All Eyes on Ukraine

Strategic Communication in the Russo-Ukrainian War, 2023–2024

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Preface

This report stems from a Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project commissioned by the Swedish Armed Forces. It was primarily researched and written by Per-Erik Nilsson, who conducted fieldwork in Ukraine and collected most of the data. Kristina Hellström assisted with the analysis, data collection, and editing of the report. Their combined efforts have shaped the findings and conclusions presented here. Editorial support, including language refinement and structural edits, was provided by Richard Langlais, whose contributions helped enhance the clarity and readability of this report.

Above all, the authors of this report wish to express their deepest gratitude and respect to all those in Ukraine who contributed, whether through interviews, by providing feedback, or by facilitating fieldwork. Additionally, the authors extend their sincere thanks to colleagues whose efforts helped bring this report to completion. The authors are especially grateful to Ivar Ekman, Matthew Ford, Roman Horbyk, Emma-Lina Löflund, Per Ståhlberg, and the staff at the Swedish Embassy in Kyiv.

Sammanfattning

Föreliggande rapport syftar till att utifrån en empiriskt grundad analys av ukrainsk strategisk kommunikation identifiera generella lärdomar för krigstida kommunikation för demokratiska rättsstater, med fokus på 2023–2024 av det rysk-ukrainska kriget. Rapporten är populärvetenskaplig och vänder sig till strateger och praktiker inom försvarssektorn, likväl som forskare, analytiker och andra avnämare.

Rapporten undersöker hur Ukraina har använt offentlig diplomati, offentliga angelägenheter (*public affairs*) och psykologiska operationer, med särskilt fokus på de utmaningar och erfarenheter som ukrainska aktörer inom strategisk kommunikation har mött. Rapporten baseras huvudsakligen på intervjuer med 18 aktörer, genomförda i Kyjiv i oktober 2024, samt på analyser av ukrainska och ryska sociala medier och nyhetskanaler, kompletterade med tidigare forskning och analys.

Rapportens huvudsakliga slutsatser är att strategisk kommunikation under krig fungerar som kritiskt instrument för att forma och förvalta krigets betydelse, men att den i sig inte ersätter militär förmåga. Vidare framstår strategisk kommunikation i en krigssituation som en oundvikligt politisk fråga, då den i grunden handlar om vem som har mandat att representera nationen. Slutligen sker snabba förändringar i informationsmiljön till följd av teknisk utveckling, algoritmer och medielogik. Dock tyder analysen på att grundläggande sociala, politiska, kulturella och psykologiska faktorer förblir relativt stabila. Därför riskerar en alltför tekniskt eller ingenjörsmässigt inriktad förståelse av strategisk kommunikation att underskatta den mänskliga komplexiteten i relation till kommunikation och krig.

Rapportens avslutande del innehåller en koncentrerad sammanfattning av preliminära lärdomar som dragits utifrån analysen med hänvisningar till de avsnitt där de behandlas mer ingående.

Nyckelord: Strategisk kommunikation, offentlig diplomati, offentliga angelägenheter, psykologiska operationer, Ukraina, Ryssland

Summary

This report aims to identify general lessons for wartime communication in democratic states, based on an empirically grounded analysis of Ukrainian strategic communication, with a focus on the 2023–2024 phase of the Russo–Ukrainian war. It adopts a popular scientific approach and is intended for strategists and practitioners in the defence sector, as well as researchers, analysts, and other relevant stakeholders.

It examines how Ukraine has employed public diplomacy, public affairs, and psychological operations, focusing on the challenges and insights gained by Ukrainian actors engaged in strategic communication. The report is primarily based on interviews with 18 actors conducted in Kyiv in October 2024 and on analyses of Ukrainian and Russian social media and news channels, complemented by previous research and analysis.

The report's key conclusions are that strategic communication during wartime serves as a critical tool for shaping and managing the meaning of war, but does not replace military capability. Furthermore, strategic communication in a war context is inherently a political issue, as it ultimately concerns who has the authority to speak on behalf of the nation. Finally, while the information environment rapidly evolves due to technological advancements, algorithms, and media dynamics, fundamental social, political, cultural, and psychological factors remain relatively stable. As a result, an overly technical or engineering-focused understanding of strategic communication risks overlooking the human complexity of communication in war.

The final and concluding section of the report offers a concentrated summary of preliminary lessons derived from the analysis, with references to the sections where they are discussed in depth.

Keywords: Strategic communication, public diplomacy, public affairs, psychological operations, Ukraine, Russia

Contents

1 Introduction

Meet Pixel (the square-headed figure in the centre of the front cover), an embodiment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and, as such, "a brave guardian of freedom" who fights for Ukraine's safety. Pixel is not alone. Together with the Ruthenian Lion, Archangel Michael, the Cossacks, viburnum berries, international allies, cats, dogs, and the ordinary Ukrainian, he catches Russian missiles and breaks them into pieces: "He fights for every Ukrainian, protecting the sky, land, and sea," and defends his "native land."[1]

Pixel is an animated figure meant to symbolise Ukrainian national identity and unity in the shadow of the Russian full-scale invasion. The first clip starring Pixel was released on YouTube in September 2024 and is set to music by the hip-hop group TNMK from Kharkiv. Pixel's target audience is Ukrainians 12 years and younger.

In a café in central Kyiv in October 2024, a respondent from the Armed Forces recounted how Pixel resulted from an ambition to create a publicly rooted symbol of the Armed Forces. The respondent said that Pixel is not a cringeworthy attempt by the Armed Forces communicators to "be cool, definitely not." Through Pixel, the Armed Forces wanted to "tell the story of 10 years of fighting for Ukraine; 10 years of fighting the Russian aggression." Without being asked about it, the respondent added that this is "not about propaganda," that "we are not calling upon them to kill Russians or to stop teaching kids Russian or something like that, no." This is "about telling our kids that we have a long and rich history; that we can fight, that we continue to fight; and that we will fight the Russians."[2]

Pixel sits at the intersection of a bundle of theoretical and practical issues regarding strategic communication in war: he is a real-time example of national mythmaking through popular culture and historical artefacts; he illustrates the creative outcome of military and civil cooperation; he is an amalgam of historical and cultural symbolism; he evokes the ethical limits of military communication, particularly when addressing domestic audiences and shaping historical narratives; and he speaks to some of the most fundamental questions in war, namely the identity, morale, and the future of a war-torn generation.

Building on these issues, this report seeks to answer how Ukrainian strategic communication has changed and adapted to changing national and global information environments since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

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[1] Knyha-mandrivka, "Piksel feat. Fahot & Fozzey, Knyha-mandrivka—Piksel boronyt svoie," YouTube, 30 September 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0fr7ODW1P8.

[2] Interview, Respondent (Armed Forces of Ukraine), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

1.1 Purpose and Aim

This report stems from a Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project commissioned by the Swedish Armed Forces. The overarching aim of this report is to contribute to the understanding of Ukrainian wartime strategic communication in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, with a particular focus on developments during 2023–2024.[3] Drawing on interviews with Ukrainian strategic communication practitioners, the report outlines and illustrates a Ukrainian perspective on the evolving nature of strategic communication as a formal and informal whole-of-government and whole-of-society system.

Intended for strategic communication practitioners, scholars, analysts, and an informed general readership, the report adopts a popular-scientific approach. It builds on earlier research conducted at FOI,[4] and offers a synthesis of new empirical material and prior studies. Relevant theoretical frameworks and previous research are referenced throughout, aiming to contribute to both practical understanding and academic research.

Based on these practitioners' views on the adaptation and evolution of strategic communication during war, the report aims to extract general and preliminary lessons regarding the practice of strategic communication; these lessons may be transformed into lessons *learned* when adapted and implemented in their specific national and organisational settings.[5]

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[3] The analysis has a cut-off date of 5 November 2024, coinciding with the presidential election in the United States. The election was considered potentially disruptive to both national and international communication dynamics. Developments beyond this point were not included due to the report's time frane..

[4] See: Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information Front – Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*, FOI-R--5451--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2023), https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5451--SE; Per-Erik Nilsson and Ivar Ekman. "'Be Brave Like Ukraine': Strategic Communication and the Mediatization of War," *National Security and the Future* 25, no. 1 (2024): 21–64; Per-Erik Nilsson, Sofia Olsson, and Kristina Hellström, *Från fronten till skärmen [From the Frontline to the Screen]*, FOI-R--5605--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2023); Pontus Winther and Per-Erik Nilsson, "Smart Tactics or Risky Behaviour? The Lawfulness of Encouraging Civilians to Participate in Targeting in an Age of Digital Warfare," *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, Paper 2 (2023), https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/02-Smart-Tactics-or-Risky-Behaviour.pdf.

[5] The emphasis on preliminary lessons reflects the limitations of available data and the inherent uncertainties of conducting research during an ongoing war. For an in-depth discussion on lessons and lessons learned, see: Tom Dyson, "The Military as a Learning Organisation: Establishing the Fundamentals of Best-Practice in Lessons-Learned," *Defence Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 107-129; Mick Ryan, *The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation Under Fire* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2024), 7. For a research overview of wartime communication, see: Roman Horbyk, "Mediatisation of War and the Military: Current State, Trends, and Challenges in the Field," in *Contemporary Challenges in Mediatisation Research*, eds Katarzyna Kopecka-Piech and Göran Bolin (London and New York, 2023), 111-128.

1.2 Approaching Strategic Communication

In this report, strategic communication refers to the intentional and goal-driven use of communication by entities such as organisations, institutions, or governing bodies to achieve their long-term objectives.[6] From this perspective, it includes various core communicative practices, such as public affairs (informing and building relations with domestic audiences and the news media), public diplomacy (engaging and influencing international audiences and news media), psychological operations (influencing adversary audiences in support of military operations and national security), and internal communication (overseeing and coordinating information flows within and between organisations, institutions, or governing bodies).[7]

Strategic communication in wartime, given its significance in shaping perceptions among domestic publics, international audiences, and adversaries, can be understood as a form of information warfare. A typically military understanding of the purpose of information warfare is to influence, disrupt, or impair enemy decision-making while protecting one's own.[8] In military theory and the academic literature, information warfare also includes cyber and electronic warfare components.[9] Information warfare activities vary in purpose depending on the audience: they may aim to strengthen domestic morale, demoralise the enemy, or reinforce allied support. As this report demonstrates, the interplay between kinetic and perceptual logics is so closely intertwined that it becomes analytically challenging to distinguish between them in practice.

Strategic communication is typically presented as relying on the normative ethical principles of transparency and dialogue, ideally fostering engagement and trust.[10] To be persuasive and aim to influence audiences through communication is not seen in contrast against these principles since persuasiveness and influence

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[6] Ansgar Zerfass, Dejan Verčič, Howard Nothhaft, and Kelly Page Werder, "Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and Its Contribution to Research and Practice," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12, no. 4 (2018): 487–505, 493.

[7] The academic literature features a significant debate regarding the definition of strategic communication and the communicative practices that fall under this umbrella. This report does not aim to engage in extensive academic discussions. Instead, it is based on James Farwell's work on American strategic communication, along with insights from Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide on internal communication. See: James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide, *Strategic Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Global Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 96–97.

[8] See, for example: Daniel Ventre, *Information Warfare* (London and Hoboken: ISTE and Wiley, 2016).

[9] Lukasz Olejnik, *Propaganda: From Disinformation and Influence to Operations and Information Warfare* (Boca Raton, London, and New York: CRC Press, 2025), 37–38. See, also: William Merrin, *Digital War: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

[10] Jim Macnamara and Anne Gregory, "Expanding Evaluation to Progress Strategic Communication: Beyond Message Tracking to Open Listening," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12, no. 4 (2018): 469–486.

arguably are at the core of communication *tout court*.[11] While strategic communication ideally operates according to these normative principles, there is an ongoing scholarly debate regarding its distinction from propaganda.[12] In this report, propaganda is seen as the deliberate use of manipulation and deception to shape perceptions and influence behaviour.[13] From this standpoint, the core distinction lies in strategic communication as persuasive communication, whereas propaganda represents manipulative communication. However, within the military strategic-communication toolbox, deception and manipulation can serve as integral components—particularly within psychological operations—blurring the line between persuasion and manipulation in the pursuit of strategic objectives.[14]

Moreover, strategic communication addresses so-called wicked problems.[15] Wicked problems are multifaceted and evolving, resisting clear definitions, where attempted solutions may reveal new issues that reshape the initial problem. Their resolution becomes even more complex in a dynamic information environment, especially during wartime, when multiple stakeholders hold differing views and national and international social and political contexts continually evolve. As a result, solutions are rarely right or wrong; instead, they need to be assessed based on their relative effectiveness and adaptability in ever-changing conditions.

Understanding the strategic aspect of strategic communication as an orderly unfolding is misguided in this problem space, even in an ideal-typical sense. Writing about military strategy, Lawrence Freedman states that in practice "strategy starts with the problem at hand and then proceeds through stages, with

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[11] Margaret Duffy, Esther Thorson, and Fred Vultee, "All Communication Is Persuasive: Exploding the Myth of Objectivity," in *Persuasion Ethics Today*, eds Margaret Duffy and Esther Thorson (New York: Routledge, 2015), chapter 2 (e-book); Jim Macnamara, "Persuasion, Promotion, Spin, Propaganda?" in *Research Handbook on Strategic Communication*, eds. Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heider (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Pelgar Publishing, 2022), 46–61.

[12] See: Elizabeth Fry, "Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influence in NATO Military Strategic Communications," *Defence Strategic Communications* 11 (2023): 177–213; James Pamment, *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Comparative Study of Policy and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

[13] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2015), p. 7.

[14] See for example: Andrew Alexandra, "PYSOP and Intelligence," in *The Ethics of National Security: Intelligence Institutions Theory and Applications*, eds Adam Henschke, Seumas Miller, Andrew Alexandra, Patrick F. Walsh, and Roger Bradbury (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 122–142; Barton Whaley, "The One Percent Solution: Costs and Benefits of Military Deception," in *Information Strategy and Warfare: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, eds John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 127–159. Note that NATO doctrine for strategic communications defines psychological operations as "based on true and factual information." See: NATO, "NATO Standard AJP-10: Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communication," ed. A, ver. 1, NATO Standardisation Office (NSO), 2023, 54.

[15] John C. Camillus, "Strategy as a Wicked Problem," *Harvard Business Review*, May (2008): 1–10; Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, "Social Issue qua Wicked Problems: The Role of Strategic Communication in Social Issues Management," *Journal of Communication Management* 22, no. 1 (2018): 79–95.

the options for each stage shaped by those preceding them."[16] Strategy can thus be understood as a dialectical process between the short-term and long-term; for Freedman, narratives, or simply stories, link the short-term with the long-term.[17] In this report, strategic communication is the function that produces this link for Ukraine.

Aligning strategic communication as an umbrella concept with the classical three-level structure of war, the strategic level focuses on overarching planning to achieve national or multinational objectives. This involves determining desired end states, allocating resources, and shaping broad narratives to fulfil political and overarching military goals. The operational level serves as the bridge between strategy and tactics, encompassing the planning, execution, synchronisation, and assessment of communication campaigns to realise strategic objectives within specific operational environments. Finally, the tactical level involves the direct execution of communication activities and message dissemination to achieve immediate, localised effects.[18]

In light of this context, this report aims to provide practical, context-based insights about strategic communication, based on an empirical study of Ukraine. It uses a reasoning process that shifts between the specifics of the Ukrainian situation (an insider view) and broader theoretical frameworks (an outsider view). The goal is to identify functional patterns that can inform general strategies, while recognising that these insights depend on and should be tailored to the specific institutional, cultural, and national environments in which they are applied. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, this report provides recommendations to improve strategic communication during conflicts and wars, acknowledging the complex and varied nature of each national context.[19]

1.3 Analysing Strategic Communication

This report relies on a mixed-methods approach. First of all, the primary author conducted interviews with 18 strategic communication practitioners in Ukraine working at the strategic, operative, and tactical levels. All interviews but one were

[16] Lawrence Freedman, "Strategic Fanatism: Vladimir Putin and Ukraine," in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of Fractured World*, ed. Hall Brands (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 55–70, 56.

[17] Ibid.

[18] For further discussion of the three levels of war, see: Andrew S. Harvey, "The Levels of War as Levels of Analysis," *Military Review* November/December (2021): 75–81.

[19] Epistemologically, the report draws on abductive reasoning. Briefly put, abductive reasoning is a way of analysing data that helps researchers develop new and creative ideas by combining existing theories with observations from real-world studies. Instead of ignoring all prior knowledge, researchers start with a strong understanding of theories and refine or expand them as they gather and analyse new information. See: Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis," *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 3 (2012): 167–186.

conducted in Kyiv during October 2024.[20] The respondents include representatives from the Armed Forces, the National Guard, the General Staff, the Ministry of Defence, the Office of the President, the Centre for Countering Disinformation, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) involved in fact-checking and public relations, and the news media. Most of the respondents are considered elites within their organisations, presumed to represent strategic direction, organisational perspective, and oversight of operational and tactical levels.[21] They have been pseudonymised to protect the respondents' identities.[22]

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. All except two interviews were recorded, and all except two interviews were conducted in English, while the remaining two were conducted in Russian.[23] Open-ended questions were posed to understand how respondents perceive the adaptation and evolution of Ukrainian strategic communication since the full-scale invasion. These questions explored strategic aspects (the role and function of strategic communication, as well as cooperation and coordination with other communicating bodies), operational aspects (planning and analysis of communication), and tactical aspects (execution of communication). The principal author and interviewer coded the interviews and subsequently matched them to the thematic questions, which both authors then analysed.

Secondly, interviews as a data collection method are limited in terms of reliability, generalisability, and the selection of respondents.[24] Considering reliability and generalisability, the respondents represent only a fraction of all the individuals involved in the Ukrainian communication effort. Moreover, several respondents explained that sensitive topics (personal, political, and operational) would have to wait until after the war, meaning that crucial information to create a deeper understanding of the research questions has at times knowingly been withheld during the interviews. It is also possible that the information that was conveyed is informed by the respondents' interests, faulty memories, and biases. Regarding the selection of respondents, access in Ukraine has been remarkably generous. Due to

[20] This report does not reveal specific dates or locations for the interviews to protect the identity of the respondents, some of whom were more adamant about this than others.

[21] Laura Empson, "Elite Interviewing in Professional Organizations," *Journal of Professions and Organization* 5, no. 1 (2018): 58–69.

[22] Christoph Houman Ellersgaard, Kia Ditlevsen, and Anton Grau Larsen, "Say My Name? Anonymity or Not in Elite Interviewing," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 25, no. 5 (2022): 673–686.

[23] Regarding transliteration, the Library of Congress (ALA-LC) Romanisation system has been used throughout—the 2011 edition for Ukrainian and 2012 for Russian. For readability, ligatures and diacritical marks have been omitted, except for the letter ï, as is customary in such texts. Exceptions include names already transliterated into established English forms (e.g., Zelensky rather than Zelenskyi).

[24] Brenda L. Moore, "In-depth Interviewing," in *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies*, eds Joseph Soeters, Patricia M. Shields, and Sebastian Rietjens (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 116–128, 125–126.

time constraints, the period spent in Ukraine and the principal author's ability to conduct more interviews was limited.

Thirdly, to remedy these limitations, the standard triangulation method was employed to verify and substantiate the interviews.[25] This means that specific information and claims have been cross-referenced with other interviews and secondary sources in news media, social media, and previous research.[26]

Fourthly, the authors have conducted social and news media monitoring, and statistical and content analysis of Ukrainian communication on social media, with a particular emphasis on the communication channels of the respondents' organisations on Telegram, X, and YouTube. This focus aims to provide insights into communication campaigns and the national and international information environments.

Finally, it is helpful to consider the context of an ongoing war where the emotional impact of the situation is tangible. When arriving suddenly in a war-torn country to conduct interviews within a short time frame, finding a balance between professional composure and empathetic responsiveness can be particularly challenging. For instance, in one interview, the respondent offered a personal reflection that is not directly related to the researcher's narrow focus on data collection but adds depth and human context to what war truly entails:

> Not all our allies, and not all the guys in Europe, understand that this is an existential fight for us. If we lose, there will be no Ukraine, and we understand that. We do understand that. This is the fight for our kids you know. It's really personal for me because I haven't seen my kids for two years… So this war is really personal for every military man in Ukraine.[27]

A researcher can only strive to do justice to the respondents' answers and situations. Against this background, it should be clear that this report will not provide a holistic picture of the state of Ukrainian strategic communication during the Russo-Ukrainian war. To quote Hal Brands, writing about war in real time "is like shooting at a moving target."[28] This report is the researchers' attempt to make meaning out of this target.[29]

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[25] Rebecca S. Natow, "The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Studies Employing Elite Interviews," *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 2 (2020): 160–173.

[26] Delphine Deschaux-Beaume, "Investigating the Military Field: Qualitative Research Strategy and Interviewing in the Defence Networks," *Current Sociology* 60, no. 1 (2012): 101–117.

[27] Interview, Member (Armed Forces), Kyiv, 8-19 October 2024.

[28] Hal Brands, "The Ukraine War and the Global Order," in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of Fractured World*, ed. Hall Brands (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 1–16, 2.

[29] Steven Krauss, "Research Paradigms and Meaning Making: A Primer," *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 4 (2005): 758–770.

1.4 Disposition

This report is organised into six chapters that systematically explore the evolution of strategic communication's core practices in Ukraine, focusing on the second and third years of Russia's full-scale invasion. Chapter 2 provides a contextual background by reviewing previous research from 2014 to 2022, analysing the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, and, based on interviews, assessing any strategic-level changes that have emerged during 2023–2024. Chapter 3 shifts the focus to public diplomacy and the international information environment, examining how attention is captured, expectations are managed, and actions are communicated globally. In Chapter 4, the discussion turns to public affairs within the national information environment, where the processes of informing the public, implementing informational control, and addressing the challenges of motivation and morale are analysed. Chapter 5 examines the challenges posed by Russian influence and information manipulation, evaluating the role and effectiveness of offensive communications in countering these challenges. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the report and suggests topics for future research.

2 Every Day Is Monday

A slightly trembling handheld camera captures a dark night on Bankova Street in central Kyiv. A deep, resonant voice is heard saying, “This is the evening of Kyiv.” The camera turns, revealing the man behind it to be Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky. He walks through his office corridors and comments, “You know, we used to say Monday is a hard day.” He finally takes a seat at his desk. Just as he sits down, the handheld and personal selfie-frame transitions to a traditional TV broadcast. He continues, “Now, every day is Monday.”[30]

The video was published on 8 March 2022. As another means to debunk Russian claims that the Ukrainian president had fled the country, it serves as an emblematic example of Zelensky’s personally framed communication that has impressed many international observers. Without a doubt, Zelensky has been crucial in both uniting the country and ensuring its voice resonates around the world.[31] As one respondent put it:

> As a country we have a very powerful tool —Zelensky, because he’s seen as quite a public hero. And that means that people are ready to listen to him, I mean not in Ukraine, well here also, but right now I’m speaking about our allies in Europe and in the United States. So, in that sense, I think we can call Zelensky a powerful communication tool for Ukraine.[32]

The presence of such a media-savvy leader, possessing the courage to remain in his office amid a full-scale invasion, is a remarkable outcome of historical chance. However, in the context of the Ukrainian communication effort, Zelensky is merely one part of a much larger apparatus. This chapter provides a chronological account of the formation of this apparatus from both military and civilian perspectives.

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[30] Volodymyr Zelensky, @Zelensky_official, Instagram, 8 March 2022: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca0hYyrIlIj/?utm_source=ig_embed.

[31] See: Mykhailo Minakov, Gwendolyn Sasse, Michael Kimmage, Lesia Bidochko, Georgiy Kasianov, Blair A. Ruble, Andrea Graziosi, Andrew Wilson, and Andreas Umland, ”Historical Significance of Zelensky’s Presidency So Far,” Fokus Ukraine: A Blog of the Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, 29 May 2024: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/historical-significance-Zelenskys-presidency-so-far. For analytical accounts of Zelensky as a political figure and communicator before and during the full-scale invasion, see: Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale, *The Zelensky Effect* (London: Hurst & Company, 2023); Simon Shuster, *The Showman: Inside the Invasion that Shook the World and Made a Leader of Volodymyr Zelensky* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023).

[32] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

2.1 Catching Up

The formalisation of strategic communication within the Ukrainian government began in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine.[33] This era was characterised by an increasingly complex digital information environment that brought about fundamental changes and possibilities, benign and malign, for participatory and networked communication with unprecedented potential for outreach.[34]

Under President Petro Poroshenko, the new political leadership recognised the imperative of safeguarding national sovereignty from Russian influence and interference. This entailed developing more effective communication strategies to engage the domestic population and the international community and creating an information environment free from Russian and pro-Russian actors. Such measures were deemed essential for ensuring the country's democratic development and protecting society, particularly during a time of war and partial siege.[35]

In 2014, a Ministry for Information Policy was established with the explicit mandate to counter Russia on the "information front," as Poroshenko described it.[36] In response to the emerging challenges, several state institutions, including the Ministries of Culture, Defence, and Foreign Affairs, adapted their communication strategies, recognising the necessity to enhance their communicative capacity domestically and internationally.[37] Notably, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) encountered challenges stemming from a lack of trust, necessitating the modernisation of their communication strategies to effectively confront resistance and strategically adapt to the situation.[38]

During the subsequent reform process, Ukraine received significant support from international organisations such as NATO and bilateral assistance from EU countries. In 2015, the concept of "strategic communication" was integrated into official Ukrainian doctrine, and in 2017, a new information security doctrine was adopted, making strategic communication a fundamental pillar.[39] This period also saw the institutionalisation of key initiatives such as the Centre for Strategic

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[33] Serhii Plokhy dates the Russian invasion 2014 to August 24, Ukraine's Independence Day: Serhii Plokhy *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (Dublin: Allan Lane, 2023), 128.

[34] Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, "Arrested War: The Third Phase of Mediatization," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 11 (2015): 1320–1338.

[35] Tetyana Syvak, "The System of Strategic Communications in Ukraine: Preconditions of Formation," *The World of Politics, Society, Geography* 1, no. 2 (2016): 69–76.

[36] "Poroshenko: Information Ministry's Main Task Is to Repel Information Attacks against Ukraine," *Interfax-Ukraine*, 8 December 2014: https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/238615.html.

[37] Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, *Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication, and Narration since the Euromaidan Revolution* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2023), 48.

[38] Ekman and Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information*, 39–40, 64–65.

