



The Social Construction of 'Will/Freedom' (Воля) in Ukrainian Media Discourse: Implications for National Identity and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

This study examines how the concept *воля* is socially constructed in contemporary Ukrainian wartime media discourse and how this discursive construction contributes to the formation of national identity and social cohesion. Moving beyond a purely linguistic perspective, the research conceptualizes media discourse as a communicative space in which collective meanings are produced, negotiated, and legitimized. The study is grounded in social constructionism and integrates media discourse studies with critical discourse analysis to explain how language participates in the construction of social reality. The empirical analysis combines functional-cognitive, pragmatic, linguostylistic, and discourse-analytical approaches to examine representations of *воля* lexeme and notion in Ukrainian media texts covering military, political, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Particular attention is paid to the semantic specificity of the Ukrainian lexeme *воля*, which encompasses both liberty/freedom and will (volition), enabling media discourse to connect individual agency with collective freedom within a unified symbolic framework. The

findings demonstrate that wartime media transform *воля* notion into a socially shared symbolic resource through which democratic values, collective resilience, national identity, and social cohesion are continuously constructed and reproduced. The study further argues that the unique semantic structure of *воля* lexeme distinguishes Ukrainian wartime discourse from comparable Balkan media discourses, where freedom and individual will are generally lexicalized separately. By integrating linguistic analysis with the sociology of communication, the article demonstrates how culturally specific concepts become mechanisms for constructing collective identities under conditions of war.

Keywords: social constructionism; media discourse; national identity; social cohesion; critical discourse analysis; sociology of communication; wartime communication, media discourse, phrase, sentence, nomination, lexeme

Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed not only the country's political and military landscape but also the symbolic foundations through which Ukrainian society interprets reality. Wartime communication extends far beyond the transmission of information: it becomes a mechanism through which collective meanings, social identities, and shared systems of values are continuously produced and negotiated (Kutsenko & Kostiuhenko, 2026). Within this process, language functions not merely as a means of representing reality but as one of the principal instruments through which social reality itself is constructed. One of the most significant symbolic resources of contemporary Ukrainian public discourse is the concept *volia* (*воля*). A distinctive feature of the Ukrainian language is that the single lexeme *воля* encompasses two meanings that are expressed by different lexical items in English. Depending on the communicative context, *воля* may denote either *liberty/freedom* - the condition of being free from external constraint - or *will* (*volition*), referring to the capacity for intentional choice, agency, and self-determination. Thus, the intended meaning of *воля* can only be established through its discursive context. This semantic duality enables the concept to function as a particularly powerful symbolic resource in wartime media discourse, where individual agency and collective freedom are frequently intertwined. This semantic multidimensionality enables the concept to function as a powerful discursive resource for constructing collective interpretations of the war and Ukraine's national future.

From the perspective of social constructionism, concepts such as *воля* should not be regarded as fixed lexical categories whose meanings simply reflect objective reality.

Rather, they are socially negotiated symbolic constructs whose meanings emerge, stabilize, and evolve through communication (Zubek et al., 2023). Wartime media discourse, thus, becomes a privileged arena in which the meanings of *воля* are continually reconstructed, connecting individual experiences with broader narratives of national survival, democratic values, and collective resilience. This perspective shifts analytical focus from the linguistic description of lexical meanings to the social functions performed by discourse. Ukrainian media do not simply describe acts of resistance or expressions of freedom; they actively construct shared understandings of what it means to be Ukrainian, how national unity is imagined, and which moral values become socially legitimate during wartime. Consequently, linguistic choices acquire sociological significance by participating in the production of national identity and social cohesion.

Meanwhile, although numerous studies examined the concept *воля* from philosophical, psychological, linguistic, cognitive, and linguocultural perspectives, considerably less attention was paid for its role as a socially constructed symbolic resource within contemporary wartime media discourse. Existing linguistic analyses identified its semantic complexity and stylistic variation; however, they rarely explain how these linguistic representations contribute to broader processes of collective identity formation and societal integration. Drawing upon social constructionism, media discourse studies, and critical discourse analysis, this article conceptualizes Ukrainian wartime media discourse as a communicative space where the meanings of *воля* are continuously negotiated and legitimized. The linguistic realization of the concept is therefore interpreted not as an end in itself but as empirical evidence of wider processes through which discourse produces socially shared understandings of nationhood, solidarity, and civic resilience.

With the above in mind, the aim of this study is to examine how the concept *воля* is socially constructed in Ukrainian wartime media discourse and how this discursive construction contributes to the formation of national identity and social cohesion. Integrating social constructionism with media discourse studies and critical discourse analysis, the research combines functional-cognitive, pragmatic, and linguostylistic approaches to identify the linguistic mechanisms through which media discourse transforms *воля* into a shared symbolic resource that legitimizes collective resilience, strengthens national identity, and reinforces social cohesion during wartime.

Literature Review

Social constructionism and the discursive production of reality

The concept *воля*, being at the intersection of different scientific paradigms and fields, is relatively fully characterized in philosophical and psychological dimensions. Such aspects of study were proposed by Gavenas et al. (2022), Feldman (2017), Baumeister (2008), Baumeister and Monroe (2014), Lam and Yeung (2025), and others. In a range of works, *воля* is considered in two aspects, in particular as follows: 1) the ability to

do what the subject wants, that is, to act without restrictions and influence from the outside; in this case, they mean freedom of action; 2) to 'will what he wants to will' (Frankfurt, 2009, p. 208), this refers to freedom of will. Frankfurt notes on this subject: "Suppose a man enjoys both freedom of action and freedom of the will. Then he is not only free to do what he wants to do; he is also free to want what he wants to want. It seems to me that he has, in that case, all the freedom that it is possible to desire or to conceive" (Frankfurt, 2009, p. 208). The psychological dimension of the study of *воля* (will) notion was chosen by Stillman et al. (2011), who analyzed people's answers to questions about free and involuntary actions in their understanding. The scientists concluded that for average people, free actions are associated with goal achievement, positive results, a high level of conscious thinking, etc.

Meanwhile, social constructionism views reality not as a fixed objective entity but as a product of social interaction and communication. Berger and Luckmann argued that social reality is continuously created, maintained, and transformed through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (cited in Weinberg, 2014). Language, thus, functions not just as a tool for describing the world but rather as a mechanism through which socially shared meanings become institutionalized. Gergen further developed this perspective by emphasizing that knowledge, identities, and social categories emerge through communicative practices rather than existing independently of them. In later scientific discussions, Burr (2024) stresses that meanings are historically and culturally contingent and are constantly negotiated within discourse. From this perspective, concepts such as *воля* should not be understood as stable lexical units with fixed meanings. Their significance is produced and reproduced through public communication, where certain interpretations become socially legitimate while others are marginalized. Wartime media discourse thus becomes an important arena in which collective understandings of freedom, agency, resistance, and national belonging are constructed.

