Famine in Neighbouring Villages"), 20 March 2022, <https://hmarochos.kiev.ua/2022/03/20/mariupol-bomby-na-shkolu-mystecztv-nasylnе-vyvezennya-do-rf-golodomor-u-susidnih-selakh/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 16 0629.com, "Chervoniy Khrest zalyshyv Mariupol. A yak zhe poraneni?" ("The Red Cross Has Left Mariupol. What About the Wounded?"), 16 March 2022, <https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3351323/cervonij-hrest-zalisiv-mariupol-a-ak-ze-poraneni> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 17 Iurii Bratiuk, "Arestovych poiasnyv, chomu zaraz ne mozna vriatuvaty Mariupol viiskovym shliakhom" ("Arestovych Explains Why Mariupol Cannot Be Saved by Military Means Now"), *zaxid.net*, 18 March 2022, https://zaxid.net/arestovich_poyasniv_chomu_zaraz_ne_mozhna_vryatuvaty_mariupol_viyskovim_shlyahom_n1538838 [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author's trans.].
- 18 Anastasiia Fedchenko, "Trupy lezhat na vulytsiakh. Ikh zakopuiut tam zhe na shtyklopatu. Monoloh zhytelky Mariupolia" ("Corpses Are Lying in the Streets. They Are Buried There with Bayonets and Shovels": A Monologue by a Resident of Mariupol), *Novynarnia*

Anna Murlykina, a journalist from Mariupol, also wrote about her acquaintances:

The family has very little gas left. They keep it as the most valuable treasure. Because these 20 litres of fuel are their last hope for survival. The last hope to make it to the humanitarian corridor, get into an old car, and escape from this hell that Russia has created.¹⁹

Oksana, a 46-year-old local woman who managed to leave on 4 March 2022, told a journalist that there was “an air raid every twenty minutes. Bombs destroy everything indiscriminately. Residential high-rise buildings. Schools. Hospitals. Administrative buildings”.²⁰ She does not provide her last name out of fear for her husband and parents, who stayed behind in a basement without water or food. The same article has a statement from 28-year-old Diana Palkina from Kyiv, who has close relatives in Mariupol: “It’s simply a genocide. They are being starved to death, freezing to death. Plus, the airstrikes that kill hundreds of innocent people. No words can describe what is happening – it is beyond human morality”.²¹

A resident of Kyiv shared messages from her brother in Mariupol with journalists. His SMS messages, starting at the beginning of the invasion and lasting until 14 March 2022, became a diary of the siege:

Houses are burning, many people with children are in basements, we have about 30 people [here]. There are dead people, they’re being gathered in a nearby store. [...] There is no government, people are abandoned. There are no police, firefighters, or others. Deaths from hypothermia, malnutrition, disease, and the inability to move will soon begin.²²

(Newsroom), 11 March 2022, <https://novynarnia.com/2022/03/11/trupy-lezhat-na-vulyczya-h-mariupol/> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

19 Anna Murlykina, “‘Donechko, shcho vidbuvaetsia?’ Yak vyzhyvaiu mariupoltsi v pekli shchodennoho znyshchennia” (“My Daughter, What’s Going On? How Mariupol Residents Survive in the Hell of Daily Destruction”), *Texty (Texts)*, 13 March 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/105960/donechka-sho-vidbuvayetsya-yak-vyzhyvayut-mariupolci-v-pekli-shodennoho-znyshchennia/> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

20 Maksim Butchenko, “Misto u vohni. Tila na vulytsiakh, vidsutnist vody ta izhi ta postitnyi vohon po zhytlovykh masyvakh – rozpovidi mariupoltsiv” (“The City Is on Fire. Bodies on the Streets, a Lack of Water and Food, and the Constant Shelling of Residential Areas – Stories from Mariupol Residents”), *New Voice*, 14 March 2022, <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/mariupol-zhive-pid-postiynimi-obstrilami-bez-vodi-ta-jizhi-50224909.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

21 Ibid.

22 Viktoriia Prysedska, “Zahybylykh skladaiut u susidnomu mahazyni. Shchodennyk z blokadnoho Mariupolia” (“The Dead Are Being Buried in a Nearby Shop: A Diary from Blockaded Mariupol”), *BBC*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-60750253> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