[39] Iryna Izhutova, "Ukrainian Strategic Communications and Martial Law," *Journal of Scientific Papers 'Social Development and Security'* 9, no. 5 (2019): 127–132, 127.

Communication and Information Security and the Centre for Countering Disinformation.[40]

Beyond state institutions, civil society and the private sector have played crucial roles in developing strategic communication in Ukraine. Several new nongovernmental media organisations emerged amid the significant societal upheavals of 2013–2014 (Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity). Many of these organisations assumed various communicative functions that the state had previously lacked, such as a press centre and the analysis of Russian information manipulation and interference.[41]

Over time, the state began to collaborate with and harness the diverse resources and expertise developed within civil society and the private sector, further advancing and institutionalising strategic communication as an overarching strategy encompassing both governmental and societal spheres.[42]

One of this study's respondents, a leading individual in the work to advance strategic communication at the General Staff, explained that once the AFU opened for civil personnel the response was beyond expectation. After an initial process to recruit civilian communicators, this respondent said that they ended up with "the best people you could ever want!"[43] Regarding creativity in communication and a deeper understanding of the importance of media, another respondent, a senior strategic communication official at the Ministry of Defence, explained that "everything changed when civilians came in" during this period.[44]

This period also saw initiatives to safeguard the Ukrainian information environment from Russian influence. In October 2014, the government banned 14 Russian TV channels from Ukrainian cable networks. In 2017, an executive order forced internet providers to restrict access to major Russian websites and social media, including VKontakte, to curb Kremlin influence and collection of data about Ukrainian citizens. Then, in early 2021, President Zelensky shut down three Kremlin-affiliated TV channels—linked to figures like Viktor Medvedchuk—to counteract Kremlin narratives and counter the threat of Russian informational aggression.[45]

This convergence of top-down and bottom-up innovation enabled Ukraine to adapt its strategic communication in response to evolving war-time challenges while reflecting its broader historical and sociopolitical transformations in its efforts to

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[40] Ekman and Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information Front*, 26–28.

[41] Ibid., 63–66.

[42] Bolin and Ståhlberg, *Managing Meaning*, 66; Isabelle Facon, *Reforming Ukrainian Defense: No Shortage of Challenges* (Paris: French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), 2017): https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/reforming-ukrainian-defense-no-shortage-challenges.

[43] Interview, Senior Communication Strategist (Public Relations NGO), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[44] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[45] Nilsson and Ekman, "Be Brave Like," 36.

keep up with the superior enemy.[46] Yet, significant gaps remained in the national framework,[47] which begs the question: To what extent had Ukraine prepared its strategic communication capabilities in anticipation of the full-scale invasion in 2022?

2.2 Harnessing Chaos

During the Russian build-up along the Ukrainian border in 2021, which was on display for the world to see, many, including numerous Western intelligence services, still could not believe the full-scale invasion would happen.

In an interview published in *Ukrainska Pravda* at the very moment of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov is quoted as saying that the West was about to learn what "Ukrainians have known for a long time: no one can live peacefully next to Russia."[48] He nonetheless expressed belief in a diplomatic solution, and later on, Zelensky would face criticism for not adequately preparing the population for what was about to come.[49]

While this story appears to be a classical failure of mirror-imaging in politics and intelligence,[50] a tale of tarnished reputation and a lack of trust among Western allies,[51] it is also about proactive strategic communication.[52] During the late autumn of 2021, American, British, and Estonian intelligence services indicated that a full-scale invasion was in the making, a messaging amplified by American news media.[53]

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[46] Ibid, 37–38.

[47] Izhutova, "Ukrainian Strategic Communications," 131; Tetyana Syvak, Petro Vorona, Yurii Nesteriak, Viktor Paliukh, and Alla Dakal, "Current State of Strategic Communications in Ukraine and Their Functional Influence on Efficiency of State Management System," in *National Security Drivers of Ukraine: Information Technology, Strategic Communication, and Legitimacy* (Cham: Springer, 2023), 167–182, 169.

[48] Original: "Ukraïntsiam vidomo davno – poruch iz Rosiieiu nikhto ne mozhe zhyty spokiino." Reznikov in: Roman Romaniuk and Ievhen Buderatskyi, "Oleksii Reznikov: Shekspirivske pytannia striliaty chy ne striliaty, stoiaty ne bude," *Ukrainska Pravda,* 24 February 2024: https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/02/24/7325213/.

[49] Liz Sly, "Zelensky Faces Outpouring of Criticism Over Failure to Warn of War," *The Washington Post*, 19 August 2022: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/18/Zelensky-ukraine-wapo-interview-warn-of-war/.

[50] Eliot A. Cohen, Phillips O'Brien, and Hew Strachan, *The Russia-Ukraine War: A Study in Analytic Failure* (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2024): https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-ukraine-war-study-analytic-failure.

[51] Mark Phythian and David Strachan-Morris, "Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 377–385.

[52] Ruxandra Buluc, Rubén Arcos, and Cristina Ivan, "When Spies Go Public! Lessons Learnt from the Instrumentalization of Intelligence for Strategic Communication in the Run-Up to the Russian-Ukrainian War," *Intelligence and National Security*, online first (2024): 1–16.

[53] See for example: Shane Harris and Paul Sonne, "Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive Against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns," *The Washington Post*, 3 December 2021:

When Russian troops finally crossed the Ukrainian border, the narrative framing of the unfolding events was already established, depriving Moscow of the element of deception.[54] Although Ukraine's strategic communication capabilities were prepared in the sense that its practitioners had been facing Russia in the information environment for at least eight years, the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion was chaotic. Russia's kinetic invasion was accompanied by massive cyber and psychological operations to hamper Ukrainian decision-making and destabilise society.[55]

What emerged during this chaos was an organic, networked, and polysemic one-voice strategic communication characterised by bold and creative communication involving the whole of government and society.[56] This style of communication can arguably be seen as a continuation of domestic Ukrainian political communication—particularly pertaining to Zelensky's presidential campaign in 2019—characterised by humour and satire, personal narratives, and transmedia storytelling. These elements, carried on from the domestic arena to a global one, likely played a significant role in shaping strategic communication during the full-scale invasion.[57]

The visible output of the Ukrainian communications was that the country presented a resilient population fighting off Russian troops with Molotov cocktails and tractors,[58] a strong and present political and military leadership,[59] cocky public

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html.

[54] Although Moscow was deprived of the element of deception, Western messaging aimed to deter Russia failed. For further discussion, see: Michael Kimmage, "The Failure to Deter: US Policy toward Ukraine and Russia from the End of the Cold War until February 24, 2022," in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of Fractured World*, ed. Hall Brands (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 71–84.

[55] Per-Erik Nilsson, *Unraveling The Myth of Cyberwar: Five Hypotheses on Cybwerfare in the Russo-Ukrainian War*, FOI-R--5513--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2023): https://foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5513--SE.

[56] Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, "Understanding the Ukrainian Informational Order in the Face of the Russian Invasion," in *Media and the War in Ukraine*, ed. Mette Mortensen and Mervi Pantti (New York: Peter Lang, 2023), 21–36.

[57] Roman Horbyk, "Road to the Stadium: Televised Election Debates and 'Non-debates' in Ukraine: Between Spectacle and Democratic Instrument," in *Routledge International Handbook on Electoral Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 157–165; Natalya Ryabinska, "Politics as a joke: The Case of Volodymyr Zelensky's Comedy Show in Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 2 (2022): 179–191; Kostiantyn Yanchenko, "Making Sense of Populist Hyperreality in the Post-Truth Age: Evidence from Volodymyr Zelensky's Voters," *Mass Communication and Society* 26, no. 3 (2023): 509–531.

[58] Brandon C. Boatwright and Andrew S. Pyle, "'Don't Mess with Ukrainian Farmers': An Examination of Ukraine and Kyiv's Official Twitter Accounts as Crisis Communication, Public Diplomacy, and Nation Building during Russian Invasion," *Public Relations Review* 49, no. 3 (2023): 1–12; Adam Taylor, "As Russians Advance on Kyiv, Ordinary Civilians Heed Calls to Fight for Ukraine However They Can," *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2022: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/25/ukraine-civilians-weapons-molotov/.

[59] Sudarsan Raghavan and Siobhán O'Grady, "Ukraine's President Zelensky: In the Streets of a War-Rattled City, a Hero Is Born," *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2022: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/26/ukraine-russia-Zelensky-war/.

diplomacy calling on the world to be "brave like Ukrainians,"[60] countering Russian information manipulation with humour and trolling,[61] and civilian volunteer information and cyber warriors making full use of participatory digital media.[62]

Behind the scenes, communication practitioners worked diligently to coordinate between government agencies and civil society, adapt outreach channels, and craft messages: the Office of the President established regular coordination structures with state agencies; the armed forces recognised the need for international communication, began identifying recruits with a background in media and communications, and created new content production functions; civil initiatives organised volunteer support; media watchdogs and data analysis companies focused on analysing Russian information manipulation; and the major national news broadcasters pooled their resources to create the *United News* telethon (*Iedyni Novyny*, a.k.a. Telemarathon), on presidential decree, which is still ongoing.[63]

In interviews with Ukrainian strategic communication practitioners in 2022, several respondents described the initial communication effort as intuitive, beehive-like communication, a fluid cooperation and coordination among government, civil society, and the private sector. This collaboration was fundamentally needs-based and trust-based, resembling a decentralised mission command structure in which the president offered strategic direction through public and internal communication channels. This enabled subordinate actors to operate autonomously while staying aligned with strategic communicative objectives.[64]

[60] Nilsosn and Ekman, "'Be Brave Like Ukraine.'"

[61] Keir Giles, "Humour in Online Information Warfare: Case Study on Russia's War on Ukraine," Working Paper, Hybrid CoE, Helsinki, 2023: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/20231106-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-26-Humor-to-combat-disinformation-WEB.pdf; Olga Tokariuk, *Humour as a Strategic Tool against Disinformation: Ukraine's Response to Russia* (Oxford: Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, 2023): https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/RISJ%20Project_OlgaT_HT23_Final.pdf.

[62] On the particularities of participatory media practices and war, in particular how civilians are partaking in war both in terms of messaging and targeting, see: Matthew Ford, *War in the Smartphone Age: Conflict, Connectivity, and Crisis at Our Fingertips* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025), 149ff.

[63] For a more in-depth account of these developments, see: Nilsson and Ekman, "Be Brave Like."

[64] Ekman and Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information Front*, 73. This picture has been given further credence by other researchers and was confirmed during the interviews for this report. See for example: Kateryna Boyko and Roman Horbyk, "Swarm Communication in a Totalising War: Media Infrastructures, Actors, and Practices in Ukraine during the 2022 Russian Invasion", ed. Mette Mortensen and Mervi Pantti (New York: Peter Lang, 2023), 37–56.

2.3 Taking Control

The overall impression of Ukrainian strategic communication as a joint effort between the government and society has significantly changed from the initially polyphonic and somewhat chaotic attempts in the early years. These changes pertain to the broader communication effort concerning centralisation and coordination, aspects that several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with.

Regarding the impression of strategic communication as a whole-of-government and whole-of-society effort, all respondents agreed that the communication effort during the first year of the full-scale invasion was a polyphonic, beehive type of communication. As one strategic communication official at the Ministry of Defence said, "everyone was doing everything." "Now", the official explained, "strategic communication is getting more and more institutionalised," but added, "we are still bees but better organised."[65]

A respondent at the Centre for Countering Disinformation referred to the first year's communication as "chaotic" but underscored that "the chaotic communication really helped us" and continued: "Because it was a chaotic situation and everyone understood that we had one aim, it was to survive, to save our country, and our people. And that's why everybody used every opportunity they had." Reflecting on how to frame the communication effort today, referring to beehive communication and spontaneity, the respondent said, "it has become harder to be chaotic, and thank God we don't need to be chaotic now."[66]

The essence of centralisation rests in the Office of the President gaining greater control over the overarching communication strategy. This Office manages the war effort's overall communication strategy and narrative framing. The fundamental process involves the President issuing directives, followed by planning meetings between the Presidential Administration and key government ministries and agencies, including the Centre for Countering Disinformation and the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communication, which "investigates disinformation." Each ministry and agency is then assigned to adapt the overall narrative into specific messages relevant to their operations, tailoring them with relevant facts for their target audiences.[67] A respondent from the Ministry of Defence explained that, in addition to these weekly meetings, there is "informal communication through chat groups, both generally and for specific projects; we all know each other across different agencies, so it's horizontal and personal."[68]

Moreover, advisors are key in the Office of the President and the Ministry of Defence. As mentioned above, during the advancement of strategic communication

[65] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence).

[66] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[67] Interview, Senior Communication Advisor (Office of the President), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[68] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence).

in Ukraine post-2014, communicators from civil society and the private sector contributed significantly to enhancing communication capabilities. At the onset of the full-scale invasion, they continued to play a crucial role, especially in relieving the President and the regular staff from the strenuous demands of communicating with national and international audiences. For example, during the initial phase, Oleksii Arestovych (who resigned after some controversies) filled the role similar to that of a press secretary of the Office.[69] Other essential communicators from the Office of the President are Mykhailo Podolyak and Daria Zarivna.[70] At the Ministry of Defence, Diana Davitian is responsible for communication and international cooperation.[71]

At the ministry level, coordination with relevant agencies and actors is carried out. At the Ministry of Defence, "the role is to systematize all communications from our area," meaning the Armed Forces and the Intelligence Services, "to provide strategy and guidance."[72] As part of tighter control over the overall strategic communication, there have been attempts to clarify the divisions of operational areas between ministries and communicating agencies. For example, the Ministry of Defence has left much of its social media-run public diplomacy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One respondent explained the development of tighter control of strategic communication in relation to the Armed Forces as a result of political ministries and agencies "waking up," understanding that "they shouldn't [be passive and] let the army do their job[s for them]," adding that, "of course there was some tension between the President and the Chief of the Armed Forces."[73] The tension mentioned here is essentially a political popularity contest; at least, this is how it appeared in public, between President Zelensky and Chief of the Armed Forces Valerii Zaluzhny.[74]

Moreover, the operational level of the military part of the Ukrainian strategic communication is described as "situated at the General Staff."[75] During 2024, the

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[69] See for example: UATV English, "Arestovych: The military situation in Ukraine remains under the control of the Ukrainian authorities," YouTube, 6 March 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOa9esaSDMo. Arestovych resigned in January 2023. See: "Controversial Advisor Arestovych Resigns after False Claims on Dnipro Missile Attack," *Kyiv Independent*, 17 January 2023: https://kyivindependent.com/controversial-advisor-arestovych-resigns-after-false-claims-on-dnipro-missile-attack/.

[70] For an account of Zelensky's advisors in 2020, see: Fedor Orishchuk and Iurii Smirnov, "Kak ustroen Ofis prezidenta Zelenskogo," *Liga.net*, 2 December 2020: https://project.liga.net/projects/zelensky_office/ [2025-02-10].

[71] Tetyana Oliynyk, "Ukraine's Defence Ministry Names 6 Aides and Advisers to Defence Minister," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 20 March 2024: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/03/20/7447346/.

[72] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence).

[73] Interview, Communications Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces), 8–19 October 2024.

[74] See: Simon Shuster, "How Zelensky Ended His Feud with Ukraine's Top General," *Time*, 12 February 2024: https://time.com/6693718/Zelensky-valery-zaluzhny-feud-over-ukraine/.

[75] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence).

General Staff revamped their communication, abandoning the term strategic communication and creating the Main Communication Department, emphasising the strategic and operative integration of information environment analysis, military public affairs, and information- and psychological operations. A senior communication officer at the Armed Forces explained that this was "a step to take control of doubling of functions and capabilities."[76] Basically, the previously separated functions of Military Public Affairs, Strategic Communication, and Information Operations were brought under one umbrella.

The doubling of functions was described by several of the respondents as systemic. One intelligence officer, for example, explained that "one of the big issues" standing in the way of a unified strategic communication, was: "When we have six different strategic communication officers for different parts of the MOD and the Defence Forces, and the civilian side of government, it creates inefficiency that is hard to reconcile, or overcome, and on multiple occasions in the last year or so."[77]

A member of the Armed Forces, however, explained that "coordination is better, a bit stronger now." The member was referring to a more explicit chain of command relating to "how to work and how to cooperate with other communications units, both within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, within the MoD, and within all the National Defence and Security Forces of Ukraine," but also "with the rest of the guys: Border Guards, Police, National Guard, and the rest of the Government." Adding, "I wouldn't say that we have a perfect system now, or a perfect structure now, there's always room for perfection," the member explained that there was room for development, particularly concerning information environment analysis and monitoring. Regarding other strategic communication agencies like the Centre for Strategic Communication and the Centre for Countering Disinformation, the officer described how "we literally speak on a daily basis" and use their "deep analysis of Russian narratives," their media literacy programs, and rely on them for cross-checking information.[78]

As mentioned, the respondents forwarded a fair amount of criticism of how strategic communication is organised and works. First of all, while advisors have undoubtedly filled and continue to play vital roles in the Ukrainian communication effort, their institutional role was questioned in three interviews. The criticism centred on vague reasons for their appointment, their legal mandate, and uncertainties surrounding their authority to govern communication at the highest strategic level in Ukraine. Issues regarding official mandates were also raised due to the absence of a legal framework for strategic communication as a whole. One respondent stated, "the problem is that the power of the Presidential Office became much stronger" at the same time that new strategic communication functions have

[76] Interview, Senior Communication Officer (Armed Forces), 8–19 October 2024.

[77] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[78] Interview, Member (Armed Forces).

been institutionalised, notably the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communication and the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security. This implies that there are, at least nominally, government institutions that coordinate strategic communication. Still, in practice, they lack that power that "unofficially belongs to the Presidential Office and advisors at the Presidential Office."[79]

These issues were described similarly but in different words from a journalistic standpoint. In an interview, a news anchor said:

> We are currently facing some issues. Two years ago, our public officials communicated with much more courage than they do now. Presently, communication has become very centralised within the Office of the President. This office serves as the central hub for presidential power, governmental authority, military authority, and all developments in Ukraine stem from the Office of the President.

The News Anchor continued to explain that the current issue is a tendency towards passivity among government ministers, who often hesitate to express their thoughts so as not to contradict the President. This sort of self-censorship allegedly manifests in conversations with officials, who often remain tight-lipped and do not share anything substantial, only discussing topics that have already been approved or voiced by the President: "I can take an interview with the Government, a minister, no problem, but they don't tell me anything interesting. It's really funny; 'first it must be said by the President, then I can repeat it.'"[80]

Another criticism raised regarded decreased cooperation and coordination between government ministries and civil society. One respondent for a public relations NGO with longstanding experience from government communications explained:

> Two years ago, all government institutions were willing to cooperate with civil society organisations but now basically, among all our partners, we have only a couple of them left. . . . Now we observe that our government doesn't really want to work with civil society.[81]

This criticism, however, was mostly directed towards cooperation concerning public communication. One respondent from a fact-checking NGO expressed an opposite view: "In my opinion, it is now easier for NGOs to collaborate with governmental bodies because the challenge of disinformation is huge."[82]

A third criticism concerns a compartmentalisation effect. In interviews, it was described how after nearly a year after the start of the full-scale invasion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs raised concerns about the Armed Forces' and the Ministry of Defence's communication to international audiences since this was

[79] Interview, Senior Communications Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[80] Interview, News Anchor (Television), Kyiv, 8–19 October.

[81] Interview, Senior Communications Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[82] Interview, Head of Analysis (Fact-Checking NGO), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

considered a matter of foreign affairs.[83] For example, the Ministry of Defence had an X account with a substantial outreach and arguable impact that drastically changed and lost international attraction, coupled with the decreased role of civil society in restricting or streamlining domains of operations.

The above issues give the impression that the organic and polyphonic beehive-type of communication appears to have faded. Instead, what appears to be the case is territorial behaviour, with an inclination toward a silo mentality between different communicating actors. One respondent decried the situation:

> Again, all these fights between institutions are very tiresome to observe. I mean, come on, guys! Why can't you just get united? If you cannot engage civil society, engage each other! How come that you all fight with each other? MFA is fighting against the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Culture is fighting against. . . it's like, you know, unbearable to observe it.[84]

Another closely related issue was political and private interests standing in the way of coherent strategic communication. As one respondent said: "It's messy because there was an attempt to establish what everyone calls a policy, but it just doesn't work. . . Because everyone has some personal agenda." The same respondent continued: "It's what I call political communication, which serves the purpose of getting more people to vote for you in the next election, to make people like you."[85]

A respondent from Defence Intelligence argued that this above-described issue was not about politicians interfering with strategic communication. Rather, the concern relates to prominent figures who took public and communicative roles during the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, such as Deputy Minister of Defence Hanna Maliar or National Defence Council head Oleksii Danilov,[86] not being replaced for unclear reasons:

> Then, if your experienced communicators are worried about being pushed out for political reasons, not because of the president, I'm talking internal military and political reasons, where we have these colonels and majors that are jockeying for positions. . . And so, if you take that political pressure internally within the military, and then you take the lack of replacement for key roles, it leads us to a point where we're worse off than we were at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. And, we had a massive amount of credibility in that first year.

Another related issue was a lack of institutional learning and a strategic communication structure that relies on specific individuals and their understanding of communication's purpose in warfare. For instance, the same respondent

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[83] Interview, Communications Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[84] Interview, Senior Communications Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[85] Interview, Communications Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[86] Regarding Maliar, she was involved in a controversy regarding the Summer Offensive 2023 when she communicated information that she had to redact. See: Stanislav Pohorilov, "Ukraine's Deputy Defence Minister Announces Liberation of Andriivka on Bakhmut Front, Military Denies It," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 September 2023: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/09/14/7419805/.

explained, "if you fill positions with people who already hold that mindset," referring to a minimalist perspective on communication and asymmetric warfare, "then you don't have to worry about telling people not to do something because they already believe that."[87] A similar issue was noted at the Ministry of Defence, where the transition from Minister Oleksii Reznikov to Umerov appears to have resulted in a more cautious approach to communication. For example, one respondent described the experience of the Ministry's disengagement with civil society:

> They said that the new Minister has a totally different style, he is very closed, he is very reserved and humble, and he doesn't like this kind of communication. And I was like, it's not about the Minister, it's a function, it's about the institution. It's about communicating from the institution; nobody cares about his own style. You know today, it's him, the Minister, in a year or two, it's going to be someone else. Nobody cares about his own preferences. It's about, again, the institutional capacity.[88]

This excerpt highlights a key concern that ran through the interviews in strategic communication, namely that institutional communication should not be dependent on individual leadership styles but should be a consistent, structured function of the institution itself. As Tom Tyson describes the "adaptation trap," institutions risk continually repeating past failures and overlooking critical insights when lessons learned are not codified into organisational memory.[89] Moreover, Dyson and the analysis highlight that bureaucratic politics can lead to internal power struggles, hampering progress when the institutionalisation of functions is driven not by best practice, but by personal preference.[90]

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter examines the evolution of Ukrainian strategic communication as a comprehensive effort that integrates both governmental and societal dimensions. The analysis identifies three distinct phases:

- In the aftermath of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine, strategic communication was in a formative stage. During this period, foundational legal and structural frameworks were established to support a coordinated response.
- The subsequent phase, marked by the early stages of the full-scale invasion, witnessed strategic communication being tested under extreme conditions. Despite the apparent disorder, a polyphonic and swarm-like

[87] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

[88] Interview, Senior Communications Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[89] Dyson, "The Military as a Learning," 109.

[90] Tom Dyson and Yuriy Pashchuk, "Organisational Learning During the Donbas War: The Development of Ukrainian Armed Forces Lessons-Learned Processes," *Defence Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022): 141–167, 144.

communication dynamic emerged, which coalesced into an organic, unified national voice.
- The present phase—central to the interviews conducted for this report—describes how strategic communication has further adapted and been partially institutionalised based on lessons from earlier phases. This phase is characterised by efforts to streamline communication, clarify mandates among actors, and reduce functional redundancies. However, several respondents noted significant challenges associated with these developments.

While the institutionalisation process is framed as an organisational necessity, it also raises critical issues that merit further investigation, particularly regarding the apparent tension between the implementation of institutional adaptations intended to improve coordination and clarity, and organisational and individually driven agendas. The chapter concludes with three overarching lessons regarding the role and function of strategic communication in wartime:

- If the ambition for a country is to curate a strategic communication effort that speaks for and is spoken by the whole-of-society, harnessing the potential of participatory digital communication, increasing centralisation of communication efforts may inadvertently marginalise key societal actors—particularly within civil society—thereby undermining strategic communication as an organic, whole-of-society effort. Moreover, siloed structures and boundary-safeguarding driven by political and power interests may further complicate efforts to maintain a unified whole-of-society voice.
- Without clear and transparent procedures for institutionalising communication functions, it may be decision-makers' personal preferences, rather than best practices, that shape these functions—potentially reinforcing ineffective methods or even past failures.
- This points to a challenging dilemma: too much horizontal and decentralised communication may lead to scattered messaging without clear accountability, whereas centralisation and institutionalisation may lead to inertia in messaging.

3 This Is Not a Hollywood Movie

On 27 May 2023, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence published a short clip on its Twitter (now X) account with the text: "There is no force in the world that can stop this nation from achieving its sacred goal of living in freedom on its God-given land." The clip depicts a platoon of Ukrainian soldiers standing on a dawn-bathed field. With his fist on his heart, the commander of the platoon cries out: "I am going to destroy!" To which the platoon responds: "The enemies of our homeland, those who have murdered my brothers, and those who have raped my sisters!" At the end of the clip, the commander and the platoon state in unison: "Oh Lord, our heavenly father, bless us! Our decisive offensive!"[91]

This short clip evokes a powerful, adrenaline-fueled call to arms typical of epic Hollywood war movies. It channels an emotionally charged, dramatic battle cry that inspires unity and resistance. It is one of several dozen movie-like clips shared via official government accounts on social media. Many of these clips have been produced by volunteers affiliated with NGOs outside government structures.

Considered a subordinate communication function within the broader strategic communication framework, which includes the efforts of states and non-governmental organisations to influence foreign populations and impact their decision-making processes to promote national interests,[92] Ukrainian communicators appear to have excelled in a textbook example of public diplomacy tailored to the digital attention economy.[93] They have used participatory media for international engagement and attention-capture opportunities through rapid, emotionally resonant, and authentic communication.[94]

In this report, public diplomacy is viewed as an important instrument for securing international recognition and legitimacy, particularly in support of a state's territorial sovereignty. Attention plays a crucial role in this process. It is not merely a matter of garnering headlines or social media engagement, but rather of shaping

[91] Ministry of Defence Ukraine, "There is no force…," @Defence_U, Twitter, 27 May 2023: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1662399743514005505.

