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**NARRATIVE WARFARE IN THE  
RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR: A  
COMPARISON BETWEEN  
UKRAINE'S AND RUSSIA'S  
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION**

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## Introduction

'We are facing the creation of a climate of fear in Ukrainian society, aggressive rhetoric, indulging neo-Nazis and militarising the country. Along with that we are witnessing not just complete dependence but direct external control [...] by foreign advisers, military "development" of the territory of Ukraine and deployment of NATO infrastructure' (Putin, 2021).

This quote from Russian President Vladimir Putin demonstrates that the war in Ukraine is a war of narratives. Information warfare is crucial in military conflicts (Farwell, 2020). Developments in information technologies have simplified the spreading of narratives and propaganda, shaping public opinion globally (Fridman et al., 2018). In this context, stories may make the difference between winning and losing a war more than military actions alone (Farwell, 2020; Maksymiv, 2023). The Russo-Ukrainian War is an illustrative example of this trend. Both sides have invested heavily in 'information warfare'. The main objective of this paper is thus to understand the narratives advanced by the two sides of the conflict. What are the communication strategies of Russia and Ukraine? Moreover, how are they spreading their side of the story?

## Russia's and Ukraine's War Narratives

Throughout history, warring parties have used narratives to interpret and justify their actions. War stories are powerful tools for gaining support and influencing perceptions, especially in today's information revolution, where narratives can spread rapidly to a global audience. In the Russo-Ukrainian war, both sides have engaged in digital information warfare, attempting to shape the history of the conflict in real time, both with their own radically different narratives (Suny, 2022; Zakharchenko, 2022). Understanding the dynamics of these narratives and communication strategies is crucial to grasp the broader implications of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the use of information as a potent weapon.

### *Russia: Rewriting History*

Russian wartime strategic narrative is based on disinformation, historical revisionism and war memories (Fridrichová, 2023; Maksymiv, 2023). 'Make Russia Great Again' can best describe the war's principal justification (Maksymiv, 2023). Vladimir Putin's primary motivation is to recover Russia's great power status, back to a golden era that must, according to the narrative, be reclaimed for Russia's survival and fulfilment. History is central to this rhetoric. Using comparison with the Great Patriotic War (i.e., the Second World War) and portraying NATO as an existential threat, the war is presented as a necessary pre-emptive military campaign to safeguard Russian culture and values.

Interestingly, Moscow's narrative is not new. In 2014, Moscow legitimised the annexation of Crimea with historical narratives. Therefore, when the conflict entered a new phase with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia had 'a full battery of strategic narratives over a decade in the making' (Fridrichová, 2023, p. 5). In a sense, 'the war in Ukraine already had a story' and did not require further narrative innovations from the Kremlin (Fridrichová, 2023, p. 5).

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Despite Russia's continued narrative and historical revisionism, Russian propagandists seemed unprepared for the invasion. According to Fridrichová (2023), Moscow misjudged the need to reinforce its storyline and the strength of Ukraine's counter-discourse. Moreover, Russia has advanced two contradictory versions to account for the origins of the war since the beginning. The first one was 'that Ukrainian Nazi extremists, motivated by aggressive ideology, dragged Western states into the war, notwithstanding the latter wanting to buy Russian gas and oil peacefully' (Fridrichová, 2023, p. 6). Second, NATO's expansionist strategy is argued to be aimed at dividing Ukrainians and Russians, leaving Russia with no choice but to invade Ukraine to defend its borders (Fridrichová, 2023).

As Chatterje-Doody (2023) notes, this discourse shifted as the war unfolded. At first, the war was often compared to the Great Patriotic War. According to this version of events, 'Russian boys are dying to protect their Ukrainian brethren, Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from fascism – just as their ancestors did during the Second World War' (Sunny, 2022). This initial 'denazification' gradually transformed into 'de-Ukrainisation'. In recent years, Russian propaganda has come to portray Ukraine's nationhood as a Western-promoted 'anti-Russia project'. In a 2021 essay, Vladimir Putin claimed that 'Russians and Ukrainians were one people'. Along these lines, the war is depicted as necessary to preserve Russia's values, culture and historical unity with Ukraine.

