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VIVIAN S. WALKER

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY



EDMUND A. WALSH SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE | GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Case 331

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Introduction

This case study begins with an examination of the origins of the strategic narrative Russia has developed about its new, post-Cold War identity and how that narrative has shaped its propaganda offensive. Following a review of key elements in Russia's information arsenal, the case study looks at Ukraine's counter-narratives, focusing in particular on the East/West dynamic that both defines and complicates its identity as a sovereign state. The study then assesses Ukraine's information initiatives and assets, before concluding with a set of recommendations for achieving effective strategic narrative development and projection in a complex information environment.

Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and the “Weaponization” of Information

During periods of crisis, when its identity and influence are most at risk, a state's viability depends on the development of an effective strategic narrative that explains its actions and states its intentions. In today's complex, networked environment, all states “depend on systems of information and the flow of images—images that have a profound impact on how a state functions and performs” for its audiences, both domestic and international.² Globalization and new information technologies have complicated a state's capacity to project its identity and protect its influence.³

For the purposes of this case study, strategic narrative will be defined as a “story” created by a state to legitimize its policies in order to influence the opinion and behavior of domestic and international audiences.⁴ An effective strategic narrative also enables a state to articulate and project national strategic objectives in a global context. It can define a state's allies as well as its enemies, place a state in its historical and cultural context, and frame a state's future in terms that persuade, attract and ultimately, influence audience attitudes and behaviors.⁵ At

its most basic, a state's strategic narrative offers an official story, based on tradition and culture, that ultimately assures “historical continuity, if not legitimacy.”⁶

The success of the narrative depends on the soft power attractiveness of its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies, when they are perceived as both legitimate and having moral authority.⁷ However, soft power can easily be weaponized when an aggressor state conveys what it describes as truthful information with the purpose of destabilizing a target state's culture, politics and relationships, both internal and external.⁸ In fact, experts have defined the “information war” that Russia is currently waging on Ukraine as a “strategic use of non-military means to achieve objectives such as regime change, an objective that might otherwise be obtained through conventional weaponry.”⁹ Indeed, well before launching the attack on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin advocated the use of “a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence.”¹⁰

It is worth noting, of course, that the weaponization of information can be used as a defensive measure—and that the definition of the aggressor is often in the eye of the beholder. But the reality is that in today's complex media environment, states have to understand and be prepared to address the use of information tools and methods as potential weapons in the defense of national security and economic interests. Whether in offensive or defensive mode, states must continuously correct the record, clearly articulate policy initiatives, and persuasively solicit support for particular actions.

Part I: Russia's Information War

The story begins with Russia's concern about Ukraine's growing political and economic relationships with the West. In November 2013, in the midst of an economic crisis, then-President

Victor Yanukovich declined at the last minute to sign a European Union Association agreement, opting instead to accept Russia's offer of a loan and energy pricing incentives. His eastward turn set off a series of angry public demonstrations, which culminated in the occupation of the Maidan, or Independence Square, in the heart of Kyiv. The government's harsh crackdown on these initial protests resulted in a bloody, full-blown political revolt that ultimately brought about the end of Yanukovich's rule and led to the establishment of a pro-Western transitional government. These events, which threatened Russia's security and economic interests in the region, provoked the Kremlin into a series of retaliatory measures. The most extreme and consequential of these measures included the annexation of Crimea and the sponsorship of a "separatist rebellion" in Ukraine's eastern provinces that was still ongoing in 2015.

At the same time that it attacked Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, the Russian Federation launched a powerful television, radio, Internet, and print offensive depicting Ukraine's leadership as despotic nationalists and puppets of the West intent on harming ethnic Russians and destroying Russia's sphere of influence in the region. In the Kremlin's current version of the narrative, Ukraine is a weak, corrupt and corrupting state teetering on the brink of collapse. Intent on preventing Ukraine from aligning itself with the E.U., NATO, and other Western security and economic institutions, Russia has launched an inflammatory propaganda offensive that portrays Ukraine as a failed state. In the Kremlin's narrative, Ukraine's Western allies are corrupt enablers intent on destroying Russia.

Russia's current information warfare strategy emerges from its growing desire to protect its "compatriots abroad"—i.e., ethnic Russians—from alleged "threats" to their human rights and physical security.¹¹ Key Russian foreign policy and state security policy reviews in

2007 and 2009¹² further delineate the need to sustain the "Russian World," which involves the maintenance, if not expansion, of a "unified Russian-language information sphere beyond the border of the Russian Federation," otherwise known as "the territory of the USSR."¹³ This mandate is in many respects a recapitulation of the Soviet-era Kremlin's perception of the Western world as hostile to its interests and values. It also reflects, as George Kennan famously noted, the tendency of Russia's czarist and communist leaders to resist "foreign penetration" and "direct contact between the Western world" for fear that their rule would suffer by comparison to the political systems and values of Western countries."¹⁴

The Russian Federation's so-called "hybrid warfare" strategy makes conventional use of military force secondary to targeted information operations. Hybrid warfare has its antecedents in Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, when, for the first time, cyber warfare and information operations played a key role in the military operation.¹⁵ Today, a shadowy, quasi-governmental media organization is responsible for the "weaponization" of information. Though this network is under the control of the Russian Presidential Administration,¹⁶ its relationship to the Kremlin is obscured, sustained through untraceable networks of money, influence, and power. This invisible alliance works closely with Russia's leadership on content development, translating official "temniki"—key messages—into propaganda.

