



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

# Putin makes his case

*Laura A. Janda*

*Anna Obukhova*

*Václav Cvrček (Univerzita Karlova)*

*Masako Fidler (Brown University)*

# CLEAR

Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian



Threat-Defuser

(Norwegian Research Council)

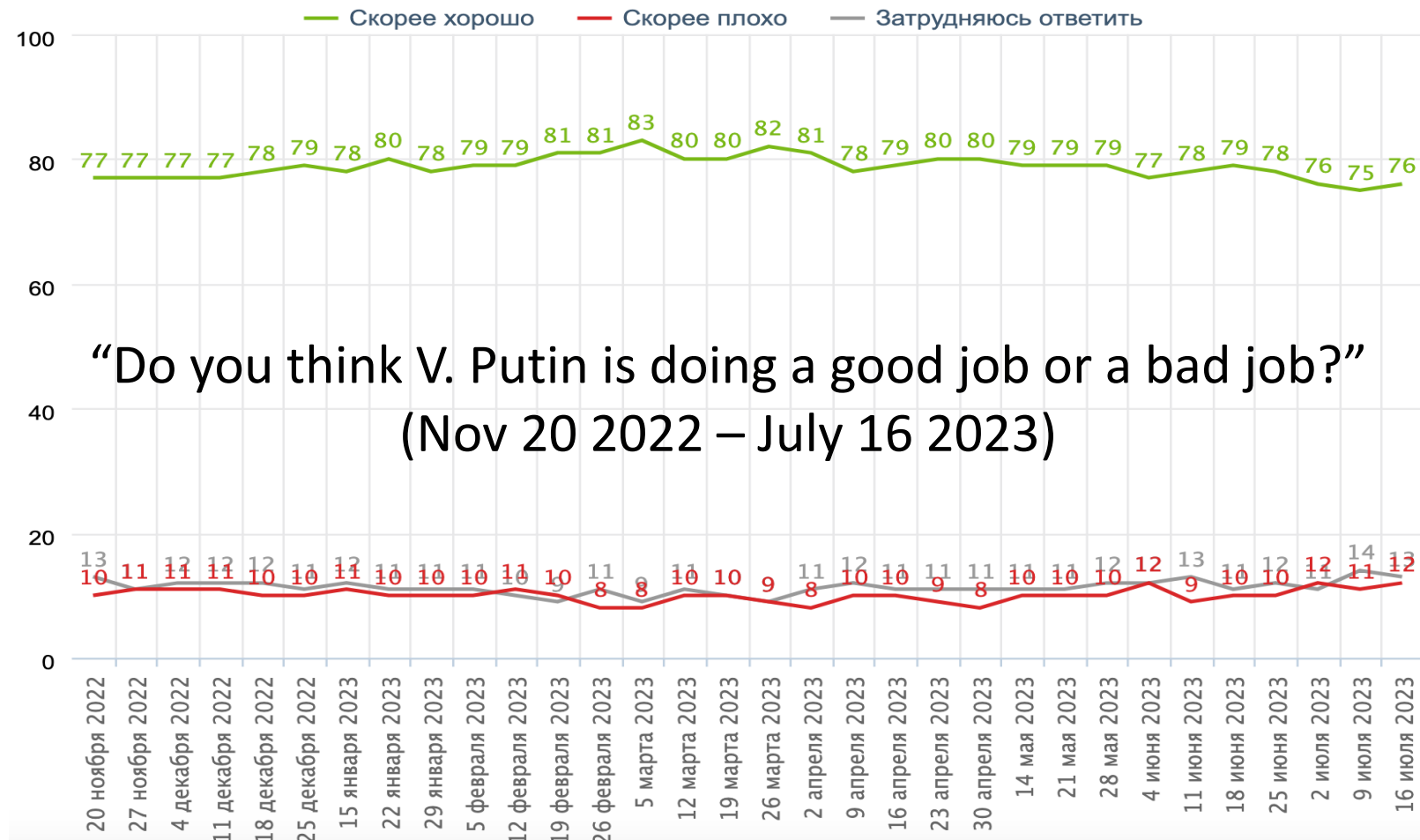
# Why is Putin so popular? Why do Russians find him convincing?

