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Course Paper

**Pragmatic functions of hedging in modern English media
discourse**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
I. CHAPTER ONE. The concept of hedging in modern pragmalinguistics	5
1.1 The concept of hedging.....	5
1.2 Mitigation in discourse.....	6
1.3 Hedging in media discourse.....	8
1.4 Conclusions to Chapter One.....	9
II. CHAPTER TWO. Pragmatic functions of hedging in modern English media representation of Russia-Ukraine war	10
2.1 How popular Western media talk about the Russia-Ukraine war.....	11
2.2 Analysis of the common means of mitigation and its influence on the reader's perception.....	12
2.3 Conclusions to Chapter Two.....	15
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS	16
RÉSUMÉ	18
LIST OF ILLUSTRATION MATERIALS	20
LIST OF REFERENCE MATERIALS	21

INTRODUCTION

We consume media everyday in all of the forms possible. Internet, newspapers, magazines, radio and television – there is information there about anything one might think of. But due to the fact all of this massive base of ideas and statements is created by humans, it's nearly impossible for it to remain objective. The messages directed at us usually carry deeper meaning which is not always noticeable on the surface level when we just encounter it.

Not only what is said but how it is said matters the most, as we can often sense the tone in which the information is reported without understanding exact means that influence our perception. Hedging has to be one of the most discreet ways of shaping an opinion, as mitigation via occasional words slowly amasses into a less serious treatment of the issue without directly depreciating it.

The relevance lays in bringing attention to the mitigating means of impacting general public' opinion on the issues highlighted in the media. These are primarily socio-political drives of the research. But, the scientific relevance of the study lies in the pragmatic effect of communicative indirectness and mitigation techniques for discursive meaning construction in Modern English media

The purpose is to identify pragmatic means for legitimizing knowledge in modern English media discourse.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to fulfil the following tasks:

- define the concept of hedging;
- to reveal the pragmatic functions of hedging in modern media discourse;
- to analyze the emotional influence of hedging in Modern English media discourse;
- to provide a Qualitative Emotion Analysis of of the New York Times articles titled “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” and “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn't Ready”

- The work consists of Introduction, 7 subsections, General Conclusions, Résumé, List of Illustration Materials and List of Reference Materials. There are 22 pages, 23 sources were used as reference materials and 2 sources were used as illustration materials.

I. CHAPTER ONE. The concept of hedging in modern pragmalinguistics

1.1 The concept of hedging

In modern pragmalinguistics, hedging refers to the use of linguistic devices to express uncertainty or ambiguity in language. Hedging is a common strategy used by speakers to convey their level of confidence in what they are saying or to mitigate potential negative effects of their speech.

Hedging can take various forms, such as using modal verbs (e.g., "might," "could," "would"), adverbs (e.g., "perhaps," "maybe," "possibly"), or phrases that express doubt or reservation (e.g., "I'm not entirely sure," "It's possible, but...").

In academic writing, hedges are often used to express caution and acknowledge the limitations of research findings (Hyland, 1998). The use of hedging is influenced by various factors, such as the speaker's level of expertise or knowledge on the topic and the context of the conversation (Lakoff, 1973). Hedges could create confusion between speakers, but one could also create confusion by using metaphors or loan words apart from hedges (Gunnarson, 2003).

(Prince, 1982) suggests that hedges serve as "approximators" and "shields" in communication. Approximators create a level of fuzziness within the utterance, while shields empower the speaker's commitment to the truth of an utterance. This view is consistent with the work of (Holmes, 1984), who suggests that hedges have both epistemic modal and affective functions. The epistemic modal function expresses uncertainty and approximation, while the affective function is used to create a more casual conversation and reduce social distances between speakers. Furthermore, (Coates,

2004) defines hedges as linguistic forms that express the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about the proposition under discussion.

However, (Gunnarson, 2003: p. 103) provides a different perspective on hedges, defining them as forms of euphemisms used to deceive or avoid saying something straightforwardly. This agrees with (Wardhaug, 2010: p. 292) claims about face-saving but contradicts Holmes' view of hedges as multifunctional. Additionally, intonation plays a crucial role in signaling certainty or uncertainty, as (Holmes, 1990) notes, with falling intonation indicating certainty and rising intonation signaling uncertainty.