The Kremlin's shadow information warriors are successful largely because they are not interested in providing facts. Indeed, their goal is to create an alternate reality—or series of realities—such that no one version of events is plausible. In other words, it is enough for their messages to seem factual, to create the impression of truth and therefore to sow doubt or confusion in the minds of their target audiences. The shadow warriors are similarly uninterested in

credibility.¹⁷ Rather, they exploit the inherent credulity and biases of their target audiences, counting on them to assimilate and interpret the narrative on their own terms.¹⁸ In other words, the Russian propagandists cleverly cater to consumer predilections and prejudices, creating incendiary narratives that feed the target audience's paranoia.

Through a barrage of falsified stories and doctored images, the Russia propagandists also aim to sow confusion and uncertainty to the extent that it becomes difficult for target audiences to discern fact from falsehood. The sheer quantity of information provided by Russia's propaganda outlets is falsely reassuring, providing consumers with the illusion of choice among data points. Russia's extensive network of Internet-based propaganda outlets is particularly effective because many social media believe that social media outlets operate independently of government controls and therefore convey "truth."¹⁹

Part II: "I'm an Occupier": The Russian Narrative

Just as the Cold War featured competing sets of values and spheres of influence, Russia's information answer to the threat against its external soft power projection is a strategic narrative that features authoritarian rule posing as a democracy, state control over resources posing as a free-market economy, and linguistic and ethnic domination posing as the restoration of Russian traditions and culture.²⁰ In the welter of half-truths and outright lies created to establish a dominant Russian sphere of influence, there is something for everyone, especially those in search of lost political power, social validation, or spiritual affirmation. The Russian propaganda machine has created a set of mythical narratives that call for the recovery of a Russian orthodox civilization to counteract Western "immorality" and decadence. Characterizing Russia's history as a series of glorious battles against would-be invaders, these narratives call for the restoration

of Russia's territorial integrity and influence. The narratives also call for the recreation of a world where Russia and Ukraine are reunited in recognition of their "shared" culture and history.²¹

In pursuit of this mythic reunion, Russia seeks to undermine Ukraine's soft power attractiveness as an independent state with a distinct national identity. It does so by targeting Ukraine's values, beliefs, and characteristics. Russia's narratives variously characterize the Ukrainian government as corrupt and Ukraine as incapable of statehood, describe the ouster of Yanukovich as a "coup d'état" and a "perversion of democracy," label the Euromaidan protesters (and subsequently elected government officials) as "fascists, Nazis, and nationalists," and claim that the government is "oppressing" ethnic Russians. Russia's version of reality portrays Ukraine as a puppet of, variously, the E.U., NATO, and the United States.²² Washington, in particular, is demonized as a malign outside force that threatens Russia's territorial integrity, security, and economic growth. According to this narrative, Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent attack on the eastern provinces were essential to the protection of ethnic Russian citizens against a corrupt, incompetent, illegally constituted Ukrainian government backed by a scheming West.

To legitimize its behavior, the Russian state also seeks to reconstruct its history and cultural traditions. President Putin's March 18, 2014, speech to both houses of the Russian parliament just after signing the Crimean accession treaty illustrates the historical mythmaking at work in Russia's strategic narrative.²³ In this case his messaging, ostensibly for domestic consumption, actually targets regional and Western audiences.

Putin begins with some historical context, laying the foundation for his Russian world paradigm: "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This conviction is based on truth and justice and

was passed on from generation to generation.” Putin goes on to describe former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s decision to transfer the Crimean region to Ukraine as a “clear violation of constitutional norms.” In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, when “Crimea ended up as part of a different country... Russia realized that it was not simply robbed; it was plundered.”

Crimea’s annexation becomes, in Putin’s version of events, a restitution of a grave political wrong and the restoration of a plundered national identity. Putin then goes on to assert that Russia and Ukraine were not the only victims: with the end of the Soviet Union, millions of people “became ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.” This statement poses a clear threat to all of the former Soviet republics with Russian-speaking minorities because it lays the foundation for future efforts to “ensure their protection.” It reflects Putin’s desire to redraw the map of the post-Soviet space, to widen Russia’s influence, and to resurrect difficult questions about borders, citizenship, language, and ethnicity that define the post-Soviet space.

Putin next attacks the current Ukrainian government, noting that he understands

“those who came out to Maidan with peaceful slogans against corruption, inefficient state management and poverty. ... However, those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine had a different agenda. ... They wanted to seize power and would stop short of nothing. They resorted to terror, murder, and riot. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup.”

