Research article

Threat and fear: Pragmatic purposes of emotionalisation in media discourse

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Abstract

The impact of mass media on individuals and society is to a great extent based on emotions. We concentrate on fear as it is one of the basic emotions triggered by risk and threat, which is claimed to play a key role in the twenty-first century consciousness (Furedi 20018). The study focuses on the emotionalisation of fear in contemporary media discourse about Russia, more specifically, on constructions of 'Russian threat' and 'fear of Russia' in Anglo-American media texts to highlight pragmatic effects and to speculate on possible purposes of such discourses. The study aims to explore the functioning of the lexemes *threat* and *fear*, in textual contexts with the focus on their pragma-discursive characteristics. It identifies the mechanisms as well as linguistic tools involved in media strategies of scare-mongering. The dataset was derived from quality British and American newspapers in the period 2018–2020, and was analysed drawing on an interdisciplinary approach combining critical discourse analysis, pragmatics, medialinguistics, psycholinguistics and the theory of proximisation. The paper argues that appealing to emotions as well as constructing emotions is aimed at enhancing the persuasive function of media and fulfilling their own agenda. The persistent use of the words 'threat' and 'fear' in relation to Russia as well as the obsessive discussion of this topic in media aim to shape a certain negative public opinion of Russia among readerships. The findings show that to achieve this goal different strategies and linguistic tools are used including: exaggeration, repetition, proximisation, interrogative headlines, presupposition, among others. The results go beyond linguistics, and may find implementation in political studies, since they provide researchers with tools for understanding contemporary social and political processes.

Keywords: *emotionalisation, manipulation, media discourse, threat, fear, strategy of scare-mongering*

Угроза и страх:
прагматические цели эмоционализации
в медийном дискурсе

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Аннотация

Воздействие СМИ на общество в значительной степени основано на эмоциях. Данная статья посвящена эмоционализации современного медиадискурса, рассматриваемой с позиций дискурсивнопрагматического подхода. Объектом исследования является страх, одна из базовых эмоций, вызываемая рисками и угрозами, которая в двадцать первом веке, по мнению исследователей, стала играть ключевую роль в формировании сознания (Furedi 2018). В центре внимания – идея так называемой «российской угрозы», активно навязываемая западными СМИ, и «страх перед Россией». Цель исследования – выявить особенности функционирования лексем *threat* (угроза) и fear (страх) в англо-американских медиатекстах и определить их прагма-дискурсивные характеристики, а также механизмы и языковые средства, применяемые для реализации стратегии устрашения. Материал взят из текстов, опубликованных в качественных британских и американских газетах в 2018–2020 годах, которые были проанализированы на основе междисциплинарного подхода с использованием данных медиалингвистики, психолингвистики, прагматики, критического дискурс-анализ и теории проксимизации. В статье показано, что обращение к эмоциям аудитории способствует усилению персуазивной функции, что является одной из основных целей современных СМИ. Утверждается, что частое использование слов «угроза» и «страх» по отношению к России, а также навязчивое обсуждение этой темы в СМИ нацелены на формирование определенного общественного мнения. Результаты показывают, что для достижения данной цели используются различные стратегии и языковые средства: проксимизация, пресуппозиция, преувеличение, повторы, вопросительные заголовки и другие. Результаты исследования выходят за рамки лингвистики и могут найти применение в политических исследованиях, поскольку они предоставляют инструменты для понимания современных социальных и политических процессов.

Ключевые слова: *эмоционализация, манипуляция, медиадискурс, угроза, страх, стратегия устрашения*

1. Introduction

Scholars have drawn attention to the emotionalisation of public domains such as political, academic and media contexts, presenting the emotions as important elements of social and political life (e.g. Bassols, Cros & Torrent 2013, Döveling et al. 2011, Lerner & Rivkin-Fish 2021, Schwab & Schwender 2011, Lerner, Zbenovich & Kaneh-Shalit 2021). The fact that emotion is an essential part of every kind of communication, and can be observed in all types of text and discourse has been convincingly proven by psychologically oriented linguistic studies (e.g.

Alba-Juez & Larina 2018, Alba-Juez & Mackenzie 2019, Dewaele 2010, Mackenzie & Alba-Juez 2019, Shakhovsky 2008, Wierzbicka 1999, among many others). This study focuses on the emotionalisation of contemporary media discourse, exploring its pragmatic effects and speculating on possible reasons for it.

The impact of mass media on individuals and society is to a great extent based on human emotions (Döveling et al. 2011) which are mobilised to achieve certain goals. Appealing to emotions as well as constructing emotions is one of the main purposes of media, which has become a "uniquely powerful" (Furedi 2018) institution; indeed Altheide (2002: 175), calls it the "most important social institution". This may be explained by the fact that "emotion may [...] directly shape cognition, and cognition may have fairly direct impact on behaviour" (Baumeister et al. 2007: 197). Studies in the psychology of emotions have shown that emotional events are recalled better than neutral events (Wirth & Holger 2005: 21).

