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## BEYOND RATIONALIST FORESIGHT: WHY DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP MATTERS FOR PREDICTING FRAGILE FUTURES

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Mainstream foresight institutions comprehensively failed to predict Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine despite clear warning signs in autocratic discourse and repeated alerts from Ukrainian analysts. This systematic failure reveals fundamental methodological limitations in contemporary foresight approaches. While organizations like World Economic Forum, McKinsey, and EU Strategic Foresight dedicate resources to analyzing trends and technologies, they systematically overlook autocratic agency concentrated in authoritarian systems. This paper argues that integrating critical discourse analysis of political leadership into foresight methodology could address catastrophic blind spots. Drawing on van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, Foucault's power-knowledge framework, Koselleck's temporal semantics, and Naisbitt's content analysis methodology, I propose examining how autocratic leaders' discourse reveals ideological commitments and revisionist ambitions that rationalist models miss. Preliminary content analysis of war/peace terminology in German, English, and Russian literature (1900-2022) using Google Ngram data reveals striking 'peace-washing' in Russian texts before 2022 invasion – dramatic peace discourse increases during military buildup. This disconnect exemplifies discursive hypocrisy critical discourse analysis can detect but rationalist frameworks miss. The failure exemplifies 'epistemic injustice' – systematic delegitimization of knowledge based on knower's position rather than evidence quality. Ukrainian knowledge, grounded in proximity and historical memory, was dismissed as 'biased' by Western institutions. This paper contributes: (1) identifying three agency types in futures discourse – collective, heroic, and autocratic; (2) proposing critical discourse analysis as essential foresight methodology; (3) providing preliminary empirical evidence of 'peace-washing'; (4) arguing for epistemic justice – systematic inclusion of voices from threatened peripheries whose proximity provides crucial insights. The paper provides theoretical foundation for future research developing discourse-based early warning systems.

*Key words:* foresight, discourse analysis, autocratic agency, epistemic injustice, Ukraine war, content analysis, peace-washing, futures studies, rationalist bias, critical discourse analysis

**Introduction.** On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This event profoundly shocked Western policymakers, intelligence communities, and foresight institutions despite mounting evidence accumulating over years. The failure to predict this war reveals fundamental limitations in contemporary foresight practices and raises critical questions about how professional futures studies approaches geopolitical risk.

Between 2015 and 2021, major foresight institutions – the World Economic Forum, US National Intelligence Council, European Union Strategic Foresight, and leading consulting firms – published numerous comprehensive reports on global risks and future trends [1; 2; 3]. Almost none predicted Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a serious possibility requiring strategic preparation. The WEF Global Risks Reports mentioned "geopolitical tensions" abstractly but



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without specific Ukraine scenarios [1]. The EU Strategic Foresight Report from July 2021 – just seven months before invasion – focused on green transition, digital transformation, and resilience, barely mentioning Russia-Ukraine dynamics [2].

Why did mainstream foresight fail so comprehensively? The dominant explanation focuses on rationalist bias: these institutions assumed war was economically irrational for Russia given extensive interdependence with European energy markets, that economic integration prevents major conflicts, and that Putin operates as a rational cost-benefit calculator [4; 5]. This assumption proved catastrophically wrong. Meanwhile, Ukrainian analytical centers warned repeatedly from 2014 onward about the possibility of Russian escalation [6; 7]. These warnings were largely dismissed in Western policy and foresight circles as “biased”, “alarmist” or “worst-case thinking”. This dismissal represents what Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice” – the delegitimization of knowledge based on the social position of the knower rather than the quality of evidence [8].

This paper argues that foresight needs to integrate critical discourse analysis of political leadership – particularly autocratic leadership – to address systematic blind spots in rationalist methodology. I propose that examining how political leaders’ discourse reveals ideological commitments, historical grievances, and revisionist ambitions can predict disruptions that trend-based analysis misses. The argument proceeds in four steps: (1) reviewing existing literature on agency in futures studies, discourse analysis, and generational theory; (2) developing a theoretical framework distinguishing three types of agency in futures – collective, heroic, and autocratic; (3) presenting preliminary content analysis evidence of “peace-washing” in Russian discourse; (4) proposing methodological integration of leadership discourse analysis into foresight practice.