Media discourse as a space of meaning production

Research in media discourse studies demonstrates that media do not simply transmit information but actively participate in the production of social meanings. Fairclough shows that discourse both reflects and shapes social relations and power structures (cited in Weinberg, 2014). Van Dijk emphasizes the role of media in reproducing collective beliefs, ideologies, and group identities (cited in Weinberg, 2014), while Wodak demonstrates how public discourse legitimizes political positions and constructs narratives of inclusion and exclusion (cited in Lock and Strong, 2010). In wartime conditions, the role of media becomes particularly significant. Media discourse organizes public interpretation of events, defines socially acceptable evaluations, and creates symbolic frameworks through which society understands conflict, sacrifice, heroism, and national survival. As Silveira et al. (2026) rightly claim, linguistic choices in media texts acquire sociological importance since they contribute to the formation of shared collective meanings. According to Al-Kassimi et al. (2026),

during wars and crises, the media functions as an active participant in meaning-making, not just a neutral channel of information. Outlets construct symbolic realities through strategic narratives and interpretative frames that justify actions, build national morale, and deeply influence collective understanding of the conflict.

National identity, political communication, and social cohesion

Studies of national identity claim that nations are sustained not only by political institutions but also by shared narratives and symbolic representations. Anderson (as cited in Putri et al., 2018) describes nations as “imagined communities” created through communicative practices, while Billig (as cited in Feinstein, 2026) demonstrates how everyday discourse continuously reproduces national belonging. Political communication plays a mediating role by translating individual opinions and experiences into collective public narratives. Social cohesion is shown in literature as the one that depends on the existence of shared values, trust, and a sense of belonging to a common political community (Gabrielsson et al., 2025; Moustakas, 2023). In this context, concepts associated with freedom, collective agency, and national resilience often become symbolic resources that connect personal experiences with broader narratives of national solidarity. Adams (2023) claims that the relationship between will, liberty, political communication, national identity, and social cohesion forms a dynamic cycle in which public discourse helps transform fragmented individual experiences into a shared national project.

The concept of “воля” in Ukrainian linguistic and cultural studies

In the national-cultural space of Ukrainians, the concept *воля* occupies one of the central places and represents the idea of freedom, dignity, national independence. We agree with the well-founded arguments of Krekhno and Minyaila (2023) that “the concept *воля* is one of the significant ones for Ukrainianness, it is a key concept in the history of Ukraine, in the formation of national consciousness” (p. 58). The idea of *воля* is rooted in collective thinking and for a long time it is considered a value that must be fought for and that requires constant protection and restoration. Analyzing the internal semantic structure of the nomination *воля* as the central marker of the analyzed concept and outlining the features of the functional manifestation of this linguistic unit in media texts of the Great War period, first of all, we consider it appropriate to present its interpretation in modern lexicography: “*ВОЛЯ*, noun, female. 1. only singular. One of the functions of the human psyche, which consists primarily in power over oneself, control of one’s actions and conscious regulation of one’s behavior. ... 2. Desire, wanting. ... 3. The right to dispose of something at one’s discretion; power. ... 4. Absence of restrictions; privilege. ... // Personal life at home (as opposed to military service, being in a closed educational institution, etc.). ... 5. Freedom, independence; the opposite of captivity, slavery. // Being not under arrest, not in a cage, not on a chain, etc. 6. historical. The liberation of slaves and serfs from their servile state” (Dictionary, 2012, p. 279–280). In addition, dictionary article presents the stable expressions *випускати (ныскати) / випустити (ныстити) на*

*волю, зусиллями волі, людина доброї волі, остання воля, політична воля, свобода волі, з доброї (rarely – по добрій) волі, мимо (помимо) моєї (своєї, його і т. ін.) волі, на волі, віддаватися / віддатися на волю, волити / вволити волю, вольному воля, воля ваша (твоя), давати / дати волю, давати / дати волю ногам, давати / дати волю почуттю (почуттям), давати / дати волю рукам, давати / дати волю серцю, давати / дати волю сльозам, давати / дати волю язикові, диктувати свою волю, заклика́ти / заклі́кати на допомогу свою волю, зданий на власну волю, мати волю, моя (твоя, його, etc.) воля волить, не мати [своєї] волі, по волі чи по неволі <по волі-неволі>, по [своїй] волі, пускати / пустити на волю Божу, своя воля, сила волі, чинити свою волю, чинити / учинити волю (to release (let go) / at will, by the efforts of the will, a person of good will, the last will, political will, freedom of will, of good (rarely - according to good) will, by (in addition to) my (one's, his, etc.) will, at will, to surrender to the will, to will / to grant the will, to the free will, your will, to give / to give the will, allow full rein to the feet, allow full rein to the feeling (feelings), allow full rein to the hands, allow full rein to the heart, allow full rein to the tears, allow full rein to the tongue, to dictate one's will, to call for help one's will, surrendered to one's own will, to have will, my (your, his, etc.) will wills, not having [one's] will, by will or by compulsion <by will-compulsion>, by [one's] will, to let / to let God's will, one's will, willpower, to do one's will (Dictionary, 2012, 280). A significant list of established compounds not only expresses the richness of the semantic content of the concept *воля*, but also serves as evidence of the exceptional significance of *воля* (will) for Ukrainians, which is their meaning of life, and also demonstrates a high degree of conceptualization of *воля* in the Ukrainian national-cultural space.*

Ukrainian scholars extensively examined *воля* notion from linguistic, cognitive, and linguocultural perspectives. Within Ukrainian linguistics studies, the concept *воля* was described in a comparative aspect, focusing on its functional expression within different languages and levels. In particular, Karakevych (2010) characterized the phraseological means of expressing the concept “*воля*”, which she analyzed in the context of Ukrainian and German ethnoculture. Maslo et al. (2025) outlined the linguistic, figurative, and semantic features of the mentioned ethnocultural phenomenon and compared the ways of its reflection in Ukrainian and Polish folk songs. A wider scope of the representational base was taken as the basis by Valylenko and Semenyshyn (2016), building their research on the Ukrainian and English languages material. In Ukrainian linguistics, attention was usually focused on the concept “*воля*”, which was described on the material of texts of many styles and genres. In particular, Boyko (2026) included the concept *воля* in the group of abstract-emotional linguistic phenomena and considered it in a dichotomy with freedom and captivity. Betsenko (2017) analyzed the text-image system of folk thoughts and found out that the concept *воля* “was formed in the subconscious of Ukrainians as a determining factor of life and existence, as a necessary reality of being, to which one must always strive” (p. 159). The researcher outlines the aesthetic nature of the specified conceptual sphere with the following connotemes containing

positive emotional and expressive overtones: 'victory', 'liberation', 'struggle', 'achieving the goal', 'mental and physical peace', etc. Betsenko considers the nomen *воля* to be a component of the national-linguistic picture of the world, associated with the concepts of independence, freedom, captivity, slave, to liberate, as well as the concepts of homeland, faith, family (parents). A comprehensive study of *воля* with a projection onto the Ukrainian linguistic picture of the world was proposed by Redina and Yatskevich (2012). Means of verbalization and structural and semantic components of the concept *воля* fell into the sphere of interest of Krekhno and Minyaila (2023). Having chosen the spontaneous speech of dialect speakers of Boykivshchyna and Slobozhanshchyna as the factual material, the scientists identified and described the formal representatives of the semantics 'independence', 'liberation struggle', 'patriot', 'linguistic stability', 'restriction of rights and freedoms', 'privilege', which they characterized in the linguocognitive aspect.

