

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of political cartoons

Larysa Makaruk ^a, Yurii Zablotskyi ^b, Iryna Charikova ^{a, *}



^a *Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University, Ukraine*

^b *National University of Ostroh Academy, Ukraine*

Received April 7, 2025; Revised May 12, 2025; Accepted June 25, 2025

Abstract. This article investigates political cartoons related to sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The selected corpus, drawn from specialized digital repositories, illustrates thematic representations of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of restrictive measures. Through analytical tools grounded in the triadic model of sender, code, and receiver, the study aims to uncover latent meanings conveyed through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal modes. Cartoons portray political figures, symbols, and events, often employing prototypes and tools to highlight specific actions and their perceived outcomes. Their multimodal nature combined with satire, metaphor, and criticism makes them especially potent for critical discourse analysis, shaped by historical, political and sociocultural factors. The analysis identifies several communication strategies that implicitly influence public opinion. Cartoons supporting sanctions often depict the Russian nation and its president through denigration, emotional appeals, and fear-based imagery, fostering solidarity with Ukraine and promoting negative assessments of Russian leadership. Conversely, cartoons emphasising the ineffectiveness of sanctions draw attention to Russia's circumvention tactics, profits from energy exports, and the economic risks to sanctioning nations. These representations may push international leaders toward seeking a ceasefire or, alternatively, undermine support for sanctions and democratic values. Ultimately, political cartoons emerge as semantically rich, visually concise instruments requiring significant background knowledge for proper interpretation. They function not only as tools of critique but also as persuasive media, influencing public discourse on the legitimacy and consequences of geopolitical actions. Based on the analyzed corpus, it has been established that political cartoons simultaneously highlight the ineffectiveness of the chosen mechanisms. On the one hand, they call on international leaders to consolidate efforts toward achieving a ceasefire and preventing potential threats to European security. On the other hand, they contribute to the weakening and delegitimization of sanction-related actions, thereby undermining democratic values and serving as a potential lever for the withdrawal of support for Ukraine.

Keywords: *Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, sanctions, visual and verbal components, political cartoons.*

* Corresponding author. Iryna Charikova,  0000-0002-5080-5216,  icharikova@vnu.edu.ua
© Makaruk, Larysa; Zablotskyi, Yurii; Charikova, Iryna, 2025. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

East European Journal of Psycholinguistics, 12(1), 113–140. <https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2025.12.1.mak>

Макарук Лариса, Заблоцький Юрій, Чарікова Ірина. Мультиmodalний критичний дискурс-аналіз політичних карикатур.

Анотація. Ця стаття досліджує політичні карикатури, пов'язані із санкціями проти Росії після її вторгнення в Україну, з використанням мультиmodalного критичного дискурс-аналізу (МКДА). Відібраний корпус, сформований на основі спеціалізованих цифрових репозиторіїв, ілюструє тематичні уявлення щодо ефективності або неефективності обмежувальних заходів. За допомогою аналітичних інструментів, що спираються на тріадичну модель «відправник — код — отримувач», дослідження має за мету виявити приховані смисли, які передає взаємодія вербальних і невербальних засобів. Карикатури зображують політичних діячів, символи та події, часто використовуючи прототипи та візуальні засоби для акцентування уваги на конкретних діях і сприйманих наслідках. Їхня мультиmodalність у поєднанні з сатирою, метафорикою й критикою робить такі зображення особливо ефективними для критичного дискурс-аналізу, зумовленого історичними, політичними та соціокультурними чинниками. Аналіз дав змогу виокремити низку комунікативних стратегій, що неявно впливають на громадську думку. Карикатури, які підтримують санкції, часто зображують російський народ та його президента в принизливому світлі, з апеляцією до емоцій і страху, сприяючи солідарності з Україною та формуванню негативної оцінки російського керівництва. Натомість карикатури, що підкреслюють неефективність санкцій, звертають увагу на обхідні стратегії Росії, прибутки від експорту енергоносіїв та економічні ризики для країн, які запровадили санкції. Такі уявлення можуть спонукати міжнародних лідерів до пошуку перемир'я або, навпаки, підірвати підтримку санкцій та демократичних цінностей. У підсумку політичні карикатури постають як семантично насичені, візуально лаконічні інструменти, для адекватного тлумачення яких потрібні значні фонові знання. Вони функціонують не лише як засоби критики, а й як спонукальні засоби, що впливають на публічний дискурс щодо легітимності та наслідків геополітичних дій. На підставі проаналізованого корпусу встановлено, що політичні карикатури актуалізують недовіру до обраних механізмів з одного боку, оскільки закликають міжнародних лідерів до акумулювання зусиль задля припинення вогню та запобігання потенційним загрозам європейській безпеці. З іншого боку, вони спонукають послабити та делегітимізувати дії із запровадження санкцій, ставлячи під загрозу демократичні цінності, що слугує певним важелем можливого припинення підтримки України.

Ключові слова: мультиmodalний критичний дискурс-аналіз, санкції, візуальні та вербальні складники, політичні карикатури.

Introduction

It is impossible to present the material studied in this article without reviewing the events and circumstances underlying it. Initially, this involved the March 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, a shocking violation of the rules-based world order followed by a range of severe consequences, including a dramatic deterioration of diplomatic relations between Russia and many other states and then followed by the imposition of various sanctions by Western countries. The EU imposed restrictive measures targeting individuals and entities involved in undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity. This included asset freezes

and travel bans designed to pressure Russia into reversing its actions in Crimea. In response to further Russian military aggression in 2022, the EU adopted unprecedented sanctions packages, expanding previous measures and targeting key sectors of the Russian economy, including bans on transactions with the Russian Central Bank, the exclusion of several Russian banks from the SWIFT financial messaging system, and prohibitions on the export of specific goods and technologies to Russia (“EU sanctions against Russia explained”, 2025). By December 2024, the EU had adopted its fifteenth package of restrictive measures, which included asset freezes and travel bans on 54 individuals and 30 entities which supported Russia's war against Ukraine (“Russia’s war against Ukraine”, 2024). This package also targeted Russia's “shadow fleet,” a network of vessels facilitating illicit oil exports to countries like India and China, which are crucial for financing the war. Overall, the sanctions applied against Russia by the EU and the USA have evolved from targeted measures in 2014 to broad and multifaceted actions intended to constrain Russia's capacity to sustain its military operations and to deter further violations of international law.

Of particular interest to us is the fact that the measures undertaken by countries in the free world to peacefully pressure Russia into abandoning the war were extensively reflected in the global media environment. This ultimately came to constitute a body of sanction-related discourse that comprised its own specific issues, rhetoric means, and semiotic resources. Many leading Western media support the sanctions, clearly pointing to the inadmissibility of the large-scale violence and brutality during the process of annexing the territory of Ukraine.

In our view, political cartoons constitute a significant segment of sanctions-related discourse, and it is possible to subject them to critical discourse analysis given their wide popular distribution: they not only give a reflection of the issue involved, but they also provide an attitudinal evaluation of the events and characters involved. Political cartoons from topic-specific repositories provide enough context to enable typical recipients to decode them. For the focus decision, each cartoon is indexed in terms of keywords: an indication is given regarding the thematic category to which it belongs, and it includes the heading and the author’s name below. In addition, some sources feature flag icons indicating the author’s nationality.

Such a structured indexing system and contextual metadata enhance the accessibility and interpretative potential of political cartoons, making them a valuable resource for analyzing the interplay between verbal and visual semiotics reflecting themes and ideological configurations of sanction discourse in the Western media environment. With these considerations in mind, we will now turn our attention specifically to the body of cartoons centered on the anti-Russian sanctions, which constitutes a discrete multimodal dimension of the broader sanction discourse.