1.2 Mitigation in discourse

In discourse analysis, mitigation refers to the use of language to reduce the impact of a speech act or to soften the tone of a message. Mitigation is often used to convey politeness, respect, or deference towards the listener or the topic being discussed.

Mitigation can take various forms, such as using euphemisms (e.g., "passed away" instead of "died"), using indirect language (e.g., "I wonder if you could possibly help me" instead of "Can you help me?"), or using hedges (e.g., "I'm not sure, but I think that...").

Mitigation refers to a communicative strategy used by speakers to convey distance in relation to the message. This strategy is used to weaken the illocutionary force of the speech acts and minimize the role of the participants in the interaction. Mitigation helps to manage interactions smoothly by reducing the threat of loss of face, self-contradiction, or interpersonal conflict. (Albelda et al., 2014) suggest that mitigation is a set of strategies used to build self-protection, prevent unwanted effects on the recipient, or repair social damage during interaction. Besides its sociological or sociolinguistic dimension, mitigation also extends its scope to other areas of discursive meaning production. According to (Caffi, 2007), mitigation affects two other domains in communication: interactional efficiency and identity construction. Caffi's psychological approach offers the possibility of contemplating mitigation as a multilevel and multidimensional

phenomenon that involves various linguistic levels together with an interactional dimension. The mitigating linguistic output is placed in a cognitive and social model of language that tackles both the cognitive and emotive effects of mitigation.

Mitigation has been generally associated with an array of linguistic mechanisms specialized in modifying the illocutionary force of the utterance. These mechanisms are often used in conjunction with each other, resulting in mitigating discourse structures. Studies have shown that mitigating devices represent a heterogeneous set of mechanisms of morphological, lexical, syntactic, and discursive nature that display the speakers' metapragmatic awareness of the parameters of the communicative event. The mitigated meaning is scalar or gradual in nature, rather than categorical.

Mitigation is a multifunctional phenomenon that extends its scope to other areas of discursive meaning production. Adopting a broader perspective, (Caffi, 2007) argues that mitigation affects two other domains in communication: interactional efficiency and identity construction. In this line of research, the model of mitigation devised by (Martinovski et al., 2004) renders a more compounded framework to understand the cognitive, emotive, relational, situational, and linguistic components of the mitigation process. Mitigation facilitates the attainment of communicative goals, while at the same time, it helps to monitor emotive distance.

Mitigation has been associated in the literature with an array of linguistic mechanisms specialized in modifying the illocutionary force of the utterance. Most research has been concerned with the mitigated meaning conveyed by isolated grammatical structures or lexical items, although several works adopting a corpus-discursive approach have identified certain discursive strategies with which mitigation might be induced. These strategies include providing justifications, making apologies and concessions, resorting to reported evidence, and more.

Mitigation can be initiated when an actual or potential conflictive (stressful) event occurs. Depending on the parameters of the communicative event, as well as the kind of

stressor experienced by the interactants, there will be recognizable and distinctive patterns of mitigation for each particular speech event. A multidimensional analysis is necessary to fully understand mitigation, embracing the cognitive and affective facets of mitigation, and their discourse representation. (Martinovski et al., 2004) propose such a model.

1.3 Hedging in media discourse

One key function of hedging in media discourse is to maintain credibility. Politicians often use hedging to avoid making statements that could be proven wrong or that could damage their credibility. By using phrases like "it seems likely" or "it is possible that," they can express their opinions without appearing too confident or authoritative. This strategy allows politicians to maintain their credibility and to avoid being criticized for making unfounded claims (Chafe, 1986).

Another function of hedging in political discourse is to avoid controversy. Hedging can be used to avoid taking a definitive stance on a controversial issue. By using phrases like "some argue" or "many believe," politicians can acknowledge different perspectives without committing to a particular position. This strategy allows politicians to avoid controversy and to maintain positive relationships with voters (Lakoff, 2011).