A detailed analysis of journalistic texts on socio-political topics for 2007–2011 allowed Pysmenna (2022) to identify a complex of features characteristic of the concept sphere of *воля* to outline lexical and semantic variants of the specified semantic, including: 1) opposition of will and power; 2) independence of the state; 3) the subject's use of civil rights (freedom of speech, press, movement, etc.); 4) the subject's participation in socio-political life (elections, etc.). A corpus approach to studying the concept of *воля* was proposed by Levchenko and Romanyshyn (2025). Comparing texts from different time periods and genres, the researchers recorded dynamics of the means of this concept verbalization and the increase in their frequency in 2022, the prerequisite for which was the Russian aggression. The article emphasizes that markers united by the generalized meaning of '*воля*' are most represented in the contexts of the legal, criminal, and political spheres, and since 2022 also in military, diplomatic, and moral issues. The most commonly used synonyms of wartime are *волевиявлення*, *визволення*, *влада*, *свобода*, *лад*, *суверенітет*, *незалежність*, *готовність* and *рішучість* (expression of will, liberation, power, freedom, order, sovereignty, independence, readiness and determination). The description of the connecting potential of the lexeme *воля* with verbs and attributive syntactic units that participate in the process of metaphorical understanding of certain objects or abstract concepts, proposed by Levchenko and Romanyshyn, deserves high professional assessment.

One should nevertheless note that the single lexeme *воля* Ukrainian language may denote both liberty/freedom and will (volition), whereas English expresses these meanings through different lexical items. This semantic convergence enables media discourse to connect individual agency with collective freedom, making *воля* a particularly powerful symbolic resource in wartime communication. At the same time, most of the studies within Ukrainian scientific community do not go beyond purely linguistic or fiction studies research of *воля* concept. Although existing scholarship convincingly demonstrated the semantic richness of *воля*, most studies remain within philosophical, psychological, linguistic, or linguocultural paradigms.

Considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how wartime media discourse socially constructs *воля* as a symbolic resource that shapes national identity and social cohesion. The present study attempts to address this gap by integrating social constructionism, media discourse studies, and critical discourse analysis with functional-cognitive, pragmatic, and linguostylistic examination of contemporary Ukrainian media texts.

Methodology

Research design

The study employs interdisciplinary research design that combines social constructionism, media discourse studies, critical discourse analysis, and linguistic analysis. Media discourse is treated as a communicative space where collective meanings are produced and legitimized, while linguistic representations of *воля* are interpreted as empirical manifestations of broader processes of identity construction and social integration. Conceptual framework for this research is depicted in Fig. 1.

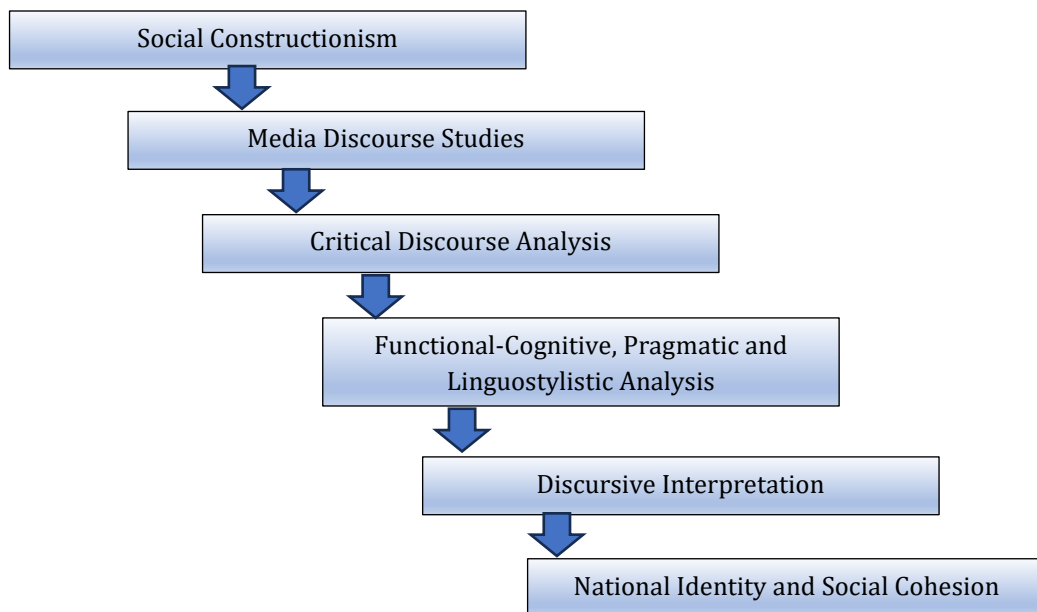


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of research. Source: developed by the authors

Data

The empirical material consists of Ukrainian media publications devoted to military, political-diplomatic, moral-psychological, and socio-cultural topics during the period of the full-scale Russian invasion. The corpus includes news reports, analytical articles, interviews, headlines, and public statements in which the lexeme *воля* and its derivatives are used.

Methods

The following range of methods was applied: i) functional-cognitive analysis was used to identify the semantic components of *воля* concept; ii) pragmatic analysis examined communicative strategies, evaluations, and authorial intentions; iii) linguostylistic analysis identified metaphor, personification, irony, antithesis, slogan-like formulas, and other expressive devices; iv) critical discourse analysis interpreted linguistic patterns as mechanisms for producing collective meanings, legitimizing social values, and constructing national identity.

Results and Discussion

Constructing “воля” as a shared symbolic reality: From linguistic meaning to social meaning

From the perspective of social constructionism, language does not merely describe social reality but actively participates in its production. Berger and Luckmann argue that socially shared knowledge emerges through continuous communicative interaction, during which individual interpretations gradually become institutionalized as objective social facts. Applied to wartime media discourse, this perspective suggests that the meanings associated with *воля* should not be understood simply as lexical properties of the Ukrainian language but rather as discursively constructed interpretations that shape collective understandings of national reality.

