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Public diplomacy during military international conflicts. The Ukraine war case

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Abstract

Nowadays, warfare is characterized by a huge intensity of fight, large investment in military technology that led to new ways of combat and increased its visibility. While the changing strategic, social and cultural features of this environment have forced governments and armies to add new fight strategies including public diplomacy, the public diplomacy itself transformed. Therefore, this article reviews current research in this field and presents a theoretical approach of the actual war. In this regard, the topic discussed is the battle between the Ukrainian and Russian military for image and legitimacy in the international public opinion. In the information age in which we live, the activities and capabilities of public diplomacy can have a significant impact on how people, organizations, and governments perceive this war. The purpose of the article is to examine the management of public diplomacy in the case of both actors involved in this war.

Keywords:
public diplomacy; Russian aggression over Ukraine; security interest; strategic communication; enemy image; public opinion.

The President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, declared on February 24, 2022 that his armed forces launched a "special military operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine" (Putin 2022). Following the initial invasion, media outlets in different parts of the world portrayed the war in drastically different lights. Western mass-media (CNN, Fox News, New York Times, etc.) labelled the "special operation" a "war crime" spawned by an "unprovoked invasion" by the Russian government. The Russian mass-media (Sputnik News, Russia Today, etc.) in turn largely denied any war crimes, stating that these reports are part of Western propaganda (Hanley, Kumar and Durumeric 2022).

The emergence of a deeply fractured image of the war in Ukraine was hardly a surprise for analysts and communication specialists. When a war breaks out, the mass-media are also mobilized, they are part of the military (Hlihor and Hlihor 2010; Thussu and Freedman 2003; Pavlik 2022, 1-17; Kirat 2014, 1-12), because the information transmitted by the mass-media has effects not only on the "audience", public opinion, but also on those potentially and effectively involved in the conflict. Shaping the perceptions of opponents, supporters, and neutral groups influences whether and how a target audience will engage and participate. Thus, mobilization, information and persuasion are an integral part of the conduct of war (Brown 2003, 87). There is thus a vast and intense "battlefield" for winning the "minds and hearts" of people outside the fields of military operations, by also engaging other actors such as those using public diplomacy. This fact is also observable in the case of the war on our border, both in Russia and in Ukraine and in the states that support them.

The belligerents, using channels and means specific to public diplomacy, seek to impose two antagonistic interpretations of the events on the international public opinion. Moscow insists on convincing, despite the evidence, that this is not a military aggression against Ukraine, but a *spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya* – "special military operation" - or *spetsoperatsiya* – "special operation (Lazareva 2022). The Ukrainian side claims that there has been an invasion of its national territory. As early as the morning of February 24, "*a few hours after the first strikes by the Russian Armed Forces in Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lutsk and other cities, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, addressed Ukrainians with a statement that Russia had started the war. On the same day, the Verkhovna Rada introduced martial law in Ukraine*" (Bilousenko 2022), which legally established the existence of a state of war.

In most states of the world, both mass-media and governments perceived the name given by the Russians to define the war in Ukraine as a euphemism for military invasion and aggression. The conflict has been condemned in Europe and North America, both at the governmental and social level, and has led, on the one hand, to the imposition of tough and "unprecedented" sanctions, according to US President Joe Biden, against Russia, and on the other hand, to the provision of logistical and military aid to Ukraine to defend itself. In Europe, an exception

to this pro-Ukraine trend "*was observed in several countries, including Belarus – Ukraine's northern neighbour and a close ally of Moscow*" (Mudrov 2022, 273). Few states and international organizations refrained from cataloguing/defining the conflict triggered by Putin on the morning of February 24, 2022. Relevant, in this regard, is the position adopted by India and China, which both in public discourse and in that the mass-media have "*shown reluctance to criticize the Russian invasion. The Chinese and Indian governments have both been reserved on the issue*" (Roy and Paul 2022).

The communication of facts and actions that take place in this war, through distortion, exaggeration or mitigation, associated with divergent representations of events, tends to deeply structure the discourses of the conflicting actors – who accuse each other of waging an "information war" and of not conducting public diplomacy activities, as happened in previous crises that took place in this space (Audinet 2018, 171-204). In such a context, where the use and access to different means and channels of communication, be they classic or new media, constitute an essential strategic issue in the conflicts of the 21st century, it is necessary to research and analyze how diplomacy public can be "mobilized" by the belligerents to *pre-determine* the perception of events in the sense in which each of the parties wants it.

The main purpose of our research is therefore to discuss whether or not public diplomacy can also be useful in the context of a military conflict, and if so, what differentiates information warfare from public diplomacy – conceptually and in terms of practice in the field. The "public diplomacy" expression was in circulation during the Cold War as an American euphemism for propaganda (Hlihor 2017, 71-78).