Hedging can also be used in diplomatic contexts to soften the impact of a statement and to maintain positive relationships between nations or groups. For example, instead of accusing another country of wrongdoing, a politician might say "we have concerns about" or "we urge them to reconsider." This strategy allows politicians to express their opinions without causing offense or damaging diplomatic relations. The downside of it is definitely the use of this strategy as a way out of answering critical questions directly. Diplomatic relations are something to hold on to, but not when it comes to defending the basic human rights. There's no place for diplomacy when you are witnessing violence. There are countless examples of such behaviour from the presidents of the EU countries.

For example, Emmanuel Macron's attempts to support the narrative of Ukraine and Russia being "brotherly nations" and statements that Russia "should not be humiliated" only represent that no matter what atrocities Russia committed, it is still feared and seen as a potential partner. It's not beneficial to ruin relations with it. And this exact behaviour shows the green light to the further violence.

Effective use of hedging can have significant implications for how politicians are perceived by the public and how policies are received and interpreted (Hyland, 1998).

1.4 Conclusions to Chapter One

The phenomenon of hedging and its effects on communication have been widely studied in the fields of linguistics and psychology. According to Schiffrin (1985), hedging is a linguistic device that allows speakers to avoid making unqualified assertions. However, as noted by (Corum, 1975), the use of hedging can also serve to "weaken the force of an assertion." (Fraser 2010: 201) argues that hedges can indicate "a lack of a full commitment" to the content of one's utterance or to the speaker's intention. This can be problematic in contexts where directness and clarity are necessary, such as in political discourse. As observed by (Chilton and Schäffner, 2002), hedging is a common feature of political discourse, as it allows politicians to avoid responsibility for their statements and to create a sense of ambiguity and vagueness. However, they also note that hedging can be used to "maintain a respectful tone and avoid causing offense or conflict".

Therefore, the appropriate use of hedging can have positive effects on communication, but its overuse or misuse can have negative consequences.

II. CHAPTER TWO. Pragmatic functions of hedging in modern English media representation of Russia-Ukraine war

2.1 How popular Western media talk about the Russia-Ukraine war

The way Western media talks about the Russia-Ukraine war can vary depending on the specific outlet and the political leanings of the audience it caters to. However, there are some common themes and perspectives that tend to be present in Western media coverage of the conflict.

Firstly, most Western media outlets tend to view the conflict as an act of aggression by Russia against Ukraine, and as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They often describe the conflict as a "war" or "invasion," and highlight the military and political support that Russia provides to the separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine. Western media also often portrays Ukraine as a victim and as a pro-Western democracy struggling against Russian aggression. Unfortunately, Ukraine is also quite often being treated as the named "obstacle", something that is "in the way". It chooses not to surrender and continue the fight for its sovereignty, therefore it causes the problem. It would be much easier for many countries to sacrifice Ukraine to keep their economy in order. For example, in the New York Times article "Opinion | The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn't Ready", Ukraine's position may be interpreted rather as a burden that America is forced to support at its own cost.

There's also a tendency to highlight the geopolitical implications of the conflict (Ker-Lindsay, 2015), particularly in terms of Russia's relations with the West and the potential for the conflict to escalate into a wider regional or global conflict. They often report on the diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, including sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries, and criticize Russia's actions as destabilizing for the region.

In general, the reporting of the conflict has been critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine and has emphasized Ukraine's right to sovereignty and territorial integrity. The articles have often used active voice and direct language to convey a sense of urgency

and to highlight the impact of the conflict on the people of Ukraine. The articles have also emphasized the role of international actors, such as the United States and the European Union, in supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. However, some articles have also used mitigating language and strategies to create a sense of neutrality or balance in the reporting, while others even tried to represent Ukraine as a potential threat rather than a victim, legitimising Russian invasion as means of protection.

2.2 Analysis of the common means of mitigation and its influence on the reader's perception

All of the big news outlets, including The Guardian, Fox News, The Times, and The Washington Post had made a lot of questionable statements, but in my analysis I want to focus on The New York Times and my choice is not groundless.

