

Policy Brief

Communication Strategies and Media Influence in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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The war between Russia and Ukraine unfolds on many theaters, including information and communication. Hybrid strategies and media old and new are utilized for information, persuasion and propaganda, with one underlying predicament, fake news, constantly lurking. Each side is keen on controlling its messages and relaying its narrative. On one hand, Russian communication seeks to legitimize its action and turn the opponent's camp from oppressed to provocateur. On the other, Ukrainian communication is in battle to win over international public opinion and politically advance its cause.

INTRODUCTION

Communication in times of war, be it for information or influence, constitutes alongside the military, diplomatic and legal dimensions, a central resource for understanding conflicts, and their development. It is therefore essential to understand communication's character, along with actors' intentions and postures. The war in Ukraine provides an opportunity to do so. This Policy Brief will explore the subject from a twofold perspective: first we will focus on the actions of communicators, in this case the warring parties, we will later focus on the effects of mediatization, i.e., the process of media intermediation in communication dynamics.

A NEW RUSSIAN DOCTRINE?

From the first angle, it should be recalled that engagement in most influence communication battles occurs for the narrative, with competing or opposing positions seeking legitimacy and success by means of narratives that are favorable to them. Actors aim here not so much to communicate around supposedly verified facts, as to appeal to emotions and feed favorable interpretive patterns to audiences. The temptation is to assume that Russia, as any military power at war, is simply recycling communication strategies, all well documented and grouped under the term "Stratcom" or "hybrid warfare"¹, to accomplish its objectives. Such strategies include deception, information and psychological operations, social media, audiovisual propaganda, and old Soviet-style techniques updated by Moscow, notably inspired by reflexive control theories². One caveat is that these strategies are never easy to implement, as they target a mixed audience: the enemy, local populations, the media and international opinion. They also entail risks to the communicator, correlated to conflict media coverage intensity, in terms of audience and/or political costs.

SUBVERSION AND DISINFORMATION

While the former USSR is frequently associated, in an almost caricatural way, with propaganda practices at the service of the Cold War, the redirection of its communications approach as well as the relevance of a new interpretation of might, based on soft power, is still relatively new territory. Several recent signs suggest Moscow increasingly combines military and communications arsenals in a seamless process that primarily seeks to perfect operating methods. Though not to the extent of delving into the "Gerasimov Doctrine", named for the Russian general of the same name who mentioned it during a speech in 2013³. In popular Western imagination, this widely referenced doctrine gives credence to the idea of a change of course in Russian military strategy towards "new generation warfare" based on subversion and disinformation before military force⁴.

Despite the quality of its military and tactical strike force in a traditional sense, Moscow

1. Hybrid refers to the coordinated and combined use of different tactics, both military (use of force) and non-military (irregular tactics, psychological warfare, etc.)

2. Reflexive control was theorized in the 1960s by Russian-American researcher Vladimir Lefebvre. It refers to a process of intentional transmission of information to a target, to influence the latter's decision making in accordance with information disseminated.

3. Overwhelmed by the hype surrounding the concept, the man behind it ultimately made amends (Galeotti (2019) The mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the language of threat. *Critical Studies on Security* 7(2): 157-161).

4. Ibid

struggles to compete with the West on all components of its C4ISR chain (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), the typical architecture governing modern armies. Starting in the early 2000s, the Kremlin sought to regain control over television broadcasting, strengthening public ownership of TV channels and/or deploying oligarchs close to the regime. In 2015, for its campaign in Syria, Russia, aware of the power of digital technology, invested massively in social networks to manage the war narrative. Six years later, these intentions are reaffirmed with the takeover of V Kontakte, the Russian "Facebook" by new shareholders close to the Kremlin (Gazprom and Sogaz).

TROUBLED COMMUNICATION IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

These capacities were not apparent during the first Chechen war (1994-1996). Moscow did of course have to deal with the transition to the post-Soviet era of pluralism and media independence, at least in the early years. The change in tone is summed up tersely by Izvestia (a remnant of the press of the former USSR, with Pravda) which on December 29, 1994, headlined: "The Chechen war was lost in Moscow". Two decades later, new ambitions are born. By 2013, Russia spells out the spirit of what is to become its foreign policy manifesto aimed at "creating instruments to influence the way it is perceived abroad", "developing its own effective means of influencing public opinion abroad" and "fighting against information threats to Russia's sovereignty and security"⁵. The Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014 and the first Ukrainian war, or War in Donbass, that same year gave Russia the opportunity to devise interpretive frameworks that enhance the country's perception and attractiveness, even though authorities initially seemed focused on pleasing domestic rather than international opinion. Russian communication relies heavily on collective memory (the Great Russian Empire, the Second World War/ Nazi atrocities, the power and collapse of the USSR) and this appeals to expatriate communities that serve as relays, particularly in border areas such as Donbass.

CAMOUFLAGING INTENTIONS AND ACTUAL POWERS

Information warfare is once again clearly part of Russia's military doctrine in this new conflict. That is why the Kremlin launched a deadly rocket attack on a TV tower in Kiev and cyber-attacks on media and government websites in Ukraine. Not to mention the banning of Facebook and Instagram, the limitation of Twitter and the passing of legislation that punishes journalists up to 15 years imprisonment for disseminating information "discrediting" Russian armed forces.

