

## Ukraine's Strategic Communication Against the Russian Disinformation

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### Introduction

On February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion against Ukraine, perhaps only a few could have imagined that Ukraine would be able to deter this aggression and later initiate its own counter-offensive to liberate the Russia-occupied regions. Such a scenario was indeed unrealistic for an outside observer and had many reasons. First of all, it was based on the experience of 2014 when Ukraine failed to respond to Russia's annexation of Crimea and virtually ceded it without a fight. In addition, it was assumed that a country facing numerous challenges (prolonged hostilities against Russia in the eastern regions, corruption, the influence of oligarchs, society's critical attitude towards the government, etc.) would not be able to deter Russia's full-scale aggression. However, against all negative expectations, Ukraine managed to do just that.

The reasons that led to the failure of Russia's plan of occupation (which at the very least envisioned the replacement of Ukraine's legitimate authorities and the installation of a puppet regime) are the subject of in-depth analysis and multi-layered research. However, it is evident that the majority of Ukraine's population supported the decision to fight against the occupation regime. This overwhelming consensus, particularly in light of society's unimpressive level of trust in the government of Ukraine (NDI survey – December 1, 2021, to January 10, 2022<sup>2</sup>), must have had its own preconditions. Most importantly, it should be noted that Ukraine is waging a defensive war and fighting against an absolutely unprovoked invasion. Certainly, morale to fight and resist is very high in such a situation. However, it should also be taken into account that since 2014, Russia has carried out robust disinformation attacks against Ukraine's population to disorganize, confuse, and intimidate them.<sup>3</sup> But as the dynamics of the war and the unity of Ukraine's society have shown, Moscow failed to achieve this goal as well. According to public opinion polls conducted at different times, the vast majority of Ukraine's population was well-aware of military and

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<sup>2</sup> National Democratic Institute (NDI). (2022). *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition*. Via link: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/December%202021%20Public%20ENG%20fin.pdf> (27.09.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Snegovaya, M. (2015). *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine – Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*. Institute for the Study of the War (ISW). Via link: <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf> (27.09.2023).

disinformation threats coming from Russia. Even before the outbreak of the war, some 74% of polled Ukrainians stated that Russian military aggression was the biggest threat to them, while 77% considered Russian disinformation and propaganda to be a significant or moderate threat.<sup>4</sup>

After February 2022, as anticipated, negative attitudes towards Russia skyrocketed. According to the Chicago University survey carried out in June 2022, 97% of those polled in Ukraine named Russia as the biggest threat.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, despite the heavy consequences of the war, 87% of Ukrainians expressed unprecedented optimism regarding Ukraine's future.<sup>6</sup> It is possible to say that this reflects attitudes that are the opposite of what Russian propaganda intended to achieve.

Following the success achieved in Crimea in 2014, the Russian propaganda machine has encountered new challenges, such as the substantiation of the "Novorossiya" concept, based on entirely false facts. This false historical narrative aimed to portray Ukraine's southeastern regions as historic Russian territory. According to relatively reliable polls conducted in these regions in 2014, the "Novorossiya" project was supported by 20-25% of the population in Odessa, Mikolaiyv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions. However, this support gradually dissipated over time.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the reasons that Putin cited in February 2022, just before ordering his armies into Ukraine, such as labeling Ukraine's government as "fascist" and accusing the Ukrainian people of carrying out "genocide," as well as the historical myth that "Ukraine has never been a country" and was "created by Russia,"<sup>8</sup> were not believed, not only by Ukraine's Russian-speaking population but also by Russian nationals.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Putin's Russia's aggression clearly revealed the reality and threats to Ukraine's population, as well as to the entire civilized world. Therefore, it can be said that this factor

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<sup>4</sup> National Democratic Institute (NDI). (2022). *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition*. Via link: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/December%202021%20Public%20ENG%20fin.pdf> (27.09.2023).

<sup>5</sup> NORC at the University of Chicago. (2022). *WSJ/NORC Ukraine Poll June 2022*. Via link: [https://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/WSJ\\_NORC\\_Ukraine\\_Poll\\_June\\_2022.pdf](https://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/WSJ_NORC_Ukraine_Poll_June_2022.pdf) (27.09.2023).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2022). *Russia's War on Ukraine: Six Months of Lies, Implemented*. Via link: <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-war-on-ukraine-six-months-of-lies-implemented/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Roozenbeek, Jon. *The failure of Russian propaganda*. University of Cambridge. Via link: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/donbaspropaganda> (27.09.2023).