Despite having a seemingly spotless reputation, a deeper look into the way The New York Times talks about Ukraine reveals a lot of ignorance or even support of the Russian propagandistic narrative. A really bewildering detail of many articles written on the topic is that authors and co-authors are often Russians or had been working in Russia for some time. And although it can possibly “give insights” into the life under the authoritarian regime, it takes away the chance of Ukrainians to speak for themselves. It yet again takes away the country’s position as a subject and puts it into the object place.

For example, the very first article about the Russian invasion of Ukraine was written not by one, but by two ex-bureau chiefs in Moscow. A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 24, 2022, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: “Russia Attacks as Putin Warns World; Biden Vows to Hold Him Accountable, which implies, Putin’s actions are rather something he was provoked to do as he “warns”, not “threatens”.

One common means of mitigation is the use of passive voice or ambiguous language to avoid attributing responsibility for the conflict to any particular party. For

example, instead of saying "Russia invaded Ukraine," a news report might say "Ukraine was invaded by Russian-backed separatists." This use of passive voice or ambiguous language can create an impression of neutrality or impartiality, but it can also obscure the underlying causes of the conflict and shift the focus away from the actions of the aggressor.

Another means of mitigation is the use of hedging or qualifying language to indicate uncertainty or ambiguity about the events being reported. For example, a news report might say "it is unclear whether the Russian military was directly involved in the recent fighting," rather than stating categorically that Russian troops were involved. This use of hedging or qualifying language can convey a sense of caution and precision, but it can also create ambiguity and leave the reader uncertain about the facts of the situation.

Finally, the use of euphemisms or alternative language to describe the conflict in less stark terms. For example, a news report might refer to the conflict as a "crisis" or "standoff," rather than a war or invasion. This use of euphemisms or alternative language can downplay the severity of the conflict and create a sense of distance or detachment, but it can also obscure the violence and human suffering involved.

A prominent example for all of the means mentioned before would be an article titled "Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia". I'll try to pick it apart with a particular attention to hedges in order to demonstrate the approximate underlying message. A non-verbal detail of "posing a threat" may be interpreted as putting "armed nationalists" in a place of aggressor is almost brilliantly accentuated with a hedge "not just". Not only there is a threat, it is even bigger, than one could think of. Finalising it by "to Russia" which seemingly equates both sides of Russia-Ukraine conflict, taking a step away from the perspective of offender and a victim. Moreover, it's Ukraine now who poses a threat to Russia.

The subheading gives the reader a better insight into the author's interpretation of the matter: "Kyiv is encouraging the arming of nationalist paramilitary groups to thwart

a Russian invasion. But they could also destabilize the government if it agrees to a peace deal they reject”. Right from the start there’s attitudinally marked vocabulary “encouraging” signalling that the “threat” is being supported on the official level.

The thing that is being “encouraged” is in fact “arming” the “nationalist paramilitary groups”. The title warned the readers of the danger posed by given nationalists, while it turns out they are not even armed yet. The phrasing “nationalist paramilitary groups” is also quite ambiguous as later on in the article the author is actually going to talk about right-wing political parties. Framing them as “paramilitary groups” creates a feeling of their unruliness and uncontrollability, therefore danger.

What comes next is a word “thwart”, and although having a definition of “to prevent from achieving a goal” according to (Merriam-Webster), it somehow feels slightly off in the given context, as if it’s written not about the war, but rather describing some much more minor circumstances.

The next sentence contains such words as “destabilise”, “peace” and “reject”. Destabilisation of the government hints on a potential armed coup, emphasising on the ephemeral “threat” posed by “nationalists”.

The use of "could" suggests potential but not certainty, indicating uncertainty about the outcome. The emotional tone is cautious, as the author considers a possible consequence without asserting it as a fact. This hedge may provide some reassurance to readers who fear instability in Ukraine.

"KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian political activist and militia member sat before his party’s flag leaving little doubt about his readiness for action. The flag depicted two axes crossed against a field of red". Here there is a description of events and circumstances relevant to an experience. The emphasis put on the flag of the party tries to highlight the violent tendencies and eagerness to fight. There are several mentions of the flag further on in the article, as if trying to depict it as something negative and to be afraid of, something definitely connected to brutality and terror. We also come across

verbal expressive language means “his readiness for action”, which stated without any mitigations, representing the leader’s confidence, which also adds up to the picture of his character represented in this article.