The Kremlin's rhetoric also needs to account for military defeats in Ukraine. Moscow's narratives failed as Ukraine's unexpected resistance – and subsequent counter-offensives – tested them (Fridrichová, 2023). The discourse must now reassure the domestic audience that everything is going according to plan. Military retreats are depicted as 'successful evacuation' and the focus is set on small victories to divert attention (Maksymiv, 2023). However, these narratives are hard to reconcile with the idea of an undefeatable army.

### *Ukraine: Rebranding Its Image*

Ukraine's wartime narrative has been mainly focused on gaining support. The authorities' explanation of the war is simple and focused on Russia being the aggressor, launching an unprovoked invasion. It is worth noting that before the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's narrative was conspicuous by going largely unnoticed (Horbyk & Orlova, 2022). Unexpectedly, a new narrative emerged, presenting Ukraine 'as a homogenous and unified actor, standing up to the Russian invasion as one person, its divisions irrelevant, its conflicts put to rest overnight' (Horbyk & Orlova, 2022, p. 228).

The government's communication changed rapidly after the invasion; its institutions appeared consistent, brave and confident. Many elected representatives, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, stayed in the capital despite the bombings (Maksymiv, 2022). Furthermore, Zelensky symbolically adopted a military clothing style, dressed in khaki, to appear as equal to the soldiers on the frontline.

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The shift in communication strategy is significant. Since its independence in 1991, others have determined Ukraine's image. However, since the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has advanced its own narrative as a 'brave, unified and defiant nation' (Horbyk & Orlova, 2022, p. 228). Nation branding is a concept which first came to post-socialist Europe in early 2000, to attract investors and portray themselves as modern states aligned with Western democratic values and economic systems (Kaneva, 2023). Ukraine revisited this notion as a war weapon (Kaneva, 2023; Kaneva, 2022). In April 2022, the government launched the 'Brave Like Ukraine' campaign, defining 'bravery' as a Ukrainian quality and using brand communication to circumvent Russia's discourse (Kaneva, 2023).

Further, Ukraine has glorified war stories and myths demonstrating bravery and military exploits, such as the Ghost of Kyiv, a fighter who reportedly shot down several Russian fighter jets single-handedly (Thompson & Alba, 2022). Although the veracity of these stories is doubtful, they are crucial in keeping the troops' and population's morale high and attracting international support. They take part in traditional wartime propaganda, aiming at highlighting Ukraine's courage and Russia's brutality (Thompson & Alba, 2022). Indeed, modern strategic communication in the digital age aims not just at sabotaging the enemy but rather at 'flooding the internet with viral messages that drown out opposing narratives' (Thompson & Alba, 2022).

### **The Use of Social Media, the Internet and Other Communication Channels**

The use of internet platforms as distribution channels is particularly remarkable, especially compared to previous conflicts involving Russia. In the 2015 Syrian conflict, only 30 percent of the Syrian population had access to 3G networks or faster. During the 2014 annexation of Crimea, only 4 percent of mobile users had relatively fast internet connections (OECD, 2022). While social media was critical in circulating videos to established media platforms in 2014 and 2015, such as civilian videos exposing Russian soldiers in the Donbas region (The Economist, 2022), the level of internet activity was not as high as in the current conflict (OECD, 2014).

The current environment in which Russia operates is vastly different from eight years ago. Regarding internet usage, Ukraine now ranks among the top ten countries in Europe, with almost 80 percent of its population having high-speed internet access in 2021 (The World Bank, 2021). This shift challenges the Kremlin's success in disinformation campaigns (OECD, 2022). While Putin could dominate the main narratives in Russia and Ukraine in 2014, the current war faces increased reporting of Russian activities from civilians and a well-organised counter-communication campaign from the Ukrainian side. Consequently, the spread of Russian narratives is hindered by a much wider pool of sources reshaping and countering their information.