Researchers of discourse highlight that the way the audience feels about something influences their rational judgements, attitudes and also the decisions they make (Alba-Juez & Mackenzie 2019). They claim that "Emotion is inextricably linked to persuasion, as can be clearly perceived in journalistic discourse, where persuasion can be used to heighten readers' sensitivity to a given issue, or on the contrary, to manipulate their emotions, stances and beliefs" (Alba-Juez & Mackenzie 2019: 18).

Emotional appeals have been defined as a strategy of manipulative discourse by Critical Discourse Analysts (e.g. van Dijk 2006: 379–380). Chomsky considers emotional impact (*Use the emotional side more than reflection)* among the top media manipulation strategies.[1] He characterizes emotional impact as a "classic technique for causing a short circuit on rational analysis, and finally to the critical sense of the individual" and further explains that the use of an emotional register opens the door to the unconscious for the implantation or grafting of ideas, desires, fears and anxieties, compulsions, or inducing behaviours (ibid). Thus, the manipulative function of emotion is determined by the fact that it suppresses the ability of rational perception of information and allows for the introduction of certain ideas into people's minds.

The current study is limited to 'fear', one of the basic emotions which, as many scholars claim, pervades modern media texts (e.g. Altheide & Michalowski 1999, Furedi 2018). Furedi claims that fear, as a response to risk and threat, plays a key role in the twenty-first century consciousness (Furedi 2018). The regular appeal to all sorts of threats (*terrorist threat, military threat, ecological threat, threat of global warming, pandemic threat, crime threat* etc.), observed in media, evidences the emergence of a discourse of threat, which constructs different types of fear (Ozyumenko & Larina 2020). As has been noticed by scholars, the word 'fear' whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective pervades news reports across all sections of newspaper (Altheide & Michalowski 1999: 75).

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[1] http://theinternationalcoalition.blogspot.com/2011/07/noam-chomsky-top-10-media-manipulation_08.html (Accessed: 12.08.2021).

A lot of studies have shown that fear is used as a tool for manipulation and exploitation by various groups, which contributes to the achievement of their social and political goals (e.g. Cap 2017, Kopytowska & Chilton 2018, Trajkova 2020, Wodak 2015, 2021). As Furedi notes, "Fear itself has become politicized to a point where debate is rarely about whether or not we should be fearful, but about who or what we should fear" (Furedi 2018: 2).

This study is focused on 'Russian threat' and the construction of 'fear of Russia' in Western media discourse. Drawing on interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis (Ponton & Larina 2016, 2017, Bilá & Ivanova 2020, Sinelnikova 2020, among others) it aims to explore the functioning of the lexemes *threat* and *fear*, their derivatives and synonyms in textual contexts with the focus on their pragma-discursive characteristics and functions.

2. 'Threat' and 'fear' in media discourse

Scholars consider threat a universal tool for influencing an audience. They highlight that negative emotions arising in a recipient as a result of a threat act, have an intense effect on thoughts, feelings and behaviour and, accordingly, represent the most effective tool for influencing others (Kara-Murza 2015: 214). Fear, an ever present factor in much modern media discourse, is viewed as an emotion widely exploited in the manipulation of consciousness. Arguably then, one of the goals of media is to create the "fearful subject" (Furedi 2018), someone who is easy to manipulate.

The construction of fear in media, and its impact, have been widely discussed by journalists, sociologists, psychologists and linguists (Altheide 2002, 2006, Altheide & Michalowski 1999, Cap 2017, Çınarlı & Nguyen 2020, Delanti 2008, Dillard & Anderson 2004, Furedi 2018, Sedláková & Kopytowska 2018, Tunney et al. 2021, Wodak 2015, 2021, Zappettini 2021 and others). Researchers are unanimous in the opinion that fear is one of the dominant emotions in contemporary times (Kopytowska & Chilton 2018), a powerful emotion that shapes our lives and our world (Dozier 1999), not only a psychological but also a social and political phenomenon (e.g. Ahmed 2014, Altheide 2006, Wodak 2015, 2021). Discussing the affective politics of fear, Furedi (2018) writes about 'culture of fear' and states that society has become fixated on "promoting a climate of fear and cultivating a disposition to panic" (Furedi 2018: 2). He specifies that the term 'culture of fear' works as a "rhetorical idiom and carries a connotation that can encompass a variety of feelings from unease and discomfort towards a sense of insecurity, powerlessness, intimidation, etc." (Furedi 2018: 4). As observed by Delanty, "fear of others and anxieties about the future have emerged as potent social forces in contemporary society" (2008: 676).

According to the studies, the word 'fear' appeared more often at the end of the 20th century than it had done before, particularly in headlines, where its use more than doubled (Altheide & Michalowski 1999) and this tendency seems to have continued. Furedi (2018), for example, states that compared to the late twentieth

century, language has become far more inclined to "embrace the rhetoric of fear" (Furedi 2018: 2) and points out that "the messages communicated by the media are often oriented towards capturing its audience's attention through appeals to people's sense of anxiety and fear" (Furedi 2018: 13). He notes the increasing presence of fear-related linguistic phenomena such as catchphrases ('the politics of fear', the 'fear factor'), highlights the role of media in these processes, and cites Grupp (2002), who points out that "there has been a general shift from a fearsome life towards a life with fearsome media" (Furedi 2018: 14).