"Yes, Yuri Hudymenko said, he is ready to take up arms, but not necessarily against Russia."

Among the hedges there is “not necessarily”, which tries to vaguely state that Ukrainian nationalists may possibly pose a threat to their own government. The emotional tone is ambiguous, as the author leaves open the possibility that the speaker may change their stance. This hedge can also be classified as an approximator.

"But any resolution seems likely to force Kyiv to accept politically perilous concessions that could be destabilizing domestically."

The use of "seems likely" indicates a degree of probability, suggesting that the author believes this outcome is possible but not certain. The emotional tone is concerned, as the author warns of potential consequences if the government makes concessions. This hedge may create a sense of unease or uncertainty towards the future of Ukraine.

"Perhaps his strongest is the threat of an insurgency by nationalist groups like Democratic Ax and the even more influential Right Sector in the event of a Russian invasion." The approximator "perhaps" signals a level of uncertainty about the claim that the threat of an insurgency is Zelensky's strongest card. The use of the word "like" also suggests that these groups are just examples, and there may be other nationalist groups that pose a similar threat.

"But the groups are a two-edged sword, threatening not just the Kremlin but also the Ukrainian government, which could be rocked and possibly overthrown by them if Mr. Zelensky agrees to a peace deal that in their minds gives too much to Moscow." The use of the phrase "two-edged sword" suggests that the situation is complex and has both positive and negative aspects, but the hedge "possibly" serves as an approximator and indicates uncertainty about the likelihood of the government being overthrown.

The phrase "in their minds" is another hedge, which appears in the sentence "if Mr. Zelensky agrees to a peace deal that in their minds gives too much to Moscow." This hedge serves as a shield and suggests that the writer acknowledges that what might be perceived as too much by the nationalist groups may not necessarily be objectively too much.

There is also hedge expressed in the statement, "For Mr. Zelensky, he added, 'the threat of war is actually only a threat, while signing compromises is guaranteed to bring protests.'" The use of "is actually only a threat" suggests that there may be less of a risk of war than is being perceived, expressing a sense of caution about the situation.

The hedge "little doubt" in the phrase "he left little doubt they would end with the ouster of Mr. Zelensky" also indicates a degree of certainty, implying that the ouster of Zelensky is a likely outcome but not a foregone conclusion.

The hedge "it is far from clear," which appears in the sentence "Yet, it is far from clear what such a peace deal would entail." signals uncertainty about the nature of a potential peace deal, suggesting that there are many possible outcomes. This hedge reflects a sense of caution and careful consideration of the risks and possible pitfalls of pursuing negotiations with Russia.

"But no serious crackdown on Democratic Ax followed." The hedge here is "serious," which suggests that some action may have been taken, but it was not sufficient to address the problem. The emotion conveyed is one of frustration or disappointment, as though there was an expectation that more would be done to counter the threat posed by nationalist groups.

2.3 Conclusions to Chapter Two

The discourse of Western media outlets and politicians regarding Ukraine has significant influence on public perception of the country and its position in the global context. The short-term economic benefits of making concessions with the aggressor may

obscure the long-term negative consequences of such decisions. Despite Ukraine's gaining recognition and respect on the global stage, it remains a bargaining chip for other countries. The violent and hostile actions of Russia towards Ukraine, including acts of genocide, necessitate global efforts to put a stop to these atrocities. In this context, the role of media discourse and propaganda becomes critical in shaping public perception and understanding of the situation. Russian propaganda, with its agents across various languages, seeks to mitigate atrocities and aggravate neutral concepts. Therefore, it is imperative for accredited and respected outlets to ensure that they are not inadvertently promoting Kremlin narratives, and for the public to remain vigilant in detecting and countering such propaganda.

The importance of media discourse and its impact on shaping public perception has been widely studied in the field of communication studies (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Similarly, the use of propaganda as a tool for shaping public opinion has been well-documented in political science (Cull, 2008). Mitigation of atrocities and aggravation of neutral concepts are their main weapon. If one knows what to look out for, it's easier to protect oneself from buying into Kremlin narratives.