[92] Efe Sevin, "A Multilayered Approach to Public Diplomacy Evaluation: Pathways of Connection," *Politics & Policy* 45, no. 5 (2017): 879–901.

[93] Public diplomacy typically includes other forms of engagement with foreign audiences than advocacy through communication in news media and social media (i.e., cultural and exchange diplomacy). See: Pamment, *New Public*, ch. 2.

[94] Roman Horbyk and Dariya Orlova, "Transmedia Storytelling and Memetic Warfare: Ukraine's Wartime Public Diplomacy," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 19, no. 2 (2023): 228–231; Nilsson and Ekman, "Be Brave Like"; Tokariuk, *Humour as a Strategic Tool*; Sofia Ventura, "War and Its Imagery: The Visual Narrative of the Ukrainian State's Instagram Account Ukraine.Ua as a Tool of Digital Public Diplomacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, online first (2024): 1–25.

the narrative of war: explaining its causes, distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate actions and actors, and articulating a vision of strategic success.[95]

By the time of the spring offensive in 2023, Ukraine had arguably maintained a strong position within Western media narratives. The trope that Ukraine was "winning the information war" echoed among international observers.[96] However, approximately a month after the release of the Hollywood-like clip, Zelensky made a statement in a BBC interview emphasising that the war was nothing like a movie: "Some people believe this is a Hollywood movie and expect results now. It's not."[97]

Drawing on this broad understanding of public diplomacy, this chapter examines how expectations are managed and attention sustained in the international information environment, ultimately focusing on communication through tangible action.

3.1 Managing Expectations

By all accounts, Ukraine exceeded expectations in not only communication, but importantly, in military capability and societal resilience.[98] One important contributing factor was the Summer Offensive of 2022, when the Ukrainian Armed Forces repelled Russian forces from Kharkiv and Kherson with what appeared to be an ingenious stratagem.[99] In the spring of 2023, international news media reported on a much-anticipated Ukrainian Spring Offensive, a repeat of the earlier

[95] See, for example: Nicholas J. Cull, *Reputational Security: Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World* (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024), 30; Eytan Gilboa, "Moving to a New phase in Public Diplomacy Research," in *A Research Agenda for Public Diplomacy*, ed. Eytan Gilboa (Celtenham and Northampton: Edward Elger Publishing, 2023), 1–23, 4.

[96] Paul Adams, "How Ukraine is Winning the Social Media War," *BBC*, 16 October 2022: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63272202; Sinan Aral, "Ukraine is Winning the Information War," *The Washington Post*, 1 March 2022: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/01/information-war-Zelensky-ukraine-putin-russia/; Anders Åslund, "Why Vladimir Putin is Losing the Information War to Ukraine," *Atlantic Council*, 6 March 2022: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-vladimir-putin-is-losing-the-information-war-to-ukraine/; Paul Baines, "Ukrainian Propaganda: How Zelensky is Winning the Information War Against Russia," *The Conversation*, 11 May 2022: https://theconversation.com/ukrainian-propaganda-how-zelensky-is-winning-the-information-war-against-russia-182061.

[97] Zelensky in: Yalda Hakim, "Ukraine War: Zelensky Admits Slow Progress but Says Offensive Is Not a Movie," *BBC News*, 21 June 2023: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65971790.

[98] For a detailed account of the initial phase of the invasion focusing on Kyiv, see: Christopher A. Lawrence, *The Battle for Kyiv: The Fight for Ukraine's Capital* (Pen & Swords Books: Barnsley and Havertown, 2023).

[99] Isobel Koshiw, Lorenzo Tondo, and Artem Mazhulin, "Ukraine's Southern Offensive 'Was Designed to Trick Russia,'" *The Guardian*, 10 September 2022: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/10/ukraines-publicised-southern-offensive-was-disinformation-campaign.

success.[100] The clip depicting the Ukrainian platoon preparing for war was posted on Twitter when anticipations ran high.

In English-speaking international news media, talk about the 2023 counteroffensive appears to have begun in January 2023. In an interview with *ABC News*, Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Chief of the Main Directorate of Intelligence, is quoted as stating that attacks would come "deeper and deeper" in Russia, expecting the fighting to be at its "hottest" in March: "This is [when we will see more] liberation of territories and dealing the final defeats to the Russian Federation."[101] Shortly after Budanov's interview, *The Observer* published an analysis of the preconditions for a successful Ukrainian "spring offensive," highlighting that success was dependent on Western partners investing in regenerating their depleting stockpiles, a decision "they have tried to defer."[102]

During the spring, a stream of reports followed, some underscoring in *The Observer* article's call to Ukrainian partners, while others fuelled the expectations for a counteroffensive. For example, based on a statement by the United States European Commander General Christopher Cavoli, *CNN* reported in April that the "Ukrainians are 'in a good position' for a counteroffensive against the Russian military."[103] In the beginning of May, *CNN* reported that "Russia appears in disarray," while quoting Reznikov saying that "preparations are 'coming to an end'" and Zelensky assuring that "a counteroffensive 'will happen,'" while demurring on any exact start date."[104]

However, other conflicting reports were more cautious. Under the headline "Senior Ukrainian Officials Fear Counterattack May Not Live Up to Hype," *The Washington Post* ran an article quoting Reznikov: "The expectation from our counteroffensive campaign is overestimated in the world."[105] At the end of May, when the counteroffensive was still waiting to happen, an article in *The Spectator* similarly asked if Ukraine's counteroffensive had "been overhyped," warning that

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[100] Se for example: Peter Dickinson, "Ukraine's Summer Counteroffensive Will Aim to Keep The Russians Guessing," *Atlantic Council*, 7 June, 2023: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-summer-counteroffensive-will-aim-to-keep-the-russians-guessing/.

[101] Britt Clennet, Dragana Jovanovic, and Tatiana Rymarenko, "Expect more strikes 'deeper and deeper' into Russia, Ukraine's spy chief tells ABC News," *ABC News*, 4 January 2023: https://abcnews.go.com/International/expect-strikes-deeper-deeper-russia-ukraines-spy-chief/story?id=96127220.

[102] Jack Watling, "Tanks Will Help Kyiv Break the Deadlock. But Its Partners Now Face a Fork in the Road," *The Observer*, 14 January 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/14/tanks-will-help-kyiv-break-deadlock-but-its-ukraine-allies-now-face-a-fork-in-the-road.

[103] Haley Britzky, "Ukraine Is 'In a Good Position' For a Counteroffensive, Senior US Military Official Says," *CNN*, 26 April 2023: https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-04-26-23/index.html.

[104] Nick Paton Walsh, "Analysis: As Ukraine Prepares Counteroffensive, Russia Appears in Disarray," *CNN*, 1 May 2023: https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/01/europe/ukraine-russia-counteroffensive-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html.

[105] Siobhán O'Grady, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Laris Karklis, and Samuel Granados, "Senior Ukrainian Officials Fear Counterattack May Not Live up to Hype," *Washington Post*, 6 Maj 2023: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/06/ukraine-counteroffensive-expectations-hype-russia/ [2025-02-13].

"Kyiv may soon end up paying the price for its own PR success."[106] In June, Deputy Minister of Defence Hanna Maliar was quoted in *The War Zone* trying to manage expectations: "It is clear that people want it to be like a movie editing, very fast, the movie started at 1 p.m., in an hour and a half it was over and it was clear what had happened," with the addition, "[b]ut, of course, the main blow is yet to come."[107] On June 21, the *BBC* published the interview where Zelensky made his statement about this not being a Hollywood movie.

Continuing the expectations management, in an interview with *CNN* in July, Zelensky explained:

> Our slowed down counteroffensive is happening due to certain difficulties in the battlefield. . . I'm grateful to the U.S. as the leaders of our support, but I told them, as well as European leaders, that we would like to start our counteroffensive earlier. And we will need all the weapons and materials for that. Why? Simply because if we start later, it will go slower, and we will have losses of lives because everything is heavily mined, and we will have to go through it all.[108]

In yet another interview with *CNN*, by the end of July Reznikov was reported as saying that the counteroffensive was "behind schedule."[109] In August, *Politico* published an article arguing that "with no apparent signs of a breakthrough, it appears it's now time to return to the drawing board for the next fighting season in spring, in case success doesn't come soon."[110]

In a late October speech, Zelensky addressed expectations in one of his official speeches: "The modern world quickly gets accustomed to success. When full-scale aggression began, many around the world expected Ukraine to not withstand. Now, the incredible things our people, our soldiers, are doing are perceived as a given."[111]

Was Kyiv a victim of its communication and earlier success on the battlefield, leading to bloated expectations? Dominic Tierney supports this view by arguing that Ukraine's initial underdog status turned the burden of high expectations into an

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[106] Svitlana Morenets, "Has Ukraine's Counter-Offensive Been Overhyped?" *The Spectator*, 24 May 2023: https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/has-ukraines-counteroffensive-been-overhyped/.

[107] Maliar in: Howard Altman, "Ukraine Situation Report: Kyiv Tries To Lower Expectations For Its Counteroffensive," *The War Zone*, 20 June 2023: https://www.twz.com/ukraine-situation-report-kyiv-tries-to-lower-expectations-for-its-counteroffensive.

[108] Erin Burnett Outfront, "One-On-One With Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky," *CNN*, 05 July 2023: https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ebo/date/2023-07-05/segment/01.

[109] Sebastian Shukla and Alex Marquardt, "Ukraine's Defense Minister Says Attacks on Crimea Will Continue, Predicts Possible NATO Entry Next Year," *CNN*, 25 July 2023: https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/24/europe/ukraine-defense-minister-oleksii-reznikov-intl/index.html.

[110] Jamie Dettmer, "As Ukraine Counteroffensive Gets Bogged Down, It's Back to the Drawing Board," *Politico*, 17 August 2023: https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-counteroffensive-volodymyr-Zelensky-russia-back-to-the-drawing-board/.

[111] Volodymyr Zelensky, "Ukraine's Success in the Battle for the Black Sea Is What Will Be In History Textbooks – President Volodymyr Zelensky's Address," The Office of the President of Ukraine, 31 October 2023: https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/uspih-ukrayini-v-bitvi-za-chorne-more-ce-te-sho-bude-v-pidru-86729.

unexpected strategic asset. Early predictions anticipated a swift Russian takeover, but Kyiv's resilience and subsequent counteroffensives garnered significant Western support. However, this success also raised the bar, leading Western observers to speculate that Ukraine might eventually force Russia out of all occupied territories, including those annexed in 2014.[112]

Measuring the effect of communication at this aggregate and high-stakes political level is complex and beyond the scope of this report. A critical part of the messaging surrounding the counteroffensive, however, was to amass deep-end support from Ukrainian partners, notably long-range weapons and fighter jets, by pushing Western partners to live up to statements like "our own fate also lies in the balance," "as long as it takes," and "we have to end this war."[113] If the counteroffensive was a planned campaign on Kyiv's part, although none of the interviews conducted for this report indicate this, it may be seen as timely and opportune, continuing the previous year's success: way to capitalise on the strong international support Ukraine had built throughout 2022.

On the other hand, based on this overview of public news reports, Kyiv did not talk with one voice, leading to mixed and sometimes conflicting messaging. As discussed in the previous chapter, ambiguities in the organisation and mandates regarding strategic communication can contribute to this conclusion. One respondent, for example, lamented: "When we talk about this one-voice policy and there are communication officers from all the government agencies, who is the boss? No one, right?"[114]

Additionally, it is possible that initial statements made in early January gained momentum independently, plunging Kyiv into an uncontrollable communicative dynamic. This, in turn, may have inflated Western expectations and fostered a self-perception of sharing near-equal symbolic stakes with Ukraine, even if not matched by equivalent political or bureaucratic action.[115]

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[112] Dominic Tierney, "The Tyranny of Expectations," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 March 2024: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/tyranny-expectations. On inflated expectations by Western partners, see also: Brands, "The Ukraine War," 11.

[113] Angelo Amante and Matthias Williams, "G7: We Will Stand With Ukraine 'For As Long As It Takes,'" *Reuters*, 27 June 2022: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/g7-we-will-stand-with-ukraine-for-long-it-takes-2022-06-27/; Yuliya Chernova, Ann M. Simmons, Stephen Kalin, and Alex Leary, "U.S. to Support Ukraine for 'As Long as It Takes,' Biden Says," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 June 2022: https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-will-respond-in-kind-to-nato-expansion-putin-warns-11656582672; Ursula von der Leyen, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian aggression against Ukraine," European Commission, March 1, 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/speech_22_1483.

[114] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[115] For a detailed account of protracted negotiations for Western support, see: Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons from Ukraine's Offensive Operations, 2022–23* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 2024), 43: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-ukraines-offensive-operations-2022-23.

Finally, as Jack Watling, Oleksandr Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds argue, the messaging and political negotiations playing out in front of the public eye "established a clear tension between the need to sell the plan and the requirements of operational security."[116] During the messaging of the counteroffensive, there was also a leak from within the Pentagon, further damaging operational security.[117]

This highlights how traditional sender–receiver models are increasingly obsolete in today's information environment.[118] When any individual can simultaneously receive, produce, and circulate messages, the clear distinctions between public diplomacy and diplomatic messaging via news and social media blur. This interconnectedness makes it exceedingly challenging to tailor communication for specific audiences, as any recipient may also act as an amplifier, even as a distorter, altering the intended message in a manner reminiscent of the Chinese whispers game. It underscores the inherently wicked nature of strategic communication, where multifaceted objectives and diverse audiences with the power to amplify and distort messaging make outcomes unpredictable and potentially counterproductive.

Now, the long-anticipated counteroffensive never materialised as portrayed in the mediatised imaginary. Tierney recounts that in "the West, overblown expectations of Kyiv's imminent success led to widespread disappointment with the Ukrainian counteroffensive, as well as grim prognoses for the war's future." He continues: "Outside observers, both experts and laypeople alike, do not evaluate military results by simply tallying up the battlefield gains and losses. Instead, they compare these results to their expectations."[119]

During autumn, international news media began running headlines about Western disappointment and war fatigue with statements like "Europe's Emerging War Fatigue," "Rising Ukraine War Fatigue Endangering US, EU Support," and "Ukraine's New Enemy: War Fatigue in the West."[120] Emblematically, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni fell victim to the Russian prankster-impersonators Vovan and Lexus and was recorded stating that "I see that there is a lot of fatigue. .

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[116] Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons from Ukraine's*, 43.

[117] John Hudson and Missy Ryan, "U.S. Officials Were 'Furious' About Leaks Exposing Ukraine War Concerns," *The Washington Post*, 13 December 2023: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/12/13/ukraine-war-discord-leaks/.

[118] Nicholas J. Cull, "The Tightrope to Tomorrow: Reputational Security, Collective Vision and the Future of Public Diplomacy," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 14*, no. 1–2 (2019): 21–35, 28–29.

[119] Tierney, "The Tyranny of Expectations."

[120] In order of citation: Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, "Europe's Emerging War Fatigue," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 December 2023: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/eastern-europe-and-former-soviet-union/europes-emerging-war-fatigue; Christoph Hasselbach, "Rising Ukraine War Fatigue Endangering US, EU Support," *Deutsche Welle*, 7 December 2023: https://www.dw.com/en/rising-ukraine-war-fatigue-endangering-us-eu-support/a-67154224; "Ukraine's New Enemy: War Fatigue in the West," *The Economist*, 27 November 2023: https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/27/ukraines-new-enemy-war-fatigue-in-the-west.

. from all the sides," and that "we [are] near the moment in which everybody understands that we need a way out."[121]

In the autumn of 2023, new messages emerged on official Ukrainian accounts on X. On November 7, the Territorial Defence Forces released a clip that, accompanied by sombre music, footage of the war's atrocities, and news headlines, conveyed the following message:

> We know that many of you are tired and anxious. Well . . . Just imagine how we feel. Unlike you, we don't have a choice. We are profoundly grateful for your solidarity and support. Though some of you think it has come at too high a price. With all due respect . . . This war has cost us a lot more. And we are not giving up. Why should you?[122]

A final concern regarding managing expectations is that controlling information and audiences' perceptions is inherently challenging—not least due to information abundance. This war has been dubbed the first "TikTok War" and is arguably the most recorded in history, with real-time footage, OSINT satellite imagery, and social media updates shaping public narratives.[123] While this unprecedented access suggests a more transparent battlefield, it also introduces the risk of information overload. As Joshua Rovner argues, under the illusion of facts being self-interpreting, the "fog of war" may now be transferred into one's own analysis, distorting decision-making rather than clarifying it.[124] The abundance of data does not guarantee accurate interpretation. Even during the buildup to the full-scale invasion, when the world witnessed 150,000 Russian troops amassing on live TV, expert analysis and intelligence services still struggled to predict the next moves. Added to this was the presence of diverse and multifaceted audiences each drawing their own conclusions based on the abundance of publically available data. This raises critical questions about the nature of transparency in modern warfare and the importance of analytical astuteness to deal with one's own and target audiences' political, social, and cultural predispositions and biases, not least when it comes to managing expectations.

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[121] Meloni in: Veronika Melkozerova and Hannah Roberts, "Europe Can't Afford to Get War Fatigue, Ukrainians Tell Meloni," *Politico*, 3 November 2023: https://www.politico.eu/article/russian-hoax-call-italy-pm-giorgia-meloni-sparks-anxiety-ukraine/.

[122] Territorial Defence Force, "We are not giving. . ." @TDF_UA, 7 November 2023: https://x.com/TDF_UA/status/1722015326332690648.

[123] Kyle Chayka, "Watching the World's First TikTok War," *The New Yorker*, 3 March 2022: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war.

[124] Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention, and Control in the 21st Century* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 23; Joshua Rovner, "Intelligence and War: Does Secrecy Still Matter?" War on the Rocks, 23 May 2022. https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/intelligence-and-war-does-secrecy-still-matter/.

3.2 Attention is Key

During the spring of 2024, the much-awaited American bipartisan aid package for Ukraine ended up bogged-down in a drawn-out process in Congress as it got entangled with domestic political priorities between the Democrats and Republicans and a divide over support for Ukraine within the Republican party.[125] While it is debatable which political camp was responsible for the protracted decision-making,[126] some members of Congress apparently took the opportunity to use the situation for political publicity, seemingly framed in a narrative convenient to Moscow.[127]

Spearheading the latter, House Member Marjorie Taylor Greene had called a press conference. Standing outside the Capitol building, she pulled a PR stunt. Frustrated by her fellow party members' support for a new aid package to Ukraine, and using the slur "Uniparty" to indicate that the Republicans and Democrats function as a single party, she stated: "The Uniparty is about Making Ukraine Great Again. It is about funding every single foreign war." She took a baseball cap reminiscent of the iconic red and white MAGA (Make America Great Again) cap to drive the point home. This cap, however, was blue with a yellow text reading "MUGA" as in "Make Ukraine Great Again," and was supposed to illustrate her criticism that Ukraine's interests were being prioritised over those of the United States of America. "The Uniparty hates MAGA," her post of the conference on X reads.[128]

Ukraine-supporting netizens, not least the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), didn't take long to react. NAFO started as an internet meme in the guise of a Shiba dog to troll and dox what the NAFO 'Fellas' considered Russian propagandists and has developed into a fundraising organisation to support Ukraine. As a decentralized, meme-driven collective, NAFO blends digital activism with real-world engagement, narrative framing, mobilizing donations, and manifesting solidarity both online and in physical spaces—all without formal leadership.[129] In a stream of internet memes and even a theme song, supposedly

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[125] Leigh Ann Caldwell and Marianna Sotomayor, "The Evolution of Mike Johnson on Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2024: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/21/ukraine-aid-mike-johnson-house-speaker/; Paul Schwennessen, "The U.S. Republican Schism on Ukraine," *GIS*, 15 March 2024: https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/republican-schism-ukraine/.

[126] Arian Figueroa, "Bipartisan Border Bill Loses Support, Fails Procedural Vote in U.S. Senate," *Missouri Independent*, 25 May 2024: https://missouriindependent.com/2024/05/24/bipartisan-border-bill-loses-support-fails-procedural-vote-in-u-s-senate/; Deirdre Walsh, "Senate GOP Blocks Border Bill, Democrats Shift Focus to Israel and Ukraine Aid," *NPR*, 7 February 2024: https://www.npr.org/2024/02/07/1229785349/border-deal-ukraine-aid-senate?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[127] Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Abigail Hauslohner, "Top Republican Warns Pro-Russia Messages Are Echoed 'on the House Floor,'" *The Washington Post*, 7 April 2024: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/07/russian-propaganda-republicans-congress/.

[128] Marjorie Taylor Greene, "The Uniparty hates MAGA. . ." @RepMTG, X, 1 May 2024: https://x.com/RepMTG/status/1785690629118251476.

[129] Eva Johais and Mareike Meis, "'Unleash the Hounds!': NAFO's Memetic War Narrative on the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict," *Critical Studies on Security*, Online First (2024): 1–13. See also: Ford, *War in the Smartphone*, 37-38.

contrary to Taylor Greene's intention, Fellas appropriated MUGA, and the same day, MUGA merchandise, including the cap, was available to buy—all made in Ukraine.[130]

NAFO is one example of the many Ukrainian and international actors that make up the polyphonic and grassroots-based public diplomacy on behalf of Ukraine. This case showcases how humour and satire can disarm dissenting voices, turning negative attention into positive in an attention-grabbing way.

Arguably, international reputation and support is inherently tied to the ability to attract and sustain attention. Without visibility, a state's reputation becomes vulnerable to external influence and manipulation. As Petro Sukhorolskyi and Iryna Sukhorolska argue, reputation must be actively maintained, as global perceptions are shaped not only by a state's actions but also by how they are communicated and received. Therefore, the ability to command attention is crucial, not just for shaping narratives but for safeguarding national identity and strategic interests in an era of constant competition for attention.[131]

When asked about the most critical channels for international communication, a senior communications advisor at the Office of the President replied: "Undoubtedly, direct discussions with representatives of Western countries and Western journalists—that is, direct communication such as meetings and press conferences. . . because that way, questions can be asked and issues can be explored in depth." The advisor further identified mass media as the second most important channel, given its broad reach and generally good reputation, and added that social media also plays an important role. Finally, the advisor mentioned that video platforms such as YouTube are important since they "allow for a more personal appeal."[132]

As discussed previously, official spokespersons for Ukraine have used news media and social media in many ingenious ways to adapt and convey their messaging to the world. However, the underlying strategic messaging has been relatively constant since the onset of the full-scale invasion. A senior communication advisor at the Office of the President explained that the "most important message" is that "Russia will not stop their aggressions if they are not punished for them." Secondly, the advisor said that this "is a matter of a genocidal type of war, that is, to them [Russia], the annihilation, or effacement, [of] the Ukrainian identity is one of their prime goals in this war." Moreover, the advisor emphasised that "contrary to the Russian propaganda. . . evidence indicates that Russia faces fundamental

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[130] North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), "Ask and you all…," @Official_NAFO, X, 1 May 2024: https://x.com/Official_NAFO/status/1785789464951873633. Saint Javelin is another fundraising organisation with a similar history who also commercialised the MAGA slogan: Saint Javelin, "MUGA!You asked, and. . ." @saintjavelin, X, 2 May 2024: https://x.com/saintjavelin/status/1785799864976068893.

[131] Petro Sukhorolskyi and Iryna M. Sukhorolska, "The Public Diplomacy of Ukraine in Wartime: A Path to Reputational Security," *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 15, Special Issue (2024): 268–291, 269–271.

[132] Interview, Senior Communication Advisor (Office of the President).

resource constraints."[133] The Ministry of Defence's international messaging was also explained as being aligned with previous communications that focus on gaining and maintaining support, countering information manipulation and interference, and illustrating the reality and impact of the war.[134]

An overview of the Ministry of Defence's and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' accounts on X during 2023 and 2024 illustrates how strategic messaging translates into concrete messages. A post by the Ministry of Defence shows a video accompanied by sombre music. The video, produced by the government-run media and fundraising platform United 24, uses satellite images to depict the destruction and mass graves after the Russian siege of Mariupol in 2022. The caption reads:

> This is how russians [sic] see the future of all of Ukraine. This could become not only Ukraine's, but also all of Europe's future. Anything other than Ukraine's victory will encourage them to keep going. Only russia's [sic] undeniable defeat can guarantee long-term peace and stability on our continent.[135]

It is worth noting that the use of a lowercase "r" in "russia" is intentional. Following the full-scale invasion—and even prior to it—it became common practice to write "russia" (or even "ᵣussia" as suggested by the General Staff in 2022)[136] and related terms in lowercase as a symbolic gesture. In September 2023, the Ukrainian National Commission on State Language Standards officially stated that such usage would no longer be considered erroneous in informal texts, although standard capitalisation remains required in official government communication.[137] This practice can be seen as a linguistic act of resistance that symbolically denies legitimacy, asserts cultural autonomy, and expresses collective defiance in the face of invasion.

An example from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs showcasing Russian atrocities and war crimes, coupled with a call for foreign military support, is a post showing a smartphone video of ballistic missiles hitting Kyiv. Its caption reads: "Today, Russia attacked #Kyiv with two ballistic missiles. #RussiaIsATerroristState that is terrorizing civilians, targeting our children who are forced to live in fear every day due to enemy attacks. #ArmUkraineNow. Help our warriors defend our skies and our people."—[138]

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[133] Interview, Senior Communication Advisor (Office of the President).

[134] Interview, Senior Communication Officer (Armed Forces); Interview, Member (Armed Forces).

[135] Ministry of Defence, "This is how russians. . ." @DefenceU, X, 29 April 2023: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1652371844232626180.

[136] General Staff, "Z pobazhan nashykh chytachiv. . ." @General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Facebook, 22 April, 2022: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=300245322288553&id=100069092624537&comment_id=669986790770205&_rdr.

[137] Maria Tril, "Ukraine Allows Lowercase "Russia" in Informal Writing," *Euromaidan Press*, 22 September 2023: https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/09/22/ukraine-allows-lowercase-russia-in-informal-writing/.

[138] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Today, Russia attacked Kyiv. . ." @MFA_Ukraine, X, 25 March 2024: https://x.com/MFA_Ukraine/status/1772198987904295414 [2025-02-14].