Such notions inform the approach of this paper, which explores how the lexemes 'threat' and 'fear' function in textual contexts, and asks what their pragma-discursive characteristics and functions are.

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, fear is a "basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction that mobilizes the organism by triggering a set of physiological changes"[2]. It is worth noting that psychologists distinguish between fear and anxiety, emphasising that "the former is considered an appropriate short-term response to a present, clearly identifiable threat, whereas the latter is a future-oriented, long-term response focused on a diffuse threat" (ibid.). This definition also mentions *intense emotion, imminent threat, immediate alarm reaction, response to a present, clearly identifiable threat,* which suggests that 'fear' is an intense emotion triggered by a present and imminent threat that is clearly identifiable, while anxiety refers to a 'diffuse threat'.

As the definitions show, there is an obvious difference between 'fear' and 'anxiety'. Fear deals with a real threat, while anxiety is provoked by a subjective idea of an imaginary threat. One feels anxious when one **thinks** that something bad **might** happen. The words 'think' and 'might' indicate that the threat is imaginary rather than real. However, in media discourse the terms 'fear' and 'anxiety' are often used interchangeably, with a preference given to 'threat'. This preference does not seem to be accidental, but rather has a specific purpose. As has been shown empirically by psycholinguistic experiments (e.g. Isenberg et al. 1999), words associated with danger, fear, threat have a demonstrable effect on the brain. Drawing on insights from neuroscientific research on the role of lexis in fear stimulation, critical discourse analysts define other words as well as discursive mechanisms that stimulate fear (Kopytowska & Chilton 2018).

3. Data and methodology

We limit our study to the word *threat*, its derivatives and synonyms, which are frequently used in contemporary media discourse as a fear trigger, as well as the word *fear*, with a focus on their pragma-discursive characteristics and functions.

The data for the study are taken from British and American newspapers (*The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Independent, The Washington Post, The Wall Street*

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[2] APA Dictionary of Psychology. https://dictionary.apa.org/fear (Accessed: 12.08.2021).

Journal, the Chicago Tribune), news websites of the BBC, Reuters, Politico, Fox News, among other media sources that cover the relations between Russia, the USA and the UK between 2018 and 2021. For data collection we used the Google search engine using *Russian threat, Russia threatens, fear of Russia* as search terms.

The corpus consisted of 160 articles taken from the sources used. We mostly focused on the functioning of the terms 'threat' and 'fear' and their pragmatic aspects. We paid particular attention to such textual features as headlines, interrogative headlines, epistemic modality, some rhetorical tools used in media texts to perform the strategy of fearmongering. We also draw attention to presupposition, which is understood as a "taken-for-granted implicit claim, embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance" (Richardson 2007: 63), and discursive elements and mechanisms that stimulate fear.

The data were analysed drawing on some notions from Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995, 2001, van Dijk 2006, 2009; Weiss & Wodak 2007), studies of the discourse of the press and media linguistics (Bryant & Zillman 2002, Dobrosklonskaya 2020, Fowler 1991, Richardson 2007, Solopova & Saltykova 2019, among many others) and proximisation theory (Cap 2013, 2017, Kopytowska 2015a,b). We use Cap's definition of proximization and consider it a "discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events or state of affairs (including 'distant', i.e. adversarial ideologies) as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee" (Cap 2017: 16).

In this this study, we limit ourselves to a qualitative analysis; however, there is no doubt that for a more reasoned conclusion, quantitative analysis is also needed, and it is intended to pursue this in future. We also intend to consider genre differences.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Threat

Searching for the collocation *Russian threat* returned the following results: *Russian threat to the US / to the UK/ to Israel/ to Sweden/ to Baltic states/ to Europe /to NATO* and even to such far away states as *Canada, Australia* and *South Africa.* Searching for *Russia threatens* returned instances such as: *Russia threatens Ukraine / Bosnia / Turkey / NATO/ Sweden / US / Israel / Georgia.*

These threats are presented as aggressive and terrifying:

(1) Russia **threatens** to NUKE US cities with 6000 mph-hypersonic Zircon missile if war breaks out after successful' test (The Sun, 26.11.2020).
(2) Putin **threatens** to target US if it deploys missiles in nearby European countries (CNBC, 20.02.2019).

Russia is also claimed as a threat to elections all over the world, especially to the US presidential elections and the European parliamentary elections, as well as elections in Bulgaria and even in South Africa. It is accused of destructive goals in America and across the European continent such as 'denigrating President Biden's

candidacy', 'undermining public confidence in the electoral process', 'exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US', causing havoc to the European elections (3). It is directly claimed as a 'hostile aggressor' (4):

> (3) The Office of the Director of National Intelligence released an assessment on Tuesday about foreign **threats** to the 2020 US federal elections. The assessment found that **Russia** pursued efforts aimed at "denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US (CNN, 17.03.2021).
> (4) The **threat** from a **hostile aggressor** [Russia] which the European Commission said last week would seek to cause the same havoc to the European elections in May. (The Guardian, 30.03.2019).