In an interview, a woman explained how she decided to leave, choosing between the mortal danger of staying and the mortal danger of going: “I understood that we might not make it, that we might be shot, hit a mine, or come under shelling, but I also understood that we would die in Mariupol. And we had to take the risk”.²³ In another interview, Yulia, a 30-year-old woman, talked about the lack of contact with those who remained: “On the one hand, you are happy that you were able to leave, and on the other hand, you want to cry because there are loved ones who are still in danger, you don’t know what happened to them, where they are”.²⁴ A local journalist reported that there was

[c]onstant shelling, rockets, bombs. Piles that no one can sort out. Fires that no one can put out. Human bodies that no one hides. Not a single hospital, not a single safe house remains. People are surviving in basements, collecting water from puddles, starving and praying to be saved.²⁵

In these messages, people who were left alone under tragic circumstances with numerous threats to their lives retell their experiences. Some of them managed to escape with relatives, acquaintances, colleagues, or the help of volunteers, who were from the territories controlled by Ukraine. Some were saved thanks to their own desperate efforts. Dmytro from Mariupol, for example, swam in the Sea of Azov for three hours until he was able to get to the shore of a seaside village, from which he reached

23 Televiziinoi sluzhby novyn (TSN) (Television news service), “U Mariupoli my zahynemo, treba ryzykuvaty: istoriia zhinky, iaka zmohla vyrvatysia z otochenoho okupantamy mista” (“We Will Die in Mariupol, We Have to Take a Risk: The Story of a Woman Who Managed to Escape from the City Surrounded by the Occupiers”), 15 March 2022, <https://tsn.ua/ato/u-mariupoli-mi-zaginemo-treba-rizykuvati-i-storiya-zhynki-yaka-zmogla-virvatisya-z-otochenogo-okupantami-mista-2009971.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

24 Ksiusha Savoskina, “Shchodnia my liahaly spaty i ne znaly, chy prokynemos’. Istoriia zhytelky Mariupolia, iakii vdalosia vybratysia z mista” (“Every Day We Went to Bed and Did Not Know Whether We Would Wake Up: The Story of a Mariupol Resident Who Managed to Get Out of the City”), *hromadske* (mass), 16 March 2022, <https://hromadske.ua/posts/shodnya-mi-lyagali-spaty-i-ne-znali-chi-prokynemos-isto-riya-zhitelki-mariupolya-yakij-vdalosya-vibratysya-z-mista> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

25 Kateryna Rodak, “U susidnomu budynku zhinku rozirvalo, ii khovaly na podviri’: Ruskii mir v Mariupoli” (“In the Neighbouring House, a Woman Was Torn to Pieces, and She Was Buried in the Yard: The Russian World in Mariupol”), *zahid.net*, 18 March 2022, https://zahid.net/v_susidnomu_budynku_zhinku_rozirvalo_yiyi_hovaly_na_podviriyi_n1538736 [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

Zaporizhzhia.²⁶ Some people remained, and it is unclear whether they survived. And some were taken to the territory of the Russian Federation.²⁷

During the considered period, Ukrainian media also reprinted material that featured Mariupol in a broader cultural and historical context:

The Greeks of Nadazov remember each of their homelands: from the valleys of the Peloponnese and Anatolia to the slopes of the Crimean Mountains. This memory allows them to reproduce an almost erased image of themselves every time. Despite past hardships, deportations, and executions. Despite the current division by Russian aggression (first published in 2020).²⁸

Such stories also mentioned the Cossack outpost of Domakha, which was the centre of the Kalmius palanquin of the Zaporizhian Cossacks, a place of the development of industries and trade, and a border fortress. This historical reference concluded by saying that, “in the middle of the 17th century, the expansion from the east stopped in Mariupol” (first published in 2014 in the newspaper *United Ukraine, Ukraina yedyna*).²⁹

Alongside the history, the memory of the 2014 events in Mariupol was also updated:

[Mariupol, a]n outpost of Ukrainian independence. Here, they've known well since 2014 what the “Russian world” is. [...] At that time, the people of Mariupol were under the control of the militants of the self-proclaimed DNR for a month and even survived a pseudo-referendum. Despite the ambiguous situation, they still managed to expel the separatists and Russian occupiers from the city and the government. [...] Even before the beginning of the invasion, the people of Mariupol publicly declared that they were ready to go to demonstrations every day, proving that Mariupol is Ukraine and Russia is the aggressor country. And Mariupol has no flowers for them.³⁰

26 Nastoiashchee Vremia. Ciuzhety (The Present Tense: Stories), “Pobeh yz Maryupolia vplav” (“Escaped Mariupol by Swimming”), YouTube video, 15 April 2022, 3:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg_Olq6li-Q [accessed: 23.07.2024].