Method

Language functions as a powerful instrument in shaping social, cultural, and political realities, often serving the interests of particular groups by influencing how objective reality is interpreted. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a methodological framework for uncovering implicit meanings and exposing underlying ideological intentions. According to Fairclough (Fairclough, 2010, p. 59), one of the founding figures of CDA, its scope encompasses three interrelated dimensions: the text (as the material, linguistic output), discursive practice (encompassing the processes of production, distribution, and interpretation), and social practice (how discourse reflects and reinforces broader sociocultural contexts).

In the present study, this framework is adapted to analyzing political cartoons as multimodal texts composed of both verbal and visual elements. Within this context, the textual level refers to the visual-verbal composition of a cartoon; the discursive practice involves not only the producer (caricaturist), medium (e.g., international cartoon databases), and receiver (mass audiences) but also incorporates genre-specific features such as symbolism, exaggeration, irony, and analogy, along with core communicative functions such as criticism, ridicule, and attitude formation. The social practice pertains to the ideological and evaluative messages conveyed within the corpus of cartoons, including their possible impact on the value systems and the political stances of the viewers. We have developed a set of criteria for the cartoons selection and conducting Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which is presented in the table below.

Table 1

The Criteria for the Cartoon Selection and Conducting MCDA

Analysis Criteria & Modes	Means of Realization	Role / Functional and Semantic Load (Deep Meaning)
Non-verbal Modes	Color	Grey – indifference; black – evil (grief); red – danger; blue-and-yellow – Ukrainian identity
	Contrast (saturation / blurriness)	Salient / marginal elements
	Size	Hierarchical or power imbalance
	Spatial Composition	Narrative and ideological relations:

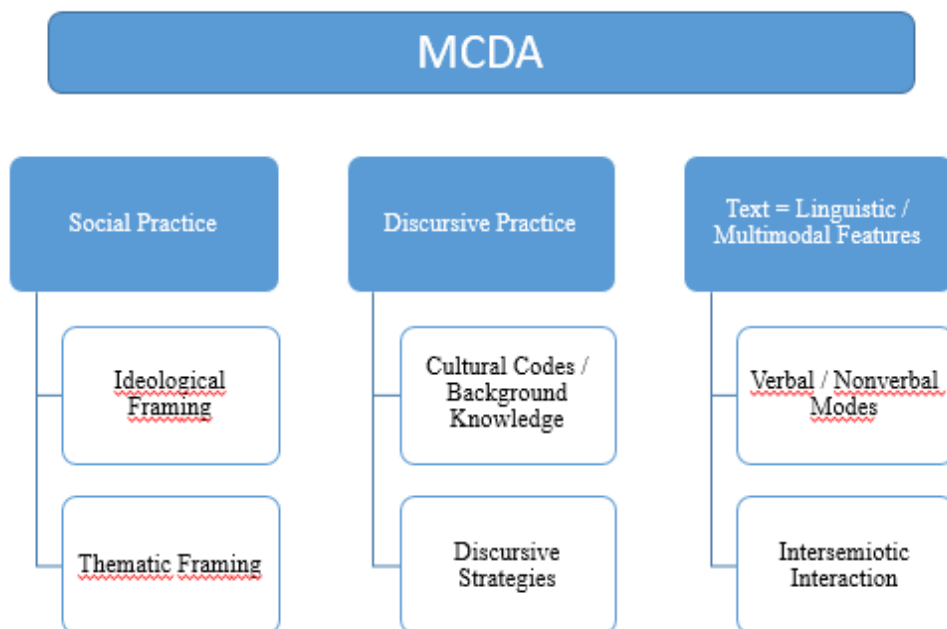
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • top-bottom = status (power/subordination); • left-right = given-new / past-future; • proximity = association / opposition
Verbal Modes	Heading, labels, inscription, names (any verbal element naming characters, objects, or places in the cartoon)	Contextual grounding through reference to characters, items, locations, etc.
Intersemiotic Interaction	Connection between verbal and visual elements; relations between multiple non-verbal components	Facilitates or complicates interpretation; reveals implicit meaning
Cultural Codes & Background Knowledge	Broad social context, set of values, encyclopedic knowledge, multimodal literacy	Enhances comprehension of visual components and assist in decoding their deeper meanings
Discursive Strategies	Metaphors, allusions, visual clichés, hyperbole, grotesque, distortion, sarcasm	Satirical critique, social commentary, symbolic generalization
Ideological Framing	Images, symbols, subjectivity	Serves as a marker of value identification; shapes the viewer's attitude; reveals political reality through stylistic framing
Thematic Framing	Recurring characters, narrative patterns, culturally marked signs	Elicit audience response to political context through periodic use of consistent visual markers

The set of developed for the selection and MCDA criteria of political cartoons is aligned with Fairclough's three level CDA model. Each parameter corresponds to one of the key analytical levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. This adaptation allows for the systematic integration of both visual and verbal components within the broader sociopolitical context of meaning-making. The

following diagram presents how these criteria map onto Fairclough's framework in the context of multimodal analysis.

Figure 1

Adapted MCDA Criteria



Following the Russian invasion, the sanction-related discourse developed gradually, patterning the particular framework and parameters, making them a linguistic analysis focus. Recent studies of the types of this sociolinguistic phenomenon provide quite a wide range of criteria for outlining distinct discourse subtypes, depending on the research objectives. The identification of discourse relating to sanctions is possible based on thematic and content parameters, as well as the social nature and ideological approach of the utilized semiotic resources. Several recent papers featuring the notion of “sanction discourse” in their titles and focusing on various linguistic aspects serve as compelling evidence of this approach (Masaka, 2012; Berkmanas, 2016; Gloria, 2021).

Establishing sanctions-related discourse as a distinct entity facilitates the process of subjecting it to the principles of critical discourse analysis. The basic framework of critical discourse analysis presupposes three elements: society, discourse, and social cognition (Van Dijk, 1995b, p. 17). Social cognition comprises historical, cultural, and mental filters of interaction with reality (Fiske, Taylor, 2017, p. 44), ultimately forming the community's beliefs, norms, and values. Unquestionably, sanctions-related discourse observed in the media presents the issue of restrictive measures applied to the Russian economy and its executives

through the lenses of the belief systems and the journalistic standards of Western countries.

The basic principle of CDA presupposes the analysis of the presentation of socially essential issues through the communicative activity of its participants at a given historical period within a particular sociocultural context. According to van Dijk, it is significant to undertake a thorough analysis of various traditional dimensions of discourse (grammar, style, rhetoric, schematic organization, speech acts, and pragmatic strategies) including other semiotic dimensions (pictures, film, sound, music, and gestures) of communicative events (Van Dijk, 1995a, p. 18) devoting particular attention to meanings and intentions implied “beyond the sentence” (Van Dijk, 1989, p. 164).