Here Putin masterfully engages in inflammatory name-calling, playing on language frequently used by Russian media to thoroughly discredit Ukraine’s leadership. This allows him to portray

himself as a hero in the fight against the forces of evil.

Putin then goes after what he considers to be the true villains, those who enable the current Ukrainian regime:

“Our Western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that [only] they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right.”

Putin cites a number of what he describes as acts of Western aggression, including, among others, intervention in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He also alleges Western manipulation of the color revolutions and the Arab Spring: “Standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, and cultures.” Finally, the West’s support for Ukraine’s “illegitimate” government was aimed against “Russia and against Eurasian integration.”

In Putin’s version of reality, the West is intent upon gobbling up territory and imposing its corrupt and corrupting values on weak nations in the service of its imperialistic might. Interestingly, Putin frames his deeply-held resentment against the West on the basis of political values rather than economic terms. His anti-Western narrative, finally, allows Putin to depict himself to his constituents, at home and abroad, as a strong leader who, in addition to restoring Russia’s territorial integrity, is leading the fight against a powerful set of enemies outside Russia’s borders.

“I’m a Russian Occupier,” a slickly produced video from “Okeyamnet” (one of the many so-called “Russian news channels” on YouTube), reinforces the essential elements of the Russian world myth.²⁴ Seemingly aimed at a younger

demographic, the video's martial music, staccato delivery and apocalyptic rhetoric replicate the experience of expository "cutscenes" in popular video war games.²⁵

Serving as a transition between levels of play, a "cutscene" distills the game's framing narrative. Similarly, "I'm a Russian Occupier" retells the history of Soviet territorial aggression and political oppression as a narrative of selfless good works and heroic sacrifice on behalf of less developed civilizations. In a tone of aggravated pique, the video's narrator makes ironic use of the term "occupation" to illustrate that Soviet presence in conquered lands actually brought economic and social benefits to indigenous populations—benefits that, with statehood and independence, have been squandered.

In the Baltic States, for example, the narrator claims the Soviets built high-quality factories and power plants; now, as citizens of sovereign nations, Estonians, Lithuanians, and Latvians "sell sprats" and clean "half the toilets in Europe." In Central Asia, the Soviets built factories, spaceports, hospitals, and stadiums on "bare steppes." Now, half the population works on Russian construction sites while Central Asian governments run into dollar debt. In Ukraine, according to the narrator, the current regime is "destroying" all the benefits provided by the former "occupant." There is nothing left, he complains, but "endless Maidans and dictatorships."

Increasingly menacing in tone, the narrator then describes a series of historic Slavic/Russian victories against Western invaders—the Poles during the "Time of Troubles," the French during the Napoleonic wars, the "Nazis" under Hitler. In a ghoulish flourish, the narrator notes that there is land enough for all invaders—in the form of gravestones. Finally, the narrator launches an *ad hominem* attack on so-called "Rotten Democracy" and "Western values" in a stream of images depicting Guantanamo and the CIA logo, NATO troops in Afghanistan,

a gay pride march, a pornographic cartoon mocking religion, and the Russian band "Pussy Riot" performing against the backdrop of an Orthodox Church altar. The video then offers a visual warning: Russian tanks and weapons lined up against a border. But the last word belongs to the occupier: "I build peace. I love peace. But I know how to fight better than anyone else." And the final image—a nod to the predominance of Russia's use of the information instrument—features the occupier's gloved hands typing and sending a warning to President Barack Obama—described mockingly as "The Lord of the World."

Part III: Russia's "Matrix of Tools and Methods"

In Russia, where 86% of the population gets its information from Russian television stations,²⁶ the carefully orchestrated, visually compelling anti-Western narrative has a broad and receptive audience. But the real battle for narrative supremacy takes place in the global media space. Building on its long experience of information control, the Russian government is waging a concerted attack on Ukraine using its national and international Russian-language television outlets.

The most prominent and far-reaching of these Russia channels, *RT (Russia Today)* provides continuous online and satellite transmission of multi-lingual news programs, wire services and radio channels. Using an estimated annual budget of \$300 million, *RT* propagates a toxic blend of allegation, rumor, innuendo, and falsehoods across the global media space.²⁷ With 22 satellite carriers and 230 operators, *RT* claims to reach 700 million households in more than 100 countries.²⁸ According to *RT*, in 2011 it was the second-most-watched foreign news network after the BBC in the United States, where it has a household viewership of 85 million. In 2013 *RT* claims to have reached a record 1.2 billion viewers on YouTube alone.²⁹

RT conducts effective market research and deftly exploits its target audiences' cultures, values, and beliefs. News stories targeted at American audiences regularly allege that the U.S. government pursues the strategic interests of a moneyed elite at the expense of everyone else. For example, *RT* claimed that U.S. government support for Ukraine's "corrupt" regime has diverted resources away from America's poor and disadvantaged populations. *RT* consistently features "news" stories in which its correspondents blame the United States for a multitude of "human rights violations" within its borders. The Kremlin propaganda machine also regularly targets the E.U., NATO, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, supposedly "documenting" numerous state and institutional "failures" to live up to "so-called European values."