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2022). *Russia's War on Ukraine: Six Months of Lies, Implemented*. Via link: <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-war-on-ukraine-six-months-of-lies-implemented/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Realpolitika. (4 May 2022). The Kremlin will no longer use "denazification" since Russian's do not understand the word. Via link: [https://realpolitika.ge/ge/akhali-ambebi/kremls-propagandidan-denatsifikatsiis-amogheba-surs-radgan-rusebs-sityvis-mnishvneloba-ar-esmit?fbclid=IwAR1G\\_XVXye4STc-9JamV\\_B6OIHyL9kYWt0pzreDJ1UZ\\_nZ7ynJSn7fXr8OU](https://realpolitika.ge/ge/akhali-ambebi/kremls-propagandidan-denatsifikatsiis-amogheba-surs-radgan-rusebs-sityvis-mnishvneloba-ar-esmit?fbclid=IwAR1G_XVXye4STc-9JamV_B6OIHyL9kYWt0pzreDJ1UZ_nZ7ynJSn7fXr8OU) (27.09.2023).

granted Ukraine a significant advantage in the information arena right from the beginning. However, given the intensity of Russian propaganda, this alone would not have been sufficient. Currently, after a year and a half since the outbreak of the war, scholars in politics and mass communications agree that in this conflict, which was dubbed the "TikTok war,"<sup>10</sup> success would have been impossible without Ukraine's well-calibrated strategic communication.

The aim of this paper is to address the question of how Ukraine and its government successfully countered years of disinformation from Russia, disseminated accurate and alternative messages among their own population, and neutralized Russia's propaganda efforts. Clearly, this is a highly complex issue with multiple components. Our primary focus is on the strategic communication efforts of the Ukrainian government, the effective delivery of messages to both domestic and international audiences, and the practices of collaboration with media and civil sectors in this process. These aspects should be discussed not only within the context of the ongoing conflict but also in the period leading up to it. Specifically, we will examine the steps taken over the years to strengthen the country's strategic communications, which have been a primary target for Russia's information and cyberattacks since 2014.

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<sup>10</sup> Chayka, K. (March 3, 2022). *Watching the World's "First TikTok War"*. The New Yorker. Via link: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war> (27.09.2023).

<sup>11</sup> Sukhankin, S. (2017). *Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine: A Breakthrough or the Veneer of Change?* Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 14 Issue: 33. Via link: <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-information-security-doctrine-breakthrough-veneer-change/> (27.09.2023).

## Bolstering Ukraine's Counter-Disinformation Capacity in 2014-2022

In accordance with conceptualization, provided by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom),<sup>12</sup> scholars (Ekman and Nilsson, 2023) define strategic communication as coordinated and purposeful communications by a state or an organisation, based on public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, information operations, and/or psychological operations.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Ukraine, which began working on an information security framework based on NATO's concept in 2015, a major emphasis has been placed on coordinating, integrating, and synchronizing government structures and civil society. The objective is to draft and disseminate messages that embody a shared ethos, align with national values, and are tailored to different target audiences.<sup>14</sup> This complex concept is more clearly explained by the clarification of Barbora Maronkova, Head of NATO Information Centre in Ukraine which she used in her interview with Ukrinform in 2018: "Strategic communications sound difficult, but it is elementary. It is all about coordinating positions and being able to speak in one voice."<sup>15</sup>

Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine, approved by President Poroshenko in 2017, outlines the key perspectives on strengthening Ukraine in the information domain, including strategic communications.<sup>16</sup> It's worth noting that adding relevant sections to different strategic documents is one thing, but another crucial aspect is how they are enforced. Therefore, it is important to analyze how Ukraine successfully implemented the aforementioned communication strategies in practice. This will provide a clearer illustration of the essence of strategic communications and their significance in both everyday situations and times of crisis.

When discussing strategic communications, it's important to highlight a fundamental component - the need for comprehensive planning. It can be said that until 2014, particularly during the rule of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, no substantial steps were taken in that direction. According to Torichnyi et al., Ukraine only had a working version of a cybersecurity strategy in 2014, while Ukraine's

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<sup>12</sup> NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. *About Strategic Communications*. Via link: [https://stratcomcoe.org/about\\_us/about-strategic-communications/1](https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-strategic-communications/1) (27.09.2023).

<sup>13</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI". (2019). *Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO cooperation under the present conditions*. Via link: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analitika/analitichna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobotnytva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-in-eng> (27.09.2023).

<sup>16</sup> УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №47/2017. Via link: <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374> (27.09.2023).