If the distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda could be questioned on these historical grounds, so could the distinction between public diplomacy and information warfare? Is it relevant to distinguish between engagement in public diplomacy and engagement in information warfare, especially in the current climate of hostility between Russia and the West? Is Russian public diplomacy essentially a rhetorical tool to combat Western attempts to influence international public opinion? Russian specialists are trying to demonstrate that their public diplomacy activities are not the products of the intoxication of a target audience, as they are presented in the West. To answer these questions, we need to see if there are major differences in the language used to describe international communicative influence – in the case of "public diplomacy" as opposed to "information warfare". Although the overlap in how information warfare and public diplomacy are defined and practiced is largely acknowledged, our hypothesis starts from the assumption that public diplomacy may represent distinct ideals for international communication worth defending, even (especially) when the climate of the international politics is tainted by the existence of an armed conflict.

Public diplomacy – part of a „media warfare toolbox"?

The press has been used as a tool to promote one's own image in the event of an armed conflict since the second half of the 19th century, but only during the World War II did the international media – press, radio, television – have become real "weapons of war" for the belligerents (Hlihor and Hlihor 2010, 127-141). In the East-West rivalry of the Cold War, interposed radio propaganda - and its corollary, radio jamming - became a tool of the ideological struggle between the Western and the USSR, between the BBC World Service, the Voice of America, Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle, on one side, and Radio Moscow, on the (Hlihor and Melinescu 2021, 53-106). The ideological and technological competition, the Soviet-American one in particular, constituted the fertile ground for the development of public diplomacy in the world (Wang and Hong 2011, 345-346).

Today, when the threats to contemporary society are no longer only of the classic type, generated by wars and armed conflicts, although they were not absent from international politics after the Cold War, public diplomacy tends to turn into a weapon in the fifth generation wars (hybrid, informational, cognitive, etc.) (Hammes 2007, 14). This fact is visible in almost all nations that have sought to attract and make use of other resources besides the classical ones of the military profile (Hlihor and Hlihor 2021, 392-413; Kent 2015, 1341-1378), and the means of communication, especially those of the new media type, can become an effective weapon (Szostek 2020, 27-28; Corman, Trethewey and Goodall 2007, 7). Public diplomacy possesses effective means to influence the thinking and behaviour of political leaders and ordinary people in other countries. In fifth-generation warfare, the means of public diplomacy are used not only to "win hearts and minds", but also to establish effective lobbying channels for the defence of the state's national interests among a target audience to be "won".

More than a decade ago, Judith A. McHale, then Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (2009), referring to the importance of public diplomacy in advancing the security interests of the USA, stated that it must be developed because "*much of our national security strategy depends on securing cooperation with other nations, which in turn depends in large part on the extent to which our efforts abroad are seen as legitimate by their public*" (McHale 2009). Matthew Wallin, in a research report entitled *The National Security Need for Public Diplomacy*, published in October 2012 by the **American Security Project**, considered that public diplomacy is a vital aspect of US national security strategy (Wallin 2012). And in the Russian Federation, the interest in promoting foreign policy goals has grown considerably, but public diplomacy is seen rather with negative effects, since it is considered "*a powerful political resource, the scope and effectiveness of which in the 21st century becomes not only quite comparable to state resources, but already exceeding them, because they include (unlike the 20th century) resources coming not only from the state, but also from businessmen, civil society and even the resources of other*

countries" (Podberezkin 2017, 41). The Chinese, in order to have effective public diplomacy, build infrastructure, cultural centres around the world, develop long-term relationships in Africa, Latin America and other parts of the globe. Iran's public diplomacy network in the Middle East and beyond includes multilingual television and radio satellite networks, over 100 newspapers and journals, and thousands of websites and blogs. And understandably, al-Qaeda and other extremists continue to engage aggressively, using a range of new and old mass-media means (McHale 2009).

During times of war and crisis, public diplomacy actions are carried out by structures of the ministries of foreign affairs, by civil society organizations, but there were not a few situations in which the military were also involved. The American specialist in communication studies and public diplomacy, Bruce Gregory, notes that, in fact, "*Americans discovered public diplomacy in times of war*" (Bruce 2007), and the involvement of the military factor in practicing of this type of activity is not a novelty, only the tools and methods are different compared to previous stages. Since the beginning of *Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan* (October 2001 - December 31, 2014), military spokespersons were been primarily those who communicated with the American public on matters of interest coming from the field of operations. The same thing happened in the case of the Iraq War, when the military communications structures had to find the most effective ways to communicate to the public opinion in the Arab societies of the Middle East and other areas around the world that the US is not fighting a war against Islam, but against a dictatorship regime in the Islamic world (Hlihor 2017). For the Kremlin, information warfare is a key facet of Russia's version of public diplomacy. With minimal (sometimes no) concern for the truth, Russia's messages to the world public emphasize self-justification. Western governments responded assertively to Russia.

