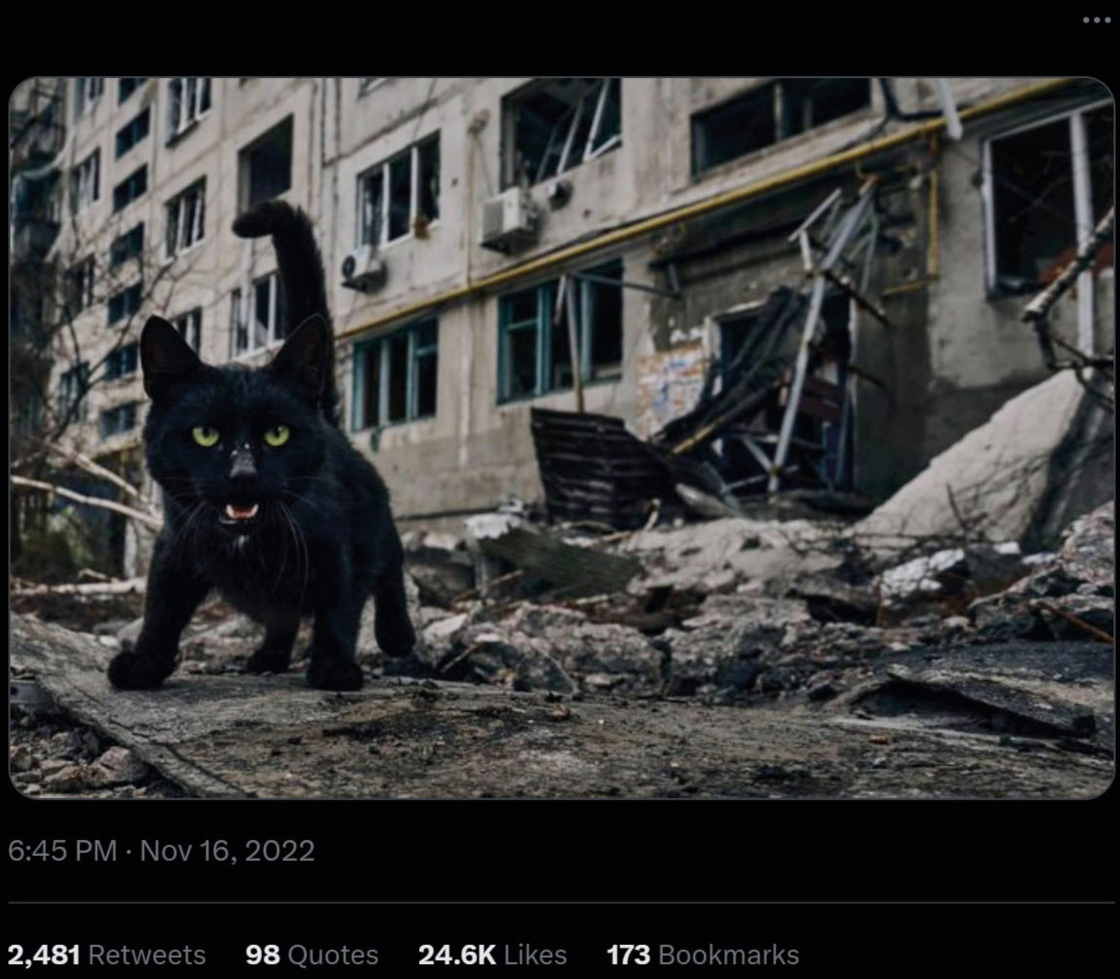

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Ukraine’s Information Front

Strategic Communication during Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson

FOI-R--5451--SE

April 2023

Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson

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Abstract

During the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022), the Ukrainian war effort superseded expectations. Meanwhile, expectations about Russian capabilities have fallen short. This is not least true in relation to the information front.

The invasion highlights the importance of strategic communication during full-scale war. Ukrainian strategic communication has been one of the more impressive efforts in this war. Against this background, the purpose of this report is to better understand the Ukrainian achievements on the information front.

The report presents an analysis of unique data based on interviews with practitioners and strategists in the Ukrainian communications effort. The interviews represent perspectives from both the civil and military sides of government, the news media, the private sector, and civil society.

The main conclusion of the report is that Ukrainian communications during the first year of the full-scale invasion is a whole-of-society endeavour, based on a strong sense of national unity and resilience that translates into a polyphonic, non-hierarchical, and creative strategic communication effort.

In terms of strategic communication in full-scale war, the Ukrainian experience is an inexhaustible source of lessons learned in relation to making the most of the preconditions, challenges, and success factors. This report is a first contribution in capturing the essence of the lessons that can be learned.

Keywords: information warfare, strategic communication, Ukraine, Russia

Sammanfattning

Under det första året av Rysslands fullskaliga invasion av Ukraina (24 februari, 2022) har Ukraina överraskat många analytiker och forskare. Den ukrainska försvarsviljan och militära förmågan har överträffat förväntningar. Samtidigt har uppskattningar om den ryska militära förmågan inte införlivats. Detta gäller inte minst i relation till informationsfronten.

Den fullskaliga invasionens första år visar inte bara på vikten av strategisk kommunikation under fullskaligt krig, utan på en imponerande ukrainsk förmåga som av allt att döma har varit en stor framgång. Mot denna bakgrund syftar rapporten till att förstå den ukrainska framgången på informationsfronten.

Rapporten bygger på unikt intervjumaterial med människorna bakom den ukrainska kommunikationsinsatsen. Eftersom det är en insats som rör hela samhället – en totalförsvarsinsats – representerar intervjuerna perspektiv från civila myndigheter, militären, nyhetsmedier och civilsamhället.

Rapportens huvudsakliga slutsats är att den ukrainsk kommunikation involverar hela samhället, och bygger på en stark försvarsvilja som översätts till en polyfon, icke-hierarkisk och kreativ strategisk kommunikationsapparat.

Den ukrainska kommunikationsinsatsen är en outtömlig källa för att dra lärdomar om förutsättningar, utmaningar och framgångsfaktorer för strategisk kommunikation under fullskaligt krig. Den här rapporten är ett första bidrag i den riktningen.

Nyckelord: informationskrig, strategisk kommunikation, Ukraina, Ryssland

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Preface

We, the authors, started the preparations for this report during the late summer of 2022. Given our previous work in strategic communication and information warfare, we were closely following these aspects in regard to the Russian buildup in late 2021, and the full-scale invasion, on 24 February 2022. When we were given the opportunity to do a more in-depth study, we decided to go behind the curated information streams of the digital and news media and acquire first-hand information of what we until then had been observing at a distance.

After two months of preparations, we set out to do fieldwork in Kyiv, to obtain a closer understanding of the Ukrainian struggle on the information front. We had booked interviews with a long list of actors within the whole of Ukrainian society. Unfortunately, shortly after we arrived in Kyiv, Russia started its strategic bombing campaign against civilian targets across Ukraine. While this gave us a first-hand glimpse of the life lived by millions of Ukrainians, it also meant we had to leave. The remainder of the interviews were carried out at a distance.

It is customary to thank the people who have contributed to finalising a work such as ours. In our case, we wish to extend an even more heartfelt thank you to all the Ukrainians who gave of their time as they endured blackouts, explosions and countless other hardships, in assisting us and answering our (sometimes trivial) questions.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the staff at the Swedish Embassy in Kyiv, to all the interested people who have given us feedback during our many lectures on our work, to our colleague Ismail Khan, and to Andrey Bovenko, who turned out to be a real lifesaver.

Finally, our colleagues Sofia Olsson, Ola Svenonius, and Carolina Vendil Pallin, as well as Roman Horbyk (Örebro University) and Fredrik Wesslau (SCEEUS) have provided invaluable and constructive comments on this report.

Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson

Stockholm, 20 April 2023

Executive Summary

Since Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, Ukraine has resisted the Russian aggression in ways that many analysts had difficulty foreseeing. Ukraine as a whole has shown high morale and ingenuity in modern warfare and, not least, on the information front.

This report portrays the Ukrainian war effort in terms of strategic communication during the first year (2022) of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the report, the authors present unique data based on interviews with people central to this effort, from high-ranking communications officers at the Ministry of Defence to information warriors in civil society.

The report sets out from the notion that the strategic communication effort has been an integral part of Ukraine's response to Russia's aggression. Against this background, the report presents an analysis of the respondents' experiences of the Ukrainian strategic communication effort and a synthesis of their understanding of the interplay between the initial conditions coming into the war, the resources, output, success factors, and challenges.

- The most central conclusion of the report is that the Ukrainian strategic communication effort is a whole-of-society effort. Throughout the interviews, the respondents pointed to the broad societal engagement and widespread volunteering as being key to the success of the communications efforts, especially inside Ukraine and in the West.

- The above conclusion relates to the fundamental fact that Ukraine is at war. Research has clearly shown a "rally 'round the flag" effect, where the support for government institutions increases sharply in times of crisis. In addition, Ukraine is fighting a defensive war against an unprovoked invasion. This just cause, together with the fact that Ukrainians perceive the war as existential, endows the communications efforts, both at home and abroad, with a strong foundation. The narrative strands produced by this reality, of how the people of Ukraine are fighting not only for themselves, but for the future of the international order and in defence of democracy as a whole; and how Ukraine is fighting a righteous and legal war, adhering to international law; are both clear and speak to the facts on the ground.

- The central government, and especially President Zelensky, have been critical in the ambition to establish what the respondents refer to as a communications pyramid or a "one-voice policy." However, it appears that Ukrainian strategic communication is not only, or even predominantly, the result of careful planning and strategies, as much as an effect of informal and intuitive processes, led by the sheer communication skills of the top leadership. The authors of the report argue that, within government agencies and in society at large, the "one-voice policy" is best understood as a polyphonic strategic communication effort, meaning that key narratives are distributed and amplified in a heterogenous and creative manner. This polyphonic process is apparent in how the Ukrainian military has been agile in manoeuvring in a somewhat sheltered part of the information environment. Bottom-up communication is mixed with a strategic awareness of the importance and sensitivity of their mission; the military uses this to maintain a (so far) functioning balance between withholding and sharing information throughout society and its own ranks.

- Ukrainian state institutions have worked proactively with information security management, and have reached a fairly high degree of control of the information environment within the country, especially for broadcast media. This has been achieved through censorship and centralisation. There seems to be widespread acceptance of this, which goes back to the second point, above, that Ukraine is fighting a war for the survival of the nation. Several difficult decisions relating to better control of the flow of information were made early on, even in the years before the invasion. According to the respondents, this was based on an understanding that creating awareness about Russian propaganda was not enough. What was needed was a disarmament of the Russian information warfare machine. Tied to this last point are Russia's failures on the information front. This is most likely a factor, but not a focus of this report.

- In terms of output and coordination, the Ukrainian struggle on the information front appears to deal with one of the key challenges in the modern information environment: the necessity of speed. Events and opportunities have been met very quickly. According to our respondents, this agility is based in both societal and organisational flexibility, which in turn are based on widespread trust between key actors in the informational struggle. A similar situation appears to be true for the quality of the content produced. The modern information environment is to a large extent an attention economy, where lower-quality content is brutally swept aside by that of a higher quality. The respondents generally showed a clear understanding of this fact, and demonstrated that they have a willingness to work in unorthodox ways to ensure that the quality (in the sense of being high-attention content adapted to different target audiences) of the content produced is as high as possible.

- The achievements of Ukraine's communications has had its limitations. As many of our respondents indicated, the picture looks different outside the collective West – in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. There is also the matter of the enemy, Russia, where the efforts of Ukrainians and others seem to have been largely ineffective in swaying how both the Russian general public and elites view the war

- In conclusion, the Ukrainian society was in many ways well-prepared for the struggle on the information front, not least by the eight years of war preceding the full-scale invasion. Efforts were carried out to increase media literacy, and there was awareness across society of Russian information operations. In addition, numerous capabilities had been developed both within the state and in civil society, and both formal and informal structures were in place to effectively mobilise and harness communications resources. When full-scale war broke out, the “beehive,” as one of the respondents called it, was ready to get to work.

1 Introduction

On the morning of 24 February 2022, years of speculation about the Kremlin's intent and capabilities came to an end, as Russian missiles, tanks and soldiers crossed the Ukrainian border. Even though the Ukrainians themselves today admit that Putin's plan to conquer Kyiv within a few days nearly succeeded, what followed during the first year of the Russian full-scale invasion was a demonstration not of Russian power, but incapabilities. Russia's strategical overreach and numerous tactical miscalculations have led many military analysts to re-evaluate their predictions about the military might of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.[1] However, while much has been written about the kinetic failures of the Russian war effort, much less has been said about the expectations of the Russian capabilities in information warfare, and its apparent failures on the information front.

The reverse is true for Ukraine. Their armed forces and civilian resilience appear to have been underestimated by many, and their performance has taken the world by surprise. This is not least true when it comes to communication, where Zelensky has stood taller than Putin, where Ukrainian memes have crowded out Russian disinformation, and where, most importantly, support for the Ukrainian resistance in key parts of the world have remained steadfast throughout the war's first year.

There are lessons to be learnt here. The Ukrainian war effort, military and civilian, will most likely encourage other states to re-evaluate and reform their capabilities. As one communications officer at the Ministry of Defence told the authors of this report, in terms of strategic communication, Ukraine is gathering unique experience that will be "attractive to other countries" for years to come. This is the focus of this report, to understand and learn from the Ukrainian communications effort.

Ukraine's communications effort, in general, has been highly effective during the first year of the full-scale invasion in shaping the narrative around the war and ensuring continued support for the war effort in Ukraine and in the West. In Ukraine, support for institutions and leaders is very high, with a recent poll showing that the armed forces is trusted by 96 percent of the public, and the president by 84 percent.[2] The belief that Ukraine will win the war is also widespread.[3]

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[1] For an in-depth discussion and analysis, see Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, "A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in the Light of the Ukraine War," *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022): 7–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044.

[2] Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Dynamics of trust in social institutions in 2021–2022," January 13, 2023, https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1174&page=3.

[3] "More than 95% of those polled are confident in the victory of Ukraine in the war with Russia. At the same time, the absolute majority of respondents (63.2%) expect it within the next year or even sooner. Only 26% answered that the war would last more than a year. Therefore, there are significant hopes in society for a quick end to the military confrontation with Russia, the final of which will be our victory. It is worth noting that almost all respondents give high (63.8%) or average (32.1%) assessments of the in-

In the West, where almost all the external material support for the Ukrainian war effort and economy originates, popular support remains strikingly steadfast. Even though there is variation among the different EU member states, in January/February 2023, 65 percent of the public, only a 3 percent drop since June/July 2022, supported continuing the supply of military equipment.[4] In the US, a somewhat more pronounced softening of public support can be noted, but a majority of respondents in a recent poll still support the continued supply of aid, with only 26 percent stating that the US is providing "too much" aid.[5]

However, there is reason to be careful in evaluating the Ukrainian communications effort. One central facet of strategic communication is the production and management of narratives. Strong narratives that tap into and confirm the worldviews of target audiences through emotional appeal are powerful. They shape our perception of the world and frame our understanding and experience.[6] Researchers and analysts are of course no exception. The months leading up to the full-scale invasion were depicted in detail on social media and the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine was immediately baptised as the first "TikTok War."[7] The deceptive presence of real-time events offered in the endless and curated information flows brought the fog of war to the screens of our digital devices.[8] Many have drawn quick and informative analyses based on fragmentary data. However, in the fog of war the risk of drawing false conclusions on the basis of fragmentary or even false data is apparent, as pointed out by Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi and colleagues.[9]

Against this background, this report sets out to further the understanding of the Ukrainian war effort in terms of strategic communication by presenting unique data provided by a number of the people central to this effort, from high-ranking communications officers at the Ministry of Defence to information warriors in civil society.

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ternational support provided to Ukraine to defeat Russia," quoted from Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Public opinion in Ukraine after 10 months of war," January 15, 2023, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1175&page=3.

[4] Standard Eurobarometer 98, "Public opinion in the European Union," Winter 2022–2023, 103, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=86115.

[5] Pew Research Center, "As Russian invasion nears one-year mark, partisans grow further apart on U.S. support for Ukraine," January 31, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/31/as-russian-invasion-nears-one-year-mark-partisans-grow-further-apart-on-u-s-support-for-ukraine/.

[6] See for example, Thomas Colley, "Strategic Narratives and War Propaganda," in *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, eds Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (London: Sage, 2020), 38–55; Dan P. McAdams and Kate McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233–238.

[7] For a discussion, see: Kaitly Tiffany, "The Myth of the 'First TikTok War'," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/03/tiktok-war-ukraine-russia/627017/.

[8] On digital and post-digital warfare and the production of imaginary holistic archives of war, see Ben O'Loughlin, "Towards a Third Image of War: Post-Digital War," *Digital War* 1, no. 1 (2020): 123–130, https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-020-00015-w.

[9] Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies – RUSI, 2022), p. 4, https://static.rusi.org/359-SR-Ukraine-Preliminary-Lessons-Feb-July-2022-web-final.pdf.

1.1 Purpose and Aim

The overall purpose of this report is to provide an early analysis, based on unique data, of the Ukrainian effort and capabilities in strategic communication during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Setting out from NATO's model for lessons learned and best practice,[10] the aim of the report is to produce knowledge, through observation and analysis, that can be used to develop the capabilities of the Swedish Armed Forces and its allies in strategic communication and information security management.[11] However, the target audience is not limited to the military. Our hope is that this report will not only lead to further academic research but also inform the general public on one of the most important aspects of modern warfare.

1.2 Research Questions

Previous research on civil and military strategic communication shows that many states have struggled with definitions, delineations, and implementation.[12] Our previous work with strategic communication, interviews with practitioners, and discussions with other scholars, confirm these observations.[13]

Observing the Ukrainian communications effort from a distance, it appeared to be not only effective but also ingenious in its whole-of-society-approach; we wanted to gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that led to this apparent success. However, given the resources and time frame for this report, measuring to what degree the effort was a success was beyond the scope of our work.[14] For this reason, we decided to limit our analysis to focusing on the understanding of challenges and success factors as they appeared from within the Ukrainian communications effort. This meant conducting interviews with communications practitioners in a) the government and state bodies, b) the ministry of defence and the armed forces, c) the news media, and d) civil society.

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[10] NATO's lessons learned model consists of three phases. The first one is the analysis phase which includes observation and analysis. The second phase is the remedial action phase which includes endorsement and tasking, implementation and monitoring, and finally validation. It is from this phase that lessons learned is transformed into capabilities. The third phase is dissemination. See NATO, *The NATO Lessons Learned Handbook* (Brussels: Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Center, 2011), 11, https://nllp.jallc.nato.int/iks/sharing%20public/nato_ll_handbook_2nd_ed_final_web.pdf.

[11] A similar approach was used in a study of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, see 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): 141–67.

[12] Ansgar Zerfass and colleagues moreover argues that communication science have neglected to understand and analyse strategic communication as an integral part of modern warfare. See: 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, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485. See also: David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, "Putting Strategy Back into Strategic Communication," *Defence Strategic Communication: The Official Journal of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence* 3 (2017): 41–69; Vladimir Vyklický and Vendula Divišová, "Military Perspective on Strategic Communication as the 'New Kid on the Block': Narrating the Czech Military Deployment in Afghanistan and the Baltic States," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 15, no. 3 (2021): 231–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2021.1906681.

[13] Per-Erik Nilsson, Sofia Olsson och Ivar Ekman, *Informationsmiljöns topografi: teknik, människa och strategi* [The Topography of the Information Environment: Technology, Humans, and Strategy], FOI-R--5342--SE (Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2022), https://foi.se/rapporter/rapportsammanfattning.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5342--SE.

Drawing on previous research and our own understanding of the challenges of strategic communication, we formulated five questions. From the perspective of the practitioners, we wanted to understand what our respondents identify as: a) important conditions (i.e., social and political developments, development of capabilities and doctrine, education, and cooperation and coordination within the state and with civil society) underlying the communications effort; b) crucial organisational resources and capabilities (e.g., specific state bodies and functions dedicated to strategic communication, personnel, and strategies); c) the most important conditions and resources that have shaped the output of communication (i.e., the understanding of the target audience analysis and the information environment, and coordination of communication); d) success factors (i.e., organisation, coordination, and output); and, e) challenges (i.e., organisation, coordination, and output).

Thus, our research questions are:

- What were the conditions coming into the full-scale invasion?
- What communications resources were in place and how have they changed during this full-scale war?
- How have the conditions and resources impacted on the output and what characterises the output?
- What have been success factors in the communications effort?
- What have been the most evident challenges?

1.3 Data & Method

To answer the research questions, we conducted interviews with 40 communications practitioners within the Ukrainian strategic communication apparatus. For reasons of research ethics and security, especially since we have been interviewing people involved in an ongoing war, we have chosen not to disclose any of our respondents' names, nor the specific dates or locations of the interviews.[15] We refer to the practitioners either generally, as "respondents," or, more individually, by using their attributed pseudonyms, epithets that in turn correspond to their functions as communications practitioners in their specific organisations.

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[14] Measuring success in communications is also a time-consuming endeavour. In stark contrast to measuring the effect of kinetic warfare, measuring communications and information warfare is much more complex and includes a wide variety of variables and actors. See for example: Claes Wallenius and Sofia Nilsson, “A Lack of Effect Studies and of Effects: The Use of Strategic Communication in the Military Domain,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13, no. 5: 404-417, 10.1080/1553118X.2019.1630413.

In terms of data collection, our original ambition was to carry out all the interviews in Kyiv, in October 2022. It took us nearly two months to coordinate our fieldwork. However, on October 10, with the start of the wave of Russian strategic bombings, we left Ukraine, thereby shortening our fieldwork. For this reason, we conducted the majority of our interviews as conference calls, via various messaging apps.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was semi-structured, meaning that we structured our interviews in line with our research questions (conditions, resources, output, success factors, and challenges), but allowed for the possibility that the respondents wished to elaborate on issues of their own choosing. When new and interesting topics emerged during the interviews, we followed up on them when possible.[16]

We conducted a majority of the interviews together, dividing the role of lead interviewer between us. For practical and security reasons, we did not record the interviews; instead, we took notes and cross-referenced our transcripts afterwards.