In keeping with old Soviet disinformation practices known as "Maskirovka," whereby real intentions or forces are disguised, Russian information warfare was careful to initially tease the border between peace and war. In the tense weeks leading up to the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian officials denied planning an attack, denouncing the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies as fomenting panic and hatred against Moscow. Russia maintained the same denial posture, even after hostilities began. The suspense lasted several weeks, to the point of at times sounding as

5. Szostek, J. (2017). Defence and promotion of desired state identity in Russia's strategic narrative. *Geopolitics*, 22(3), 571-593.

if Washington and President Joe Biden were alone in stubbornly declaring the imminence of an attack.

As the war in Ukraine intensified, the credibility of information was another collateral victim of the crisis. To mitigate the impact of fake news, US platforms restricted access to Russian state-controlled media accused of spreading conspiracy theories. Russian news channel RT today pays the price, with a number of countries deciding to ban it. US social networks followed suit, deleting or restricting media they consider suspicious and tagging content they do not remove. In a new report made public on April 7, 2022⁶, Meta (Facebook's parent company), announced the dismantling of a group of hackers who were trying to spread false messages of surrender from Ukrainian soldiers.

BATTLE OF PERCEPTION

Globally, the Russian campaign, and perhaps this is the main novelty, permeated the information ecosystem to the point of spreading virally. Putin seeks to rally segments of opinion that for any number of reasons is dissatisfied with the prevailing world order. Incidentally, in some parts of the world the war in Ukraine seems justified and not only in countries friendly to Russia. While upset by the ensuing human tragedy, parts of Southern populations identify with what resembles widespread resentment of the West and its media, which are accused of asymmetrical treatment of conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Iraq. Russian military casualty figures (nearly 10,000 dead, making it one of the heaviest losses for Moscow since the Afghan campaign) communicated by Kremlin spokesman in an interview on LCI on 6 April⁷ stem from similar motivations: win the perception battle among international opinion by humanizing the assailant, and therefore rendering him/her fallible and vulnerable.

While Moscow censored independent local media, state-owned media and the government still have accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (although access to these accounts in Europe and Ukraine is restricted). Similarly, to sanction Google for what it considers to be anti-Russian campaigns on YouTube, Moscow recently banned Google from charging for advertising, but stopped short of blocking the video streaming platform. The Kremlin thus continues to fight for global public opinion.

UKRAINE BETWEEN NARRATIVE CONTROL AND AGILE COMMUNICATION

In asymmetrical conflict situations, information provides valuable avenues for disrupting the balance of power. Incapable of competing militarily with Russia, Ukraine, in a David versus Goliath attitude, seeks to surf on this premise through narrative control and agile communication strategies. The objective is to rally international support to the cause of the weakest, as well as protect the morale of citizens and troops. The effectiveness of resistance depends on military resilience, and on the psychological state of Ukrainians.

6. Meta's Adversarial Threat Report, First Quarter 2022. <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/04/metad-adversarial-threat-report-q1-2022/>

7. <https://www.tf1info.fr/international/replay-l-entretien-exclusif-de-dmitri-peskov-porte-parole-de-vladimir-poutine-guerre-ukraine-russie-2215751.html>

Ukraine sought to play on the concept of imagefare from the outset, using images as a guiding principle or substitute for traditional military means to attain political goals by capitalizing on the proximity of political culture, and culture in general, with the West. This tactic, popularized by Ahed Tamim, the young Palestinian girl who stood up to Tsahal in a war of images on social networks, creates interpretative frameworks favorable to those using it. Ukrainian rhetoric places great emphasis on cultural and ideological convergences with its international audience. The strategy is partially carried by President Zelensky, a brilliant speaker, also very comfortable with digital tools and fully aware of the advantages, in our times of mobile everywhere, of capitalizing on information in mood scrolling, i.e., the tendency to scroll the screen of one's smartphone in an almost addictive way. This calls for audiovisual content above all.

Ukrainian population also feeds the narrative strength through social networks. On this site, a Ukrainian tank, outnumbered, is filmed valiantly holding off several Russian tanks. Other sites show ordinary everyday scenes, yet extremely effective ones in influencing communication, owing to their strong emotional charge. Examples include a Kiev Zoo manager sharing his distress, caught in a Russian-controlled area and unable to feed his animals, as they die day after day. Elsewhere, the stories of sportsmen, footballers, rugby players, biathletes, dying in combat because they would not leave the front. The interpretative scope of this type of media representation captures significant projection/identification effects with target audiences.

Nevertheless, in a process most visible in the daily publication of videos on social networks, or in speeches to various parliamentary assemblies around the world, the track record of Ukraine's president is far from flawless. Zelensky's analogy with the Holocaust in his speech to the Knesset on March 20 caused controversy, including in Israel.

