

Precedent Phenomena in Slovak Media Discourse on the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of precedent phenomena in Slovak media discourse on the war in Ukraine. By analyzing news reports, opinion pieces, and commentary published between 2022 and 2025, it explores how these references activate collective memory, shape public interpretations of the conflict, and serve as rhetorical tools of persuasion. The findings suggest that precedent phenomena not only reflect historical analogies but also function as framing devices constructing multi-layered narratives that influence audience understanding and interpretation of current events.

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine has become a dominant topic not only in the global media but also in the Slovak media discourse, with narratives often polarizing public opinion. With such intense media coverage, figurative language plays an important role, serving not only as a linguistic tool but also as a means of interpreting and evaluating events. According to T. G. Dobrosklonskaya, metaphor as a stylistic device used in an indirect sense provides an opportunity to “deepen the content of media texts by incorporating memorable, evaluative, often culturally specific images” (Dobrosklonskaya, 2014: 138). A similar approach to the meaning of cultural and historical references in text is also taken by Wierzbicka (1997) and Kövecses (2005), who emphasize the role of cultural context in the interpretation of metaphors. Such culturally charged metaphors often draw upon what linguists refer to as *precedent phenomena* – expressions rooted in shared cultural knowledge and collective memory.

Precedent Phenomena and the Theory of Intertextuality: A Theoretical Framework

The theory of precedence was first introduced and elaborated by J. N. Karaulov, who describes precedent phenomena as culturally shared mental and emotional patterns that hold particular significance for individuals and are actively reproduced in everyday language use (Karaulov, 1987: 216). The theory of precedence develops from the concept of intertextuality, which E. A. Nakhimova views as a characteristic element of mass culture, media, and the arts, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal forms such as music, visual art, and film (Nakhimova, 2007: 40).

Linguists use various terms such as intertextuality, precedent phenomenon, historical (social, political) or literary (theatrical) metaphor, textual reminiscence, logoepisteme, element of vertical context, antonomasia, and allusion as a type of rhetorical trope and figure, or proper name, which functions as a common noun. These terms are not entirely identical in content, as they express different views on the belonging of phenomena to the mental, cultural, or other spheres and are used in different scientific paradigms (Nakhimova, 2007: 8-9).

Precedent phenomena are divided into precedent texts, precedent situations, precedent expressions, and precedent names. Precedent names are the core of the category of precedence, actively updating precedent texts, statements, and situations. This term refers to the names of authors and characters, titles of literary works, literary toponyms, and situational nominations. Precedent names are used for categorization, conceptualization, and evaluation in the construction of a national linguistic worldview. They create a national system of values and anti-values that, to a certain extent, influence the behavior of representatives of the linguocultural community, uniting “us” with “them” (Nakhimova, 2007: 143).

While the Russian linguocultural tradition emphasizes the communicative and cognitive aspects of precedent phenomena, Western research approaches the same issues through the lens of intertextuality and metaphor theory. In Western literature, these phenomena are referred to as intertextual references, cultural allusions, allusive metaphors, or conceptual metaphors with intertextual anchoring (Kristeva, 1980; Genette, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Intertextuality is understood as a process in which “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980: 66). With this concept, Kristeva builds on Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogical nature of text, according to which no text exists in isolation, but constantly enters into dia-

logue with other texts and social discourses (Bakhtin, 1981; Duleba, 2022: 266).

Therefore, intertextuality allows us to understand precedent phenomena in the media as active references to cultural, literary, or historical phenomena that influence the evaluative and metaphorical connotations of the text. Bakhtin describes this as follows: “The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an “image” of the object, may be penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them” (Bakhtin, 1981: 277).

Genette extends the concept of intertextuality to the broader concept of transtextuality, which he defines as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1997: 1), emphasizing that every precedent name or reference phenomenon creates an intertextual connection in the media that influences the interpretation and evaluation of events.

In our analysis, we consider precedent phenomena to be a fundamental element of the cognitive basis of a linguistic and cultural community, a means of accessing other precedent phenomena in communication. The specificity of their use presupposes that a person, with their knowledge, experience, and emotions, is consciously or unconsciously able to transfer the characteristic property of a name to any object or phenomenon of reality, thereby making this process metaphorical in nature. Among the most productive source domains of precedence in contemporary media are literature, theater, cinema, war, politics, music, economics, and sports. Precedent names fulfill various functions in media texts, such as evaluative, pragmatic, modeling, aesthetic, cognitive, nominative, and communicative.

Methodology

In this paper, we focus on analyzing the potential and functions of precedent phenomena in the metaphorical framing of the war in Ukraine in Slovak media discourse. The research period spans from the outbreak of the war in February 2022 to the present, with data sourced from Slovak electronic media (news portals, commentaries, analyses, and blogs).