However, *RT* and numerous Russian-language Internet-based "news programs" reserve the bulk of their ire for Ukraine. They base their reports on a pastiche of doctored or out-of-context photos and images, along with "fake" interviews with actors posing as innocent bystanders and ordinary citizens to substantiate Putin's assertion that Ukraine's "neo-Nazi, "ultranationalist" regime has launched an all-out attack its ethnic Russian citizens. For example, to support a claim that massive and violent demonstrations against the Ukrainian government resulted in a brutal attack on Ukraine's ethnic Russians, *RT* created reportage from video clips featuring demonstrations, exploding grenades and other weaponry, wounded Russian civilians, and alleged Ukrainian extremists.³⁰ Careful review of the images in the story revealed that none of the footage actually depicts Ukrainians harming ethnic Russians, but that news came too late to have any real impact on a viewership already groomed to believe that Ukraine's leadership would be capable of such acts.

The Russian television offensive also targets Ukraine's domestic audiences. Despite

Kyiv's efforts to restrict or limit Moscow's broadcasting reach, Russian TV news programs continue to offer a potent blend of disinformation, provocation, and questionable "facts." For some ethnic Russian audiences in eastern Ukraine, these programs build upon deeply held anti-Ukrainian prejudices to cast doubt on the country's leadership and offer Russian protection as an antidote to Ukrainian aggression. In addition, local TV towers in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Lugansk relay Russian broadcasts to the local population. Russian radio broadcasts, which offer similar, if less intensive, program content, are easier to control but at the same time have less potency than television.³¹

Thanks to the Internet, Russia's strategic narratives have penetrated a significant segment of the social media space. In addition to the regular propagation of fake photos and video clips, the Russian government employs an army of "trolls"—paid freelance propagandists—to spread disinformation in legitimate twitter feeds, blog commentaries, and other social media outlets.³² Each troll is expected to post 50 news articles daily, maintain six Facebook accounts and 10 Twitter accounts with a minimum of 50 tweets a day—at a reported cost to the Kremlin of approximately \$250 million a year.³³ Using these tools, Russia effectively creates a climate of uncertainty and suspicion among its target audiences. Designed not to promote its own credibility but destroy the credibility of others, Moscow's negative influence campaign seeks to create division among its enemies.

Part IV: "Heaven Admits No Slaves": The Ukrainian Narrative

The narrative disjunction between Western and Russian (Eastern) versions of reality also plays out in Ukraine's strategic narrative. In the global media space, Ukraine's most pressing challenge remains the supremacy of the Russian narrative, which consistently undermines Ukraine's ability to project its influence and promote its identity

as a functional, independent state. Kyiv's narrative is also marked by a tension between its Eastern and Western cultural and linguistic identities, a dynamic that complicates its effort to project a unified set of political values and a legitimate, morally authoritative foreign policy.

The East/West dynamic that underlies Ukraine's narrative plays out in public attitudes about Ukraine's national identity. A 2014 poll, which asked Ukrainian citizens a series of questions about sovereignty, ethnicity, and language, reveals ambivalence about Ukraine's status as a European nation. A clear majority (77%) of Ukrainians believed that Ukraine should remain a single, unified state. In western Ukraine, 93% supported a unified Ukraine and in eastern Ukraine (which includes areas along the Black Sea and the Russian border), a smaller but still sizable majority of 70% also preferred to belong to a unified state. And the majority of Ukrainians (68%) preferred strong ties with the West.³⁴

However, while ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in general had positive attitudes towards one another, western and eastern Ukraine remained sharply divided over questions of official language and governance in the run-up to the May 2014 elections. In Ukraine's west, 66% believed that Ukrainian should be the official language of the state, while 73% of eastern Ukrainian residents said that both Russian and Ukrainian should be official state languages. Similarly, 60% of western Ukrainians had confidence in the current (pre-election) government while 67% in the east did not, and both eastern (71%) and western Ukraine (55%) expressed concern about the lack of political leadership.³⁵ These cultural and linguistic divisions influence perceptions about internal political values and ultimately shape external power projections.

Ukraine's current effort at narrative legitimization in the global media space conveys a powerful message of freedom and defiance

against oppression. It derives in part from the story of one Maidan protester, Mykhailo Gavrylyuk. Beaten, stripped, and humiliated by riot police, Gavrylyuk subsequently held a press conference to denounce his tormentors: "I am a Cossack; I took an oath that I will defend the Ukrainian people."³⁶ Likely targeted because he resembled a traditional Cossack from the Ukrainian region of Zaphorozhia, Gavrylyuk's shaved head, forelock, and matching mustache became one of the enduring images of the Ukrainian revolution, emblazoned on T-shirts with the slogan: "Heaven Admits No Slaves. Glory to the Heroes." The image and slogan, which have immediate cultural and historical relevance for the Ukrainian public, originated in the person of Ivan Sirko, a leader of the Zaphorizhian Cossack military force in the latter half of the 17th century. A somewhat controversial figure in Ukrainian history, Sirko led a number of battles against Tatar, Polish, and Turkish forces in defense of Zaphorizhian territory.