The analysis showed that it is not uncommon to see 'threat' in the headlines of articles referring to Russia. They explicitly claim the presence of a 'Russian threat' and the need to be prepared to confront it, though the articles do not give any details concerning the facts declared in the titles:

> (5) NATO Chief Warns of **Russia Threat**, Urges Unity in U.S. Address (Reuters, 04.04.2019).
> (6) Trump silent as top officials warn of **Russian threat** (POLITICO, 08.02.2018).
> (7) Justice Department filing contradicts Kushner's view of **Russia threat** (POLITICO, 23.04.2019).

Though the articles may not provide any convincing facts nor arguments about the 'Russian threat', its presence in the headline has an effect on an uncritical reader, as headlines primarily attract readers' attention and remain in their memory.

The role of interrogative headings in discourse that aims to manipulate has been an object of research (see Richardson 2007, Ozyumenko 2017, 2019; Ozyumenko & Larina 2020; Larina et al. 2020).

> (8) Does Russia present a credible threat to the UK? (The Guardian, 15.03.2018).
> (9) Truth or dare: how serious is Russia's missile threat to the US? (The Times, 28.02.2019).

Headings (8–9) presume that a Russian threat exists, that Russia does present a threat to the UK, and that Russian missiles do threaten the US. The question is only how credible and how serious this threat might be. Presuppositions are present in "wh-questions', e.g. in heading (10) which, despite its interrogative form, actually claims that Russia is a threat to world peace:

> (10) Why is Russia a threat to world peace? (https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/podcasts/why-russia-threat-world-peace).

These tactics enable journalists to convey to the reader any idea, no matter how incredible without being held responsible (Larina et al. 2020: 26), since the

mechanisms of pragmatic presupposition allow them to deliver the desired idea without affirming it directly.

Co-textual analysis showed that 'Russian threat' is presented as an *ongoing, rising, escalating* and *evolving* process:

> (11) But the filing also sheds light on how the Justice Department views the **ongoing threat** of Russian attempts to influence American politics and goes well beyond what Mueller's team was able to say in its 448-page report. (POLITICO, 23.04.2019).
> (12) Britain and France must take their military alliance "to the next level" to combat **escalating threats**, the chief of the defence staff has said (The Times, 24.09.2018).
> (13) Williamson said the funding had been allocated in response to an **evolving threat** and will help ensure the UK remains a global leader in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence (The Sunday Times, 03.03.2019).

The escalation of this process is also conveyed by evaluative adjectives. In our data, we have the collocations *big threat*, *bigger threat, biggest threat*, *greatest threat* as well as *major threat*, *grave threat, reckless threat, death threat* which increase the impact on the audience's emotions:

> (14) Putin poses a bigger **threat** than populism (The Times, 26.12.2018)
> (15) Lawmakers said jointly in a statement Friday, pointing to recent reports about Facebook's efforts to discredit its political opponents and slowness to identify Russia as a **major threat** (The Washington Post, 23.11.2018).
> (16) Russia possesses **a grave threat** to our national security (USA Today, Jan. 2018).

It is worth noting that Western media reiterate that Russia and its regime pose a 'new threat' to the world, which differs considerably from the earlier dictatorship threats, and it is seen as particularly dangerous:

> (17) Britain faces a new kind of **Russian threat** (The Times, 10.09.2018).
> (18) Meister was one of the first analysts in Berlin to raise the alarm of a **new Russian threat** (The New York Times Magazine, 25.07.2019).
> (19) Putinism represents **a new threat** to the world, one very different in fundamental ways from those of earlier imperial dictatorships. (USA Today, 17.02.2019).

Another tactic of enhancing the emotional impact on the audience is repetition. The repetition of the idea of 'Russian threat' can be observed in the media space as a whole, within the framework of one newspaper and even in a short message. For instance, the short item of 78 words entitled "The Times' view on China and Russia: A Global Challenge (Again)" contains the collocations **biggest threat** and **greatest threat:**

> (20) These nations [China and Russia] have been identified as the **biggest threat** to the western alliance for many decades. It is time to close ranks and stop squabbling. China and Russia have become like "lips and teeth", said

a Beijing official recently, referring to the closeness of the relationship. The United States intelligence community this week identified the alignment as the **greatest threat** to America and its allies since the height of the Cold War in the mid-1950s. (The Times, 31.01. 2019)

The idea of Russian threat can be delivered less explicitly and directly with the use of epistemic modality which adds some uncertainty to the statement. However, as previous study has shown, uncertainty is frequently used in media as a strategy of manipulation (see Larina, Ozyumenko & Ponton 2020). Though the fact that Russia's interference in the US presidential election in 2016 has never been proven, the Guardian claims that Moscow "may seek to influence the 2020 elections" by launching cyber-attacks, disinformation, covert agent operations and other "active measures", as it did in the 2016 elections (21). It also suggests that Russia plans "to sway South Africa election" (22). The Times states that Russia "will sow dissent during European parliament elections" (23). The Sunday Times goes even further and writes about a possible invasion of Belarus or the Baltic (24).