- Russians are usually skeptical of their government
- Public opinion polls not entirely reliable, but a lot of people support Putin, at least passively
- Sociologists say people are “hypnotized”
- Independent media shut down, replaced by 24-hour TV propaganda

Putin is not a brilliant orator, but his speech consistently deviates from norms



Data from:  
Фонд Общественное Мнение  
(Public Opinion Foundation)



# Philosophical issues: norms, meaning, and grammar

- A corpus as a proxy for experience and expectations of native speakers
- Speakers may be sensitive to deviations from norms
- Words can be consciously chosen, grammar less under conscious control and more systematic
- Grammar and meaning: the semantic continuum lexicon – grammar

# Overview

- Keymorph Analysis as an extension of Keyword Analysis
- Meanings of Russian grammatical cases
- 2022 “The case for case in Putin’s speeches”  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11185-022-09269-2>
  - Macro-level quantitative comparison: Putin’s use of case vs. reference corpus
  - Micro-level qualitative interpretation of Putin’s use of case
- 2023 Comparison with Putin’s speech Feb 21, 2023
  - Media have reported that this speech was more of the same
  - But we found some stark differences

# 2022


Russian Linguistics

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09269-2>

---



## The case for case in Putin's speeches

Laura A. Janda<sup>1</sup>  · Masako Fidler<sup>2</sup> · Václav Cvrček<sup>3</sup> · Anna Obukhova<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 5 October 2022

© The Author(s) 2022

### Abstract

Vladimir V. Putin has banned the use of the word ‘war’ to refer to the conflict in Ukraine. While one’s choice of words is deliberate and conscious, grammatical categories are obligatory and pivotal to signaling the roles notions have in a discourse. Over- and underrepresentation of grammatical cases can be identified by Keymorph Analysis, which measures deviations from corpus norms analogously to Keyword Analysis. This first application of Keymorph Analysis to Russian data compares the use of grammatical case for the nouns meaning ‘Russia’, ‘Ukraine’, and ‘NATO’ in Putin’s speeches in the period leading up to and immediately after the invasion of Ukraine. Our analysis reveals a narrative in which Putin depicts Russia as a dynamic, agentive, foregrounded actor, a reliable partner for collaboration, but also the victim of unfair geopolitical maneuvers. Ukraine, by contrast, is dehumanized

# Keymorph Analysis as an extension of Keyword Analysis

- Keyword Analysis (cf. Egbert & Biber 2023):
  - widely used in corpus-assisted discourse analysis
  - focus on the distribution of words, identifying as “keywords” those that are unusually frequent in a target text vs. reference corpus
  - Keywords reveal the “Aboutness” of a text
  - mostly used with English, which has little morphology
  - it is customary to remove English function words, also known as “stopwords”
- Keymorph Analysis:
  - takes advantage of the morphological expression of grammatical categories
  - developed by Fidler & Cvrček (2017, 2018, and Cvrček & Fidler 2019) on the material of Czech
  - this is the first pilot study/proof-of-concept using Russian data



# Meanings of Russian grammatical cases

- Based on previous publications (Janda 1993, 1999, 2000, Janda & Clancy 2002 )
- Meanings most relevant for analysis of Putin's speeches in 2022
  - Nominative (NOM): agent (subject); label
  - Genitive (GEN): agent or patient; possession
  - Dative (DAT): potential agent (usually human)
  - Accusative (ACC): patient (direct object); destination
  - Instrumental (s + INS): collaborator
  - Locative (LOC): a place

# Macro-level quantitative comparison: Putin's use of case vs. reference corpus

- Data: scope and source
- Raw data
- Difference Index keyed to frequency (DIN\*)
- Visualizations