The Cossack image and slogan embody the underlying tension between Ukraine's Eastern (Russian) and Western identities that shape the Ukrainian narrative. Nikolai Gogol's novella *Taras Bul'ba* (1835), which depicts the Zaphorizhian Cossacks' history of resistance against the Poles, illustrates this dynamic. An ill-fated love story about the son of a Cossack warrior who abandons the Cossack brotherhood and its traditions for the love of a Polish lady, *Taras Bul'ba* has been interpreted, variously, as an account of the tensions between Slavophil (Cossack) and Western (Polish) values and traditions, or, more recently, as a celebration of Ukrainian (Cossack) identity in the face of czarist/Russian imperialism and aggression. At the same time that the story of *Taras Bul'ba* describes the Ukrainian Cossacks' deeply held resentment against the incursion of foreign/Western values, it also conveys their attraction to those influences.³⁷ This tension between resistance to and embrace of the West plays out

in Ukraine's current attempt to create a credible strategic narrative. It also suggests the existence of a fundamental uncertainty about the definition of the Ukrainian national character.

"Heaven Admits No Slaves: The Ukrainian Revolution, 2013-2014," a documentary made by expatriate Ukrainian filmmakers, also plays on this dynamic tension at the heart of Ukraine's national identity.³⁸ Like the legend of the Zaphorizhian Cossack, whose motto appears in the film title, the trailer conveys defiance against oppression, both internal and external. At the same time, the narrator asks a series of rhetorical questions suggesting that, in the face of this aggression, Ukraine's national identity is divided:

Who will we be when they start setting fires to our cities?

What will we become when the president and government declare war on their own people?

What will we do when our ancient enemy's army is standing at our doorstep?

When the blood of our friends and loved ones runs along the pavement?

I don't know if we will become warriors or insurgents.

I don't know if there will be heroes.

Or regular people among us who will off[er] their shoulder to their neighbor.

But I know for sure that we will never give up our freedom or our will.

And we will never become slaves.

These questions catalogue a series of identities for Ukraine. It has been made a victim—of its government as well as its "ancient enemy." It might become a "warrior" who defends the governing authority or an "insurgent" who fights

against it. While the narrator does not choose between heroism and insurgency, he most emphatically rejects the possibility of slavery. He knows clearly what Ukraine is not—but is less clear about what Ukraine should become. This highlights a division in the way Ukrainians see themselves, their country, and their future. The only constant is a desire not to be oppressed. In this sense, opposition becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to overcome the prevailing threat.

Tellingly, this documentary mirrors the narrative form, imagery, and rhetoric in "I am an Occupier." Both narrators invoke scenes of horror and mayhem against a backdrop of violence, blood, and flames. Like much of the language in the Russian video, the Ukrainian film uses absolutist, unrelenting and even apocalyptic terms: "We will never give up our freedom or our will. And we will never become slaves." However, the Russian national character projected in "I am the Occupier" is unequivocally warrior-like and heroic. The only victims in the Russian narrative are those who oppose or fail to uphold the Russian world's values and interests. By contrast, the Ukrainian narrator is defined solely by his desire not to be oppressed.

At best, Ukraine's current messaging is defiant, and inspirational in its celebration of its national character. But its defense is largely reactive, defined by the near fruitless effort to respond to Russian's myriad propaganda techniques and countless red herrings. At worst, Ukraine's narrative mirrors Russian rhetoric, imagery, and content so closely that it is not easy to distinguish between the two. While the image of the heroic Cossack does, on the one hand, communicate a healthy defiance of oppression, it can also project an ultra-nationalist sentiment not in keeping with Ukraine's image as a tolerant, pluralistic nation. The Cossack imagery also feeds the Kremlin's account of contemporary Ukraine as a hotbed of fascism even as it replicates the fierce nationalism of the Russian world.

Part V: Ukraine's "Matrix of Tools and Methods"

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "To Europe, Our Home"

As reflected by its website, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has undertaken a comprehensive effort to tell the story about Russia's victimization of Ukraine. In addition to general information about the ministry and its activities, the site features three links that support Ukraine's effort to win the information war against Russia. The first, "Stop Russian Aggression," links to a publication, the "Kremlin's Black Book," which details Ukraine's casualties as well as the economic and industrial consequences of Russia's "temporary occupation of Crimea" and its military aggression in the eastern provinces. "Ukraine's Fight for Freedom" provides a series of photos detailing major events in Ukraine's recent history. "Ukraine under Attack," meanwhile, provides a series of articles detailing Russian aggression and a brief "History of the War."³⁹