27 Khmarochos, “Mariupol”.

28 Mykhailo Drapak, “Mariupol ta hreky: zberehty svii dim” (“Mariupol and the Greeks: Saving Your Home”), *Lokalna Istoraiia (Local History)*, 17 March 2022, <https://localhistory.org.ua/texts/reportazhi/mariupol-tse-ukrayina/> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author's trans.].

29 Maksim Maiorov, “Mariupol zupynyv navalu zi skhodu” (“Mariupol Stops an Invasion from the East”), *istorychna pravda (historical truth)*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/columns/2022/03/18/161082/> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author's trans.].

30 Instytut Prosvity (Institute of Enlightenment), “Mariupol: zhyva rana Ukrainy ta druhyi Niurnberh dlia tsyvilizovanoho suspilstva” (“Mariupol: Ukraine's Open Wound and a Second Nuremberg for Civilised Society”), 18 March 2022, <https://iprosvita.com/ma>

By 19 March 2022, the defenders of Mariupol – the Azov Regiment, the soldiers of the marines, and the National Guard – were surrounded, yet “continue[d] to defend the city and wait for help”.³¹ The same article states that,

[f]or the defence of Mariupol, the defenders of the city – the commander of the Azov Regiment, Denis Prokopenko “Redis”, and the commander of the 36th Marine Brigade, Volodymyr Baraniuk – received the title of Hero of Ukraine.³²

The Liberation of the Territory of the DNR by the National Militia under the Cover of Russian Troops: Russian-Language Sources

In Russian-language media from 6–13 March 2022, Mariupol appears as “the hottest spot after Volnovakha was liberated”.³³ These stories represent a different perspective from those given above. Here, the Russian Federation calls itself a liberator. Despite my impulse to deny and refute the invader’s claims, I give these Russian-language narratives to show how they present the events and residents of Mariupol.

In the Russian-language publication *regnum*, these texts were published as part of the recurring thematic broadcast on the ‘special military operation’ (*spetsialnaia voiennaia operatsiia*). The theme was titled “The History of this Issue” and started with Vladimir Putin’s speech from 24 February 2022. In the speech, Putin explains that the operation was to be a “protection against the actions of the nationalist junta” in Kyiv, which the West supports, and the “demilitarisation and denazification” of the territories of Ukraine. Another text that was part of this broadcast mentioned that “earlier, the heads of the DNR and LNR [the Luhansk People’s Republic] asked Vladimir Putin to help repel the aggression of the Kyiv regime to avoid casualties among the peaceful population and a humanitarian disaster in the Donbas”.³⁴

In Russian-language reports, the leading actors in events connected to Mariupol were the ‘military units of the Donbas republics’ and the ‘People’s Militia of the DNR’, which, “with the support of the Russian Armed Forces, are liberating their territory

riupol-zhyva-rana-ukrainy-ta-druhyj-niurnberh-dlia-tsyvilizovanoho-suspilstva/ [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

31 Viktor Kruk, “Ukrainski ‘300 spartantsiv’: zakhysnyky Mariupolia vidtiahnuly na sebe 10% armii okupantiv” (“The Ukrainian ‘300 Spartans’: The Defenders of Mariupol Repelled 10% of the Occupiers’ Army”), *Telehraf* (Telegraph), 19 March 2022, <https://www.telegraf.in.ua/kremenchug/10104272-ukrajinski-300-spartanciv-zahisniki-mariupolja-vidtjagnula-na-sebe-10-armiji-okupantiv.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

32 Ibid.

33 *regnum*, “Pushilin: Mariupol – samaya goryachaya tochka posle Volnovakhi” (“Pushilin: Mariupol is the Hottest Point after Volnovakha”), 12 March 2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/3531173> [accessed: 27.01.2024] [author’s trans.].