Information Security Doctrine, adopted in 2009 by decree of the President of Ukraine, was outdated, and the probability of waging information warfare against Ukraine was not properly evaluated. Consequently, there were no mechanisms in place to respond to threats or readiness to counter them. In this light, during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russia conducted a massive information and psychological operation aimed at demoralizing the local population. They utilized local formal and informal leaders to promote the Russian narrative, manipulated media coverage of events, cultivated pro-Russian sentiments among the populace, and made false promises of a common "happy future."<sup>17</sup>

Russia's annexation of the Crimea Peninsula highlighted the weaknesses of the Ukrainian state and the necessity to address these shortcomings. Since 2014, the situation has gradually started to change. Naturally, it was the military that was unprepared to deter Russian aggression to become the first subject of reform.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, the importance of strategic communications as one of the counter-measures for hybrid threats was recognized, and relevant steps were taken to improve this field or establish it from scratch. First and foremost, Ukraine introduced the concept of strategic communication into legislation, which was incorporated into Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine with proper explanation. The doctrine also provided a detailed overview of various threats emanating from Russia, including information operations aimed at degrading Ukraine's defense capabilities and destabilizing the socio-political or socio-economic situation. It also covered operations conducted worldwide to damage Ukraine's image, the expansion of the aggressor country's information infrastructure in Ukraine, the aggressor state's information dominance in temporarily occupied territories, the dissemination of calls for radical actions, and support for isolationist and separatist concepts of regional co-existence within Ukraine. At that time, the list of threats also included problematic issues for Ukraine's information security field, such as the inefficiency of the state's information policy and the underdevelopment of Ukraine's national information infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Torichnyi, V. et al. (2021). *Information and Propaganda Component of the Russian Federation Hybrid Aggression: Conclusions for Developed Democratic Countries on the Experience of Ukraine*. TRAMES, 25(75/70), 3, 355–368. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2021.3.06>

<sup>18</sup> Zagorodnyuk, A. et al. (2021). *Is Ukraine's reformed military ready to repel a new Russian invasion?* Atlantic Council. Via link: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-ukraines-reformed-military-ready-to-repel-a-new-russian-invasion/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>19</sup> Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI". (2019). *Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO cooperation under the present conditions*. Via link: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analitika/analitchna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobitnytva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-in-eng> (27.09.2023).

These steps were followed by the addition of relevant mechanisms to the doctrine aimed at countering Russia's hybrid warfare and other information threats. The key features of these mechanisms are as follows: Coordination between different branches of government; Monitoring through mass communications to identify threats; Cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure Ukraine is portrayed accurately in foreign media; Coordination of effective communication at both the government and local levels; Drafting and promoting national strategic narratives during crisis situations; Planning and utilizing communication strategies related to the occupied territories; Collaborating with different ministries and developing strategic narratives based on their profiles.

At both theoretical and practical levels, particular attention was given to the fight against disinformation, involving the scrutiny and response to the main messages of Russian propaganda. In 2021, a relevant service was established - the Center for Countering Disinformation.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, the Strategic Communication and Information Security Centre<sup>21</sup> was created within the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, primarily focusing on cooperation with civil and international communities. This collaboration includes organizations such as StopFake, VoxCheck, the Regional Press Development Institute, Ukraine's Crisis Media Centre, Open Information Partnership, Internews Ukraine, DFRLab, and the EU representation in Ukraine, among others. At the same time, in contrast to the Center for Countering Disinformation, the Strategic Communication and Information Security Centre is more focused on developing what are known as alternative narratives and on the study and promotion of Ukraine's history.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, since 2019, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been presenting evidence of Russian aggression, supported by relevant sources on their website. The same website also includes a separate section dedicated to the Russian occupation.<sup>23</sup>

However, for years, before these institutions were established, Ukraine sought to organize its own strategic communication with the assistance of Western partners in countering Russian propaganda. Cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the fight against disinformation and propaganda deserves

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<sup>20</sup> Center for Countering Disinformation. Via link: <https://cpd.gov.ua/en/golovna-storinka-czentr-protydiyi-dezinformaciyi-pry-rnbo-english/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>21</sup> Center for Strategic Communication. Via link: <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>22</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. (December 19, 2019). *10 facts you should know about russian military aggression against Ukraine*. Via link: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/10-facts-you-should-know-about-russian-military-aggression-against-ukraine> (27.09.2023).

special mention. In particular, in 2017, the EU's East Stratcom Task Force<sup>24</sup> created an informal working group with the Ukrainian government to assist in defining strategic communications and supporting Ukrainian media. Furthermore, to address Ukraine's communication challenges, several projects were implemented under the EU's auspices, including the "EU Mythbusters Twitter Feed," "Disinformation Review," and the "Center for the Exchange of News in the Russian Language in Prague," where journalists from different countries publish their work in Russian and collaborate to investigate disinformation and share their findings. Furthermore, EU's representation in Ukraine is focused on dissemination of correct, fact-based information about the EU, effective communication with civil society and bolstering media freedom.<sup>25</sup>

