

THE MEDIA WAR: STRATEGIES AND ESCALATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, caused a real planetary shock, not only on the battlefields but also in terms of the multiplication of the components of a hybrid war. Information and disinformation go hand in hand on both sides, with significant conflicting approaches that illustrate two different worldviews.

Keywords: media, war, Ukraine, Russia, strategy, symbol

The war in Ukraine, triggered by Russia's invasion of a sovereign country, challenges us in many ways. There is the battle - horrible, devastating, inhuman - that continues its deadly course on the ground, and there is also the other battle - no less dangerous but much more perfidious and difficult to manage - that unfolds through the media and social networks. Asymmetrical battles at all levels: military, diplomatic, economic, media, and psychological.

But the main problem does not come from the battlefield, or at least not only. Rather, it comes from human nature and, more precisely, from the organization of our brain, which, over time, for reasons of survival at first, has learned to judge and evaluate in a dualistic way. In other words, although no one doubts that life, the world, or the human mind have countless shades and colors, our fundamental impulse is to analyze in black and white, to sort out the immensity of the stimuli that assail us every second, to classify, to simplify, to take shortcuts and... to get used to everything, even to the worst. The double danger lies here in this propensity to embrace a cause, a unique and monovalent vision, to the detriment of any criterion of objectivity, and in what, for some time now, following in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, we have called the banality of evil.

Thus, today, the largest part of the democratic world, caricaturally speaking, abhors the Russians and adores the Ukrainians. Or rather, it hates and fears the Putin regime and is under the spell of the surprising President Zelensky. Because it seems that, especially in times of war, one is not allowed to soften radical statements at the risk of being bluntly dismissed as a supporter of one side or the other. Obviously, the puppeteers who articulate, stage, and filter any political message have long understood how the human mind works, and they juggle the brake and gas pedals of our emotions. Communication thus becomes an informational weapon just as powerful as the HIMARS rocket launchers.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, from which it has issued with a lot of sores, humanity has been brutally confronted with another provocation, equally disturbing, although indirect and intermediated, backed by the inconceivable nuclear threat. The problem is that perceptions of information differ according to our upbringing, past experiences, values, and beliefs at both individual and community levels. Differences can be deleterious or at least disconcerting when national identities are challenged. Sometimes, this generates insurmountable differences in the interpretations of the same situation, assuming that one has, through the various media, an accurate picture of the facts. And the questions that already plagued the ancient world come back to haunt us: Who decides where the borderline between good and evil

lies? The elected? The masses? The shadowy leaders we ignore? Can we be certain that these people hold the absolute truth? And what is absolute truth, after all?

Faced with a situation as serious and complex as the war in Ukraine, our reptilian brain asks us to take a position for or against, to scan the situation, to evaluate it, and to issue a negative or positive judgment. In this sense, contemporary military conflicts represent a particularly rich laboratory of communication and media experiments. From the Romanian Revolution, which was watched live on television, to the various Orange, Green, and Spring revolutions, or to the wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan, the media have progressively taken center stage, relaying information and facts according to the political orientation and interests of their financial backers. But the role and impact of visual and emotional communication in information and disinformation have never been so obvious, so important as in the 2022 war in Ukraine.

We are not interested here in the media battle that is supposed to circumvent the power in place in an authoritarian country like Russia, but precisely in the elaboration and the elements that make up the official arguments of the two sides. The war of images and narrative discourses engaged by the Russians and Ukrainians has been unfolding roughly in parallel with physical aggression. And the vocabulary of both sides established its landmarks from the outset, both for fellow countrymen and foreign addressees. On the Russian side, there is a “special military operation” – a formula from which no one can escape since the word “war” is forbidden, and the persons who use it risk being sentenced to prison. What follows it is also standardized: Russia has only responded to the so-called request for help from the “republics” of Lugansk and Donbass, where Russian speakers are “persecuted” by the “Nazis” and “drug addicts” of the “depraved” regime in Kiev. In the other camp, they immediately spoke of “invasion,” “war,” and “occupiers.”

From then on, progressively and in parallel with the advance on the ground, we have witnessed how narratives have become more complex and adjusted, depending on the bias adopted and the intended recipients, as well as on military realities on the ground and echoes in international circles. This flexibility and discursive suppleness are probably a contemporary achievement, a direct consequence of the explosion of instantaneous networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, in a world that has increasingly less patience for long unfolding and in-depth explanations. Brief, punchy, gripping: this is how news hits home and can influence the masses. This conflict has been dubbed the “TikTok War”, or more succinctly, the “WarTok”.