34 Ibid.

from Ukrainian occupation”.³⁵ The same article reported that these military units approached the Azovstal plant.³⁶

The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported that “armed forces strike only at military infrastructure and Ukrainian troops”.³⁷ These sources also blamed the Ukrainian authorities and the military for the difficult humanitarian situation “in this city [Mariupol], like in many others”.³⁸ Lastly, according to such sources, Ukrainians “reject the majority of Russian initiatives to evacuate civilians from combat areas [and] prohibit civilians from leaving the city on their own”.³⁹ These Russian-language articles described military actions with emotionally neutral military expressions (e.g., “tighten the ring”,⁴⁰ “squeeze the enemy”,⁴¹ “strike”,⁴² “ensure a safe exit”,⁴³ etc.).

Other sources reported on the consequences of the actions of the Russian troops, and that the Russian Ministry of Defence denied them. For instance, following the airstrike on the maternity hospital on 9 March 2022, Russian representatives accused Ukraine of “staged provocation”.⁴⁴ Among other things, statements from a local resident named Ihor, who was evacuated to the village of Bezymenne, served as

35 EurAsia Daily, “V Mariupole voiska DNR vyshli k zavodu ‘Azovstal’ – Minoborony” (“In Mariupol, DNR Troops Reached the Azovstal Plant – Defence Ministry”), 10 March 2022, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/03/10/v-mariupole-voyska-dnr-vyshli-k-zavodu-azovstal-minoborony> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

36 Ibid.

37 Krasnaia Vesna (Red Spring), “Zhiteli Mariupolya vyrazili zhelanie, chtoby natsionalisty ubralis iz goroda” (“Mariupol Residents Expressed Their Desire for Nationalists to Get Out of the City”), 08 March 2022, <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/bb28287a> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

38 Roman Kretsul and Bogdan Stepovoi, “V gorodskoi cherte: podrazdeleniia Donbassa prodolzhat osvobodhat Mariupol” (“Within the City Limits: Donbas Units Continue to Liberate Mariupol”), *Izvestia* (News), 11 March 2022, <https://iz.ru/1303439/roman-kretcul-bogdan-stepovoi/v-gorodskoi-cherte-podrazdeleniia-donbassa-prodolzhat-osvobodhat-mariupol> [accessed: 23.07.2023] [author’s trans.].

39 Ibid.

40 Krasnaia Vesna, “Zhiteli Mariupolya”.

41 Kretsul and Stepovoi, “V gorodskoi cherte”.

42 Krasnaia Vesna, “Zhiteli Mariupolya”.

43 Violetta Khaneneva, “V DNR soobshchili o rasstrele natsionalistami mirnykh grazhdan, pokidavshikh Mariupol” (“The DNR Reported that Nationalists Shot Civilians Fleeing Mariupol”), *gazeta.ru* (newspaper.ru), 06 March 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/03/06/17389471.shtml?updated> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.]; and Moskva24, “Mariupol zablokirovan, vse mosty i podstupy k gorodu razrusheny – Minoborony RF” (“Mariupol Blocked, All Bridges and Entrances to the City Destroyed – the Russian Defence Ministry”), 11 March 2022, <https://www.m24.ru/news/politika/11032022/439609> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

44 RIA Novosti (RIA News), “V Minoborony nazvali ‘aviaudar’ po Mariupolyu srezhissirovanoy provokatsiei” (“The Defence Ministry Called the ‘Airstrike’ on Mariupol an Orches-

the basis for this explanation. Ihor, whose mother was an employee of the maternity hospital, said that “the [Ukrainian] military broke all the locks, dispersed the staff of the maternity hospital, and set up firing points in the building”.⁴⁵

Russian news called Ukrainian participants in the events in Mariupol nationalists. Articles claimed that these Ukrainians shot at a humanitarian convoy and mined the city’s main roads.⁴⁶ When articles mentioned the Azov Regiment, instead of calling them by just a generalisation (e.g., ‘nationalists’), they always indicated that this is an “extremist organisation prohibited in the Russian Federation”.⁴⁷