> (21) Moscow **may seek** to influence the 2020 elections by launching cyber-attacks, social media disinformation, covert agent operations and other "active measures" as it did in the 2016 election (The Guardian, 27.05.2019).
> (22) Documents **suggest** Russian plan to sway South Africa election (The Guardian, 08.05.2019).
> (23) Russia '**will** sow dissent during European parliament elections' (The Times, 18.03.2019).
> (24) The agency's analysts fear that President Putin's regime regards the elections as a chance to sow political dissension across the continent before a **possible** invasion of Belarus or the Baltic states (The Sunday Times, 18.03.2019).

Although examples (21–24) have some markers of epistemic modality (*may seek, suggest, will sow, possible invasion*), they do not reduce the perlocutionary effect on the readers, who usually do not pay attention to shades of modality. After reading (21–24), it is most likely that what is most salient will be retained, in each case, i.e.: *Russia, cyber-attacks, disinformation, covert agent, sway elections, sow political dissension, invasion of Belarus and the Baltic states*. The publication of these facts in the newspaper make them real for the reader. It is interesting to note that the last accusation contains the modal word *possible*, but at the same time the preposition *before* indicates the planned nature of this action.

4.2. Fear

Arguably, one of the main goals of threat discourse is to trigger fear, and in this context it is interesting to note that the lexemes 'threat' and 'fear' often go together:

> (25) British man and family plead for asylum after hiding in Australia in **fear** of Russian **threats** (The Guardian, 25.01.2019) (headline).

(26) […] Pinedo has experienced harassment and death **threats** over his walk-on role in the Mueller probe. Lessem also suggested that Pinedo has curtailed his activities because of **fears** he could be the victim of attack by Russia, Russian sympathizers or their opponents. (POLITICO, 27.09.2018).
(27) The unclassified "Strategic Multilayer Assessment" marks a clear warning from the military establishment to civilian leaders about a national security **threat** that strategists **fear**, if left unchecked, could ultimately lead to armed conflict. (POLITICO, 30.06.2019).

The emotion of fear is conveyed by different grammatical forms: noun, verb, adjective (fearsome), participle (feared), as well as their **synonyms** (afraid, concerned, scared, worried, troubled):

(28) The security minister has turned down a meeting with a Tory peer who has financial links to Moscow **amid fears** about Russian influence and lobbying in parliament, *The Times* can reveal. (The Times, 24.10.2018).
(29) Britain and America **fear** Vladimir Putin is prepared to cause financial chaos by attacking undersea cables between the countries and are going to extraordinary lengths to track Russian submarines (The Telegraph, 06.10.2018).

We observe in our data some inconsistency between the emotion of fear and the use of the word itself. As has been noted above, semantically to *fear* means 'to feel worried and afraid that something bad will happen or has already happened', while anxiety is a 'worried feeling you have because you think that something bad might happen'[3]. From our perspective, in many examples (e.g. 27–29), the words 'anxiety' or 'concern' would be more appropriate than 'fear'. Hence, we suggest, this emotional intensification may serve the scope of inducing this emotion in the audience.

Our analysis of 'fear' lexemes has revealed some functional similarities with that of 'threat'.

It is possible for more than one fear lexeme to be used in a sentence, and repetition enhances the emotional impact on the audience:

(30) Yet while our **threat** perception in the past year has shifted from a **fear** of non-state groups to great-power confrontation, we are still nowhere near the **fearsome** heights of the Cold War. (The Sunday Times, 30.12.2018).

We also see the word 'fear' in headlines, which focus the audience's attention:

(32) America's enemies want **fear** and chaos from our election (Dallas News, 02.11.2020).
(33) Lithuania **fears** a Russian invasion. Now, it wants to build a border fence (Washington Post, 17.01.2017).
(34) U.S. cybersecurity officials **fear** 'grave' fallout from suspected Russian hack as Trump stays silent (Daily News, 17.12.2020).

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[3] Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners.

It also occurs in interrogative headlines which trigger presuppositions, Wh-questions in particular:

(35) Is Trump **scared of** Putin? (Chicago Tribune,18.04.2018).
(36) Why is Trump **so afraid** of Russia? (The New York Times, 21.03.2018).
(37) Why is Britain **so afraid** to make a stand against Putin's clownish cronies? (The Telegraph, 10.10.2018).

If the headline in (35) simply refers to Trump's fear of Putin, the questions "Why is Trump so afraid of Putin" or "Why is Britain so afraid…" presuppose the existence of this emotional state.

Fear is described as an increasing and developing process, which also enhances the dramatic effect:

(38) Even as **fear** of Russia is rising, its military spending is actually decreasing (Washington Post, 02.05.2018).
(39) Fears are rising that the group (Wagner) is fomenting turmoil in Libya so that the Kremlin can then sweep in and stabilise the nation. (The Times, 04.03.2019).

The emotional impact can be enhanced by the use of intensifier *very* and superlative lexemes, as well as a strategy of exaggeration:

(40) But in his most recent tweet on about election meddling, Trump said, "I'm **very concerned** that Russia will be fighting very hard to have an impact on the upcoming election. (POLITICO, 26.07.2018).
(41) The **biggest fear** *is* that Russia might attempt to close the "Suwalki Gap" (Washington Post, 17.01.2017).