Other recurring examples of messages are infographics depicting the daily Russian drone and missile attacks. While withholding information about Ukrainian casualties has been a deliberate strategic decision—and when numbers have been communicated, it has caused distress[139] —there are plenty of portraits of military and civilian Ukrainians who have died at the hands of the Russians. One post from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows a photo of two sisters, reading: "Forever 14 [broken heart emoji] Two sisters that were killed yesterday by #Russia's missile attack on #Kramatorsk. They were only 14. #RussiaIsATerroristState."[140]

When it comes to international support, a common form of messaging is the daily updates featuring infographics about Russian losses and Ukrainian military capabilities,[141] which include everything from battlefield drone footage to a wide variety of satirical internet memes.[142] One such satirical clip posted by the Ministry of Defence featuring footage from Russia's historically bombastic Victory Day Parade on May 9, 2023,[143] displayed a single T-34 tank from World War II rolling over the Red Square in Moscow set to the 1970s love ballad "All By Myself" performed by Eric Carmen.[144] Other messages promote international support that enhances the importance of Ukraine's security to Western liberal democratic values and envisions a shared future within the EU and NATO. Other messages highlight the parallels between other nations' histories and Ukraine's own, forging common ground regarding history, identity, and values while focusing on emotional and empathic resonance.[145]

In a series of clips thanking partner nations published on the Ministry of Defence's Twitter/X account, the creators use captivating messaging built around national

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[139] In November 2022, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen communicated Ukrainian casualties. Her statement received criticism from Kyiv and the European Commission later on backed from the statement. In: "European Commission Explains Its Mistake Regarding Allegedly 100,000 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 30 November 2022: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/11/30/7378622/. In February 2024, Zelensky made the first public comment on Ukrainian casualties. In: Kathryn Armstrong, "Ukraine War: Zelensky Says 31,000 Troops Killed Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion," *BBC News*, 25 February 2024: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68397525.

[140] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Forever 14. Two sisters. . ." @MFA_Ukraine, X, 28 June 2023: https://x.com/MFA_Ukraine/status/1673990576184733696 [2025-02-14]. Also see: Ministry of Defence, "A mother and her…," @DefenceU, X, 28 April 2023: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1652042318503878661.

[141] See for example: Ministry of Defence, "You can, you should. . ." @DefenceU, X, 21 September 2024: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1837360383239074286.

[142] See for example: Ministry of Defence, "Thrill for the enemy. . ." @DefenceU, X, 18 November 2024: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1858625730319679501.

[143] Peter Dickinson, "Putin's One Tank Victory Parade Is a Timely Reminder Russia Can Be Beaten," *Atlantic Council*, 9 May 2024: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-one-tank-victory-parade-is-a-timely-reminder-russia-can-be-beaten/.

[144] Ministry of Defence, "We watched Russia's 'victory. . ." @DefenceU, X, 9 May 2023: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1656090079830061075.

[145] See for example the campaign #WhatWeAreFightingFor: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "603,628 reasons to fight. . ." @MFA_Ukraine, X, 25 February 2023: https://x.com/MFA_Ukraine/status/1629510409291005954; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Despite Russia's desperate attempts. . ." @MFA_Ukraine, X, 25 April 2024: https://x.com/MFA_Ukraine/status/1783545600304120294.

stereotypes to flatter and boost partners' contributions. For example, in a clip thanking Sweden, Abba music accompanies a list of Swedish contributions, ending with Ikea's instructional icon (a simple drawn human figure), giving a thumbs-up with the text: "No assembly required."[146]

In the interviews, the importance of the information environment and audience analysis was consistently highlighted as crucial. One communication officer working with national and international communication for one of the few brigades that work with fundraising explained how "data-driven" analysis of target audiences was imperative: "It's about recognising what clicks with people," be it individual donors or companies.

> For example, in the USA and Northern Europe, an ideal donor would be a middle-class donor, a person who understands the mission, supports Ukraine, wants to support military procurement, and wants to support a specific unit or brigade. However, a middle-class woman might support Ukraine and the mission but don't want to contribute to procuring arms. For her, donations for medical equipment might be another story.

During the interview, the Communication Officer showed examples of the brigade's campaign material. One example is a shorter clip in which a drone operator is interviewed about the need to meet the requirements of drone and electronic warfare: "It's about creating a personal link between the donor's interests and the people using the equipment." Moreover, the Communication Officer explained the importance of transparency to the donors by publishing reports of how donations are used and, equally, to counteract fraudsters.[147]

When discussing the topic of attention, a few of the respondents raised concerns about the direction of central government accounts on international social media. Issues that were brought up included declining reach and a lack of communication development in response to changing conditions for international communication, not least how Hamas's minor invasion of Israel and hostage-taking on October 7, 2023, turned the global spotlight to Israel and Palestine, a shift fuelled by Russian communication channels. As a response to the trending hashtag "AllEyesOnRafah" on social media in the wake of Israel's response to Hamas's atrocities, reportedly reposted by 47 million accounts on Instagram,[148] the hashtag "#AllEyesOnUkraine" soon emerged.[149]

Now, some of the respondents' concern about declining attention for Ukraine on international social media is supported by the authors' analysis of the Ministry of

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[146] Ministry of Defence, "Thank you, Sweden [UA flag emoji]. . ." @DefenceU, X, 24 August 2024: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1694595392124657797.

[147] Interview, Communication Officer (National Guard), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[148] Alys Davies and BBC Arabic, "All Eyes on Rafah: The Post That's Been Shared by More Than 47m People," *BBC News*, 30 May 2024: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjkkj5jejleo.

[149] While the hashtag was posted widely by average users, it was identified in only one of Ukraine's official accounts on X: Ministry of Defence, "russia continues its brutal. . ." @DefenceU, X, 30 May 2024: https://x.com/DefenceU/status/1796228830790824414.

Defence's account on Twitter and then X between 2022 and 2024, based on data collected from the last week of every other month. The Ministry's posting activity followed four distinct phases. The initial phase (February–March 2022) saw high posting frequency, averaging 250 posts per week. This sharply declined in the second phase (May–November 2022) to 60 posts per week and declined further in the third phase (January–November 2023) to 40 posts per week. In the fourth phase (July–September 2024), posting frequency returned to 60 posts per week. Engagement (likes and reposts) shows a consistent decline, with occasional spikes. During the onset of the full-scale invasion, total engagement peaked at 5.3 million likes (average 17,500 per post) and 855,000 reposts (average 2800 per post). A notable spike in September 2022, likely linked to the Kerch Bridge attack and major strikes on Kyiv, recorded 1.25 million likes (average 19,200 per post) and 171,000 reposts (average 2600 per post). However, engagement steadily declined thereafter. For instance, in July 2022, there were 390,000 likes (average 7600 per post), whereas by May 2024, totals had dropped to 150,000 likes (average 2300 per post) and 20,800 reposts (average 300 per post).

A simple analysis of Google searches for "Ukraine" as a measure of public attention in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the USA reveals a consistent pattern across all these countries during the time frame of this report. Interest was initially high at the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 but gradually declined to relatively low levels over time. On the other hand, a notable observation is that peaks in search interest align with major military campaigns and significant geopolitical events. These include Ukraine's counteroffensive in 2022, the missile strike in Poland (November 2022), the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam (June 2023), and other widely publicised events that briefly revived public attention. Beyond February 2022, public interest in Ukraine remained driven by events, with occasional short-lived spikes corresponding to significant developments.[150]

These patterns reflect a decrease in international public engagement for Ukraine, potentially influenced by declining interest, shifting social media algorithms, or changing communication strategies. It should be underlined, however, that these analyses offer nothing more than an indication, which should be substantiated by a more thorough analysis of social and news media, as well as the podcast ecosystem.[151]

[150] The analysis is based on data from Google Analytics (search "Ukraine" for each country 2022–2024) and analysed with the assistance of ChatGPT's Data Analyst (matched with major mediatised events).

[151] See, for example, the podcasts *Silicon Curtain*, *UkraineWorld*, and *Reporting in Ukraine Every Day Until Victory*.

3.3 Actions Speak Louder Than Words

To manage the meaning of war in a heterogeneous global information environment, creating events that capture attention is a solution, particularly in the Russian information environment. A number of events illustrate this.

First of all, the Summer Offensive in 2022 led to Ukraine regaining occupied territory, garnering international support, and showing that the Russian war machine not only could be stopped but also pushed back. Furthermore, it appears to have broken through the Russian information environment, leading to cracks in the discourse about the full-scale invasion being a "special operation." In September, Putin announced a partial mobilisation, and in December, Putin spoke publicly about a "war" for the first time, a war started in 2014 "by Ukrainian separatism" against ethnic Russians: "[A] war was unleashed on them in 2014. I mean a war."[152]

In an interview with a senior communications officer from the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the officer recounted how the Summer Offensive was tightly coordinated between kinetic and psychological operations forces. Psychological and special operations were coordinating with upper command on a 24/7 basis, and every morning, the responsible communications officer in the General Staff received briefs to direct the release of information. The officer gave an example from when the Armed Forces liberated Kherson in November. In video footage spread on social media and then by international news media, Ukrainian soldiers were greeted by cheering civilians: "The whole world saw videos of people running around and hugging. . . that was footage from our psychological operations team." The officer added that during the offensive, "we managed to always get our psychological operations team to be first – and the one who's first on location is the one who's controlling information."[153]

As discussed, the Spring Offensive of 2023 was surrounded by official messaging, which can be seen as an example of public messaging clashing with operational security. However, other examples of Ukrainian kinetic action coupled with messaging that appear to have had a tangible impact in Russia and internationally are the Belgorod raids, Ukrainian drone strikes deep in Russia, and the Kursk incursion.

Regarding Belgorod, in late May 2023, news came out about raids from pro-Ukrainian forces in the region. The Freedom of Russia Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps, consisting of dissenting Russian soldiers, published footage on their Telegram channels showing their presence in the region followed by calls to local residents, for example: "Stay at home, do not resist, and do not be afraid; we

[152] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin Answered Questions from Journalists," President of Russia, 22 December 2022: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70170.

[153] Interview, Senior Communications Officer No. 1.

are not your enemies. Unlike Putin's zombies, we do not harm civilians and do not use them for our own purposes."[154] Later on, they announced that they had "liberated Kozinka," a village in the region.[155] In Ukrainian social media, a flood of satirical memes followed, calling for the announcement of the new "Belgorod's People Republic," ostensibly mocking Moscow's declaration of Ukrainian territory as the People's Republic of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2022 and the "little green men" who annexed Crimea in 2014. Even images of printed ballot tickets were spread on social media, stating: "Are you for the Belgorod region seceding from the Russian Federation and becoming an independent state? Yes. No."[156]

Kyiv denied being behind the operation. In a post on X, satirically mirroring Russian messaging during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the presidential advisor Podolyak wrote that "Ukraine is watching the events in the Belgorod region of Russia with interest and studying the situation but has nothing to do with it." He ended the tweet by stating: "As you know, tanks are sold at any Russian military store, and underground guerrilla groups are composed of Russian citizens."[157]

In an analysis of the Russian information environment following the raids, Karolina Hird and colleagues conclude that the raids caused disarray and confusion and revealed political infighting. While some so-called military bloggers accused the attackers of being traitors, others speculated that the raids were a Ukrainian psychological operation meant to spread chaos ahead of a counteroffensive. Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin leveraged the situation to criticise the Russian Ministry of Defence for failing to secure the borders, to announce Wagner's withdrawal from the frontline, and to demand proper recognition for his forces. Meanwhile, Russian officials fixated on taking credit for the capture of Bakhmut, which took place just before the first raid.[158]

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[154] Alona Mazurenko, "Explosions in Belgorod Oblast: Russian Volunteer Corps and Freedom of Russia Legion Urge not to Resist," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 22 May 2023: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/05/22/7403263/.

[155] "Belgorod Governor Reports Incursion into Region by 'Ukrainian Sabotage and Reconnaissance Group," *Meduza*, 22 May 2023: https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/05/22/belgorod-governor-reports-incursion-into-region-by-ukrainian-sabotage-and-reconnaissance-group.

[156] Original: "Vy za vykhod Belgorodskoi oblasti iz sostava Rossiiskoi Federatsii, orbazovanii Belgorodskoi oblastiu samostoiatelnogo gosudartsva?" In: Anastasiia Pecheniuk, "'Bozhe, bombi Bielhorod': merezha vybukhnula memamy cherez podiï v 'BNR,'" *Unian*, 22 May 2022: https://www.unian.ua/society/novini-byelgorod-reakciya-ukrajinciv-v-socmerezhah-na-podiji-v-bnr-12265914.html.

[157] Mykhailo Podolyak, "The only driving political. . ." @ Podolyak_M, X, 22 May 2022: https://x.com/Podolyak_M/status/1660603091068164096.

[158] Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 22, 2023," *Institute for the Study of War*, 22 May 2023: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22-2023.

When talking about Ukrainian drone strikes in Russia and the Kursk incursion in August 2024,[159] a senior communications advisor at the Office of the President explained that from the Ukrainian point of view, kinetic actions of this sort were paramount, to "create social pressure in Russia" and impact "Russian political thinking":

> The attack in Kursk is about taking back the initiative and moving the war to the enemy's territory. Attacks with drones or missiles in different areas, not just the ones bordering Ukraine, deep in Russia, clearly shows to Russia, to the average Russian, that war is terrifying. . . It is about taking the initiative over information.

Taking initiative over information is here understood as a way to challenge the reigning framing of the war in Russia and to create and reveal cleavages inside Russia, as exemplified in the reactions to the Belgorod raids. However, the advisor also stated that these attacks were about kinetic warfare in a general sense: "That is to say that Russia will not be able to concentrate their forces in one direction, as they are used to. They will have to divide them, and when Russia cannot concentrate their forces, they are weak."[160]

If the goal was to draw attention to the war in Russia, the Kursk incursion seems to have achieved this, at least initially. According to a late August poll by the Levada Centre, nearly all Russians (94%) were aware of Ukraine's recent attack on the Kursk region, and 51% were closely following the situation. Furthermore, if the intention was to bring the terror of war to Russia, 63% were very worried and 28% somewhat worried about the unfolding situation.[161] Maria Snegovaya notes that the incursion increased the level of anxiety from 33% to 49% among the Russian population and points out that many residents of Kursk have indicated in surveys that they believe the war only began after the incursion.[162]

In the interviews, merging kinetic and information strategies with an international focus was not addressed solely regarding Russian audiences; it also pertained to Ukraine's partners, particularly their evident concern about Russian "red lines." Basically, the senior communications advisor at the Office of the President explained that one of the recurring strategic messages from Kyiv was that "there

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[159] In an interview, a senior communications officer (No. 2) in the Armed Forces explained that this operation illustrated that the Kursk incursion was an example where operational security worked "really well," too well, perhaps, "since there was a little scandal where one brigade didn't know which area they were heading to."

[160] Interview, Senior Communication Advisor (Office of the President).

[161] "The Conflict with Ukraine and the Attack on The Kursk Region: Key Indicators in August 2024," Press-Release, Yuri Levada Analytical Center, 10 November 2024: https://www.levada.ru/en/2024/10/08/the-conflict-with-ukraine-and-the-attack-on-the-kursk-region-key-indicators-in-august-2024/.

[162] Maria Snegovaya, *The Reluctant Consensus: War and Russia's Public Opinion* (Washington: Atlantic Council and Russia Tomorrow: Navigating a New Paradigm, 2024), 10: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/RussiaTomorrow_The-reluctant-consensus-War-and-Russias-public-opinion.pdf [2025-02-17].

are no read lines and no escalations that the Russian propaganda has been talking about for all these years."[163]

Moscow has been discussing red lines and the risk of escalation since the first invasion in 2014.[164] Since the onset of the full-scale invasion, the list of Moscow's ever-evading red lines is long.[165] Commenting on them, Steven Pifer writes: "It is an absurd war in which the Russian military can hit targets, military or civilian, throughout Ukraine while seeking to somehow bar Ukraine from striking targets in Russia."[166] Arguably, the Russian red lines have influenced the perceptions of escalation and agency among Ukraine's major partners and in segments of their populations, leading to reactive protraction, seemingly driven by fear of escalating the war rather than a proactive steadfastness based on a strong vision of victory. In a troubling reversal of roles, the nation under invasion is restricted, while the invading country dominates the narrative on escalation risks. As Lawrence Freeman is quoted as stating: "It [threats about crossing red lines] sounds menacing, but he [Putin] never actually is very specific about what he's going to do. He allows us to make our own interpretations, and people interpret the worst."[167]

In one of the interviews, a senior official at the Centre for Countering Disinformation summed up the situation: "We see that our partners have this hesitation still, because the Russians are talking like this [about escalation and red lines]," but added with emphasis, "in the battlefield we have crossed these red lines a million times."[168]

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[163] Interview, Senior Communications Advisor (Office of the President).

[164] David von Drehle, "What Putin Wants," *Time*, 6 March 2014: https://time.com/13826/what-putin-wants/ [2025-02-17].

[165] See analysis of statements by Russian officials regarding red lines in news channels and on Telegram: "Rossiia prakticheski perestala ugrozhat 'krasnymi liniami' i 'udarami po tsentram priniatiia reshenii'," *Agentstvo*, 2 October 2024: https://www.agents.media/rossiya-prakticheski-perestala-ugrozhat-krasnymi-liniyami-i-udarami-po-tsentram-prinyatiya-reshenij/. See, also: "Fifty shades of the Kremlin's 'Red Lines,'" EUvsDisinfo, 29 October 2024: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/fifty-shades-of-the-kremlins-red-lines/.

[166] Steven Pifer, "Arming Ukraine without Crossing Russia's Red Lines," *Brookings*, 6 April 2023: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/arming-ukraine-without-crossing-russias-red-lines/.

[167] Freeman in: Catherine Belton and Robyn Dixon, "With Nuclear Option Unlikely, Putin Struggles To Defend His Red Lines," *The Washington Post*, 22 September 2024: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/22/putin-russia-red-lines-nuclear-threat-retaliation/.

[168] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter explores Ukrainian public diplomacy in relation to international recognition and legitimacy, focusing on major challenges in messaging within the international information environment:

- Kyiv faced the challenge of managing inflated expectations, in part due to its own successes in garnering international support for its defensive war effort. Additionally, cracks in Ukraine's "one-voice" policy made it more difficult to maintain a consistent message. The growing challenge of international war fatigue further complicated these efforts.
- A critical factor in maintaining international support is fostering social and political ties between Ukraine and its partners. However, the rapidly shifting information environment, differing media consumption patterns across countries, and evolving conditions on international platforms pose significant challenges. Geopolitical events also compete for global attention. Notably, the decline in focus on Ukraine appears to correlate with shifts in its communication strategy, at least on the accounts analysed in this report. Public attention appears to surge when normalcy is disrupted, with normalcy here understood as a fluid concept.
- Ukraine has demonstrated an acute understanding of how the impact of kinetic operations, when paired with strategic information and psychological operations, is amplified. It has showcased how to integrate these dimensions not only to shape narratives but also to challenge and dismantle entrenched Russian influence over international discourse. It is not just about countering Russian narratives but actively disproving them through decisive action.

To conclude, this chapter illustrates both the challenges and opportunities of using public diplomacy to strengthen international support during war, and it leads to the following general lessons:

- The abundance of real-time footage and open sources to document a modern war such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, brings attention to the risk of information overload and misinterpretation. The sheer availability of data does not guarantee clarity – misjudgements can and are likely to occur, as seen in the failure to predict key developments despite extensive intelligence. It should be assumed that an abundance of data will transfer the fog of war into decision-making systems, emphasising the need for strong analytical capabilities to navigate biases and maintain strategic clarity.
- The boundaries between public and private, formal and personal, are increasingly blurred. Politicians and heads of state now use social media not only for direct communication and policy announcements but also for making strategic decisions, voluntarily or involuntarily bypassing

traditional institutions.[169] This phenomenon illustrates how international messaging has grown more complex, requiring a delicate balance between geopolitical messaging, managing expectations, and maintaining operational security.

- In a rapidly shifting media landscape, securing and maintaining global attention is a key challenge for public diplomacy. The information environment is fragmented, with different platforms, audiences, and geopolitical events competing for visibility, especially when messaging travels in unpredictable ways.[170] War fatigue, shifting media priorities, and evolving public sentiment require constant adaptation in messaging strategies. Importantly, effective communication is not just about countering the adversary and gaining attention through strategic messaging, but also about actively demonstrating credibility, resilience, and agency through concrete action. However, due to the wicked problem space of strategic communication, planning should account for the limitations of control and the flawed assumption that communication follows a clear cause-and-effect logic. Instead, it should be understood in relation to outreach and communicative presence, where unexpected effects are not only possible but likely.
- Functional strategic communication appears to be an important tool for the general war effort, but not a standalone solution to war. Regarding lessons pertaining to public diplomacy, it is about shaping and garnering political and material support, as well as influencing adversaries where strategic military and communicative objectives merge. While this report focuses on new developments in this regard, some longstanding principles remain relevant, particularly the importance of perception in shaping international opinion and political will. Walter Lippmann, writing on public opinion and war after the First World War, observed that "each side believes absolutely in its perception of the opposition, taking as fact not what is, but what it assumes to be true."[171]

[169] For a deeper analysis of the development of this phenomenon, see: Philip Seib, *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era* (Cham: Springer, 2011).

[170] This discussion can be further developed through the concept of "media ecologies"; see: Ford and Hoskins, *Radical War*, 48-49; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, "Introduction," in *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, eds Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 1–22.

[171] Walter Lippmann, *Public opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 7.

4 Face Your Fears

On April 30, 2023, referring to Ukrainian public service as the source,[172] one of the most popular and anonymous Ukrainian Telegram channels for news updates posted a comment stating: "Ombudsman [Dmytro] Lubinets advised Ukrainians who remain in the occupied territories not to give up their Russian passports in order to save their lives."[173] The post also informed that a new law was being drafted, making it possible to renounce Russian citizenship. Trukha published another post the following day referencing an article in *Ukrainska Pravda*,[174] explaining that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories Iryna Vereshchuk's advice was: "Do not take Russian passports, do not cooperate with the enemy, instead leave if possible, or wait for the Armed Forces of Ukraine." The post asked rhetorically: "Well, you'll figure it out somehow, huh?"[175]

Seemingly, there were two contesting statements concerning Russia's forced nationalization of Ukrainians in occupied areas.[176] In a post on X the same day, the Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak clarified that there is no contradiction in the advice of officials Dmytro Lubinets and Vereshchuk. He urged Ukrainians to avoid taking Russian passports if possible but acknowledged that doing so under threat of repression or torture is justified: "If you have the possibility to avoid getting a Russian passport, try not to get one. If you need to take a Russian passport to avoid repression and torture, take it." He reassured that Ukraine will not prosecute those who "passively" accepted Russian passports under coercion, emphasising that forced passportisation was a key Russian intimidation tactic and "a clear indication of the systemic genocidal nature of this war."[177]

This case illustrates the evolving information environment and news consumption, where legacy media is referenced through social media, and government policy explanations are primarily communicated via these platforms. It also highlights the

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[172] Iaroslav Pryshchepa, "Zarady vyzhyvannia: Lubinets poradyv ukraïntsiam na okupovanykh terytoriiakh otrymuvaty hromadianstvo RF," *Suspilne*, 30 April 2023: https://suspilne.media/461522-zaradi-vizivanna-lubinec-poradiv-ukraincam-na-okupovanih-teritoriah-otrimuvati-gromadanstvo-rf/.

[173] Original: "Ombudsmen Lubinets poradyv ukraïntsiam, iaki zalyshaiutsia na okupovanykh terytoriiakh, ne vidmovliatys vid rosiiskoho pasportu zadlia zberezhennia zhyttia." In: Trukha, "Ombudsmen Lubinets poradyv ukraïntsiam. . ." @Trukha [flash emoji] Ukraina, Telegram, 30 April 2023, https://t.me/c/1199360700/72322.

[174] Iryna Balachuk, "Vereshchuk dala protylezhni poradam Lubintsia rekomendatsiï shchodo pasportiv RF," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 May 2023: https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2023/05/1/7400170/.

[175] Original: "Nu vy tam iakos′ rozberetesia, a? … ne braty rosiiskykh pasportiv, ne spivpratsuvaty z vorohom, natomist za mozhlyvosti vyïkhaty, abo chekaty ZSU." In: Trukha, "Nu vy tam iakos. . ." @ Trukha [flash emoji] Ukraina, Telegram, 1 May 2023: https://t.me/c/1199360700/72349.

[176] Lily Hide, "Forced to Fight Your Own People: How Russia Is Weaponizing Passports," *Politico*, 1 January 2023: https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-citizenship-war-russia-weaponize-passport-passportization-mobilization-draft/.

[177] Mykhailo Podoloyak, "U poradakh predstavnykiv derzhavy. . ." @Podolyak_M, X, 1 May 2023: https://x.com/Podolyak_M/status/1653054424497922048 [2005-02-20].

high stakes of clear communication during war, where lives are at risk, and unclear messaging or misunderstandings among the population can lead to severe consequences, whether through immediate Russian actions or potential repercussions from Ukraine afterward.

From a strategic communication standpoint, this case relates to the practice of public affairs. A textbook definition of public affairs is providing accurate, timely information to the public, political representatives, and military personnel about resource use in a democracy. The core aim is to be transparent and informative, ensuring citizens understand how their government operates and makes decisions.[178] In wartime, however, this core aim is challenged due to necessities relating to the delicate management of media relations, where journalistic inquiry, typically a cornerstone of democratic transparency, can pose significant risks to military operations and national security and the need for information control. This is what this chapter is about.

4.1 Public Outreach

As stressed throughout the interviews, an initial step for any communications practitioner is to analyse the information environment, which involves identifying the primary communication channels and systematically examining the target audience's information consumption patterns. In a poll from mid-2024, the Ukrainian NGO OPORA detailed changes in Ukrainian news and information consumption. With the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian social-media usage more than doubled to become a significant source of news and information. During 2024, social media remained the dominant news source for Ukrainians, used by 73.4% of the population, though at the time of writing (spring 2025), its popularity has declined by 4.5%. The internet (excluding social networks) followed at 60%, while TV viewership dropped significantly to 42.7% (a 20% decline from 2023). Traditional media declined, with radio (22%) and print media (12%) losing 11.7% and 6% of their audience, respectively.

Trust in all media sources is declining, with an increasing number of Ukrainians distrusting any news source (15.2% in 2024, up from 7.7% in 2023). Social networks remain the most trusted platform (47.3%), but confidence in them has dropped from 60% in 2023. Trust in television (34.1%) and radio (24.2%) saw the most significant declines, nearly halving compared to 2023.

