Ukraine's Information Policy during Russia's Hybrid War against Ukraine

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Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak. Elena Psyllakou, Gerardo Nicoletta & David Adler

The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

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Since the beginning of the hybrid war in the end of the 1990s, Russia has invested huge resources in the war propaganda against Ukraine, based on the idea of Pax Russica, the Russian Empire, as a cover for all nationalities. The article presents a brief overview of Ukraine's information policy over recent years and right before the beginning and immediately after the activation of Russia's aggression since February 24, 2022. It reveals a slow information response of the Ukrainian state to the obvious signs of the approaching war. The lack of an information security strategy in Ukraine and a state body created for its implementation almost before the start of the war, keeping off the radar the real threat of military aggression, which allowed neither local administrations nor residents of Ukraine to take security measures. Of note are President Zelenskyy's communications, as a leader of a European state, when it comes to countering and restructuring of Russia's propaganda narratives in the war with Ukraine.

Keywords: propaganda messages, state information policy, hybrid war

1. Communicative concepts of Kremlin's propaganda

Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine, the active phase of which began in 2014 and turned into military aggression on February 24, 2022, is characterized as a new type of war, which has been prepared and is being conducted simultaneously in several directions - military, information, political, economic and humanitarian. An important policy affecting the state's security in the 21st century is the information policy – a complex of political, legal, economic, socio-cultural, and organizational measures of the state in the realm of Information production and dissemination.

The world is overwhelmed with information these days and it is often the one who first reports the news that wins over. Since the beginning of the hybrid war – the end of the 1990s, Russia has invested huge resources in the formation of a propaganda machine aimed at information and psychological operations against Ukraine. The propaganda campaign is still being carried out along three main lines: "1) Targeting the citizens of Ukraine (with the exception of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts), and aimed at forming a sense of hopelessness of the 'western direction' among the patriotic population; strengthening the desire to resume dialogue with the Russian Federation on the terms of the Kremlin among the pro-Russian population. 2) Targeting the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts forming a sense of impossibility for the population of those territories to return to Ukraine on a pro-Western course; forming hatred for the current government of Ukraine; forming hatred for NATO, the EU and the West as a whole. 3) Targeting the citizens of the EU, the United States and Ukraine's partner countries" (Melnichenko, 2021), seeking to shape the image of Ukraine as an unstable state; creating an anti-Ukrainian discourse in Western media; forming an information trend of Ukraine's historical belonging to the Pax Russica.

The Kremlin's political strategists have developed a number of concepts that have become the basis of military Russia's propaganda and ideological war against Ukraine. Among them are the concepts of "Pax Russica", "Russian civilization", "Novorossiya", "Crimea is ours"; "Bandera's supporters", "Nazis", and "junta" memes. The idea of the Russian Empire as a common roof for

all people has been revived and refined. To establish the so-called "Pax Russica" five historical and political myths were used, serving a foundation for propaganda messages for the Pax Russica establishers in Ukraine:

1. Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian people are one Orthodox population.

2. Ukraine is a multinational state and should be a federation with two state and official languages.

3. Dual nationality is the best option for citizens of modern Ukraine and the diaspora.

4. A neutral status is provided for by the Constitution and will protect and preserve Ukraine.

5. NATO means military bases on Ukrainian territory, which means an ongoing war with fraternal Russia (Putin, 2021).

2. State authorities as a guarantor of information security. Ukrainian scenario

The analysis of Ukraine's information policy over recent years, directly before the beginning and immediately after the activation of aggression shows a slow information response of the Ukrainian state to the obvious signs of the approaching war. Ukraine was not ready to face this war, and there were neither clear strategies nor tactics in case of imposing explosive social technologies until the end of 2021. The Center for Strategic Research and Information Security as part of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine was created only one year before the beginning of the war, in March 2021. The Center (as its web page says) "focuses on countering external threats, joining the efforts of the state and public organizations in the fight against disinformation, prompt response to fakes, and promoting Ukrainian narratives" (Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 2022).

The actors that shape the country's information security are both state agencies, represented by the Presidential Administration, the National Security Council, law enforcement agencies and specialized ministries, public organizations, people's diplomacy, volunteers, and educational and cultural institutions. However, the state has a particularly significant role in ensuring that information policy is in place and information security is provided. In defining information policy, we are guided by the theoretical framework presented in Sandra Braman's research, which defines information policy as law and policy for information creation, processing, flows (Braman, 2006). In his book "Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power" she notes, that "Contemporary practices make the problem of defining information policy more difficult because there is constant innovation, genres are blurred, new alternative communication practices are appearing, and legal issues historically of concern only to information and media professionals now affect all of us (Braman, 2006, p. 61).