The empirical material demonstrates that Ukrainian media consistently represent *воля* notion as a concept extending far beyond its dictionary meanings. Although the lexeme may denote either liberty/freedom or will (volition) depending on the communicative context, wartime discourse systematically integrates these semantic dimensions into a unified symbolic framework. Consequently, individual agency is repeatedly linked with national freedom, while personal determination becomes inseparable from collective resistance. This process can be observed across multiple thematic domains. In military reporting, expressions such as the will to resist, the will to victory, the unconquerable will of Ukrainians, and the struggle for *воля* present military resistance not simply as a sequence of battlefield events but as the manifestation of an enduring collective disposition. Rather than describing isolated acts of courage, these formulations construct resilience as an intrinsic characteristic of the Ukrainian nation. The repeated association between military action and *воля* gradually naturalizes resistance as an expected and socially legitimate form of collective behavior.

According to the observations of Levchenko and Romanyshyn, “The first year of full-scaled Russian aggression against Ukraine (2022), quite predictably, witnessed the emergence of a new contexts of concept realization; military, diplomatic and moral” (2025, p. 242). The researchers point to the activation of the linguistic units of *good will, ambassador of good will, will to victory, to fight, to break the will*. In military texts,

we find a significant part of the compounds presented earlier, which indicates the continuity of their functional manifestation, in addition, other constructions are also attested: *Андрій Білецький – доброволець, який на війні став генералом. Це – постать, яка надихає молодь: сила слова і зброї, шляхетність, відповідальність за людей, **воля до боротьби**, результати на полі бою, які дають упевненість у перемозі добра над злом* (Andriy Biletsky is a volunteer who became a general in the war. This is a figure that inspires youth: the power of words and weapons, nobility, responsibility for people, **the will to fight**, results on the battlefield that give confidence in the victory of good over evil) (Gazeta UA, December 1, 2025); *Бо зараз українці нагадують усьому світові про те, що головне – це **воля до опору, воля до перемоги*** (Because now Ukrainians are reminding the whole world that the main thing is the **will to resist, the will to win**) (Defence UA, January 1, 2023); *Путінський план **зламати волю українців** атаками на енергетику провалився, – Снегірьов* (Putin's plan **to break the will of Ukrainians** by attacking energy failed, - Snegirev) (headline) (UATV, January 24, 2026); *Росія хоче **зламати волю українців до опору**, але вони обороняються дуже успішно – Пісторіус* (Russia wants **to break the will of Ukrainians to resist**, but they are defending themselves very successfully – Pistorius) (headline). *Росія продовжує щодня атакувати Україну, намагаючись **зламати волю українців до опору**, але вони продовжують витримувати невпинні атаки та обороняються дуже успішно* (Russia continues to attack Ukraine every day, trying **to break the will of Ukrainians to resist**, but they continue to withstand relentless attacks and defend themselves very successfully) (Ukrinform, June 4, 2025). In a significant number of contexts, the lexeme *воля* functions together with the subordinate toponym *Ukraine* as a value-marked image of the state and at the same time as an anthropomorphized subject of resistance: ***Воля України до опору** і польова інноваційність виявилися критично важливими для стримування Росії* (**Ukraine's will to resist** and field innovation turned out to be critically important for deterring Russia) (Enovosty, February 17, 2026); *Життя Героя трагічно обірвалося 7 лютого 2026 року: Андрій загинув, вірно виконуючи свій військовий обов'язок у бою **за волю України** поблизу населеного пункту Будки Сумського району Сумської області* (The Hero's life was tragically cut short on February 7, 2026: Andriy died while faithfully performing his military duty in the battle **for the freedom of Ukraine** near the settlement of Budky, Sumy district, Sumy region) (Varta, April 18, 2026). In the sentences presented above, the main emphasis is on the conceptualization of *воля* as determination, resilience, readiness to confront the enemy, to maintain faith in victory. *Воля* becomes integral part of the heroic image of individual people and the Ukrainian people as a whole and, when used in contexts of military actions and harm to the civilian population, gives the statements a distinct mobilization potential, performs a consolidating and evaluative function, and serves as an important element of patriotic discourse. From the functional-cognitive and pragmatic sides, the discursive formulas *to break the will of Ukrainians* and *to break the will of Ukrainians to resist* conceptualize the national resilience and indomitability of Ukrainian society, and form a positive image of Ukrainians capable of withstanding

long trials. Thus, in the media discourse of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the lexeme *воля* not only denotes the semantic nuances outlined in the dictionary, in particular, freedom, the ability of people to control their actions, to be independent, to freely dispose of something in accordance with their desires, but also participates in modeling contexts about testing the nation for its devotion to the values of the state, the ability to resist, which in modern circumstances are inseparable from the idea of self-sacrifice.

The same mechanism operates in political discourse. References to Ukrainees political will, the will of the Ukrainian people, and the sovereign will of the state construct political agency as the legitimate expression of collective democratic choice. Conversely, expressions referring to attempts to impose another state's will upon Ukraine frame external domination as a denial of both political freedom and collective subjectivity. Through this discursive opposition, media narratives continuously reinforce the distinction between autonomous national agency and externally imposed coercion.

The markers that conceptualize *воля* in the political-discursive space include the compound *політична воля* (*political will*), which represents the readiness of the state leadership to take responsibility for certain decisions: *Дрони та політична воля. Чи може Україна нанести вирішальний удар у відповідь по Росії (headline). Таких дронів у нас вже є вдосталь, і ми справді, як каже Штілерман, «можемо за одну добу перекритий весь нафтовий експорт Росії у Балтійському і у Чорному морі», і це можна зробити «вже зараз», як каже Берлінська. І вони підштовхують Зеленського знайти в собі політичну волю і зробити цей крок (Drones and political will. Can Ukraine strike a decisive blow in response to Russia (title). We already have enough of such drones, and we really, as Shtilerman says, "can block all of Russia's oil exports in the Baltic and Black Seas in one day," and this can be done "right now," as Berlinska says. And they push Zelensky to find political will in himself and take this step)* (DSnews, May 25, 2026). In the presented fragment, the conceptual model of *воля* is expressed by such features as responsibility, determination, willingness to take risks, the ability to choose a further course of action and be responsible for the consequences, which determines the effectiveness of a political leader. The pragmatic function of the structure *to find political will* within itself is to implement a hidden call for concrete measures.