For many years, particularly since 2015, Ukraine has actively cooperated with NATO in the field of strategic communications. NATO assists both government agencies and civil society organizations while actively supporting the implementation of the strategic communication partnership roadmap between Ukraine and NATO. Ukraine also collaborates with the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, based in Riga, Latvia.<sup>26</sup> NATO's cooperation with Ukraine aims to develop a culture of strategic communications, support effective and transparent government communications, and enhance trust in government institutions, especially in the fields of security and defense. Additionally, the collaboration between Ukraine and NATO in strategic communications includes training sessions, seminars, information visits abroad, and more. Thousands of personnel from the defense and security fields attend these educational programs every year. NATO-Ukraine cooperation also involves consultative support in the drafting of major policy documents for strategic communications.<sup>27</sup>

According to multiple research studies, apart from official efforts, civil society and the media have made significant contributions to the development of Ukraine's strategic communications. This achievement was primarily made possible through close and effective cooperation between government

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<sup>24</sup> East StratCom Task Force – A team of experts assembled by the EU which brings together mostly specialists of communication, journalism, social science and Russian Studies. It aims to fight Russian and not only Russian) disinformation. Via link: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI". (2019). *Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO cooperation under the present conditions*. Via link: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analitika/analitichna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobitnytva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-in-eng> (27.09.2023).

<sup>26</sup> NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Via link: <https://stratcomcoe.org/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>27</sup> Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI". (2019). *Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO cooperation under the present conditions*. Via link: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analitika/analitichna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobitnytva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-in-eng> (27.09.2023).



agencies and the civil sector. Organizations such as StopFake (a website that verifies Russian fake news), The Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group at the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (which studies Russian disinformation tactics), Detector Media (which monitors Russian disinformation content and has an annual readership of 4.2 million), and Texty.org.ua (which fights Russian disinformation using the latest tools of data journalism) have actively collaborated with Ukrainian authorities in the fight against Russian propaganda.<sup>28</sup> These organizations bring years of experience, independence, and a variety of tactics to combat disinformation, adding credibility and flexibility to Ukraine's strategic communications.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, cooperation among civil society organizations has proven to be crucial, as it has led to the establishment of a common counter-disinformation network. This network ensures the speed and efficiency necessary to counter the Kremlin's disinformation efforts effectively.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, it is evident that Ukraine's civil society has been playing a crucial role in the field of communications since 2014. Moreover, it has frequently responded to challenges that, in other countries, typically fall within the purview of government bodies.<sup>31</sup> According to Jakub Kalensky of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “the work of civil society between 2014 and 2022 paid significant dividends in many ways, including how it inspired governments in Ukraine and around the region to ramp up their research and efforts to counter Russian narratives about the war.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, the significant contribution of the NGO sector to increasing Ukrainian society's awareness of Russian propaganda over the years cannot be overstated.

As mentioned earlier, the contribution of the media in spreading awareness about the false narratives of the Kremlin was crucial. However, within the context of the media, it's noteworthy to discuss the stance of the Ukrainian authorities, who believed that the efforts of certain media outlets in countering Kremlin's disinformation were inadequate. They felt that more drastic measures were

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<sup>28</sup> Petrenko, G. (February 24, 2023). *How Ukraine is beating Russia's disinformation campaigns*. Rest of World. Via link: <https://restofworld.org/2023/how-ukraine-is-beating-russias-disinformation-campaigns/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>29</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>30</sup> Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). *Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Via link: [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf) (27.09.2023).

<sup>31</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>32</sup> Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). *Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Page 6. Via link: [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf) (27.09.2023).



necessary to contain the Kremlin's propaganda. Specifically, Ukraine banned the broadcast of Russian TV channels in 2014, in 2016, several Russian journalists were prohibited from entering Ukraine and in 2017, popular Russian social networks, including VK, the most popular social network in Ukraine, were blocked. In addition to targeting Russian media, platforms, and journalists, in February 2021, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government shut down three Ukrainian TV channels - ZIK, NewsOne, and 112 - which were connected to the Kremlin through Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk.<sup>33</sup> This move prompted a strong reaction from the Kremlin, while European leaders criticized President Zelenskyy for infringing on freedom of speech. In response to the criticism, Zelenskyy stated: "I believe these TV channels have killed a lot of people... Not directly but through the means of information."<sup>34</sup> This decision by the Ukrainian government was indeed controversial in terms of freedom of speech and expression. However, it is possible to argue that after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this approach gained further legitimacy, which was reflected in subsequent actions. In particular, the EU blocked the major mouthpieces of Russian propaganda, RT and Sputnik,<sup>35</sup> and they were subsequently blocked on the internet by Google.<sup>36</sup>