Moreover, we started each interview by clearly explaining to the respondents the purpose of our research and the data storage and confidentiality; we then proceeded with procurement of their consent. Our respondents have also been given the opportunity to correct our citations and to completely withdraw from the study, if they wished.

Regarding the analysis of the resulting material, we thematically divided the Ukrainian strategic communication apparatus into four sectors: a) the government and state bodies, b) the military (including the Ministry of Defence), c) news media, and d) civil society.[17] In a second step, we used qualitative content analysis to code our material in line with the research questions,[18] laying the ground for how we would produce a narrative synthesis of the analysis, based on primary and secondary sources.[19]

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[15] We are aware that using pseudonyms and not revealing further details about the interviews and the respondents create problems in terms of validity and transparency. For further discussion, see: 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): 673–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1932717.

[16] On basic methodology for qualitative interviewing and semi-structured interviews, see Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), p. 51–59.

[17] The specific institutions and organisations are: the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ukrainian Armed Forces; the Territorial Defence; the Centre for Countering Disinformation, under the National Defence and Security Council; and the Centre of Strategic Communication and Information Security, under the Ministry of Culture and Information Security; as well as journalists from public and private news media, companies within the private sector, and NGOs in civil society.

[18] At its most basic, this means systematically identifying recurring themes and topics in data that is coded in a consistent and transparent manner. During the course of our analytical work, we have also lectured quite extensively on the topic matter. While this has been time-consuming, it has also allowed us the possibility to refine our analysis and obtain feedback from a broad range of audiences. On qualitative

1.4 Limitations

As mentioned, part of this report's purpose is to present an early analysis to derive preliminary lessons-learned, rather than a fully comprehensive view of the Ukrainian strategic communication effort. As such, we wish to underscore four important limitations of the report, namely: data selection, representation, generalisability, and the general scope.

First of all, our primary data represents what in academic research often is referred to as an elitist perspective.[20] This means that the people we have interviewed are positioned at the top of their respective institutions and organisations.[21] In the research literature, it is generally acknowledged that elites are harder to access than non-elites.[22] While we have not experienced any problems gaining access to respondents, we have in many cases not been able to decide exactly whom we would interview.

Second, the elitist perspective may not correlate to that of others, further down in the hierarchies.[23] Since the Ukrainian strategic communication effort is a whole-of-society effort, our data thus only represents a limited perspective.

Third, interviews are an interactive process between the respondents and the researchers. This implies that the data should not be taken at face value. There are a great number of factors that might influence how the respondents' answers correlate to factual events and relations, on the one hand,[24] and, on the other, how we as researchers apply our own biases to the analysis and construct and construe a

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content analysis, see Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012).

[19] On qualitative research and presentation of analysis, see Angela Thody, *Writing and Presenting Research* (London and New York: Sage, 2006), 145–158.

[20] See for example: Laura Empson, "Elite Interviewing in Professional Organizations," *Journal of Professions and Organization* 5, no. 1 (2018): 58–69, https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jox010.

[21] On definitions of elites, see: Houman Ellersgaard et al, "Say My Name?," p. 675-676.

[22] See for example: Robert Mikecz, "Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues," *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 6: 482–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412442818.

[23] See: Laura Empson, "Elite Interviewing in Professional Organizations," *Journal of Professions and Organization* 5, no. 1 (2018): 58–69, https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jox010.

[24] E.g., personal interests, cognitive biases, distorted memories, severe stress, and so on. For an overview of the various forms of the predicaments involved in doing interviews and how different epistemological approaches relate to them, see Mats Alvesson, "Beyond Neopositivists, Romantics, and Localists: A Reflexive Approach to Interviews in Organizational Research," *Academy of Management Review* 28, no. 1 (2003): 13–33, p. 15, https://doi.org/10.2307/30040687. See, also: Brenda L. Moore, "In-depth Interviewing," in *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies*, ed Josepth Soeters, Patricia M. Shields, and Sebastian Rietjens (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 116–128.

narrative out of the interviews.[25] To safeguard our analysis, and based on the time frame prescribed for its completion, we have cross-referenced the interviews with each other and, when possible, cross-checked verifiable information with open sources.[26]

The final caveat regarding our report relates to its limited scope. This report focuses on public affairs, public relations, and military strategic communication, and not on offensive information and psychological operations (see definitions of strategic communication and information warfare, below). This is due to a lack of first-hand data on these issues and not to any supposed irrelevance of their effects.[27]

In this report we do not measure the outreach, reception, and success in relation to various target audiences. Our analysis focuses on our respondents' understanding of these aspects of communication. When available, we use secondary sources to substantiate our analysis. We have chosen to include illustrative examples, but mainly from Ukrainian communications that address an international audience. This means that the Ukrainian news- and social-media ecosystem and its intersections with the Russian counterpart are not addressed in this report.

Moreover, we have not analysed the importance of information technology infrastructure. It is however safe to say that a challenge and a crucial precondition for strategic communication in today's digital information environment is maintaining functionality and safeguarding it from being overtaken by the enemy.[28]

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[25] In qualitative organisation studies, our approach is described as reflexivity. For an overview, see Kathryn Haynes, "Reflexivity in Qualitative Research," in *Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current Challenges*, ed Gillian Symon and Cahterine Cassell (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2012), 72–89.

[26] See Rebecca S. Natow, "The use of triangulation in qualitative studies employing elite interviews," *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 2 (2020): 160–173, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119830077.

[27] There are many reports of how Ukrainian intelligence services and others have used ingenious methods for psychological operations. For example, the identities of captured and killed Russian soldiers have been found on social media (VK) through the use of facial recognition software (from the company, Clearview AI). Once the social media profiles are found, family and social relations can be mapped out and used for various purposes, for example to pressure the soldiers' mothers. See Drew Harwell, "Ukraine Is Scanning Faces of Dead Russians, then Contacting the Mothers," *Washington Post,* April 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/15/ukraine-facial-recognition-warfare/. On the development of information warfare in Ukraine, see: Brett van Niekerk, "The Evolution of Information Warfare in Ukraine: 2014 to 2022," *Journal of Information Warfare* 22, no. 1 (2023): 10–31. On Russia's unconventional warfare operations, see: Jack Watling, Oleksandr Danylyuk V, and Nick Reynolds, *Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022-February 2023,* RUSI, 2023, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-russias-unconventional-operations-during-russo-ukrainian-war-february-2022.

[28] For a brief discussion of information technology infrastructure and the Ukrainian information technology sector, see Romina Bandura and Janina Staguhn, "Digital Will Drive Ukraine's Modernization," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/digital-will-drive-ukraines-modernizations. On soldiers' reliance on and practices concerning connectivity in eastern Ukraine, see Roman Horbyk, "'The War Phone': Mobile Communication on the Frontline in Eastern Ukraine," *Digital War* 3, no. 1 (2022): 9–24, https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00049-2.

With these limitations in mind, our analysis is but one contribution in a much larger project of properly mapping out and understanding what appears to have been, up until the time of writing, a noteworthy effort in strategic communication.[29]

1.5 Central Concepts

While this report is not a theoretical deliberation about the pertinence of concepts and how they measure against real world situations such as full-scale war, it is necessary to give a brief background to the three central concepts of this report: strategic communication, information warfare, and information security management. Importantly, our overarching theoretical understanding of these concepts does not always correlated with those of our respondents.

We understand strategic communication in line with NATO's conceptualisation. This means that we see 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.[30] What distinguishes strategic communication from information operations and psychological operations, in terms of public diplomacy, public affairs, and military public affairs, at least in theory, is its focus on conveying reliable information, transparency, audience engagement, and agile and adaptive communications.[31]

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[29] For academic and analytical pieces, see for example, Marta Dyczok and Yerin Chung, "Zelens'kyi Uses His Communication Skills as a Weapon of War," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64, no. 2–3 (2022): 146–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2106699; Teemu Saressalo and Aki Huhtinen, "Information Influence Operations: Application of National," *Journal of Information Warfare* 21, no. 4 (2022): 41–66; Sofia Romansky, Lotje Boswinkel, and Michel Rademaker, *The Parallel Front: An Analysis of the Military Use of Information in the First Seven Months of the War in Ukraine* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), https://hcss.nl/report/the-parallel-front-military-use-information-ukraine/. For journalistic pieces, see for example, Sofia Maksymiv, "How Strategic Communications Are Managed in Wartime Ukraine: Pros and Cons," *Ukraine World*, September 6, 2022, https://ukraineworld.org/articles/analysis/strategic-communications; Torey McMurdo, "Ukraine Has Been Winning the Messaging Wars. It's Been Preparing for Years," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/28/russia-ukraine-propaganda-misinformation-media-zelensky/.

[30] See NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, "About Strategic Communication," website, February 22, 2023, https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-strategic-communications/1.

[31] See: Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide, *Strategic Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Global Practice* (London: Routledge, 2022); 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): 469–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1450255; Juan Pablo Villar García, Carlota Tarín Quirós, and Julio Blázquez Soria, "Strategic Communication as a Key Factor in Countering Hybrid Threats," (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/14410; Patricia Riley, Gail Fann Thomas, Rebecca Weintaub, Allison Noyes, and Stephanie Dixon, "Good Governance and Strategic Communication: A Communication Capital Approach," in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, eds by Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 201-213.

This broad definition of strategic communication moreover aligns with Ukrainian civil and military doctrine, which, since 2015, has been developed on the basis of NATO's conceptual framework.[32] Since then, the development of Ukrainian strategic communication has come to focus on the coordination, integration, and synchronisation of governmental agencies and civil society, with a focus on the production and promotion of unified messages that, as in the case of Ukraine, are in alignment with national values and adapted to various target audiences.[33]

As mentioned, information warfare is not the explicit focus of this report. Regardless, this is a concept that is frequently used, as a general understanding of how information and information technology is an integral part of modern warfare, both in research and by our respondents. Information warfare has most likely been practiced for as long as human beings have been engaged in warfare. Well over 2000 years ago, the Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, declared that all warfare is deception.[34] While many fundamentals of information warfare are timeless, the last two decades of digitalisation of the information environment have changed the conditions for information warfare. At its most basic level, we understand information warfare as "the deliberate manipulation or use of information by one party or adversary to influence the choices and decisions that the adversary makes in order for military or strategic gain."[35] As such, in this report we limit the scope of information warfare to encompass offensive communications, such as information operations and psychological operations.

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[32] In 2015, Ukrainian strategic communication was codified in military doctrine based on NATO's model. It is worth mentioning that, since 2020, another conceptualisation, which is described as consisting of four interrelated blocks, has also been in use. First, the interactional block involves public diplomacy, public affairs, and internal communication. The second block, the informational and psychological, consists of information, psychological, and special operations. The third block, the technical, revolves around cyber and electromagnetic confrontation and security. Last, the military block focuses on military power and civil-military operations, monitoring, and active influence. However, this report is limited in terms of elaborating on the conceptual understanding of strategic communication in Ukraine. For further details on strategic communication and its codification in Ukraine, see Tetyana Syvak, "The System of Strategic Communication in Ukraine: Preconditions and Formation," *The World of Politics, Society, Geography* 1, no. 2 (2016): 69–76, p. 70. It should moreover be mentioned that the legacy of the USSR's military thought has influenced Ukrainian military theory and doctrine, in particular with a holistic understanding of information confrontation as central to modern hybrid warfare. For further discussion, see Michelle Grisé, Alyssa Demus, Yuliya Shokh, Marta Kepe, Jonathan W. Welburn, and Khrystyna Holynska, *Rivalry in the Information Sphere: Russian Conceptions of Information Confrontation* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-8.html. See also: Bohdan Yuskiv, Nataliia Karpchuk, and Oksana Pelekh, "The Structure of Strategic Communication during the War: The Case-Study of the Telegram Channel Insider Ukraine," *Politologija* 107, no. 3 (2022): 90–119, p. 97.

[33] Syvak, "The System," p. 70–71.

[34] Mark McNeilly discusses Sun Tzu's theories in relation to information warfare and the importance of "foreknowledge." He identifies three basic principles for successful deception: a) know the enemy, know the environment, and c) know thyself. See: Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 68-97.

[35] Christopher Whyte, A. Trevor Hall, and Brian M. Mazanec, "Introduction," in *Information Warfare in the Age of Cyber Conflict*, ed. Christopher Whyte, A. Trevor Thrall, and Bryan M. Mazanec (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 2.

Finally, information security management is an integral part of strategic communication and information warfare. Based on this conceptual framing, we understand information security management as a holistic approach in securing the intersections of information, information technology, and information technology infrastructure (physical and digital) from hostile actions.[36] Information security management, moreover, relates to how states have sought to control the mediatisation of war.

Drawing on the work of Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Laughlin, the mediatisation of war can be divided into three phases.[37] Up until the end of the 1990s, war was mainly mediatised through mass media. TV, radio and press journalists functioned as gatekeepers to the information made available for broader audiences, and states were gatekeepers to journalists' access to information. With the advent of social media, mediatisation entered a new and more chaotic phase. In tandem with the development of portable communication devices, anyone could, in theory, document, archive, and partake in the mediatisation of war. The current, third, phase is marked by how "professional media and military institutions have arrested the once-chaotic social media dynamics and more effectively harnessed them for their own ends through new understandings, strategies, and experiments."[38] Some actors and states, not least Russia, were at the forefront of entering into the third stage, harnessing the chaotic situation for information warfare against states still lingering in the second phase, for example Ukraine.[39] As we show in this report, from this perspective, Ukraine has adapted to this third phase.

1.6 Disposition

This report is structured around the four sectors in the Ukrainian strategic communication apparatus. This means that we dedicate Chapter Two to a discussion of the communications efforts of the government and state bodies; Chapter Three, to military strategic communication; Chapter Four, to communications from the perspective of the news media; and Chapter Five, civil society. Each chapter, in turn, is structured around our five research questions: i.e., on conditions, resources, output, success, and challenges. The final chapter presents conclusions and discusses further research needs.

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[36] See: Zahoor Ahmed Soomro, Mahmood Hussain Shah, and Javed Ahmed, "Information Security Management Needs More Holistic Approach: A Literature Review," *International Journal of Information Management* 36, no. 2 (2016): 215–25, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2015.11.009.

[37] Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, "Arrested War: The Third Phase of Mediatization," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 11 (2015): 1320–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1068350.

[38] Hoskins and O'Laughlin, "Arrested War," p. 1320.

[39] See: Bilyana Lilly, *Russian Information Warfare: Assault on Democracies in the Cyber Wild West* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2022).

2 The Government and State Bodies

On the eve of the full-scale invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky gave a forceful speech. Standing in a well-tailored suit in front of a map of Ukraine and the Ukrainian flag, he informed Ukrainian citizens about the government's work to amass international support to dissuade the Kremlin from invading.[40] He then switched from Ukrainian to Russian to address Russian citizens. Zelensky urged his presumed audience to listen to "the voice of reason" about the absurdity of claims that he is a Nazi, and that any spark could lead to a "large war on the European continent." He moreover stated, "We don't need war, neither cold, nor hot, nor hybrid," and added that if their leaders were to order an invasion: "You will see our faces. Not our backs. Our faces." During his next public speech, on February 24, he had replaced his suit with a green military t-shirt. It was war.

Zelensky has emerged as a world leader with an impressive communicative ability. With his smartphone, he has published one remarkably well-composed selfie video after another and exploited the modern information environment to its fullest. As the journalist Jonathan Freedland notes, he has by far outperformed his Russian counterpart: "He's Churchill with an iPhone."[41] However, while Zelensky is the emblem of the government and the state's communications, behind him stands an entire apparatus of people, functions, and institutions.

While the outcome of the first year of the full-scale invasion is a story of Russian strategic and operational failures, it is also a story about Ukrainian capabilities.[42] For many in the West, Ukraine has long been an object of knowledge seen through the lens of Moscow, as a vague national subject and as a distant borderland between Russia and Europe.[43] For years, Ukraine has been struggling to bring attention to the consequences of Russia's invasion in 2014, the following war in the east of Ukraine, and the Russian information war in Ukraine as well as in the West.[44] This situation has dramatically changed. After the full-scale invasion, a sardonic meme started to spread in Ukraine stating that perhaps "now NATO can apply to Ukraine," suggesting that the tables have turned; now everyone in the

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[40] Dominic Cruz Bustillos, "Full Translation: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Feb. 23 Speech," *Lawfare*, February 24, 2022, https://www.lawfareblog.com/full-translation-ukrainian-president-volodymyr-zelenskyys-feb-23-speech.

[41] Jonathan Freedland, "A Key Reason Putin's Bloody Invasion is Faltering? He's no Match for Zelenskiy's iPhone," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/25/churchill-iphone-volodymyr-zelenskiy-ukraine-west.

[42] See Zabrodskyi et al., *Preliminary Lessons*.

[43] On postcolonial imbalances in knowledge production and the Western imagery of Ukraine, see Frank Furedi, *The Road to Ukraine: How the West Lost Its Way* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022).

[44] See for example: Iryna Sopilko, Andrii Svintsytskyi, Yevheniia Krasovska, Andrii Padalka, and Andrii Lyseiuk. "Information Wars as a Threat to the Information Security of Ukraine," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2022): 333–47, https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21331.

West sees and wants to learn from Ukraine.[45] Indeed, as the historian, Serhii Plokhii, points out, the Kremlin's attempt to eradicate the Ukrainian nation has had the opposite effect: Ukrainians have been showing the world and themselves that they "are a nation, that they're dedicated to their state."[46] The historian Owen Mathews has similarly argued:

> "Putin's invasion also precisely created the very things it was intended to avert. It united Ukraine and gave the country a sense of nationhood. The war also reinvigorated NATO with new purpose, money and members, and also reminded the European Union of the post-war anti-totalitarian values on which the European integration was founded."[47]

In this chapter, we develop our analysis of Ukrainian political communication and information security management. Our data is primarily based on interviews with representatives from the country's National Defence and Security Council's Centre for Countering Disinformation, the Ministry of Culture's Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We base our discussion of the political leadership and the presidential administration on secondary sources.

2.1 Conditions

Our respondents were adamant in underlining that Ukraine has been in a war started by Russia since 2014, that the full-scale invasion is an *escalation*, not a new war. Since 2014, the importance of countering Russian information warfare and various forms of influence operations has become an increasingly vital task for Ukrainian authorities.

Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has been seeking to develop and coordinate the interaction of the government and civil society in terms of communications, as well as political and strategic goals. Overall, a holistic approach to strategic communication has been an integral part of Ukraine's development of civil and military defence capabilities since 2015.[48] A broad range of initiatives have been launched, many with Western support, to strengthen the Ukrainian capabilities, which among other things included monitoring, analysis, and education, in countering Russian information warfare that has been targeting both elected officials, civil servants, and civil society.[49] Of particular interest is the Security Information

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[45] Olesya Khromeychuk and Sonya Bilocerkowycz, "The Nation Ukraine has Become," *New York Review*, March 25, 2022, https://www.nybooks.com/online/2022/03/25/the-nation-ukraine-has-become/.

[46] Plokhii in Philippp Blom, Serhii Plokhii, and Timothy Snyder, *The War in Ukraine and Universal Values, Institute for Human Sciences*, March 11, 2022, p. 4, https://www.iwm.at/sites/default/files/inline-images/The%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20and%20Universal%20Values.pdf.

[47] Owen Matthews, *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War Against Ukraine* (London: Mudlark, 2022), p. 8.

[48] Syvak. "The System."

[49] For a similar point, see McMurdo, "Ukraine Has."

Doctrine, approved by President Petro Porochenko, in 2017.[50] The Doctrine was an institutionalised recognition of the threat Ukraine was experiencing from Russian information warfare. Valentine Petrov, at the time in charge of information security at the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, explained that, during "the past three years, Ukraine has become the main testing ground for Russian offensive operations and most advanced cyber technologies."[51]

The purpose of the Doctrine is "to counteract the destructive information influence of the Russian Federation in the context of the hybrid war unleashed by it," and to respect the "the dignity for the individual" as well as "the legitimate interests of society and the state, ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine."[52] In terms of communications, the Doctrine underscores the importance of strengthening information security through the creation of better monitoring systems for threat assessment, legislative regulations for blocking and removing subversive physical and digital information, and the development and protection of IT infrastructure. It moreover aims at promoting the "national interest of Ukraine in the information sphere" through a great emphasis on the "spiritual, cultural, and moral values of the Ukrainian people," creating a positive image of Ukraine in the world based on "objective and reliable information," and the development of "the information society" and of a "strategic communication system of Ukraine." The Doctrine ends by stating that, given the "aggressive information war against Ukraine, ensuring the implementation of the Doctrine is possible only if the measures are carried out and properly coordinated by all state bodies."[53]

Against this background, the post-2014 development of capabilities, in terms of strategic communication and information security management, prepared the ground for the wartime efforts of the Ukrainian state and civil society. However, many of our respondents underlined that they had regardless been experiencing rather chaotic situations when capabilities were being put to the test, demanding creative and flexible solutions.

As is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four and Five, Ukrainian society has undergone many rapid and fundamental developments in the last decades. Since independence in 1991; the Orange Revolution, in 2004–2005; and the Revolution of Dignity, in 2013–2014, the seeds have been sown for a Ukrainian nation based on a strong sense of civic nationalism, whose future lies in the West rather than within the Russian orbit, a vision that appears to have come into full blossom after the full-scale invasion.[54]

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[50] The President of Ukraine, "Указ Президента України №47/2017, Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 29 грудня 2016 року 'Про Доктрину інформаційної безпеки України'" [Decree of the President of Ukraine No 47/2017, On the Decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine of December 29, 2016], Official Website of the President of Ukraine, February 25, 2017, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374.

[51] Petrov in Sergey Sukhankin, "Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine: A Breakthrough or the Veneer of Change?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, no. 33, published by *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 13, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-information-security-doctrine-breakthrough-veneer-change/. On its similarities to Russian doctrine, see: Grisé et al, *Rivalry in the Information Sphere*, p. 79-96.

