THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Ukraine

«battle of vaccines» and «battle for the vaccine» («битва вакцин» та «битва за вакцину»)

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Abstract:

Ukrainian. *Словникова стаття присвячена аналізу медійних дискурсивних практик використання висловів **«битва вакцин»** та **«битва за вакцину»** як метафоричного поля інформаційної боротьби під час пандемії Covid-19. Розглядається використання цих метафор в українському медійному середовищі, а також маніпулятивні практики російської пропаганди, спрямовані на дискредитацію вакцин компаній Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca та просування російської вакцини «Спутник V».*

Вакцина «Спутник V» використовувалася керівництвом РФ як потужна зброя гібридної війни, наділена значним мілітарним змістовим потенціалом.

У словниковій статті розкриті можливості своєрідних підривних версій щодо пафосної пропагандистської риторики РФ, зокрема ресурси медіаосвіти засобами медіа, а також мемів, здатних формувати в людини критичне сприймання дійсності.

English. *The entry is devoted to the analysis of media discursive practices of using the phrases **«battle of vaccines»** and **«battle for the vaccine»** as a metaphorical field of information struggle during the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of those metaphors in the Ukrainian media environment, as well as manipulative practices of Russian propaganda aimed at discrediting Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca vaccines and promoting the Russian «Sputnik V» vaccine are considered.*

Etymology:

The noun *битва* (*battle*) is formed by a suffixal way from the verb *бити* (*to beat*), which has ancient Indo-European origins (Етимологічний словник 1982, т. 1, с. 186–187).

According to the academic Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language, in the modern language the word *битва* (*battle*) has two meanings: «1. Бій між ворожими арміями, військовими з'єднаннями і т. ін. 2. *за що, з ким-чим і без додатка, перен.* Уперта, наполеглива політична, господарська і т. ін. боротьба» («1. Fighting between enemy armies, military units, etc. 2. *for what, with whom, with what, and without an object, fig.* Stubborn, persistent political, economic, etc. struggle» (Словник української мови 1970, т. 1, с. 168).

The Dictionary confirms that the word *битва* (*battle*) in each of these two meanings can be used figuratively.

The metaphorical phrase ***«битва вакцин»*** (***«battle of vaccines»***) corresponds to the first dictionary meaning, and the metaphor ***«битва за вакцину»*** (***«battle for the vaccine»***) to the second one.

Problematization:

Since 2014, Ukraine had been forced to confront the Russian Federation in its hybrid war, that is Ukraine had to deter its armed aggression in the east part of the country and constantly repel harsh information attacks.

In 2020–2021, one of the leading directions of that information warfare was the problem of vaccination of Ukrainian citizens as the main way to protect against the Covid-19 pandemic.

During 2020, Covid-19 vaccines were developed and tested in several countries in a very short time, and by the end of 2020 economically developed countries began mass vaccination programs. Race of the world's leading countries for the priority in the invention and production of vaccines took place in laboratories and government offices, as well as in the world media space (Yuk-ping Lo, 2020; Febryantsyah, 2021; Vankovska, 2021; Moreno et al., 2021).

Ukraine tried to promptly provide its citizens with quality vaccines from the world's leading producers.

Russia made the most of its informational influence to discredit vaccines produced in the United States, Great Britain, China, and India, and imposed its own vaccine in every possible way.

In the Ukrainian media space, the metaphorical phrase *«війна проти коронавірусу» («war against the coronavirus»)* had not become widespread, because since 2014 the word ***war*** was used mainly in its literal sense. Instead, the metaphors ***«битва вакцин»*** та ***«битва за вакцину»*** (***«battle of vaccines»*** and ***«battle for the vaccine»***) carried a significant semantic load as a reflection of the information warfare which Russia directed against Ukraine.

Communication strategies:

The metaphor ***«battle of vaccines»*** means 'tough competition, fierce struggle between vaccines'. The word *vaccine* in this phrase means not the drug itself, but – based on metonymic connection and personification, i.e., on the basis of metonymic metaphor – it means those collective subjects that own or dispose of this drug: pharmaceutical companies, certaincountries, authorities in those countries.

For example, the final news program «Facts of the Week» on ICTV (07.03.2021) in the story *«**Battle of Vaccines**. Which one is better and how much will it cost for Ukraine?»* presents a journalistic analysis of the vaccination situation in Ukraine and the world.



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95ifOK8Nb7k

The main directions of journalistic investigation are (systematizing the plot composed on the clip principle):

- criticism of the Ukrainian authorities' actions: inefficiency of the Ministry of Health in the organization of vaccination, corruption scandals with the purchase of vaccines, missed opportunities to produce vaccines at Ukrainian pharmaceutical facilities;
- economic aspects of vaccine production and sale;
- aspects of strengthening the geopolitical influence of countries that produce and supply vaccines;
- manipulative technologies of struggle in the information sphere.

The metaphorical field of the analytical media discourse in this message (in the speech of the heroes of the story and the journalist himself) is represented by the expressions: *«**battle** of vaccines»*, *«hybrid **weapons**»*, *«**arms race**»*, *«**winners** in the arms race»*, *«**reconquer** vaccines»*, *«**confrontation** of pharmaceutical companies»*, *«**competition** of the biggest players»*, *«**hunt** for the vaccine»*, *«**hunt** for other people's technologies»*, *«vaccine **diplomacy**»*.