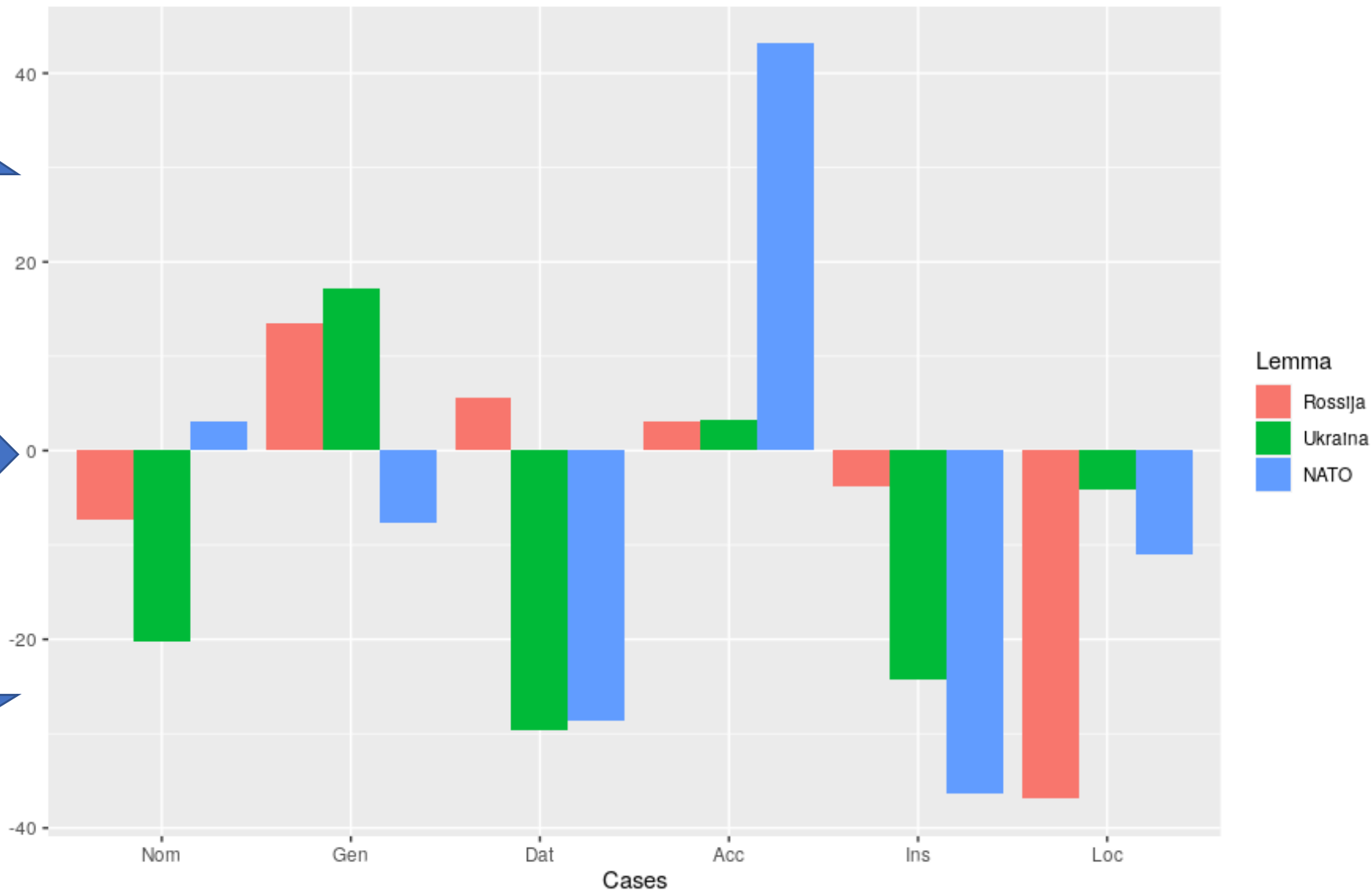
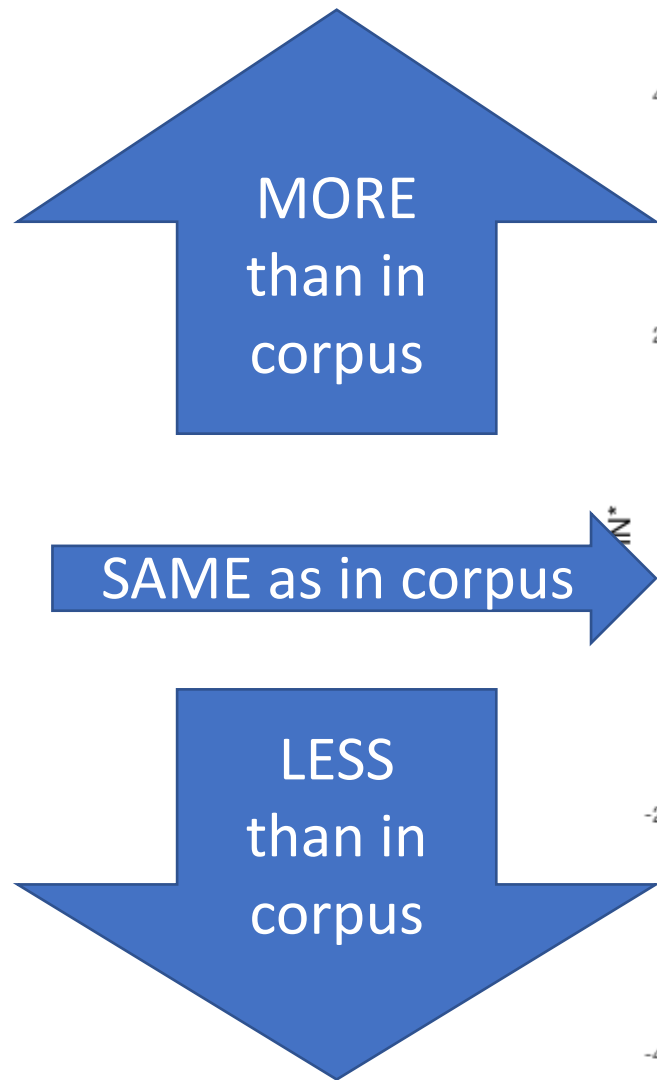