The compound *політична воля* (*political will*) is evidenced in contexts of the lack of Russian authorities' intention to change the direction of their course: *Водночас, за словами Федоренка, у РФ на поточний момент немає політичної волі до перемир'я та немає на це запиту суспільства (At the same time, according to Fedorenko, the Russian Federation currently has no political will for a truce and there is no demand for it from society)* (UNIAN, May 7, 2026). The desire of the Russian political elite to subjugate Ukraine and control it is conveyed by the compound *нав'язати Україні свою волю* (*to impose its will on Ukraine*), which in the modern media discourse of the Russian-Ukrainian war acquires a negative axiological

assessment and evokes associations with imperial practices of dictatorship and the denial of the sovereignty of other states: *Москва прагне нав'язати Україні свою волю й зруйнувати її як незалежну державу з окремою національною ідентичністю. Україна виснажена – але не доведена до відчаю (Moscow seeks to impose its will on Ukraine and destroy it as an independent state with a separate national identity. Ukraine is exhausted - but not driven to despair)* (Enovosty, February 17, 2026). *Воля (will)* in this case serves as a symbol of external coercion and limitation of sovereignty. The compound *виконує волю Кремля (fulfills the will of Kremlin)* has a similar meaning in a sentence that informs about the political dependence of Belarus on the Russian Federation: *Білорусь наразі повністю виконує волю Кремля, проте ресурси окупантів для можливих нових операцій залишаються під питанням (Belarus is currently fully fulfilling the will of Kremlin, but the resources of the occupiers for possible new operations remain in question)* (Gazeta UA, May 22, 2026). As in the previous one, in this statement, *воля (will)* is associated with aggressive policy, pressure and the desire to control others, and the image of the Kremlin acquires a negative assessment.

Equally significant is the representation of *воля* within moral and psychological discourse. Media texts describing wounded soldiers, civilians, volunteers, and internally displaced persons frequently employ constructions such as an unbreakable will, strength of will, and the will to continue living. Although these expressions appear to refer primarily to individual psychological endurance, they rarely remain confined to the personal level. Instead, they are systematically embedded within broader narratives of national resilience, thereby connecting individual recovery with collective perseverance. Personal determination is thus transformed into symbolic evidence of the nation's capacity to survive and overcome existential challenges.

The understanding of *воля* as one of the key factors of national resilience is often conveyed in quotes or indirect language of foreign politicians and military: *Війна – це випробування волі і саме тому Україна зрештою досягне успіху, – генерал Ходжес (War is a test of will and that is why Ukraine will ultimately succeed, - General Hodges)* (headline) (Espresso TV, December 29, 2025). In this sentence, the combination “*test of will*” indicates the ability of Ukrainians to overcome difficulties, and also has a clear pragmatic potential, since it leads to strengthening faith in victory, maintaining morale and consolidating society. The analyzed construction actualizes the idea that the decisive factor in war is not only material resources, but also the moral and will qualities of the people. In addition, the personified-metaphorical representation of armed confrontation gives the phrase expressiveness and enhances its emotional impact. The war, understood as a kind of test of moral endurance, determination and the ability of the people to remain true to their values, is presented in another sentence: *У нас, може, і немає вікон, але є незламна воля (We may not have windows, but we have an unbreakable will)* (TSN, May 29, 2026). In this statement, *воля (will)* acquires signs of psychological and spiritual strength and expresses the resilience, steadfastness and invincibility of the Ukrainian people.

In a significant part of media content, *воля* represents the internal moral and psychological strength of the individual, resilience, internal resource, ability to self-recovery and conscious choice of life despite pain and suffering: *Воля рухатись вперед – це про силу духу, яку щодня демонструють українські ветерани. Вони не зупиняються, відновлюються через спорт і надихають інших іти далі* (*The will to move forward is about the strength of spirit that Ukrainian veterans demonstrate every day. They do not stop, recover through sports and inspire others to move forward*) (NV, September 2, 2025); *Ці люди втратили на війні частину себе, але не втратили головного – Волю* (*These people lost a part of themselves in the war, but did not lose the main thing – Will*) (NV, July 22, 2025); *Щоденна робота над собою, травми й біль, падіння й підйоми – те, що гартує твою Волю до перемоги* (*Daily work on yourself, injuries and pain, falls and rises - what hardens your Will to victory*) (NV, July 22, 2025). These sentences refer to servicemen who have been injured, but despite this do not lose faith in themselves, courageously overcome the consequences of war, and maintain resilience. In the contexts of the specified sample, the concept *воля* (*will*) goes beyond the traditional understanding of freedom or independence, acquires a distinct existential sound and appears as one of the key markers of the indomitability of Ukrainians in war conditions. It combines the seven 'spiritual strength', 'endurance', and 'purposefulness', forming the image of a person capable of overcoming the most difficult trials. The functional-cognitive aspect of the study of statements about people's motivation allows noting that in such syntactic units the conceptual model *воля* is the driving force for life is actualized. The predominant capitalization of the lexeme *Воля* (*Will*) emphasizes the axiological status of the analyzed concept and conceptualizes it as the highest internal value that remains with a person even after severe physical and psychological trials, and the metaphorized compound *hardens your Will* provides stylistic expressiveness of the text. In the sentence *Воля – це вибір жити, коли здається, що все втрачено* (*Will is a choice to live when everything seems lost*) (NV, July 22, 2025) the main emphasis is made on expressing a person's ability to consciously choose life despite difficult circumstances. The contexts given above perform a motivational and value-consolidating function. They are aimed at forming the image of a veteran as a person who overcomes not only an external enemy, but also his own injuries and limitations. Thus, the lexeme *воля* (*will*) is an important element of a positive media narrative about recovery, indomitability and resilience. It actualizes a range of important values, including courage, self-discipline, optimism, and responsibility for one's own future.

From the standpoint of social constructionism, such discursive regularities are not accidental. As Gergen argues, meanings become socially real through repeated communicative practices that establish particular interpretations as collectively accepted knowledge (Gergen as cited in Sandu & Nistor 2020). The persistent recurrence of *воля* across news reports, political speeches, interviews, cultural projects, and commemorative narratives gradually stabilizes the concept as one of the central symbolic categories through which Ukrainian society interprets the

experience of war. In Berger and Luckmann's terminology, the discourse surrounding *воля* undergoes a process of objectivation: what initially appears as individual linguistic choices becomes institutionalized as an apparently self-evident component of social reality.