[52] The President of Ukraine, "Указ Президента України."

[53] The President of Ukraine, "Указ Президента України."

In terms of politics, however, perhaps nobody symbolically encapsulates the many transitions that the Ukrainian state and society have undergone since their independence better than Zelensky himself.[55] He was born in the USSR, is a native Russian speaker and an actor-comedian who became an immensely popular comedian both in Ukraine and in Russia. Eventually, Zelensky and his comedy group, Kvartal 95, became symbols of a humoristic and satirical critique of an old and corrupt country living in the shadows of the Soviet Union versus a new, reinvigorated, civic and Westward-looking, modern and rights-based nation-state.[56]

When he entered the political scene, he did so as a postmodern politician.[57] In the popular TV show, *Servant of the People*, he played a history teacher who became the president of Ukraine thanks to a video going viral – a president of the people, for the people. In 2018, Zelensky revealed the ambition to make the show reality when a political party was registered in the same name as the show. The third season of the show was launched during the run up to the presidential election in 2019. Zelensky's campaign was framed in the way of a comedian: "I'm not kidding!"[58] The new presidential candidate's main messages were peace in Donbas, economic prosperity for the average Ukrainian, and an end to corruption.[59] With a drain-the-swamp rhetoric, Zelensky won the presidential election by a landslide and his party gained a majority in the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada).[60]

Some critics might say that Zelensky symbolised an unruly development in postmodern infotainment politics. However, to the electorate, the burden of responsibility on the political leadership was not only a catchphrase on social media. The expectations upon the political leadership to fulfil its promises to work towards a country free of corruption, with strong and democratic institutions, beloning in NATO and the EU but not the Russian sphere of interest, were real. Zelensky's perceived failures to live up to some of his promises, a badly played diplomatic peace negotiation with Russia, and accusations of nepotism and corruption contributed to his plummeting popularity in opinion polls – and in hindsight, surprisingly poor skills in political communication and diplomacy.[61] This all changed on 24 February 2022.[62]

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[54] On the Orange Revolution, EuroMaidan, and the changes in civil society, see Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 78–103.

[55] Zelensky's history and public image before the invasion is a far more complex topic than can be dealt with here. Suffice to say that there have been many controversies and doubts from within Ukraine regarding his loyalties and capabilities. On Zelensky's biography and career, see Régis Genté and Stéphane Siohan, *Volodymyr Zelensky: Dans la tête d'un héros* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2022); Serhii Rudenko, *Zelensky: A Biography* (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2022).

[56] See Matthews, *Overreach*, p. 141.

[57] For a lengthier discussion on the topic, see Luke Harding, *Invasion: Russia's Bloody War and Ukraine's Fight for Survival* (London: Guardian Faber, 2022), p. 46ff.

[58] On his campaign, see Rudenko, *Zelensky*, p. 4–8.

[59] Mykhailo Minakov and Matthew Rojansky, "The First Sixth Months: An Assessment of Zelenskyy's Achievements," *Wilson Center*, November 13, 2019, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-first-six-months-assessment-zelenskyys-achievements.

[60] See Ilya Timtchenko, "From Virtual Candidate to Compromised President: Zelenskyy's Tough First Year," *Atlantic Council*, April 23, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/from-virtual-candidate-to-compromised-president-zelenskyys-tough-first-year/.

2.2 Resources

It is our understanding that Zelensky and the civil leadership in general have played and continue to play a crucial role in Ukrainian strategic communication. The fact that central actors in the political leadership have long and diverse experience in communications (PR, entertainment, and news media) has contributed to an impressive capability for wartime communications. However, as one high-ranking communicator said in one of our interviews, "It's a big mistake to see Zelensky as the only originator; it's all of society."

The first lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, with a background as a screenwriter and editor, has emerged as a national and international voice for the human stakes of the war. When addressing the US Congress in July 2022, she for example began an emotional speech by stating that "I want to address you not as first lady, but as a daughter and as a mother, to emphasize: I am asking for air defense systems in order for rockets not to kill children in their strollers … and kill entire families."[63] She has moreover embarked on several diplomatic missions and used her platform to bring Ukraine's messages to both news- and social media.[64]

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[61] On the crisis that followed after Zelensky signed the Steinmeier Formula peace agreement, see Justin Lynch, "Zelensky Flounders in Bid to End Ukraine's War," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/11/zelensky-pushes-peace-deal-ukraine-war-russia-donbass-steinmeier-formula/. On corruption close to Zelensky, see Rudenko, *Zelensky*, 133–151. On Zelensky's hardships in communications and diplomacy, see: Mathews, *Overreach*, p. 146.

[62] Polls conducted in March and April showed that a sum of 94% of the Ukrainian population either approved (20%), or strongly approved (74 %), Zelensky's activities. See Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Ukraine: March 30–April 2, 2022* (Washington: International Republican Institute, 2022), https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine/. These numbers appear to have remained throughout the first year of war: Center for Insights in Survey Research, *National Survey of Ukraine – February 2023* (Washington: Republican Institute, 2023), https://www.iri.org/resources/iri-ukraine-poll-shows-strong-confidence-in-president-zelensky-a-surge-in-support-for-nato-membership-russia-should-pay-for-reconstruction/.

[63] Cited in: Amy B. Wang, "Ukraine's First Lady Asks Congress for More Arms to Counter Russia," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/20/ukraine-olena-zelenska-congress/.

[64] See: Maggie McGrath, "Ukraine First Lady Olena Zelenska In Exclusive Forbes Interview: Russia's Abduction Of Children Is A 'Shameful' War Tactic," *Forbes*, March 13, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiemcgrath/2023/03/13/ukraine-first-lady-olena-zelenska-in-exclusive-forbes-interview-russias-abduction-of-children-is-a-shameful-war-tactic/?sh=707ba5be1531. Among other appearances, she was at the cover of Vogue in July 2022. See: Rachel Donadio, "Portrait of Bravery: Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska," *Vogue*, July 26, 2022, https://www.vogue.com/article/portrait-of-bravery-ukraines-first-lady-olena-zelenska.

Retaining the focus on Zelensky, in terms of communication resources, the presidential administration consists of many who have a similar background as Zelensky. For example, the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andrij Yermak, with a background as a lawyer and film producer, has become a leading spokesperson. Communications Adviser Oleksii Arestovych,[65] with a background in the military, politics, and acting, who also was a popular, if somewhat controversial, social media figure before the full-scale invasion, is another example. Moreover, by many accounts, Zelensky's speechwriter Dmytro Lytvyn has been crucial for the presidential communication effort.[66]

Regarding the wider state apparatus, different ministers have come to play important roles as public figures communicating on their specific policy areas (see Chapter Three for the Ministry of Defence). At the regional and local levels, elected officials have been pivotal in coordination, communication and, in many cases similar to Zelensky, as symbols of resistance, as has, for example, Vitaly Kim, the Mayor of Mykolaiv.[67]

While the presidential administration and the elected political leadership stands for the overall strategic narratives, the question of coordinating strategic communication has been a central question in the development of capabilities.[68]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ukraine's window and megaphone to the international community, saw strategic communication as a prioritised topic before the full-scale invasion. Their communications department is, like the presidential administration, run by people with experience from the private PR sector as well as various initiatives and NGOs in civil society. The agency also makes use of external communicators with similar backgrounds so as to diversify their competence. One of the current team's first major challenges was the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a high-ranking official, the pandemic was a "crash test for the diplomatic system, especially in terms of communications." The experience from the pandemic was "fundamental" for the current situation.

In 2021, the ministry adopted a simple communications strategy that outlines who communicates what as well as how communications are to be coordinated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and externally. During the Russian buildup, the ministry worked with four threat scenarios based on different types of escalations by Russia, from information operations to a full-scale invasion. “The aim was to secure communications between Kyiv and foreign missions to stay coordinated in times of crisis,” as one respondent put it.[69] The respondent continued, “on February 24… when I heard an explosion, I understood that it had started. We had a chat to coordinate [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. And then we started working according to the [worst-case] scenario.” In the following chaotic situation, organisations in civil society played a crucial role in performing tasks that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have resources to do themselves.

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[65] Arestovych resigned in January 2023 after receiving extensive critique regarding a statement made in relation to a Russian missile strike in the city of Dnipro resulting in at least the death of 45 people. See: Megan Specia, "A Zelensky adviser says he will resign after outrage over comments on the Dnipro strike," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/world/europe/zelensky-adviser-resigns-dnipro.html.

[66] Luke Harding, "How Zelenskiy's Team of TV Writers Helps His Victory Message Hit Home," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/16/zelenskiy-ukraine-war-writers-journalists.

[67] See for example, Wendel Steavenson, "Ukraine's Mayors Are Leading from the Front," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2022, https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/03/23/ukraines-mayors-are-leading-from-the-front.

[68] Syvak, "The System."

As a step in further developing strategic communication and information security management, two centres were launched in 2021. Their ambition was to coordinate and synchronise the government’s communications with the state and civil society. In early spring 2021, Yermak stated that “the problem of countering disinformation today requires activities of all state institutions, the parliament, the government, civil society, and the involvement of not only the resources of the state, but also our international partners.”[70] Shortly thereafter, Zelensky declared publicly that the government had launched a government body dedicated to fighting disinformation and promoting information security, the Centre for Countering Disinformation. Under the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, the Centre for Countering Disinformation was according to Zelensky to become the “information shield of Ukraine.”[71] The Secretary of National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov, moreover, explained that the centre was to work with the intelligence services in securing Ukrainian information security.[72]

With a staff of just over 50 people, the centre’s priorities are ensuring information security, exposing disinformation and manipulation, informing the population, and fighting against, what is considered to be, “information terrorism.”[73] In our interviews with high-ranking officials at the centre, we were told that the methodology of the Centre for Countering Disinformation is to counter the source of disinformation, since "debunking disinformation doesn't really work." As one official put it, "what we are facing, is not simply fakes and propaganda… it's pure information terrorism," which, according to the official, concerns the whole toolbox of Russian information warfare, including cyber operations. Without finding the roots, Ukraine will be stuck in a "groundhog day" situation, as one official said.

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[69] The respondent underlined the importance of UNDP, as “fruitful cooperation with the UK, and support from the EU.

[70] Ira Ryaboshtan, “Міжнародний центр протидії дезінформації запустять на базі РНБО” [The International Centre for Countering Disinformation Will Be Launched on the Basis of the National Security and Defence Council], *Detector Media*, March 11, 2021, https://detector.media/infospace/article/185715/2021-03-11-mizhnarodnyy-tsentr-protydii-dezinformatsii-zapustyat-na-bazi-rnbo/.

[71] Volodymyr Zelensky, “Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the decisions of the National Security and Defence Council, the situation in Donbas and the U.S. support for Ukraine,” *President of Ukraine,* April 2, 2021, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-shodo-rishen-rnb-67761.

[72] Detector Media, “Ткаченко окреслив повноваження Центру стратегічних комунікацій та інформбезпеки” [Tkachenko Outlined the Powers of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security], March 23, 2021, https://detector.media/infospace/article/186232/2021-03-23-tkachenko-okreslyv-povnovazhennya-tsentru-strategichnykh-komunikatsiy-ta-informbezpeky/.

[73] For a full explanation of the centre’s activities, see Centre for Countering Disinformation, “Про Центр” [About the Centre], website, February 24, 2023, https://cpd.gov.ua/documents/про-центр/. Compare to: Ryaboshtan, “Міжнародний центр.”

In parallel to the launch of Centre for Countering Disinformation, the Minister of Culture and Information Policy, Oleksandr Tkachenko, also declared that the ministry had launched a similar body, the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security.

The purpose of the centre, according to Tkachenko, was to combat Russian "hybrid warfare."[74] This was to be achieved by the neutralisation of disinformation and information influence, strengthening Ukrainian information protection, and engaging in education and communication projects on disinformation and resilience. In contrast to the Centre for Countering Disinformation, the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security were to focus on a strong engagement with civil society and international cooperation. Among the organisations mentioned were StopFake, VoxCheck, Institute for Regional Press Development, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, Open Information Partnership, Internews Ukraine, DFRLab, and the EU Delegation to Ukraine.[75]

The newly appointed director of the centre, Liubov Tsybulska, who has long experience from working both inside and outside the government, explained that she had identified three directions for the centre – countering disinformation, strategising, and international outreach.[76] Tsybulska moreover underscored that cooperation with civil society would play an important role. Given that many initiatives in strategic communication and countering disinformation already existed in Ukraine, Tsybulska explained that she did not "want to duplicate what is already being done and what has already been done." Instead she emphasised that it was "important to reinforce these extremely strong, absolutely brilliant initiatives to counter disinformation that already exist, and to conduct positive narrative campaigns so that Ukraine not only refutes the information, but also forms its own narrative."

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[74] Detector Media, "Ткаченко окреслив."

[75] Oleg Chernysh, "Фабрика правди. Як і для чого Україна створює Центр боротьби з фейками" [Factory of Truth. How and Why Ukraine is Creating the Centre for Combating Fakes], *RBC Ukraine news agency* [РБК-Украина], March 23, 2021, https://daily.rbc.ua/ukr/show/fabrika-pravdy-ukraina-sozdaet-tsentr-borby-1616422383.html.

[76] Ira Ryaboshtan, "Любов Цибульська назвала основні напрямки роботи на посаді голови Центру стратегічних комунікацій та інформбезпеки" [Lyubov Tsibulska Named the Main Directions of Work as the Head of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security], *Detector Media,* March 19, 2021, https://detector.media/community/article/186135/2021-03-19-lyubov-tsybulska-nazvala-osnovni-napryamky-roboty-na-posadi-golovy-tsentru-strategichnykh-komunikatsiy-ta-inform-bezpeky/.

At the time of writing, the current director of the centre is Ihor Solovey, and Mykola Balaban is the deputy director. The centre consists of a team of 20 people, of whom nine are civil servants and eleven are externally funded by donors and international organisations, e.g., as a part of EU support for countering disinformation. Since the full-scale invasion, the centre has adapted its work to meet the needs of war: "We systematically monitor and counter Russian propaganda and disinformation, respond to enemy information attacks, and do everything to support Ukrainians' resilience to enemy narratives."[77] A large part of the centre's work is creating awareness of Russian propaganda and disinformation.[78]

2.3 Output

In terms of communicative output, at least three aspects are central: coordination, narratives, and communication style.

2.3.1 The first aspect: Coordination

Regarding the first aspect of communicative output, several of our respondents describe the overall coordination and structure for Ukrainian strategic communication as a "one-voice" policy or, as a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it, "a communications pyramid." From our understanding, the pyramid metaphor describes well how strategic messages move through the communications apparatus. However, it is not a question of messages being distributed top-down. Similarly to the Ukrainian tradition of polyphonic choir singing, strategic narratives appear to function as a leading voice that it is supported by a vast array of heterogeneous voices, navigating their own way through the song.[79] In terms of strategic communication, this translates to a non-hierarchical communications process where lower levels of the pyramid are given extensive creative leeway to adapt, reframe, and amplify the strategic narratives the best way they see fit.

Moreover, in one sense, the president's communication appears to have become not only informative and inspiring, but also an efficient means of intra-state policy instruction.[80] As one respondent at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it: "The communication pyramid is a very simple model of communication. Important messages are delivered by important people – the president should speak first, then the respective ministers and subordinated structures should take it further.” The respondent continued, “it’s not about hierarchical internal control, it’s about the best way to get the message out,” and added that despite all the coordinating institutions (e.g., Centre for Countering Disinformation and Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security), “it’s not very coordinated.”

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[77] Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, "Centre for Strategic Communication in 2022," website, January 3, 2023, https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/centre-for-strategic-communication-in-2022/.

[78] The centre is organised around four teams, each with a specific function: operative communications, analysis, project development, and training.

[79] See: Yuliia Havrylenko, Yuliia Hrytsun, Iryna Kondratenko, and Liubava Sukhova, "Development of Ukrainian Choral Art in Conditions of Postmodernism," *Postmodern Openings* 13, no. 2: 345-357, https://doi.org/10.18662/po/13.2/458.

[80] A high-ranking official moreover described how the centre prepares a daily "message box" that contains communicative guidelines and ready-made messages about yesterday's events, adapted to different target audiences. The same respondent described how the cooperation with other state agencies is functioning well and in particular so in its contacts with the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Political communication is thus not only a one-way street. The political leadership and state agencies are quick in picking up communicative trends in social media and to amplify and adapt them to specific target audiences. For example, when Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov proudly shows his digital NAFO avatar on social media (on NAFO, see Chapter Five).[81]

2.3.2 The second aspect: Narration

In considering the second aspect of communicative output, the notion of adapted messaging is useful. For us, this term entails the tailoring of strategic narratives to fit different target audiences.[82] To the Ukrainian population in general, a central message has been morale and resilience. The Kremlin’s attempt to assassinate Zelensky failed and their image of him as a cowardly “clown” and “drug addict” has had little bearing outside Russia.[83] When offered by the US to be evacuated in the early days of the invasion, Zelensky allegedly answered: “The fight is here! I need ammunition, not a ride!”[84] This has contributed to strengthening the image of Zelensky and the Ukrainian nation as an underdog, that this is a story of a Goliath-like belligerent attacking an underestimated David. During the Munich Security Conference, in February 2022, Zelensky accordingly stated, “Being David is having a sling to win,” and added, “We do not yet have a sling.”[85]

When communicating to the international community, and in particular the West, it is a matter of making Ukraine’s cause universal, that Ukraine is the defence line of the democratic and rules-based international order. A typical message framing, where Ukrainian bravery merges with being a safeguard of the international order, is Zelensky’s declaration, in April 2022: “This is what it means to be us. To be Ukrainians. To be brave. If everyone in the world had at least ten percent of the courage that we Ukrainians have, there would be no danger to international law at all."[86]

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[81] Oleksii Reznikov, Twitter post, August 30, 2022, https://twitter.com/oleksiireznikov/status/1564646677197328385. NAFO stands for North Atlantic Fellas Organization. It’s an online meme and internet community in support of Ukraine. Their symbol is a Shiba Inu dog that is being digitally fitted to create digital avatars of people that NAFO supports in particular.

[82] On target audiences, see also: Teemu Saressalo and Aki Huhtinen, “Information Influence Operations: Application of National,” *Journal of Information Warfare* 21, no. 4 (2022): 41–66, p. 48.

[83] These slurs were recurrent in Ukraine during the presidential election in 2019. See Rudenko, *Zelensky*, p. 137–141.

[84] See, for example, Simon Shuster, “Inside Zelensky’s World,” *Time*, April 28, 2022, https://time.com/6171277/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-ukraine-war/.

[85] Zelensky, in Erika Solomon, “At a Security Conference in Munich, Zelensky Invokes the Battle of David and Goliath,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/world/europe/at-a-security-conference-in-munich-zelensky-invokes-the-battle-of-david-and-goliath.html.

According to journalistic accounts, "to be brave like Ukraine" was part of a skilful nation-branding campaign initiated by the advertising agency, Banda.[87] It is a remarkable campaign since the underlying message is not "we're like you", the West, but rather "be like us!"[88] The campaign has been running both in Ukraine and internationally. It is moreover typical for how private and public cooperation has been working in Ukraine. The agency is freely offering its services, the governments pays for production costs, and media companies, including several global ones, amplify the campaign.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the beginning of the full-scale invasion, bringing international attention to the situation became the primary occupation. After Russian cyberattacks took down the ministry's website, with external help they remade Ukraine's official tourist site, Ukraine.ua, into an information portal about the war. A section called Defenders of Freedom, telling the stories of Ukrainian citizens and soldiers who became "heroes," was created on the website.[89] As one official at the ministry put it: "We launched Defenders of Freedom . . ." to show ". . . real human stories about those who defend Ukraine." This website is but one example of the many ways in which the consequences of Russian atrocities and terrorism are communicated to the world.

Yet another example of how attention to Russian "information terrorism" is being raised is the Centre for Countering Disinformation's work in sanctioning what it considers Russian or pro-Russian influence agents. The centre also publishes a list of international "speakers who promote narratives consonant with Russian propaganda."[90] This list, and similar initiatives,[91] can arguably be seen as part of the

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[86] Volodymyr Zelensky, "Being Brave Is Our Brand; We Will Spread Our Courage in the World – Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy," *Official Website of the President of Ukraine,* April 7, 2022, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/buti-smilivimi-ce-nash-brend-budemo-poshiryuvati-nashu-smili-74165.

[87] Nadia Kaneva, "With 'bravery' as Its New Brand, Ukraine Is Turning Advertising into a Weapon of War," *The Conversation,* August 19, 2022, http://theconversation.com/with-bravery-as-its-new-brand-ukraine-is-turning-advertising-into-a-weapon-of-war-188408.

[88] For an in-depth analysis and discussion, see: Nadia Kaneva, "'Brave Like Ukraine': A Critical Discourse Perspective on Ukraine's Wartime Brand," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy,* online first, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00273-3.

[89] On Ukraine's official landing page, www.ukraine.ua, the visitor can click a link to "not look away from the war," which leads to the Defenders of Freedom site, www.war.ukraine.ua.

[90] The list is available at the centre's website: Centre for Countering Disinformation, "Спікери, які просувають співзвучні російській пропаганді наративи" [Speakers Who Promote Narratives Consonant with Russian Propaganda], website, February 24, 2023, https://cpd.gov.ua/reports/spikery-yaki-prosuvayut-spivzvuchni-rosijskij-propagandi-naratyvy-2/.

[91] A similar initiative was launched early during the full-scale invasion by a volunteer initiative, called "How Not to Turn into a Vegetable." See: Institute of Mass Information, "Database of Russian Propagandists Created in Ukraine," July 5, 2022, https://imi.org.ua/en/news/database-of-russian-propagandists-created-in-ukraine-i46548.

Ukrainian information security management, as well as an example of more offensive information warfare. The Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security similarly publishes its analysis of Russian influence operations. During 2022, the centre has published well over 200 analytical texts, often in both English and Ukrainian. In addition, they have produced a digital emergency platform for Ukrainian citizens, called Dovidka.[92] The platform consists of information (website, brochures, and chatbots) about how civilians are supposed to act in crisis and war.