A comprehensive investigation into the communicative specificities of sanctions-related discourse, including its multidimensional semiotic configuration, can be carried out within Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). Multimodality, as a field of linguistic inquiry, is grounded in the principles of Visual Social Semiotics, as formulated by Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), and is derived from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a linguistic theory developed by M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). According to Kress, meaning can be realized not just through language means but by the use of other semiotic resources such as dance, art, and pictures; they can “articulate ideological positions of complex and potent kinds, and they, too, should be approached from the point of view of social critique” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 15), and thus should be studied within the framework of CDA.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) expands the scope of CDA by incorporating multiple modes of communication, such as images, gestures, sounds, layout, and other visual or non-verbal elements. It analyzes how these modes interact with language to convey meaning and perpetuate ideologies. MCDA conceptualizes a text – the central unit of discourse analysis – as a multimodal semiotic entity constructed on a specific set of meaning-making choices determined by its creator. Its coherence is governed by both internal factors (textual structure) and external factors (communicative context), all of which are inherent within a given social group framework (Kress, 2023, p. 36). Unlike van Dijk, who emphasized the importance of uncovering hidden meanings within texts (Van Dijk, 1995a, p. 18), G. Kress rejects the notion of “implicitness”, arguing that since all modes contribute to meaning-making, the traditional critical analysis focused solely on linguistic parameters is limited in identifying the proper interpretation (Kress, 2023, p. 39). Any multimodal text is defined by three interrelated systems: information value (giving specific value to elements through their position on the image: left and right, top and bottom, center and

margin), salience (the ability to the viewer's attention via foreground or background balance, relative size, color, and tone contrast), and framing (dividing or uniting elements of the image) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). These visual characteristics can intensify, add or even slightly change the aggregate meaning. Thus, the full potential of the discourse can only be realized when attention is given to all the modes and semiotic material involved. For this reason, the generalized approach to its social nature investigation should be based on the MCDA.

The socio-semiotic approach involves primarily the processes associated with the expression of meaning in general and the formulation of meaningful communicative output by individuals in particular (Jewitt, et al., 2016); it identifies types of multimodal cartoons and clarifies the meaning of their components and all units used in them; it also focuses on the relationship between modes and their compatibility, and the social needs for which they serve, taking into account the individual producing the sign and the context in which these meanings are realized. The comparative method enabled the implementation of the comparison to identify common and different parameters within the multimodal constructs identified in the media.

The multimodal representation of the Russia-Ukraine war in political cartoons has attracted scholarly attention in recent years. Researchers have explored ways in which cartoonists have dealt with the subject through the lens of multimodal and semiotic analysis, including Zrekat, Alanazi, and Lababneh's (Zrekat, Alanazi & Lababneh, 2023) examination of caricatures associated with the war, Abbasi, Zahra, and Asghar's (Abbasi, Zahra & Asghar, 2022) semiotic interpretation of political cartoons, and Semotiuk's (Semotiuk, 2019) comparative analysis of cartoons from American, German, and Ukrainian media. While these studies offer valuable insights into how the war is visually and discursively constructed, the specific topic of multimodal discourse analysis of economic sanctions imposed on Russia, with a focus on the social influence on the recipients, remains largely underexplored in linguistic research. This gap underscores the relevance and novelty of the present study.

Remarkably creative, semantically diverse, and thought-provoking political cartoons have become an integral part of sanctions-related discourse, helping to fulfill its key objectives within a defined communicative and social context. A political cartoon is a multimodal semiotic artifact (Stöckl, 2004) that integrates visual and verbal elements (Hussein, 2019) to frame, critique, and interpret political and societal issues (Abraham, 2009). This genre's fundamental principles involve the use of incongruity, exaggeration, metaphor, and irony (Genova, 2018) to reflect and shape public opinion on critical social matters by distilling complex issues into accessible and thought-provoking imagery. Despite their seemingly

“childlike” aesthetics and the frequent incorporation of humor, political cartoons do not always serve solely as a source of amusement and fun (El Refaie, 2009). Political cartoons are inherently socially charged due to their broader contextual grounding. They are rarely neutral in stance, and often imbued with an evaluative component, which makes them particularly effective for presenting ideology-related issues (Umer, Asghar, Qasim, Ahmad, Hassan, 2024); this renders them valuable for a comprehensive critical study of sanction discourse within the multimodal analysis.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, decoding political cartoons entails a complex interplay of cognitive and interpretive processes. As Forceville (2024) argues, decoding political cartoons requires not only linguistic competence and visual literacy but also the ability to activate relevant background knowledge and infer intended meanings – ranging from explicit cues to weakly implicated, context-dependent interpretations – making the process cognitively demanding and reliant on the viewer’s individual cognitive environment (pp. 262–264). Successful comprehension requires not only grammatical and syntax structures – the ability to process verbal elements such as captions and labels – but also situational awareness and encyclopedic knowledge, including multimodal and visual literacy skills necessary to interpret symbols, metaphors, and culturally loaded imagery. Viewers must integrate information across these semiotic strata to construct a coherent and meaningful message. This integrative process demands active cognitive engagement, particularly in reconciling visual and textual cues with background knowledge. Importantly, the mental effort involved in interpretation is often psychologically rewarding: recipients who successfully decode nuanced or layered meanings may experience a sense of cognitive gratification or intellectual satisfaction, coupled with a feeling of ingroup affiliation – that is, identification with a socially or ideologically aligned readership, such as audiences of liberal-democratic media outlets. Thus, cartoon interpretation operates both as a communicative shared worldview and affective responses within target audiences.

Despite the undeniable advantages of MCDA in discourse studies, it may exhibit certain shortcomings. As stated by P. Ledin and D. Machin, excessive reliance on SFL systemic parameters and strict adherence to semiotic resources outside their canon of use (norms and standards of their usage in a particular genre) as the foundation of analysis (Ledin & Machin, 2019, p. 501) might not be equally effective for all aspects of multimodal analysis, disregarding the broader social, cultural, and historical communicative context of meaning-making and potentially leading to a deficient analysis of the ideological influences of a given discourse (Ledin & Machin, 2017, p. 60). This criticism highlights the importance of developing a more socially-driven approach to MCDA, with the social aspect at

the centre, surrounded by canons of use and framed by the cultural context of a given historical period.

We acknowledge these concerns, but for several reasons, we consider political cartoons a major candidate for the application of MCDA within sanction-related discourse. Firstly, the “story” of sanctions as presented in a set of political cartoons is strongly socially framed, as it addresses the issue of an indefensible Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, a country in the middle of Europe, in an era where the prevailing pattern has involved open borders and global cooperation. It is intended not only to provide a commentary on this injustice but also to seek to rectify it. Secondly, while transmitting the main idea of a message, their content is ideologically charged, as they not only draw attention to the issue but they also seek to influence the readers’ attitude towards the events and their participants, using skillfully combined semiotic resources. Finally, it can be observed that the multimodal presentation of sanctions-related discourse is based on a number of predominant themes that convey a specific message. It possesses a distinct set of features shaped by particular strategies and tactics, expressed verbally using particular vocabulary, puns, and metaphors, as well as visually through various typical scenarios and images.

The source material for this study is political cartoons from the internationally known cartoon databanks *CartoonStock* (<https://www.cartoonstock.com/>), *GoComics* (<https://www.gocomics.com/>), and *Cartoon Movement* (<https://www.cartoonmovement.com/>). They are cartoons on important current global issues, indexed into thematic categories enabling specific search options. The websites display slight differences in their meta-information structure: *CartoonStock* presents each cartoon along with its title and the author’s full name at the bottom; *Cartoon Movement* additionally includes the date and a flag icon that indicates the author’s nationality; *GoComics* provides the author’s nickname and, optionally, the cartoon’s original source (such as a newspaper, a magazine or a website). While the inclusion of national flags suggests additional analysis parameters such as author’s identity and its potential influence on the issue perception, any attempt to reliably establish the cartoonist’s actual identity, nationality, or broader ideological viewpoint remains highly problematic. Many creators use pseudonyms, and verifying their background with confidence would require extensive investigation via search systems, professional directories, and personal websites. Taking into account the impossibility to apply this criterion to every element in the corpus, we consider such a task to go beyond the practical scope of this study due to its complexity and time-consuming nature. Other elements ensure sufficient social context, provided that the reader has a good command of English (as found in the cartoon titles and verbal components), is familiar with major current global issues (events

and prominent figures), and possesses fundamental visual literacy skills (such as the ability to recognize basic symbols, metaphors, and allusions).