**Futures studies and the problem of agency.** Futures studies emerged in the mid-20th century with Wendell Bell and Elise Boulding’s work establishing methodological foundations [10; 11]. The field has developed sophisticated techniques for scenario planning, trend extrapolation, and risk assessment. However, most contemporary foresight practice has shifted toward structural and trend-based approaches. Corporate foresight emphasizes extrapolating from current trajectories – demographic shifts, technological adoption curves, economic cycles [12; 13]. This methodological choice effectively marginalizes individual agency, treating humans as aggregate populations rather than purposive actors capable of disrupting predicted trajectories.

Where individual agency does appear in futures discourse, it typically takes heroic form. Speculative fiction – particularly science fiction – frequently centers protagonists who challenge and transform their worlds [14; 15; 16]. Ukrainian author Taras Antypovych’s *Chronos* (2022) depicted Russian military aggression scenarios that professional analysts dismissed as implausible [9]. Yet this literary tradition has minimal influence on professional foresight, which treats fiction as imaginative rather than analytical. What remains systematically absent is autocratic agency – the capacity of authoritarian leaders to override economic rationality, institutional constraints, and predicted trajectories through ideologically-driven decisions.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), pioneered by scholars like Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, and Ruth Wodak, examines how language constructs social reality and reproduces power relations [17; 18; 19]. Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach emphasizes that discourse reveals mental models and ideologies that shape action [17]. Applications of discourse analysis to futures remain limited but growing. However, systematic analysis of autocratic leaders’ discourse as predictive foresight data remains underdeveloped [20; 21].

Generational theory, from Karl Mannheim to contemporary scholars, argues that cohorts shaped by common historical experiences develop distinct worldviews [22; 23]. Leaders born in

the 1940s–1950s experienced formative years during late Stalinism and Cold War, developing worldviews fundamentally different from those who came of age after 1991. Michel Foucault's work on power-knowledge relations demonstrates how what counts as “truth” or “knowledge” is structured by power [26; 27]. Applied to futures: power operates not by prohibiting certain futures but by rendering them unthinkable within regimes of truth.

**Three types of agency in futures.** To understand why mainstream foresight failed to predict the invasion, we must examine how different practices conceptualize agency in future-making. Type 1: Collective Agency (Corporate Foresight). Corporate and institutional foresight – exemplified by WEF, McKinsey, OECD – focuses almost exclusively on collective phenomena: trends, technologies, demographic shifts, economic cycles [1–3]. Individual humans appear only as aggregate populations or market segments. This methodological choice reflects underlying assumptions that futures emerge from large-scale structural forces and that individual actions average out statistically. This framing renders autocratic agency invisible.

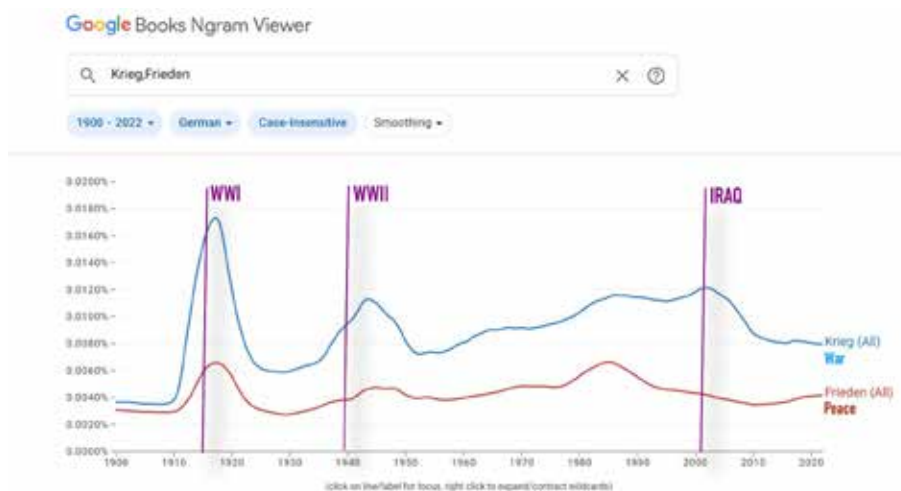
Type 2: Heroic Agency (Speculative Fiction). Science fiction and speculative literature frequently center protagonists who challenge and transform their worlds [15; 16]. Ukrainian authors imagined futures that Western analytical frameworks deemed unthinkable [9]. This literary tradition explores individual agency navigating macro-historical forces, asking whether personal action can disrupt collective trajectories. However, professional foresight minimally engages this tradition. Type 3: Autocratic Agency (Systematically Overlooked). Concentrated power in authoritarian systems enables leaders to disrupt predictions through decisions driven by ideology rather than economic rationality. This is precisely what happened with the Ukraine invasion – economically destructive for Russia, strategically questionable, yet ideologically coherent.