Exaggeration can be expressed by lexical means, for instance by superlatives as in (41) and also at the content level as in (42) where in "A clear majority of people" is used as a means of exaggeration. This statement is not based on any facts; therefore, it cannot be a rational argument:

(42) **A clear majority of people** in eastern European countries including Poland **fear** that war will break out with Russia as the US-backed liberal order **threatens** to dissolve into an era of renewed conflict (The Times, 11.02.2019).

To enhance the emotional impact, journalists use various rhetorical tropes and expressive means such as idioms, hyperboles, metaphors, word play, cultural images, animalistic symbols, etc. In our material, Russia is compared with a dangerous wounded bear[4]:

(43) "We are **very** concerned about Russian **aggression**. A **wounded bear** is **dangerous**," MEP Anders Vistisen, of the Danish People's party said last month in Milan, on the sidelines of Salvini's nationalist coalition launch (The Guardian, 17.05.2019).

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[4] Bear is an animalistic symbol of Russia.

In (43) we can see the combination of lexical means construing fear: *very concerned, aggression, dangerous.*

Some headlines contain homophonic puns with the word 'bear': beware – bear, fear – bear.

> (44) **Beware** the **wounded bear**: *Russia could hit back hard after inept spies exposed* (The Telegraph, 06.10.2018) (headline).
> (45) The Russia Anxiety by Mark B Smith review — should we **fear** the Russian **bear**? (The Sunday Times, 30.06.2019) (headline).

We agree with Richardson (2007), who notes that while such features can be viewed as a merely entertaining aspect of discourse, they often underscore a political agenda (Richardson 2007: 70), and they are an effective means of emotional impact on the audience.

It should be mentioned that besides verbal means for the realization of a scare-mongering strategy, a variety of multimodal means (Ponton 2016) are used, e.g. heading size, colour, photographs, caricatures, etc. The image of a bear is frequently used in cartoons about Russia, and the Russian president is portrayed in a frightening and threatening manner as the embodiment of evil (see e.g. Ozyumenko 2017). However, these aspects of emotional appeal are beyond this paper.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm the idea that the lexemes 'threat' and 'fear' pervade Western media discourse (Altheide & Michalowski 1999, Furedi 2018). The analysis has revealed that the ideas of the 'Russian threat' as well as 'fear of Russia' are expressed in the reviewed sources persistently and quite explicitly though implicit means are not uncommon either. Taking into account the semantics of the word 'fear', it seems that in many cases, the words 'concern' or 'anxiety' seem to be more appropriate than 'fear' (e.g. in examples 27–29, and others). Preference for the lexeme 'fear', in our opinion, is indicative of a purposeful fear-mongering strategy used by mass media.

The findings reveal some similar linguistic tools and discursive strategies used to construe the ideas of a 'Russian threat' and 'fear of Russia'. In both cases, we observe the use of superlative lexemes (e.g. *biggest / greatest threat, biggest fear*), repetition (20, 30), exaggeration (41, 42). Both threat and fear are described as growing and escalating (*escalating/evolving threat, rising fear*). Both words are used in headlines (affirmative and interrogative). As a result, the idea of a Russian threat as well as fear of Russia are expressed explicitly (5–7, 32–34) and implicitly, through presupposition (9, 10, 36, 37). To construe fear and dramatise the current situation, these two lexemes are often used together (25–27, 30).

It is worth mentioning that the declarations of Russian threat are hardly confirmed by any facts, which are not deemed necessary any more. For instance, not having a full report on Russian interference in the US elections, the Guardian claims that it was a 'terrifying' and 'incontrovertible evidence of an attack by Russia on America'.

(46) Because even while we still do not have the full report, even Barr's summary of it confirmed something extraordinary and **terrifying: incontrovertible** evidence of an attack by Russia on America. (The Guardian, 30.03.2019).

The portrayal of an alleged and never proven hacker intrusion into the campaign as an 'attack by Russia on America' heightens the dramatic effect of the situation, as does the high-intensity lexis ('terrifying').

Persistently instilling the idea that a 'Russian threat' exists, and that it affects the whole world from the USA to South Africa, journalists pursue the goal of showing that, although Russia is far away, the threat posed by it knows no boundaries; it can easily and quickly come to any country.

We suggest that such rhetoric is a meditated application of the discursive strategy of proximization (Cap 2013, 2017), which is aimed at "presenting physically and temporally distant events and state of affairs […] as directly, increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee" (Cap 2017: 16). It is a "forced construal operation meant to envoke closeness of the external threat to solicit legitimization of preventive measures" (Cap ibid.). The goal of proximisation is to move the threat from the periphery of the discursive space to its center, arouse fear among the population and enlist the support of subsequent preventive measures: unprecedented expulsion of Russian diplomats, economic sanctions against Russia and others. It is not by chance that just a few days after the notorious 'Novichok' episode, for example, in Salisbury, the newspapers were full of statements by political leaders emphasizing that this could happen on the streets of any city:

(47) The prime minister told the UK's allies that such an attack could have taken place on the streets of any of their cities. (The Guardian, 15.03.2018).