A random sampling technique was applied to select data for further Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The phrase “Russia sanctions” was used as a key search term to identify cartoons related to this theme. The selected corpus was subsequently analyzed from a multimodal perspective. Based on the analysis of verbal and visual elements, two major themes were identified, namely the presumed effectiveness or the implied ineffectiveness of sanctions. These themes are presented by means of recurring scenarios, which were further categorized based on typical visual artifacts conveyed by means of specific imagery. The findings indicate that the overall semantic meaning of the selected cartoons is constructed by means of the combination of stylistic devices (such as metaphors, metonymies, multimodal puns, and allusions), established conventions (such as the functions of criticism and satire), communicative strategies and tactics (including mobilization, support for the affected party, delegitimization of sanctions, and emotional exhaustion), and overarching discourse ideologies (notably anti-war rhetoric and advocacy for the removal of sanctions). This methodological approach within the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) allows for a systematic examination of how linguistic and visual elements interact to construct meaning, allowing for a deeper understanding of the ideological and rhetorical functions performed by political cartoons in the context of sanctions-related discourse.

Following a keyword-based search, a total of 90 political cartoons depicting the economic sanctions imposed on Russia were identified and incorporated into the studied corpus. After a preliminary qualitative analysis based on recurring communicative scenarios, the material was divided into two overarching groups: cartoons representing the effectiveness of sanctions and those emphasizing their ineffectiveness. Each of these two groups was subsequently subdivided into ten thematic categories, reflecting dominant visual and semantic patterns.

The effectiveness group comprises five categories. The most represented among them is “Putin Under Pressure” (16.7%), which illustrates the personal consequences of sanctions for the Russian president, followed by “Crushed Economy” (14.4%), which visualizes the broader collapse of Russia’s economic infrastructure. Other categories in this group include “Civilian Suffering” (6.7%), highlighting the population’s hardships, “Trapped Bear Motif” (4.4%), using animal symbolism to portray geopolitical entrapment, and “Oil Sanctions Targeting Putin” (4.4%), emphasizing the targeting of energy revenues.

The ineffectiveness group contains the remaining five categories, with the highest frequency found in “Circumventing Restrictions” (16.7%), which depicts Russia’s adaptive strategies and sanction evasion tactics. “Backfiring Sanctions”

(13.3%) follows, focusing on the negative consequences for sanctioning states themselves. Additional categories include “Oil Profits for Putin” (8.9%), portraying Russia’s continued energy gains, “Military Power Unshaken” (7.8%), suggesting the persistence of Russian military strength despite sanctions, and “Sanctions Falling Short” (6.7%), reflecting the general perception of inefficacy.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that while both supportive and critical framings of sanctions are present, the visual discourse in the analyzed corpus leans more heavily toward representations of ineffectiveness. The emphasis on loopholes, unintended consequences, and enduring resilience reveals a complex and often skeptical view of sanctions as an effective geopolitical instrument.

Results and Discussion

The events related to and encompassing the theme of sanctions have been extensively covered in various media outlets in a variety of forms, including political debates, economic reports, news segments, and journalistic articles as well as in political cartoons, forming a body of linguistically-conditioned, socially-framed and ideologically-charged sanctions-related discourse. The discourse regarding anti-Russian sanctions has been shaped at the intersection of multiple narratives: military, as it represents the Western world's nonviolent response aimed at halting military actions; economic, since the measures primarily consist of financial and trade-related restrictions; and media-related, as the dissemination and framing of sanctions largely depend on communication channels. It has been widely reflected in oral and written form as news reports and newspaper articles, which have been extensively examined by linguistic experts in numerous publications. It can nonetheless be argued that the field of political cartoons has not been studied adequately, even though it provides such a rich source of raw material for Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The study undertaken here is intended to provide an analysis of the major themes, patterns and images of sanctions-related discourse presented in political cartoons from Western media sources. The analyzed material displays underlying messages and explicit intentions embedded within specific communicative strategies.

The Degree of Effectiveness of International Anti-Russian Sanctions

The Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the studied corpus has revealed recurring patterns that shape two distinctly identifiable major themes: the effectiveness, or conversely, the ineffectiveness of the sanctions applied against the Russian Federation. Each integral theme has been divided into several

subcategories, represented with different sets of semiotic resources embedded by the use of stylistic devices in accordance with canons of use of the political cartoon genre into ideologically charged and socially- and culturally-framed stories. Most narrations can be classified in terms of certain discursive tactics designed to achieve specific communicative objectives. The verbal and graphical components of these multimodal artefacts complement each other, outlining – through metaphorical projection and expressive means – the basic features of political cartoons: supporting certain values, condemning injustices, and shaping public opinion through critique and satire. Thus, they are not all intended to embody an element of humor; however, most of them are cleverly conceived and precise.

Within the studied material, the theme of the effectiveness of sanctions is conveyed in terms of the following scenarios: potential harm affecting Russia, its citizens, economy, and its president Vladimir Putin in particular. Sanctions themselves are depicted in the form of individuals, tools, obstacles, or weapons that could put pressure on Russian authorities to end the invasion of Ukraine. As suggested above, the target of these punitive measures is either Vladimir Putin personally, the metonymized Russian population, or the metaphorized economy, which suffer from the restrictions imposed. The primary intent of these multimodal texts is not to inflict further hardship but to force Russia to halt the war. The emotional tone, the unflattering depictions of key figures, and the compositional elements of these cartoons reflect a strong disapproval of violations of international law. The various visual representations, political figures, and design choices are, in a manner of speaking, united under the overarching theme of condemning the aggressive occupation of a peaceful country in the heart of Europe.

In one of the most common scenarios, Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation, is depicted as being the target of international sanctions. In view of the political situation in Russia, Mr. Putin is seen as the most influential individual; as such, he was among the first to be subjected to personal travel bans and asset freezes. He is depicted as being entrapped by sanctions, which are presented using a variety of objects, enforced by figures symbolizing the initiators of the sanctions, or suffering physically or mentally from the restrictions imposed (Fig. 1). All of the cartoons portray the Russian president in a very unfavourable light in terms of his appearance as well as the role he is shown to be performing: a seedy military man, a criminal, a shabby hobo, or even a malicious and deranged Gollum in his dark cave. However, in some cases, visual elements can evoke a certain cognitive dissonance. In the first cartoon, the visual component demonstrates the weight of the sanctions – the size of the kettlebell is larger than that of Putin himself, yet we can see that the character is holding the weight in his

hand, while the verbal component “If they won’t play my way, I’ll take my ball and go home...” suggests that he is more offended by others than actually suffering from the burden. It is also worth highlighting the use of visual devices that create hidden meaning, such as background and size. If we look closely, we can see that the background consists of a large crowd of people whose figures are barely distinguishable. The blurriness and small size of the “other” characters compared to the size of Putin’s figure make them minor objects, creating ambiguity in the perception of the overall message.