The way Russia and Ukraine share information also relates to their different means of communication. Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western companies ceased their operations in Russia, either voluntarily or due to government bans (KSE Institute, 2023). Russian courts banned major social media platforms such as Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter) (Reuters, 2022). This became a defining moment for how contrasting information would spread globally. There is a notable divide between the media platform usage: while X, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook are popular in the West, Russia predominantly relies on VKontakte, Telegram, and Yandex (Perez & Nair, 2022).

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Consequently, Russia's efforts primarily aim to influence and spread narratives within its borders, indicating a lack of significant interest in spreading narratives in Western states. In contrast, Ukraine has embraced media channels popular in Western states to influence the opinions of Western audiences and garner support from their governments (Maksymiv, 2022).

### **Restricting the Opponent's Narratives**

A key aspect of spreading information is trying to stop the spread of the opponent's narratives. Both Ukraine and Russia attempt to diminish or suppress each other's portrayal of events. Russia's attempt is evident through its foreign agent law implemented by Roskomnadzor, Russia's federal media censor (Vinokour, 2022). The 2012 law concerning foreign agents initially targeted nongovernmental organisations with foreign financing (Kim, 2021). Over time, modifications broadened its scope to encompass not only media entities but also virtually anyone who receives funding from overseas and expresses political viewpoints, such as individual journalists and bloggers (Kim, 2021). Through this law, Russian officials were able to strengthen state-controlled news outlets. Independent newspapers such as Novaya Gazeta received warnings and eventually had to halt their operations (Vinokour, 2022). Furthermore, it compelled anti-war individuals to refrain from speaking and avoid openly sharing information on media platforms (Gershkovich, 2022).

Since the 2014 annexation, Ukraine has focused on restricting the dissemination of Russian narratives. These policies, adopted between 2014 and 2022, remain relevant in the ongoing conflict as they have shaped information sharing. The Ukrainian government was particularly keen on tackling this issue since Ukraine has served as a testing ground for Russian disinformation campaigns before and after 2014 (Wilson Centre, 2021). This prompted both the Poroshenko and Zelensky administrations to prioritise combating this issue (Wilson Centre, 2021). In 2021, President Zelensky signed a decree that imposed sanctions on three television stations associated with Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch linked to the Kremlin (Skorkin, 2021). It came after the Ukrainian National Security Council sanctioned Medvedchuk, a pro-Kremlin politician, his wife and allies (Wilson Centre, 2021). The decision sparked divisions among Ukrainian citizens. While some considered it necessary to address the problem, others saw it as a restriction on rights, similar to what was happening in Russia at the time (Wilson Centre, 2021). Still, the ban was aimed at a public figure closely associated with the Kremlin and had a noticeable impact on public opinion in Ukraine. The Russian bans had a less defined scope, which even led to the silencing of actors with little influence (Kim, 2021).

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## Conclusions

In conclusion, both Ukraine and Russia have shaped and disseminated their versions of the conflict to gain support and influence perceptions domestically and internationally. Russia's strategic narrative has been based on disinformation, historical revisionism and the appeal to a golden past to justify its actions in Ukraine. However, its narrative has faced challenges in justifying its military defeats in Ukraine and the discourse has shifted over time.

Conversely, Ukraine's narrative has focused on portraying itself as a brave, unified nation standing up against Russia's aggression. The government's communication strategy rapidly shifted after the invasion, presenting a consistent and confident image to attract international support. To this extent, Ukraine's strategic narrative appears more successful than Russia's. It has effectively framed Russia as the aggressor and garnered significant Western support. However, Russia's discourse remains strong within its own country and resonates with some non-Western states. The distribution channels for spreading narratives have evolved significantly since the country's previous conflicts.

Moreover, the widespread use of social media, the internet and sanctions have provided the means for both parties to influence public opinion. Russia focuses on maintaining support domestically, while Ukraine also focuses on the international level, especially towards the West. Nevertheless, the two narratives seem irreconcilable at the time of writing, leaving no room for common understanding and possible compromise, making a peace agreement almost impossible (Zakharchenko, 2022).

In general, this paper has emphasised the significance of narratives in times of conflict. In particular, it serves as a timely reminder to European states about devising effective communication strategies to counter well-established Russian disinformation campaigns.

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