General Conclusions

The use of hedging in language has been extensively studied in linguistics and communication studies, and its impact on how we perceive information has been analyzed in depth. While hedging can provide a more diplomatic and nuanced approach to sensitive issues, it can also lead to indirectness and avoidance of expressing true opinions (Hyland, 1996). However, a balanced and honest use of hedging can accurately represent a matter without causing harm.

In contrast, a direct and unwavering approach may be necessary to solve urgent societal issues. Avoiding the problem only leaves it unresolved. Expressing sincere concerns with strong words can evoke respect and understanding of the struggle.

The language used by Western media outlets and politicians to discuss Ukraine is of particular importance, as it has a significant impact on society's perception of the country and its place in the world. Short-term economic benefits may tempt leaders to make concessions with aggressors, but this approach ignores the long-term effects.

Despite Ukraine's steady progress in gaining world recognition and respect, it is still treated as a negotiating object by other countries. The severity of Russia's war crimes and hostility should motivate humanity to work together to end these atrocities as soon as possible. However, the Kremlin propaganda network poses a significant threat to this effort, with its agents all over the world and in various languages. It is essential to ensure that no such people are within trusted and respected media outlets.

In conclusion, the use of language in the media plays a crucial role in shaping our perception of issues. It is up to us as consumers of information to be aware of and critical of the language used and the potential impact it may have. The stakes are high, particularly when it comes to human rights violations.

RÉSUMÉ

Тема курсової роботи “Прагматичні функції хеджування у сучасному англійськомовному медіадискурсі”.

Об’єктом дослідження є прагматичні засоби легітимізації знань у сучасному англійськомовному медіадискурсі.

Предметом дослідження є хеджування у статтях the New Your Times “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” та “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn’t Ready”.

Мета дослідження – визначити прагматичні засоби легітимізації знань у сучасному англійськомовному медіадискурсі, які за допомогою хеджування створюють пом’якшувальний ефект в аналізованому дискурсі статей (статті “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” та “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn’t Ready”). Для досягнення цієї мети дослідження були поставлені наступні завдання:

- дати визначення поняття хеджування;
- розкрити прагматичні функції хеджування в сучасному медіадискурсі;
- проаналізувати емоційний вплив хеджування в сучасному англійському медіадискурсі;
- надати якісний емоційний аналіз (Qualitative Emotional Analysis) статей the New York Times “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” та “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn’t Ready”.

В першому розділі було дано визначення основним поняттям (хеджування, мітигація, щілди та апроксиматори). Розділ поділяється на чотири підрозділи. В першому підрозділі були дані різні визначення хеджування та їхня класифікація. В другому підрозділі було висвітлено поняття мітигації та її місце у дискурсі.

Третій підрозділ – це хеджування у сучасному медіадискурсі, четвертий – висновки до підрозділів першої частини.

Другий розділ складається з практичної частини курсової роботи, а саме якісного емоційного аналізу статей “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” та “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn’t Ready”. Було досліджено, які саме використовуються хеджи для створення ефекту пом’якшення наданої інформації. Другий розділ поділяється на три підрозділи. В першому підрозділі було висвітлено те як західні медіа коментують російсько-українську війну. У другому розділі було проведено аналіз засобів хеджування у статтях “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia” та “The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn’t Ready”.

Для досягнення поставленої мети та вирішення проблем був використаний такий методи дослідження: якісний емоційний аналіз (Qualitative Emotional Analysis).

Робота складається зі вступу, 7 підрозділів, загальних висновків, резюме, списку ілюстративних матеріалів та списку довідкових матеріалів. 22 сторінок, 23 джерела використані як довідкові матеріали та 2 джерела використані як ілюстративні.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATION MATERIALS

1. Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia. A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 11, 2022, Section A, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: Militia Units Pose Threat, But Not Just for Russians. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html>
2. The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn't Ready. Appears in print on May 22, 2022, Section SR, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: The War in Ukraine Is Getting Complicated, and America Isn't Ready. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/america-ukraine-war-support.html>

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