Thus, the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) has undertaken a massive effort to create an "informational ring around Russia", offering information programs designed not only for Russians, but also aimed at audiences in countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan and other neighbours of Russia. "*Since the invasion began in February 2022, the agency has also introduced a new Ukrainian- and Russian-language satellite channel that reaches all of Ukraine and parts of Russia. As the Kremlin silences independent media voices in Russia, demand for content from abroad is growing. In the first three weeks after the Russian invasion, USAGM checked more than one billion video views of its Russian-language programs on social media platforms. The agency reports that interviews with grieving Russian mothers whose sons were killed in combat are among the most watched*" (Seib 2022).

Since Russian public diplomacy efforts in the West have largely failed (Åslund 2022), the Kremlin has turned to some NGOs in Western countries to promote its image. One of these is the public organization *People's Diplomats of Norway*, led by former left-wing politician Hendrik Weber. This is how he describes Moscow's occupation of Crimea and the sanctions that the West has imposed on the Russian Federation:

"*With the information blockade in the foreign media, a distorted picture of the current situation in Crimea is going around the world, so it becomes most important for us to be able to tell the truth. We are making efforts to dispel mistrust and myths that have been propagated in Western countries about Crimea* (Weber 2020, 234). Another case is that of the American journalist George Eliason, who since the beginning of the war against Ukraine appeared several times in Russian propaganda media shows (Olhovskaya 2022), where he exactly repeated the Russian disinformation about the war against Ukraine and promoted fake news. Currently available information about Eliason proves that the Kremlin uses him as a "Western journalist to legitimize disinformation and anti-Ukraine propaganda" (FactCheck 2022). Another Kremlin propagandist is Dutch citizen Sonja van den Ende, called a "Western journalist" by the Russian press. In her comments, she repeats and confirms the main ideas of President Vladimir Putin's speech (FactCheck 2022). Another employee of the pro-Kremlin disinformation apparatus, referred to as a "Western expert", is John Mark Dugan, a US-born former police officer and marine officer. Dougan was convicted of illegal wiretapping and tax fraud in Florida and fled to Russia in 2016, where the Russian government granted him asylum-seeker status. From May 18-21, 2022, John Mark Dougan, along with other "Western journalists", visited territories occupied by the Russian military on a "press tour" organized by Russia and promoted numerous false claims about the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia (FactCheck 2022).

The Kremlin has a long history of using foreign figures as part of its public diplomacy efforts. The Soviet Union at one time had "*more than 25,000 different scientific, cultural and educational organizations and bodies*", and "*maintained contacts with 7,500 organizations, public figures and representatives of scientific and cultural circles in 134 countries*" (Burlinova 2022, 113-114). This shows that, although the Russian Federation does not have such a long tradition of conducting public diplomacy activities, its actions in this field should in no case be underestimated. Public diplomacy can be an effective weapon as any other and must therefore be treated as such. It should also be taken into account that public diplomacy is used in external and internal conditions that are hard to predict and changeable in order to achieve the goal with the necessary efficiency. From this perspective, it is necessary to use in the action of planning and conducting public diplomacy an adaptive management to the situations that may arise, to resort to techniques and means that have proven their effectiveness in peacetime. The monitoring and feedback of activities provide crisis and wartime public diplomacy management structures with data for analysis and prediction of future situations.

Ukraine war. The battle for image in international public opinion

Even before military operations were launched on February 24, 2022, a war for image, credibility and legitimacy began. A battle of narratives from the two protagonists

began. Vladimir Putin described his actions as *"self-defence" and emphasized that truth and justice are on Russia's side. Putin insisted that Moscow had no intention of occupying Ukraine. A few minutes later, heavy artillery strikes began in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Missiles were fired at all major areas and military bases in at least half of Ukraine* (Lupescu 2022). The credibility of this speech was extremely low, with marginal effects among conservative audiences in Western countries. The impact was not what Vladimir Putin expected, because the mass-media serving conservative circles have a niche audience already convinced by the Kremlin's rhetoric. "*They have little power to sway publics reluctant to this discourse and are dependent on the volatility of opinion, as the Ukrainian crisis tends to demonstrate. Finally, they do not participate in curbing anti-Russian beliefs in Poland or the United States, for example*" (Breil 2022).