As a result, through the analysis of various studies and practical experiences, it becomes evident that long-term and coordinated efforts in countering disinformation, especially Kremlin propaganda, are indispensable. After 2014, thanks to the joint and years-long endeavors of both the government and civil organizations, the false Russian narrative was minimized.<sup>37</sup> Ukraine succeeded in engaging not only the state in digital information initiatives but also non-state actors, including NGOs and ordinary citizens. Consequently, during Russia's full-scale aggression, the majority of Ukrainians were well-prepared to recognize and resist Russia's manipulative messages.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Shuster, S. (June 22, 2023). *Inside Zelensky's Plan to Beat Putin's Propaganda in Russian-Occupied Ukraine*. TIME. Via link: <https://time.com/6288904/ukraine-russia-propaganda-counteroffensive-zelensky/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>35</sup> Council of the European Union. (March 2, 2022). *EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU*. Via link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>36</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (March 1, 2022). *Google Blocks RT, Sputnik YouTube Channels In Europe As EU Readies Sanctions Against The Media Outlets*. Via link: <https://www.rferl.org/a/rt-sputnik-google-youtube-blocking/31729860.html> (27.09.2023).

<sup>37</sup> Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). *Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Via link: [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf) (27.09.2023).

<sup>38</sup> NASTASIA, S., & GEORGE, A. M. (2023). *Communication Lessons from the Ukraine War: The Strategies, Narratives, and Implications of the Information Warfare*. ESSACHESS. <https://doi.org/10.21409/C6VV-BT86>

### Ukraine's Strategic Communication After 24 February 2022

Ukraine appeared to be well-prepared in many respects, including fight along information frontlines, for Russia's full-scale invasion. The system that has been established through years, bringing government and civil society sectors together, used available resources as efficiently as possible and succeeded in mobilizing local and international community. According to one of the officials from Ukraine's Strategic Communication office when full-scale war started, "beehive" of the communication services was ready to get into work. Of further note is that communication strategy, approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021 which included specific coordinated actions were based on four scenarios with varying difficulty – from Russia's information operations to full-scale military aggression. On 24 February 2022 these communication activities started in line with the worst-case scenario. However, it should also be added that despite readiness, it is only natural that calculation of all steps for such type of crisis is impossible. Therefore, chaos was noticeable across structures responsible for strategic communications. In this situation, civil society organizations played decisive role in accomplishing such tasks for which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no sufficient resource.

Ukraine appeared to be well-prepared in many respects, including its fight on the information frontlines, in anticipation of Russia's full-scale invasion. The system that had been established over the years, bringing together government and civil society sectors, efficiently utilized available resources and successfully mobilized the local and international community. According to an official from Ukraine's Strategic Communication office, when the full-scale war began, the "beehive" of communication services was ready to spring into action.<sup>39</sup> It's worth noting that the communication strategy, approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021, included specific coordinated actions based on four scenarios of varying difficulty, ranging from Russia's information operations to full-scale military aggression. On February 24, 2022, these communication activities were set in motion in line with the worst-case scenario. However, it should also be acknowledged that despite their readiness, it is only natural that the planning of all steps for such a crisis is impossible. Therefore, some degree of chaos was noticeable across the structures responsible for strategic communications. In this situation, civil society organizations played a decisive role in accomplishing tasks for which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs lacked sufficient resources.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Page 9. Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Page 26.

In the chaos that ensued in the first hours of the war, President Zelenskyy and his government's communication with the public proved to be of vital importance. Amidst rumors that leaders of the Ukrainian government had left the country immediately after the invasion, Zelenskyy recorded a video with members of his administration in the streets of Kyiv. In the video, he wore khaki to signify that he is the President of a country at war and is not going to leave the capital. It is widely believed that this message from the President restored people's faith in the government and contributed to his stronger authority as a leader in the international community.<sup>41</sup>

Ekman and Nilsson (2023) outline three main factors in their research that characterized Ukraine's strategic communication from the beginning of the full-scale war: coordination, the creation of major narratives, and the style of communication. In terms of coordination, Ukraine's strategic communication was distinguished by the "one voice" approach, where the main communication messages were homogeneous. Communication was channeled from the government to various levels of government. During this process, certain components were either added or removed from the messages, which were then bolstered and tailored to different audiences based on their needs. It's important to note that this approach did not require someone to blindly parrot the government's messages but resembled more of a polyphonic music, where the leading voice was augmented by other colorful voices.<sup>42</sup> The second aspect, narrative, was based on shaping messages in a way that demonstrated Ukraine's moral superiority over Russia and the audacity of Ukrainians on the battlefield as much as possible. It also aimed to portray Russia as a terrorist state that kept the number of casualties in secret and only spoke about Russian losses (while Ukraine published relevant statistics every day). The narrative constantly reiterated that Russians could not defeat motivated Ukrainians and that they were sensibly dying on Ukrainian soil, etc. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, Ukraine showcased many heroic individuals, such as the Ukrainian elderly lady who hosted the occupiers with poisoned food, the mysterious sniper woman known as "Charcoal," the guardians of Snake Island, the pilot known as the "Ghost of Kyiv," and many others who heroically fought against vehicles marked with the Z sign and occupier troops, often referred to as "Russian orcs."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Guillot, N. *8 Lessons in Communications Strategy: Learning from Volodymyr Zelenskyy*. CISION. Via link: <https://www.cision.com/resources/articles/lessons-in-communications-strategy-from-zelenskyy/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>42</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>43</sup> Goudsouzian, T. (October 23, 2022). *How Ukraine Won the Information War*. The National Interest. Via link: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-ukraine-won-information-war-205428> (27.09.2023).

