

Ukraine's Information Front

Executive Summary

Ivar Ekman och Per-Erik Nilsson

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.

THE REPORT "UKRAINE'S Information Front – Strategic Communication During Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine" (FOI-R--5451--SE), 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 Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson, 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 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, based on 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 are 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.

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