From day one, the communication strategies of the two presidents and the two media structures that relay their messages have been clearly divergent with, however, some points of convergence. The West, bathed in its democratic reveries and diplomatic minuets, did not see it coming. Yet this war started in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea; it happened so suddenly that it took everyone by surprise and did not cause any real international reactions. True, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution denouncing the attachment of the peninsula to Russia, and the United States, the European Union, and other countries decried the violation of international law. Yet, in fact, the free world was just beginning to discover this great country that was thought to be orbiting the Russian Federation and that the Euromaidan revolution and the flight of former President Yanukovich had revealed as modern, fearless, and pro-democracy. It was already knocking on the doors of the EU and NATO, but its geopolitical position was too complicated and dangerous for any prospect of integration in the near future. In any case, the EU is militarily impotent, NATO was not directly concerned, and the United States did not want to stir Moscow's nuclear bear. Moreover, despite a liberal-focused economy, a strong and vocal civil society, and a bloc of Western-oriented NGOs and media organizations (generously funded by Western donors), Ukraine was – and still is – quite dependent on the same oligarchic system that is rampant in Russia. Basically, Euromaidan, like the Arab Spring, was not about political and social rupture or structural change but rather about replacing the ruling elites with more Western-oriented and modern ones, but on the same basis of heavy paternalism and clientelism inherited from the former USSR. As the Ukrainian state weakened after the annexation of Crimea, two other determining factors entered the increasingly tangled game in the region: European and American military, logistical and political aid, and the strengthening of far-right groups such as Svoboda and Azov, whose ideology is a radical interpretation of Ukrainian nationalism.

If one can legitimately say that there would have been no Euromaidan (or other contemporary revolts) without the media, which first created what Jürgen Habermas termed a public space, and then a public sphere for the ideas and demands of the revolutionaries, broadcast worldwide, one could also argue that the war in Ukraine would not have taken this decisive turn and would not have led to this unparalleled international mobilization in favor of Ukraine and to the detriment of the Russian aggressor without the unprecedented, bold, innovative communication strategies established with lightning speed by President Zelensky's astute image advisors, probably American, or in any case, initiated by them, judging by their style.

International spectators - because thanks to the media and social networks, the planet has become a huge theater - were confronted with two diametrically opposed approaches, corresponding to the profiles of the two presidents and the two nations (despite their common history and undeniable linguistic kinship). The shock was astonishing from the first moment; it was visible, almost palpable. Modernity and prehistory. Fire and ice. Harry Potter and Jurassic Park. A concentrated, persuasive, warm speech facing a tense, cold, implacable message. Don Quixote and the statue of the Commander.

On the one hand, Volodimir Zelensky, a young president-player, in the true sense of the word, a former stand-up comedy actor, was largely unknown before the war in Ukraine began. From then on, however, he was practically the only figure seen in the media. Very quickly, with his entourage, he developed a multi-faceted communication model, with great flexibility in the construction of the message and with striking changes in tone and accent, depending on the recipient. This is one of the main differences that set him apart from Putin: the modulation and adequacy of his narrative content, the alternation of types of discourses, going from injunctions, veiled criticisms or even reprimands addressed to the Western partners – who are often too slow or indecisive –, to the already famous brief and focused daily midnight speeches, intended to reassure or warn the population, to keep up the morale of the troops and to throw jabs at the invaders, to speeches full of respect, gratitude and compassion when he visits the soldiers on the battlefield or in the hospitals, or when he speaks to the bereaved families. And let us not forget the targeted irruptions, equally pragmatic and emotional, in the assemblies and parliaments of the countries that speak mostly for Ukraine, while the appearance of Russian officials in international meetings emptied the rooms. It is also true that Zelensky's acting skills have something to do with it, but beyond a certain facility to draw attention to himself, one feels the authentic man, committed, suffering, and hoping just like his people. Always dressed in combat gear, his face drawn, his voice often hoarse from talking all day long, the Ukrainian president has proven to be, to the equal consternation of the West and Russia, the man of the moment, determined, brave, empathetic, able to convince the most experienced diplomats as well as the simplest people, and above all a communicational genius, handling with an innate and/or acquired prescience the best strategies of persuasion and seduction, embodying the hero who, against his will, guards the doors of European values and freedom. An Ashkenazi Jew by origin, Zelensky skillfully uses this other string of his bow, which allows him to credibly counter the Putin regime's accusations of Nazism and also to win the support of Israel and the powerful Jewish diaspora.