The background of the next two cartoons also plays an important role. In the second image, Putin is being led into the distance, where the silhouette of Saint Basil’s Cathedral on Red Square – one of the key symbols of Russia – can be seen against a deep black horizon. Ambiguity arises from the direction of the characters’ movement: the handcuffed criminal is being led into a gloomy space that, nevertheless, appears to be his familiar homeland. The background of the barren land in the third cartoon reinforces its overall unsettling impression, suggesting that the place ruled by Putin is turning into a deserted wasteland. These subtle graphic devices may seem insignificant at first glance; however, they play a crucial role in decoding the core message and shaping the recipient’s perception.

Figure 2

V. Putin Enduring the Consequences of the Sanctions



The body of somewhat similar cartoons is undoubtedly intended to humiliate the leader of the country that launched the brutal war. In this manner defacing the image of the Russian leader, this sector of sanctions-related discourse aims at supporting Ukrainians in their struggle and putting pressure on the aggressor nation to end the war. This strategy is widely used in a variety of discursive practices that relate to any opposition of a social nature. The stark negativity of the image of Mr. Putin, conveyed by means of repulsive facial features and compositional details, reflects the ideological rejection of the war by the creators

of the cartoons. Within a wider social context, this highly unfavorable representation of Vladimir Putin is designed to express condemnation of the violent breach of international law, to mobilize conscientious people to provide assistance for Ukraine, and unite nations that are part of western civilization in the support of democratic values.

Apart from Vladimir Putin himself, another target affected by the sanctions is the Russian Federation – both the political entity and its citizens as a whole. The trade restrictions primarily target the Russian economy, which provides the underlying power for the military forces; the sanctions exclude health- and food-related products in order to avoid harming ordinary people (“EU sanctions against Russia explained”, 2025). However, it is obvious that the measures will, to some extent influence every segment of society: no individuals can escape the effects of certain strategic moves, such as the withdrawal of international businesses and services as a protest against the aggression. To outside observers, it seems incongruous that following the invasion, the approval rating of President Putin among Russians rose by over 10 percent (“Vladimir Putin's approval rating in Russia”, 2025), so there would be a certain logic in causing economic consequences for Russian households in order to weaken support and create social pressure on government authorities.

The selection of cartoons introducing this thematic section of sanctions-related discourse draws some attention to the suffering of average citizens because of the restrictions. Russians are depicted using stereotypical Soviet images of low-income “babushkas” (old ladies) and plural “dedushkas” (old men) struggling with various inconveniences as a result of difficult economic period or suffering from the absence of the “benefits of civilization” which they had enjoyed previously (Fig. 2). The overall depressing mood of the cartoons is communicated by means of a pale colour scheme, gloomy inner and outer attributes of the people, shabby old-fashioned clothes, rough, unhappy and anxious faces, and by their rigid and lifeless positions.

The first picture depicts a harsh winter scene with a woman sitting outside near a small wooden shed labeled “HEATBOX,” and which resembles an outhouse in a small Russian village, obviously ridiculing the primitive standard of living, further complicated by economic hardships due to geopolitical tensions. The inscription “NYETFLIX” on the blank TV screen in the second cartoon stylistically resembles the name of the major American media provider “Netflix”, with a slightly altered spelling at the beginning that means “no” in the Russian language. In this creative manner, the exit of the streaming service from the Russian media market is portrayed. The colour contrast helps to emphasize that the population lost access to something bright and entertaining. The note “RUSSIA” on the old woman’s apron in the third cartoon helps to metonymize the whole country,

using the image of a stereotypical frail elderly woman nailed to the wall by a missile labeled “SANCTIONS”. Next to her is Vladimir Putin, with a torn Ukrainian flag in his hands, mockingly exclaiming, “Hah! Missed!”, illustrating the fact that measures targeting the Russian leader were harming only the country’s ordinary people. It is worth mentioning that the visual salience of Vladimir Putin described via his central position intensifies the overall meaning. The composition of the analyzed cartoons aims at evoking the sense of fear in the minds of Russians, in order to make them think about the unwarranted and senseless war directed against Ukraine, and the horrendous impact the sanctions are having on their daily existence.

Figure 3
Russians Suffering the Consequences of Sanctions



Another thematic-like set is various storylines depicting Russia with a metaphor of a bear. The bear is the animal traditionally used to symbolize Russia, implying its military might and geopolitical influence, as well as its wildness, aggressiveness, and diplomatic clumsiness. In a set of political cartoons, this powerful and terrifying wild animal is presented as having gotten into trouble, struggling under the weight of international sanctions (Fig. 3). The first illustration shows the bear caught in a painful trap, symbolizing Russia's entanglement in economic restrictions that hinder its movement. Another one depicts the bear wearing a collar labeled “U.S. Sanctions”, restricting its ability to act freely, particularly in the cyber domain, as suggested by the “Russia Hackers” label on its shirt. In yet another depiction, the bear’s neck is squeezed by a belt which hinders it from eating, a deadly hazard for a wild predator. Collectively, these images illustrate how sanctions, though not directly confronting Russia’s military forces, attempt to undermine their influence and limit their aggressive actions. The cartoons reflect the idea that while the ‘bear’ might remain strong and furious, its actions can be hindered by the collective efforts of the international community. The background of these cartoons is plain and neutral; the major effect is depicted by means of symbolic images of the animal (Russia)

and traps (sanctions trying to stop the beast). However, the red color of the T-shirt and the sinister look of the bear in the second cartoons flags about hidden danger despite the imposed restrictions causing the fear in viewers' minds.

Figure 4

The Russian Bear Motif in Sanctions-Related Discourse



A substantial portion of the international sanctions against Russia primarily targets the economic sector. Despite the constant claims of the Russian authorities about the success of “import substitution” and “new opportunities”, global experts state that the impact of Western measures on Russia’s economy has been considerable. For example, the GDP level has decreased by 10-12% compared with its pre-invasion level and personal disposable income has declined by 20-25% from what it would have been if the war had not begun (Szyszczak, 2025). The topic of recession is widely presented, with several recurring patterns portraying a bad economic situation (Fig. 4) from different perspectives.

The first picture in this set shows the true story of precarious economic conditions hiding behind the hypocrisy of media propaganda. The framing effect divides the picture into two parts, separating two parallel realities for Russian citizens. The left part, which usually presents the typical, known information, shows the smiling TV presenter with an abstract face telling his audience, “Western sanctions have zero effect on us”. The studio background colour is plain black. The word “zero” is written in red, a colour typically associated with danger, intended to plant some doubts in the minds of viewers. The right side, which introduces key information, occupies a larger part of the image and shows the broader picture: the black studio background is in reality a big “hole” in the Russian economy.

The second illustration is one of the metaphoric variations for the unprecedented devaluation of the national currency, when the Russian ruble crossed the psychological threshold of 100 to the dollar (“The ruble falls”, 2024). Even though sanctions were only partly responsible for the weakening, with declining global oil prices over the past few days accounting for the rest, the

overall financial – and even more, the psychological impact has been profound and far-reaching. The enormous size of the rolling ruble chasing Vladimir Putin underscores the country's dire financial situation, while also evoking the notion of a once “mighty ruler” transformed into a “frightened prey”.

Eventually, the freeze of more than half of Russian reserves, together with trade restrictions, the SWIFT ban, and other measures, led to the situation where the “steamroller” of EU sanctions “squeezes” resources such as employment positions with ensuing consequences for the Russian economy. The futility of Russian efforts to resist sanctions is presented by means of their disproportionate size, and the rolling they are trying to stop. A flock of crows circling over the deserted land in the background highlights the grimness of the image and consequently of the economic situation.