Under the state information policy we understand the processes - both the formation of the strategic course of the state in the information sphere and the management of the information sphere. The purpose of the state information policy is to ensure the security of the state. Measures of state policy regarding the development of the information space of the country should be combined with measures to protect the national interests of the country and measures to ensure the information security of the person, society, and state. We will make a brief review of the state information policy on the eve and during the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine.

Ukraine has given no attention to the development of an information security strategy, and the comprehensive development of media literacy and critical thinking as critical competencies. Neither the state nor the public sector attached importance to these issues. It was not until April 2008 that the State Information Policy of Ukraine started implementing a set of measures to ensure the information security in Ukraine. President Viktor Yushchenko's Decree № 377/2008 "On Urgent Measures to Ensure Information Security in Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, March 23, 2008) provides for limiting the penetration of foreign TV companies, radio stations, print media, and web resources into Ukraine's media market. The foreign media, according to the Ukrainian administration, are dangerous for Ukraine's state security. The implementation of the information policy envisages removal of books promoting communist ideology from libraries; terminated retransmission of Russian TV channels; restricted import of anti-Ukrainian books from Russia and Belarus.

It should be noted that Ukrainian authorities reacted to Putin's decree "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" of July 2, 2021, on the goals of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, which specifies the following tasks: "... 18) ... strengthening the positions of the Russian language as the language of international communication; 19) supporting fellow citizens living abroad in the exercise of their rights, including the right to preserve COMMON RUSSIAN cultural identity, ensuring the protection of interests; 20) strengthening fraternal ties between the peoples of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine ..." (President of Russia, July 2, 2021) month later – in August 2021. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, by his decree, put into effect the decision of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) on the cyber security strategy of Ukraine, and also approved the updated version of the strategy (Kyiv Post, August 27, 2021).

It was not until December 2021 that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presented a new information security strategy for Ukraine. The document states that Russia's information policy poses a threat not only to Ukraine: "Special information operations run by the Russian Federation target key democratic institutions (including elections), while special services of the aggressor power are trying to intensify internal conflicts in Ukraine and other democracies" (President of Ukraine, July 26, 2022).

The importance of propaganda narratives for Russia is confirmed by the fact that they are often voiced by the first person of the state.

3. President of the country under the war. Image and actions

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been a powerful agent in shaping the information realm of Ukraine since the beginning of the war. Since the first days of the war, he has been constantly present in the information space, publicly addressing Ukrainians, residents of Russia, international organizations, and international society, using key messages that distract from the propaganda narratives of Russia and focus on the evidence of Russia's crimes. The image of the president of a country at war is military casual, inexpensive shoes, informal style of clothing at Protocol events, and constant presence in the media. It should be noted that even before the aggression began, Volodymyr Zelenskyy often communicated with the media. Moreover, he introduced a new tradition of holding presidential press conferences – an annual multi-hour Press Marathon. Ukraine's state officials have been active in the information space – both the president of Ukraine and the ministers of law enforcement agencies communicate with the media and the general public regularly. Volodymyr Zelenskyy records official or personal appeals once or twice a day, using newsworthy developments and an opportunity to keep the war in Ukraine in the spotlight by using all channels that are available to him. The president of Ukraine also responded to questions from Russian journalists from opposition media. It should be noted, though, that information received from government officials and their representatives is often contradictory. There is no consolidated state information resource. It's been four months since the war began and there is still no clear general state information policy to present a real picture of the development of events in Ukraine. Still, there is information that is accessible, so the media and Ukrainians are able to choose sources that they find trustworthy.

4. Communicative decisions on the formation of a unified communicative space in Ukraine. Case overview

It was not until 18 March 2022 that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed decrees to implement a single information policy under martial law to neutralize threats to state information security. This means bringing together all public TV channels, the programming of which consists mainly of news and/or news and analytical programs, on a single information platform for strategic communication – the round-the-clock information marathon "United news #Uarazom". That measure has received an ambiguous wel-

come from experts and the public – from condemnation and the "censorship being brought in" type of reactions to approval – the introduction of control over anti-state content in the information space during wartime.