# Data: Putin's speeches 10.02.-02.03.2022

- 10.02.2022: Russia launched its “largest military exercise since the Cold War, holding joint maneuvers with Belarus, close to the Belarus/Ukrainian border” (Walker 2022: 27).
- 02.03.2022: height of the first phase of invasion when Russian forces in Ukraine moved “to tighten their siege of key cities, including the capital, Kyiv, and the southern port of Mariupol” (Walker 2022: 39)
- Size of target corpus: 34,720 tokens
- Focus on three words:
  - Россия ‘Russia’
  - Украина ‘Ukraine’
  - НАТО ‘NATO’
- Reference corpus:
  - Russian InterCorp (Czech National Corpus [www.korpus.cz](http://www.korpus.cz)) 20.1 M tokens

# Comparison with reference corpus

Case prominence In Putin's speeches 2022



Micro-level qualitative interpretation of  
Putin's use of case

Representation of

- NATO
- Ukraine
- Russia

Every example manually tagged for case  
submeaning

# NATO in 2022



- NATO represented as
  - just a label, not an agent (NOM)
  - a threat (GEN)
  - a destination or container (ACC, LOC)
  - not a collaborator, dehumanized (little INS and DAT)

# Ukraine in 2022

- Ukraine represented as
  - passive (NOM with stative verbs)
  - manipulated (ACC)
  - dehumanized (little DAT)
  - not a collaborator (little *s* + INS)
  - just a location, a region (*na* + LOC, GEN)