The main narratives of Ukraine's communication were naturally based on the analysis of Russian information operations, which had been carried out before and gained even more intensity from February 24th. Throughout 2022, the Strategic Communication and Information Security Centre published over 200 analytical articles in both English and Ukrainian languages. Additionally, the Centre launched a digital platform for Ukrainian nationals called "Dovidka Info."<sup>44</sup> This platform includes information in the form of a website, roadmaps, and chatbots on how the civilian population should behave during times of crisis and war.<sup>45</sup> The latter, apart from providing necessary information, also instills a sense of solidarity among Ukrainian nationals that they are not alone in the face of danger.

According to the aforementioned research by Ekman and Nilsson (2023), the third aspect of communication by the Ukrainian government is the style of communication. This style is well-calibrated, designed, and employs various techniques necessary to capture the attention of different audiences in today's information environment. These techniques include humor, sarcasm, bullying, and even trolling, often disguised in the form of "memes." Additionally, the research clearly demonstrated the importance of not only reactive but also proactive communication in the battle against Russian disinformation and countering the Russian version of "reality" in this manner.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to these factors, scholars also emphasize the importance of using new technologies in Ukraine's communication strategy, particularly social networks and the creative dissemination of high-quality content through them. In today's information-rich environment, low-quality content simply cannot compete. Therefore, Ukraine faced the challenge of creating high-quality content to gain an advantage over Russian communication sources on social media, and it can be said that Ukraine succeeded in doing so.<sup>47</sup> In this context, it's worth mentioning the "online elves," a group comprised of volunteers (the exact number of which is unknown) known as The North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO).<sup>48</sup> NAFO is dedicated to mocking Russia's propaganda and raising awareness about Russian crimes committed in Ukraine. Geared towards a Western audience, NAFO produces and shares English-language content with audiences in the USA, Europe, and other regions. NAFO plays a crucial role in what is referred to as "cognitive

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<sup>44</sup> Via link: <https://dovidka.info/en/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>45</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> The North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO). <https://nafo-ofan.org/>

warfare"<sup>49</sup> against Russia, employing techniques like memes, jokes, and other creative methods.<sup>50</sup> As a result, social media has become a major tool for Ukraine to disseminate and receive textual and visual information in real-time, document Russian aggression, and mobilize international empathy and support.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, Ukrainian analysts specializing in disinformation leveraged artificial intelligence to promptly identify Russian narratives and develop effective responses to neutralize them. By simplifying the analysis of disinformation sources' behavior, artificial intelligence tools empowered counter-disinformation experts to anticipate Russia's future campaigns.<sup>52</sup> This effort received substantial support from Western allies, in contrast to the situation in 2014. Ukraine's strategic and proactive communication efforts were bolstered by extensive open-source intelligence assistance and support from relevant agencies in both the USA and Europe for identifying Russia's so-called "false flag" operations.<sup>53</sup>

From the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, Mykhaylo Fedorov, launched a campaign for a "digital blockade" of Russia, urging brands to withdraw from Russia. This campaign turned out to be successful. Additionally, he played a key role in establishing Ukraine's IT army, a digital movement that comprises nearly 100,000 individuals, including Ukrainian and foreign experts in the information environment as well as hackers. Their primary objective is to wage a digital war against Russia, which includes tactics like cyber-attacks on Russian state media and various websites operated by the Kremlin.<sup>54</sup>

In the context of strategic communications, it's worth noting the Ukrainian government's communication efforts with regions that have been liberated from Russian occupation. It should be

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<sup>49</sup> NATO's Strategic Warfare Development Command. (April 5, 2023). *Cognitive Warfare: Strengthening and Defending the Mind*. Via link: <https://www.act.nato.int/article/cognitive-warfare-strengthening-and-defending-the-mind/> (04.10.2023).