Despite changes in trust and usage, the ranking of popular social networks remains stable. Telegram (78.1%) continues to lead, followed by YouTube (59.5%), Facebook (44.6%), Viber (42%), Instagram (29.6%), TikTok (26.8%), and

[178] Ken S. Heller and Liza M. Persson, "The Distinction Between Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, eds Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 225–232, 226.

X/Twitter (7.8%). While Telegram's news audience increased by 6.8%, platforms such as YouTube (-6.7%), Facebook (-10.4%), and Viber (-7.7%) experienced a decline in users.[179] In the interviews, and as documented elsewhere, Telegram and TikTok were considered problematic, given the alleged ties between Russian and Chinese influence and access to user data.[180] These trends underscore an evolving information landscape where trust is diminishing across all platforms, and Ukrainians are adjusting their media preferences in response to the ongoing war.

When asked about the most important channels for reaching the Ukrainian population, the senior communications advisor at the Office of the President responded, "social media." Regarding the answer, the advisor explained, "classical media are in a difficult spot because there is no market for advertising."[181] Economic challenges and the sharp decline in advertising revenues for legacy media are well documented. In January 2025, Oksana Romaniuk, director of the NGO Institute of Mass Information, stated that 90% of Ukrainian news media have remained operational since the full-scale invasion, primarily due to grant funding. According to Romaniuk, regional news outlets, in particular, are struggling, with revenues reaching at best only 10% of pre-war levels.[182]

Meanwhile, a senior decision-maker at the Ukrainian public service broadcaster *Suspilne* noted a growing demand for local news: "People put more trust into those who are near them." This was especially evident in frontline cities such as Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv, where local branches saw a dramatic rise in subscribers. The broadcaster has also adapted its programming to the challenges of war, prioritising content for low-energy devices such as smartphones. Radio remains a key focus, as it is "the most useful platform because it's cheaper [more efficient] in production, broadcast, and consumption; you only need a radio and a battery." As for reaching Ukrainian areas under Russian occupation, this is not pursued due to the risks involved. "The Russians will find out if we change a satellite from transmitting in Ukraine to an occupied area," making such efforts dangerous for those inside.[183]

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[179] Olha Snopok and Anastasiia Romaniuk, "Media Consumption of Ukrainians: The Third Year of a Full-Scale War," OPORA, 10 July 2024: https://www.oporaua.org/en/viyna/media-consumption-of-ukrainians-the-third-year-of-a-full-scale-war-25292.

[180] In September 2024, it was reported that the National Cybersecurity Coordination Centre restricted Telegram usage by government employees, military personnel, and employees in critical infrastructure: Daria Dmytriieva, "Ukraine Bans Telegram for Military and Government Employees on Work Devices," *RBC-Ukraine*, 20 September 2024: https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/ukraine-bans-telegram-for-military-and-government-1726831387.html; Mariia Patoka, "Does TikTok Threaten National Security? The Case of Ukraine," *Svidomi*, 29 June 2024: https://svidomi.in.ua/en/page/does-tiktok-threaten-national-security-the-case-of-ukraine.

[181] Interview, Senior Communication Advisor (Office of the President).

[182] Romaniuk in: "Oksana Romaniuk: 90% of Ukrainian Media Survived Thanks to Grants," Institute for Mass Information (IMI), 28 January 2025: https://imi.org.ua/en/news/oksana-romaniuk-90-of-ukrainian-media-survived-thanks-to-grants-i66314.

[183] Interview, Senior Decision-maker (*Suspilne*), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

All the communications practitioners interviewed emphasised the importance of social media for connecting with the population in Ukraine. This was also coupled with an observed popular demand for information.[184] For example, the Centre for Countering Disinformation, under the National Defence and Security Council, the full-scale invasion led to expanded activities. A senior official at the centre explained: "After the full-scale invasion, we changed a little bit our focus – not only on analysing information threats, but also, we started public communication."[185]

The public outreach work involves a presence across the major social media platforms and a focus on raising awareness about disinformation through social projects and media literacy initiatives. It also led to developing educational programs and training sessions for state representatives, students, and various audiences. The centre's first public awareness campaign was a series of cartoons for children explaining "what is bots, how we should fight bots, what is an information bubble, and other points which connect with disinformation," as the official said.[186] Moreover, the centre gradually started working with other state agencies concerning strategic communication and information environment analysis, such as the Armed Forces, and fact-checking NGOs, such as VOX Ukraine.[187]

At one leading fact-checking NGO, the Head of Analysis explained that cooperation with government bodies has been crucial for outreach and credibility: "When we have the analytical capacity from an NGO and the coverage from governmental bodies as the official source of information have, we can reach the greatest results."[188] Informing the public awareness about media literacy was described as a continuous work "in relation to the challenges that Russian disinformation poses on us.[189] Moreover, as underscored throughout the interviews at the Office of the President and the Armed Forces, the Head of Analysis at this NGO explained that transparency is essential. This is because fact-checking for transparency about methodology not only furthers transparency, it is also educational:

> We include links to these sources, we include screen-shots of the sources, we explain why we think that something is true or false, and we explain how we use tools for fact-checking and I would say that it's education through informing people about how we work; by showing them our sources of information, our tools, and our logic.[190]

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[184] See: Nilsson and Ekman, "Be Brave Like Ukraine."

[185] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation).

[186] Centre for Countering Disinformation, "1 Seria," YouTube, 2 June 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLY6hyZ4dtg&list=PL2eyJdiZ4yvY7Bp5C_qj9f1cENBXrJuR1.

[187] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation).

[188] Interview, Head of Analysis (Fact-checking NGO).

[189] Ibid.

[190] Ibid.

Another example of the many Ukrainian initiatives related to public affairs is information and education about soldiers' and veterans' rights. A member of the Armed Forces recounted a campaign referred to as "Wounded Soldier," with the aim of providing active-duty personnel "as much information as possible on their respective rights, on their social benefits, what they are eligible to receive."

The member explained that the campaign included infographics, social media content, and printed materials distributed to all military and civilian medical institutions providing treatment. A dedicated website offers clear guidance on available benefits, treatment options, psychological support, free prosthetics, and step-by-step instructions for accessing these services. It also includes sample paperwork and automatically generated forms, allowing individuals to quickly personalise and submit required documents. A user-rating system for medical care facilities has also been developed as well as a hotline for urgent needs: "So once again, it is about having a comprehensive approach, information campaigns in social media, thousands of leaflets, a website, and so on."[191]

Examples of this campaign include the Ukrainian Veteran Centre's web portal and informational messages in the Ministry of Defence's Telegram channel.[192] This informational messaging is complemented by stories of wounded veterans, not only their struggles to recover from serious injuries and their experiences adapting to civilian life with prosthetics, but also cases of soldiers returning to the frontline after recovery.[193]

At the Armed Forces, a lot of this work is done by the Military Media Centre. As recounted in an interview: "This is not the place where the media come for briefings and so. No, this is a media production centre. There are guys that produce content for the military, so it's like the combat camera teams, the social-media operators, the guys who produce, for instance, they work as copywriters and filmmakers."[194]

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[191] Interview, Member (Armed Forces).

[192] Ukrainian Veteran Centre, Website: https://www.ukrainemedicalcenter.com/en/ [2025-02-23]; Ministry of Defence, "Ridni ta blyzki – Velyka. . ." @Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny, Telegram, 9 September 2023: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/7962. See also: Ministry of Defence, "Try zavdannia Departamentu okhorony. . ." @Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny, Telegram, 6 July 2024: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/9884.

[193] See for example: TSN News, "[Robot arm emoji] [heart emoji] Viiskovyi z. . ." @TSN Novyny, Telegram, 1 May 2023: https://t.me/TCH_channel/81796; Territorial Defense Forces, "Soldier Oleksandr Sivash helped. . ." @TDFUA, 22 July 2022: https://x.com/TDF_UA/status/1550542371045007361 [2025-02-23].

[194] Interview, Respondent (Armed Forces).

4.2 Media Relations

In war, it is paramount to control and safeguard the information environment from adversary influence through messaging, cyber operations, and kinetic destruction. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Ukraine initiated work in this line in 2014. Regarding public affairs and the importance of conveying clear and verified information to the public, the United News (*Iedyni Novyny*) telethon is central. The telethon emerged when the major Ukrainian private broadcasters and *Suspilne* joined forces to broadcast the same content on their channels while dividing the editorial work between them on a scheduled six-hour slot basis. The first broadcast was held just before the full-scale invasion (February 16) and developed organically to be launched officially on February 26. On March 18, it was institutionalised by presidential decree under the heading of "a unified information policy under martial law."[195] The telethon was, moreover, imperative for the broadcasting companies to survive without ad revenues during the beginning of the full-scale invasion.[196]

A television journalist involved in this process explained that the telethon's goal was to "convey centralised information to the Ukrainian people. Because nobody knew what was going on, we needed centralised information from the President, the Government, and the Army." Being a journalistic enterprise, the telethon has been working closely with the Government, where the latter, for example, "recommends topics." However, the journalist said that "I can ignore these topics. I do it regularly."[197]

In an interview with international news media in 2022, the head of the Ukrainian Media Monitoring NGO Detector Media, Svitlana Ostapa, explained that "the [T]elemarathon is the information war equivalent of our anti-aircraft systems, and I think it's the most optimal option for Ukraine right now."[198] In 2023, in a meeting with representatives of the telethon, Zelensky stated: "I believe that United News is one of the key projects that you have created and one of the key stages in the history of the invincibility of our state."[199] While this view is supported in earlier interviews with representatives of Ukrainian news media and media watchdogs,

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[195] Office of the President, Ukaz Prezydenta Ukraïny No. 152/2022, Kyiv, 19 March 2022: https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1522022-41761 [2025-02-23].

[196] Boyko and Horbyk, "Swarm Communication."

[197] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[198] Ostapa in: Isobel Koshiw, "'Death to the Enemy': Ukraine's News Channels Unite to Cover War," *The Guardian*, 25 May 2022: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/25/death-to-the-enemy-ukraine-news-channels-unite-to-cover-war.

[199] Volodymyr Zelensky, "United News Is One of The Key Stages in The History of Invincibility of Our State – President During the Meeting with Representatives of The Telethon," Office of the President, 16 November 2023: https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/yedini-novini-odin-iz-klyuchovih-etapiv-v-istoriyi-nezlamnos-87081.

concerns about censorship were raised early on.[200] Beyond doubt, martial law demands that journalists not reveal information sensitive to national and operational security.[201] However, much of the criticism concerned the issues of biased political representation and lack of oppositional voices. In 2023, a report by the United States Department of State concluded that "authorities did not always respect" the freedom of expression and freedom of the news media and that the Telethon had "enabled an unprecedented level of control over primetime television news."[202]

During the spring of 2024, tensions between the private broadcasters and *Suspilne* were revealed, leading to the public broadcaster leaving the telethon broadcast and launching one on its own.[203] A senior decision-maker at *Suspilne* described this event as "a polite divorce" resulting from disagreements about the division of air-time slots and, importantly, disagreements about political representation: "We follow rules and count how many times different politicians appear in our slot. And for us it was very important to keep political balance. And there are many reports that talk about this."[204] One such report is from Detector Media, based on their weekly monitoring of the telethon, pointing to a lack of representation from opposition parties in parliament. The report writes that "the parliamentary guest policy of United News has degenerated into an informational dictatorship by the government."[205] In the autumn of 2024, the European Commission, in its assessment of Ukraine's potential EU accession, stated that it "should be reassessed whether this is the best platform for facilitating a free exchange of views among Ukrainians."[206]

In a lengthy interview with presidential communications advisor Dmytro Lytvyn at Detector Media, these issues were discussed: "Overall, Ukraine has a diverse and rich media landscape, where anyone who wants their position to be represented and

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[200] See for example: Ihor Kulyas, "The Results of The United News Telethon Monitoring for Half a Year (March–September 2022). Part Two," Detector Media, 27 October 2022: https://detector.media/shchodenni-telenovini/article/204201/2022-10-27-the-results-of-the-united-news-telethon-monitoring-for-half-a-year-march-september-2022-part-two/; Yana Lyushnevskaya, "Analysis: Ukraine's Wartime TV Marathon Stokes Media Freedom Fears – BBC Monitoring," *BBC Monitoring*, 28 April 2022: https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203f6ss.

[201] For an in-depth account, see: Ekman and Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information Front*, 52–61.

[202] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Ukraine 2023 Human Rights Report," United States Department of State, 2023, 21: https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/.

[203] Alona Mazurenko and Anhelina Strashkulych, "Suspilne' vykhodyt z telemarafonu, ale zalyshytsia v proiekti," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 21 May 2024: https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2024/05/21/7456789/.

[204] Interview, Senior Decision-maker (*Suspilne*).

[205] Oleksandr Morskyi, "The Monomarathon. Guest Censorship of the United News," Detector Media, 29 May 2024: https://en.detector.media/post/the-monomarathon-guest-censorship-of-the-united-news.

[206] European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document: Ukraine 2024 Report" SWD (2024) 699 final, 30 October 2024, 39: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1924a044-b30f-48a2-99c1-50edeac14da1_en?filename=Ukraine%20Report%202024.pdf.

heard can achieve this through one media resource or another."[207] Lytvyn emphasised the Telethon's importance in unifying information dissemination during the war: "This is a source of information for people at critical moments [e.g., drone attacks and shelling]. And that is why the marathon is a wartime tool that should operate throughout the duration of the war."[208] On questions about potential changes to the telethon, he answered: "Maybe something needs to be added, removed, but it's up to the channels, how they see it, and what they can do."[209]

These questions aside, the Telethon's popularity and the public's trust have decreased. In February 2024, a national poll by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology showed that 69% did not trust the telethon, compared to 47% in May 2022.[210] A poll by USAID and Internews from the same year gave a slightly different result, with 43% not trusting the telethon and 37% trusting it. However, 20% gave the answer "hard to say."[211] Regarding viewership, the same poll showed that 86 % of the population had knowledge of the telethon. Out of those, 37% watched it weekly, whereas 29% have never watched it and 23% had stopped watching it.[212]

Commenting on these trends, a television journalist explained that:

> We have some problems with the Marathon since it's about war and about problems mostly, but people are very tired from the war. And every week I saw that our ratings, well every month, they were slowly going down and down and down. It's problem for all of the Ukrainian society, they're tired from war.[213]

War fatigue was not only brought up regarding society; within communicating organisations, public and private, the tiredness was tangible during the interviews. One public-diplomacy coordinator in an NGO put it bluntly: "We're exhausted."[214]

Yet another central issue brought up in several interviews was a lack of information from government officials resulting in information vacuums. One

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[207] Original: "Zahalom v Ukraïni dostatno riznobarvne y bahate mediine zhyttia, de bud-iaki liudy, iaki khochut, shchob ïkhnia pozytsiia bula predstavlena i pochuta, zdatni tse zabezpechyty zavdiaky tomu chy tomu mediinomu resursu."

[208] Original: "Tse dzherelo informatsii dlia liudei u krytychni momenty. I same tomu marafon — tse instrument voiennoho chasu, iakyi maie pratsiuvaty protiahom voiennoho chasu."

[209] Original: "Mozhe, shchos treba dodaty, prybraty, ale tse pytannia do kanaliv, iak vony tse bachat i shcho mozhut zrobyty." In: Natalka Sokolenko and Vadym Miskyi, "'Prezydent obiektyvno stav holovnym media kraïny'— Dmytro Lytvyn, radnyk Zelenskoho z komunikatsii," Detector Media, 30 October 2024: https://detector.media/mediumy/article/234074/2024-10-30-prezydent-obiektyvno-stav-golovnym-media-krainy-dmytro-lytvyn-radnyk-zelenskogo-z-komunikatsiy/.

[210] Kyiv Institute of Sociology, "Dovira telemarafonu 'Iedyni Novyny': Presreliz pidhotovlenyi vykonavchym dyrektorom KMIS Antonom Hrushetskym," 19 February 2024: https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1369&page=1.

[211] USAID and Internews, "Ukraïnski media, stavlennia ta dovira u 2024 r.," 2024, 23.

[212] Ibid., 21.

[213] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[214] Interview, Public Diplomacy Coordinator (NGO), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

analyst at a fact-checking NGO argued that the public's "demand of truth" was not met by the Government opening up for misunderstandings that are easily exploited by Russian influence operations:

> I believe there's a lack of communication which creates an informational gap where people try to make their own interpretations of what's happening. . . and when people don't receive the whole truth, they try to make their own interpretations, and this might actually help Russian propaganda.[215]

A similar picture was painted by a military analyst from an NGO, who stated that there was a "lack of communication and information" from "inside of Ukraine." The Analyst also argued that there was a "disbalance" between Ukrainian and foreign news media: "We do not have enough information, but we get this information from foreign media. Because they're speaking more freely about different issues."[216] While a statistical analysis is needed to substantiate these statements thoroughly, an overview of the Minister of Defence's Telegram account points in this direction. An analysis of the publication frequency between 2022–2024 indicates that the account has seen bursts of high activity, posting over 100 times in some weeks, while also being completely inactive during certain periods, such as July and September 2022. Over time, the strategy appears to have changed. Although posts are now published on most days, the overall weekly volume has significantly decreased. These trends underscore a noticeable shift: the initial phase (February 2022 to April 2023) was marked by high-volume bursts interspersed by a few inactive periods, while the later phase shows a steadier, more understated posting pattern. While this can suggest a shift toward more measured and possibly curated content, there is noticeable inactivity, suggesting periods of information vacuum.[217]

The described information vacuums moreover touch upon the issue of the public's thirst for information. A television journalist talked about these issues in relation to operational security and how lack of information incentivises the public to find information from less unverified experts in channels with low journalistic standards:

> We talk about this all the time. Because in war, people want to know everything. They want more information than they need. That's why we have no information about certain topics, like what we're doing in Kursk in Russia, it's very secret, secret military information. But people want to know what is going on. That's why they will find this information in other channels…

[215] Interview, Analyst (Fact-checking NGO), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[216] Interview, Military Analyst (NGO), Kyiv, 8–19 October 2024.

[217] This analysis has been carried out by manually recording the publication frequency of the total amount of postings on the Minister of Defence's Telegram accounts at the end of every week every other month starting in March 2022 and ending in September 2024. It also includes a recording of days with publications every month from February 2022 to September 2024.

> From experts who think they know something but that in reality don't. . . It's like psychotherapy for the people.[218]

Talking about this issue, a military analyst who frequently featured in the telethon brought up the difficulties for such a broadcast to balance media logics of maintaining the public's attention while keeping a focus on wartime information: "You know, one person from the Telethon said to me: 'Look, we need to have a live Budanov interview, because our ratings are going down. People will like this.' OK, people like this, but this is not a show." What instead was needed, the Analyst argued, was clear and concise "official information."[219]

The identified information vacuums were said to lead to at least two fundamental problems. First of all, as mentioned by the television journalist, these vacuums incentivise the public to seek information elsewhere. One such channel is the aforementioned Telegram news channel *Trukha*. As one of Ukraine's most popular news channels, its ownership, revenue model, and editorial policies remain ambiguous. It has remained anonymous despite being encouraged to register as a recognised digital news media outlet with Ukraine's National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting.[220] Media watchdog reports suggest the channel blends credible information with sensationalised fabrications and, according to sources, sells publication spots, effectively monetising disinformation.[221] This underscores the problem of a collapsed news media market caused by declining ad revenue and public information channels that fail to engage audiences. This situation has created a landscape dominated by anonymous Telegram channels, questionable websites, pseudo-experts, and clickbait news factories.

Second, delays in official information may lead to unnecessary speculation. One example was the information about North Korean troops joining the Russian armed forces. In mid-October 2024, this news broke in Ukrainian and international news media, based on a warning from South Korean intelligence published on October

[218] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[219] Interview, Military Analyst (NGO).

[220] "NCTRB Chair Suggested 'Trukha' Register as an Online Media Outlet." Institute for Mass Information, 2 April 2024: https://imi.org.ua/en/news/nctrb-chair-suggested-trukha-register-as-an-online-media-outlet-i60375.

[221] Iuliia Dukach, "UPD: Trukha. Iak populiarnyi Telehram-kanal rozhaniaie feiky i prydumuye vidmazky, koly tse pomichaiut," Texty, 1 August 2022: https://texty.org.ua/articles/107377/informacijna-telehram-smittyarka-dlya-2-miljoniv/; Oleksandr Miasyshchev, Iuliana Skibitska, and Kateryna Kobernyk, "'Amerykanske vydannia' napisalo pro strashnu koruptsiiu v Ukraïni — novynu poshyryly 'Trukha' i 'Obozrevatel'," *Babel*, 17 November 2023: https://babel.ua/texts/100747-amerikanske-vidannya-napisalo-pro-strashnu-korupciyu-v-ukrajini-novinu-poshirili-truha-i-obozrevatel-naspravdi-ce-manipulyaciya-a-vidannya-shozhe-na-rosiyskiy-feyk-i-chastinu-velikoji-mediynoji-viyni; Kateryna Rodak, "Trukha: True Colors Revealed," NGL Media, 5 September 2023: https://ngl.media/en/2023/09/05/trukha-true-colors-revealed/.

8[222] and supposedly substantiated by "a Ukrainian source" on October 10.[223] On October 13, Zelensky alleged: "We see an increasing alliance between Russia and regimes like North Korea. This is no longer just about transferring weapons. It is actually about transferring people from North Korea to the occupying military forces."[224] Without concrete information, speculation ran high in news and social media about the number of soldiers and their readiness.[225] Kyiv confirmed the information on October 18.[226] As the Intelligence Officer said: "During this period of five days, you can imagine what is happening in our information environment."[227]

In times of crisis, such as war, a lack of timely official communication can create informational vacuums. As the Intelligence Officer alluded to, these gaps often become filled by informal, unofficial flows of information—rumours, speculation, and assumptions—which spread rapidly and unpredictably through social networks and interpersonal channels. Such dynamics can distort public perception and undermine crisis-response efforts. To counter this, communicators could saturate the information space with timely and credible updates, ensuring facts outweigh speculation. Even when full transparency is not possible, offering contextual clarity—such as outlining response measures or expected timelines—can help stabilise public trust and reduce reliance on unofficial narratives.[228]

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[222] Ketrin Jochecová, "North Korean Soldiers Are Likely Dying for Putin in Ukraine, Seoul Says," *Politico*, 8 October 2024: https://www.politico.eu/article/north-korean-soldiers-are-likely-fighting-in-ukraine-seouls-defense-minister-says/.

[223] Emma Graham-Harrison and Justin McCurry, "North Koreans Deployed Alongside Russian Troops in Ukraine, Sources Say," *The Guardian*, 10 October 2024: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/10/north-korea-engineers-deployed-russia-ukraine. See also: Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Kostiantyn Khudov, and Isabelle Khurshudyan, "North Korean Forces Are Backing Russia inside Ukraine, Officials Say," *The Washington Post,* 11 October 2024: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/11/north-korea-russia-ukraine-military-cooperation/. The article in The Washington Post was picked up by the Institute for the Study of War and then reported by Ukrainian news media: Iryna Balachuk, "Several Thousand North Korean Soldiers Training in Russia, Potential Deployment to Ukraine Possible—ISW," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 12 October 2024: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/10/12/7479369/.

[224] Volodymyr Zelensky, "We Need to Act Right Now to Prevent Russia and Its Accomplices from Adapting to Our Capabilities—Address by the President," Office of the President,13 October 2024: https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/same-zaraz-potribno-diyati-shob-ne-dati-rosiyi-ta-yiyi-spiln-93821.

[225] Chris York, "North Korean Soldiers Are Reportedly in Ukraine—Here's What We Know," *Kyiv Independent*, 14 October 2024: https://kyivindependent.com/north-korean-soldiers-are-reportedly-in-ukraine-heres-what-we-know/.

[226] Mike Corder, Lorne Cook, and Raf Casert, "Zelensky Says 10,000 North Koreans Could Join Russian Forces in Ukraine as He Pushes 'Victory Plan,'" *AP News*, 18 October 2024: https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-Zelensky-europe-victory-plan-summit-863bd5c70816449e3c92b7c1f767a2ff; Iryna Labiak, "Pivnichna Koreia vstupaie u viinu: iak i skilky biitsiv KNDP dopomahatymut Putinu vbyvaty ukraïntsiv," *TSN*, 18 October 2024: https://tsn.ua/exclusive/viyska-kndr-trenuyutsya-v-rosiyi-video-2682453.html.

[227] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

[228] See: Theodore Caplow, *How to Run an Organization: A Manual of Practical Sociology* (Hinsdale: Dryden Press, 1976), 76; Cathy Faye, "Governing the Grapevine: The Study of Rumor during World War II," *History of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2007): 1–21; Jitendra Mishra, "Managing the Grapevine," *Public Personnel Management* 19, no. 2 (1990): 213–228.

The Intelligence Officer, commenting on the need for official and timely information to avoid information vacuums, stated that there was a great need for a "rapid response to what is unfolding." While the officer said that Zelensky is "amazing in his nightly messaging in the sense that he touches on all the topics," he argued that "there's nobody set to go deep enough."[229] In several interviews, the topic of having a designated spokesperson "going deep enough" was brought up. However, during the beginning of the full-scale invasion, "we had this," as the Military Analyst said. The spokespeople referenced include Arestovych (see Chapter 2), who held daily briefings, and Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine.[230] Also mentioned was presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak, though it was noted that "he is just one person, on his own." This situation was contrasted with that of the US National Security Council's public communications function, exemplified by the Communications Advisor John Kirby: "Everyday he has briefings, every day. It doesn't matter what's happening, everyday briefings. And not just briefings, you know. . . he prepares to answer questions of journalists. . . So, we don't have a person like this."[231]

While several government agencies publish daily briefs on social media,[232] the issue highlighted here is the expressed absence of an institutionalised spokesperson who can engage with the news media on a daily and continuous basis, which, according to these accounts, results in a lack of continuity and excessive reliance on a variety of individuals to fulfil a critical public affairs function.[233]

4.3 Myths and Motivation

One of the most daunting tasks for a democratic government during wartime is to convince citizens to risk their lives to defend the nation. As Lynette Finch writes, in modern warfare, this is a necessity "to the point of martyrdom."[234] This is

[229] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer, (Defence Intelligence).