The MFA recognizes, however, the need for another external narrative that conveys Ukraine's potential as a viable strategic partner and depicts it as a "diverse country united by its commitment to the creation of a state that is responsive to the will of its people."⁴⁰ To project a positive image of Ukraine for foreign audiences, the MFA commissioned an external branding campaign that attempts to ally Ukraine's national identity firmly with Western values. This brand package, which includes a set of linked images, slogans, logo, and font, characterizes Ukraine's primary foreign policy objective as European integration. The campaign opens with a photo of a sailboat on an azure ocean under the slogan "Ukraine: Our Boat." The next image depicts a billowing sail with the words "The will of the people—our wind." The final image of a sail offers a description of the MFA as "our sail that leads us to Europe. Home."⁴¹

The message intended for external audiences is clear: Ukraine's foreign policy is oriented toward the West. However, the challenge in nation-branding is to convey what makes a particular country unique and different.⁴² The new MFA logo, introduced as part of this campaign, attempts to mitigate the somewhat generic image of the sail by putting it together with a depiction of a stylized trident. This traditionally Ukrainian image, based on the symbol of Kyivan Rus leadership, became, in 1992, the official emblem of Ukraine. The sail/trident logo is meant to encapsulate the East/West dynamic that lies at the heart of Ukraine's national identity.

Ukraine Today: "Honesty," "Freedom," and "Rule of Law"

In an effort to combat Russia's propaganda war and establish a more robust presence in the global media space, in 2014 a privately owned Ukrainian media group launched "Ukraine Today (UT)," a television news program. In many respects a replica of RT, UT aims at a global audience, broadcasting in Ukrainian and English 24/7 via satellite and live streaming on YouTube. UT promises to "take viewers 'beyond the headlines' with a commitment to 'Honesty,' 'Freedom' and 'Rule of Law,'"⁴³ qualities that are, by implication largely absent from Russian media efforts. It also seeks to tell the story of Ukraine's revolution and its aftermath.

Inaugural news reports described how the Maidan protests changed the lives of European journalists reporting on them. Another report detailed the impact of Western sanctions on Russia's economy. Early promotional spots touted "Ukraine's European ambitions."⁴⁴ More recent reports provide coverage of the conflict in the eastern provinces, attempt to debunk Russian propaganda efforts and expose its biases, as demonstrated by a recent set of headlines from one day of reporting: "Ukrainian troops and Russian-backed militants continue battle for Pisky"; "Crimea's Night Wolves biker

gang unites to defend ‘Russian world’”; and “*Daily Mail*: Russia fails in bid to stop U.N. staff benefits for all gay couples.” The bulk of *UT*’s reporting attempts to rescue Ukraine’s national identity and reputation and place it more firmly in a mainstream Western narrative.

StopFake.org: “Struggle against fake information about events in Ukraine”

StopFake.org, an independent English-language website established in 2014 by Ukrainian journalists and students of journalism, has also taken a prominent role in Ukraine’s battle for narrative control. Part of the “struggle against fake information about events in Ukraine,” *StopFake* aims to counteract Russian state propaganda by checking all of the facts in Russian television, radio, Internet, and print news stories, and then highlighting falsehoods, inconsistencies, and discrepancies.

In a set of instructions describing “how to identify a fake,” *StopFake* notes that “a significant percentage” of information available on the Internet about Ukraine “does not correspond to reality” owing to “the use of such information for governmental purposes ... news stories are used not to inform the public, but to impose certain opinions on them.”⁴⁵ Only in comparing multiple versions of the same story do the inconsistencies and fabrications come to light. *StopFake* not only identifies fake stories but instructs its readership in “how to identify a fake”—the art of detecting altered images in photos and video footages, false “witness” statements, sham news outlets and attempts to twist stories from reputable media sources.

StopFake consistently attacks elements of the Russian narrative about Ukraine. Typical posts include the original headline put out by Russian media sources followed by an explanation of the facts. For example, “Fake: Kyiv Administration Plans to Demolish Monument to Soviet Military Commander” is followed by a correction: “On March 15, several Russian news sources,

including the Federal News Agency, wrongly reported that the Kyiv administration was planning to demolish a monument to World War II Soviet military commander Nikolai Valutin.” “Deceptive Headline by *Zvezda*: ‘Ukrainian Battalion Commander Confessed on Ukrainian TV about How He Had Become a Fascist’” is followed by the actual story: “In reality, Yurii Bereza, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and the commander of the Dnipro-1 made no such confession.” *StopFake*’s concentrated efforts to expose the gap between Russia’s narrative and reality have earned it a devoted audience: one-third of its followers are from Ukraine, one-third from Russia, and one-third from the rest of the world.⁴⁶

The Ukraine Crisis Media Center: “On the Front Lines of Freedom”

The Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) was established in the early days of the crisis to provide accurate information to the international community about events in Ukraine. In addition to facilitating internal and external media reporting on the conflict, the UCMC manages Ukraine’s “One Voice” policy, aimed at standardizing and coordinating official Ukraine’s messaging efforts. Nevertheless, government communication efforts remain largely reactive rather than proactive.⁴⁷ Because Ukraine’s government is not building its own set of narratives about the conflict with Russia and its domestic consequences, it has no control over how these stories play in domestic as well as international media.