Implication: Foresight must explicitly theorize autocratic agency requiring: (1) systematic discourse analysis of leaders' statements revealing ideological frameworks; (2) generational analysis of leadership cohorts examining how formative experiences shape worldviews; (3) epistemic humility recognizing rationalist model limitations when ideology overrides economics; (4) epistemic justice systematically including analytical voices from threatened peripheries whose proximity provides crucial insights distant objectivity misses.

**Content analysis evidence: war and peace discourse.** Beyond political leadership discourse, broader cultural-linguistic patterns provide additional evidence of discursive preparation for conflict. Following John Naisbitt's pioneering content analysis methodology from *Megatrends* (1982) [30] – which demonstrated that analyzing word frequency in published texts reveals emerging societal transformations before they become visible in policy – I examined the usage of war/peace terminology in German, English, and Russian literature across the 20th–21st centuries using Google Books Ngram Viewer.

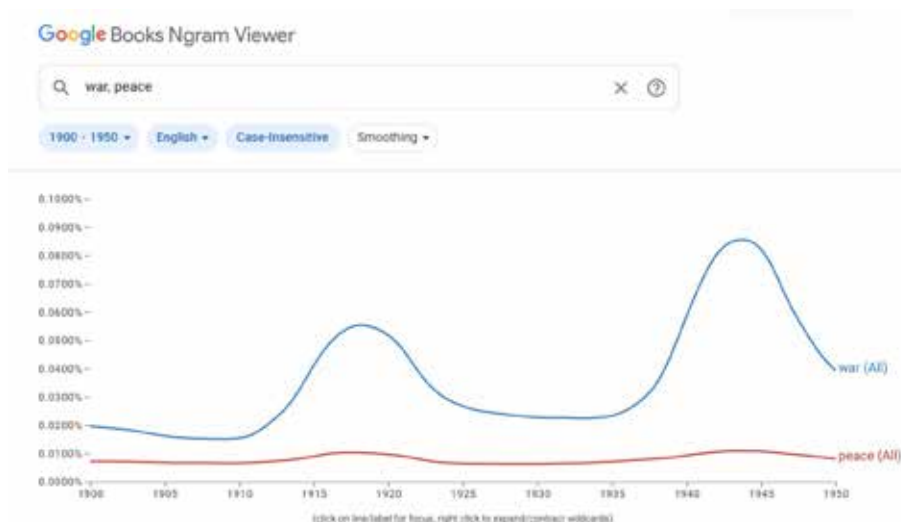
The patterns are striking and theoretically significant. Figure 1 shows German-language usage of “Krieg” (war) and “Frieden” (peace) from 1900–2022. Sharp growth in war discourse appears four years before WWI (1914–1918) in 1910, and again four years before WWII (1939–1945) in 1935. With the Iraq War (2003), war content growth started in the mid-1990s, producing a third, smaller peak. Notably, peace discourse remains relatively stable and lower throughout, suggesting that preparation for and engagement in major conflicts generates intensified linguistic attention to war as concept and reality.

Figure 2 presents English-language patterns for “war” and “peace” (1900–1950). The visualization reveals similar spikes 3–4 years before both World Wars, with war discourse dramatically elevated during conflict periods. The relatively flat peace discourse suggests that even in English-language literature, active conflict rather than peace-building dominated cultural attention during the first half of the 20th century.