The Ukrainians have been communicating to the Russian leadership and soldiers that fighting against motivated Ukrainians is fruitless, the Kremlin is cynically wasting thousands of Russian lives, and that atrocities are being committed by the Russian forces themselves. On New Year's Eve 2022, Zelensky addressed the Russian population, in Russian, with the message that the Russian president does not have the best interest of Russian citizens in mind:

> "The terrorist state will not be forgiven. And those who give orders for such strikes, and those who carry them out, will not receive a pardon. To put it mildly… All this war that you are waging, you are Russia, it is not the war with NATO, as your propagandists lie. It is not for something historical. It's for one person to remain in power until the end of his life."[93]

2.3.3 The third aspect: Communication style

The third aspect of communicative output involves the communication style of Zelensky and various Ukrainian agencies. Their communication style has been well-calibrated, making use of the many tools necessary to capture the attention of different audiences in today's information environment. Humour, sarcasm, affect, bullying, and defiance; packaged in memes, snappy one-liners, and even trolling; have contributed to branding Ukrainian communications, and it stands in stark contrast to Russian communications. As for Zelensky, he is depicted as a president and a commander in chief who greets, eats with, and embraces his ministers and soldiers. A couple of days into the invasion, Zelensky posted a selfie on Twitter in which he and the Minister of Defence, Reznikov, look like two buddies doing their best to gain control over an impossible situation.[94] In stark contrast to the Western mediatized image of Putin, who convulsively clutches a desk, or seats himself at an oversized table with a five-meter distance between himself and his nearest ministers, Zelensky has been framed as a man of the people, for the people, who has survived against all odds.[95] As one commentator put it, Zelensky stands for “existential authenticity,” in contrast to Putin’s “violent authority.”[96]

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[92] See the Dovidka Web Portal: www.dovidka.info.

[93] Volodymyr Zelensky, "The Terrorist State Won't Be Forgiven, and Those Who Give Orders and Carry out Strikes Will not Receive a Pardon – Address of the President of Ukraine," *The Official Website of the President of Ukraine*, December 31, 2022, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/derzhava-terorist-ne-matime-proshennya-ti-hto-viddaye-nakazi-80193.

[94] Oleksii Reznikov, Twitter post, February 27, 2022, https://twitter.com/oleksiireznikov/status/1497982463334928391.

Moreover, Zelensky and the general Ukrainian communications effort skilfully use affect and emotions, both in the form of contemporary memes and in more traditional rhetoric. For example, when Zelensky is talking to heads of states and national parliaments, he seamlessly makes use of emotionally loaded historical references to the specific nation’s experiences of war and atrocities. Addressing the German Bundestag, Zelensky was playing on German guilt after World War II, when he called upon the members to assist Ukraine so that “you don’t look over your shoulder even after this war.”[97]

Using affective and humouristic communications is a delicate balancing act between creating catchy, memorable, and meme-friendly statements and being offensive and unserious. Beyond being an effective means of getting attention in today’s information environment, this type of communication is also described as a coping mechanism. One high-ranking official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs answered our question about humour and communications by stating that it is true that Ukrainians now “are known for their sense of humour,” yet added, “but we also cry a lot!” Since the full-scale invasion, it is a constant “psychological mood swing – from laughter to tears. Everyone is tired – but we are prepared for a long run.”

2.4 Success

Our respondents express that Ukrainian government communications have exceeded expectations. As one communicator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it, in relation to the international audience: “We almost totally won the information war in the countries that are our traditional partners.” In our interviews, the respondents frequently mentioned four factors that have contributed to this result: preparations, coordination, flexibility and speed, and reliability and transparency.

Regarding *preparations*, as mentioned, the many hard-learned lessons since 2014 initiated a holistic approach to the development of capabilities in strategic communication. This means that Ukraine’s development of capabilities has been continuously tested in real-life events. For example, upon entering the full-scale invasion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs crisis preparedness for securing the agency’s communications paid off. When Russian cyberattacks took down both external and internal communications channels, backup channels had already been prepared

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[95] Victor Jack, “What’s Wrong With Vladimir Putin,” *Politico,* June 2, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/backpain-cancer-and-covid-vladimir-putin-top-health-scares-throughout-the-years/.

[96] Bernhard Pörksen, “Lessons of the Information War,” *Deutsche Well,* August 3, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/lessons-of-the-information-war/a-62446987.

[97] Volodymyr Zelensky, “Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Bundestag,” *President of Ukraine Official Website,* March 17, 2022, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-u-bundesta-73621.

(e.g., direct messaging applications). Here described by one high-ranking communicator at the ministry: “You have to be prepared for losing websites and accounts. Then it’s better to have more official channels in case some wouldn’t work.” The ministry also had prepared strategically positioned embassies as communication hubs in case of a breakdown in Ukraine.

In terms of coordination, it is our understanding that the polyphonic aspect of Ukrainian strategic communication has been successful in communicating a joint Ukrainian narrative. Of particular importance for this is the coordination and cooperation with civil society that began well before the full-scale invasion. One high-ranking official at the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security explained that the real strength of the centre is the first director’s work of “bringing in fact-checkers and information warriors from civil society.” At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the younger generation of media-savvy Ukrainians in civil society were cherished and the importance of a shared understanding of fundamental values was underscored: “It’s easy to reach out to [civil society] when you know that you share the same values.” Reaching out is moreover a question of resource complementation. One communicator said that while diplomats are not trained in monitoring and analysis of the information environment, many NGOs are. For example, media watchdogs “help us to include arguments and evidence on Russian discourse and actions.”

One signifying feature for many of the institutions involved in Ukrainian strategic communication, that emphasize the polyphonic nature of Ukrainian communications, is flexibility and speed. For example, the communications team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was described to us as “a very strong team of mixed people and expertise,” “flexible and fast.” One key in managing diversity, flexibility, and speed is to put trust in human resources. According to a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this means that “decision-making doesn’t need unnecessary approval” through complicated chains of command: “If in war, you better kill the unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and ensure fast ways of communications.”

Finally, our respondents continuously bring up reliability and transparency, often referred to as “truth” in our interviews, as a fundamental narrative anchor point. If Ukraine is to be the spearhead of democracy and a rules-based international order, then Ukrainian communications cannot afford to deceive and manipulate its own population and allies. Balancing reliable information, transparency, and security, however, is a fine and complicated line to walk, and tensions between official Ukrainian understandings of certain events have clashed with those of its allies.[98]

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[98] On casualties, the head of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, for example, stated that over 100,000 Ukrainians had been killed, a statement she later retracted: BBC, “Ukraine War: Zelensky Aide Reveals up to 13,000 War Dead,” December 2, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63829973. Another example is when a Polish border town was hit by a missile, which according to the official Ukrainian stance was a Russian missile, while the official Polish and NATO line claimed that it

While not mentioned during our interviews, it is worth quoting Sofia Maksymiv's analysis of the challenges for Ukrainian strategic communication:

> "Quite often, Ukraine's government has preferred maintaining calm to the delivery of the whole truth. Even though it is not always required by military necessity, there has sometimes been a disparity between what the government communicates and what the situation is really like on the frontline. This often creates inflated expectations among people which can later lead to them underestimating the severity of the wartime situation or cause carelessness, which results in casualties."[99]

Nonetheless, one communicator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised the importance of "being true" without "exaggerations," meaning, "we do not communicate unchecked communication. The ministry doesn't speak up if it's not officially checked." Reliability and transparency is also what separates official Ukrainian communications from its Russian counterpart, wherefore it "is also important for other countries' leaders to speak frankly about displaced people, about the energy consequences of the war. These are very tough and unpopular topics, but should be talked about honestly to domestic audiences, since it helps to debunk Russian false claims."

2.5 Challenges

In our interviews with the centres and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, two major challenges were mentioned: institutional coordination and outreach.

Institutional coordination relates to resource optimisation and long-term strategy. One high-ranking official at the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security argued that there has been an unfortunate development with strategic communication in Ukraine. Since they are "posh topics, each and every institution is trying to claim the field." While not being the case yet, instead of resource optimisation, this might lead to a "splintering" situation, where different state bodies are competing over crumbs, instead of working in a joint effort. In addition, the respondent argued that, while those in the presidential office are "very good communicators," their communication is often more "reactional than strategic." Accordingly, the respondent argued there is an urgent need for a structure based on a long-term strategy for the institutionalisation of a pro-active strategic communication that lays out the tracks for "where we're going in 1, 5 and 10 years." The respondent underscored, however, that there is a general fatigue towards strategic

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was a Ukrainian missile gone astray: Jon Henley, "Missile that Hit Poland Likely Came from Ukraine Defences, Say Warsaw and NATO," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/16/poland-president-missile-strike-probably-ukrainian-stray.

[99] See Makymiv, "How Strategic Communication."

documents; what is needed is concrete action and not "documents for documents' [sake]."

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the challenge of coordination was discussed in relation to civil society and how to harness all the voluntary support: "Starting from February, the biggest challenge was to coordinate the volunteering support, meanwhile, as staying focused on the government's and the ministry's goals."

In terms of outreach, one high-ranking official at the ministry admitted, "the battle of information and narratives is far from a win globally." Another official at the ministry told us that strategies to better communicate with Asian and African countries were being developed, by adding: "The Global South is a new information battleground."

Even if the West perceives that the information front appears to be controlled by Ukraine, support for the Ukrainian cause differs widely between different countries' populations. For example, in the beginning of the full-scale invasion, 50% of the French population agreed with at least one of the Kremlin's many explanations for the invasion.[100] In Greece, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Hungary, far less than 50% hold Russia responsible for the invasion.[101] A related challenge to outreach concerns evaluating its effect: "Evaluation is always a challenge. We are so extremely busy with current projects. We have no resources for evaluation. But we rely on a lot of data provided by our partners."

2.6 Conclusions

Conditions. Given that Russia had already been at war with Ukraine for eight years, Ukraine was working on information security management and the development of informative, defensive and offensive communications capabilities when the full-scale invasion started.

Resources. Since 2015, a rather ambitious effort focused on synchronising and harmonising the state's communications through a one-voice policy has been underway. Moreover, the fact that Zelensky and many of the people in his proximity have unique experience from the entertainment industry has most likely contributed in shaping the Ukrainian communications effort.

Output. The Ukrainian communication effort has efficiently used today's information environment and the attention economy to frame its communication in ingenious ways. Altogether, ingenious communications campaigns and grass-roots communications have turned Ukrainian communications into a brand in its own right. Campaigns such as “Be brave like Ukraine” are echoing famous commercial slogans like Nike’s “Just Do It” or Apple’s “Think different.”

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[100] Paul Cebille and Marie Agathe Deffain, *Volet 1:Désinformation, Complotisme et Populisme à l'heure de La Crise Sanitaire et de La Guerre En Ukraine* (Paris: Ifop, 2022), https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Rapport_Ifop_REBOOT_VOL_1_2022.03.24.pdf.

[101] Flash Eurobarometer, *506 EU's Response to the War in Ukraine – April 2022* (Brussel: European Commission, 2022), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/260873.

Successes. While the institutionalisation of Ukrainian strategic communication was still under development when Russian tanks crossed the Ukrainian border, the fact that the state and civil society have been working actively with developing their capabilities has contributed to establishing a polyphonic communications mindset. This makes visible how trust allows for agile and fast communications.

Challenges. Despite years of conceptual and organisational development of communications capabilities, our respondents described a situation that initially was uncoordinated chaos. There appeared to be a risk that different state bodies developed separate communications capabilities that might end up competing for resources instead of pooling them together. From a communications perspective, one of the great risks for Ukraine is that their international audiences may lose interest and/or that the Kremlin’s narratives acquire traction.

3 The Military

On 7 October 2022, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence published a speech by the Minister of Defence, Oleksii Reznikov, on its YouTube channel.[102] The speech is in Russian and starts with Reznikov simply presenting himself, followed by: "I am addressing soldiers, sailors, sergeants, petty officers, midshipmen, officers, generals, and admirals of the Russian Army. I did not make a mistake – the Russian Army!" Reznikov then explains how proud he is of the leadership of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, its generals and its officers, as well as its soldiers: "They are the salt of our land. We will take care of them after the war."[103] He refers to President Zelensky and states that "our President is with his army," and asks rhetorically, "Where is yours?"

Alluding to a frightened Russian president and dishonest political leadership, Reznikov declares: "You have been deceived and betrayed. You were promised an easy walk and they sent you into a trap. You are paying with blood for someone's fantasies and false goals." Appealing to the close historical and national ties between the two nations, he states: "Not so long ago, you were considered good neighbours… now enmity has been sown for generations to come." Seeking to address his target audience's humanity, he encourages afterthought: "Ask yourself, who will you be after this war? What will your children and grandchildren think of you when they find out the truth? How will you go down in history?" He has the answer: "You will be remembered as thieves, rapists, and murderers." However, the minister provides a solution: "We guarantee life, safety, and justice to everyone who refuses to fight… Still, you can save the Russian army from humiliation and disgrace, but time is running out. Don't miss it."

Reznikov's speech is an eight-minute crash course in Ukrainian strategic communication. It was broadcasted roughly two weeks after Putin had announced a partial military mobilization in Russia, when young Russian men were fleeing the country.[104] It transmits the Ukrainian strategic narrative in a factual and emotionally laden way; it seeks to deter Russian soldiers with a mix of rationality, brotherhood, and fear; it provides Russian soldiers a way out from the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation; and it cherishes the international support from NATO. It is a message of a united nation whose leaders are proud of their "heroes," those who are resisting the Russian assault.

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[102] Oleksii Reznikov, "Обращение Министра обороны Украины Алексея Резникова" [Address by the Minister of Defence of Ukraine Olekssi Reznikov], *Ukrainian Military TV*, October 7, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGqs-OgwTBs.

[103] He mentions by name General Valery Zaluzhny (Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine), Colonel-General Alexander Syrsky (Commander of the Ground Forces), Vice-Admiral Alexey Neizhpapa (Commander of the Naval Forces of Ukraine) and Lieutenant General Nikolai Oleshchuk (Commander of the Airforce).

[104] Kareem Fahin, Zeynep Karatas, and Robun Dixon, "The Russian Men Fleeing Mobilization, and Leaving Everything Behind," *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/28/russia-turkey-partial-mobilization-ukraine/.

Coupled with communicating strategic messages, one crucial aspect of the military side of strategic communication is the military's work in information security management, and in particular the military censorship invoked at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. This was a strategic decision, in order to safeguard information from Russian propaganda and to maintain operational security.[105] While this strategy has largely been successful, due to broad public acceptance, it is a strategy that is not without its problems (see also Chapter Five). How it measures up in the long run remains to be seen.

In this chapter, we thus turn to the military side of strategic communication. We present our analysis of our interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which includes the Territorial Defence Forces.

3.1 Conditions

By early 2022, Ukrainian military communications had faced many challenges since 2014. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, its unconventional warfare methods, and its ensuing regular warfare in the Donbas was an unruly awakening. Not only had it become clear that Ukraine and Russia would most likely not live in peace for generations to come, but serious shortcomings in the Ukrainian civil and military defence became apparent.

The Ukrainian army was generally underfunded, suffering from corruption, and was poorly trained.[106] One of the reasons, according to Isabelle Facon's research, was that the political leadership, dreading to be overthrown, had favoured domestic security services over national defence. Moreover, the military leadership at the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine were divided over the country's future: Brussels or Moscow?[107] In 2016, the Minister of Defence, Stepan Poltorak, reported that 14 out of 35 senior officials (40%) within the Ministry of Defence failed a polygraph test. We were told that the purpose of the polygraph was to detect, prevent, and counter cases of corruption, as well as to increase the integrity of personnel. According to journalistic sources, the polygraph was designed to evaluate the loyalty of personnel to Ukraine; the purpose of this was to be rid of those with pro-Russian allegiances.[108]

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[105] See Emmanuel Grynszpan, "On Ukrainian television, the difficult balance between military censorship and pluralism of ideas," *Le Monde*, October 22, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/22/on-ukrainian-television-the-difficult-balance-between-military-censorship-and-pluralism-of-ideas_6001331_4.html.

[106] On the capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine from 2014 to 2022, see Dyson and Pashchuk, "Organisational Learning"; Daniel Michaels, "The Secret of Ukraine's Military Success: Years of NATO Training," *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-military-success-years-of-nato-training-11649861339; Andriy Zagorodnyuk, Alina Frolova, Hans Petter Midtunn, and Oleksii Pavliuchyk, "Is Ukraine's reformed military ready to repel a new Russian invasion?" *Atlantic Council*, December 23, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-ukraines-reformed-military-ready-to-repel-a-new-russian-invasion/.

[107] Isabelle Facon, *Reforming Ukrainian Defense: No Shortage of Challenges* (Paris: French Institute for International Relations – Ifri, no. 101, 2017), p. 5, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/facon_reforming_ukrainian_defense_2017.pdf.

Additionally, according to the descriptions received in our interviews, the general resilience and morale of the Ukrainian population in the direct aftermath of 2014 was low. A contributing factor, according to our respondents, was shortcomings in communicating the failure of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to take control of the occupied areas in the Donbas and Crimea. One high-ranking communicator at the Armed Forces of Ukraine explained that “we suffered huge losses,” “families protested” against the war “and asked for peaceful negotiations”; according to this respondent, these factors played a significant part in pushing the Ukrainian government to concede to the Minsk Agreements.

Against this background, it became necessary to reform the Armed Forces of Ukraine, in particular, and the Ukrainian civil and military defence, in general. As one of our respondents stated: “We had to change the situation.” In this sense, “conflict became an engine for transformation,” as Facon puts it.[109] What followed were developments in terms of legislation, doctrine, organisation, and capabilities. Strategic communication was an integral part of this work. To develop their capabilities, both the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine turned to external expertise, not least communications experts from civil society. Eventually, the public’s rather sceptical view of the Armed Forces of Ukraine seems to have gradually shifted when the Revolution of Dignity 2014 appeared to lay the ground for a significant shift in terms of morale, both within the defence sector and civil society at large. Fighting for Ukraine had been given a new meaning, as a continuation of the Revolution. Facon concludes: “In another first, civil society now regards the challenges of reforming the armed forces as an integral part of transforming Ukrainian society.”[110]

3.2 Resources

When the full-scale invasion became reality on the morning of 24 February, Ukrainian strategic communication was tested in the harshest manner imaginable. Now capabilities had to be coordinated and adapted to the unpredictability of full-scale war. As one respondent at the Ministry of Defence said: “This sphere [strategic communication] is new for our country; we have just started to introduce this system in the armed forces. . . and we are testing this under real war.” However,

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[108] Facon, *Reforming Ukrainian*, p. 17.
[109] Facon, *Reforming Ukrainian*, p. 5.
[110] Facon, *Reforming Ukrainian*, p. 13.

"new" here is to be understood from a perspective of developing military capabilities, which takes time. As already mentioned, Ukraine had been working with the development of capabilities since 2015 and this development was carried out in relation to the war in eastern Ukraine. A communications strategist at the Ministry of Defence told us the following:

> "The strategic communication system of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine began operating in 2016 and was tested during the anti-terrorist operation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and during the operation of the United Forces (since 2018). Now it is actively operating during the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as well."

At the Ministry of Defence, our respondents explained how the newly developed capabilities in strategic communication were put to the test, where flexibility appears to have been key. Nowadays, the Ministry of Defence has a strategic communication office tasked with coordinating a "one-voice policy within the defence domain."[111] The office is responsible for the coordination of all communications operations within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which includes communicating strategic narratives, public affairs, and psychological operations.

Public relations and public affairs were described as a cornerstone of the Ministry of Defence, but it was not until 18 August 2022 that the Ministry of Defence launched the new Military Media Centre.[112] The centre was described as a "platform that embraces all the media efforts by the defence and security actors in Ukraine," with the purpose of "unifying communications" through "proactive media engagement."

In the same vein, during the inauguration of the centre, the Deputy Minister of Defence, Hanna Maliar, explained the lessons learned from the first chaotic months, and the goals going forward:

> "Since the beginning of the full-scale aggression, we have faced information challenges we have not seen before. However, we managed them and received a unique experience. Becoming a single voice of security and defence forces is our goal. We have to become a reliable source of information in the defence sphere. Together, cooperating and complementing each other, we can show a more voluminous picture of events on the front."

More concretely, the ambition described by the Deputy Minister of Defence translates into engaging with national and international journalists through public briefings, press conferences, access to military personnel, and discussion panels dealing with current developments.

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[111] Several other communications functions are located at the Ministry of Defence; these concern information policies, narrative production, campaign planning, monitoring, target audience analysis, and internal communications.

[112] Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, "Military Media Center Began Its Work in Ukraine's Defence Sphere," Article id. 681 38, August 18, 2022, https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2022/08/18/military-media-center-began-its-work-in-ukraines-defence-sphere/.

At the Armed Forces of Ukraine, one high-ranking communicator told us that, in terms of communications coordination, “in the beginning, we were like orphans: abandoned.” However, all this had gradually changed and when we conducted our interviews in October and November 2022, the overall situation was described as “different,” for the better. “Now, we are in close communication with the Office of the President,” the respondent said and continued to explain that the coordination with the Ministry of Defence had improved, as had the coordination with “the whole sector of security and defence.”

The one-voice policy was also underlined at the Armed Forces of Ukraine. As one respondent explained, “we have been focusing our work on synchronisation, co-operation, and the one-voice principle.” For example, under the Commander in Chief is a strategic communication office that works with coordination with other agencies and the development of narratives for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Armed Forces of Ukraine also has a central press and public affairs office, called the Department of Public Relations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and “almost every regiment has a press office.” Having good relations with “the civil news media under wartime” was underlined as “very important.”