The absence of a unified approach to strategic communication also damages the credibility of the Ukrainian government with its key audiences. Each ministry and government agency continues to focus on tactical messaging in support of institutional interests. Individual ministries send messages that appear to contradict communications from other ministries on the same topic, which further confirms public skepticism about government

intentions. Nor can ministries agree on the type and quantity of information to be released, especially when it comes to national security. For example, the UCMC reports that the Ministry of Defense (MOD) has resisted the public release of Russian “separatist” casualties, on the grounds that it would compromise operational security. However, the UCMC is concerned that the failure to mention Russian casualties creates the impression that only Ukrainians are dying—and that Ukraine’s defenders are losing. This has significant implications for domestic morale.

With respect to external audiences, the UCMC worries that the absence of accurate information about what is happening in the eastern provinces conveys the mistaken impression that conflict is “frozen,” or static, and, worse yet, that Russia might actually be complying with the Minsk agreement. If the conflict is perceived to be over (or at least in hiatus), it is likely to be much less acute in the mind of the beholders, a situation with serious implications for Ukraine. European citizens who believe that the crisis has abated will be less likely to accept their government’s continued support for Ukraine. In a worst-case scenario, the apparent lack of conflict might result in the loss of broad moral and financial support for Ukraine.

Domestically, the UCMC has the lead in implementing the Presidential Administration (PA)’s “One Voice” strategy, designed to unify government ministries in the effort to combat Russia’s propaganda offensive. Under the UCMC’s auspices, a designated spokesperson provides daily updates on the conflict, detailing Russian attacks in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) region and clearly identifying them as violations of the Minsk agreement. In addition, the UCMC is working to counter the Russian Federation narrative about Ukraine, both in the occupied regions and as it unfolds in global media via *RT* and other key players in Russia’s disinformation network. In cooperation

with the Ministry of Information Policy (MOIP), the UCMC has improved the speed and efficiency with which the government of Ukraine (GOU) processes information requests from international journalists. In addition, the UCMC is working with the MOIP to streamline the accreditation process for international journalists wishing to access the ATO. Finally, the MOD, MOIP, and UCMC will soon implement an embed program that will put international journalists on the front lines of the conflict.

The challenge for the UCMC remains, as one team member put it, to remove the word “crisis” from its name. Asked to envision a post-crisis narrative for Ukraine, the UCMC team, like the MFA, suggested that Ukraine might project itself as an embodiment of “European” values such as democracy, freedom of speech, tolerance, and diversity. At the same time, UCMC team members are overwhelmingly focused on short-term messages that detail the nature and scope of Russia’s war on Ukraine. In their view, the world needs to be reminded that Russia, in victimizing Ukraine, is also threatening to reclaim its territorial integrity, security, and economic prosperity. In short, an attack on Ukraine is the harbinger of a broader anti-Western offensive. As one team member puts it, Ukrainians are “dying to protect Western values” on the “front lines of freedom.” Longer-term messaging can wait.⁴⁸

Ministry of Information and Policy: “The Best Counter-Propaganda is Truth”

The Ministry of Information and Policy has taken over management of strategic communication efforts with respect to the eastern territories and Crimea. As argued in recently published English- and Ukrainian-language MOIP pamphlets, “the “main instrument to combat the Kremlin propaganda machine is spreading the truth about what is happening at the hot point” of the ATO.⁴⁹ The MOIP recently negotiated with local authorities to stand up the transmitter

towers that will assure direct broadcast of Ukrainian television and radio content to the ATO and, ultimately, to Crimea.

Specifically, with the support of Radio Liberty, there will now be five hours of television programming a day aimed at audiences in Donetsk and Donbas. Similar programming is planned for the Lugansk area; however, the MOIP has yet to acquire transmitter towers tall enough to broadcast effectively in the flat terrain of that region.

In addition to streamlining accreditation procedures and standing up the journalist embed program in the ATO, the MOIP implemented a five-day field training program for press officers and journalists assigned to cover the eastern territories. The MOIP also launched a “Crimean Peninsula Support Information Campaign” called “Crimea Is Ukraine” that includes a Crimean Tatar-language version of the MOIP website. The MOIP plans to develop language-appropriate radio news and information programming for Crimea, as well as an external outreach initiative that tells Crimea’s story to the West.⁵⁰ It also recently issued a series of Russian-language “Wanted” posters that call for information leading to the arrests of Russian “separatists” who have “committed crimes” against the people of Ukraine.

Finally, the MOIP is developing a government-owned TV station designed for external messaging purposes. Envisaged as the official equivalent to the privately owned “Ukraine Today,” this station (tentatively called “Ukraine Tomorrow” or “Free Ukraine”) will provide English-language information and editorial content, emphasizing accurate accounts of events in the eastern provinces and Crimea.⁵¹ In the short term, the MOIP’s external messaging will focus on countering Russian disinformation. In the longer term, however, the MOIP intends to focus on the projection of a post-crisis Ukraine that is secure and economically stable.