An important decision of the President of Ukraine, in terms of countering Russian propaganda, is to suspend the activities of the opposition and other ten political parties that had ties with Russia (the law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine Banning Political Parties" dated May 6, 2022). The law provides for the Banning of parties if their goals or actions are aimed at:

- justification, recognition as lawful, denial of military aggression against Ukraine, including by presenting the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine as an internal conflict, civil conflict, civil war, denial of the temporary occupation of a part of the territory of Ukraine;

- glorification, justification of actions and omissions of persons who were involved or are being involved in the military aggression against Ukraine, representatives of military formations of the Russian Federation, other illegal military formations, gangs, groups of mercenaries created and/or subordinate to, and/or managed and/or financed by the Russian Federation, as well as representatives of the occupation administration of the Russian Federation, including by defining them as "rebels", "militiamen", "polite people" (Tishenko, 2022).

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy supported a project to create the Unified Platform of Culture and Media during the War. The website #StandwithUkraine (United Platform of Culture and Media during the war, 2022) gives an overview of all projects and funds implemented by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine since the beginning of the large-scale invasion of Russia. Together with volunteers and various professionals the Ministry has created and launched more than 20 large-scale projects to draw the world's attention to the war in Ukraine and consolidate the international community in resisting Russia's aggression. Evidence of military crimes of the Russian Federation, destruction of cultural heritage, unique photos and videos, the fight against disinformation, military art, and many other initiatives are now available on the United Platform.

An important development is the launch of an online war map. It reflects real-time situation. Ukrainian developers have collected all the latest data in a single map (Deepstatemap.live, 2022). It is continuously updated to provide facts on the ground. The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine does not publish the all-sources data on the alignment of forces – because of the ongoing fighting for many settlements and the changeable situation.

As for other agents that influence state information policy, of note are individual state and business entities that initiated creative projects of the patriotic stance with the mes-

sages of support for Ukraine in the fight against aggression. For example, Ukrposhta postal stamps (Ukrposhta, 2022), Monobank cards design (Segodnya, August 7, 2022).

Sandra Braman argues for defining information as an agent that can shape reality: "Information is not just affected by its environment, but affects its environment as well" (Braman, 2006, p. 19). The agents of the formation of the information field are the media of the global information space – local and international, private and public, traditional and online of all kinds. The content that forms the information field can pose a threat to national security, therefore, it should be the focus of attention of the state information policy. Non-professional work of journalists, misinformation can exacerbate economic and political problems, affect the level of public confidence in the authorities.

Unfortunately, it's not only the information that Ukrainian journalists who are shaping the information space in Ukraine lack, but also the war reporting knowledge and experience. As, for example, on how to report on emotional and physical traumas and losses, how to interview people who have lost their loved ones, and how to cover military operations. Journalists have no knowledge of regulatory specifics related to that kind of reporting. It was only in the course of the unfolding Russian aggression, in March 2022, that the manual for the media on how to interact with the Armed Forces of Ukraine under martial law was released, which is not quite enough to fully satisfy those requests (Armed Forces of Ukraine, 2021).

Also, as mentioned above, there is no consolidated state information center where journalists and citizens can get information about evacuation, cash and humanitarian assistance, and shelter. With the beginning of the war, these functions were taken over by volunteers and public organizations.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that Ukraine's state information policy during the period of open threats posed by Russia did not work to protect state interests when the hybrid war started. Created as late as in 2021, the Information Security Strategy (December 2021) and the Center for Strategic Research and Information Security (March 2021) are slow response measures to more than 20 years of Russia's anti-Ukrainian policy. Professional crisis communications being absent as a culture, the poorly developed information and media literacy and information security and public relations education in Ukraine lacking direction – have created a favourable ground for the spread of Russian propaganda projects. Had the state been giving attention to those issues, along with other important areas of foreign and domestic policy since the beginning of the 2000s, adequate conditions for prevention or early response to national security threats could have created. Among the constructive processes, presidential communications since the beginning of Russia's aggression should be pointed out. The President of Ukraine has impersonated the image of a new leader refraining from the image of a post-Soviet head of state: informally and simply dressed,

present in the public space, uses various modern communication platforms, shows respect for family values, and shows care. That image being used by Ukrainian and international media fosters empathy and support for Ukraine in the international information space to counter the development of the Russian threat.

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