At the Territorial Defence Forces, the beginning of the full-scale invasion was also described as chaotic, although from an organisational point of view. One public affairs specialist and communicator at the Territorial Defence Forces told us about the seemingly impossible task of preparing the organisation for full-scale war. The Territorial Defence Forces was actually only formally created in the beginning of 2022, when the Law of Ukraine, “On the Basics of National Resistance,” entered into force on 1 January. Over a very short timeframe, 25 territorial defence brigades and four operational commands were created. The original plan was to develop the organisation during a period of 2–3 years, that is, to implement proper organisational structures, set up contracts, train conscripts, and so on. On the morning of 24 February, all that changed. The Territorial Defence Forces had to grow from 10,000 full-time soldiers to 120,000, in just a week: “It was a nightmare to grow like this.”

Amidst all this chaos came possibilities. Given that the Territorial Defence Forces was such a young and expanding organisation, they had an urgent need to fill their ranks, and they appear to have done so with ingenious creativity. Great effort was directed towards finding the right people for the right positions: “This was when we started to look for media and communications people in our ranks” to fill positions on the battlefield, as press officers, in communication teams, as well as at the command level. Afterwards, “suddenly, within the Territorial Defence Forces, we had a lot of talented people” and “we have managed to use them.”

Regarding the coordination and synchronisation of communications thorough the one-voice policy, we were told that the Territorial Defence Forces communications channels “don’t run any news stories that haven’t been cleared by Ministry of Defence or the Commander in Chief.” Reports and stories from the front line are double-checked with the ministry; the ministry has continuous briefings with Territorial Defence Forces communications teams: the strategic overhaul is explained, and horizontal communications encouraged. The Territorial Defence Forces has also worked on harmonising their internal communications, from the headquarters to the soldiers in the trenches. During the autumn 2022, when we carried out our interviews, the Territorial Defence Forces had a weekly newspaper and was working with a major Ukrainian logistics company to develop a smartphone application for the soldiers, containing general information and training material.

As argued in the previous chapter, from a strategist's perspective, "one voice" describes the process of coordinating and synchronising communication. However, what we hear and observe is also a polyphonic, bottom-up type of strategic communication. For example, from brigades to squads, there appear to be a relative vast leeway to convey messages and partake in the overall Ukrainian communications effort in digital media.[113]

3.3 Output

In understanding the output of Ukrainian military strategic communication, at least three aspects are central: narratives, framing, and content production.

Narratives are not only about creating stories, but also adapting them to specific target audiences. In our interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, three general target audiences were emphasised: the military and defence sector, Ukrainian society, and the international community (mainly the West).

In line with the one-voice policy, the purpose of communications directed to the Ukrainian population, according to one communicator at the Armed Forces of Ukraine, was to "unite and inspire civilian population to fight the Russian aggression." One of the most consistent communications published by the Ministry of Defence is the daily reporting on Russian losses in social media, which is also accompanied by a quote, usually from military strategists, of humorous comments on life by the cartoon character, Homer Simpson. In contrast, it has been an official strategy to never talk about Ukrainian losses. This highlights the delicate balancing act of strategic communication in wartime, between operational security and deception on the one hand, and openness and transparency on the other. As the same communicator at the Armed Forces of Ukraine put it: "We don't want to share information with the enemy: how we act, what we do, and why. But we can't lie."

However, it is also evident that Ukraine has used narratives to deceive the Russian military. For example, during the summer 2022, Ukraine launched an information operation pushing the narrative of a counteroffensive targeting Kherson, in southern Ukraine. In Western as well as Russian news and social media, speculations about when and how this offensive would happen were soon widespread. The target of the information operation was the Russian military leadership. Apparently convinced that a Ukrainian southern counteroffensive was imminent, the Russian military redeployed troops from the north to the south, leaving the defence of the actual target, Kharkiv oblast in the north, weakened.[114]

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[113] See for example the 3rd separate assault brigade's [3-тя окрема штурмова бригада] YouTube channel.

In addition, it is our understanding Ukrainian journalists did indeed report about the counteroffensive as it happened, but within the limits of military information security management. They used Russian sources for their reports, thus not revealing sensitive information from within Ukraine and creating plausible deniability if the offensive would have failed.

Besides providing numbers on Russian losses, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine experience great demand to participate in the news media to provide strategic overviews and updates on the latest developments from the battlefield. Here, one challenge for them has been to find experts that can communicate relevant information without infringing on operational security, but in a way that is comprehensible for the average citizen (for more on the news media, see Chapter Five). The solution has been to rely on external experts, many with a background in the military, and to feed these experts information in line with the strategic communication goals.

Moreover, similarly to political communications, military communications have continuously published messages and issued statements that show the presence of the leadership, both military and civilian, such as through the speech by Minister of Defence Reznikov, referred to above. In general, the Ministry of Defence has been quite adept in making use of diverse types of communications channels to reach out, in particular to an international audience. On Twitter, the Ministry of Defence has over 1.8 million followers and Reznikov himself has well over 600,000.

At the Armed Forces of Ukraine however, manifesting the presence of the military leadership for the general Ukrainian audience was initially not as obvious. One high-ranking communicator explained how the Armed Forces of Ukraine eventually understood the importance of being present in social media, due to a growing "interest from the public to hear from the military guys." One response to this expressed demand was to by early October 2022 launch a Twitter account for the Commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Beyond being a purely communitive initiative, creating an official account was also a way to counter an increasing number of fake accounts that were spreading disinformation. As a likely proof of the great demand for information from the military leadership, Zaluzhnyi's account had over 250,000 followers on Twitter within a couple of weeks. "It was important for the people to know that the Commander is with the people and what his position is," as the communicator put it.

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[114] Huw Dylan, David V. Gioe, and Joe Littell, "The Kherson Ruse: Ukraine Deception and the Art of Military Deception," Modern War Institute, September 12, 2022, https://mwi.usma.edu/the-kherson-ruse-ukraine-and-the-art-of-military-deception/; Isobel Koshiw, Lorenzo Tondo, and Artem Mazhulin, "Ukraine's Southern Offensive 'Was Designed to Trick Russia," The Guardian, September 10, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/10/ukraines-publicised-southern-offensive-was-disinformation-campaign.

Finally, one central communicative strategy for strengthening morale and resilience in the Ukrainian ranks has been "to tell the stories about our heroes." As discussed in Chapter Two, the heroizing of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians has been part of the government's strategic narratives. All over Ukraine there are billboards with images and names of Ukrainian soldiers under the headline "Ukrainian heroes"; in TV broadcasts, soldiers are given a human face; in social media, various campaigns from the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Territorial Defence Forces tell stories about how 24 February turned the life of average citizens upside down: how the rockstar and the hairdresser overnight became a heroic defender of Ukraine.

To international audiences, Ukrainian military communication has, as has the political communication, focused on amassing support (political and material). One communicator at the Ministry of Defence explained that it has been "a strategic goal to get the world to arm Ukraine" and that Ukraine was using all the communicative tools at hand to "to persuade Western governments." To show gratitude, countless thank you messages to international allies have been posted in social media in the form of slogans, images, and videos, often tailored to address each specific nation's contribution.[115] At the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the Territorial Defence Forces, our respondents have also underscored the importance of transparency in relation to foreign support. One way of both showing and ensuring transparency is to work with international news media and journalists, and allow them to see the materiel at work.[116] However, there have been some controversies regarding unequal access for foreign and domestic news media, with accusations of the Ukrainian authorities favouring the former.[117]

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[115] A video that expresses thanks for Sweden's support is doing so by forwarding the message that Swedes make great investments: it compares the price of the Carl-Gustav anti-tank weapon and the Russian T-90 tank, the point being that 20,000 USD is sufficient to take down a 4,500,000 USD tank. The video is accompanied to the tunes of Abba's "Money, Money, Money." See Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "The art of marketing Swedish-style. How to support the Forces of Good in war and promote the name of your king. Don't stop, dear Swedes. Ukraine still needs your support," Twitter, June 18, 2022, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1538169555108896776. A video that thanks France for its support is framed in a stereotypically French romantic scene accompanied by Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg's song, "Je t'aime moi non plus." See Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "Sophie Marceau… Isabelle Adjani… Brigitte Bardot… Emmanuel Macron! … and CAESARs!" Twitter, October 12, 2022, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1580090899228418048.

[116] This is of particular importance given Russian disinformation claiming that Ukrainians are channelling Western military material to terrorist groups or selling it for profit, instead of using it themselves.

[117] See for example: Isobel Koshiw, "Ukraine's Reporters Adapt Amid Media Restrictions and Pressure of War," *The Guardian*, March 5, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/05/ukraines-reporters-adapt-amid-media-restrictions-and-pressure-of-war.

In terms of communication framing, the Ministry of Defence's social media accounts is a case in point of Ukrainian atypical strategic communication. Their Twitter account is filled with humorous and sarcastic messages, in the form of catchy memes and videos. In our interviews, this type of communication was explained and described as a way of capturing the entire spectrum of what it means to be a human being: someone who loves, hates, is afraid, angry, compassionate, and sees the value in all life, cats and dogs included. The Ministry of Defence's humorous framing is showcased in their banner on their Twitter page. At the time of writing, it depicts a concrete wall with graffiti reading, "Freedom Is Our Religion."[118] One of many viral slogans that has been spreading via the Ministry of Defence's Twitter account is a message that both cherishes international support and adds a threat to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, by saying, "Good evening occupiers! It's HIMARS o'clock!"[119] Such a message is likely aimed to communicate to all major target audiences. For example, it can be understood as a message of strength and morale to Ukraine's own ranks, as a threatening message to Russian troops, and a message to the West that their weapons are being used in an effective manner.

Several of our respondents reflected on the importance of creatively seizing every opportunity to push the information front. For example, on 10 October 2022, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation started to use Iranian-made drones for their strategic, or terror, bombings. Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of Defence's official Twitter account posted a Tweet of a cloud shaped like a hand giving the finger, followed by the text: "More iranian drones and russian missiles have gone the way of the russian warship [sic]."[120] Furthermore, various Ukrainian social media accounts started posting messages directed not at Iran, but to Israel. Convincing Iran to stop providing Russia with drones was most likely seen as a dead end by Ukrainian strategists and communicators; however, this was a chance of aligning Israeli and Ukrainian interests.

Yet another example concerns Russian participation in international sporting events. When discussions arose about allowing Russian athletes to participate in the upcoming Olympics, the Ministry of Defence's Twitter account (1 February 2023) published a video where the first scene depicts a Russian athlete throwing his javelin in a stadium.[121] The next scene shows authentic footage of a Russian cruise missile hitting a Ukrainian apartment building, followed by the hashtag

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[118] The slogan is from a nation-branding campaign used in 2017, when Ukraine hosted the Eurovision Song Contest.

[119] Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "Good evening, occupiers ! It's HIMARS o'clock!," Twitter, November 29, 2022, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1597618889914998786.

[120] Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "More iranian drones and russian missiles have gone the way of the russian warship," Twitter, October 19, 2022, https://twitter.com/defenceu/status/1582747094557020160?lang=ar-x-fm.

[121] Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "Sport is beyond politics, do you have any doubts?," Twitter, February 1, 2023, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1620718986169303041?cxt=HHwWgoDStZfV-f0sAAAA.

"#boycottrussiansports." Five days later, the Ministry of Defence published the news that the Ukrainian figure skater, Dmytro Sharpar, who had participated in the 2016 Youth Olympics, had been killed near Bakhmut.[122] The message: ". . . russia is sending its troops to kill Ukrainians. It also wants to send its athletes to kill the reputation of Olympics. We must stop them from doing both!"

When it comes to content production, the Ministry of Defence has since the start of the full-scale invasion outsourced central parts.[123] External partners in the private sector and in civil society have contributed with expertise in public affairs and public relations to create messages that are adapted to today's information environment. One high-ranking communicator at the Armed Forces of Ukraine explained that after the full-scale invasion, "advertising agencies found me and I received messages from media specialists – PR, IT, and design – that were offering their skills and their time to do something for the Armed Forces of Ukraine." When this type of outsourcing is in play, it is our understanding that this primarily concerns the operational and tactical levels, where the Ministry of Defence still controls the strategic levels as well as approves content created before publication.

Nowadays, another type of content that has been central to this war is military imagery, from satellite images of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation's buildup during 2021 to high-resolution first-person videos of Ukrainian snipers shooting Russian soldiers. As one high-ranking communications advisor at the Armed Forces of Ukraine said, it is a matter of producing content "from the battlefield to Twitter." To do so, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have specific press officers at the front; it is the responsibility of each commander of the fighting units to oversee content production: "I ask them for material and they give it to me."

In our interviews, the Territorial Defence Forces respondents were the ones who elaborated most on how they organise their content production. One high-ranking officer told us that at the strategic level, "we create a matrix of communication strategies, like key messages" then "find local stories and proof on the local level." A lot of the content is produced "in-house and on battalion levels" and part of the production is run by "talented professionals." For example, the Territorial Defence Forces had three video production teams who travelled to combat zones at the time of our interviews. The teams were made up of "top-level journalists, prominent TV and paper journalists, and anchors." Instead of seeking to control them, the officer explained, "we let them do what they do best, but just for us!" Moreover, the Territorial Defence Forces had worked intensively to create partnerships with commercial actors, for example film companies who had been given access to the Territorial Defence Forces, so that its voice is heard not only through their own production, but also via movies and documentaries.

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[122] Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (@DefenceU), "Ukrainian figure skater Dmytro Sharpar was killed near Bakhmut. Before the war Dmytro participated in the Youth Olympic Games. russia is sending its troops to kill Ukrainians. It also wants to send its athletes to kill the reputation of Olympics. We must stop them from doing both!" Twitter, February 6, 2023, https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1622642023697088517.

[123] See, for example, Mehul Srivastava, Christopher Miller, and Roman Olearchyk, "'Trolling Helps Show the King Has no Clothes': How Ukraine's Army Conquered Twitter," *Financial Times*, October 14, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/b07224e1-414c-4fbd-8e2f-cfda052f7bb2.

The output of military strategic communication has, as has the communication from the entire Ukrainian communications apparatus, been transformed into a brand in its own right. And it is significantly different from its adversary's style of communication. As discussed in Chapter Two, reliability and transparency has been of crucial importance for the political leadership. This is also the case for the military strategic communication. As one communicator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it, it is a matter of showing "the importance of all human lives, the Geneva Convention, and our commitment to international law."

3.4 Success

The explicit success factors that were mentioned during the interviews were the following: proactive and reliable communications and resource optimisation, and external support. First, several respondents underlined the importance of staying ahead of Russian activities in the information environment, since, as mentioned above, they did not consider that debunking Russian disinformation and propaganda works. Instead, proactive and reliable communications appeared to be key. A high-ranking communications agent at the Ministry of Defence confidently declared that "we are the winners in the information war," since "we've succeeded on three points": "early revelations of Russian operations"; "quick response to all Russian fakes"; and "audiences. . . we've managed to spread the truth with facts."

This effort to come out ahead of Russian information operations with the help of quick, reliable, and transparent communications, not least with the help of intelligence, can also be seen in the international arena. Leading up to the full-scale invasion, the United States publicly released intelligence indicating that Russia was about to launch the invasion. Publicly disclosing what earlier have been considered secrets has been referred to as a "new intelligence playbook" to not only publicly reveal Russian plans, but also to "stymie" Russia and align support for Ukraine.[124] Indeed, one arguable effect of this proactive communication was that the narrative framing for target audiences in Ukraine and in the West was established before the fact. When Russian missiles and tanks crossed the Ukrainian boarder, there were little doubt about what was going on.

Second, one reoccurring success factor mentioned repeatedly in all our interviews is resource optimisation. Above, we discussed how the Territorial Defence Forces found a creative solution to filling its ranks with communications specialists. The experience of one high-ranking communications officer is however worth mentioning. During our interview, the officer explained that “since we all have communications backgrounds, we know what platforms and content work for different audiences.” Having a long background in the private PR sector, the officer added: “Internationally award-winning producers. . . now, people like this are soldiers,” and concluded, “I would never have dreamed of having such a team that I have here.”

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[124] See Julian E. Barnes and Adam Entous, "How the U.S. Adopted a New Intelligence Playbook to Expose Russia's War Plans," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/us/politics/intelligence-russia-us-ukraine-china.html..

Finally, cooperation and coordination with external actors, be it from the private sector, civil society, or international states and non-governmental organisations, appears to have been pivotal for many state agencies’ capabilities. At the Ministry of Defence, we were told that keeping up with the high pace demanded by publishing new information (which at the beginning of the full-scale invasion was every fourth hour), would not have been possible without help from external translators.

3.5 Challenges

From the perspective of military communications, two major challenges arose during our interviews: operational security and Russian information warfare. Operational security relates to the challenge of communicating reliable and transparent information while not giving away or compromising sensitive information. This challenge also relates to the soldiers on the battlefield, where sloppy usage of private communications devices can reveal troop locations and sensitive information. One communicator at the Armed Forces of Ukraine explained that “we don’t have enough regulations for this issue.” At the same time, the communicator explained that the Armed Forces of Ukraine had decided not to rush through new regulations, since the issue is a matter of freedom of speech, even for soldiers: “Restricting this [freedom of speech and communications] for soldiers should be based on very solid ground. . . it’s a very sensitive issue.” So far, “we use our internal communications to explain why it’s dangerous to share certain type of information.”[125]

A high-ranking communications officer at the Territorial Defence Forces emphasised that “it’s an online war; strategically we have to be very careful to keep the balance between keeping people informed and not violating security or endangering operations.” The officer reasoned, however, that “there’s a lot of people to control and you cannot control all of them”; nevertheless, “it is important to explain the guidelines to the soldiers [via memos, information, newspaper].” The point here was pedagogical, that the issue was “not only about the dos and don’ts, but also the reasoning behind that.” On a positive note, the officer saw a benefit in letting soldiers produce content since “the closer to the frontlines” content is produced, “the better people understand the reasons” for what they are fighting for.

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[125] Other accounts of how mobile phones were used before the full-scale invasion describe that soldiers at the front in Donbas were forbidden to use social media, with various results. See Irina Shklovski and Volker Wulf, “The Use of Private Mobile Phones at War: Accounts From the Donbas Conflict,” in *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–13, Montreal QC, Canada, ACM, April 2018, https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173960.

At the Armed Forces of Ukraine, another positive aspect relating to the relative few regulations was mentioned. Armed Forces of Ukraine soldiers producing content might create "an information overload" for the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, which might drain their resources and divert their focus from other issues.

When it came to our discussing Russian information warfare, the Ministry of Defence communicated an overall positive stance. For example, "Russia failed to influence our military; our military is still fighting!" Regarding civilians, "when Russia tried to spread panic among our civilians, they failed. Our society is very united, much more so than before." However, this does not mean that the information battle has been won. "We are experiencing huge information campaigns against our population"; the campaigns have the aim of reaching "all type of audiences in our country," as well as "international audiences." The military had been targeted by "information-psychological campaigns" and a lot of "Russian information resources is spent on social media and websites."[126]

At the Armed Forces of Ukraine, we were told that the targeting of commanders and soldiers, directly or indirectly, by Russian information warfare was indeed a real problem. First, "the most vulnerable audience to Russian influence, it's the relatives of the soldiers." Russian agents localise "mothers and wives of soldiers who have been recently mobilised [also POWs]" and feed them narratives saying that their sons and husbands "are cannon fodder and the like." Their point is to nudge the relatives to speak out publicly to lower morale and trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the political leadership. Another issue that was brought up is how Russian influence operations make use of Ukrainian miscommunication. For example, there have apparently been some misunderstandings regarding the mobilisation of soldiers to the Territorial Defence Forces. One communicator explained: "Many guys were assured that they were supposed to fight near their houses. Not on the frontline in the East and the South." When these "guys" were sent to the front, "the Russians made material targeting this." Finally, ordinary soldiers are said to be targeted by various forms of psychological operations; they are particularly "vulnerable when they don't have rotations and enough rest."

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[126] See: EU vs Disinfo, "Still at War: Russia's Disinformation Targeting Ukraine," November 7, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/still-at-war-russias-disinformation-targeting-ukraine/#; 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*, May 5, 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/; Romansky, *The Parallel Front*; Watling et al, *Preliminary Lessons*.

3.6 Conclusions

Conditions. The events of 2014 meant that Ukraine received some hard-learned lessons that forced their armed forces to reform. This work had been marked by a generational shift and the rebuilding of trust vis-à-vis the public.

Resources. The respondents at the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces all described that the beginning of the full-scale invasion was a chaotic situation. Respondents told us that strategic communication and the one-voice policy were communications capabilities in the making. This situation necessitated creative solutions, resource optimisation, and cooperation with actors outside of the defence sector. Moreover, our respondents described military's information security management in terms of censorship as a necessity justifying the means, and that it so far has been a potent weapon in the information environment.

Output. Similarly to the office of the President and other civil state bodies, the military strategic communication has been making full use of the contemporary digital information environment in a polyphonic manner. The output has been directed at different target audiences but is in general marked by ambivalent and sardonic communications to the Russian and international audiences, while being informative and heroizing for the benefit of the national audience.

Success. As underlined by our respondents, proactive communications is an important and successful tool to proactively revealing Russian deceptive communications. Another success factor, from our point of view, is resource optimisation, making full use of civilian communications capabilities, both through enlisted citizens with a PR background and in cooperation with the private sector and civil society.

Challenges. The most apparent challenges for the Ukrainian communications apparatus are operational security and censorship in terms of longevity. For how long can free speech be infringed upon before its undermining becomes a new normal? Another set of challenges derive from Russian information warfare and its potential effects within Ukrainian society and abroad.

4 The News Media

On the evening of 16 February 2022, Ukraine was marking a day of defiance and unity. The Russian invasion that had been predicted for that day had not materialised. To mark the non-occasion of war, President Zelensky had announced a "day of unity,"[127] and a number of TV channels pooled their resources to produce a show together that, in the words of one of our respondents involved in the unified broadcast, would "talk about this massive aggression that did not happen."