Figure 5

The Russian Economy Struggling Under Sanctions



A significant number of the cartoons connected with economic sanctions involves oil and gas-related multimodal narratives depicting the dramatic fall in Russian's hydrocarbon revenue. Over the past decade, oil and gas revenues have been the Kremlin's primary source of income, contributing between a third and half of the total federal revenue (“Russian oil and gas revenues”, 2025). Reacting to Russia's invasion in Ukraine, the EU Council adopted the sixth package of sanctions, which declared a prohibition on the purchase, import and transfer of seaborne crude oil and certain petroleum products, accounting for 90% of EU oil imports from Russia (“EU sanctions against Russia explained”, 2025). This ban was very significant for the Russian economy, considering that almost half of its oil exports used to go to the EU. Consequently, this situation was extensively covered by the media in the form of various scenarios with Vladimir Putin as the victim of the oil and gas embargo (Fig. 5). EU restrictions are presented as a “heavy burden” for the Russian leader, smashing him like an anvil. The top-down opposition in the image highlights the ‘dominance’ of sanctions over Vladimir Putin. The gas pipe used as a blackmail tool turned to be a deadly ‘trap’ for Mr. Putin, who is shown

with bloodstained hands. The serene and soft background elicits the feeling that Putin's dire situation, most probably resulting in death, is part of the natural order of things. Finally, the imposed price cap (the label on a jar lid) on Russian oil imports severely constrained his country's ability to finance the war against Ukraine. The unpleasant look of Putin resembling an entrapped frog combined with an instruction in red letters "KEEP LID FIRMLY CLOSED" create both an image of ridicule and a feeling of danger. This set of cartoons demonstrates the impact of EU sanctions on a key economic sphere of the Russian Federation, severely diminishing its financial stability, while ridiculing the image of the Russian leader.

Figure 6
The Impact of Oil and Gas Sanctions on V. Putin



The Purported Ineffectiveness of International Sanctions on the Russian Federation

The second major theme identified within the material under consideration is the purported ineffectiveness of international sanctions against the Russian Federation. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis has revealed the following five subcategories: the apparent ineffectiveness of sanctions, schemes for evading restrictions, unexpectedly high revenues from Russian oil and gas exports, the seeming reverse effect of the economic measures, and the apparent lack of impact on the military operation. Following a consistent genre principle and exploiting similar images and symbols in different scenarios, this section of the multimodal sanctions-related discourse places a question mark on the value of imposing restrictions. This contention is partly advanced by economic theorists whose vision is grounded in the pragmatic awareness that artificial obstacles to international cooperation in today's deeply globalized world negatively impacts all participants in international trade. Another aspect is that this rhetoric, reinforced by specific visual elements, manipulates public opinion to promote

well-funded pro-Kremlin propaganda. The portrayal of sanctions as being ineffective not only places a question mark on their strategic value but also influences international perceptions, thereby complicating the preservation of a global consensus on economic measures against the aggressor. This discursive practice does not align with democratic values, in that it undermines fact-based opinions on the part of recipients, weakens support for established international regulations, and seeks to undermine the recognition of the just nature of the struggle of the Ukrainian people.

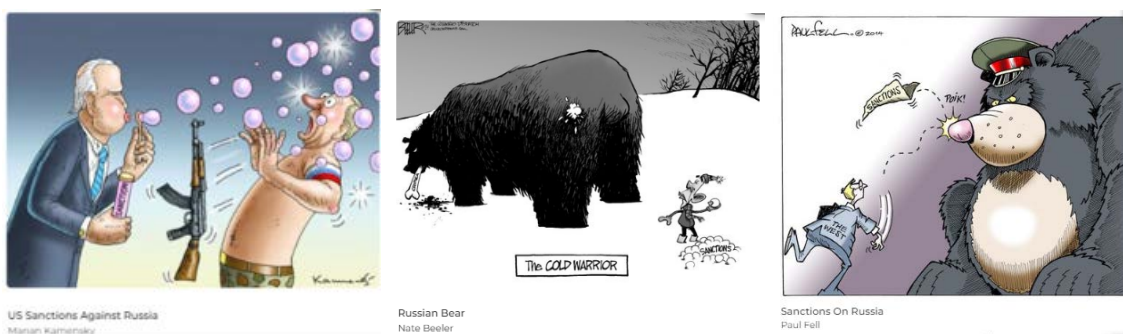
The imposition of severe international sanctions is not a common practice in the domain of international affairs, and is only applied as a radical economic instrument of political pressure against countries violating human rights and international norms to an extreme degree. Previously, such measures were imposed on the authoritarian regimes of North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria and couple of others, but achieved no real success in terms of producing any significant change. In fact, economics-related research provides no persuasive evidence that economic sanctions are an effective policy instrument (Smeets, 2018). The targeted countries manage to overcome obstacles by exploiting loopholes in international legislation; they find alternatives for importing and exporting goods in the huge global market, while at the same time coercing their citizens with power and fear. Unlike the other sanctioned states, the Russian Federation is a huge country with vast domestic markets and extensive international relations experience. Therefore, it has a much greater chance of evading even the unprecedented economic sanctions now affecting them.

A common tactic used to suggest the ineffectiveness of sanctions within the political cartoon framework is to utilize a humorous approach to this topic. The analyzed material contains the whole range of canvas suggesting the incongruity of the described activities. Their semantic core centers around the confrontation between Russia (metaphorically presented image of Vladimir Putin or of a bear) and Western countries (represented by the figure of a recognizable politician or just a generic man with a corresponding verbal label) (Figure 6). The first cartoon shows Joseph Biden blowing harmless pink bubbles labeled as “sanctions” towards a startled Vladimir Putin, who drops his rifle in surprise – obviously not the most effective “weapon” against the leader of an aggressor country. The second cartoon depicts a small figure of Barak Obama ironically nicknamed “THE COLD WARRIOR” (a person who engages in or promotes a cold war) throwing a snowball at the huge bear's back, leaving only a small white mark. The futility of the described actions is highlighted by the characters' size disproportion as well as by the grey, cold and indifferent background. The third cartoon demonstrates a fragile collective image of the West trying to intimidate a huge bear wearing a Russian military hat, with a paper airplane marked “Sanctions,” causing nothing

but a smile on the recipient's face, emphasizing the ineffectiveness of the sanctions. The size and the background colour scheme function as fundamental visual cues that underscore the absurdity of the depicted situation, thereby eliciting an ironic response from the viewer.

The use of verbal and visual elements is consciously or unconsciously intended to disparage sanction efforts, making them seem insignificant, and spreading the notion that attempting to affect Russia's powerful economy, bolstered by vast hydrocarbon deposits and other valuable resources, is futile. The use of humour distracts attention from the harsh realities of war, downplays the real reasons for deep concern, and cultivates the image of the invulnerability of the Russian economy.

Figure 7
The Ineffectiveness of Sanctions on Russia



Russia's skill in evading sanctions is another topic identified in the studied material. Despite extensive efforts by the international community to isolate Russia's trade networks, its pre-established connections enable it not only to securely acquire dual-use items but also to continue trading its resource commodities efficiently, albeit at slightly reduced prices. The prevalence of business interests over moral principles helps Russia to evade restrictions and even to establish new economic ties (Chazan, 2024). The situation is worsened by the fact that in spite of the massive withdrawal from Russian market of international businesses, reflecting their opposition to the war, 123 large and 328 mid-size and smaller U.S. firms continue doing business with Russia, which together account for taxes amounting to one billion US dollars to the federal budget (Plummer, 2025). This thematic section of multimodal sanctions-related discourse is presented with recurring scenarios exhibiting the unprincipled opportunism of global business participants; the skillful outmaneuvering by Vladimir Putin; and his partnership with India and China, who became principal oil and gas importers following the EU export ban (Figure 7). All three cartoons make use of the center and margin principle to outline the priority of business

interests in the first cartoon and granting Vladimir Putin a salient position in global affairs.