<sup>50</sup> Romandash, A. (May 22, 2023). *Ukraine's IT Army: Digital Resistance to Russian Propaganda*. Peace Policy. Via link: [https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2023/05/22/ukraines-it-army-digital-resistance-to-russian-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR32QsfTAIL4kDYOvtCs3EYs3umBJc9hO3Rz4U9eE5\\_mEI5yoojLb\\_8HX\\_s](https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2023/05/22/ukraines-it-army-digital-resistance-to-russian-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR32QsfTAIL4kDYOvtCs3EYs3umBJc9hO3Rz4U9eE5_mEI5yoojLb_8HX_s) (04.10.2023).

<sup>51</sup> NASTASIA, S., & GEORGE, A. M. (2023). *Communication Lessons from the Ukraine War: The Strategies, Narratives, and Implications of the Information Warfare*. ESSACHESS. <https://doi.org/10.21409/C6VV-BT86>

<sup>52</sup> Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). *Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Via link: [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED\\_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf) (27.09.2023).

<sup>53</sup> Lopatto, L. (March 4, 2022). *The Limits of Putin's Propaganda*. Wilson Center. Via link: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/limits-putins-propaganda> (27.09.2023).

<sup>54</sup> Romandash, A. (May 22, 2023). *Ukraine's IT Army: Digital Resistance to Russian Propaganda*. Peace Policy. Via link: [https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2023/05/22/ukraines-it-army-digital-resistance-to-russian-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR32QsfTAIL4kDYOvtCs3EYs3umBJc9hO3Rz4U9eE5\\_mEI5yoojLb\\_8HX\\_s](https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2023/05/22/ukraines-it-army-digital-resistance-to-russian-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR32QsfTAIL4kDYOvtCs3EYs3umBJc9hO3Rz4U9eE5_mEI5yoojLb_8HX_s) (04.10.2023).

emphasized that as early as 2019, Ukraine and the President were actively working to convey accurate, counter-disinformation messages to the local population. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, himself a native Russian-speaker, spent most of his acting career performing in various concert halls across Russia and Ukraine. Many residents of Crimea and Donbass grew up watching his movies and TV shows, which earned him a great deal of trust among the locals. After winning the Presidential elections, Zelenskyy pledged to pay pensions to those living under Russian occupation and to simplify movement between Ukraine-controlled and occupied regions, allowing people to visit friends and family. He stated, "People should see that it is better here, and their mindset will gradually change... We have to take them back and fight for them."<sup>55</sup> Since autumn 2022, when Ukrainian troops began advancing in the Russia-occupied regions, Kyiv developed plans for the reintegration of people living there. Irina Vereshchuk, who leads the structure responsible for this process, mentioned that the authorities have started preparing a team consisting of public servants, teachers, and social workers who will be able to work there after the liberation of those regions.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the terminology used by the Ukrainian government to refer to the occupied territories is also significant. They introduced the term "temporarily occupied territories," sending a strong signal to both Ukrainian citizens and Russia that the liberation of these territories is only a matter of time. It's worth noting that Ukraine has successfully promoted this terminology not only locally but also on the international stage, with Ukraine's Western partners frequently using it.<sup>57</sup>

Before and after February 24, 2022, Ukraine's strategic communication services actively collaborated with NGOs and the media in the fight against Russian disinformation. Following the invasion, one of the most noteworthy developments is the joint broadcast of Ukraine's TV channels. The telethon known as "united news" disseminates breaking news from the frontlines, provides safety advice to the public, and reports on Ukraine's economic situation, among other things. In short, this project enables the Government of Ukraine to deliver its messages to the people promptly and effectively.<sup>58</sup> Naturally, such news broadcasts during peacetime might be seen as a threat to pluralism. However, during times of war, they serve as a demonstration of the country's unity. It's worth mentioning that in regions liberated by

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<sup>55</sup> Shuster, S. (June 22, 2023). *Inside Zelensky's Plan to Beat Putin's Propaganda in Russian-Occupied Ukraine*. TIME. Via link: <https://time.com/6288904/ukraine-russia-propaganda-counteroffensive-zelensky/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> EU Statement – UN General Assembly: The Situation in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine. (July 18, 2023). Via link: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-situation-temporarily-occupied-territories-ukraine\\_en?s=63](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-situation-temporarily-occupied-territories-ukraine_en?s=63) (02.10.2023).