A little more than a week later, the aggression happened. The collective sigh of relief of 16 February was premature. But the events of the 16th had also turned out to be a rehearsal for one of wartime Ukraine's more consequential media events: the creation of the "United News" format, the unification of Ukraine's main TV channels into a daily, single, hours-long news broadcast focused on the war.[128]

Ukraine's media landscape has been impacted in numerous ways by the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022. Collapsing advertising revenue has led to serious economic challenges for many outlets. The needs and behaviour of the audience have shifted, with millions of Ukrainians under attack, fleeing, or living under occupation. In addition, with the very existence of Ukraine on the line, the state has taken numerous drastic measures – such as military censorship and centralising news production – to control the flow of information through the country's media.

In this chapter, we do not analyse the wartime media landscape in Ukraine as a whole. Instead, we focus on two of the major aspects of that landscape: the "United News," and Ukrainian Public Broadcasting. Our data is primarily based on interviews with representatives from the media sector: an executive from Ukrainian Public Broadcasting, as well as journalists and representatives of the media watchdog, NGO Detector Media.

4.1 Conditions

The Ukrainian media landscape has been in flux ever since the country's independence in 1991.[129] However, in the years between the Revolution of Dignity of 2013–

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[127] Darya Korsunskaya and Natalia Zinets, "Ukraine president calls for 'day of unity' for Feb. 16, day some believe Russia could invade," *Reuters*, February 15, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-hints-concessions-russia-scholz-heads-region-2022-02-14/.

[128] Max Goldbart, "Ukraine: Media Groups Join Together For 'United News' & Urge World To Turn Off Russian Channels," *Deadline*, February 26, 2022, https://deadline.com/2022/02/ukraine-media-groups-join-together-for-united-news-urge-world-to-turn-off-russian-channels-1234960684/.

[129] See, for example, Natalya Ryabinska, "The Media Market and Media Ownership in Post-Communist Ukraine – Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 6 (2011): 3–20, https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216580601; Marta Dyczok, "Was Kuchma's Censorship Effective? Mass Media in Ukraine Before 2004," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 2 (2006): 215–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500481386; Dariya Orlova, "Ukrainian Media after the EuroMaidan: In Search of Independence and Professional Identity," *Publizistik* 61 (2016): 441–461,

2014 and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, three defining features can be noted. One is the dominance of oligarch-controlled media companies in television, which traditionally has been by far the most important source of information and entertainment in Ukraine.[130] Another is the rapid growth of online media as an alternative public space, and especially Telegram.[131] Thirdly, the state increased its activities to reform the media landscape, not least by replacing state-run media outlets with public broadcasting (as well as privatising many state-owned media assets).[132]

In addition, the state took several steps during these years to restrict the influence of Russia in the Ukrainian information space. In 2014, Russian television channels were blocked from broadcasting;[133] in 2016, a number of Russian journalists were banned from entering Ukraine;[134] and, in 2017, popular Russian online networks were blocked, among them VK, at the time the most popular social network in Ukraine.[135] Beyond these moves aimed directly at Russian outlets, platforms and journalists, in February 2021 the Zelensky government shut down three Ukrainian TV channels – ZIK, NewsOne, and 112 – linked to the Kremlin through the Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk.[136] This was justified, President Zelensky said at the time, by the need to "fight against the danger of Russian aggression in the information space." Zelensky also added: "This is by no means an attack on freedom of speech; this is a well-founded decision to protect national security."[137]

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https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-016-0282-8; Roman Horbyk, "In pursuit of kairos: Ukrainian journalists between agency and structure during Euromaidan", *Baltic Worlds, 12*, no. 1 (2019), 4-19.

[130] The four main conglomerates are StarLightMedia, owned by Viktor and Olena Pinchuk; 1+1 Media, owned by Ihor Kolomoiskiy; Inter Media, co-owned by Dmytro Firtash, Valeriy Khoroshkovsky and Serhiy Liovochkin; and Media Group Ukraine, founded and owned by Rinat Akhmetov. Taken together, the channels controlled by these four conglomerates before the war captured nearly 76 percent of the television audience between them. See Jacob Hedenskog and Mattias Hjelm, "Propaganda by proxy: Ukrainian oligarchs, TV and Russia's influence," FOI memo 7312, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, Stockholm, 2020, https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%207312; Anna Korbut, "Strengthening public interest in Ukraine's media sector," *Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Report,* 2021, p. 8, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021-04-23-ukraines-media-sector-korbut.pdf; Orlova, "Ukrainian media," p. 452–453.

[131] Korbut, "Strengthening public interest," p. 8; Orlova, "Ukrainian media," p. 451.

[132] Orlova, "Ukrainian media," p. 451–2.

[133] Reuters, "Ukraine bans Russian TV channels for airing war 'propaganda,'" August 14, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-television-idUSKBN0GJ1QM20140819.

[134] Shaun Walker, "Ukraine bans Russian journalists accused of 'stirring hatred'," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/02/ukraine-bans-russian-journalists-margarita-simonyan.

[135] Andrew Roth, "In new sanctions list, Ukraine targets Russian social-media sites," *Washington Post,* May 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-new-sanctions-list-ukraine-blocks-russian-social-media-sites/2017/05/16/a982ab4e-3a16-11e7-9e48-c4f199710b69_story.html.

[136] Peter Dickinson, "Analysis: Ukraine bans Kremlin-linked TV channels," *Atlantic Council*, February 5, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/analysis-ukraine-bans-kremlin-linked-tv-channels/.

[137] The President of Ukraine, "President of Ukraine Met with the Ambassadors of the G7 and the European Union," *Official Website of the President of Ukraine*, February 3, 2021, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-ukrayini-zustrivsya-z-poslami-krayin-g7-ta-yevroso-66353.

The history of the creation of public broadcasting in Ukraine is long and convoluted.[138] Through a number of initiatives and political setbacks, the process accelerated after 2014 and eventually came to fruition on January 19, 2017, when the public joint-stock company, National Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine, was registered as a legal entity,[139] generally known as "Suspilne" (Ukr. *Суспільне*, "Public"). The era dating back to Soviet times, when there was direct state control of an important part of the Ukrainian broadcasting system, was over (even though the parliamentary channel, "RADA," remains). "We were trying to catch the last train in democracy," as one of our respondents, a high-ranking executive at Suspilne, put it.

In the years that followed, Suspilne broadcasted three national television channels and 24 regional channels, with a similar structure for radio. In addition, in early 2020, Suspilne launched a new digital platform for news, Suspilne News.[140] However, throughout its existence, the state has underfunded Suspilne, compared with the revenues it should receive by law.[141] "The government never gave us a full budget," said the executive. "But they ask where is the result, where are the ratings, why are you not efficient? The situation didn't change with new president."

4.2 Resources

After Russia's full-scale invasion, all private Ukrainian media, and especially television, suffered catastrophic losses of revenue, due to the collapse of the advertising market.[142] The challenges were especially pronounced for oligarch-controlled media, as they had generally not been profitable even before the war.[143] In addition, private regional media were also hit very hard.[144] There have been closures, layoffs and reduced salaries across the media sector.

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[138] For a very thorough history of this process, see Natalia Lyhachova (ed.), *Public Broadcasting in Ukraine: History of Creation and Challenges* (Kyiv: Detector Media, 2018), https://detector.media/php_uploads/files/books/ua-suspilne_en.pdf.

[139] Lychanova (ed.), *Public Broadcasting*, p. 116.

[140] Korbut, "Strengthening Public Interest," p. 18–19.

[141] "The law states that 0.2 percent of the country's total budget expenditure in the previous year should be allocated to the public broadcaster in the following year. However, it received around half of that sum in 2018 and 2019. For now, funding depends on the political will of the government and parliament to draft and approve a budget. Parliament slashed the 2019 budget for Suspilne, despite harsh criticism from the media community, civil society and international organisations. The 2020 budget initially allocated the highest annual sum yet to Suspilne, but it was still around 15 percent below the funding originally promised, and budget sequestration in response to the COVID-19 crisis led to further cuts"; see Korbut, "Strengthening Public Interest," p. 21.

[142] Kateryna Boyko and Roman Horbyk, "Swarm Communication in a Totalizing War: Media Infrastructures, Actors and Practices in Ukraine during the 2022 Russian Invasion," unpublished manuscript, March 2023.

[143] Natalia Dankova, "Що відбувається з медіабізнесом Ріната Ахметова?" [What Is Happening with Rinat Akhmetov's Media Business?], *Detector Media*, July 12, 2022, https://detector.media/rinok/article/200916/2022-07-12-shcho-vidbuvaietsya-z-mediabiznesom-rinata-akhmetova/.

[144] See, for example, Natalia Dankova, "Як виживають газети і журнали під час війни. Сім історій із різних кінців України" [How Newspapers and Magazines Survive During the War. Seven Stories

For public broadcasting, the war has also been a challenge economically, but less so than for private media companies. According to the public broadcasting executive, the government decreased Suspilne's revenue by ten percent in 2022, and would decrease it by another 20 percent in 2023. "But we have other problems. We have money on paper, but we do not get the actual money," the executive said. "However, we have stability with the salaries for our employees. We also increased the support from [international] donors dramatically. This gives us an opportunity. I see a chance that public broadcasting will be stronger than the private companies."

In addition to economic and structural challenges for media-producing companies, the full-scale war also meant increased efforts of information security management on the part of the Ukrainian state. In any wartime environment, the states involved try in different ways to control the information flowing through the media.[145] Ukraine is no exception. On 23 February, President Zelensky issued a decree introducing a state of emergency in Ukraine, which among other things included a "ban on the production and dissemination of information materials that may destabilise the situation."[146] The day after, martial law was introduced,[147] followed in early March by an order from the Commander in Chief to implement military censorship.[148]

Altogether, the above described factors seem to have played into a decision taken on 24 February to create the "United News" format (Ukr. "*Єдині новини*," often also referred to as the TV "marathon" or "telethon"). In practice, this meant that the resources of the four major commercial television networks, together with Suspilne, were pooled to do a unified broadcast aired simultaneously on all five main channels.

How this decision was actually made seems to be in some dispute. "The official version is that the media companies launched [the "marathon"]," said the Suspilne

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from Different Parts of Ukraine], *Detector Media*, May 28, 2022, https://detector.media/rinok/article/199558/2022-05-28-yak-vyzhyvayut-gazety-i-zhurnaly-pid-chas-viyny-sim-istoriy-iz-riznykh-kintsiv-ukrainy/.

[145] See, for example, Philip Seib, *Information at War – Journalism, Disinformation and Modern Warfare* (London: Polity, 2021), p. 42–43.

[146] President of Ukraine, "Указ Президента України №63/2022 – Про введення надзвичайного стану в окремих регіонах України" [Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 63/2022 – On the Introduction of a State of Emergency in Certain Regions of Ukraine], Official Website of the President of Ukraine, February 23, 2022, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/632022-41393.

[147] The President of Ukraine, "Указ Президента України №64/2022 – Про введення воєнного стану в Україні" [Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 64/2022 – About the Introduction of Martial Law in Ukraine], Official Website of the President of Ukraine, February 24, 2022, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/642022-41397.

[148] Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "Order, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine – About the Organization of Interaction Between the Armed Forces of Ukraine, other Components of Defence Forces and Representatives of Mass Media During the Legal Regime of Martial Law," Official Website of the Ministry of Defence in Ukraine, March 3, 2022, https://www.mil.gov.ua/content/zmi/ORDER%2073-English.pdf.

executive. “But it was a situation from both sides [both the government and the companies].” Another respondent, a journalist and host who worked with “United News” from the first day, said:

> “I have no answer [who started it]. You get different answers depending on whom you ask. From the President and the government, it was the idea of the government. To have one voice from the government and the state in the information war. From TV managers you hear another version, that it was a proposal from managers of the big TV channels: let’s do this together. Probably [the truth] is somewhere between these two points. In any case, it was very important that on February 16 we had this experience [of doing a joint broadcast] for all of Ukraine. That is why it was easier on the 24th to do this together.”

Whatever happened, it is clear that the media companies had their own reasons to work together: practical, but also patriotic. The Suspline executive said:

> “When the war started, we all tried to contact the same speakers, and we quickly understood we need to unite. We also had different strengths. One private media group has a big network [of reporters] in Europe. We have wide regional network. We also have a resource centre in Lviv, that we could rent out to other companies. Now it is not a situation about competition, we’re together. We unite our minds and our resources to defeat aggression.”

However, it was only by late March 2022 that an official decision was made by the state in relation to the “United News.” On 18 March, the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (NSDC) decided to implement a “unified information policy in the conditions of martial law,” pointing to the “direct military aggression by the Russian Federation, the active dissemination by the aggressor state of disinformation, distortion of information, as well as the justification or denial of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.” [149] The decision gave the Ukrainian broadcasting regulator a mission to unify “all national TV channels, the programming content of which consists mainly of information and/or information and analytical programs on a single information platform of strategic communication,” that is, the “United News” platform. In practice, this decision means that the unified broadcast will continue until the government decides otherwise.

Apart from formalising the “United News” format, the NSDC’s decision had another noteworthy repercussion. In April 2022, three TV channels, Priamyi, 5 Kanal, and Espreso, tied to the former president, Petro Poroshenko, were disconnected from digital broadcasting.[150] The authorities pointed to the NSDC decision as the reason, since the three channels were not part of the "United News."[151] However, representatives of the channels argued that they had wanted to be part of the platform, but had not been invited. Some critics said that the real reason for the decision was political, as Poroshenko is the main rival of President Zelensky.[152]

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[149] National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (NSDC), “Щодо реалізації єдиної інформаційної політики в умовах воєнного стану” [Regarding the Implementation of a Unified Information Policy in the Conditions of Martial Law], National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, March 18, 2022, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/n0004525-22#Text.

[150] Detector Media, “Мономарафон. Чому влада припинила мовлення 5 каналу, Прямого та ‘Еспресо’” [Monomarathon. Why the Authorities Stopped Broadcasting Channel 5, Pryamoy and ‘Espresso’], April 19, 2022, https://detector.media/infospace/article/198512/2022-04-19-monomarafon-chomu-vlada-prypynyla-movlennya-5-kanalu-pryamogo-ta-espreso/.

4.3 Output

According to our respondents, the programming of the "United News" has been very much of a work in progress. This is how one respondent, a veteran journalist who worked as a host for the broadcast from its earliest days, described his first day with the "United News":

> "On the 25th, I come to the TV studio, and the marathon had started. I sit down before the camera, and have five or six hours on the air. All of Ukraine look at me, and I have to talk. My job was to talk to people about what was going on in Ukraine, what was going on with the war. It was my hardest challenge ever. We had no information, and we had to keep military secrets. We started to try, day by day, we do it better and better. We found phone numbers, soldiers, commanders, parliamentarians, political specialist, economic specialists, day by day we do this five–six hours of marathon."

In addition, the tone of the broadcast proved a challenge. Said the same host:

> "The first day was very emotional, and this was not good. TV and other media is multiplier of emotions. When people see you being very emotional, they become so too. That's why it is important to be optimistic, positive, and calm. If they see the TV presenters being calm, they stay calm too. We did not do this first days and weeks. But now this is what we do."

According to the respondents, the "United News" is not the most popular programme on Ukrainian television – some channels only do light programming and entertainment, and have a higher viewership (apart from the fact that social media has rapidly been overtaking television as the number one information source, especially for younger Ukrainians). But, according to one respondent, "the marathon provides 60 or 70 percent of all official information about the situation of the war and the economy. Even if you don't watch it personally, you will get information originating in the marathon in your information feed."

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[151] Detector Media, "Держспецзв'язку: Цифровий ефір «Еспресо», Прямого та 5 каналу відключили на виконання рішення РНБО" [State Special Communications: Espresso, Direct and Channel 5 Digital Broadcasts Were Turned Off in Compliance with the Decision of the National Security Council], May 9, 2022, https://detector.media/infospace/article/199070/2022-05-09-derzhspetszvyazku-tsyfrovyy-efir-espreso-pryamogo-ta-5-kanalu-vidklyuchyly-na-vykonannya-rishennya-rnbo/.

[152] Detector Media, "Мономарафон" ["Monomarathon"].

As for the role of the state in the broadcast, the relationship between journalism and the restrictions of martial law and military censorship appear fluid and complicated. According to the TV host:

> Some type of coordination is done, but I don't know how. My producers tell us there is a conference, where representatives from all TV groups and the government meet. They talk about the main topics [we plan to cover on air]. But we haven't had any representatives of the ministries [come to the] TV station. Instead, we feel what we can do, and we feel what we must not say.

The TV host underlined that it is more a matter of self-censorship than any kind of government intervention:

> "I don't have any outside censors that sit down near me, telling me you must say this and that. Instead, there is a self-censor inside me as a journalist at this moment. There could be incidents where journalists would talk about something happening on the front, and as a result some Ukrainian soldiers could die. That's what we fear, and that's why Ukrainian journalists have this deep and aggressive self-censor inside."

Public broadcasting, with its pre-existing connections to government, is in this view in a special position. "All governments always try to control public broadcasting; there is always a conversation ongoing," said the Suspilne executive. But in general, he continued, the current government has accepted Suspilne and its independence: "I can't imagine [the minister] saying you need to do something." As for the military censorship, said the respondent: "We understand we have some restrictions, like that we have to wait for three hours before we report where a bomb hit. Our big challenge is staying independent, and check that military censorship doesn't turn into political censorship." In his view, however, there are mechanisms in place in the "United News" format that can stop this from happening: "In this marathon there are five different editorial teams. If one would report something that looks like censorship, all will know about it. In this era of social media, it will be a big scandal right away."

The media watchdog, NGO Detector Media, which keeps track of the political representation on air, among other things, has continuously monitored the "United News" broadcasts.[153] According to one of our respondents at Detector Media, this monitoring has proved contentious:

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[153] See, among many other reports: Ihor Kulias, *The Results of the United News Telethon Monitoring for Half a Year (March — September 2022) Part One* (Kyiv: Detector Media, 2022), https://en.detector.media/post/the-results-of-the-united-news-telethon-monitoring-for-half-a-year-march-september-2022-part-one.

> "It was a tough decision to start the monitoring. Early on it was complicated, even journalists said this was not the time for criticism, that we should unite all our efforts and that this feedback was not good during the war. Our position is clear: quality media is a building block of democracy. And the more we did it, the less criticism we had."

Suspilne was the broadcaster most open to changing its approach, said the respondent: "Suspilne was very positive about the monitoring, even giving us follow-up questions. They took our monitoring into account in their work."

4.4 Successes

The overall effect of the "United News" platform is hard to assess, but one study of wartime media in Ukraine saw it as "a powerful tool to demonstrate the unity of the nation."[154] The monitoring mentioned above concluded that the first six months of "United News" had "painted an informative picture for the audience every day." [155] There were, however, some questions about a number of sensitive topics being omitted, among them the disconnection of the Poroshenko TV channels, which could have been the result of either self-censorship or "getting some advice from the top." What had actually happened was unclear: "There is no evidence for this or that," the report concluded. Indeed, the study mentioned above saw "United News" as a powerful tool to demonstrate unity, while also warning that it has the potential to be "hazardous for the freedom of speech and pluralism."[156]

Beyond the effects of "United News" itself, it is clear that the state interventions in the media sphere, both in the years before 2022 and since the full-scale invasion, have had a major effect in supressing the consumption of both Russia-produced and pro-Kremlin media content in Ukraine.[157]

In addition to the national broadcast on "United News," Suspilne's strong regional network has proven a very important resource in a time of consolidation and centralisation in the commercial media sector. "For example in April, when Chernihiv, Sumy and Charkiv were surrounded by Russian troops, we were the only broadcaster on the ground," said the Suspilne executive. "We shared our journalism with all media. In that case, it is not about competition, but about spreading information that people need."

Apart from television, Suspilne has also managed two other platforms that have proved important during the war. One is radio, which by tradition has a limited audience in Ukraine, and especially talk radio, where Suspilne has little competition. "Radio has been very important," said the executive. "In occupied territories, in Bucha, in Izium, radio was for many the only source of information." The executive also pointed to the enormous traffic jams of people leaving Kyiv on the first day of the full-scale invasion as an occasion when radio played a major role in providing people in their cars with reliable information. "On that first day of war, we switched on AM transmitters that can't be jammed, which means you always can turn on your radio. In occupied territories, radio is also very important. In Kherson, Russia switched off Ukrainian radio and TV, and switched on Russian channels. As a reply, we increased our [transmission] capacity from Mykolaiv."[158]

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

[155] Kulias, *The results*.

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

[157] Yevgeniy Golovchenko, "Fighting Propaganda with Censorship: A study of the Ukrainian Ban on Russian Social Media," *Journal of Politics* 2, vol. 84 (2022): 639–654; Korbut, "Strengthening Public Interest," p. 11.

Finally, Suspilne has found what might be its biggest success in digital media, where the regional content again has been key. According to the executive,

> "Before the war, our Telegram channel had about 30,000 subscribers. Now we have about 1,2 million. This is because of information we can share in the regions. Very quickly you get messages about things that are happening. For many people, it is a question of survival, not of media consumption. Some of our regional Telegram channels now have more subscribers than popular Kyiv media."

4.5 Challenges

As detailed above, the challenges for Ukrainian media are plentiful: economic, structural and political. For the "United News" platform, the challenge most commonly mentioned was, as one respondent put it: "How long should it last?" All our respondents generally understood and supported the creation of the platform, but the question was when this centralisation of media would become detrimental to the Ukrainian democracy, if the war drags on.

This question about the relationship between the state and the media has been further brought to the fore since our interviews by the introduction of a new media law in December 2022. While the government says the new law brings Ukraine in line with EU regulations, and helps the country fight Russian propaganda, critics view it as a potential tool to censor media critical of the incumbent government.[159]

Another challenge for the "United News" is how to, in practical terms, handle the information relating to the military and the military situation in the country. Said the host involved in the production:

> "It is hard to speak with the military as a journalist. When we have soldiers and commanders [on the show], we can't talk about many things, because of the censorship. My audience want to know what is going on in Kherson, or Zaporizhzhia, but it's top secret. We have to talk

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[158] In addition, reports indicate that radio was an important and reliable source of information during the blackouts of the Russian bombing campaign targeting electricity infrastructure in the fall of 2022, see for example: Tetiana Maloholovchuk-Skrypchenko, "How Ukraine is Adapting to Frequent Blackouts," *Emerging Europe*, December 27, 2022, https://emerging-europe.com/voices/how-ukraine-is-adapting-to-frequent-blackouts/.