According to these sources, residents evacuated from Mariupol “express their desire for the nationalists to leave the city”,⁴⁸ gratefully accept Russian humanitarian and medical aid, and agree to the conditions of their stays in the temporary accommodation points.⁴⁹ At the same time, representatives of the DNR police were suspicious of residents of the ‘liberated’ village of Talakovka: “It is important to understand that the locals are favourable to us at first glance. They smile at you, wave, but could just as well stick a knife in your back”.⁵⁰

Mariupol is a Strategic Goal of the Russian Federation and Revenge for Their Defeat Near Kyiv: English-Language Sources

In English-language reports from 10–17 April 2022, Mariupol is completely surrounded and the site of the “fiercest urban warfare” since the beginning of the invasion.⁵¹ Such articles called Mariupol a southern port of Ukraine, whose population before the war was about 400,000 inhabitants. Six weeks of fighting, shelling, and bombing destroyed a large part of the city, as confirmed by satellite

trated Provocation”), 10 March 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220310/provokatsiya-1777547947.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

45 Dmitrii Plotnikov, “Bolshe nedeli im ne proderzhatsya: Zhiteli Mariupolya – o gumanitarnoi katastrofe, kotoraya razvorachivaetsya u nikh na glazakh” (“They Won’t Last More Than a Week: Mariupol Residents on the Humanitarian Catastrophe Unfolding Before Their Eyes”), *lenta.ru*, 08 March 2022, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2022/03/08/mariupol/> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

46 Khaneneva, “V DNR soobshchili”; and Moskva24, “Mariupol zablokirovan”.

47 Kretsul and Stepovoi, “V gorodskoi cherte”.

48 Krasnaya Vesna, “Zhiteli Mariupolya”.

49 Plotnikov, “Bolshe nedeli im ne proderzhatsya”.

50 Dmitrii Grigoriev, “Kak bliz Mariupolya nachalas denatsifikatsiya Ukrainy” (“How the Denazification of Ukraine Began near Mariupol”), *URA.RU*, 11 March 2022, <https://ura.news/articles/1036284140> [accessed: 23.07.2024] [author’s trans.].

51 Emma Brown and Taylor Umlauf, “After More Than a Month of Fighting, Much of Mariupol Lies in Ruins”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mariupol-in-ruins-11650132943> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

image analysis. The number of deaths among the population was not known. Residents remained without electricity, water, and communication, and many could not evacuate. The media referenced President Zelenskyy, who reported that tens of thousands of Mariupol residents were killed,⁵² and quoted Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who apocalyptically stated that “[t]he city doesn’t exist anymore”.⁵³

English-language media consistently pointed to the uncertainty of reporting war events, particularly when referring to the claims of the Russian Federation. One article, for example, stated that “Russia said on Wednesday [that] more than 1,000 Ukrainian marines, among the last defenders holed up in the Azovstal industrial district, had surrendered, though Ukraine did not confirm that”.⁵⁴ These sources referenced both the Russian claims that they were gaining control over the city and the Ukrainian claims that the fighting was continuing: “Ukraine Says Mariupol Has Not Fallen” (headline).⁵⁵ Ukraine’s statements about the use of chemical weapons on the city’s territory remained unconfirmed: “Ukrainian authorities are investigating a report by troops in the port city of Mariupol that they came under a Russian chemical-weapons attack on Monday”.⁵⁶ Ukraine also claimed that tens of thousands were killed in Mariupol and accused Russian troops of torture and executions; Reuters, for instance, “confirmed widespread destruction in Mariupol but could not verify the alleged crimes”.⁵⁷

These media sources marked the dramatic culmination of the military confrontation by announcing the deadline for surrender that the Russian command set for the Ukrainian military in Mariupol. Media reports on this topic gestured to their

52 BBC, “Mariupol: Battle for key port city continues, Ukraine says”, 11 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61068650> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

53 CBS News, “Transcript: Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on ‘Face the Nation’”, 17 April 2022 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dmytro-kuleba-transcript-face-the-nation-04-17-2022> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

54 Pavel Polityuk and Natalia Zinets, “Explainer: Mariupol: ruins of port could become Russia’s first big prize in Ukraine”, Reuters, 13 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/mariupol-strategic-prize-russia-symbol-resistance-ukraine-2022-03-30/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