MEDIA FRAMING

The second perspective examines media roles in crisis coverage both in cycle and in content. First, it is essential to contextualize the multiple facets of media identity in times of upheaval, and involving alternative forms of information production (citizens, bloggers, NGOs, communities...). These question the rules of the game not only in traditional media ecosystems (print and broadcast), but also in state and military control over information flows. As the news landscape becomes more fragmented, and more hybrid, to borrow Chadwick's (2017)⁸ conceptualization in a scramble between old and new media, it is difficult to identify standardized patterns capable of facilitating the understanding of media representations in conflict. For the sake of consistency, we limit the present analysis to mass media behavior. Using the Bloch-Elkon model⁹ employed in recent years for coverage of international crises, the Ukraine crisis media cycle can be divided into four phases: start - escalation - de-escalation - impact. Media coverage intensity currently seems to be at its peak, i.e., phase 2 (escalation), where the toll of war is heaviest.

Over the course of the crisis, topics covered by the media combine classic war reports¹⁰ and analyses that fuel public debate on humanitarian issues, security, the new world order

8. Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.

9. Bloch-Elkon, Y. (2007). Studying the media, public opinion, and foreign policy in international crises: The United States and the Bosnian crisis, 1992—1995. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 12(4), 20-51.

10. Continuous war coverage (better known as rolling news) is no longer the preserve of the mainstream media. In an unprecedented initiative, volunteer editors documented Russia's invasion on Wikipedia as it unfolded, even if this meant moving away from the free encyclopedia's original scope.

and, for European media, the macroeconomic impact of the war, notably energy supply and inflationary risk. Delimiting the scope of subjects covered should not preclude the question of what influence specifically means in the media context. Mass media in fact use framing processes that imply selecting what is considered relevant and trigger certain interpretations by emphasizing specific aspects of a subject exclusively- a phenomenon termed "salience" in information sciences. Studying media strategy, as framing implies, requires distancing oneself from it. To begin with, it is useful to consider the twofold nature of media actors as both democratic institutions and commercial enterprises (at least when subscribing to the liberal acceptance of the media construct). Beyond internal drivers of journalistic practice, norms and media organizations, there also are external determinants of historical, political, economic and societal landscapes where media operate and, where understanding of the sources of influence on the media agenda remains elusive. Still, it is important to ascertain that such frameworks do not oversimplify or misrepresent. The risk of distortion in similar situations, i.e., in times of war, is well documented: the media sometimes lead conflict coverage according to proximity of political culture between their country and that of the warring parties.

RULES OF OBJECTIVITY

In fact, regardless of the impossibility of logistically covering the conflict from a Russian perspective, given the restrictions on information imposed by Moscow, some of the media treatment took considerable liberties with the standard rules of objectivity, reinforcing a view held by parts of the Anglo-Saxon mass media that associates war reporting with a "moral enterprise". This view, defended in particular by a number of star TV presenters including CNN's Christine Amanpour, considers that, because they do not stand apart from the world, journalists should discriminate between good and evil in their coverage of conflicts, and possibly pass judgement on acts they consider reprehensible¹¹. Some media postures have gone as far as to call for a "moral" approach to war reporting. Others have gone even further, resorting to excessively Eurocentric interpretations of the war, to the point of caricature, as in the case of an editorial writer who defended (before later qualifying his statement, unprepared for the outcry) the call to take-in Ukrainian refugees, not on humanitarian grounds, but rather on the grounds that they were "culturally European". With no attempt to standardize determinants of media representation, the perception of Russia is handicapped from the outset in what resembles racial profiling. Analyzing the editorials of three US newspapers (New York Times, Wall Street journal, Washington post) on Russian domestic politics between 2008 and 2014, Tsygankov (2017)¹² notes that media frameworks carry above all the image of a backward and autocratic Russia. The more neutral and positive angles of progress or difficulties encountered in development are almost never covered. Clearly, Russia still is used as the perfect counter-example to the ideal political model and is denied the right to be different.

11. Harris, J., & Williams, K. (2018). Reporting war and conflict. Routledge.

12. Tsygankov, A. P. (2017). The dark double: The American media perception of Russia as a neo-Soviet autocracy, 2008–2014. *Politics*, 37(1), 19-35.

CONCLUSION

In times of war, comparative advantages also depend on information flows. The Russia-Ukraine conflict is a perfect illustration of this. It provides the opportunity to revisit interpretation processes that feed on both shifts in the media ecosystem and on the specificity of current global crises, most of which are asymmetrical. Ukraine's strategy is supported by a narrative communication process that puts an emphasis on storytelling. At a military disadvantage, Ukraine exhibits aggressiveness, indeed vitality, that is surprising. Insofar as it rallied large parts of international public opinion, now won over to its cause. One thing is certain: for Ukraine, the outcome is overwhelmingly positive. Despite not having the agility of Ukraine's approach, Russia's strategy is not any less elaborate. Recognizing past mistakes, Moscow continues to experiment seeking the optimum dosage of communication to frame conflict coverage, as well as consolidate its power internally vis-à-vis its own population. But despite efforts to improve what might be considered the Achilles heel of its arsenal, Moscow clearly struggles to tip the information war in its favor.

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About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South: A public good for strengthening public policy. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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