The main aim of the research is to identify, categorize, and interpret precedent phenomena that appear in Slovak media discourse when reporting

on the war in Ukraine. The categorization is carried out according to the source domain of the precedent phenomena (e.g. history, literature, etc).

The analysis builds on the classification of Nakhimova (2007) and Karaulov (1987), who distinguish between precedent texts, names, situations, and statements, but we extend it to include the dimension of cultural intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980; Genette, 1997), which allows us to examine the connections between media texts and the broader cultural, historical, or literary context.

To interpret the identified phenomena, we apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) according to the approaches of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008), which allows us to examine the power and ideological aspects of media language.

History as a Source Domain of Precedent Phenomena in Slovak Media Discourse

When examining examples of precedent phenomena, it is not surprising that parallels with World War II appear in Slovak discourse. Such images correspond to collective memory, as World War II represents a highly evocative and emotional framework that media authors employ to emphasize the significance of current events.

Slovak media texts often use the universal precedent name *Hitler* in relation to Vladimir Putin. This intertextual reference carries strong emotional and evaluative connotations, activates historical memory, and allows recipients to interpret current events through a morally polarized framework of “good and evil.” *Hitler and Tiso. Putin and Fico. The same story of shame. Unlike Tiso, Fico did not have to follow Putin; he is not his vassal. He went there of his own accord, with admiration for the murderer and dictator* [dennikn.sk, 11/5/2025].

During World War II, *Tiso*, the president of the wartime Slovak State, was associated with collaboration with fascist Germany. In media discourse, this image is used to portray Prime Minister Robert Fico as a close ally and admirer of Vladimir Putin, thereby creating a negative framing of his political views and persona. Such a connection appeals to collective memory and activates moral and emotional connotations associated with the period of collaboration and totalitarianism.

Strong connotations in the collective memory are also evoked by the historical events of the *Sudetenland* in 1938 and the *Munich Agreement*, which symbolize concessions to the aggressor and appeasement. Germany claimed the right to the Czechoslovak territory of the Sudetenland in 1938, arguing

that it was necessary to protect the German-speaking population. Similar rhetoric can be observed in the case of Russia, which often defends its actions in Ukraine with arguments about protecting the Russian-speaking population. In an effort to avoid World War II, the Western powers decided to comply with Germany: *Putin's efforts to gain control of Donbas are reminiscent of Hitler and the Sudetenland. Russia's interest in Ukraine's defensive lines in the Donetsk region is reminiscent of Hitler's acquisition of Czechoslovakia's fortifications in the Sudetenland* [sme.sk, 19/08/2025]. / *Fico rejects the idea of an early election, but he can see around corners when it comes to foreign affairs. He predicts that the West will prepare a "nice Munich" for Ukraine next year. According to him, Russia will retain Luhansk, Donetsk, and Crimea, a peaceful solution will be "extremely painful" for Kyiv, and after "Munich," Slovakia will have to reckon with a large amount of illegal migration and an influx of weapons from Ukraine* [aktuality.sk, 09/12/2024]. / *The world must not fall into the trap of appeasement; it did not work in 1938 and it will not work now* [spravy.pravda, 16/02/2025]. / *Suspension of US aid to Kiev. It is worse than Munich because (at that time) they at least did not try to portray Czechoslovakia as the aggressor. But here they are trying to accuse the victim of aggression—it is extremely dangerous* [spravy.pravda.sk, 04/03/2025].

Slovak and foreign authors see parallels between the events of 1938 and the current war in Ukraine. In this context, Russia is portrayed as the aggressor and Donbas as the *modern Sudetenland*. Robert Fico predicts that Western powers may back down and sacrifice disputed Ukrainian territories to Russia, thereby demonstrating their weakness and inability to resist Russia. At the same time, his rhetoric draws attention to the possible negative consequences for Slovakia. This example illustrates how political actors use historical parallels to create an evaluative framework and influence the perception of events in the media. The stronger and more relevant the image they use, the more emotional the response they elicit from their audience.

In Slovak media discourse, the name *Winston Churchill* often appears in connection with Vladimír Zelensky. This precedent name has predominantly positive connotations, as Churchill, an important British statesman and orator, played a key role during World War II and became a symbol of courage and determination. The parallel between Zelensky and Churchill is used to emphasize Zelensky's leadership qualities, his ability to motivate society, and maintain the morale of the nation in times of war. From the perspective of the theory of precedence, this is an example of a universal precedent name that transcends the boundaries of a single national culture and becomes part of the global memory space.