[159] Oleg Sukhov, "New Media Law: Tool to Fight Russian Propaganda or Censorship Attempt?" *Kyiv Independent*, February 10, 2023, https://kyivindependent.com/national/new-media-law-tool-to-fight-russian-propaganda-or-censorship-attempt.

> around these issues, and instead talk about Russian troops and Russian weapons. The audience want to see military men and women on TV. But we can't do this clearly, we can't be open."

For Suspilne, a broadcaster that in many ways has proven its worth during the first year of full-scale war, the challenge is an intensified version of that of public broadcasting everywhere: getting the resources from the state that are necessary to stay relevant to the general public, while keeping enough distance to that very same state.

4.6 Conclusions

Conditions. The years leading up to 2022 saw the Ukrainian state working to reshape the media and information landscapes. A public broadcasting system was created, while Russian and Russia-related media were to an increasing extent shut out from Ukraine. At the same time, media consumption changed, in that television's dominance was to an increasing extent challenged by digital media.

Resources. The full-scale invasion brought massive changes to Ukrainian media. Economic challenges, especially for commercial media, together with a state of emergency and martial law, led to the centralisation of television news production in the form of the "United News" platform. At the same time, the role of public broadcasting grew, especially in the regional news space.

Output. The "United News" platform has been a work in progress, and is balancing the wishes and needs of the state with journalistic integrity and the trust of the audience. Much of this balancing appears to be done through self-censorship by the journalists involved, rather than direct state involvement.

Successes. The creation of the "United News" platform, together with the closing off of the Ukrainian media landscape from Russian and Russia-related media, appear to have had a substantial effect on streamlining how the war and its effects are reported in Ukraine. In addition, the war has shown the strength of a public broadcasting system, with its different funding streams, as well as different tasks compared to commercial media, especially in the areas of regional news and radio.

Challenges. Going forward, the main challenge for the "United News" platform, as well as for public broadcasting, is how to continue balancing the interests of the state with independence and journalistic integrity. Reporting on the military and the military situation in the war is a concrete example of this.

5 Civil Society

In the early hours of 8 October 2022, a massive explosion struck the Kerch Bridge, connecting the occupied Crimean Peninsula with Russia. Only a few hours later, a video was posted on social media showing a group of people wildly celebrating and singing loudly in what looked like a pub. The words of the catchy chant are a bit difficult to make out by themselves, but the video is captioned: “Kerch bridge on fire! Your defence is terrified!”[160]

The celebration became a viral sensation, and has since been viewed millions of times. The only catch is that the revellers were not actually singing about the Kerch Bridge. The video was originally filmed during a gathering of fans of the British football team Wigan Athletic, who in 2016 were singing about their team’s favourite forward. The actual lyrics are “Will Grigg’s on fire! Your defence is terrified.”[161]

What happened six years later was that a supporter of the Ukrainian war effort masterfully applied what researchers call “the McGurk effect.” This is a form of “multisensory integration,” where “an acoustic utterance is heard as another utterance when presented with discrepant visual articulation” (which, in simpler terms, means that you hear “Kerch bridge” because you read “Kerch bridge,” even though the actual lyrics are “Will Grigg’s”).[162]

What happened on 8 October 2022 was also a perfect example of the role of civil society in Ukraine’s efforts on the information front. The swiftness with which the Kerch Bridge video was posted, its ingenuity and impact, are all typical examples of how civil society holds a very special role in these efforts. Different actors based in civil society bring essential capabilities, not only filling in where Ukrainian state capacity is lacking, but also offering knowledge, experience, and production skills that would be difficult for any state to quickly organise, even under the best of circumstances.

Ukrainian civil society is in many ways unique. Voluminous research has detailed how the revolutions of the past 20 years, and especially the Euromaidan/Revolution of Dignity of 2013–2014, spurred an “unseen [. . .] mobilisation of Ukraine’s society,” leading to the creation of “a wide network of civic activists and initiatives.”[163] As Ukrainian state institutions began to consolidate following the upheaval of 2014, and as Russia annexed Crimea and the war in Donbas began, a deep and complex relationship between the Ukrainian state and civil society developed, not least in the broad field of wartime communications.[164] This development forms the basis of civil society's important role in what since the full-scale Russian invasion has truly become a whole-of-society communication effort.

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[160] Saint Javelin (@saintjavelin), “Kerch Bridge on fire! Your defence is terrified, na na na na na na,” Twitter, October 8, 2022, https://twitter.com/saintjavelin/status/1578728315044892672.

[161] Krimola, “Will Grigg’s on Fire – Best Football Chant Ever,” YouTube, May 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOpGCGtCVsE.

[162] Kaisa Tiippana, “What Is the McGurk Effect?” *Frontiers of Psychology* 5 (2014), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00725.

[163] Natalia Shapovalova and Olga Burlyuk, “Civil Society and Change in Ukraine Post-Euromaidan: An Introduction,” in *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Revolution to Consolidation*, ed. Natalia Shapovalova and Olga Burlyuk, (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2018), 11–40, p. 11.

However, the involvement of such a broad spectrum of society also carries a lesson that goes beyond the unique character and history of Ukrainian civil society. Our research shows that the patriotism and engagement of civilians following a military attack is a communication force to be reckoned with, especially in an era of social media and digitised media production. If this force can be harnessed, it can bring substantial benefits to the struggle on the information front. In the case of Ukraine, the existing civil society structures have been a way to channel this force.

This chapter details and analyses the role of civil society in Ukrainian communication efforts. Our data comes primarily from interviews with key actors in the field, mainly high-ranking representatives of a number of Ukrainian civil society organisations.

5.1 Conditions

The expansion of Ukrainian civil society in and since 2014 spurred activity in many different sectors, not least that of media and communications. Among the respondents in this study are people with backgrounds in journalism, media studies, PR, social media analysis, and translation. Most of them have connections to NGOs and other organisations that either came into being during, or were deeply involved in, the events of 2013–2014. As one respondent, the co-founder of a central communication NGO founded in 2014 said: "We wanted to apply our talents and skills to communicate the truth and our point of view during Maidan and the start of the war in the East." Another respondent, with a similar background, said: "We wanted to do something about Russian disinformation and propaganda." The thinking for many of these actors seems to have been quite short-term: "We were thinking it would only be for a few months," as one of them put it, about the work that began in 2014. It turned out, however, to be a much bigger commitment, which pulled many of these people and their activities into close cooperation with state institutions.

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[164] See, for example, Göran Bolin, Paul Jordan, and Per Ståhlberg, "From Nation Branding to Information Warfare: The Management of Information in the Ukraine–Russia Conflict," in *Media and the Ukraine Crises: Hybrid Media Practice and Narratives of Conflict*, ed. Mervi Pantti (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2016), 3–18; Susann Worschech, "Is Conflict a Catalyst for Civil Society? Conflict-Related Civic Activism and Democratization in Ukraine," in *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Revolution to Consolidation*, ed. Natalia Shapovalova and Olga Burlyuk, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, vol. 193 (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2018), 69–99.

Some of these organisations, such as the media watchdog, Detector Media, already had established roles in the communications ecosystem of Ukraine.[165] Others, such as Ukraine Crisis Media Center, which was created in early 2014 to cater to the needs that foreign journalists coming to cover the protests had for briefings, contacts and translation services,[166] quickly came to fill roles usually carried out by state institutions. The revolution was eventually eclipsed as the main news story out of Ukraine by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Describing that period, one of the people involved said: “It was a big mess at that time. We were an important place for communication in the first years, there was a military speaker present [at the Centre] every day to talk about Donbas.” Another respondent, who was central in the creation of Ukraine Crisis Media Center, said: “Little by little this media platform transformed into a full-blown think tank, working with counterpropaganda, with efforts to reintegrate [de-occupied] areas. We gained a lot of experience during this time.”

In the years that followed, this connection between the state and civil society evolved and deepened in many areas. According to one respondent, there was a “shift of mindset, [to one where the view was] that civil society is useful. Both sides [state and civil society] are the most effective together in achieving common goals.” The respondent underscored that this also had to do with “personal connections, but most importantly a shift of mentality.” One example of this shift was that civil society began training political parties in understanding and detecting disinformation: “Before, political parties approached me with jobs about how to create disinformation. Now, they are much more interest in combatting disinformation.”

This also happened in relation to how the state dealt with Russian information operations. According to one respondent, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center “had to help the state be more competent in how they were handling Russian information dealing with Ukraine.” This led to a project where a number of civil society activists were seconded to different government institutions, “in parliament, in ministries, in the office of the president, to use the skills of these people, aligning the communications of different parts [of the government].” Another respondent, who was one of those temporarily working in a state institution, said: “At that point ministries’ press services couldn't fight themselves, couldn’t cover requests, couldn’t be creative. So many psyops were coming from Russia, trying to polarise [Ukrainian society]. This experience of cooperation [between civil society and the state] came from Maidan and post-Maidan reality.”

The cooperation also involved the military (see Chapter Two). A formative event at this time was the battle of Debaltseve, in central Donbas, in early 2015. One civil society communicator, who at the time was working at the General Staff, said this about how Ukrainian losses in Debaltseve were communicated: “Each ministry gave a number, the emergency agency, the MOD, and people would just multiply [these numbers]. People would say: do they even know what the real number is? It was very demoralising.” This experience fed into a wide-ranging project:

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[165] Detector Media, “Редакційна політика” [Editorial Policy], website, February 14, 2023, https://detector.media/page/editionpolicy/.

[166] Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC), “Who We Are,” website, January 27, 2022, https://uacrisis.org/en/pro-nas.

> “Right after Debaltseve [. . .] we analysed the coverage of the army leadership in the Ukrainian information space, and we were shocked. The view was 62 percent negative. This affected the psychological condition of the troops, their readiness to fight. So we had to do something. We created a pool of speakers, trained them, gave them topics to speak about. We created a brand book, a visual identity, but most important was to put the [military] leadership in the spotlight. We organised eight to ten interviews per day. Prior to this, there were so many fake experts commenting on the [ongoing] combat. We fixed the crisis, moved on to stratcom, to documentaries, to recruiting campaigns.”

Another effect of this cooperation was that in these years a number of people from civil society were permanently recruited to fill government positions, reaching as far up as the role of deputy minister (among whom several were interviewed for this report).

In addition to these direct, competence- and capability-building connections between civil society and state institutions, other activities were carried out that proved to be important when the broader war began in 2022. As an example, in 2014 the NGO StopFake began an extensive effort to document and debunk Russian disinformation, especially on Russian and Russia-linked TV channels broadcast in Ukraine. This effort continued and expanded in the years that followed.[167] One respondent involved in this work commented on how a long-term commitment to monitoring can bear fruit when the situation deteriorates: “In 2021, we noticed how the Russian pro-war [propaganda] machine started to prepare a casus belli for an invasion. We warned everybody that Russia was preparing for war. This shows the importance of monitoring propaganda.”

During this time, a number of civil society organisations, among them Detector Media, StopFake and Internews, carried out analyses of the threat Russia posed in the information environment. According to our respondents, this work had a direct impact on Ukrainian government policy. In 2018, the NGO, Internews, published the report, *Taming the Hydra: How to Resist the Kremlin’s Information Aggression*, which was written by a number of representatives of different communications-related NGOs.[168] “The goal [of Russian information warfare] is not to lie and confuse. The goal is to destroy the enemy,” said one of the respondents, who played a key role in the production of the report. “That’s the message of ‘Taming the Hydra.’ Key advice was to proceed with information disarmament, disarm [Russia’s] instruments, and set up bodies dealing with this issue. We are happy this advice made it to the Ukrainian government." To this respondent, it was evident that both the revoked broadcasting licenses of a number of Russia-linked TV channels (see Chapter Four), as well as the creation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, and the Centre to Counter Disinformation (see Chapter Two), were tied to this analysis.

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[167] StopFake, “About Us,” website, January 27, 2023, https://www.stopfake.org/ru/o-nas/.

[168] Volodymyr Yermolenko, ed., *Taming the Hydra: How to Resist the Kremlin’s Information Aggression* (Kyiv: Internews and Ukraine World, 2018), https://ukraineworld.org/articles/books/hydra.

In conclusion, it is clear that most of our respondents considered the experiences from 2014 and the years that followed as of utmost importance for the efforts on the information front following the full-scale invasion in 2022. As one respondent summed up the situation; "The eight years taught us a lot. We learnt the Russian playbook, learnt the Russian narratives, the main actors, their main tricks. In February when they attacked us, we were prepared."

5.2 Resources

As the picture painted above makes clear, many of the Ukrainian civil society organisations working in the communications field already had functioning structures in place when the full-scale invasion began on 24 February 2022. One major development when the wider war broke out was that most of their non-war-related activities were put on hold, and practically all their efforts were directed at the information front of the ongoing war. This is how one high-ranking respondent at one of the NGOs described the situation:

> "Civil society is extremely active. But not like before, to improve the lives of Ukrainians, to work for reform. Now it is all about how to help the front, how to work with foreign audiences, make foreign countries help Ukraine. It is a different society now. All these brilliant people who were here discussing lots of different subjects are now concentrating on one thing: how to win the war, how to survive."

Another important development following the full-scale invasion was volunteer mobilisation. "In February I got so many requests from ordinary people," said one respondent. "'What can I do, how can I help, how can I fight Russia on the internet?' These were IT people, producers, journalists, designers, whatever." The situation in the preceding years seems to have played a big role in how these volunteers reached out specifically to people from within civil society, and also in allowing civil society actors to draw on their experience to organise their efforts. The same respondent continued: "I created a network of volunteers, and organised them into three big groups: an international one, a Ukraine one and one [working with Russia-related communication]. To coordinate these groups, I launched an NGO." In addition, the experience of working both within and together with state institutions appears to have allowed these efforts to be effectively channelled into capabilities of direct value for the state: "We now have a number of projects and cooperate closely with [state agencies]." Another respondent told us of how the connections and networks that were already established in the years before 2022 were directly applicable when the full-scale invasion took place: “This is a large country, but also small country. If you are in certain circles, you know a lot of people.”

For many of the more established civil society organisations, it is clear that outside donor support is important. Among the organisations interviewed for this study, that support comes from a number of Western governments and the EU, as well as from charitable foundations, such as the International Renaissance Foundation. Apart from providing grants and other forms of support, outside donors also play a role in coordinating the different efforts. About the work of the American NGO, the National Democratic Institute, one respondent said:

> “NDI created the circumstances to work together, a community-building activity. Under this umbrella of this [so-called] info hub, civil society organisation[s] working with countering disinformation have strategic sessions, as a community. [It is a] place to meet for all organisations, share strategy: you do this, we do that. They are rivals in grant applications, but they can communicate to each other to build standards.”

Another development worth noting is how civil society efforts have widened, both geographically and topically. The nature of the internet means that what is happening in Ukraine engages people not only there, but also all over the world. As an example, in February 2022 a Canadian journalist who had previously worked in Ukraine began selling stickers with an internet meme depicting a Madonna holding the American-made anti-tank missile Javelin. He called the meme Saint Javelin.[169] The symbol quickly caught on, both on- and offline,[170] and Saint Javelin expanded into a very contemporary hybrid project. It is now a combination of fashion and merchandise production for charitable purposes (supporting mainly military but also civilian actors in the war), as well as a media production organisation, both using the armed Madonna as their unique selling point and the internet as their platform.[171]

Today, Saint Javelin has collected more than 2 million USD for charitable purposes, and has a sizeable following on social media for its edgy and often irreverent communications.[172] A manager of Saint Javelin’s Ukraine operations, when talking about the project’s ability to move quickly and react to events in a way that has an impact in the modern information environment, said: “Our decision process is very horizontal in terms of what content we produce, where we should be posting more, what product we should launch, which meme to use."

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[169] Saint Javelin, “About Us,” website, February 8, 2023, https://www.saintjavelin.com/pages/about-us.

[170] Bernd Debusmann Jr., “How ‘Saint Javelin’ Raised over $1m for Ukraine,” *BBC News*, March 10, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60700906.

[171] It is worth underlining that the more unconventional, internet-based civil society efforts are by no means limited to projects based outside Ukraine. One Ukrainian example is “Teronlyfans,” where erotic pictures are used to raise money for the Ukrainian military. To date, close to USD 1 million has been raised this way. See: Daryna Antoniuk, “Saving Ukraine with Nudes: Ukrainians Raise $700,000 for Military Selling Erotic Photos,” *Kyiv Independent*, August 9, 2022, https://kyivindependent.com/saving-ukraine-with-nudes-ukrainians-raise-700-0000-for-military-selling-erotic-photos/.

[172] 133,000 on Instagram and 98,000 on Twitter, as per February 8, 2023.

Saint Javelin has full-time staff in both Canada and Ukraine, something that appears to strengthen its communications effort. The same manager described the project's ability to bridge communications between Ukraine and the outside world by saying:

> "Our [followers/customers] don't want only the views of someone working for a big media company. People want someone on the ground, to connect emotionally. [This is what we've achieved] after we got more Ukrainians involved in social media management, with extensive experience of living abroad, who know the Western audience, but still have homes and families in Ukraine. This has allowed us to add local context, to be reporters on Twitter, Instagram and soon YouTube."

To underline the unconstrained, networked quality of these internet-based, international efforts, in 2022 Saint Javelin began collaborating with North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), another pro-Ukrainian internet meme based on a Shiba Inu dog that caught on soon after the full-scale invasion. NAFO grew quickly into "a grassroots coalition of anonymous trolls, activists, and supportive politicians united in countering Russian narratives and raising funds for the Ukrainian army." [173] The Saint Javelin manager said,

> "We have been in touch with them informally, doing joint projects, putting their stuff on our merchandise. [NAFO] was a network-driven initiative; the guys who started NAFO, and the people spreading and building the community, they realised with so many on board, they had to channel that in an organised way. That's where the cooperation with Saint Javelin emerged."

Neither Saint Javelin nor NAFO has any direct cooperation with the government, but their material has been picked up by official accounts several times, for example by the official Twitter account of the Minister of Defence, Oleksii Reznikov (see Chapter Two).[174]

5.3 Output

The communications material originating from Ukrainian civil society since the start of the full-scale invasion is vast, and a reflection of civil society's heterogeneity. However, several of our respondents underlined the unified view of the threats from Russia, and the overall methods for how to meet them. “There is complete unity in [how civil society views] what is Russian disinformation,” said one respondent. “There are lots of different organisations, but there is now a very clear [and common] distinction between freedom of speech and national security. This has evolved naturally.”

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[173] Stanislav Budnitsky, "Global Disengagement: Public Diplomacy Humor in the Russian–Ukrainian War," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2022), online first, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00291-1.

[174] See, for example, Oleksii Reznikov (@oleksiireznikov), "My personal salute to #NAFOfellas. I'd like to thank each person behind Shiba Inu cartoon. Your donations to support our defenders, your fight VS misinformation is valuable. I'm changing my profile picture for a few days. Cheers @marlowc2324[.] NAFO expansion is non-negotiable!" Twitter, August 30, 2022, https://twitter.com/oleksiireznikov/status/1566347144654618624.

The examples of output specifically mentioned in the interviews can be divided roughly into three categories:

1. Output created in direct cooperation with the state.
2. Independent output in line with the “one-voice” policy mentioned above (see Chapter Two).
3. Output challenging the state.

The first category includes several different types of activities. One is monitoring and analysis. Said one respondent involved with the NGO, StopFake:

> “We share our findings, share analysis. We work with the Ministry of Culture [and Information Security], the National Defence and Security Council, and also the Ukrainian media regulator. Partially based on our information, the national regulator banned two networks [with ties to] the Kremlin. Our analysis demonstrated that the narratives on these networks were the same as on Russian television.”

A high-ranking official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described another specific case involving StopFake: “StopFake provided us with a really good analytical data set, to help [our international law team] with arguments and evidence. This was based on discourse analysis on how Russia had justified the invasion.”

Another type of activity is the production of content. Even though not possible to describe in detail here, a number of instances of how material produced in civil society succeeded in entering directly into important official government channels were mentioned in the interviews. Several respondents underlined that the culture and looser structure of Ukrainian civil society compared with state bodies, together with the trust built up between the two in the years leading up to 2022, means that the output can be of higher quality. One respondent commented:

> “When you have this trust, you can do so much. We felt that our government fully accepts what we give them. This was a breakthrough. The ones working at [different government institutions] have a lot of restrictions. The independence of [our] team gives us freedom. If you look at our videos, you see that the person who did it has to be totally free.”

Another respondent, also involved in content production for a state entity, said: “Content is king. Even if you’re [a government body], you have to be funny, dramatic, serious. If [the content is] not strong, people will unsubscribe. But if we do our work well, we reach the hearts and minds of ordinary people and experts, and then we get what we need to win the war.”

Output from the second category mentioned in the interviews is quite wide-ranging, covering everything from relations with international media, via journalism-like news reporting, disinformation monitoring/debunking, international campaigns in line with Ukraine’s strategic goals, to internet trolling aimed at Russian targets.

As an example, since February 2022, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center has been handling a great number of international media requests, just as they did after the events of 2013–2014. As one person involved in the effort said: “In February we were already in close touch with hundreds of journalists. We [now] give 10–15 interviews per day to the international press. We try to be a voice inside the country, giving this objective, correct view of what’s going on.” This is not coordinated with the government, but it is still within the polyphonic “one-voice” policy. “We try to emphasise any message from the government,” said the respondent. “In all interviews we give to the international media, we pass the message. But this is not about cooperation or advice or counselling.”

Simultaneously, Ukraine Crisis Media Center has started a YouTube channel about the effects of the war, with a particular focus on regional issues, called *Ukraine in Flames*:[175] “Every day we have explanations of different topics and perspectives, [about what is happening in] Zaprorizhzhia, in Kharkiv, about diplomatic issues, what is going on with Russia. We invite speakers, record them, make 15–20 minute videos with an English presenter.”