Critical discourse analysis further clarifies the mechanisms underlying this transformation. Fairclough emphasizes that discourse simultaneously represents and constitutes social reality, while van Dijk demonstrates that media discourse plays a central role in reproducing shared ideological frameworks. The present findings support these theoretical assumptions. Ukrainian wartime media do not simply report acts of resistance, solidarity, or sacrifice; rather, they continuously organize these diverse experiences around the symbolic nucleus of *воля*. As a result, freedom, agency, responsibility, resilience, and national independence cease to function as separate conceptual domains and become integrated within a coherent collective narrative. This integration has important sociological implications. Through the continuous circulation of shared meanings, *воля* becomes a symbolic resource that facilitates the construction of national identity. Individuals encountering media discourse are invited to interpret their personal experiences not as isolated events but as components of a larger collective story centered on democratic self-determination and national resilience. Consequently, media discourse contributes to the production of a common symbolic repertoire that enables citizens to recognize themselves as participants in a shared political community.

The findings of media discourse analysis, thus, suggest that principal contribution of wartime media discourse lies not in describing the realities of war but in constructing an interpretative framework through which these realities become socially meaningful. Within this framework, *воля* functions as a socially produced symbolic category whose significance extends far beyond its lexical semantics. By repeatedly connecting individual agency with collective freedom, media discourse transforms *воля* into one of the central mechanisms through which Ukrainian national identity and social cohesion are continuously constructed and reproduced.

From individual will to collective agency: discursive construction of national identity

One of the most significant findings of the present study concerns the ability of Ukrainian wartime media discourse to transform individual expressions of will into narratives of collective agency. This process is largely enabled by the semantic structure of the Ukrainian lexeme *воля*, which simultaneously encompasses the meanings of liberty/freedom and will (volition). While these semantic domains are lexicalized separately in English, their convergence within a single Ukrainian concept creates unique opportunities for constructing collective identities through discourse. The analyzed corpus demonstrates that media texts rarely employ *воля* as a purely psychological category. Even when the concept initially refers to an individual's determination, persistence, or moral strength, its interpretation is systematically

expanded toward collective experience. Expressions such as the *unbreakable will of our defenders, the will to fight, the will to survive, and the will to rebuild the country* consistently transcend individual experience and become symbolic representations of the nation itself. Through this discursive strategy, personal agency becomes inseparable from collective resistance, while individual determination is reinterpreted as evidence of the resilience of Ukrainian society as a whole. This process corresponds closely to Berger and Luckmann's concept of objectivation. Individual experiences, initially expressed through personal narratives, become socially institutionalized once they are repeatedly reproduced within media discourse. Continuous circulation across news reports, interviews, editorials, political speeches, and commemorative narratives gradually transforms subjective experiences into collectively recognized knowledge. As a consequence, the "will" of individual citizens ceases to represent merely a psychological characteristic and becomes objectified as a defining attribute of the Ukrainian nation.

The findings likewise support Gergen's relational understanding of meaning construction. Rather than existing independently of communication, collective agency emerges through continuous interaction between journalists, political leaders, military representatives, cultural actors, and audiences. Each communicative act contributes to reinforcing previously established meanings while simultaneously adapting them to new wartime circumstances. Consequently, national identity appears not as a fixed cultural essence but as an ongoing communicative accomplishment maintained through the repeated production of shared narratives. This mechanism becomes particularly visible in representations of volunteers, civilians, medical personnel, and internally displaced persons. Although these actors occupy different social positions, media discourse consistently incorporates them into the same symbolic narrative of *воля*. Volunteer work is framed as an expression of civic will; humanitarian assistance becomes the manifestation of collective responsibility; psychological resilience signifies the nation's determination to endure. Through such discursive integration, diverse social experiences are interpreted as components of a common national project.

In Ukrainian media, *воля* is the result of various forms of activity, united by certain events, the names of which contain this linguistic marker: *Ветерани та військовослужбовці з Коломиї здобули призіві місця на іграх «Воля до життя»* (*Veterans and military personnel from Kolomyia won prizes at the "Will to Life" games* (headline) (KL Informator, March 10, 2026). Functioning as part of the official name of a sports and rehabilitation event, the lexeme *воля* retains a powerful conceptual potential and actualizes the sense of endurance, hard work on oneself, recovery, and the ability to overcome the consequences of traumatic events. The name "*Will to Life*" performs a distinct motivational function and contains a hidden shade of optimism. It focuses not on loss or trauma, but on a person's ability to return to social activity. In a media context, such a nomination forms a positive image of a veteran who not only survived the trials of war, but also finds strength for development. At the same time,

the compound verbalizes socially significant meanings related to the rehabilitation of veterans, their physical recovery and life motivation. In the name of sports competitions, the lexeme *воля* acquires a symbolic character and forms a kind of motto that represents the idea of overcoming consequences of war through activity, sports and self-development.

The word *воля* is also attested in the titles of other events, including exhibitions: *«Волю вільних не зламати»: в Києві відкрили виставку, присвячену містам-героям України* (*"The Will of the Free Cannot Be Broken": an exhibition dedicated to the hero cities of Ukraine opened in Kyiv*) (headline) (ArmyInform, August 23, 2025); *«Воля не смерть»: як вулична галерея в Одесі об'єднала художників під час війни* (*"Will is not death": how a street gallery in Odessa united artists during the war*) (headline) (Suspilne Media, May 30, 2026). In the above headlines, the analyzed lexeme plays the role of a key element of the symbolic, slogan-based and axiologically loaded war discourse, in which it acquires the most generalized and ideologically marked meaning. In the construction *"The Will of the Free Cannot Be Broken"*, which conveys the idea of the indestructibility of the national spirit, will appears as an internal collective force of the people. The antithesis-based title of the gallery, *"Will Not Death"*, contains a life-affirming motif and forms a message about cultural and spiritual resistance to war. The common denominator of the titles of both events is brevity and aphorism, which contributes to their memorability and increased emotional impact.

Critical discourse analysis further reveals that these representations perform important legitimizing functions. As Fairclough argues, discourse contributes to establishing particular social identities as legitimate while marginalizing alternative interpretations (van Hulst et al., 2025). Ukrainian wartime media consistently privilege narratives emphasizing democratic self-determination, civic solidarity, and collective responsibility. Rather than presenting national identity as an ethnic or inherited characteristic, media discourse constructs it as a shared commitment to defending political freedom and preserving sovereign statehood. In this sense, *воля* functions as a symbolic bridge between civic agency and national belonging.

The empirical findings actually suggest that wartime media discourse constructs national identity through a process of semantic integration. Individual will is repeatedly connected with collective freedom until both dimensions become inseparable within public consciousness. Consequently, *воля* ceases to function merely as a linguistic concept and becomes a socially constructed symbolic resource through which Ukrainians collectively interpret their role within the ongoing struggle for national survival.