<sup>58</sup> Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). *Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Via link: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE> (27.09.2023).

the Ukrainian military, one of the most immediate tasks for authorities is the restoration of TV towers to ensure that people have access to the "united news." On the contrary, the Russians are making every effort to hinder this process.<sup>59</sup>

As part of media coordination efforts, Ukraine's Ministry of Defense has engaged in noteworthy communication with journalists. On August 18, 2022, the MoD inaugurated a military media center. According to the center's description, it serves as a hub for news disseminated by Ukraine's defense and security forces and aims to facilitate coordinated communication with the proactive involvement of the media. This involves close cooperation with both Ukrainian and foreign media professionals through briefings, press conferences, and the utilization of other communication channels.<sup>60</sup>

When discussing Ukraine's success in information warfare against Russia, the so-called "leader's factor" deserves special mention. According to Ingenhoff & Klein (2018),<sup>61</sup> the perception of a leader greatly impacts a country's overall image in the international community. Additionally, Peña (2019)<sup>62</sup> delves into the personal qualities of modern leaders and their significance in governing a country. In this regard, a clear parallel can be drawn with Ukraine's leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Undoubtedly, there are numerous professionals supporting Zelenskyy, and no single individual would be able to contend with the Russian propaganda machine alone. However, Zelenskyy's personal qualities and public communication skills have made a significant contribution to the success achieved on the information battlefield. President Zelenskyy is capable of speaking in plain, understandable language and delivering convincing messages that establish strong emotional connections. Furthermore, he frequently reiterates his strategic messages to influence the audience. In contrast to his adversary, President Putin, President Zelenskyy has been "accessible" from the beginning of the war. For example, he appeared in videos from central Kyiv, held meetings with Ukrainian soldiers, and visited regions liberated from occupation. Moreover, particularly at the onset of the war, Zelenskyy was omnipresent in the online environment, posting on

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<sup>59</sup> Shuster, S. (June 22, 2023). *Inside Zelensky's Plan to Beat Putin's Propaganda in Russian-Occupied Ukraine*. TIME. Via link: <https://time.com/6288904/ukraine-russia-propaganda-counteroffensive-zelensky/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. (August 18, 2022). *Military Media Center began its work in Ukraine's defence sphere*. Via link: <https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2022/08/18/military-media-center-began-its-work-in-ukraines-defence-sphere/> (27.09.2023).

<sup>61</sup> Ingenhoff, D. & Klein, S. (2018). *A Political Leader's Image in Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: The Impact of Competence, Charisma, Integrity, and Gender*. International Journal of Communication 12(2018), 4507–4532. Via link: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/8186/2498> (02.20.2023).

<sup>62</sup> Peña, M. (2021). *A New Political Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. Via link: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/211208\\_Pena\\_Political\\_Leadership.pdf?VersionId=xlp15N8NKRATWHszlb9U4YNjsM006zPF](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/211208_Pena_Political_Leadership.pdf?VersionId=xlp15N8NKRATWHszlb9U4YNjsM006zPF) (02.10.2023).



YouTube and Twitter. He didn't just post in Ukrainian but also in English, Slovak, Polish, and Georgian languages to emphasize the importance of combating a common enemy. He delivered speeches in the U.S. Congress as well as in the UK and European parliaments.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

At this time, more than 1.5 years since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, scholars widely agree that Ukraine has won every battle against Russia in the information field. Several key factors contribute to this success. First and foremost, Ukraine's position as a victim of unprovoked aggression works in its favor. In simple terms, the truth is on Ukraine's side. However, this alone would not guarantee Ukraine's dominance in the information environment. Since 2014, Ukrainian authorities have been diligently developing strategic communication strategies with the active involvement of Western partners. Throughout this process, all government bodies, the NGO sector, media outlets, and civil society have worked in a coordinated manner. Therefore, Ukraine's efforts in the field of strategic communication over the years have been crucial in the face of Russia's unprecedented aggression. Additionally, the coordinated efforts of agencies responsible for strategic communications, following the so-called "one voice" policy, have played a significant role. It's worth noting the close, transparent, and trust-based cooperation between government agencies and the civil sector and media. These collaborations have been instrumental in uncovering and combatting Kremlin disinformation. To gain an advantage in information warfare against Russia, it was essential not only to be responsive but also to engage in proactive communication, overshadowing the adversary's narratives with Ukraine's own. Naturally, assistance from Ukraine's Western partners has made a substantial contribution to this process. Furthermore, Ukraine has effectively harnessed modern technologies, such as social media and the capacities of artificial intelligence. The effective use of these tools primarily implies speed and the production of high-quality content, making Ukraine's strategic messages more easily perceptible and attractive to both Ukrainian and international audiences. The success of Ukraine's strategic communications has also been greatly influenced by individuals who communicate effectively with the public, including President Zelenskyy and other officials. Ultimately, Ukraine has been able to assert control over the information environment, achieving success in information warfare against an aggressor country that was considered highly adept in this regard.

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<sup>63</sup> Guillot, N. *8 Lessons in Communications Strategy: Learning from Volodymyr Zelenskyy*. CISION.Via link: <https://www.cision.com/resources/articles/lessons-in-communications-strategy-from-zelenskyy/> (27.09.2023).