The use of the name *Winston Churchill* in the Slovak media environment points to a tendency to draw on an internationally shared cultural canon and transfer its symbolic values to the current geopolitical context. Such an intertextual reference has a strong axiological and evaluative dimension—it highlights the moral righteousness and resilience of Ukraine, while contrasting it with the image of the aggressor represented by Vladimir Putin: *Zelensky is allegedly not the legitimate president of Ukraine. And Churchill was the legitimate prime minister of Britain* [sme.sk, 25/02/2025]? / *Zelensky is “the Winston Churchill of our time,” former President George W. Bush paid tribute to him* [sita.sk, 06/05/2022].

On the contrary, Vladimir Putin is often compared to *Joseph Stalin*, especially in connection with his authoritarian style of governance and aggressive political actions against Ukraine. The name *Stalin* carries significantly negative connotations in the collective memory, associated with totalitarianism, repression, and the famine that afflicted the population of Ukraine in the 1930s. This framing of Putin through the figure of Stalin has a strong evaluative effect—it serves to demonstrate his moral discredit and ideological evil.

In contrast to Zelensky, whom the media often associate with the name of Winston Churchill, this reinforces the axiological dichotomy of “leader-aggressor” versus “leader-defender,” which forms the basis of the media’s interpretation of the conflict: *Putin as Stalin: is Russia committing genocide in Ukraine* [dennikn.sk, 25/11/2025]? / *It has been 70 years since Stalin died, but when you look out the window, he is still here with us. He just shaved his beard* [spravy.pravda, 05/03/2023].

Another universal precedent situation from World War II is *Pearl Harbor*, when the Japanese unexpectedly attacked the USA in 1941. *Pearl Harbor* has become a metaphorical symbol for a shocking moment that changes the military and political situation. At the same time, it is a symbol of shame, failure, and inability to predict. In connection with the war in Ukraine, Russia experienced its *Pearl Harbor* when Ukraine attacked it with its drones: *An operation that will go down in history, or Russia’s Pearl Harbor. According to analysts, the weekend drone attack on airports deep inside Russian territory is a demonstration of Ukrainian ingenuity and, at the same time, a huge embarrassment for the Russian security forces* [tvnoviny.sk, 03/06/2025]. / *The Ukrainians have succeeded in creating a “Russian Pearl Harbor.” However, Russia’s missile attacks are unlikely to cease even after the loss of aircraft* [aktuality.sk, 04/06/2025].

As the analyzed examples show, the attack on Russian airports was unexpected and humiliating. The precedent situation of *Pearl Harbor* is reinterpreted here—the original relationship between aggressor and victim is

inverted, as in this case it is the country defending itself against aggression that is attacking. Such framing reinforces the narrative of retribution and moral victory for Ukraine. This discourse can be interpreted as a means of constructing a moral framework for the conflict that supports a pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian perspective.

Another significant precedent situation from World War II is the meeting of Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference in 1945, where they agreed on the post-war world order. This event became a symbol of the division of Europe into the Western and Soviet blocs: *Putin is preparing a new Yalta. Together with Trump, he wants to divide Europe* [hnonline.sk, 14/01/2025]. In the analyzed example, the media updates a historical event and uses an analogy with the *Yalta Conference* to frame current geopolitical relations. The author implicitly suggests that Putin and Trump are attempting to divide spheres of influence in Europe, similar to what the Allies did after World War II, but this time in the context of energy policy and oil supplies.

In media and political discourse on the war in Ukraine, parallels are often drawn with the US military intervention in Vietnam: *Perhaps a more accurate parallel is the Vietnam War, one of the proxy conflicts of the Cold War, but in this case we have to switch sides. It seems that, rather than Hitler's visions of world domination, Russian rhetoric today corresponds more to the United States' exaggerated defensive response during the Cold War* [standard.sk, 26/09/2022]. / *Every day, the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation increasingly resembles the Vietnam War. It is a dark day in US history, as the Western power failed to win the war and its troops left the devastated country on the side of the defeated. Russia may suffer a similar fate in Ukraine* [topky.sk, 20/11/2024].

The Vietnam War was a conflict during the Cold War in which the USA was primarily seeking to prevent the spread of communism and protect its strategic interests. However, Vietnam did not pose an immediate threat to the USA, and American military intervention is therefore often viewed as an excessive defensive response. The Russian justification for the invasion of Ukraine in the media uses a similar narrative—defense against “NATO expansion” and protection of its own interests. As the analyzed examples show, the media use the precedent of the Vietnam War to point out the risk of long-term conflict and possible failure for Russia.