In this example, we can simultaneously see the application of all three types of proximization — spatial, temporal, and modal or axiological (Cap 2017): (1) the enemy is not in faraway Russia, but in the UK, in the small peaceful town of Salisbury (spatial proximisation); (2) this is not a hypothetical possibility, but an event that has already happened (temporal proximisation); (3) the enemy is insidious and merciless, he ruthlessly kills civilians in peacetime violating all democratic and humanistic values (axiological proximisation), and, as a result, he and his country must be severely punished.

The strategy of temporal proximisation can be performed by 'nominal presupposition' (Richardson 2017: 64), triggered by nouns and adjectives. In (48) the use of 'not ready' presupposes that this threat is not hypothetical but real and it already exists.

(48) NATO **Fears** Its Forces Not Ready to Confront **Russian Threat** (The Wall Street Journal. 28.03.2018) (headline).

As has been shown (18, 19), Western media emphasize that Russia and "Putinism" as a combination of the socio-economic and political structure of modern Russia, pose a completely new threat to peace which is constantly changing

and appearing in new forms. Trying to prove this, the journalists demonstrate their ingenuity by providing a series of facts which may be absurd, but nevertheless are eagerly discussed and actively circulated by various publications. Our material supports Furedi's idea that "at times it almost appears as if fear has become a caricature of itself" (Furedi 2018: 5).

As an instance of a patently absurd story, consider accounts of the beluga from Russia, which appeared off the coast of Norway and was immediately suspected of espionage. This was announced on April 29, 2019 by the BBC, CNN, The Telegraph and other influential sources. The reason for the assumption that the dolphin was a Russian spy was a "harness for a camera" discovered on it with the words "Equipment. St. Petersburg", testifying to its belonging to Russia. It was immediately stated that the Russians were training dolphins for underwater espionage activities against the West. While some publications reported this under a question mark (49), others quoted politicians and experts who did not doubt the fact of espionage (50):

(49) Is this whale a Russian spy? Beluga turns up in Norway with camera harness (CBC, 02.05.2019).
(50) Marine experts believe it was trained by the Russian military… Another marine mammal researcher said it was "undoubtable" that the whale was trained. (CNN, 29.04.2019).

This ridiculous story was replicated by such reputable publications as The Guardian, The Times, The Telegraph, The Washington Post and others. A few days after the dolphin was discovered (05.05.2019), the British newspaper Times wrote about a poll on Norwegian television to choose a name for the dolphin, where the first place was given to the name Hvaldimir, formed by adding the words *hval* (dolphin) and *Vladimir* and referring to the name of the Russian president. Other preferences included *Agent James Beluga* and *White Russian*. Soon (09.05.2019), the Times published another message stating that beluga whales suspected of espionage may have been used to treat children with mental disabilities, but this disclaimer made little headway against notions concerning the Russian spy Hvaldimir, which had long been an important news item, a favourite topic of scientific discussions and opinion polls.

The Financial Times, under the heading "Opinion: Political espionage", published an article by British writer, critic and scientist John Day under the heading "The 'Russian spy whale' has plenty of historical company". The author poses the moral and ethical question of the use of animals as weapons, and ends with the words: *Despite its apparent friendliness, there's something very sad about the Russian spy whale, and the indignity of turning a wild creature into a tool of war.* Thus, on the basis of an unproven fact, the author condemns Russia as a cruel immoral state whose values are at variance with the values of the Western world. The beluga story implies that Russian spies can appear in the most unexpected places, at any time, that is, right here and now, and one must be ready to fight them.

Our findings confirm the idea of Altheide (2002), who claims that "fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek

to benefit" (Altheide 2002: 24). Emphasizing the role of mass media in shaping public opinion, he argues that "Fear begins with things we fear, but over time with enough repetition and expanded use, it becomes a way of looking at life" (Altheide 2002: 3).

To understand how justified any case of fear might be, it is necessary to analyze how real the threat is. If we take into account the lack of supporting/confirming facts, as well as the colossal difference in the military budgets of Russia and NATO countries, the intensity of threat and fear in media discourse does not seem to be proportional to the objective character of the specific threat. However, in media statements western politicians and analysts highlight the weakening of the European Union and the inability to respond to growing threats from Russia (51), the need to ready forces and have enough strength to counter this evolving threat (52–54).

> (51) He [Jakub Kalensky] said internal politics and a resistance among some European leaders have left the system too sluggish to respond to the Russian **threat**. (The New York Times, 06.06.2019).
> (52) Javid (Home Secretary) said: "We have to ensure that we have the necessary powers to meet current and evolving **threats** to the UK, both domestically and overseas. (The Guardian, 20.05.2019).
> (53) *U.S. Pushes NATO Allies to Ready Forces Against Russian **Threat*** (Reuters, 04.04.2019).
> (54) *Russia is a **strategic threat** that must be aggressively countered* (The Guardian, 17.05.2019).