Resource and Capacity Shortfalls

Clearly, significant resource and capacity shortfalls complicate Ukraine’s battle for narrative control. Ministries rely on an ad hoc network of volunteer experts and donor-assisted NGO to carry out short advocacy and information outreach programs. For example, the MOD’s Department of Information Technology, which manages tactical information operations in the occupied territories, receives the majority of its funding and technical expertise from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, and other private-sector donors.⁵² While filling a clear short-term need, these parallel strategic communication financing and professional support structures are not well integrated into the ministries, and are not likely to leave behind a lasting infrastructure once external funding dries up.

Next, inadequate coordination of message content hampers development of a clear, consistent official messaging stream. Moreover, government officials are reluctant to be fully transparent with the media, citing operational security and an unwillingness to compromise future strategic initiatives. Others fear that reporting bad news will have a negative impact on public morale. However, this fundamental reluctance to share information and promote transparency damages the government’s ability to develop and disseminate a credible defense against the Russian propagandists and their compelling stories.⁵³

Finally, significant technical and programmatic deficits prevent Ukraine from regaining control of the contested information space in the east. Ukraine’s internal broadcast and transmission capacities are still inadequate to deal with the growing number of rogue television and radio signal sources from Russia.⁵⁴ Insufficient diversification of domestic information resources, and the absence of targeted programming for the occupied territories, have permitted Russia to create large pockets of disinformation within

the occupied territories.

Part VI: Conclusions and Recommendations for Action

In the battle to establish strategic narrative supremacy, what does victory look like? Is it, as some theorists ask, “when your rival’s narrative disappears?”⁵⁵ Or when it has been discredited to the point that it can no longer plausibly communicate state legitimacy? Alternatively, does “victory” consist of opposing narratives that permit each state to legitimate their differences? Certainly the credibility of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War was “enhanced by the opportunity to compare, contrast, and denigrate the other’s narrative.”⁵⁶

As the MFA’s ambassador for strategic communication has noted, Ukraine’s “credibility” in the global media space is its only remaining resource: “If our credibility is lost, we lose the information war.”⁵⁷ In order to make the case that Ukraine “is on the right side of history,” Kyiv must actively promote its soft power potential. This will require a representation of Ukraine’s national identity that overcomes the now-polarizing East-West dynamic and translates into a positive, future-oriented force. This new, outwardly focused narrative must explain Ukraine’s vision of the role it can play as a viable strategic partner in the region and the world.

The story that Ukraine tells about itself is ultimately something for its people and their leadership to decide. However, from an outside perspective, it seems necessary to move beyond the prevailing short-term narrative that Ukraine is a victim of Russian aggression and disinformation. While Ukraine cannot abandon the effort to counteract Russian propaganda, its new strategic narrative should project a unified vision of a post-Maidan, post-conflict Ukraine. This narrative should emphasize that Ukraine’s existence as a nation—its rebirth as an independent state following the collapse

of the Soviet Union, its Orange Revolution, and the ongoing anti-corruption campaign—demonstrates freedom, democracy, and diversity at work.

Why? Because post-Maidan Ukraine is, ultimately, a testament to the power of its citizenry to bring about peaceful change. The ongoing, government-wide reform process is an expression of that power. And finally, Ukraine’s future is tied to Europe and the West as a strong, viable partner with shared strategic values. That is where the new narrative must begin.

First, because accessibility of information ultimately enhances credibility, the GOU must make a concerted effort to be more forthcoming about its actions and intentions. This requires the creation of functional information sharing networks within the government to promote effective outreach, both domestically and with audiences in key partner countries. Next, the GOU must deepen its understanding of target audiences needs and interests in order to develop effective message content. Visually compelling and easily understandable representations of Ukraine’s strategic interests and potential must appeal to external and internal audiences, as well as local and international opinion-makers and journalists.

Finally, the GOU, in cooperation with both public- and private-sector institutions, must build a regional, and ultimately global, network of journalists and news organizations to support Ukraine’s efforts to professionalize its official media output and expand its outreach efforts. Such a network would also facilitate the systematic investigation and exposure of the Kremlin’s “weaponization” of information, revealing the hollow core of the Russian narrative that is built on falsehoods.

Effective strategic narrative development and projection in a complex information environment is an iterative, context-dependent process and therefore difficult to define. Nevertheless, there

are certain basic requirements such official agreement on message content and vision and coordination across the full spectrum of stakeholders. It requires enough transparency to assure credibility, and enough evidence to be persuasive. It requires full understanding of target audiences and prevailing perceptions, expectations, and biases. It requires a wide range of vested stakeholders who can contribute to greater message value and resonance. Ultimately, an effective strategic narrative can help a state to project its legitimacy and thus to promote its survival in the global information arena.

Endnotes

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