# Russia in 2022

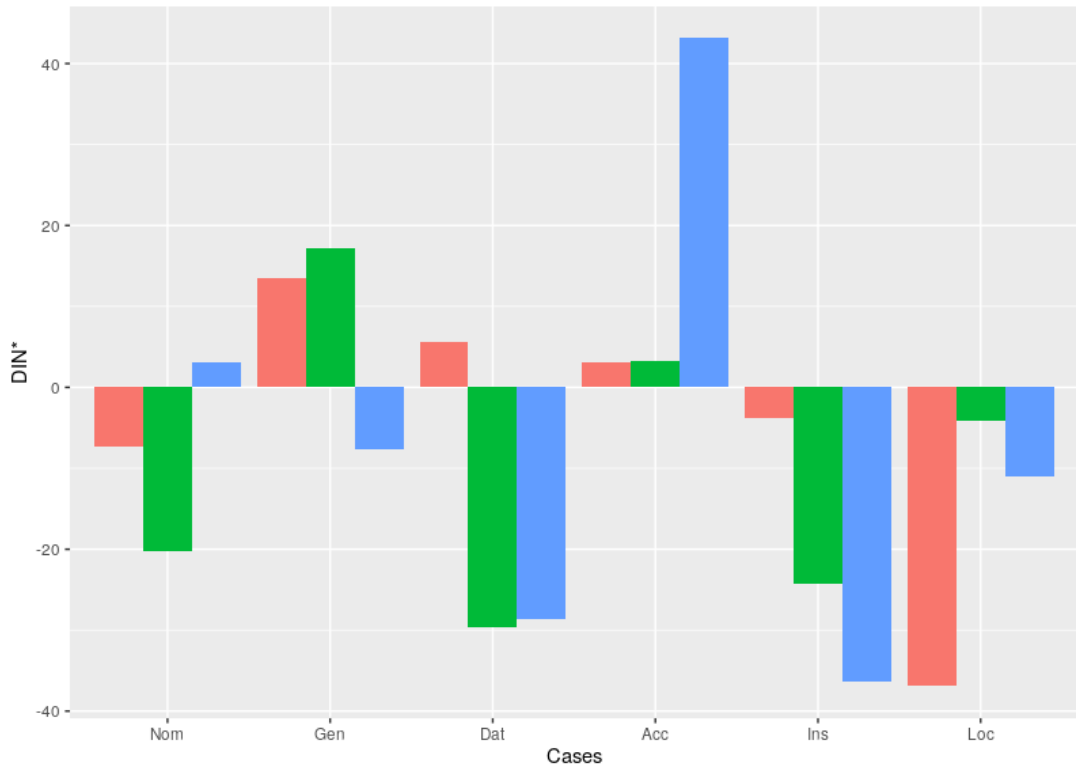


- Russia represented as
  - a dynamic agent (NOM)
  - a collaborator (INS)
  - treated unfairly (ACC) and therefore in need of a strong leader
  - humanized, inspires empathy (DAT)

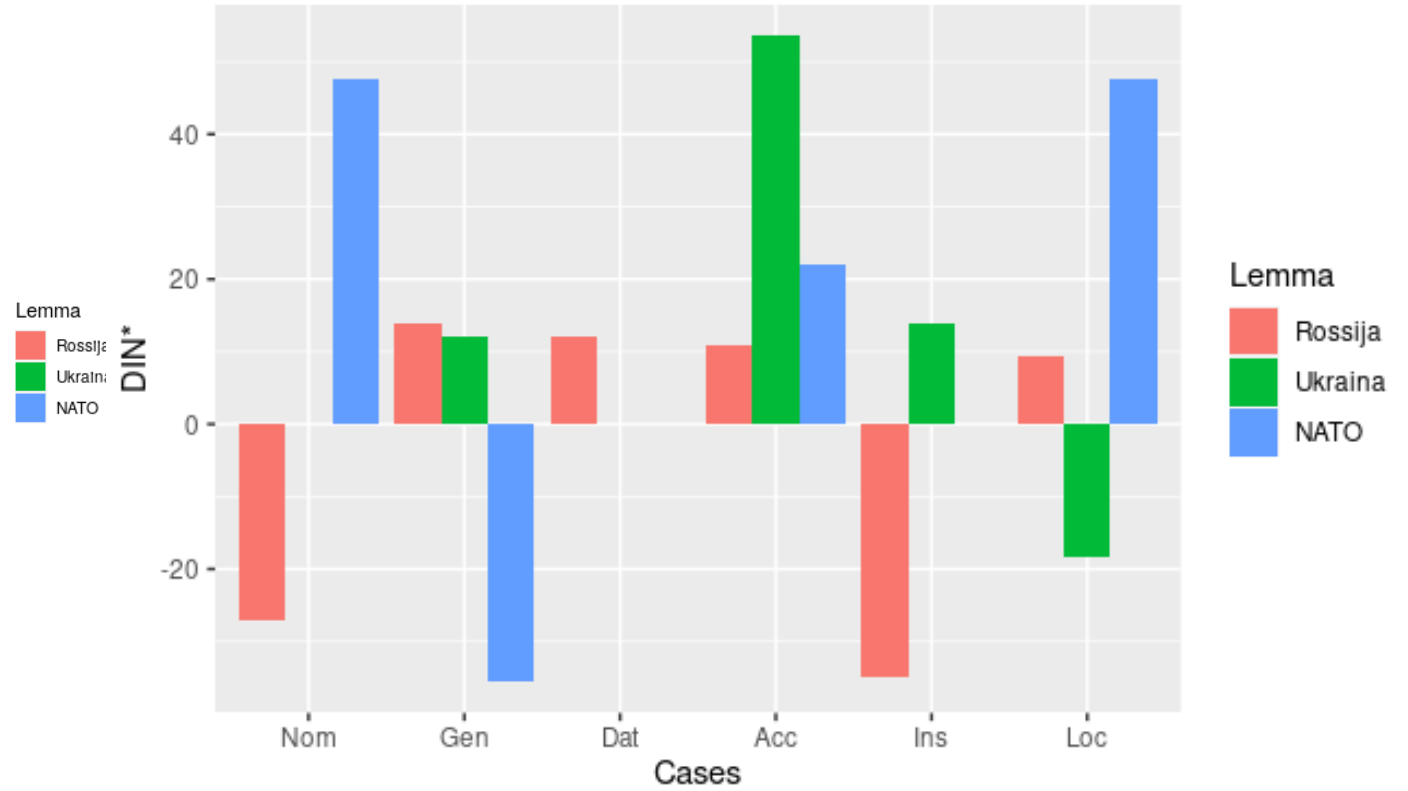
# Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly Feb 21, 2023: 10,538 tokens