[230] Danilov was replaced in March 2024. See: Nate Ostiller and Kateryna Denisova, "Ukraine Dismisses Security Council Secretary Danilov," *Kyiv Independent*, 26 March 2024: https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-dismisses-security-council-secretary-danilov/. Another influential spokesperson not mentioned in the interviews is Illia Yevlash. See: Valentyna Romanenko, "Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief Appoints New Air Force Spokesperson," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 18 March 2024: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/03/18/7447030/.

[231] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer, (Defence Intelligence).

[232] See, for example, the General Staff's daily briefs, called "Information Operation [Operatyvna informatsiia]" on their Facebook site (https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua).

[233] One interpretation of what is alluded to here is the American and British tiered communication implemented during the Gulf War. At the tactical level, frontline reporters provided immediate, firsthand accounts. The operational level consolidated and processed these reports, offering a more coordinated narrative. Finally, the strategic level delivered overarching messaging, framing the conflict within a broader geopolitical context. See: Paul Baines and Robert M. Worcester, "When the British 'Tommy' Went to War, Public Opinion Followed," *Journal of Public Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2005): 4–19.

[234] Lynette Finch, "Psychological Propaganda: The War of Ideas on Ideas During the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 3 (2000): 367–386, 374.

arguably not an endeavour restricted to soldiers but to all of society. After World War II, the American PSYOPS soldier Leo Margolin observed: "[T]he behaviour of the American population in its everyday life, in its morals, its mores, its moral support of the soldier behind the gun is more than just an intangible factor to the soldier. It becomes a matter of living or dying."[235]

The organic and participatory nature of strategic communication described in this report exemplifies how civilians and soldiers create martyrs and integrate everyday life into wartime narratives of resistance and military capability. This phenomenon spans from the heroification of fictional figures such as the Ghost of Kyiv and the cartoon Pixel, to commemorating fallen soldiers on the front lines and the influence of such popular cultural productions as the Marvel Universe, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones*.[236]

Anastasiia Poberezhna and colleagues write about this real-time mythmaking and argue that:

> [P]olitical myths contributed to Ukrainian subjectivity becoming securitized in at least three ways: by mythologizing the superiority of the Ukrainian military, which gives people hope for victory and comfort for victims and losses; by mythologizing acts of bravery of ordinary citizens, thereby encouraging unity and keeping the common aim in mind; and by mythologizing the connection between Ukrainians and the land as an unbreakable link between the people and their territory.[237]

This unbreakable link was also evident in the surge of Ukrainian resolve to resist and fight at the onset of the full-scale invasion, with queues to enlistment offices. Much has been written about how the Ukrainian resolve surprised many. In the World Values Survey, before 2022, Ukraine had the lowest willingness to fight among ten post-Soviet countries. However, by March 2022, following the invasion, 80% of Ukrainians expressed readiness to fight.[238] Without going into detail, this change is likely attributed to the so-called rally-round-the-flag effect motivated by the persuasion that Ukraine's struggle is part of a larger fight for the future of democracy and the confidence that international support increases the likelihood of victory.[239]

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[235] Margolin in Finch: "Psychological Propaganda," 377.

[236] Elizaveta Gaufman and Bohdana Kurylo, "Ukraine in Popular Culture: Editorial for a Special Issue," *Czech Journal of International Relations* 59, no. 1 (2024): 7–22; Robert Saunders, "Ukraine at War: Reflections on Popular Culture as a Geopolitical Battlespace," *Czech Journal of International Relations*, Online First (2024): 23–57; Tine Munk, *Memetic War: Online Resistance in Ukraine* (London and New York: Routledge).

[237] Anastasiia Poberezhna, Olga Burlyuk, and Anja Van Heelsum, "A Superhero Army, a Courageous People and an Enchanted Land: Wartime Political Myths and Ontological Security in the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Czech Journal of International Relations*, Online First (2024): 59–91.

[238] Rating Group, "National Poll: Ukraine at War (March 1, 2022)," 1 March 2022: https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/obschenacionalnyy_opros_ukraina_v_usloviyah_voyny_1_marta_2022.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[239] Tor Bukkvoll and Frank Brundtland Steder, "War and the Willingness to Resist and Fight in Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2024): 245–258; Olga Onuch, "Why Ukrainians Are Rallying Around

Scott Sigmund and Gary Segura write that "the initiation of a conflict usually leads to a flurry of support generated by a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect." However, as "a general rule, opposition will grow across the duration of any conflict," which is due to "a variety of factors, including mounting economic costs, the cost of soldiers' absence from home, anxiety regarding the achievement of war aims, and mounting casualties."[240]

Although the symbolic connection appears unbreakable, supported by a rally-round-the-flag-effect, its impact on sustaining the war effort appears fragile. In a poll on Ukrainian attitudes towards the war conducted in early 2024, the large majority (80%) saw Ukraine's future as "rather promising," and the confidence in Ukraine winning the war was high (88%). However, on questions of mobilisation, the nation seemed divided, with 30% believing it was "too much," 33% saying it was "just right," and 36% saying it was "not enough."[241]

In 2024, the Ukrainian population appeared steadfast in support of the military and a sovereign Ukraine. However, in late 2023, mobilisation became an increasingly problematic issue. In May 2024, a new mobilisation law was introduced, including the implementation of an online recruitment registry and a reduction the draft eligibility age from 27 to 25. Crucially, it did not address the issue of demobilisation.[242] A national poll conducted in May and June showed that the support for the law was divided with 15% "completely agree," 19% "somewhat agree," 32% "completely disagree," and another 20% "somewhat disagree."[243]

Oleksandr Danylyuk argues that the "difficulties with recruiting new military personnel began to arise only at the end of 2023, after the Ukrainian counteroffensive was choked off."[244] As a spokesperson for a fact-checking NGO put it during an interview: "So, a lot of people were disappointed because they

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Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022): 37–46. On the rallying effect, see also: John E. Mueller, "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 1 (1970): 18–34.

[240] Scott Sigmund and Gary M. Segura, "War, Casualties, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998): 278–300, 280–281.

[241] Center for Insights in Survey Research (The International Republican Institute), "National Survey of Ukraine: February 2024," 2024: https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-ukraine-feb-2024/.

[242] Emma-Lina Löflund, "Ukraine's Law on Mobilisation: Positive Effects and Remaining Dilemmas," FOI Memo 8786, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2025: https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208786.

[243] Olga Onuch, David Doyle, Evelyn Ersanilli, Gwendolyn Sasse, Sorana Toma, and Jacquelien Van Stekelenburg, "MOBILISE Project Determinants of 'Mobilisation' at Home & Abroad," Technical Report Ukraine Nationally Representative Survey May/June 2024, KIISS OMNIBUS (Data collected/commission by MOBILISE French Team), 2024: https://mobiliseproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/mobilise-project-mayjune-2024-survey-of-the-ukrainian-population-technical-report_20240610.pdf.

[244] Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, "The Current State of Ukrainian Mobilisation and Ways to Boost Recruitment," (RUSI), 8 August 2024: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/current-state-ukrainian-mobilisation-and-ways-boost-recruitment.

expected something much bigger. So, they expected at least something like that," referring to the 2022 counteroffensive.[245]

According to Danylyuk, the main reason for the decline in willingness to mobilise was the growing awareness that the war had become prolonged with no clear mechanisms for demobilisation. As a result, enlistment was increasingly seen as a one-way path, where soldiers had no certainty of returning to civilian life unless they were killed or severely injured. This situation has led to military service being perceived not as a temporary and difficult duty, but rather as an indefinite commitment that comes at the cost of personal life, family, and career.[246] Beyond the law, there is an ongoing debate about the fairness of mobilisation, for example, regarding issues of social and economic class.[247]

During the interviews, respondents confirmed these broader issues while emphasising the challenges, specifically in the aspect of public affairs. Running through these challenges is the insight from Scott Sigmund Gartner, namely: "[W]ar affects domestic politics, and domestic politics influences the conduct of war."[248]

The first common theme was a lack of engagement in public communication. One respondent from a fact-checking NGO explained that in Ukrainian society, it is widely understood that the army needs more personnel. After nearly three years of war, persuading people that experienced soldiers must be replaced by new recruits, including their own family members, is difficult. The government repeatedly postpones addressing this issue directly, avoiding an open conversation with society: "They're afraid to start this honest conversation with the people, with society."[249] Tied into Danylyuk's argument, another respondent from a public relations NGO said that the reasons why people are hesitant to mobilise are that "they are afraid to die, of course, but also people think that they will get sent to some bad commander who will not use them wisely. Also, they think that they will not get proper training." The respondent underscored that it was a well-known fact that the mobilisation was not going well and argued that the Minister of Defence appears not to want to communicate about it at all."[250] In a discussion about the challenges facing Ukrainian strategic communication, yet another respondent from the journalistic side said that "from time to time, we have situations when we have

[245] Interview, Spokesperson (Fact-checking NGO).

[246] Danylyuk, "The Current State of Ukrainian."

[247] Dmytro Huliichuk, "'Liudy – ne idioty': u Tretii shturmovii nazvaly holovnu problemu mobilizatsiï," *TSN*, 30 January 2025: https://tsn.ua/ato/lyudi-ne-idioti-u-tretiy-shturmoviy-nazvali-golovnu-problemu-mobilizaciyi-2756115.html.

[248] Scott Sigmund Gartner, "Opening Up the Black Box of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998): 252–258, 254.

[249] Interview, Spokesperson (Fact-checking NGO).

[250] Interview, Senior Communication Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

no voice," and this was especially so in such complicated situations as the mobilisation, when "it looks like we have no adult in the room."[251]

The second theme concerned speculation about the reasons for the experienced lack of public engagement in the mobilisation problem. The respondent from the public relations NGO asked rhetorically: "Why? Because then you will get a lot of criticism and then you are the one who are taking our people and killing them."[252] A respondent from the Armed Forces argued along the same lines, arguing that this had become a "toxic topic" that, over time, had become more about political expediency than effective governance. Lamenting this perceived development as "childish," the respondent explained: "Because if I chose to communicate on this topic, this means politically that I will become politically toxic person, and no one will vote for me during the next election. But this is not how you should operate during a war, you know?"[253]

The third theme focused on how the apparent lack of public communication created opportunities for Russian influence campaigns to further demoralise and polarise Ukrainian society regarding this issue. The respondent from the public relations NGO, with long-standing experience in military communications, explained that influence campaigns targeting Ukrainian soldiers and, in particular, their families are a well-known Russian modus operandi in effect since 2014. Typically, family members are targeted by influence campaigns resulting in them calling their active-duty family members and trying to convince them to lay down their arms: "Quit, why are you there, come back, why should you fight, it's not your war, it's the President's, and about his fight with Putin, it's about money and so on." Given that "we know all these messages, and we know that they are very effective," the respondent questioned the lack of proactive communications regarding such an essential question for the Ukrainian war effort, such as the mobilisation. Discussing the issue further, the respondent brought up the topic of how "mobilisation centres on the street."[254] By the end of 2023, several videos posted on social media showed rather violent methods of personnel recruitment, involving taking Ukrainian men from the streets.[255] In central Kyiv in October 2024, following a concert by the popular rock band Okean Elzy, recruitment personnel waited outside the concert hall to check the papers of men of conscription age, detaining those who failed to provide them.[256] Reportedly a real

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[251] Interview, Senior Decision-maker (*Suspilne*).

[252] Interview, Senior Communication Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[253] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[254] Interview, Senior Communication Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[255] "Ukraine's Army Is Struggling to Find Good Recruits," *The Economist*, 17 December 2023: https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/12/17/ukraines-army-is-struggling-to-find-good-recruits; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "'People Snatchers': Ukraine's Recruiters Use Harsh Tactics to Fill Ranks," *The New York Times*, 15 December 2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/world/europe/ukraine-military-recruitment.html.

[256] "Recruitment Center Comments on Raid after 'Okean Elzy' Concert," *Ukrinform*, 14 October 2024: https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3915827-recruitment-center-comments-on-raid-after-okean-elzy-

issue in Ukraine, Russian influence campaigns have done their best to spur these tensions with a mixture of amplifying real-case events and staged ones, also seeking to create a divide between active-duty personnel and non-conscripted male citizens.[257]

The respondent from the Armed Forces summarised the issue at hand: "And this is a big, like, problem, because I personally don't understand how to manage it. Like, how to get people to the army if they don't want to, while simultaneously staying a democratic country."[258] In March 2024, Lubinets, the Ukrainian Parliament's Commissioner for Human Rights, addressed the issue in an interview by *Suspilne*: "The military cannot walk the streets and detain Ukrainian citizens. Who will benefit from this? There must be a clear procedure, aimed, first of all, at motivating the citizens of Ukraine to go to the army, and not to be driven there by force."[259]

During the interviews with representatives from the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence, no one shunned this problem. For example, a strategic communication official stated that there now was "a working group working on finding a solution to the problem. It needs a broad approach involving different agencies. A one-voice policy is needed. A new strategy and a new campaign is in the making."[260]

Since the campaigns in question fall outside the time frame of this report, their formation remains a subject for further research. However, several campaigns about the new mobilisation law were identified during 2024. For example, informational campaigns and infographics explaining the law's structure, conditions, and obligations aim to clarify the procedure and emphasise both obligations and benefits for conscripts.[261] One more elaborate campaign is "Face Your Fears." In a video posted on the Ministry of Defence's Telegram channel, a young boy in a rural area hesitantly approaches a large German Shepherd near a neighbouring house, his movements cautious, his face lined with tension. He wipes sweat from his brow. His distress is evident. As he kneels, reaching out to pet the

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concert.html; Abbey Fenbert and Dmytro Basmat, "Officers Detained Men Outside Okean Elzy Concert in Kyiv, Official Confirms," *The Kyiv Independent*, 11 October 2024: https://kyivindependent.com/conscription-officers-detain-men-outside-okean-elzy-concert-in-kyiv/ [2024-10-11].

[257] Sergii Kostezh, "What's up With Mobilization in Ukraine?" *Kyiv Post*, 21 March 2024: https://www.kyivpost.com/post/29886 [2025-02-26].

[258] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[259] Original: "Tak. Ne mozhut viiskovi khodyty po vulytsyakh i zatrymuvaty hromadian Ukraïny. Khto vid tsoho vyhraie? Povynna buty zrozumila protsedura, napravlena, v pershu cherhu, na motyvatsiiu, shchob hromadiany Ukraïny ishly v armiiu, a ne ïkh tudy zahanialy syloiu." Lubinets in: Olena Removska, "'Ia proty zbilshennia povnovazhen TTsK'—Lubinets pro mobilizatsiiu, obmin polonenymy ta povernennia ukraïnskykh ditei z RF," *Suspilne*, 29 March 2024: https://suspilne.media/720044-a-proti-zbilsenna-povnovazen-tck-lubinec-pro-mobilizaciu-obmin-polonenimi-ta-povernenna-ukrainskih-ditej-z-rf/.

[260] Interview, Strategic Communication Official (Ministry of Defence).

[261] Ministry of Defence, Infographics, @ministry_of_defense_ua, Telegram, 30 January 2024: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/8753; Ministry of Defence, "Zakon pro mobilizatsiiu z novymy. . ." @Ministerstvo oborony Ukraïny, Telegram, 24 April 2024: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/9348.

dog, the scene abruptly shifts. In the next frame, the boy has become a soldier. Now in a military camp, he embraces a German Shepherd with familiarity and affection, stroking its fur and pressing a gentle kiss to its head. A voiceover narrates: "Being afraid is normal. But acknowledging your fear is strength. We need the strong. Update your data at the TCC and SP [Territorial Centre of Recruitment and Social Support]. Strength overcomes fear."[262]

It remains uncertain, however, to what extent communication campaigns can be effective without directly addressing the root causes of public concerns. As the respondent from a public relations NGO put it: "Communication cannot change everything, cannot fix everything. It has to go along with management, right?"[263] As Gartner notes, prioritizing external image over substantive action is flawed: "Worrying first about external image will likely fail. In government and politics, image is sometimes perceived as more important than reality. But image without substance is difficult to maintain."[264]

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter examines Ukrainian public affairs and highlights challenges in public outreach, media relations, and mobilisation. In particular, it exemplifies the wickedness underlying strategic communications, where attempted solutions may reveal new issues that reshape the initial problem, such as the telethon and the communication surrounding the mobilisation.

- Social media remains the dominant channel for public communication and information consumption, with Telegram dominant in the landscape. Meanwhile, the collapse of the advertising market has significantly weakened legacy media. In response to the high demand for information, government agencies and NGOs have launched educational and informational campaigns, which have been illustrated through efforts to counter disinformation and address issues related to soldiers' and veterans' rights.
- The telethon initiative was launched to provide reliable and verifiable information but has struggled with declining viewership and trust. Under martial law, tensions between freedom of expression and operational security have further strained media relations. Information vacuums have emerged as a critical issue, pushing citizens toward alternative sources, often on platforms with unclear credibility, where monetised and

[262] Original: "Boiatysia—tse normalno. A vyznavaty svii strakh—sylno. Nam potribni sylni. Onovliui dani v TTsK ta SP. Syla peremahaie strakh." Ministry of Defence, "Strakh—pryrodna reaktsiia. Vyznavaty," @ministry_of_defense_ua, Telegram, 11 September 2023: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/7973.

[263] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[264] James L. Garnett, *Communicating for Results in Government* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1992), 222.

clickbait-driven news dominates. These gaps also fuel speculation, creating opportunities for competing narratives to take hold. To address these challenges, there is a recognised need for changes in government outreach, for example, through a public spokesperson function to ensure regular and transparent interactions with journalists.

- While national identity is strong and public support for the war effort remains high, this has not translated into mobilisation, at least not to the needed levels. This issue presents unaddressed communication challenges due to potential political costs, the absence of a unified message, and Russian disinformation exploiting the situation. The problem is widely acknowledged, and steps have reportedly been taken to address it.

This chapter illustrates changes in popular support and the willingness to fight in a society at war. That social changes of this sort occur is well documented in previous research and is nothing unique for Ukraine. How this develops is not, however, a given. The general lessons from this chapter are:

- In wartime, trust in verified news sources seems essential, as emphasised in previous research.[265] Declining ratings due to war fatigue, information fatigue, and a demand for quick updates appear to push people toward alternative information sources. Furthermore, the observed politicisation likely undermines trust in what was initially regarded as a necessary and valued communication initiative. This emphasises the importance of agility and flexibility in engaging one's population, addressing media logic requirements, adapting to changing information consumption patterns, and preserving credibility, while meeting the demands of democratic and free debate during wartime.
- When government and public affairs, for whatever reason, do not act agilely and rapidly enough, information vacuums can occur, leading to rumours, speculation, and assumptions. The information provided by official sources needs to answer the public demand for information to stifle these, balancing real-time reporting with centralised information management, by, crucially, implementing transparency throughout the chain.[266]

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[265] Ashley K. Barrett and Cindy Posey, "Organizational Crisis Communication in the Age of Social Media: Weaving a Practitioner Perspective into Theoretical Understanding," in *New Media in Times of Crisis*, ed. Keri K. Stephens (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 15–41, 23; Richard R. Dolphin, "Crisis Communications Today's Strategic Imperative," *International Journal of Management Practice* 1, no. 3 (2005): 294-308; Paul Slovic, "Perceived Risk, Trust, and Democracy," *Risk Analysis* 13, no. 6 (1993): 675–682; Shari R. Veil, Tara Buehner, and Michael J. Palenchar, "A Work-In-Process Literature Review: Incorporating Social Media in Risk and Crisis Communication," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 19, no. 2 (2011): 110–122.

[266] The Western Allies' communication during the Gulf War has received substantial criticism for censorship and media manipulation. For any communicator involved in this type of communication, lessons regarding what not to do are as essential as best practices. On criticism, see for example: John R. Macarthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

- In democratic societies, open journalistic debate naturally creates tensions, particularly in strategic communication, where the question of who speaks for the nation and who holds responsibility remains politically contested. The politicisation of communication can lead to democratic inertia, where the need for accountability results in a reluctance to act. Institutional measures and clear lines of responsibility are essential to mitigate these risks. Moreover, government communication campaigns that attempt to shift public attitudes without addressing underlying policy issues can backfire, fostering public scepticism and eroding trust, which underscores the necessity for credible, action-based communication strategies that align with tangible policy solutions.

5 Russia Hates the Truth

In December 2023, a video allegedly portraying a Ukrainian soldier with Down syndrome in the trenches spread on social media. The video was likely taken from a TikTok account that was active for a brief period but gained traction on Telegram, YouTube, and VK. The video's titles were like "In Ukraine, a person with Down syndrome has been caught up in mobilisation."[267] The video itself had an attached text reading in Ukrainian, "Vokha on duty," followed by a crying-laugh emoji.[268]

Within days, the video was broadcast on the Russian television show *60 Minut*, whose host, Olga Skabeyeva, is widely recognised for her staunch pro-Kremlin stance. She also shared the video on her Telegram account.[269] Two months later, this video and others of Vokha still circulated on Russian television, for example, in the show *The People's Front* by the talk-show host Anatoliy Kuzichev.[270] The videos show how Vokha is berated and mistreated. After showing one of them, Kuzichev comments: "You understand that a person with that diagnosis, in that condition, is incapable of fighting. When I look at this, you know, it just breaks my heart with sorrow and lament." He continues to ask how he was recruited in the first place and concludes that it's "simply" because of "an extreme shortage" of Ukrainian recruits.[271]

Beyond doubt, these are horrible clips if they are true. Ukrainian fact-checkers had already investigated the case of the alleged soldier Vokha in January 2024. They found clear signs of information manipulation. For example, his uniform lacks distinguishable traits of the Ukrainian army, his gear does not match, and the trench where it is filmed appears to be elsewhere than at the front line.[272] None of this was discussed on the Russian television show.

Commenting on this case, a respondent explained that Russian actors use it to convey several messages. "First of all," it is about creating the image that the Ukrainians are so desperate that they conscript a guy with Down Syndrome."

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[267] Original: "Na Ukraine pod mobilizatsiiu popal chelovek s sindromom Dauna."

[268] Original: "Vokha cherhuie."

[269] Olga Skabeyeva, "Tak vot o kakoi. . ." @skabeeva, Telegram, 30 December 2023: https://t.me/skabeeva/24499.

[270] See: Pervyi Kanal, "Narodnogo fronta," broadcast 11:00–12:00 (timestamp 11:16:30–11:18:45), 12 February 2024.

[271] Original extended: "Sami ponimaete, chto voievat s takim diagnozom v takom sostoianii chelovek ne sposoben. Vot ia smotriu na eto, prosto, vy znaete, nu, kak by, vrode kak eto nash tam, nu, tam, vrag i tak dalee. U menia serdtse szhimaetsia prosto ot toski i ot zhalob. . . Kak on tam voobshche okazalsia, blin? Kak on tam voobshche okazalsia? Chto tam proiskhodit, esli on. . . Ia ne dumaiu, chto eto kakaia-to nedorabotka vrachebnoi komissii. Net, nifiga. Ia uveren, chto eto prosto. . . Eto zhestochaishii defitsit."

[272] Ielyzaveta Tkachenko and Anastasiia Brodovska, "Feiky shchodo systemy okhorony zdorovia: v Ukraïni poshyriuiutsia 'zabuti khvoroby' - dyfteriia ta kir. Vypusk No. 88," VoxCheck, January 10, 2024: https://voxukraine.org/fejky-shhodo-systemy-ohorony-zdorov-ya-v-ukrayini-poshyryuyutsya-zabuti-hvoroby-dyfteriya-ta-kir-vypusk-88.

Secondly, it also about creating the image of Ukrainians being "evil, that they bully a person with this type of condition." Third, the clips also create the image of a backward Ukrainian army, "with this poor guy who only has a wooden stick to counter Russian sophisticated weapons and drones."[273] Discussing this case, an analyst at a fact-checking NGO stated that "there has been so many cases where there have been videos to discredit the Ukrainian Armed Forces."[274]

This chapter discusses psychological operations, which are here defined as strategic communication practices aimed at influencing adversary audiences in support of military operations and national security. These operations include manipulative and deceptive messaging.[275] The chapter starts by focusing on how Russian actors use information manipulation as part of their psychological warfare against Ukraine. This is followed by the respondents' perspectives on the challenges and impacts of these practices. Finally, rather than reiterating the extensively researched approaches to countering information manipulation— both proactive measures such as media literacy ("pre-bunking") and reactive strategies such as corrective messaging ("debunking")—the chapter focuses on the potential role of offensive communications in the battle to shape public perceptions of the war.

5.1 Russian Information Manipulation in 5D

Information manipulation is defined as the intentional and coordinated dissemination of information with the intent to deceive and manipulate target audiences.[276] This means that the focus on the communicated information is not merely on whether it is forged or not. Rather, it is about how it is framed in a deceptive and manipulative way. For example, the issue of street recruitment in Ukraine seems genuine. However, when Russian actors amplify it, they create the impression that the problem is far more severe than it truly is and introduce forgeries to heighten this perceived magnitude further; this is arguably a case of information manipulation.

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[273] Interview, Member (Armed Forces).

[274] Interview, Analyst (Fact-checking NGO).

[275] For further discussion and definitions, see: Sunil Narula, "Psychological Operations (PSYOPs): A Conceptual Overview," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2004): 177–192; Anastasia Roberts and Adrian Venables, "Military Psychological Operations in the Digital Battlespace: A Practical Application of the Legal Framework," in 2024 16th International Conference on Cyber Conflict: Over the Horizon (CyCon) (Tallinn: IEEE, 2024) 281–296.

[276] Strategic Communications, Task Forces, and Information Analysis (STRAT.2), *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence, Report on FIMI Threats* (Brussels: European Union External Action Service, 2023), 4: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en. For more in-depth discussions about the spectrum of persuasive to deceptive and manipulative communication, see: David L. Helfert, *Political Communication in Action: From Theory to Practice* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2018), 40.