Discursive legitimization of social cohesion through wartime media narratives

The analysis further demonstrates that the discursive construction of *воля* extends beyond the formation of national identity and performs an equally important integrative function by strengthening social cohesion. From the perspective of social

constructionism, cohesion is not understood as a naturally existing property of society but as a communicatively produced condition that depends upon the continuous reproduction of shared meanings, values, and symbolic reference points. The considered media texts repeatedly construct *воля* as one of these shared reference points. Rather than emphasizing differences between regions, professions, generations, or social groups, wartime discourse systematically foregrounds common experiences of responsibility, sacrifice, endurance, and collective resistance. Consequently, linguistic representations of *воля* contribute to reducing social fragmentation by providing a symbolic vocabulary through which heterogeneous experiences become collectively interpretable.

Van Dijk (2014) argues that media discourse reproduces socially shared mental models that guide public understanding of political and social reality. The present findings strongly support this proposition. The recurrent appearance of expressions such as the will of the Ukrainian people, our common will, the nation's will, and the unconquerable will of Ukraine gradually establishes a cognitive framework in which individual citizens perceive themselves as members of a unified political community. The repetition of these formulations across different communicative genres facilitates their internalization as socially accepted knowledge rather than temporary rhetorical devices. Integrative function of these narratives is particularly evident in reports concerning civilian resilience. Stories devoted to local communities restoring infrastructure, volunteers assisting displaced families, teachers continuing educational activities, and healthcare workers supporting affected populations consistently employ the discourse of *воля* to connect local initiatives with national resilience. As a result, geographically dispersed actions become symbolically interpreted as manifestations of one collective effort rather than isolated local responses. This discursive strategy also contributes to constructing trust, which constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of social cohesion. Instead of focusing on uncertainty and social disintegration, media discourse repeatedly foregrounds mutual support, civic responsibility, institutional cooperation, and confidence in collective capacities. Such representations normalize solidarity as expected social behavior and reinforce public expectations regarding cooperation under conditions of prolonged military conflict.

From the perspective of Berger and Luckmann, these processes illustrate the institutionalization of social meanings. Continuous media reproduction transforms solidarity from an episodic response into an objectified social norm that gradually acquires the status of common sense. Individuals therefore encounter cohesion not merely as an abstract political objective but as an already existing social reality whose legitimacy is constantly reaffirmed through public communication. The findings, thus, demonstrate that Ukrainian wartime media discourse performs an important sociological function by constructing symbolic conditions necessary for maintaining social cohesion. Rather than describing an already cohesive society, discourse actively

contributes to producing cohesion through the continuous circulation of shared meanings centered on *воля*.

Media discourse as symbolic power: legitimization of democratic values and collective resilience

The empirical findings further indicate that the discursive construction of *воля* represents an important mechanism of symbolic power. According to Fairclough, discourse constitutes one of the principal means through which particular interpretations of reality become socially legitimate (Irawan& Adnan, 2018). Similarly, van Dijk emphasizes that control over public discourse contributes directly to the reproduction of ideological frameworks guiding collective cognition. The analyzed Ukrainian media texts clearly illustrate these processes. Throughout the corpus, *воля* lexeme is consistently associated with democratic governance, civic participation, political sovereignty, and resistance to authoritarian domination. Conversely, attempts to suppress Ukrainian independence are represented through lexical constructions emphasizing coercion, imposed will, occupation, and violence. Such oppositional framing establishes a clear moral distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political orders. Consequently, democratic self-determination is normalized as the only socially acceptable interpretation of Ukraine's political future.

The discursive opposition between individual' *воля* and imposed will performs several complementary functions. First, it legitimizes political institutions defending Ukrainian sovereignty. Second, it reinforces collective confidence in democratic decision-making. Third, it delegitimizes narratives seeking to justify external domination or political dependence. Media discourse therefore does not simply communicate political events but actively constructs normative evaluations that shape public perceptions of legitimacy. This mechanism also contributes to the production of symbolic resilience. Rather than framing resilience solely as psychological endurance, media discourse repeatedly associates it with democratic values, civic responsibility, and national dignity. Such representations transform resilience into a socially desirable moral norm rather than an individual psychological characteristic. The repeated articulation of these values across diverse media genres gradually institutionalizes them as defining components of Ukrainian political identity.

Thus, the findings support Fairclough's proposition that discourse simultaneously reflects and transforms social structures. Wartime media discourse constructs a hegemonic narrative in which *воля* functions as a central symbolic category organizing interpretations of political legitimacy, democratic agency, and national resilience. Through continuous communicative reproduction, this narrative contributes to maintaining the symbolic foundations of Ukrainian society under conditions of existential threat.

Comparative perspective: Ukrainian concept of “воля” and discursive construction of national identity in the Balkans

The Ukrainian case acquires additional analytical significance when considered within a broader comparative perspective. Although South Slavic societies have likewise experienced armed conflicts, state disintegration, and intensive nation-building processes, the linguistic resources through which collective identities were constructed differ substantially from those observed in Ukrainian wartime discourse.

During the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s, political and media communication in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro relied extensively on the concept of *sloboda* ("freedom") as the principal symbolic representation of national liberation and political sovereignty. Public discourse associated *sloboda* with independence, statehood, historical justice, and resistance against external domination. At the same time, the lexeme *volja* retained its primary meaning of personal will, desire, or intention and only rarely acquired the broader collective significance characteristic of Ukrainian *воля*. Consequently, two distinct conceptual domains remained largely separated: individual agency was articulated through *volja*, whereas collective freedom was represented through *sloboda*. This lexical distinction has important sociological implications. Because freedom and volition are encoded through different linguistic signs, Balkan wartime media generally construct collective identity through the interaction of two complementary concepts rather than through a single integrated symbolic category. Narratives of national liberation are predominantly organized around *sloboda*, while individual responsibility, determination, or political intention continue to be expressed through *volja*. The transition from personal agency to collective identity therefore requires additional discursive mediation.

The Ukrainian case demonstrates a fundamentally different mechanism. The semantic structure of *воля* enables wartime media discourse to connect individual volition and collective freedom without shifting between separate lexical concepts. This semantic convergence considerably increases the symbolic density of discourse. A single lexical unit simultaneously evokes personal determination, political sovereignty, democratic freedom, civic responsibility, historical continuity, and national resistance. As these meanings repeatedly co-occur within media communication, they become mutually reinforcing components of one integrated symbolic framework. From the perspective of social constructionism, this linguistic specificity significantly enhances the capacity of media discourse to produce socially shared meanings. The repeated circulation of *воля* lexeme across military reporting, political communication, commemorative narratives, cultural projects, and civic campaigns allows multiple dimensions of social reality to become condensed into one culturally recognizable symbol. Consequently, individual experiences are incorporated into collective narratives with remarkable semantic economy, facilitating the rapid institutionalization of shared interpretations during wartime.