All leaders of Western states and most of the non-European world condemned the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine. US President Joe Biden announced to international public opinion that "*The world will hold Russia accountable*" (Macias, Wilkie and Taylor 2022), which led to the formation of a broad coalition of support of the Ukrainian people. The invasion of Ukraine almost instantly shattered the means that Russian power had put in place in Western countries for years. Some media outlets, such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik,* were immediately banned, Western companies gradually abandoned the Russian market, and political figures, who did not hide their admiration for Putin's pragmatism, joined the general boycott. Public diplomacy entered the fray from the very first moments of the Russian-Ukrainian war. From this point of view, the Ukrainians were not taken by surprise, as they had at that time well-established institutions, with people trained and instructed in the great centres of public diplomacy in the West (Bureiko 2021). After the start of the war, in March 2022, Kyiv developed a *Public Diplomacy Strategy* (Bureiko 2021). This establishes the general guidelines, the financial and human resources, as well as the objectives to be achieved for the coming years. The efficiency and realism of the objectives set in the Strategy are also confirmed by international institutions that measure the soft power of states. Before the war, Ukraine was not in one of the leading places of soft power (number 61 out of 120, in 2021), according to *Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index*. Perception of Ukraine improved after the Russian invasion, with a whopping 44% increase in influence and 24% in reputation (Ellwood 2022).

All tools in the toolbox of public diplomacy were used with maximum efficiency. An edifying example is that of the English language newspaper *Kyiv Independent* that experienced a phenomenal rise in popularity, being perceived in English society as "*an amazing symbol of Ukrainian national resistance, another Ukrainian David and Goliath story. Its Twitter account increased from 30,000 followers to 1 million in 2 days, then to 2 million in a month. Its website, which only launched in January, with 1,000 daily users, had 7.5 million unique views in March. The team frequently submitted stories to English-speaking journalists around the world*" (Ellwood 2022).

Public diplomacy in Ukraine used strategic humour (Chernobrov 2021, 1-20) to more easily "win over" the target audience in dramatic situations, such as those generated by the battles that are taking place on Ukrainian territory today. Ukraine sends various humorous images and narratives about the invading Russian troops to the liberal Western public to maintain the idea that they are invincible and to secure their support for the war they are waging and to convey for a potential membership in the Euro-Atlantic community (Budnitsky 2022). A caricature of Putin likened to Hitler particularly resonated with Western audiences and "*aligned perfectly with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's comparison of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine to Nazi Germany's 1939 invasion of Czechoslovakia*" (Sirikupt 2022). Through the *@Ukraine* platform, many Twitter users were encouraged to join the trolling effort and reproduce anti-Kremlin humour. Just a month after the start of the war, the Ministry of Defence released videos showing, for example, Ukrainian farmers shooting Russian military vehicles, with Western music playing in the background, to indicate that Ukraine was part of the West (Elrisala 2022). In addition to the irony against the Russian military, the Ukrainian military emphasizes its care and compassion for animals to emphasize the humanity of its soldiers, and memes and videos show soldiers evacuating pets and zoos, along with scenes of Russian brutality. Another example of a social media platform is *Ukrainian Forces Meme* on Twitter, which has over 330,000 followers and regularly posts satirical responses and memes related to news coming out of Ukraine (Ukrainian Memes Forces 2022).

Despite some successes considered resounding only a few years before, Russia's reaction in using public diplomacy to promote its interests was, in the opinion of Western specialists, often inadequate and especially not credible (Seib 2022), although in recent years, Russians "*acted to reform the RIA Novosti news agency, the Voice of Russia radio station, created Russia Today Channel TV and the Russkiy Mir Foundation specialized in popularizing the Russian language and culture in the world. In addition, "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" publishes monthly inserts for the Washington Post, The Daily Telegraph, Le Figaro, as well as leading publications in Argentina, Bulgaria, Brazil, India, Spain and Italy, with a total circulation of several million*" (Bartosh 2017). As the events of the last months of the war in Ukraine show, any propaganda efforts undertaken by Russia through public diplomacy means and institutions outside its own borders are virtually "drowned" by the incredibly effective messaging of Ukraine and its supporters around the world (Ball 2022). The failures suffered show that Russia's information operations were never on the scale that Western specialists once perceived. Russian specialists, faced with the impossible task of presenting an unprovoked invasion as a peacekeeping operation, hit a wall. Instead, after some months of conflict, Ukraine has a huge, energized supporter base ready to promote its success narratives and images. It can minimize its losses and increase its victories - by posting pictures of vehicles or tanks abandoned by the Russian invaders, with civilian heroism, or with inspirational quotes.

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine highlights that information warfare will be a significant factor in future conflicts. Among the lessons learned from this war should be that: an unprepared public is dangerously susceptible to misinformation. Manipulated communication expands during a conflict. In response, global audiences will need to embrace mass-media literacy, which encourages healthy scepticism as people weigh the information they receive. This presupposes the existence of some forms of "media literacy" in the school programs of education systems in contemporary society. Some nations, Finland for example, already do this, but most countries lag far behind.

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