It should be emphasised that information manipulation, as one aspect of psychological operations, is but one method by which Russian actors seek to exert influence. In the Soviet era, so-called active measures (*aktivnye meropriiatiia*) included a broad set of tactics ranging from the exploitation of real political interests and disinformation to bribery, coercion, honeypots, and assassinations.[277] Russia still uses these types of methods. For example, Russian intelligence services recruit disloyal Ukrainians through Telegram to work as spotters for Russian missile strikes, promising them a couple of hundred dollars.[278] Russian social media network channels track Ukrainian recruiters to assist those Ukrainians who wish to avoid them, even providing legal assistance.[279] When it comes to procurement and weapons manufacturing, Russian actors strategically buy components that Ukrainian manufacturers need.[280]

This section provides a thematic overview of Russian information manipulation strategies since the full-scale invasion. Drawing on data from the Centre for Countering Disinformation and insights from respondents,[281] it categorises these tactics according to the European External Action Service's 5D model—dismiss, distort, distract, dismay, and divide—to illustrate how they are deployed to shape the public image of the war and advance Russia's strategic interests.[282]

The dismissal tactic aims to counter criticism typically by attacking the source of compromising information, labelling it biased and morally corrupt. For instance, when confronted with reports of civilian casualties or accusations of war crimes, Russian officials and state media often dismiss these claims as fabrications, labelling them as "fake news" or attributing them to biased, politically motivated Western sources. A case in point for this tactic is the response to the atrocities in Bucha committed by Russian forces. When images and reports emerged showing civilians executed by Russian forces, Russian officials, state media, and social media accounts quickly dismissed the claims as fabrications, even arguing that it was staged to delegitimise Russia.[283] Such dismissive strategies work to insulate the official narrative from external scrutiny and maintain support among audiences that may already be predisposed to distrust Western accounts. Other cases concern

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[277] See: Olga Bertelse, ed., *Russian Active Measures: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2021).

[278] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

[279] Interview, Respondent (Armed Forces).

[280] Interview, Communication Officer No. 2 (Armed Forces).

[281] The overview is based on the Centre for Countering Disinformation's weekly reports. These reports are 3 to 4 pages long and contain a detailed analysis of Russian information activities and assessments of Ukrainian, Russian, and international news and social media, including statements by political spokespeople. Starting in April 2023, the overview is a thematised summary of every third week's reports until October 2024.

[282] STRAT.2, *1st EEAS Report*, 12

[283] Roman Osadchuk, Givi Gigitashvili, Eto Buziashvili, Emerson T. Brooking, Nika Aleksejeva, and Lukas Andriukaitis, "Russian War Report: Kremlin Claims Bucha Massacre Was Staged by Ukraine," Atlantic Council, 4 April 2022: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-kremlin-claims-bucha-massacre-was-staged-by-ukraine/.

the many influence campaigns waged by Russia and its proxies to discredit the Ukrainian political and military leadership as morally and economically corrupt, even denying that Ukraine exists as a nation.[284]

Distortion is about changing the overarching narrative frame through reconfigured or fabricated information, often used to enhance the dismissal tactic further. Examples include laying the blame on Ukraine for documented Russian missiles killing civilians and depicting Ukrainians as terrorists and Nazis. In a distortion of the reality in which Russian drones and missiles continuously bomb civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, Maria Zakharova who serves as Russia's Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote the following on her Telegram channel in June 2024: "The Kyiv regime continues to commit terrorist acts aimed at destroying the civilian population and civilian infrastructure."[285] Another example is how Dmitri Peskov immediately after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023, called out a "deliberate sabotage from Ukraine."[286]

Moreover, the dismissal of the Ukrainian political and military leadership is supported by a large swath of distortional fabrications, ranging from Zelensky buying Hitler's Mercedes to Ukrainian authorities partaking in multibillion dollar human trafficking and organ-harvesting schemes, spread through social media and planted news articles.[287] One overarching distorted framing has been that Russia is waging a defensive war where Ukraine is committing genocide against ethnic Russians in Ukraine and is merely a puppet in the hands of the West and NATO. In August 2023, Putin, for example, proclaimed: "Our actions in Ukraine have one purpose—to end the war that the West and its satellite states are waging against the

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[284] The Centre for Countering Disinformation continuously flag this in the centre's weekly reports. For example, in the reports of: 8-14 May 2023; 25 September-1 October 2023; and 15–21 April 2024. For examples, see: "DISINFO: Zelensky and His Acolytes Are not Interested in Peace Because War is a Way to Enrich Themselves," EUvsDISINFO, 9 August 2024: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/Zelensky-and-his-acolytes-are-not-interested-in-peace-because-war-is-a-way-to-enrich-themselves/; Olga Robinson, Adam Robinson, and Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Ukraine War: How TikTok Fakes Pushed Russian Lies to Millions," *BBC Verify*, 15 December 2023: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67687449.

[285] Maria Zakharova, "Kievskii rezhim prodolzhaet sovershat. . ." @MariaVladimirovnaZakharova, Telegram, 19 June 2024: https://t.me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/8273.

[286] Peskov in: "Ukraine Commits Sabotage at Kakhovka HPP, Says Kremlin," *TASS*, 6 June 2023: https://tass.com/defense/1628365.

[287] See: "DISINFO: Zelensky buys Hitler's Mercedes," EUvsDISINFO, 8 October 2024: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/Zelensky-buys-hitlers-mercedes/; Centre for Countering Disinformation, *Analytical Research of the Information Space Regarding the Issue of 'Clandestine Transplantation'* (Kyiv: National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, 2023): https://cpd.gov.ua/en/report/transplantation/; Centre for Countering Disinformation, *Analytical Report: The Network of Russian Propaganda Resources 'Ukrleaks'* (Kyiv: National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, 2024): https://cpd.gov.ua/en/report/analytical-reportthe-network-of-russian-propaganda-resources-ukrleaks/; VIGINUM, *Portal Kombat: A Structured and Coordinated Pro-Russian Propaganda Network*, Technical Report (Paris: Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, 2025): https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20240214_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_PART2_ENG_VF.pdf.

people of Donbas."[288] Such claims are typically tied to distorted portrayals of agency, where Ukraine is portrayed as the aggressor. On September 30, 2024, Russia's representative at the UN Vasilii Nebenzia, for example reversed the logic of the Russian invasion and shifted the blame to the Minsk Agreements by proclaiming: "I would like to warn at once that there will be no repetition of the scenario with the Minsk Agreements, no freezing of the front so that Zelensky's regime can 'lick its wounds.' Neither will there be Ukraine's accession to NATO in one form or another."[289] Statements of this sort, dismissing Ukraine and distorting the logic of the war, are coupled with seemingly contradictory claims that Russia is striving for peace. On May 30, 2024, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, declared: "The 'party of war' rules in Kiev, and it seeks, at least in words, to defeat Russia 'on the battlefield'. In such conditions, it is difficult to imagine a dialogue about peace."[290] In the rationality of Moscow, this might be a genuinely held view that a "Pax Russica" would be achieved through complete submission by Ukraine.[291] However, this represents a distortion of the overwhelming evidence of Russia's weaponisation of peace agreements, genocidal intent, countless war crimes, strategic bombings of civilian infrastructure, and psychological and physical terror inflicted upon the Ukrainian population.[292] Regrettably, when this messaging gains traction, poorly executed journalism and self-proclaimed experts risk falling into the logical trap of false equivalence. As a

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[288] Putin in: Enjoli Liston and Matthew Mpoke Bigg, "In Speech to BRICS Nations, Putin Again Blames West for Ukraine War," *The New York Times*, 23 August 2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/23/world/europe/putin-ukraine-war-brics-summit.html.

[289] Original: "Srazu khochu predupredit, chto nikakogo povtoreniia stsenariia s minskimi dogovorennostiami, nikakoi zamorozki fronta dlia togo, chtoby rezhim Zelenskogo mog "zalizat rany", ne budet. Kak ne budet i vstupleniia Ukrainy v tom ili inom vide v NATO." Nebenzia in: "Nebenzia zaiavil, chto RF ne dast rezhimu Zelenskogo "zalizat rany," *TASS*, 31 October 2024: https://tass.ru/politika/22283765.

[290] Original: "V Kieve pravit «partiia voiny», i ona stremitsia, kak minimum na slovakh, oderzhat pobedu nad Rossiei 'na pole boia'. V takikh usloviiakh dialog o mire trudno sebe predstavit." Lavrov in: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Interviu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova MIA 'Rossiia segodnia', 30 maia 2024 goda," No.1014-30-05-2024, 30 May 2024: https://mid.ru/tv/?id=1953604&lang=ru.

[291] On Pax Russica, see: Aleksandr Dugin, "Pax Russica: For a Eurasian Alliance Against America," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 56–60.

[292] See for example: Kristian Åtland, "War, Diplomacy, and More War: Why Did the Minsk Agreements Fail?" *International Politics*, Online First (2024): 1–21; Pavel Baev, "False Hopes and Broken Promises on the Road to War: The Minsk Process to Manage the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, 2014–2021," University of Notre Dame, 2024: https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/f987ab10-af59-4d55-b775-bdd37aeacc27/FCDO%20grant%20case_Minsk.pdf?inline=true; Stephen Gailliot, "Lessons of the Minsk Deal: Breaking the Cycle of Russia's War in Ukraine," Institute for the Study of War, 2025: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/lessons-minsk-deal-breaking-cycle-russias-war-against-ukraine; Kristina Hook, ed., *The Russian Federation's Escalating Commission of Genocide in Ukraine: A Legal Analysis*, (Montreal: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, 2023): https://www.raoulwallenbergcentre.org/images/reports/2023-07-26-Genocide-Ukraine-Report.pdf; Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Sixth Interim Report on Reported Violations of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law in Ukraine* (Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2024): https://www.osce.org/odihr/582835.

news anchor remarked in an interview: "We call this 'five minutes for Hitler, five minutes for Jews.'"[293]

Distraction diverts attention from an actor and an issue or directs focus towards the nonsensical or misleading. This can be accomplished through tactics such as whataboutism, blame-shifting, and any strategy that helps to derail focus from one concern to another. A well-known method of distraction is the so-called Russian "firehose of falsehoods," which inundates the information environment with contradictory claims, shifting attention away from Russian actions and leading analytical focus down one rabbit hole after another.[294] For instance, a distraction campaign circulated false information claiming that the Ukrainian Chief of the Armed Forces, Valerii Zaluzhny, had been killed, which was untrue.[295] Another example involves a network of Telegram chats where Russian operatives set up accounts that appeared to be created by locals in areas slated for occupation but were managed by Russian influence agents and bots. These channels propagated false information about ongoing events and encouraged readers to report misinformation to Ukrainian authorities, aiming to overwhelm and mislead them.[296] A spokesperson from a fact-checking NGO recounted a similar example during an interview. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Telegram accounts started to publish photos of signs that were presented as targets for the Russian Air Force. It turned out that Russian actors had hired Ukrainian teenagers to put the signs up: "And Ukrainians, instead of helping the army with real things, went out to take these down and just wasted their time to do some useless stuff."[297] As these examples illustrate, the distraction tactic ranges from the firehose of falsehoods to manipulating the information environment for tactical military objectives.

The dismay tactic seeks to instil fear, anxiety, and apathy through threatening messaging, alarming predictions, and emotionally charged imagery designed to emphasise danger and uncertainty. At the onset of the full-scale invasion, Russian cyber-enabled influence campaigns targeted Ukrainian government websites and civilian mobile phones with discouraging messages, likely intended to undermine morale and weaken resistance.[298] Additionally, messaging directed specifically at

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[293] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[294] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016): https://doi.org/10.7249/PE198.

[295] "Ukraine's Armed Forces Post Video with Zaluzhnyi to Dispel Russian Propaganda Lies," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 25 May 2023: https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/05/25/7403873/.

[296] Ksenia Ilyuk, Evgeny Sapolovich, and Ira Ryaboshtan, "'Now we will live to the fullest!' How and Why Russia Has Created a Telegram Channels Network for the Occupied Territories of Ukraine," DetectorMedia, 5 May 2022: https://detector.media/monitorynh-internetu/article/199010/2022-05-05-now-we-will-live-to-the-fullest-how-and-why-russia-has-created-a-telegram-channels-network-for-the-occupied-territories-of-ukraine/.

[297] Interview, Spokesperson (Fact-checking NGO).

[298] Alden Wahlstrom, Alice Revelli, Sam Riddell, David Mainor, and Ryan Serabian, "The IO Offensive: Information Operations Surrounding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," Mandiant, 19 May 2022: https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/information-operations-surrounding-ukraine.

frontline soldiers highlighted the brutal treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war, including graphic footage of executions such as filmed beheadings.[299] While atrocities and war crimes were often concealed during the great wars of the 20th century, the Russian approach marks a disturbing departure from this norm. It embraces a grotesque form of violent horror communication, reminiscent of that used by radical Islamist terrorist groups such as ISIS and Hamas. Acts such as beheadings and the deliberate starvation of Ukrainian prisoners of war appear to serve a grim communicative function—using shocking displays of violence to intimidate, demoralise, and signal the severe costs of resistance to both Ukrainian soldiers and the broader population.[300] Moreover, in the context of a highly transparent battlefield, Ukrainian drone footage targeting Russian soldiers and dead Russian soldiers—widely shared on social media—may inadvertently highlight the vulnerability of Ukrainian forces as well.[301] These dynamics exemplify the wicked nature of wartime communication, where intended messages are entangled with unpredictable and potentially counterproductive effects.

Complementing these psychological efforts, Russian influence campaigns strategically combined messaging with targeted bombings of civilian infrastructure, exploiting harsh winter conditions to amplify fear and erode public morale.[302] At a strategic level, Russia continually attempts to demoralise Ukrainians by manipulating and countering international media narratives, fostering perceptions that Western support is waning.[303] This approach aligns with Moscow's broader strategic communications, emphasising "red lines" and framing the conflict as potentially escalating into World War III, as discussed in Chapter 3. Illustrating this tactic, in September 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin

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[299] Office of the High Commissioner, "Ukraine: Alarming Rise In Executions Of Captured Ukrainian Military Personnel," United Nations, 3 February 2025: https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Alarming-Rise-in-Executions-of-Captured-Ukrainian-Military-Personnel; David L. Stern, Robyn Dixon, and Dalton Bennett, "Video of Alleged Beheading of Ukrainian Soldier Draws Condemnation," *The Washington Post*, 12 April 2023: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/12/beheading-ukraine-video-russia-war/; Tim Zadorozhnyy, "Ukraine Identifies Soldier in Severed Head Photo, Documents Russian War Crime," *Kyiv Independent*, 3 February 2025: https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-identifies-soldier-in-severed-head-photo-documents-russian-war-crime/.

[300] Stephane J. Baele, "Introduction—Full-Spectrum Propaganda: Appraising the 'IS Moment' in Propaganda History," in *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message (Causes and Consequences of Terrorism)*, eds Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd , and Travis G. Coan (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1-19; Lilie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas, "The Communication of Horrorism: A Typology of ISIS Online Death Videos," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 24–39.

[301] See for example the Ministry of Defence's campaign "X Number of Days of War in 60 Seconds": Ministry of Defence, "Nashi zakhysnyky znyshchyly rosiiskyi…," @ministry_of_defense_ua, Telegram, 21 June 2023: https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/7709.

[302] Orest Slyvenko, "'A Terrible Winter Awaits Ukrainians.' What Russian Propagandists Are Saying on Telegram about the 2024–2025 Winter in Ukraine," Detector Media, 23 September 2024: https://en.detector.media/post/a-terrible-winter-awaits-ukrainians-what-russian-propagandists-are-saying-on-telegram-about-the-2024-2025-winter-in-ukraine.

[303] Insikt Group, "Russia Seeks to Exploit Western 'War Fatigue' to Win in Ukraine," Recorded Futures, 29 February 2024: https://www.recordedfuture.com/research/russia-seeks-exploit-western-war-fatigue-win-ukraine.

responded to discussions of Ukraine potentially using long-range weapons provided by its Western supporters for strikes deep within Russia by stating: "It is a question of deciding whether NATO countries are directly involved in the military conflict or not. If this decision is made, it will mean nothing but the direct participation of NATO countries, the United States, and European countries in the war in Ukraine."[304]

Division is about capitalising on existing societal and political tensions, especially those that are already contentious and challenging. The methods for achieving this vary but typically focus on amplifying the controversial issues and polarisation between societal and political groups. Russian influence campaigns have exploited societal and political divisions, mainly focusing on contentious issues such as mobilisation, civilian-military relations, and political leadership credibility. Russian-linked messaging amplified tensions by disseminating manipulative content intended to deepen societal polarisation and erode morale.[305] Efforts to undermine mobilisation included messaging portraying conscription negatively and highlighting alleged abuses in recruitment practices. Another type of messaging concerns spreading provocative content on social media praising draft evasion. This includes social media accounts by alleged Ukrainians who are proud "evaders" and voices from "ordinary Ukrainians on the streets" and "bloggers on the internet" making statements such as: "I don't need a hero, I need a living one."[306] Additionally, manipulative messaging around the issue of Ukrainian military casualties, using inflated and unsubstantiated figures, was strategically employed to discredit Ukraine's leadership, demoralise the population, and discourage military recruitment.[307] Concurrently, messaging framing Ukraine's political leadership as corrupt, ineffective, and responsible for infrastructure failures, particularly concerning winter energy shortages, seeks to create fissures between the public and the political leadership. For example, beyond dismaying messaging, one instance concerns "Black Winter" and the dissemination of messages such as: "Black Winter is not a joke, but a reality. Be prepared for it and do not rely on the state where corruption has consumed everything."[308] Finally, efforts were made to create divisions between Ukraine and its international allies. This includes statements suggesting that the West has deceived Ukraine into a

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[304] Vladimir Putin, "Answer to a Media Question," President of Russia, 12 September 2024: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75092.

[305] Digital Forensic Research Lab, "In Ukraine, Russia Tries to Discredit Leaders and Amplify Internal Divisions," Atlantic Council, 29 February 2024: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/in-ukraine-russia-tries-to-discredit-leaders-and-amplify-internal-divisions/.

[306] Legitimnyi "#raskladka Ukhiliant – Eto prestizhno…" @legitimniy, Telegram, 20 April 2024: https://t.me/legitimniy/17761. The "Evaders" case is reported in the Centre for Countering Disinformation's weekly report for 15– 21 April 2024.

[307] See for example: "Shoigu Says Russian Army Is Most Combat Capable in World," *TASS*, 19 December 2023: https://tass.com/defense/1723781.

[308] Kartel, "#spletni Chernaia zima priblizhaetsia," @ZE_kartel, Telegram, 22 November 2023: https://t.me/ZE_kartel/8016.

deadly impasse. For instance, the Telegram channel of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shared an excerpt from an interview with the Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU, Kirill Logvinov, on the Russia 24 television channel, where Logvinov asserts: "The decision to commence pre-accession negotiations with Ukraine is hypocritical. It appears that the EU political establishment attempted to 'thank' the Ukrainian elite with some form of advance. Ordinary Ukrainians are neither particularly concerned nor indifferent about yesterday's decision. It will be detrimental for them if the political signal sent by the EU implies that the Kyiv regime is now simply obliged to repay this— with the lives of Ukrainians in a military confrontation with Russia.[309]

Based on the Centre for Countering Disinformation's weekly reports from 2023–2024, Russian information manipulation targeting Ukraine emphasised three core messages: the Ukrainian Armed Forces are weak and incompetent, the Ukrainian government is corrupt and illegitimate, and Ukraine itself is a dependent puppet of the West. Similar themes characterised the messaging aimed at Ukraine's partner nations, albeit with nuanced differences. Russian messaging stressed military superiority over Ukraine's Armed Forces, portrayed Ukrainian political leadership primarily as incompetent and illegitimate rather than corrupt, and amplified messaging highlighting Western fatigue and diminishing support for Ukraine. Taken together, Russia's international messaging seeks to systematically destroy Ukraine's reputation and deprive Ukraine of agency in the country's future. Regarding Russia and its leadership, messaging simultaneously depicts them as victims of Western geopolitical aggression and Ukrainian "Nazism," while paradoxically portraying Russia as an unparalleled military power whose decisions alone determine whether the world descends into a new global war.

To conclude, the head of a fact-checking NGO explained:

> I would say that Russia has the same grand narrative, or meta narrative - you can call it either way - for decades. And that's the narrative that Ukraine is a failed state. And all other stories, narratives, they are supplements for the existence of this narrative. And all methods and tools used by the Russian propaganda are targeted to keep this narrative alive.[310]

5.2 Methods and Effects

From the respondents' perspective, three methods were identified in answering questions about modifications in the execution and dissemination of Russian information manipulation operations.

First, the prevalence of AI (i.e., Large Language Models, LLM) was mentioned throughout the interviews as an increasingly challenging problem. An analyst at a

[309] Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), "[flash hashtag] Interv'yu i.o. Postpreda," @MID_Russia, Telegram, 16 December 2023: https://t.me/MID_Russia/33732.

[310] Interview, Head Analyst (Fact-checking NGO).

fact-checking NGO stated that, "I don't think much has changed, but except for in the means." The Analyst explicitly highlighted AI-generated content, emphasising that the rapid advancement and widespread availability of sophisticated content-generation technologies pose significant challenges—not only in detecting AI-generated content but also in keeping pace with its proliferation. Moreover, the Analyst added that AI-generated content is not only used as a sledgehammer: "So the technology got better and I would say that their understanding of the Ukrainian society also got better." [311]

While discussing the issue of targeting Ukrainian soldiers, a member of the Armed Forces stated that "we do observe a massive use of AI, especially to create deep fakes." The respondent cited the example of a deep fake of the Chief of the Armed Forces, Zaluzhny, that was circulated in November 2023. In the video, the fake Chief states, "that we would surrender and that the Russian Armed Forces are undefeatable and so on." The respondent commented, "They have some pure-quality products."[312] Another example of sophisticated information manipulation is the Russian Pravda network, which has strategically flooded AI training data with pro-Kremlin messaging to manipulate search engines and chatbot responses to current events.[313] These are but a couple of examples of the dynamic and evolving methods for managing the presentation of meaning in war, but they point to an enduring phenomenon—the age-old practice of manipulating information—now dressed in new technological attire.

Second, when it comes to methods for influencing Ukrainian society, the Spokesperson for a fact-checking NGO said that "after years of bombing, sending missiles to Ukrainian cities killing hundreds of thousands of people," the regular Russian "rhetoric does not work." Instead, the Spokesperson continued: "So they have changed their approach and now they mostly disseminate their narratives and rhetoric through pro-Ukrainian anti-corruption accounts, pretending to be patriotic accounts, Ukrainian military accounts, local media organisations or local groups in different towns and cities."[314] As a news anchor put it, "today Russian propaganda try to stay invisible."[315] While this type of information-laundering is not a new method, it was seen by many respondents as an increasingly complex problem.[316]

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[311] Interview, Analyst (Fact-checking NGO).

[312] Interview, Respondent (Armed Forces). For an analysis of the video, see: "Fake: Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Zaluzhny Is Preparing a Military Coup," StopFake, 8 November 2023: https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-ukrainian-commander-in-chief-zaluzhny-is-preparing-a-military-coup/.

[313] McKenzie Sadeghi and Isis Blachez, "A Well-Funded Moscow-Based Global 'News' Network Has Infected Western Artificial Intelligence Tools Worldwide with Russian Propaganda," Special Report, *NewsGuard*, 6 March 2025: https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/a-well-funded-moscow-based-global.

[314] Interview, Spokesperson (Fact-checking NGO).

[315] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[316] For a detailed analysis of proxies and information laundering, see: Maryna Vorotyntseva, Olena Yurchenko, Andryi Dikhtiarenko, Serhii Pakhomenko, Viacheslav Husakov, and Denys Kaplunov, *The Use of Russian Proxy Actors in the Media Environment in Ukraine: A Comparison between Occupied and Non-Occupied Areas, 2017–2023,* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2024):

Internationally, this method is prevalent. In the United States, for example, several cases of influential political pundits acting as instruments of Russian influence have been revealed.[317]

Finally, several respondents explained that Russian information manipulation, in the attempt to dismay and divide Ukrainian society, has increasingly been playing on psychological and emotional grievances. For example, a senior official at the Centre for Countering Disinformation explained, "They are messaging that 'it's not fair that you are mobilised,'" while laughingly adding that of course, "they are not mentioning that 'hey, it was us who created the situation.'"[318] A senior communication strategist at a public relations NGO similarly explained:

> Basically, Russia does what it always does. It exploits our internal vulnerabilities, our internal sentiments, and those moods that currently prevail in our society. Either it is tiredness or anger, they [the Russians] exploit these sentiments and opinions, and they basically redirect this anger towards our government, our, you know, our institutions.[319]

Regarding effects, it is widely recognised in the research literature that measuring the impact of information manipulation poses significant challenges. Establishing clear causality between specific campaigns and outcomes is difficult, given the numerous intervening variables—such as political and cultural contexts—that influence effects. Moreover, analysts and researchers frequently lack access to essential data, weakening analyses from the outset. Finally, the field itself often relies on uncertain epistemological foundations and untested assumptions.[320]

All of our respondents working with analysing and countering Russian information manipulation acknowledged the inherent difficulty in measuring effects but reported observing tangible impacts, frequently illustrated through specific cases or

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https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/the-use-of-russian-proxy-actors-in-the-media-environment-in-ukraine-a-comparison-between-occupied-and-non-occupied-areas-20172023/312.

[317] Steven Lee Myers, Ken Bensinger, and Jim Rutenberg, "Russia Secretly Worms Its Way Into America's Conservative Media," *The New York Times*, 7 September 2024: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/07/business/media/russia-tenet-media-tim-pool.html; Peter Suciu, "Tucker Carlson's Moscow Videos Were Just Latest Pro-Putin Propaganda," *Forbes*, 16 February 2024: https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2024/02/16/tucker-carlsons-moscow-videos-were-just-latest-pro-putin-propaganda/; Elise Thomas, "Why Russia Embraces Tucker Carlson," *The Moscow Times*, 10 October 2023: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/10/why-russia-embraces-tucker-carlson-a82715; Kate Tsurkan, "How US Right-Wing Podcasters Shape Pro-Russia, Anti-Ukraine Sentiments," *Kyiv Independent*, 5 March 2025: https://kyivindependent.com/how-us-right-wing-podcasters-shape-pro-russia-anti-ukraine-sentiments/.

[318] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation).

[319] Interview, Senior Communication Strategist (Public Relations NGO).

[320] Jon Bateman, Elonnai Hickok, Laura Courchesne, Isra Thange, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Measuring the Effects of Influence Operations: Key Findings and Gaps From Empirical Research," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 June 2021: https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/06/measuring-the-effects-of-influence-operations-key-findings-and-gaps-from-empirical-research?lang=en#effects/?lang=en; Olga Belogolova,, Lee Foster, Thomas Rid, and Gavin Wilde, "Don't Hype the Disinformation Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 May 2024: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russiandisinformation-the-threat-federation/dont-hype-the-disinformation-threat.

anecdotal evidence. On the question of effectiveness, a spokesperson at a fact-checking NGO answered:

> Well, you need to make some research to make this conclusion— if its more effective or less effective. Well, they do not stop. They are flexible and change their approach all the time. Some things, they do give results. . . We cannot say that they are not effective. Well, they are not stupid. They would not spend billions of dollars a year to keep this network of organisations, not just in Russia and Ukraine, but probably in most European countries and United States.