**Figure 1: German “Krieg, Frieden” (1900–2022)**

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer



**Figure 2: English “war, peace” (1900–1950)**

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer

Most revealing for this study is Figure 3, showing Russian-language patterns for “війна” (war) and “мір” (peace) from 1900-2022. During WWI and WWII, war discourse grew early as expected. However, before WWII the leading indicator was not war usage but the peace discourse! The crucial inversion appears in the post-Cold War period and particularly in the 21st century: while Russia actively prepared for and ultimately launched large-scale military aggression against Ukraine, Russian-language literature increasingly emphasized peace

discourse over war discourse. The word “мір” (peace) shows dramatic growth from 2010 (after the Georgian war) onward, reaching its highest point precisely in 2020–2021 – the period when military buildup around Ukraine and invasion preparation intensified.

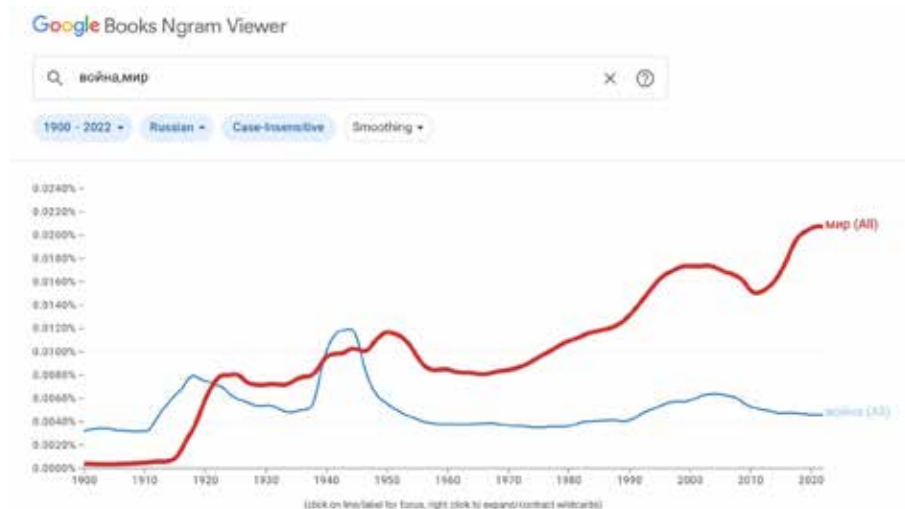


Figure 3: Russian “війна, мір” (1900–2022)

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer

This discursive pattern suggests what might be termed “peace-washing” – the rhetorical emphasis on peace even while preparing for war. Unlike Germany and Britain, whose literary discourse during wartime honestly reflected war’s reality, contemporary Russian discourse exhibits systematic disconnect between linguistic production (peace rhetoric: “we bring peace to Russian people in Ukraine”) and material preparation (military buildup around Ukrainian borders, aggressive foreign policy escalation). This aligns with the consistent framing of Russian actions as “peacekeeping operations”, “denazification”, and “special military operation” rather than war. Naisbitt’s methodological insight – that analyzing what people write reveals more than what governments announce – proves particularly valuable here [30]. The contrast between Russian peace discourse explosion and actual military aggression exemplifies the kind of discursive hypocrisy that critical discourse analysis can detect but which rationalist foresight frameworks systematically miss.

**Toward discourse-informed foresight.** Integrating critical discourse analysis of autocratic leadership into foresight practice requires fundamental methodological reconceptualization. Rather than treating political discourse as rhetorical noise external to “real” structural drivers, foresight institutions must recognize leadership discourse as constitutive data revealing ideological commitments that shape action trajectories. The methodological shift involves four interconnected dimensions: (1) systematic longitudinal analysis of political leaders’ discourse in high-risk contexts – authoritarian regimes with concentrated power, revisionist states challenging international order, societies experiencing generational leadership transitions; (2) applying critical discourse analysis frameworks drawing on van Dijk’s ideological analysis, Foucault’s genealogical methods, and Koselleck’s temporal semantics [17; 26; 23]; (3) generational

analysis examining how leadership cohorts' formative historical experiences structure their "horizons of expectation"; (4) developing integration mechanisms ensuring discourse analysis complements rather than replaces traditional trend-based foresight, incorporating epistemic justice principles [8].