That said, we sometimes feel – and this does not detract us from the sincerity of his remarks – a certain air of American showbiz, which is not always to everyone’s taste. This is particularly the case with the worldwide distribution of the television series “The Servant of the People”, in which Zelensky starred when he was an actor and a comedian, and which he also created and produced. The reception of the series was polarized: its admirers saw it as a premonition (the character played by Zelensky, a young history teacher, climbs the political ladder up to the supreme function in the state), while his detractors and the Russian propaganda used it to denounce the lack of seriousness and the political inexperience of a man whom nothing had prepared to meet the great challenges of history.

This type of communication strategy is indeed a double-edged sword: on the one hand, many are those who appreciate an American-style self-made man story, yet on the other hand, the broader contextualization that followed the broadcast of the series aroused the curiosity of the public and revealed more troubling aspects in the recent past of the star-president. He is not just an actor, he is also a successful entrepreneur, a millionaire (in dollars), the owner of a magnificent villa in Tuscany, among others, and a close friend of certain Russian oligarchs (such as Igor Kolo-moïski).

However, with the help of his advisers, he has been working on putting forward the image of a simple, friendly man, who speaks in a relaxed, familiar way, and who, at the same time, has strength, energy, and the power to instill in his fellow citizens the desire and ability to uphold their position until the end. It is also for the international public sphere that he recently appeared in a photo shoot, with his wife Olena, in the famous fashion magazine “Vogue.” The shoot was made by the legendary photographer Annie Leibovitz. In this case, Zelensky’s communication advisers may have been less inspired than usual. The result, aesthetically flawless, engendered perplexity as to the moral appropriateness of this Hollywood staging, with amorous and nostalgic airs against a backdrop of war, a glamour deemed inappropriate at a time when Ukraine is going through the most profound crisis in its history, and the whole world is suffering the fallout. The recourse to this kind of publicity at this precise moment could be explained by the necessity to reach the international community, which is fond of small juicy details concerning prominent personalities rather than complicated technical and military explanations so that we do not forget the Ukrainian tragedy.

As we are getting used to the unbearable, we tend to drive it out of our thoughts. It is for the same reason that, apart from powerful politicians, Zelensky also invites world-famous actors and musicians (a strategy that the Russians also try to imitate,

without too much success, with the notable exception of Steven Seagal). He thus tries to arouse a surplus of sympathy and attention for the human dimension of this war, even though, in order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to go through an exercise of a certain frivolity.

It is too early now to state whether this communication device has had more positive than negative consequences on the general way of relating to the war. What is certain is that the “Vogue” photoshoot made waves. Here again, we are talking about polarization. But, upon reflection, in the second degree, the contradictory reactions, the collective frenzy of whatever type, fan the flames and perpetuate the interest.

On the other hand, there is the imperturbable President Putin, wax-faced, rigid, reassuring for his own people, ironic, snappy and threatening towards the Ukrainians, the Americans, and the Europeans, a sort of icy mutant, without the shadow of a smile or a benevolent intonation, always perfectly dressed, in an overwhelming setting of splendor, and as if detached from the vicissitudes of this sick planet. Putin is untouchable; he has built an aura of a god descended from the skies to restore the image of a vanished empire and to give the Russian people the glory and the place it deserves. The persuasive capacity of his discourse owes nothing, or very little, to its content. On the contrary, its arbitrary character, swaggering to the point of bordering on the absurd, seduces and fascinates the masses just like the gaze of a snake. His communication with his fellow citizens is most often rough but extremely efficient: Russia is proud and powerful, has weapons and technology far superior to those of its enemies, its natural resources protect it from any international sanction, and the Russian people are unique, invincible, talented, the creator of a civilization that the whole world envies! And this strategy works wonderfully. We have seen TV reports from the streets of major Russian cities and we have listened, in amazement, to young and educated people who are active on social networks, who have access to information unfiltered by the factories of trolls, rallying without a blink to Putin’s politics, and who even add to it, in terms of cynicism. Admittedly, we know that many brave intellectuals, scholars, and journalists wrote open letters to protest against the murderous uselessness of this war. Still, most opponents to the regime left Russia or ended up in jail.