The Spokesperson gave an example of how Telegram channels disseminated laundered information about Russians seizing Ukrainian army and police vehicles during the chaos of the onset of the full-scale invasion: "Several accidents happened, when friendly fire happened. Some Ukrainian defenders were killed in friendly fire in Kyiv and other cities."[321]

Regarding effectiveness, several respondents claimed that obvious Russian messaging does not work well on Ukrainians. A senior official at the Centre for Countering Disinformation said that "when they [Russians] are coming with stupid things like Ukrainian are Nazis and so on, it's not working. Like I said, when it comes directly from Russia, it's not working on our people."[322] However, when information is laundered and channelled through what is or appears to be credible sources, Ukrainian or Western, the effectiveness was seen as serious. A communication advisor at the Office of the President, for example, stated that: "At the very least, the whole thinking world— and Ukraine— has gotten used to Russian propaganda and how it works through lies and disinformation." The advisor added, "but it is another story entirely when this disinformation gets picked up by our own media and splashes into our information space." Discussing disinformation "routed through the West, spread via their bots and trolls," the advisor said that it "is quite dangerous as well" while adding, "if this disinformation ends up being picked up by political leaders—for example, in Italy or Germany—that can really hurt."[323]

Ignorance was another factor highlighted in interviews as reducing resilience to Russian information manipulation internationally, particularly among the American population. An intelligence officer explained that "the Russians have managed to take advantage of built-in misconceptions, or built-in understandings and prejudices against the Ukrainian people on a worldwide level." The officer continued:

> It's not, 'Oh hey they're Nazis,' or the biolabs; that shit is a façade. Americans don't know there's a fucking difference between Ukraine and Russia. The vast majority don't know that.

[321] Interview, Spokesperson (Fact-checking NGO).

[322] Interview, Senior Official (Centre for Countering Disinformation).

[323] Interview, Communication Advisor (Office of the President).

> And then, when you add in the fact that 30% of the people speak Russian, that really makes it cloudier, and it allows Russia's disinformation network to succeed and penetrate.[324]

Regarding the challenges of analysing and countering Russian information manipulation, keeping up with the flood of such information manipulation was seen as futile. As the Intelligence Officer mentions, there is the "façade" and tangible impact, where the façade distracts. In other words, too much focus on the tactical aspects of information manipulation might blind the observer to the aggregated strategic impact.

Other challenges discussed included analysing AI-generated content, where producers leveraging AI appear to consistently stay one step ahead of fact-checkers. Another issue raised was the spread of voice messages through direct messaging apps like WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram. When discussing potential AI-based tools for analysing deepfakes and manipulated content, the head of a fact-checking NGO explained that "of course, as an organisation, we could pay for any tool." However, the challenge highlighted by this NGO, and shared by many others in Ukraine, was that "if we want to make people understand which tools they can use to fact-check something by themselves, we should also show them which tools are. . . free and available online." In other words, maintaining public trust through transparent analysis places constraints on the kinds of tools these organisations can adopt.

On the topic of trust, the same respondent emphasised the importance of maintaining public confidence in official sources, especially during war. Effective Russian influence operations undermining trust could lead to harmful consequences, such as diminished support for the Army and political leadership. As an example, the Fact-Checker highlighted attacks on Green Corridors, where Ukrainian authorities publicly announce safe evacuation routes after agreements with Russian counterparts, only for Russian forces to attack these corridors and pro-Russian social media accounts to blame the Ukrainians afterwards.[325] While recognising the risks of "blind trust," the Fact-Checker stressed that during wartime, relying on official information can sometimes be "a matter of staying alive."[326]

Several respondents highlighted the difficulty of distinguishing genuine Russian information manipulation from legitimate criticism or diplomacy. A news anchor noted that Ukrainians sometimes quickly label content critical or hostile toward Ukraine as "'Russian disinformation,' but mostly it is not true," since Russia still

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[324] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

[325] Centre for Civilians in Conflict, *When Words Become Weapons: The Unprecedented Risk to Civilians from the Spread of Disinformation in Ukraine*, Washington and the Hague, 2023, 22–23: https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CIVIC_Disinformation_Report.pdf.

[326] Interview, Head of Analysis (Fact-checking NGO).

holds significant diplomatic and cultural influence globally.[327] A fact-checker further explained that the most important challenge is "not dealing with false information, but with manipulations" rooted in real social and political problems within Ukraine.[328]

From the respondents' perspective, the effectiveness of Russian information manipulation relies on leveraging all available channels and technologies, both low-tech and high-tech, to exploit specific situations, such as the chaos of the onset of the full-scale invasion or socially divisive issues like the mobilisation. Emotional appeals, ignorance, and the laundering of information further enhance the impact of these efforts.[329] The respondents also allude to information manipulation's "wicked" nature, where effects are not always immediate, predictable, or even intentional. In some cases, the mere mention of rumours about Russian influence create an impact, regardless of the actual presence or success of such influence operations.

Moreover, the interviews highlight the complexities of trust in the context of information manipulation. A key challenge is distinguishing between outright and verifiable fabrications and manipulative messaging that distorts or amplifies real societal and political issues. The latter is particularly challenging, as it exploits existing grievances, complicating fact-checking and increasing the risk of wrongly labelling legitimate criticism as disinformation, which might further deepen the core of the grievances instead of mitigating it.

[327] Interview, News Anchor (Television).

[328] Ibid.

[329] While all these perspectives find support in the research literature, more research on this specific situation is needed to draw real conclusions. According to two specific studies on the impact of Russian information manipulation in Ukraine, the effects of such manipulation vary in scope and duration; while social media plays a role, research suggests that legacy media, particularly television, remains more effective in shaping public perception. Additionally, topics on which people have little prior knowledge, such as economics, are especially vulnerable to manipulation. See: Aaron Erlich and Calvin Garner, "Is Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Effective? Evidence from Ukraine," The *International Journal of Press/Politics* 28, no. 1 (2023): 5–28; Lennart Maschmeyer, Alexei Abrahams, Peter Pomerantsev, and Volodymyr Yermolenko, "Donetsk Don't Tell—'Hybrid War' in Ukraine and the Limits of Social Media Influence Operations," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 22, no. 1 (2025): 49–64.

5.3 Offensive Communication

Much has been written about proactive and reactive measures against information manipulation based on Ukrainian experiences.[330] As mentioned above, one of the core challenges is simply keeping up with an adversary who dwarfs one's countermeasures in terms of resources. As the Intelligence Officer asked rhetorically: "But beyond that [regular pro-active and reactive measures] we can't compete with it, so why are we trying? Why are we allowing it to bother us?" The officer continued:

> I'm talking to my command and asking why we are saying something that doesn't make sense. Why are we responding? Why do we even care when we should be creating our own messaging that is directly aimed, offensively, at the enemy. . . Why the fuck would we be wasting our time on that? And then amplifying it? No, we want them amplifying our messaging.

Some respondents used "offensive communication" interchangeably with psychological operations (PSYOP) and information-psychological operations (IPSO). For operational security reasons, much of Ukraine's offensive communication practice remains secret.[331] Nevertheless, publicly available examples and interviews on the topic show how a democratic country might communicate offensively.

For example, on August 6, 2024, Russian soldiers in Kursk Oblast received dismaying messages on their smartphones stating: "Today the flames of war unleashed by Putin and Co. have spread to the Kursk region."[332] The subsequent message urged the Russian soldiers to surrender. That same day, Ukraine launched the Kursk offensive, the first time since WWII that a foreign army set foot on Russian soil by force. This was part of the "I Want to Live" (*Khochu zhit*) campaign, operating under Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR), which targeted Russian soldiers to encourage them to surrender. Peter Schrijver notes that the campaign presents surrender as a safe and legitimate alternative to combat.

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[330] See: Todd C. Helmus and Khrystyna Holynska, *Ukrainian Resistance to Russian Disinformation: Lessons for Future Conflict* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2024): https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2771-1.html; Young Kim and Hyunji (Dana) Lim, "Debunking Misinformation in Times of Crisis: Exploring Misinformation Correction Strategies for Effective Internal Crisis Communication," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 31, no. 3 (2023): 406–420; Jakub Kalenský and Roman Osadchuk, *How Ukraine Fights Russian Disinformation: Beehive vs Mammoth* (Helsinki: The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2024): https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240124-Hybrid-CoE-Research-Report-11-How-UKR-fights-RUS-disinfo-WEB.pdf.

[331] For overviews, see: A. V. Kovalevska-Slavova, "Modern Psyops: Communicative Pathogenicity Structure," *Opera in Linguistica Ukrainiana*, no. 30 (2023): 272–281; Marian Nicușor Stancu and George Căzănaru, "Psychological Operations During the Russian War of Aggression in Ukraine," *Land Forces Academy Review* 29, no. 3 (2024): 351–357.

[332] Original: "Segodnia plamia voiny, razviazannoi Putinym i Ko, perekinulos na Kurskuiu oblast." In: I Want to Live, "Segodnia plamia voiny, razviazannoi. . ." @hochu_zhyt, Telegram, 6 August 2024: https://t.me/hochu_zhyt/1768.

Soldiers receive instructions on surrender, legal guidance, and even asylum options through a website and encrypted communication channels.

Schrijver points out that this campaign leverages smartphones and social media for direct, two-way engagement with individual soldiers. Unlike mass SMS, leaflet drops, and messaging through loudspeakers, which are also used,[333] this approach personalises outreach, fostering one-on-one communication with Russian troops. The campaign also relies on video testimonials from surrendered Russian soldiers, challenging enemy perceptions of Ukrainian forces and amplifying its reach via social media. Schrijver remarks on how the initiative exploits divisions within Russian ranks, seeking to drive a wedge between factions and to fuel distrust in Russian leadership.

Crucially, Schrijver observes that the "I Want to Live" campaign integrates real-time intelligence with psychological operations, tailoring its messaging based on battlefield developments. By tracking surrender requests and monitoring shifts in public sentiment, Ukraine refines its strategy to maximise impact. According to Ukrainian sources, this approach has proven effective; by early 2024, the project's website had amassed over 48 million visits, mostly from within Russia. The campaign is reported to have led to thousands of surrenders.[334] In November 2024, it was reported that it was adapted for North Korean troops.[335]

The respondents who wanted to discuss audience analysis and evaluation of offensive communication campaigns in Russia talked about the issue's complexity. Beyond human and open-source intelligence, other more creative approaches were discussed. For example, a senior communication officer in the Armed Forces explained that Russian prisoners of war were "a good source of knowledge about relatives and acquaintances in Russia."[336] Another example, brought up by a communication officer in the Armed Forces, concerned the difficulty of getting reliable statistics for aggregated opinions. The officer said that there is "a good project called ICAR, where people called to Russia and said something like they were from a Russian research agency." According to the officer, the project was recent, and the people involved were working on producing research and evaluations: "Sometimes these projects work. . . we try to find our ways."[337]

This includes infiltrating Russian social media channels and publicising information to demonstrate lesser-known aspects of the Russian war effort. For

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[333] Interview, Senior Communication Officer (Armed Forces).

[334] Peter Schrijver, "'I Want to Live': Psychological Warfare for the Modern Era," Irregular Warfare Initiative, 4 November 2024: https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/i-want-to-live-psychological-warfare-for-the-modern-era/.

[335] Young Gyo Kim and Andriy Borys, "Ukraine Doubles down on Psychological Campaign against North Korean Troops," *Voice of America*, 1 November 2024: https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-doubles-down-on-psychological-campaign-against-north-korean-troops/7847270.html.

[336] Interview, Senior Communication Officer (Armed Forces).

[337] Interview, Communication Officer No. 1 (Armed Forces).

instance, “Operation Pharmakon,” which, according to public sources, involves cooperation between the “Ukrainian Defence Forces and Russian-based partisan groups,” has leaked footage of a Kremlin-associated NGO called “Boomerang of Good,” which used disabled children to produce materials for the Russian Armed Forces.[338]

One emblematic example of offensive communication, in the double sense of the word *offensive*, is the campaign *Russia Hates the Truth*, a YouTube English-language series consisting of a number of shows, approximately twenty-minutes-long, rhetorically ramped-up infotainment presented by a caricature of an American transgender person, “a non-binary Nazi” (*nebinarnyi natsist*) according to Russian television.[339] Although the person behind the fictitious caricature is indeed a transgender American called Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, the show spun on this identity to attract attention from the Russian news media. In an interview with *Ukrinform*, she said: “So we created this character that was based off of what they would imagine me to be.”[340]

The campaign was launched under the Deputy Minister of Defence Maliar and run together with the Territorial Defence Forces and the Foreign Intelligence Service. One intelligence officer with in-depth knowledge about the campaign said its purpose was to “hit them [Russians] in a way that forces them to respond instead of us answering questions.” The plan was to retort by ramping up the rhetoric.

The show depicted Ashton-Cirillo standing behind a podium with a Ukrainian flag beside her and a screen with Territorial Defence logos behind her. Depending on the episode, additional props were introduced. In one instalment, Ashton-Cirillo begins narrating as the broadcast cuts between images of Zakharova, Russia’s Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an array of NAFO Shiba Inu dogs dressed in military gear, wielding shovels and guns under a NATO flag. “Prior to chasing after some make-believe Shiba Inus, Putin’s favourite blonde sniffed me out,” she recounts, “personally attacking me through her Telegram page, along with the feeds belonging to the Russian embassy in the U.S. and the Russian MFA in April 2022.” Further visuals include the NAFO logo, a UNITED24 fundraiser for naval drones featuring a Shiba Inu mascot, and an image of Zelensky standing among armed Shiba Inus in a war-torn city.

A clip of Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence tweeting light-hearted praise for NAFO’s fight against Kremlin information manipulation and interference is contrasted with

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[338] Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, “Putin-Backed NGO Uses Disabled Kids to Feed Russian War Machine,” *Resolute Square*, 10 October 2024: https://resolutesquare.com/articles/5J7El7WAMaJ0C7s1WM4XAe/putin-uses-disabled-kids.

[339] Rossiia 1, “*60 Minut*,” broadcast 18:00–20:00 (timestamp 19:12:10), 5 June 2024.

[340] Ievgen Matiushenko, “Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, American journalist turned Ukraine Army Sergeant,” *Ukrinform*, 9 April 2024: https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3849504-sarah-ashtoncirillo-american-journalist-turned-ukraine-army-sergeant.html.

a response from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where Zakharova delivers a scathing critique, accusing NAFO of embodying Western hypocrisy. Against this backdrop, Ashton-Cirillo delivers a pointed takedown, branding Zakharova an "unindicted war criminal" unravelling over "a growing pack of cartoon dogs." She underscores NAFO's role as a decentralised pro-Ukraine movement that funds NGOs while countering Russian disinformation, highlighting how their in-person gathering in Vilnius triggered a meltdown within Moscow's influence machinery. Referencing Zakharova's bizarre remark—"We ourselves will become sons of bitches, if only to spite Russia"—Ashton-Cirillo mocks the Kremlin's desperation, noting that, 499 days into its failing war, they are now more preoccupied with neutering Twitter accounts than achieving their military objectives.[341]

In the interview with the Intelligence Officer, who had insight into the campaign, the officer underscored that addressing disinformation was not a priority. It only happened when "they [Russians] would say something so stupid," but then, the counter would be based on "what I call 'escalation theory.'" The essence of the theory was to use an inflated propagandistic logic to counterattack the messaging that was being directed at Ukraine. In one episode, for example, Ashton-Cirillo retorts a Russian claim that the UK had been forced into cannibalism as a result of how Ukraine's partner nations are suffering from the war:

> This headline is from the Tsargrad website, "Cannibals in London." Due to the war in Ukraine. This is not a tabloid article. It was presented as a factual by-product of Russia's full-scale invasion. We researched the matter and not only found no cases of cannibalism in the UK since the article came out, but in the decade prior, we discovered that Russian authorities arrested at least five people for committing more than 30 cannibalistic murders in areas such as St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Krasnodar. I'm pretty certain the headline we saw is called "Deflection." Russia hates the truth, but they don't seem to mind cannibalism all that much.[342]

Reflecting on the campaign's effect, the Intelligence Officer stated: "It caught something because they weren't used to being attacked. And that's why, because they are so used to creating chaos and nobody answering to them." The officer continued: "Through *Russia Hates the Truth*, we got them to allow [saying] *Slava Ukraïni* on Russian television, it's illegal to say but by running the broadcast of the devil person, they did it."[343] Indeed, the campaign was picked up by Russian prime-time TV shows and despised by talk-show host Skabeyeva and others.[344] In

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[341] TDF Media Studios, "Russia Hates the Truth: Episode 4 hosted by Sergeant Sarah Ashton-Cirillo," YouTube, 10 July 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRNLwwrF2UM.

[342] TDF Media Studios, "Russia Hates the Truth : Episode 2 hosted by Sergeant Sarah Ashton-Cirillo," YouTube, 7 July 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxIFMEnUBf0&list=PLG9D5ui79DyWIrsEBc4fMWGWcq0ScyK3s&index=8.

[343] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

[344] Rossiia 1, "60 Minut," broadcast 18:00-20:00 (timestamp 18:16:50–18:21:30), 25 September 2023.

the evening news, the campaign also managed to convey the message that Russians are "orcs" governed by "vampires."[345]

Russia Hates the Truth was eventually discontinued after it had served its purpose. It was low cost and required little manpower. Although its strategic effectiveness is difficult to assess, it was one of several campaigns that penetrated Russia's otherwise sealed information environment. The Intelligence Officer, reflecting on the project, added: "I don't believe in analytics teams when it comes to [offensive] coms. Because you can overthink when it comes to [offensive] coms. People want authenticity, especially from the offensive standpoint."[346] In the cases displayed in this chapter, offensive communication is both offensive in the aggressive sense and offensive in the repugnant sense. However, contrary to the Russian firehose of falsehoods, the cases are well-researched and fact-based, although deliberately distorted. They aim to be provocative by lifting a mirror to Russian society and a magnifying glass to the outside world, exposing realities within Russia.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter explores psychological operations, focusing on Russian information manipulation, associated challenges, and the use of offensive communication to counter adversarial psychological operations.

- The EASS 5D model (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay, divide) illustrates Russian information manipulation tactics. These tactics represent a core aspect of Russia's efforts to shape international perceptions of its war of aggression and to influence Ukrainian society, ultimately serving Russian strategic interests. Russian messaging about Ukraine at the strategic level has remained relatively consistent, portraying Ukraine as a failed state and a non-existent nation.
- Regarding methods and effects, the chapter demonstrates that Russian information manipulation techniques are dynamic and continuously evolving. Recent developments include the use of AI (such as large language models), information laundering, and the exploitation of psychological and emotional grievances. Respondents indicate that laundered information and the exploitation of societal and political divisions pose the most significant challenges in Ukraine. Internationally, ignorance about Ukraine remains a primary obstacle. Consequently, a considerable challenge for countereffortsis simply keeping pace with the extensive Russian apparatus for information manipulation.
- Moving beyond traditional proactive (pre-bunking) and reactive (debunking) methods, the chapter explores Ukrainian offensive

[345] NTV Mir, "Segodnya," broadcast 19:00-20:00 (timestamp 19:16:10–19:16:20), 21 September 2023.
[346] Interview, Intelligence Non-commissioned Officer (Defence Intelligence).

communication as a component of psychological operations, illustrated with practical examples. This approach involves actively employing fact-based yet deliberately provocative communication against adversary soldiers and political leaders. Additionally, it exposes realities within Russian society and amplifies internal developments in Russia for the global audience.

The general lessons from this analysis do not represent a ready-made blueprint but rather suggest approaches for dealing with a thoroughly researched area still fraught with definitional ambiguities and underlying assumptions, and the relatively less explored area of Ukrainian offensive communication.

- Managing meaning in conflict and war is not new, but it is essential to anticipate the full range of possible methods that adversaries may employ. While detailed analysis of foreign information manipulation is important, it is crucial not to become distracted by superficial narratives or façades and forget about broader strategic context.
- As highlighted in the interviews and supported by previous research on Russian information manipulation practices, exploiting genuine societal and political divisions remains a critical challenge. Effective countermeasures involve systematically analysing these foreign manipulation attempts to better understand and respond to the societal trends and sentiments within one's own country through strategic listening.
- Avoid the overly simplistic assumption that revealing the truth alone will resolve the problem of information manipulation. Recognise that multiple rationalities exist among international and domestic audiences. Clearly identify the source of information manipulation and respond accordingly. If information is obviously fabricated and impactful, employ appropriate correction strategies. If manipulation taps into genuine societal issues, attention should shift towards addressing these underlying problems. Simply exposing falsehoods is insufficient; effective countermeasures require transparency, accountability, and proactive engagement with the social and political conditions that lend traction to disinformation.
- Psychological operations, utilising offensive yet fact-based communication, can provide a cost-effective way to influence adversary soldiers and broader adversary populations. These include traditional psychological methods aimed at demoralising or dividing enemy forces to encourage desertion. Additionally, they can involve strategic operations within adversary communication channels, not for intelligence collection but to expose compromising or contradictory actions. Creative communication campaigns can also attract considerable attention within adversary news and social media, diverting focus from one's own political and military leadership.

6 Conclusion and Lessons

This report presents general lessons regarding strategic communication in war; however, the specific measures it highlights are context-dependent, and their applicability for other countries needs to be adapted to their specific information environments. Similarly, as historical contingency has shaped the Ukrainian communication approach—as with other countries' past wartime communications—future wartime communication will also depend significantly on material, social, political, cultural, organisational, and individual variables.

The purpose of this report is to extract general lessons about strategic communication by analysing Ukrainian practitioners' perspectives on its adaptation, evolution, and challenges during wartime. These lessons are informed not only by respondents' views but also by secondary sources and previous research.

Firstly, in Ukraine, organisational adaptation and implementation of lessons have been crucial, yet challenging (see Chapter 2). Institutionalising strategic communication is essential but inherently complex, marked by tensions between the need for clarity and coordination and underlying political power struggles. Three primary lessons stand out:

- Centralising communication to achieve a unified national voice risks sidelining crucial societal actors, notably civil society groups. If the strategic communication ambition is genuinely whole-of-society participation, it should balance coordination with inclusivity, harnessing rather than constraining participatory digital communication.
- Transparent and clear institutional procedures are vital. Without these, communication functions risk being shaped by decision-makers' personal preferences rather than by evidence-based best practices, potentially reinforcing ineffective strategies or past mistakes.
- Strategic communication is likely to become politicised during wartime because it raises fundamental questions about national representation. Such politicisation can complicate unified messaging, exacerbated further by siloed institutional structures and protection of political boundaries.

In the domain of public diplomacy (see Chapter 3), which aims to influence international perceptions and further a country's reputation through peer-to-peer communication, several critical lessons emerge:

- The extensive availability of real-time footage and open-source information heightens the risk of information overload and misinterpretation. More data does not equate to greater clarity, as demonstrated by failures to anticipate critical developments despite extensive intelligence. Robust analytical capacities for information

environment and audience analysis are therefore essential to manage this modern "information fog of war" effectively.

- The boundaries between private and public, and between personal and formal communication, are increasingly blurred. Politicians regularly use social media platforms to shape strategic decisions directly, circumventing traditional institutions. This evolution complicates geopolitical messaging, requiring careful balancing of strategic messaging, expectation management, and operational security.
- Sustaining global attention within an increasingly fragmented media environment is challenging. Diverse platforms, shifting geopolitical events, multifaceted audiences, and evolving public sentiments demand constant adaptation of messaging strategies. Moreover, how to handle participatory media practices and horizontal communication with state-run strategic communication is a challenge without clear answers.
- In the current fractured and unpredictable information environment, an agile communication strategy requires a level of risk-taking and creativity, where focus should be on aligning messaging with tangible actions.
- While recent technological developments have reshaped strategic communication methods, enduring human principles persist. Perception and diverging rationalities formed by society, politics, culture, and psychology continue to shape international political will.

With respect to public affairs—accurate, timely, and transparent domestic communication—three further lessons are highlighted (see Chapter 4):

- Trust in verified news sources during wartime remains essential but fragile. War fatigue and shifting information consumption patterns push audiences toward alternative sources. Politicisation further undermines credibility, emphasising the necessity for agility, transparency, and flexibility in responding to public information demands while preserving democratic debate and credibility.
- The inability to swiftly address public informational needs can create informational vacuums, fuelling speculations, and assumptions. Effective public affairs strategies should balance real-time responsiveness and information management, embedding transparency across all levels of communication, which also pertains to strategic communication in general.
- Democratic contexts inherently foster tensions in strategic communication, especially around who speaks on behalf of the country. Such politicisation may lead to hesitation or democratic inertia, where accountability mechanisms inadvertently stall decisive action. Clearly defined responsibilities and transparent institutional practices can mitigate these risks. Communication strategies should avoid superficial attempts to

influence public attitudes without corresponding policy action, as such approaches risk public scepticism and erosion of trust.

Lastly, addressing an adversary's psychological operations through strategic communication provides tentative yet valuable lessons (see Chapter 5):

- Managing wartime perceptions requires anticipating comprehensive adversary methods. Strategic clarity demands a consistent focus on the broader context rather than being sidetracked by superficial messaging.
- Exploiting genuine societal divisions remains a significant challenge. Counter-strategies require systematic analysis of foreign information manipulation attempts and its broader strategic impact, incorporating these insights into domestic strategic listening processes.
- Truth alone is insufficient to resolve information manipulation challenges. Different audiences operate from varied rationalities. Effective responses demand transparency, accountability, and engagement with the deeper social and political drivers that amplify disinformation.
- Fact-based yet provocative psychological operations can cost-effectively impact adversary morale and public opinion. Creative communication campaigns can attract substantial adversary media attention, diverting scrutiny from one's own leadership and simultaneously undermining the adversary's ability to exploit social, political, or informational vulnerabilities.

Taking everything into account, just as kinetic warfare evolves, so must strategic communication, continuously adapting to its wicked problem space and shifting information environments. Strategic communication is not a panacea for war but, when executed effectively, serves as a critical tool for the war effort. One respondent explained that it should be integrated with other aspects of warfare rather than treated as a separate domain. "For many people in other countries, our perspective is brutal," referring to strategic communication as a proper "tool of war."[347] When drawing lessons from the Ukrainian wartime communication effort, it is essential to remember that this is precisely what it is about—war.

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