This comparison nevertheless, does not imply that Ukrainian media discourse is unique because of linguistic structure alone. Rather, it demonstrates how language and communication interact in the social construction of national identity. Whereas Balkan media discourses rely upon the coordinated interaction of several symbolic concepts, Ukrainian wartime discourse mobilizes the exceptional semantic flexibility of *воля* to integrate agency, freedom, resistance, dignity, and sovereignty within a single communicative framework. This integration substantially strengthens the capacity of media discourse to reproduce collective identity and maintain social cohesion under conditions of prolonged military conflict. The comparative analysis actually reinforces central argument of the present study: the sociological significance of *воля* lies not only in its semantic richness but also in its exceptional ability to function as a discursive mechanism through which media communication continuously constructs, legitimizes, and reproduces the symbolic foundations of Ukrainian national identity.

The social construction cycle of “воля”: from media discourse to social cohesion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the construction of *воля* in Ukrainian wartime media discourse extends beyond the lexical and stylistic organization of media texts. From the perspective of social constructionism, the identified linguistic patterns constitute interconnected stages of a broader process through which discourse transforms culturally embedded meanings into socially shared reality. Rather than functioning as isolated communicative acts, media representations of *воля* participate in a continuous cycle of meaning production in which individual experiences are interpreted, institutionalized, and reproduced as collective understandings of national belonging. This process is summarized in Fig. 2.

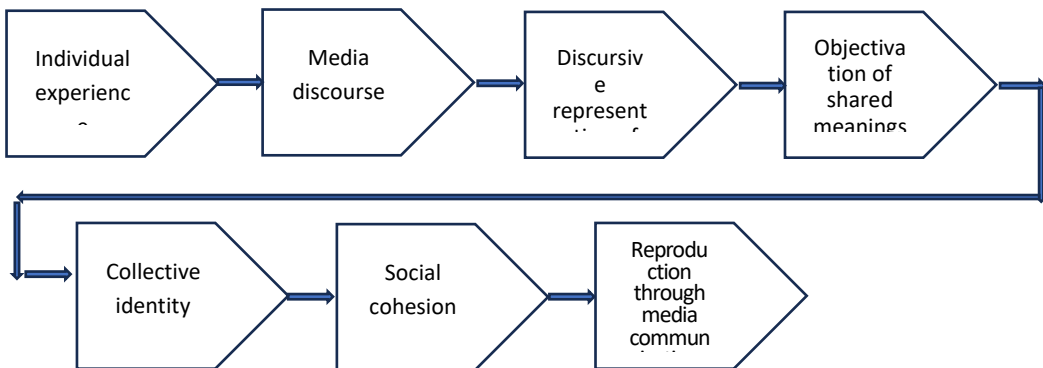


Fig 2. The Social Construction Cycle of *воля* in Ukrainian Wartime Media Discourse. Source: developed by the authors

As illustrated in Fig. 1, individual experiences of war - including resistance, suffering, sacrifice, moral choice, and civic responsibility - are first articulated through media discourse. Within this communicative space, the concept *воля* acquires discursively stabilized meanings that connect personal agency with collective freedom. Through

continuous repetition across news reports, political speeches, interviews, cultural projects, and public campaigns, these meanings become objectified in Berger and Luckmann's sense, gradually transforming into socially accepted interpretations of Ukrainian national identity. Once institutionalized, these interpretations reinforce collective solidarity, strengthen social cohesion, and subsequently re-enter media communication, where they are reproduced, adapted, and further legitimized. Thus, media discourse does not simply reflect existing social values; it functions as an active mechanism through which collective identities are continuously constructed, maintained, and socially reproduced.

Conclusion

The presented study examined the concept “*воля*” as a socially constructed symbolic resource within contemporary Ukrainian wartime media discourse. Moving beyond a purely linguistic interpretation, the research demonstrated that media discourse functions as an institutional mechanism through which meanings are negotiated, legitimized, and transformed into collectively shared social reality. Consequently, the linguistic realization of *воля* should be understood not only as a reflection of cultural values but also as an active instrument for constructing national identity and strengthening social cohesion under conditions of war. The findings indicate that semantic specificity of the Ukrainian lexeme *воля* constitutes one of the principal mechanisms underlying this process. Unlike English, where the notions of liberty/freedom and will (volition) are lexicalized separately, Ukrainian integrates both meanings within a single culturally significant concept. This semantic convergence enables wartime media discourse to establish a direct connection between individual agency and collective freedom, thereby transforming personal determination into a symbolic expression of national resilience. The study demonstrates that this linguistic feature substantially expands the discursive potential of *воля*, allowing it to function simultaneously as a political, moral, cultural, and identity-building category.

Interpreted through the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, the empirical findings reveal that the repeated use of *воля* across military, political, psychological, and socio-cultural media narratives contributes to the institutionalization of particular interpretations of Ukrainian reality. In Berger and Luckmann's terms, recurrent media representations become objectified as socially recognized knowledge, while Gergen's relational perspective explains how these meanings are continuously negotiated through communicative interaction rather than merely reflecting pre-existing reality. Consequently, wartime media discourse produces a shared symbolic framework in which freedom, agency, responsibility, resistance, and national solidarity become mutually reinforcing elements of collective identity.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that discursive construction of *воля* performs several interconnected social functions. At the individual level, it legitimizes agency,

responsibility, and psychological resilience. At the collective level, it constructs shared narratives of belonging, resistance, and democratic self-determination. At the societal level, it strengthens social cohesion by transforming diverse individual experiences into a common symbolic repertoire through which Ukrainian society interprets both the present war and its collective future. In this respect, media discourse operates not merely as a channel of political communication but as a mechanism of symbolic integration that contributes to the resilience of the national community. The comparative perspective also highlights the sociolinguistic distinctiveness of the Ukrainian case. Whereas South Slavic languages generally lexicalize freedom (*sloboda*) and will (*volja*) as separate conceptual domains, the Ukrainian lexeme *воля* integrates both meanings within a single semantic structure. This linguistic specificity enables Ukrainian media discourse to construct a particularly dense symbolic connection between personal volition and national liberation, thereby providing a more direct discursive pathway from individual agency to collective identity and social cohesion. The findings therefore suggest that the Ukrainian conceptualization of *воля* represents not purely linguistic peculiarity but a distinctive model of symbolic nation-building under conditions of existential threat.

Interdisciplinary framework proposed in this study demonstrates the analytical value of integrating social constructionism, media discourse studies, critical discourse analysis, and linguocognitive approaches. Such integration makes it possible to move beyond the description of linguistic phenomena toward explaining how discourse actively participates in the production of social reality. Future research may extend this framework through comparative analyses of wartime media discourses in other post-conflict societies, particularly in the Balkans, in order to explore how culturally specific concepts of freedom, agency, and collective identity contribute to different models of national resilience and social cohesion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare absence of any conflicts of interests.

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