Figure 8

Russia's Methods for Evading Economic Sanctions



The MCDA shows a 'number of cartoons connected with the theme of Russia receiving high profits from the oil and gas trade. Despite some temporary effects in 2023, international sanctions failed to impact conclusively on this vital source of state revenue. Until recently, high global crude oil prices, together with the involvement of China and India as major new international hydrocarbons importers, helped to increase the proceeds for Russia from oil and gas sales in 2024 by 26% ("Russian oil and gas revenues", 2025). Sanctions-related multimodal discourse reflected this fact with cartoons showing Vladimir Putin enjoying profits from these industries (Figure 8). The first cartoon depicts Mr. Putin driving forward with his "OIL PROFITS"-powered truck that bore the license plate "RUSSIA", chasing a bear on a small three-wheeled bicycle with a "DEMOCRACY" flag attached. We infer that the truck driver is being presented as pursuing his own citizens who do not support the war. The power of Putin's "oil machine" is emphasized by its oversized barrel-shaped wheels. Another cartoon shows a winter scene in a forest with the half-naked Russian president resting on a wooden bench on the top of a trimmed tree in front of a huge gas flame. A label "Russian Sauna" hangs near a bloodstained axe. The Russian leader appears relaxed and comfortable, and seems to be in control of the situation. The calmness and confidence of Vladimir Putin are complemented by a stoic winter landscape in the background. The third cartoon exhibits a shirtless Vladimir Putin with an armband in the colors of the Russian flag, operating a press that transforms tiny figures of people on a conveyor belt, into oil. Another conveyor belt moves bags full of gold coins. A personified Earth under Putin's boot serves as a bag for gold. Vladimir Putin's enormous size in contrast to the line of figures – and even the personified Earth – serves to underscore his dominating power. The darkened background suggests an atmosphere of secrecy and underlying menace

unfolding on the depicted stage. The general idea of this set of cartoons is to project a strong image of the Russian president by seeking to point to his fearlessness, and his ability to generate profit based on combustible minerals.

Figure 9
Putin Enjoying Oil and Gas Revenues



A very popular scenario within sanctions-related political cartoons implies that economic restrictions targeted at the Russian Federation have the reverse effect, hurting the EU itself. Research into the effects of sanctions indicates that they affect all countries involved, including those taking the sanctions, even when the measures are backed by groups of countries collectively and are covered by a decision taken by the United Nations (Smeets, 2018). This narrative is broadly depicted with cartoon characters representing their political entities (Figure 9). Some of them are imagery figures made recognizable by means of national elements (a blonde woman in a blouse with a strip of stars around her waist, portraying Europe, or a typical Uncle Sam character representing the USA) or verbal elements (a moustached overweight gentleman wearing a grey suit, a blue tie and glasses with the inscription, "EUROPE"). Others are shown by means of specific elements of personal appearance obviously pointing to Russian president Vladimir Putin or Angela Merkel, the former chancellor of Germany. In the first case, the sanctions are exhibited as a boomerang that is coming back to those (the personified United States and Europe) who threw it. The danger from which the frightened characters are fleeing is emphasized by the bright red color of the boomerang set against a calm, light blue background. In the second illustration, Uncle Sam is holding a giant axe labeled "Sanctions" above his head, ready to strike a serene matryoshka doll labeled "Russia" which is located on the head of an old man who represents Europe. The cartoon obviously seeks to demonstrate that sanction efforts aimed at the Russian economy will have serious consequences for the EU. The futility and absurdity of the depicted actions are reinforced by the dull background colors. The third episode displays Vladimir Putin standing calmly and confidently in a red judo uniform. On the right side,

one can see the much smaller figure of Angela Merkel and two other men behind her. One man, wearing a Breton shirt and a skipper cap, has a fishing rod and a bowl of fish, clearly indicating his occupation. The man in a straw hat has a basket of cherries. One can also see a bomb labelled “SANCTIONS” thrown by the ex-chancellor, which has bounced back from Putin and is heading towards the man. The general message of the cartoons reflects the situation when anti-Russia sanctions turn against the EU by devastating its fishing and agricultural industries. The political prominence of the depicted characters is effectively illustrated by their relative sizes. This set of cartoons evoking strong emotional appeal by means of the combination of visual characteristics targets at creating the idea of the uselessness of restrictions and evoking fear in the minds of EU citizens. Obviously, economic obstacles might affect regional parties, decreasing living standards, but it is not to be compared with the brutal and immoral invasion of a small and peaceful country in the middle of Europe.

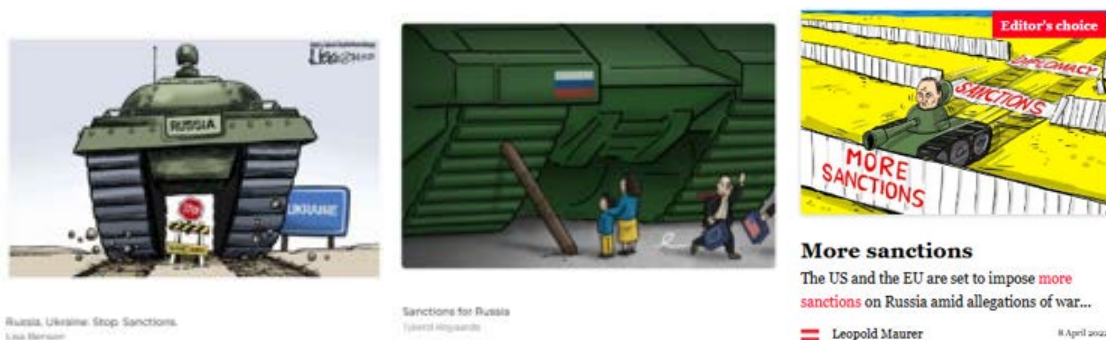
Figure 10
Sanctions Affecting Their Initiators



The last thematic cluster in this category involves cartoons depicting the limited effectiveness of international economic sanctions in countering the Russian war machine. As the world’s second-largest military power, and with a population exceeding 140 million, the Russian Federation launched an unprovoked attack on Ukraine, its neighbor, without any legitimate geopolitical or economic justification. When the initial offensive proved unsuccessful, the EU, the USA, Great Britain, and their allies began providing Ukraine with military and humanitarian aid simultaneously imposing severe sanctions on the aggressor. However, economic sanctions have limited power and cannot fully replace military support (Kulikov, n.d.). The motif of the ineffectiveness of economic restrictions to stop the huge Russian army is one of the key topics in the analyzed multimodal material (Figure 10). The sanctions are represented as a tiny stop sign, a fragile wooden stick or a flimsy fence. They definitely cannot stop enormous tanks symbolizing the Russian Federation identified by the label “RUSSIA”, by its national tricolored flag, or by a tank driver resembling Vladimir Putin. The disproportionateness in size between the military vehicle and the obstacles intended to stop it serves as the primary

visual device in the first two cartoons, additionally evoking a sense of fear in the viewer's consciousness. The bright, almost cheerful yellow background of the third cartoon contrasts sharply with the violence of the image causing some cognitive dissonance: brutal aggression unfolding in a deceptively bright setting. Undoubtedly, recipients interpret the metaphorical scenario and understand that sanctions are not intended to directly deter Russian tanks but rather to deprive Vladimir Putin of the financial resources necessary for continuing the war. However, the emotional impact of the imagery – depicting massive and aggressive military machinery – may evoke a sense of the ineffectiveness of the sanctions and the inevitable defeat of Ukraine, ultimately undermining faith in justice and in the efficacy of international intervention.