Literature and Cultural Narratives as a Source Domain of Precedent Phenomena

Literature and cultural narratives, including biblical stories, constitute traditionally productive source domain for framing the war in Ukraine. A typical example is the *David versus Goliath* parallel, which is employed to describe the use of light Ukrainian quad bikes against Russian tanks.: ***David versus Goliath: Light Ukrainian quad bikes destroy Russian tanks*** [auto.pravda.sk, 05/05/2022]. In this case, we can observe a surprising contrast between the military technology of both sides. Ukraine, representing *David* in this metaphorical interpretation, managed to overcome Russia's technological and numerical superiority, reinforcing the image of an asymmetrical conflict and strategic surprise. This biblical reference allows the media to frame the event in a way that is easily understandable and emotionally evocative to the audience, emphasizing the courage and ingenuity of the smaller party in the conflict with a much stronger opponent.

One of the frequently updated precedent situations is the *Trojan War*, whose motif is transferred to the context of the current military conflict: ***"Trojan trucks"* full of drones from Ukraine took Moscow by surprise** [tvnoviny.sk, 03/06/2025]. / ***Putin's Trojan horses?* Latvians are putting pressure on the Russian minority, fearing the fate of Donbas** [hnonline.sk, 03/26/2024]. The motif of the *Trojan horse* is a symbol of a surprise, strategic attack, or deception in conflict and represents a universal cultural code that is highly recognizable. The examples show that the media use this image to frame the behavior of both actors in the conflict—on the one hand, Ukraine, which surprises Russia with its military tactics, and on the other hand, Russia, whose political actions are described as insidious or manipulative. This precedent image thus fulfills an evaluative and interpretive function, as it allows the recipient to perceive events through a familiar narrative of deception and cunning.

In connection with the war in Ukraine, parallels with Orwell's dystopia 1984, which depicts totalitarian control and constant propaganda, appear in Slovak discourse: ***More than two minutes of hate, or Russian-style Orwell*** [blog.sme.sk, 08/06/2024] / ***George Orwell would be delighted. Russian MPs are rewriting the past to control the future*** [debata.pravda.sk, 12/03/2024]. George Orwell is a well-known author, and his name carries strong cultural and evaluative intertextual connotations. Authors of media texts use references to Orwell to evaluate and ideologically frame Russian actions, presenting them as totalitarian, manipulative, and negative.

Samuel Beckett's absurd drama *Waiting for Godot* is an important work of world literature, whose theme of endless waiting and absurdity can be

used in media discourse to frame situations where the subject is waiting for decisions or interventions that do not come: *Ukrainian waiting for Godot. The absurdity of the plot, which leaves neither the spectator nor the reader any wiser, is very apt for Ukraine's wait for an invitation to join NATO* [24dnes.sk, 07/07/2023]. The author uses this literary reference to frame Ukraine's waiting to join NATO. Framing Ukraine through absurd drama allows recipients to understand waiting as frustrating and fruitless, emphasizing the need for support from the international community.

Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that precedent phenomena are extensively used in Slovak media discourse on the war in Ukraine. The most productive source domain is history, particularly World War II. Precedent names such as *Hitler*, *Tiso*, *Stalin*, and *Churchill* frame political actors in moral or evaluative terms, often through a dichotomy of "good versus evil." Ukraine, represented by President Zelensky is consistently portrayed positively, while Russia and President Putin are depicted as aggressors. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico associated with the precedent name *Tiso*, is framed negatively, emphasizing his alignment with Russia and portraying him as an obedient admirer. These framing strategies reflect the ideological and evaluative mechanisms that CDA seeks to uncover, showing how media discourse positions actors within moral and political hierarchies.

Precedent situations form another key category of framing. Historical events, including the *Munich Agreement*, the *Yalta Conference*, and the *Vietnam War* are invoked to highlight potential outcomes of the war and to underscore the perceived threat posed by Russia. Russia is consistently represented as an aggressor acting under the guise of self-defense, seeking to seize the territory of its neighbor. This interpretation exemplifies the critical CDA focus on power, ideology, and the reproduction of social hierarchies through media language.

Literature and cultural narratives are also employed, though they tend to be less emotionally evocative and more conventional. Biblical stories, such as *David versus Goliath*, and literary motifs, like the *Trojan Horse* illustrate asymmetry, strategic deception and moral struggle. Literary works, including Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, emphasize absurdity, uncertainty, and oppression, framing Ukraine's prolonged struggle for support and highlighting manipulative or totalitarian actions by Russia.

While historical parallels often evoke stronger emotional reactions due to collective memory, literary and cultural references enrich discourse by offering evaluative, symbolic, and morally charged perspectives. Their use in media discourse reveals how language constructs meaning, frames ideological positions, and shapes public perception.

In conclusion, literature and cultural narratives function as essential tools for metaphorical framing, moral evaluation, and interpretive guidance in Slovak media coverage of the war in Ukraine. They work alongside historical precedent phenomena to create a multi-layered discourse that informs, evaluates, and emotionally engages the audience, illustrating the broader social and ideological processes at play.

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