Many of the civil society organisations covered in the interviews, such as StopFake and Detector Media, also continued the disinformation monitoring and debunking activities that they already had in place since before 24 February 2022, albeit under changed circumstances. According to one respondent at StopFake:

> “The flood of information is enormous, compared with what we had two to three years ago. Distribution also changed, eight years ago we had three Russian [TV] networks fully available here. Now it is difficult to find a way to watch Russian television; it has been banned online and banned on satellite. Social platforms and messengers are the way [for Russia] to reach Ukraine now.”

Our respondents also told us of a number of international campaigns originating in civil society, well within the “one-voice” policy. For example, in March 2022 the NGO We are Ukraine launched a social media campaign called “Ukraine Street,” to rename the streets where Russian embassies are located in different countries.[176] The respondent involved in this effort called it an “asymmetrical creative project,” and continued: “When Russia wanted to exterminate Ukraine, the team started to [help inspire] spontaneous action to rename streets and places. By now, it has happened in 20 different places.” The same NGO is also behind the broad

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[175] See Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC), “Ukraine in Flames,” February 14, 2023, https://uacrisis.org/en/tag/ukraine-in-flames.

[176] See Ukraine Street, “Rename the Street the Russian Embassy is Located on,” website, February 14, 2023, https://uastreet.world/.

"B4Ukraine" campaign, a social media-based effort launched in July 2022 to push international companies to leave Russia.[177] The respondent described the campaign:

> "This coalition of forty organisations exposes companies who continue their operations, who are neglecting their own values. In those efforts we try to find the right players in civil society, as well as government and the media, so they work together. [We need to] make sure the pressure is right. [We combine] direct investor outreach with media pressure and protests."

In addition to these more traditional forms of output – PR-like campaigns, monitoring, journalistic-like content and media services – there are also forms that are more difficult to categorise: memes, trolling and provocations. This is output typical of the modern, digitised information environment, in the case of Ukraine coming from organisations such as Ukrainian Meme Forces, Saint Javelin and NAFO. In one sense, NAFO and Saint Javelin conduct straightforward amplification of the central narratives of the "one-voice" policy described in Chapter Two. They use their social media presence to highlight Ukraine's successes and to underline the need for Western weapons, by showing the efficiency of what has been delivered and the importance of the Ukrainian fight to the wider Western world. An example is the video of the "celebration" of the Kerch Bridge bombing described in the beginning of this chapter.

However, at the same time, organisations such as these function as a kind of grassroots psyops, forcing Russian or pro-Russian actors in the information environment to spend precious resources on handling provocations. The Saint Javelin manager said: "What NAFO fellas are doing is rejecting this idea that to fight Russian propaganda, you have to do everything by the book, you have to stick to the behaviour of a monk in a monastery, be super polite." One example is how in June 2022 NAFO "fellas" provoked Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian ambassador to international organisations in Vienna, to, as one news report said, "break one of the cardinal rules of posting: he replied to his troll." The incident led the ambassador to suspend his Twitter activities, and to suggest that the NAFO "fellas" were bots. [178] Others have claimed that NAFO is a CIA-organised effort, which in itself has become a meme and has led a number of NAFO "fellas" to change their Twitter location to Langley, Virginia.[179] According to the Saint Javelin manager "You have to provoke [pro-Russian actors]. By doing that you show how closely they are affiliated with Russia. You expose their cover. This works way better than having an equal dialogue with these people, since they have no ethical standards."

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[177] See B4Ukraine, "B4Ukraine Declaration," February 14, 2023, https://b4ukraine.org/about.

[178] Matthew Gault, "Shitposting Shiba Inu Accounts Chased a Russian Diplomat Offline," *Vice*, July 12, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3pd5y/shitposting-shiba-inu-accounts-chased-a-russian-diplomat-offline.

[179] Propastop, "Who Are the NAFO 'Fellas' Fighting Misinformation Online?" February 2, 2023, https://www.propastop.org/eng/2023/02/07/who-are-the-nafo-fellas-fighting-misinformation-online/.

The third type of output, challenging the state, has for example been the type of monitoring of the “United News” format done by the NGO Detector Media. This is described in detail above, in section 4.3.

5.4 Successes

Ukrainian civil society has played an important role in the overall achievements described in detail above (see Chapter Two). The precise effects of any single activity carried out by one of the many actors involved are difficult to quantify (even though this makes for important future research). Our respondents are nevertheless unified in their view that their work is worthwhile and makes a real difference in the information war with Russia. In our interviews, five factors were mentioned that contributed to this: preparations, independence, flexibility/speed, tone and coordination/trust.

Ukraine’s deep historical and cultural ties with Russia were generally seen as an important factor in preparing Ukrainian society in general, and civil society more specifically, for the communications challenges after February 2022. As one respondent put it: “It’s easier to be influenced if you’re not aware of what is actually going on.” Another similar factor, also related to preparations, is that the war has been going on since 2014. “We have taught our population how Russian propaganda works,” as one respondent said.

Several respondents also underscored that civil society’s role as a more-or-less independent mediator between the needs and wishes of the broader Ukrainian society and the state gives it a unique position in the information environment. One respondent, involved in the monitoring and debunking of Russian propaganda, said: “It would be strange if a ministry did fact-checking. Our NGO status gives us credibility, [so that people understand that] this is not Ukrainian propaganda against Russian propaganda. Our reputation as an independent player, not financed by the Ukrainian government, is very important for our audience.” This independence also seems to have played a role in how volunteers reached out to civil society actors to help with the war effort, as described above.

Speed and flexibility also appear to be important factors. The case of Saint Javelin and the explosion on the Kerch Bridge are examples mentioned above. As the Saint Javelin manager said, with their horizontal decision processes they “can react fast to events happening, [for example] to the explosion on the [Kerch] Bridge. We immediately created content and saw a spike in our products. Our ‘Crimea beach party 2023’ products were super popular right away.” This, said another respondent, comes back to the sense of urgency shared by the entire Ukrainian society: “Nobody wants to have Russia in our society; everyone understands that we have to do whatever it takes to get rid of them. There is a strong sense of urgency citizens have now. That’s why we are so fast, so efficient.” Indeed, this respondent even ascribed the successful communication of President Zelensky to the broader societal response:

> "Zelensky feels it very well, that is why he and his team are fast and creative. They feel the mood of the Ukrainians. He is not avant-garde, the society is avant-garde. As president, you cannot betray these people. You cannot be weak when they are so good and strong. It is a mistake to say that Zelensky gives this push, it is the Ukrainian society doing this. It comes from the bottom to the top, not the other way around."

Among our respondents, there is also a clear sense that civil society's freedom from bureaucratic restrictions and political sensibilities makes it possible to communicate in a tone that is difficult for other actors to achieve. This goes both for the communications that are created for the state, as well as what they spread in their own channels. Humour was mentioned several times. "You have to be funny to be heard," said one respondent. "It is a coping mechanism, but also a national trait of character, we like to joke even despite hard problems." But humour also plays a strategic role, this respondent continued:

> "We are joking to show that Russia can be defeated, and most people really like that. Humour is a universal tool to create empathy. Suffering is one way, but showing suffering is not enough. You also need to add something positive; we need to show we [Ukrainians] are human beings like you, that we also smile when we see something funny."

Another respondent put this in relation to the communications efforts directed to the West:

> "My idea, my team's work, is to show that Ukraine is capable of winning. In our communication we show [Ukraine's] capabilities, our strength, our humour and beauty. Not just atrocities, not just the terrible part of the war. That is why Ukraine still manages to keep the attention of the West. We show this full-scale story, like an epic, with humour, heroism and pain. It is like a fairy tale for many Westerners, with the tractors [towing Russian tanks], and the dogs [saved by Ukrainian soldiers]. Somehow, Russia has not managed to give the world this. They only show cruelty, anger and humiliation."

Finally, it seemed that the respondents agree that the networks built up through the years, and the trust this has created between different actors, makes coordination work well, even when the formal structures might be lacking. As one respondent put it: "It is natural for Ukrainian society, a kind of beehive communication. Every bee knows instinctively what to do and where to fly. That's our secret and why we are effective."

5.5 Challenges

In our interviews, some of the same challenges mentioned in the above chapters arose; these included the lack of success outside the West, as well as the problems reaching audiences inside Russia. As one respondent said, “[Russia] controls all distribution of information in their own country. There are no reliable channels to target Russians from the outside. The ability of Ukraine and rest of the world is very limited. They created an information bubble around the country, and in this case this was successful.”

Several respondents also underscored the risks of underestimating or belittling the Russians. As one of them said:

> “The Russians are like caricatures of themselves. They are like the worst characters in Hollywood movies, or even worse. But we shouldn’t underestimate them. That would undervalue our efforts: all the sacrifice, the suffering would be in vain. I will laugh at them and their stupidity, but I wouldn’t say that they are total losers. They are pretty skilful and successful in certain things. We cannot portray our enemy as total imbeciles. They are not. They are cruel and not sophisticated. But still, they kill a lot of people. I wouldn’t say successful, but effective.”

In addition, there was a worry about keeping the guard up and not falling victim of one’s own propaganda. As one respondent put it: “There’s a lack of someone who explains the real picture and the real hardship that will come, the real effect of missiles, economical problems, energy, and so on.” Said another: “Too much polished hope runs the risk of creating unrealistic expectations and hurting our long-term resilience.”

A challenge more specific for civil society was also brought up: resources. As indicated by one respondent working on a content project for a state institution, “On our team we are 20 plus people, and everything we do is pro bono, with volunteers. We have come to a point where we will have to do fundraising, because it is difficult to sustain the team.” The quality of the output also created its own challenges, continued the respondent, “We have increased the expectations of our audiences, and we have to maintain a certain level.”

Lastly, a slight worry about more personal fatigue was mentioned. One respondent who works full time, while still organising a host of civil society communications efforts, answered the question “How do you have the time?” thus: “I don’t. After eight months we need to reconnect with ourselves, to take a deep breath.” However, another respondent held a different view:

> “As long as the fight goes on, as long as our people are suffering, are occupied, as long as we have Russia on our lands, there will be no problem sustaining this. It is very clear we have to repel them. Within Ukraine I see not even the slightest hint of fatigue or the feeling that we should stop fighting. There is no option to get tired.”

5.6 Conclusions

Conditions. Ukrainian civil society has since 2014 played a very important role in the area of communications, often filling roles that in other countries would be carried out by state institutions. During the years prior to 2022, a deep and complex relationship between the Ukrainian state and civil society also developed. During this time, a number of civil society organisations analysed the threat Russia posed in the information environment, which appears to have had a direct impact on Ukrainian government policy.

Resources. The structures, networks and experiences from before 2022 have proved important in allowing civil society to mobilise effectively as a crucial part of the war effort. In addition, civil society appears to have been an efficient conduit for mobilisation of volunteers. External donor support appears to have been crucial in allowing civil society to fill these roles. In addition, mobilisation has happened in new areas, where a global diaspora has pushed the communications effort to reach even further in the modern information environment.

Output. The output from civil society can be categorised into three areas:

- Output created in direct cooperation with the state.
- Independent output in line with the “one-voice” policy.
- Output challenging the state.

In all these areas, civil society has contributed by creating content that would be difficult for any state to produce efficiently, even under the best of circumstances.

Successes. The five key aspects identified for the successful contribution of civil society were:

- Preparations. With deep historical ties to Russia, there was a profound understanding of the enemy, in addition to all the experience gained from the eight years of war leading up to 2022.
- Independence. The role of civil society as separate from the state appears to give actors in this field a level of trust in the wider society.
- Flexibility/speed. The non-hierarchical structure of civil-society organisations appears to give them a flexibility and rapidity that are both crucial in the modern information environment.
- Tone. The freedom from bureaucratic restrictions and political sensibilities also makes it possible to communicate in a tone that is difficult for other actors to achieve.
- Coordination/trust. Networks built up through the years, both within civil society, as well as between civil society and the state, make coordination work well, even when the structures are lacking.

Challenges. Resources and the wherewithal to continue the struggle appear to be challenges for civil society specifically. In addition, there appears to be a challenge in how to best balance the messaging, between optimism and realism, as well as in how to portray the enemy: as hapless, or as a very real threat.

6 Conclusions

When Russia launched its massive attack on Ukraine in February 2022, it marked the beginning of the biggest war on the European continent since the Second World War. The war caught many by surprise. Not only by the fact that it happened, but also how it played out during its first year. This report seeks to capture how the Ukrainians dealt with on one of the war's key fronts: information. With regard to the modern, digitised information environment, most observers and practitioners – not least the Ukrainians – agree that this front is of utmost importance. But it is also fluid, wide-ranging and full of ambiguities. Continuing the war metaphor, the information battlefield is vast and the forces involved extremely diverse, while the weapons used are of a quality that make precision targeting difficult and, thus, the measurement of their effects a challenge.

The research questions posed at the beginning of the report, relating to the conditions and resources coming into the war for different parts of the Ukrainian society; and how the key players interviewed saw the output, successes and challenges after the war broke out; are addressed in the preceding chapters. However, it is also possible to use the results to pose yet another, overarching, question: How has Ukraine fared on the information front in the first year of the war?

Again, the efficacy of communications activities, both individually and as a whole, is difficult to measure, not least in wartime. Nor is doing so within the scope of this report. However, it appears that when our respondents claimed that Ukraine's efforts on the information front have been a success, they were and are broadly correct. Judging from key poll numbers, much of what our respondents pointed to as the strategic goals of the Ukrainian communications efforts seems to have been achieved over the last year.

Not only is support for institutions and leaders very high in Ukraine, but the belief that Ukraine will win the war is also widespread.[180] In the West, where almost all of the external material support for the Ukrainian war effort and economy originates, popular support remains strikingly steadfast, especially in the EU. In the US, a somewhat more pronounced softening of public support can be noted; however, at the time of writing the support remains strong.

Success, however, has not been total. As many of our respondents indicated, the picture looks different in other parts of the world, such as Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. There is also the matter of the enemy, Russia, where the efforts of Ukrainians and others seem to have been largely ineffective in swaying how both the Russian general public and elites view the war.

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[180] "More than 95% of those polled are confident in the victory of Ukraine in the war with Russia. At the same time, the absolute majority of respondents (63.2%) expect it within the next year or even sooner. Only 26% answered that the war would last more than a year. Therefore, there are significant hopes in society for a quick end to the military confrontation with Russia, the final[e] of which will be our victory. It is worth noting that almost all respondents give high (63.8%) or average (32.1%) assessments of the international support provided to Ukraine to defeat Russia," quoted from: *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology,* "Public opinion in Ukraine after 10 months of war," January 15, 2023, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1175&page=3.

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the Ukrainian communications efforts have been carried out with limited resources. This means that it is likely that the focus by necessity has been on the West, where there has been the greatest potential for strategic gains.

6.1 Success factors

What, then, are the main reasons for this success? Our research has identified a number of crucial factors.

On the most basic level, it is important to remember that Ukraine is at war. Research has clearly identified a “rally ’round the flag” effect, where the support for government institutions increases sharply in times of crisis, and where the voice and messages of leaders carry greater weight than in peacetime. In addition, Ukraine is fighting a defensive war against an unprovoked invasion. The widespread perception within society that Ukraine is fighting a just war, together with the fact that Ukrainians perceive the war as existential, lends the communications efforts, both at home and abroad, a very strong basis. The narrative strands produced by this reality – how Ukraine is fighting not only for itself, but for the future of the international order and in defence of democracy as a whole; and how Ukraine is fighting a righteous and legal war, adhering to international law – are both clear and speak to the facts on the ground.

However, the main challenge for this narrative basis is that is has to be what the respondents referred to as “truthful.” Beyond the research material analysed in this report, we have also noted a few instances where Ukrainian communications appeared to contradict the “just cause” narrative. One was when pictures of dead Russian soldiers were published early on in the war, another when Ukraine’s communication about the missile that landed in Poland in November 2022 was different from that of Ukraine’s main allies. So far, these instances appear to have been too few to seriously undermine the overall resilience of Ukraine’s strategic communication.

The notion of a “just cause” is also a factor that separates Ukraine from Russia, both on a superficial and on a deeper level. A “war for survival” is in itself a stronger message than a “special military operation,” especially when it is a war as brutal and destructive as the one being played out on the ground in Ukraine. In addition, the anti-colonial aspects of the Ukrainian struggle stand in stark contrast to the clearly imperialistic behaviour and messaging from the Russian side. This contrast also appears to feed into a Ukrainian understanding of Russia’s behaviour and messaging, while the Russian side simply does not seem to comprehend why Ukraine is doing what it is doing (i.e. resisting). Ukraine's understanding leads to clear messaging, while Russian communications are often fragmented, untethered to reality and at times baffling (for example, in the use of such terms as "de-Nazification," "biolabs," "controlled by the West").

Tied to the existential aspect of the war is a coming together of Ukrainian society, which appears central to the whole-of-society aspect of the Ukrainian information war. Throughout our interviews, the broad societal engagement and widespread volunteering were identified as central to the success of the communications efforts. This is also reflected in how many of the respondents highlighted the wide-ranging and often informal cooperation between different institutions in different parts of society, as seen between the central government and the periphery, the state and civil society, and the military and the rest of the state. This is clearly a case of using decentralisation as a strength, where a "one-voice" policy is translated into an effective, polyphonic whole, not by fiat, but by a sense of a shared responsibility to prevail.

On a more detailed level, the Ukrainian struggle on the information front appears to handle successfully one of the primary challenges in the modern information environment: the necessity of speed, to establish narratives ahead of the opponent, instead of needing to catch up and trying to debunk information that has become widespread. Events and opportunities generally appear to be met very quickly. According to our respondents, this agility is grounded in both societal and organisational flexibility, which in turn are based on widespread trust between essential actors in the informational struggle. In addition, outside support (as when American intelligence was used to prebunk Russian justifications for the invasion) has been important in keeping Ukraine on the front foot in the information struggle.

A similar situation appears to be true for the quality of the content produced. The modern information environment is to a large extent an attention economy, where lower-quality content is brutally swept aside by that of higher-quality. Our respondents generally demonstrated a clear understanding of this fact, and revealed a willingness to work in unorthodox ways, both across institutional boundaries and with outside support, to ensure that the quality of the content produced was as high as possible.

It is also important to remember that Ukrainian state institutions have reached a fairly high degree of control of the information environment within Ukraine, especially within the broadcast media. This has been accomplished through efficient information security management, censorship and centralisation. There seems to be widespread acceptance of this strategy, which goes back to the first point, above, which is that Ukraine is fighting a war for the survival of the nation. Outside Ukraine, this is reflected in how many Western countries have restricted the spread of messaging coming out of Russia, leaving a more open field for Ukrainian communication.

Tied to this last point are additional Russian failures on the information front. These are most likely a major factor; although worthy of more research, it is not a focus of this report.

6.2 The institutional view

We have also identified a number of institutional factors tied to the specific parts of Ukrainian society (Government, Military, Media, Civil Society) that we see as important reasons for Ukraine's success and, consequently, use to define and label the structure of this report.

The central government, and especially President Zelensky, have been vital in establishing a form of communications pyramid, what our respondents referred to as the "one-voice" policy. However, it appears that this has not so much been the result of careful planning and strategies as an effect of the informal, intuitive, and polyphonic processes (described above) that are based on the sheer communication skills of the top leadership and the coming together of Ukrainian society.

The Ukrainian military appears to have been skilfully manoeuvring in a somewhat sheltered part of the information environment. The importance and sensitivity of their mission appears to be widely understood and accepted, and the military uses this for maintaining a (so far) functioning balance between withholding and sharing information.

In relation to Ukraine's media sphere, the government, even in the years before the invasion, took a number of quite drastic decisions related to the centralisation of news production, but also to restricting the flow of Russian, or Kremlin-controlled, information. According to our respondents, this was based on an understanding that merely creating awareness of Russian propaganda was not enough. What was needed was disarmament of the Russian information-warfare machine. These decisions seem to have received widespread support. In addition, the creation of a public service system appears to have created a media space where reliable information can continue to flow even during wartime, with radio and regional news as prime examples.

The wider Ukrainian society was in many ways well prepared for the struggle on the information front, not least by the eight years of war preceding the full-scale invasion. Civil society strived to increase media literacy, and there was awareness across society of Russian information operations. In addition, numerous capabilities had been developed within the state and in civil society, and both formal and informational structures were in place to effectively mobilise and harness communications resources. The "beehive," as one of our respondents called it, was ready to get to work.

6.3 Future research

This report is a first analysis of a highly complex topic. Each chapter contains a multitude of lessons, but for these lessons to be learnt in full, more in-depth research is necessary, especially on the ground in Ukraine.

Apart from a deeper understanding of the processes, institutional relationships and outputs within the Ukrainian strategic communication “beehive,” there are also other areas that warrant closer scrutiny. One such is the issue of “success,” discussed above. Even if it is challenging (and not within the scope of this report) to conduct careful measurement of the impact resulting from Ukrainian efforts, it does not mean that it is not possible to carry out more research. A rich source for future research awaits in the many different audiences and target groups involved, and in the host of different channels bearing different types of messages. Asking what works and what does not, and where and how, are all fruitful areas for further enquiry. In addition, the passage of time is also an important factor to take into account for future research. What has been effective in the early stages of the war could very well turn out to be difficult to sustain, or even counterproductive in the longer run. The questions and issues detailed in this report therefore need to be continuously evaluated.

Another area to pursue is the Russian side of strategic communication and information warfare, where expectations were high, but the results have so far been less than expected. This is also an issue that begs for a better understanding achieved through additional research.

Lastly, this report details events during the first year of Russia’s full-scale invasion. The war is still ongoing, and its outcome appears far from certain. What seems clear, though, is that even if Ukraine’s war effort is very much dependent on continued support from the West and, thus, continued success on the information front, real victory can only be attained on the ground, by reconquering lost territory. Russia, on the other hand, might be able to claim victory if the support for Ukraine falters. This means that the struggle on the information front will continue to be central, and that Russia’s focus on this front may very well increase. In other words, continued understanding of what happens in the information environment, and not least in the West, is of utmost importance.

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