Thus, the illusion is created that Russia is a powerful and aggressive state that threatens the whole world, and that it is necessary to unite in order to resist it. Such rhetoric, arguably, has the aim of influencing opinions in society regarding the need to increase military spending and support the government's actions to modernize and strengthen military forces, as well as justify unfriendly actions against Russia. As Cap (2017) rightly claims, "the construal of imminent danger paves the way for the legitimization of preventive measures in a vast number of public discourses" (Cap 2017: 9).

This purposeful, often unfounded fear-mongering is arguably used as a strategy of manipulation, which is a form of "cognitive mind control" (van Dijk 2009: 359) whose aim is to turn people into an uncritical, easily manageable mass. A vivid illustration is provided by one instance from our data, the article by Michael Trace in the New York Daily News, entitled "Never forget the Trump-Russia moral panic: By fearmongering far beyond the evidence, the media and politicians did a huge disservice to the public" (New York Daily News, 25.03.2019). He describes attending numerous Democratic rallies across the country, where people expressed their displeasure with Trump's victory. What amazed him most was the fact that the protesters focused single-mindedly on one thing that day, far above the rest: Russia. "Not just "Russian interference" broadly construed, either, but the specific notion that Trump had personally conspired with a hostile foreign state to steal the election". This is how he describes the people attending these rallies and their emotions:

> I could see the psychological stress in their eyes; it was even taking a physical toll on their bodies. They really, truly believed that the U.S. government had been subverted by an elaborate Kremlin espionage plot. And if that's what they really thought, they were right to be upset, and scared.
>
> The problem was, they were deceived. A journalistic failure of almost unfathomably monumental proportions whipped these (well-meaning, largely) people into a dangerous frenzy, and wrought untold damage on the body politic. I resolved then that I would not take out my anger on ordinary citizens, who were sold a demented conspiratorial fantasy by cynical profit-seeking media corporations and self-interested politicians. I would instead reserve my scorn for the people who should've known better: the wealthy MSNBC hosts, the progressive-leaning legislators, the savvy podcasters and YouTube stars.[5]

He concludes saying

> Journalists largely knew this, but they failed at their most basic duty: to be good stewards of the public trust. Raising questions is fine, but what they did was generate a panic.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper attempts to further understand the social construction of feelings in modern media discourse, and their role. It corroborates the idea that to appeal to emotions, as well as construct them, is a recognized characteristic of media discourse, and argues that one strand in modern Western media focuses on appealing to fears about Russia. We explored how the landscape of 'Russian threat' and 'fear of Russia' is cultivated in British and American newspapers. Our findings confirm the claim that threat and fear pervade modern media texts (Altheide & Michalowski 1999, Furedi 2018).

The findings are consistent with the idea that the power of media is illustrated by its "capacity to influence language usage and popularize the rhetoric of fear" (Furedi 2018: 17). To render the fears "palpable, visual, dramatic and intensely personal" (Furedi 2018: 16), different strategies and linguistics tools are used. As our analysis shows, exaggeration, repetition, proximisation, interrogative headlines, presuppositions are among these. As it was stated by Fairclough, presuppositions can be *sincere* or *manipulative,* but can also have *ideological* functions, when what they assume has the character of 'common sense in the service of power' (Fairclough 1989: 154). Interestingly, that exemplifying his conception of 'presupposition' he used an expressions *the Soviet threat,* which became a frequently repeated formula in newspaper reports, and "can cumulatively help to naturalize highly contentious propositions which are presupposed – in this case, that there is a threat (to Britain, Europe, 'the West') from the Soviet Union" (Fairclough, ibid).

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[5] https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-never-forget-the-trump-russia-moral-panic-20190325-i3vgecetwvcqdmuzhuv5dyt22i-story.html (Accessed: 12.08.2021).

The paper argues that the persistent use of 'Russian threat' and 'fear of Russia', as well as the obsessive discussion of this topic in the media, testify to the occurrence of Russian threat and fear discourse in the Western media. Through repetition, the notions of threat and fear are endowed with an "existential quality" (Furedi 2018: 17).

We agree with Furedi, who notes that it would be too simplistic to attribute solely to media the escalation of fear in society, as "the media itself is to a significant extent the bearer of pre-existing attitudes and values that inform society's ideas about emotions such as fear" (Furedi 2018: 19). Nevertheless, as our data demonstrate, Western media purposefully introduces the idea of a Russian threat into the minds of people, a process which arguably serves a political end. Frequent exposure to narratives of a Russian threat might produce a 'cumulative effect' (Bell 1996) on an uncritical reader. A negative image of Russia as a hostile and aggressive country is created, and the unfriendly actions of politicians in relation to Russia, which have lately been witnessed, are given justification. As has been shown by critical discourse analysists, political leaders enforce the imminence of an outside threat to claim legitimization for their preventive policies, and optimum legitimization effects may be obtained through discursively constructed appeals to fear, which, with the aid of a compliant mass media, ensure quick social mobilization (Cap 2017).

Emotional impact is an effective strategy of manipulation, widely used by contemporary media, as it suppresses the ability of rational perception of information, and helps to introduce certain ideas into the minds of the uncritical. We do not claim that the strategy of scare-mongering as well as emotional persuasion in general is only found in Western media discourse; however, in this study we limited our scope to instances found in Anglo-American media.

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