Case prominence In Putin's speeches 2022



Case prominence in Putin's speech (Feb 21, 2023)



Caveat: some distortion due to much smaller dataset

No data for

- 'Ukraine' Nominative, Dative
- 'NATO' Dative, Instrumental



# NATO in 2023



- NATO represented as
  - an aggressor, placing weapons on Russia's borders, directly stating that it wishes to defeat Russia, equated with USA and the West (NOM)
  - having expanded to Russia's borders and having representatives who are liars and deceivers (GEN, ACC)
  - the location of multiple nuclear arsenals (LOC)
  - strongly dehumanized (no s + INS, no DAT)

# Ukraine in 2023

- Ukraine represented as
  - non-existent as an actor (no NOM)
  - entirely manipulated, the destination of NATO's weapons (ACC, *na*)
  - dehumanized (no DAT)
  - not a collaborator (no *s* + INS), a name rendered "just for now" (subject to change) (INS)
  - the location of a conflict and a neonazi regime (*na* + LOC)

‘Ukraine’ appears only 12 times in 2023 speech:

*Мы не воюем с народом Украины...*

‘We are not fighting with the people of **Ukraine (GEN)**...’

*А в наше время из Украины они стали делать <<анти-Россию>>.*

‘At present they have started to make **Ukraine (GEN)** into an “Anti-Russia”

*этот проект ... с одной целью - оторвать эти исторические территории, которые сегодня называются Украиной, от нашей страны.*

‘this project ... [has] one goal – to tear away from our country the historical territories that are now called **Ukraine (INS)**’

*Запад использует Украину и как таран против России, и как полигон.*

‘The West is using **Ukraine (ACC)** both as a battering ram against Russia, and as an artillery range.’

# Russia in 2023



- Russia represented as
  - an agent that helps others, remembers, depends on its citizens, an open country (NOM)
  - a land of great potential and people, unfairly targeted (GEN)
  - united (s + INS)
  - being exploited but cannot be defeated, the place to invest (ACC)
  - humanized and victimized, in no need of cooperation with western economies (DAT)
  - a place with a strong economy and values (LOC)

# Putin 2022 vs. Putin 2023: What has changed?

- NATO
  - no longer the destination of Ukraine
  - foregrounded as the aggressor
- Ukraine
  - sinks further into background
  - Russia's "historical territories", the West's "Anti-Russia"
- Russia
  - self-sufficient economy with great potential
  - unfairly targeted by the West

# What does this buy us?

- Proof-of-concept for Keymorph Analysis applied to Russian data
- Keymorph Analysis is unique, can complement Keyword Analysis and other traditional methods of discourse analysis
- Analysis of grammatical case reveals roles of social actors in discourse
- Consistent deviation from norms likely has an impact on hearers
- Useful not only for linguistics, but for history, political science, and other disciplines in the social sciences
- Invites further comparisons (Putin vs. other politicians, etc.)
- Method could be used to analyze other types of manipulative texts

# Thank you!

- Threat-Defuser: <https://threat-defuser.org/>  
Funded by the Norwegian Research Council
- CLEAR: Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian:  
<https://site.uit.no/clear/>