55 VOA News, “Ukraine Says Mariupol Has Not Fallen”, 17 April 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-says-mariupol-has-not-fallen-/6533156.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

56 The Wall Street Journal, “What Is Happening in the Besieged Port City of Mariupol”, 12 April 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-04-12/card/what-is-happening-in-the-besieged-port-city-of-mariupol-vE3kFf16BocQpGKChkN> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

57 Pavel Polityuk, “Ukraine says tens of thousands killed in Mariupol, accuses Russia of abuses”, Reuters, 12 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-says-tens-thousands-killed-mariupol-accuses-russia-slowing-evacuations-2022-04-11/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

sympathies for one of the parties, quoting either Russian or Ukrainian officials, and emphasising the motives of humanity or dignity:

Russia's defence ministry has told the Ukrainian forces still fighting in the besieged southern port of Mariupol to lay down their arms starting at 6 a.m. Moscow time (03:00 GMT) on Sunday (17 April) to save their lives.⁵⁸

Ukrainian forces besieged in Mariupol have rejected Russia's demands to surrender and are still resisting an unrelenting assault on the southeastern port city, top Ukrainian officials said on Sunday.⁵⁹

"Mariupol in final siege; Ukrainian forces 'will fight till the end'" (headline).⁶⁰

English-language media emphasised the strategic position of Mariupol. This position, according to them, explained the current situation of the war, the reasons for the extreme intensity of military operations, the force and means used, the number of victims, the level of destruction, and the ravaging of the city:

Mariupol is a strategic objective for Moscow. Taking the city would create an overland corridor from Russia across the northern lip of the Azov Sea to the Russia-annexed Crimean Peninsula.⁶¹

Russia attempts to solidify its grip on an area that provides strategically important access points to the Black Sea and beyond.⁶²

[A s]trategic city, which lies between Russian-annexed Crimea and eastern areas of Ukraine held by Russian-backed separatists.⁶³

58 Euractiv.com with Reuters, "Russia sets deadline for Ukraine troops in Mariupol to surrender", Euractiv.com, 17 April 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-sets-deadline-for-ukraine-troops-in-mariupol-to-surrender/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

59 Jessie Yeung et al., "Ukraine rejects deadline to surrender in Mariupol as Russia threatens to eliminate resistance", CNN, 17 April 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/17/europe/ukraine-mariupol-russia-assault-intl-hnk/index.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

60 Fenit Nirappil et al., "Mariupol in final siege; Ukrainian forces 'will fight till the end'", The Washington Post, 17 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/17/ukraine-russia-mariupol/> [accessed: 23.07.2024].

61 Brown and Umlauf, "After More Than a Month".

62 Nirappil et al., "Mariupol in final siege".

63 Polityuk, "Ukraine says tens of thousands".

The city is in a strategic location just south of the Donbas area of Ukraine and has an excellent port on the Sea of Azov – an arm of the Black Sea. Mariupol would provide the Russians “unfettered and unhindered land access between the Donbas and Crimea”.⁶⁴

English-language media also often explained the attacks on Mariupol through the broader context of the Russo–Ukrainian War. Judging by the labelling and tagging that such media used, they mainly perceived these events in this context. This explanation linked the situation in Mariupol with Kyiv: “The Kremlin hopes an attack in the east could reverse the battlefield fortunes for Russia after a humiliating failure to quickly storm the capital, Kyiv”.⁶⁵ In this way, the destruction and killing in Mariupol were revenge for the Russian defeat around Kyiv: Mariupol “could become the first big city captured by Russia since its invasion”.⁶⁶ Noting the frank emotion of this interpretation, many other media sources reprinted or referred to a Reuters quote,⁶⁷ which read, “ruins of port could become Russia’s first big prize in Ukraine”.⁶⁸

Lastly, English-language reports allowed for a heroic interpretation of the losses in Mariupol. In these interpretations, the city was a symbol of Ukrainian resistance: “Mariupol holds out against Russia’s siege, a symbol of Ukrainian resistance”⁶⁹ and the city shows a “resistance that has thwarted the Kremlin’s invasion plans”.⁷⁰