If Zelensky and those close to him bet on relational simplicity – playing on the figure of a leader who has known how to stay close to his people, a normal, natural man, attached to his family, worried but strong, sharing the life and the concerns of his compatriots, Putin and those close to him (a relatively false term, as the chronic distrust and the shadowy character of the Russian President, make him a great lon-

er, like any dictator, basically) favor another communication formula, better suited to the psychology of the Russian people – sentimental, melancholic and slightly whimsical, a great consumer of fairy tales and legends. However, Putin understood very well that, in order to secure the vote of a large majority of the population, he had to preserve his halo of intangibility, of an extraordinary man-God, who gallops and hunts on wild bears, bathes in the icy waters of Siberia, practices all sorts of sports and boasts a black belt in judo. In short, a sort of superman, disciplined and strict, who watches over the destiny of his great nation and does not bother with trifles about his private life. It is through the mystery that his legend survives.

What are the primary objectives pursued by the communication strategies of the two countries? The Ukrainians, through Zelensky, seek recognition of their belonging to 21st century Europe, highlighting their adherence to the values, conceptions, and ways of life of the free world. The Russians, through Putin, claim a timeless civilizational and military superiority, a unique place and role among the world's nations. A wish to integrate into the larger structures, on the one hand, a cult of self-sufficient uniqueness on the other. This distinction is also highlighted by non-verbal signs. The Ukrainian President welcomes his foreign guests with ease, in his trademark green T-shirt, at the Mariinsky Palace, or in the streets of Kyiv, or even among the ruins of the bombed cities; he kisses them, stands close to them and speaks to them in a familiar manner. On the other hand, Putin is filmed crossing the huge golden rooms of the Kremlin, or welcoming his guests around tables of varying dimensions, ranging from large to enormous, with all the symbolic subtext of this assertion of discretionary authority and with the message implicitly transmitted to his interlocutors, whether they are heads of state or subordinates.

It is interesting to note that the second ring of power reproduces the model of the leader. We have discovered, from February 24, 2022, onwards, not only a casual, endearing President who spoke quickly and well, at ease with all the powerful figures of this world but also a government made up of dynamic young people, professionals, and fighters, like their leader. Among them, one could particularly notice the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, aged 39, a diplomat and specialist in communications, sober and efficient, speaking in elegant and precise English, knowing very well the backstage of the Kremlin and the political games of the leaders of this world, knowing how to modulate his public speeches, pressing the accelerator pedal if necessary (we have seen him sermonize, alongside his leader or by himself, the representatives of the great powers and international organizations who skimp a little on the harsh sanctions against Russia or on the financial and military aid provided to Ukraine). And, above all, we saw him standing up to

and fighting on an equal footing with the ternal, irremovable Russian Foreign Minister, the extremely cunning and yet petrified, stereotypical Sergei Lavrov, aged 72. The differences in approach, strategy, and means of persuasion are obvious. The accusations of Nazism, the nuclear threat, and the other enormities uttered by Putin's old spokesman no longer seem to convince anyone, not even himself, while the young Kuleba has no difficulty in making his country's demands heard, making judicious use of illustrations and factual data.

Actually, two divergent symbolic imaginaries nourish the two types of discourse and the two communication strategies we are discussing here. The past confronts the present and the future. For Putin and his cronies (especially his staunch and passionate media supporter, Vladimir Soloviev), History stopped at the time of Peter the Great and of Catherine the Great, with a few dives into modern and contemporary history to detach from their context the Russian victories over the European armies. Putin himself published last July, on the Kremlin website, a text titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," rewriting and reinterpreting historical facts to justify the invasion of Ukraine. It is however true that the situation is complex and that it would be unfair to perform a radical and clear cut, separating things, and putting the good guys on the one side and the bad guys on the other. This is, however, too long and tortuous a discussion to undertake in this article. It is clear, nevertheless, that Putin goes back in time to where it suits him, in order to unearth the arguments that he needs to legitimize his current actions and aims.

As for Zelensky, he contents himself with emphasizing the present and the future of a country which, paradoxically and completely against the intentions of the Kremlin, has acquired, or at least has become aware of its distinct identity under the bombardment of the Russian missiles, in the midst of the humanitarian disaster generated by the war. The Ukrainians, and especially a good part of the Russian speakers, who hesitated before, now know what they want and especially what they do not want. They want to be part of the great European and global constructions based on freedom and democracy, they do not want to live gagged, hands and feet tied in the name of a chimera and an ambition they do not share.

But our certainties and convictions should not make us turn a blind eye to the various manipulations and fake information produced and relayed by social networks or traditional media. Critical thinking, lucidity, moderation of judgements are the only safeguards that can guide us in grasping a reality that increasingly escapes us.

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