In the metaphor ***«battle for the vaccine»*** the dependent noun has the meaning of the object being fought for. During 2020, that metaphorical phrase was used mainly in the meanings:

- invention, testing, and production of vaccines;
- purchase, receiving of the vaccine.

However, in January 2021, Ukrainian media discourses began to sound that, in addition to those aspects, the transparency of the government actions on the purchase of vaccines, a high-quality information campaign on the need for vaccination, and the promulgation of a clear mechanism for vaccination nationwide were of great importance. All of this together was also part of the *«battle for the vaccine»*.

Another important meaning of the phrase *«battle for the vaccine»* was the fight for a fair distribution of vaccines between countries, including free access according to the global initiative COVAX.

The information environment of discussions on vaccination during the pandemic was a battleground for geopolitical, economic, informational influence, i.e. the sphere of **information warfare**.

The discrediting of Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca vaccines and, in contrast, the positive coverage of the Russian «Sputnik V» vaccine was carried out primarily by Russian media and Ukrainian media with strong pro-Russian rhetoric, as well as pro-Russian deputies and popular bloggers.

The very name of the vaccine *«Sputnik V»* contains direct reference to the Cold War. The vaccine was named after the first orbital satellite launched by the Soviet Union in 1957 that started the global space race.

Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, which is financing Russian vaccine research, suggested the name. Referring to the world's first spacecraft launched by the USSR, in late July 2020 he said to CNN: *«Americans were surprised when they heard Sputnik's beeping. It's the same with this vaccine. Russia will have got there first»*.

The Russian authorities considered this vaccine as a powerful weapon of information warfare and saw a military content potential in it. In 2021, on the eve of Victory Day on May 9, Vladimir Putin compared «Sputnik V» to Soviet-era weapons, arguing that the Russian vaccine was *«as reliable as a Kalashnikov assault rifle»*.

As of February 2022, «Sputnik V» has not yet received approval from the WHO (the World Health Organization) and the EMA (the European Medicines Agency). The Gamaleya Research Institute (which developed the «Sputnik V» vaccine) had not disclosed or published the results of the final phase of the clinical trial of the vaccine, although it was completed more than a year before. According to a journalistic investigation by Meduza (a Russian-language independent news website based in Latvia), Moscow was unable to use «Sputnik V» as «a soft power» because it was in too much of a hurry and administrative pressure, especially on vaccine developers. «Lobbying does not help» when it comes to gaining recognition in the West. Instead, strict adherence to procedures, evidence of vaccine safety and efficacy is required. The result was «a pure adventure because of aplomb».

In his interview with The New York Times on December 16, 2020, the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky identified **quality** as the main criterion for choosing a vaccine for Ukrainians, emphasizing that **the promotion of «Sputnik V»** is *«**one more strong information war** by Russia»*. The issue of vaccine quality was key: *«… we must not allow Ukraine to take the Russian vaccine that has not passed all the tests. **We have no real evidence** that that vaccine has **a 100% positive effect**. … Ukraine primarily bases its decision on **choosing a safe vaccine**»*.

Thus, ***«battle of vaccines»*** and ***«battle for the vaccine»*** as a metaphorical field of information struggle demonstrates fundamentally different approaches from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, highlighting different values and semantic dominants in official, political, and media discursive practices.

Subversion:

The development of media literacy of the audience, in particular media education by means of media, contributes to the critical perception of manipulative media messages. One of the examples is the analytical and satirical project «Uncensored» on the portal Censor.NET.



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKsGplmnSt4

Issue *«Putin, bring in the vaccine! How Russia and its Fifth Column in Ukraine Impose Their Pseudo-medicine»* (11.12.2020) is devoted to the analysis of Russian propaganda's fakes and the disinformation campaign to promote the Russian vaccine.

In particular, in this issue the journalist reveals the ironic content of the popular meme ***«Путін, введи вакцину»*** (***«Putin, bring in the vaccine»***): *«When the whole world is fighting Covid-19, Russia uses the coronavirus to increase its geopolitical influence in the world. Now the main slogan of Russian propaganda is not «Putin, bring in troops», but* ***«Putin, bring in the vaccine»****.*

A real photo can also become a meme when it reveals all the absurdity of the event in reality. Such an image can serve as a kind of subversive version regarding the propaganda rhetoric of the Russian Federation.

For example, the mayor of the Argentine city of Roque Perez, 72-year-old Juan Carlos Gasparini was vaccinated against the coronavirus with a Russian vaccine holding Putin's portrait in his hands to «express respect» and «gratitude for saving the lives of Argentines». He posted the photo on his Twitter.



Screenshot: Twitter

Such materials clearly demonstrate the impact of propaganda on a person's ability to critically perceive, soberly and adequately assess reality.

Discussion:

What is your opinion on the following issues:

- What are the reasons for comparing *«the vaccine race»* worldwide with the Cold War? Under what conditions would cooperation between countries be possible in the invention, production, and equitable distribution of vaccines?
- What political, economic, and socio-cultural factors contributed to the formation of the metaphors ***«battle of vaccines»*** and ***«battle for the vaccine»*** in the general field of «military» rhetoric of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Have the metaphors ***«battle of vaccines»*** and ***«battle for the vaccine»*** been used in your country's media discourses? What factors can influence the formation of national and cultural specifics of such metaphors in a particular country?
- What aspects of the information struggle are embodied in those metaphors?

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