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- 64 Jim Garamone, “Russian Forces, Ukrainians Vie for Mariupol”, U.S. Department of Defense, 12 April 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2997624> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 65 Yuras Karmanau, “Ukraine’s port of Mariupol holding out against all odds”, AP, 15 April 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-europe-moscow-f5b814ca711f0679cf362016cd46cd47> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 66 Polityuk and Zinets, “Explainer”, Reuters.
- 67 See, for example: Derek Saul, “Ukraine Effectively Surrenders Mariupol – Here’s Why The City Is Such A Prized Target For Russia”, Forbes, 17 May 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2022/05/17/ukraine-effectively-surrenders-mariupol-heres-why-the-city-is-such-a-prized-target-for-russia/> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; Pavel Polityuk and Natalia Zinets, “EXPLAINER-Mariupol: ruins of port could become Russia’s first big prize in Ukraine”, Mail Online, 13 April 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-10715165/EXPLAINER-Mariupol-ruins-port-Russias-big-prize-Ukraine.html> [accessed: 23.07.2024]; and Pavel Polityuk and Natalia Zinets, “Explainer-Mariupol: ruins of port could become Russia’s first big prize in Ukraine”, The Star, 13 April 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2022/04/13/explainer-mariupol-ruins-of-port-could-become-russia0395-first-big-prize-in-ukraine> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 68 Polityuk and Zinets, “Explainer”, Reuters.
- 69 Yuras Karmanau, “Mariupol holds out against Russia’s siege, a symbol of Ukrainian resistance”, PBS, 15 April 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/mariupol-holds-out-against-russias-siege-a-symbol-of-ukrainian-resistance> [accessed: 23.07.2024].
- 70 Karmanau, “Ukraine’s port of Mariupol”.

Conclusions

The media reports that I analysed in this article have a common object of focus: the city of Mariupol, its territory and infrastructure, and its residents. These articles all appeared within a short time of each other and described the course of military operations in Mariupol and nearby areas. At times, the reports in different languages referred to the same sources (e.g., representatives of the Mariupol City Council, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, the Russian Ministry of Defence, etc.) and used the same photo and video materials.

The articles, however, differ in their perspectives on and perceptions of the events. The Ukrainian-language sources spoke from the perspective of the attacked country and region and the people resisting this aggression. Meanwhile, the perspective of the Russian-language sources focused on the DNR and the 'liberation' of its territory from 'nationalists' – which is also the official narrative of the Russian Federation. Lastly, the perspective of English-language sources was oriented around war strategies and security issues.

Mariupol was presented with different interpretations for audiences using one of the three languages for Google searches. In these sources, Mariupol was a victim of the aggression of a neighbouring country, the object of liberation from nationalists, and a means and key point for the realisation of another military goal. It is unlikely that the average user would read all three versions at the same time. This is hindered not only by the information limitations of wartime but, above all, by a commitment to a particular picture of reality. Knowledge of such narratives, however, helps to understand the behaviour of people who hold a particular perspective, including how they form communication strategies.

Returning to the questions I posed at the beginning – how those outside of Mariupol will greet the occupied citizens after the war and what beliefs about their current situation different societies have – I can formulate some conclusions based on my study of the media representations of Mariupol. In the English-language sources, a focus on the strategic goals of the military operations prioritises military troops and institutions. Everyone else in this context is called a 'civilian', whose condition is determined by the rules of warfare. During military operations inside the city, those with 'civilian' status can potentially become 'civilian casualties', or victims of the war. In fact, the English-language sources explain and justify (i.e., legitimise) the losses of the civilian population in the context of the strategic aims of the Russian authorities. The Ukrainian-language perspective tends to victimise the people under occupation, placing the responsibility for the casualties and the destruction on the Russian authorities, which invaded the territory of a sovereign neighbouring state unprovoked. The Ukrainian perspective, however, avoids any justifications for such losses. Russian-language sources label Mariupol residents as 'rescued' and in need of external guidance and control. These same sources,

however, also present such people as unreliable, treacherous, and dangerous for their ‘saviours’.

As I argue in this text, the Ukrainian-language, Russian-language, and English-language sources offer different messages in terms of their content, the context given with the explanations and arguments, and their emotional colouring. The narratives and discourses to which these three perspectives belong influence the perceptions of the studied categories of people and urgently require further research.

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