Figure 11
Ineffectiveness of Sanctions Against Military Power



Conclusions

Political cartoons constitute a salient element within the contemporary English mass media communicative space, functioning as a potent instrument capable of conveying meaning both explicitly and implicitly. Despite their compact size, their visual nature gives them the capacity to convey a substantial amount of information, for which extensive verbal articulation would otherwise be required. Political cartoons emerge in response to prevailing situations in diverse global contexts. The analyzed corpus constitutes a comprehensive collection of political cartoons depicting the perceived effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of its war against Ukraine.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the illustrative corpus leads to the conclusion that various semiotic resources can represent complex social concepts and scenarios colouring them with additional implicit meaning, evaluative attitudes, and ideological bias. The broad social and political context, the structure of the general visual composition and verbal elements provide sufficient grounds

for decoding the intended message. The political attributes are represented through recognizable stereotypical components, such as the bear, the national flags of the states involved, military accessories etc. Characters are identified by distinctive facial features or corresponding inscriptions. The situations they are placed in and the emotions they convey construct narrative arcs that evoke admiration or aversion in the audience's perception. The systematic and repetitive use of such multimodal narratives contributes to the formation of broader discursive frameworks and facilitates the shaping of public opinion regarding the sanction discourse.

Political cartoons dealing with the sanctions imposed on Russia communicate meaning by utilizing stylistic devices encompassing critique, satire, mockery, irony, and metaphorization. Prototypes employed to convey the effectiveness of the sanctions include depictions of the president of the Russian Federation, the image of a bear, the Russian populace, and the Russian economy. This representational strategy is designed to underscore the results or the consequences of sanctions, presumably to give impetus to the efforts of the European community in demonstrating support for Ukraine and a refusal to tolerate Russian aggression.

Alternatively, the purported ineffectiveness or even the counterproductiveness of the sanctions is presented using various illustrative strategies to depict Russia's circumvention of restrictions, the substantial profits that it continues to receive from the oil and gas trade, and the potential risks incurred by the initiators of the sanctions. These techniques are often intended to minimize or delegitimize sanctions efforts, with the possible result of undermining support for democratic values and potentially for Ukraine itself. Emotionally-oriented appeals, instilling a feeling of futility and evoking fear, constitute primary discursive strategies existing within recurring scenarios of the cartoons that have been studied.

The combination of verbal elements, characters, and objects depicted in political cartoons – alongside the broader social context – offers recipients complex scenarios with relatively transparent meanings. However, minor details embedded in the background, colour scheme, orientation, position, and scale can be decoded only by an experienced and visually literate viewer. These subtle nuances, although seemingly innocuous at first glance, may nonetheless influence the perception process at a subconscious level, thereby shaping the viewer's attitude toward the depicted issue.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interests.

References

- Abraham, L. (2009). Effectiveness of cartoons as a uniquely visual medium for orienting social issues. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 11(2), 117–165.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379090110020>
- Berkmanas, T. (2016). Doing sanctions with words: legacy, scope, fairness and future (?) of a reprimand. *International Journal of Law, Language & Discourse*, 6, 29–36.
- El Refaie, E. (2009). Multiliteracies: How readers interpret political cartoons. *Visual Communication*, 8(2), 181–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357209102113>
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (2017). *Social cognition: from brains to culture* (3rd edition). SAGE Publications.
- Genova, D. (2018). Grasping political cartoons?. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 6(1), 85–99.
- Gloria, E. V. (2023). Justifying economic coercion: The discourse of victimhood in China's unilateral sanctions policy. *The Pacific Review*, 36(3), 521–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1980605>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Hussein, I. (2019). Analyzing political cartoons in Arabic-language media after Trump's Jerusalem move: A multimodal discourse perspective. *International Journal of Cognitive and Language Sciences*, 13(4), 451–465.
- Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J., & O'Halloran, K. (2016). *Introducing multimodality*. Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2023). Multimodal discourse analysis. *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 35–51). Routledge.
- Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: the grammar of visual design* (2nd ed). Routledge.
- Ledin, P., & Machin, D. (2017). Multimodal critical discourse analysis. In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse studies* (pp. 60–76). Routledge.
- Ledin, P., & Machin, D. (2019). Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: from metafunctions to materiality. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(5), 497–513.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1468789>
- Masaka, D. (2012). Paradoxes in the 'Sanctions Discourse' in Zimbabwe: a critical reflection. *African Study Monographs*, 33(1), 49–71.
- Stockl, H. (2004). In between modes: Language and image in printed media. In E. Ventola, C. Charles & M. Kaltenbacher (Eds.), *Perspectives of Multimodality* (pp. 9–30). John Benjamins.
- Umer, A., Asghar, I., Qasim, Z., Ahmad, N. N., & Hassan, A. (2024). Print media as a vehicle of narrative building: A multimodal discourse analysis of political caricatures. *Migration Letters*, 21(s11), 223–241.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1989). Social cognition and discourse. *Handbook of Language and Social Psychology* (pp. 163–183). Wiley.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Aims of critical discourse analysis. *Japanese Discourse*, 1(1), 17–28.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Discourse analysis as ideology analysis. In *Language & Peace* (pp. 17–33). Routledge.

Sources

- Chazan, Y. (2024, January 16). How the Russian Economy Survives Western Sanctions. *Geopolitical Monitor*. Retrieved from <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/how-russia-survives-western-sanctions/>
- EU sanctions against Russia explained. (Last Review: 2025, February 25). *Council of the EU*. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>
- Kulikov, V. (n. d.). Economic Sanctions are Insufficient to Stop the War. *Review of Democracy*. Retrieved from <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/03/24/economic-sanctions-are-insufficient-to-stop-the-war/>
- Plummer, K. (2025, January 11). US firms pay over \$1 billion in taxes to Russia Amid Ongoing Ukraine war. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/us-companies-pay-over-1-billion-taxes-russia-amid-ongoing-ukraine-war-2012473>.
- Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: EU adopts 15th package of restrictive measures (2024, December 16). *Council of the EU*. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/16/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-15th-package-of-restrictive-measures/>.
- Russian oil and gas revenues jump 26% in 2024 to \$108 billion. (2025, January 13). *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russian-oil-gas-revenues-jump-26-2024-108-bln-2025-01-13/>.
- Smeets, M. (2018). Can economic sanctions be effective?, *WTO Staff Working Paper*, No. ERSD-2018-03, World Trade Organization (WTO), Geneva. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30875/ob967ac6-en>.
- Szyszczak, E. (2025, February 19). Sanctions effectiveness: what lessons three years into the war on Ukraine? *Economics Observatory*. Retrieved from <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/sanctions-effectiveness-what-lessons-three-years-into-the-war-on-ukraine>.
- The ruble falls: what is happening to russia's currency. (2024, November 15). *Center For Countering Disinformation*. Retrieved from <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/results/rf-en/the-ruble-falls-what-is-happening-to-russias-currency/>.
- Vladimir Putin's approval rating in Russia monthly 1999–2025. (2025, February 25). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/>