**Conclusion.** Mainstream foresight's failure to predict Russia's 2022 invasion resulted from systematic methodological choices that privileged certain knowledge forms while excluding others. Corporate and institutional foresight focused on trends, technologies, and aggregate populations, rendering autocratic agency invisible. When Ukrainian analysts warned based on proximity, historical memory, and discourse analysis, their knowledge was dismissed as "biased".

This paper makes four contributions to futures studies: (1) identifying and theorizing three distinct types of agency in futures discourse – collective agency privileged by corporate foresight, heroic agency explored in speculative fiction, and autocratic agency systematically overlooked; (2) proposing critical discourse analysis of political leadership as essential foresight methodology complementing traditional approaches; (3) providing preliminary content analysis evidence of "peace-washing" discursive pattern in Russian-language literature before 2022 invasion; (4) arguing for epistemic justice in foresight practice. Future research requires systematic CDA of complete discourse corpus, comparative cases, indicator development, and predictive testing. For foresight institutions: create dedicated capacity for discourse analysis; train analysts in CDA methods; build longitudinal databases; establish partnerships with regional analytical centers; include explicit "autocratic disruption" scenarios in planning; examine epistemic exclusions in current practices.

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## **ПОЗА РАЦІОНАЛІСТСЬКИМ ФОРСАЙТОМ: ЧОМУ ДИСКУРС-АНАЛІЗ ПОЛІТИЧНОГО ЛІДЕРСТВА ВАЖЛИВИЙ ДЛЯ ПЕРЕДБАЧЕННЯ КРИХКИХ МАЙБУТНІХ**

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Провідні інституції форсайту всебічно не змогли передбачити повномасштабне вторгнення Росії в Україну 2022 року, попри чіткі попереджувальні сигнали в автократичному дискурсі та застереження українських аналітиків. Цей системний провал виявляє фундаментальні методологічні обмеження сучасного корпоративного та інституційного форсайту. Хоча престижні організації, як-от Всесвітній економічний форум, McKinsey та Стратегічний форсайт ЄС, присвячують значні ресурси аналізу трендів і технологій, вони систематично ігнорують автократичну агентність, сконцентровану в авторитарних системах. Ця стаття аргументує, що інтеграція критичного дискурс-аналізу політичного лідерства в методологію форсайту могла б усунути катастрофічні сліпі плями. Спираючись на критичний дискурс-аналіз ван Дейка, концептуалізацію влади-знання Фуко, темпоральну семантику Козеллека та методологію контент-аналізу Найсбіта, пропонуємо дослідити, як дискурс автократичних лідерів розкриває ідеологічні зобов'язання та ревізійні амбіції, які раціоналістичні моделі пропускають. Попередній контент-аналіз термінології війна / мир у німецькій, англійській та російській літературі (1900–2022) за допомогою Google Ngram виявляє різкий патерн rease-washing у російських текстах перед вторгненням 2022 року – драматичне зростання дискурсу миру під час військового наробітання. Цей розрив ілюструє дискурсивне лицемірство, яке критичний дискурс-аналіз виявляє, але раціоналістичні фреймворки пропускають. Провал є прикладом епістемічної несправедливості – систематичної делегітимізації знання на основі позиції того, хто знає, а не якості доказів. Українське знання, засноване на близькості та історичній пам'яті, було відкинуте західними інституціями як упереджене. Стаття робить такий внесок: (1) ідентифікація трьох типів агентності в дискурсі майбутнього – колективної, героїчної та автократичної; (2) пропозиція критичного дискурс-аналізу як суттєвої методології форсайту; (3) надання попередніх емпіричних доказів rease-washing; (4) аргументація на користь епістемічної справедливості – систематичного включення

голосів із загрозованих периферій, близькість яких надає вирішальні інсайти. Стаття надає теоретичне підґрунтя для майбутніх досліджень систем раннього попередження на основі дискурсу.

*Ключові слова:* форсайт, дискурс-аналіз, автократична агентність, епістемічна несправедливість, війна в Україні, контент-аналіз, rease-washing, дослідження майбутнього, раціоналістичний ухил, критичний дискурс-аналіз.

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