I. V. Izhutova,
Candidate of Sciences in Public Administration,
Head of Strategic Communications Department,
National Defence University of Ukraine

Ukrainian strategic communications and the Russia-Ukraine war

This article represents the lessons learned of development of the strategic communications in Ukraine since 2014 as an effective response to propaganda and disinformation and as a tool to disseminate and support own narrative and key messages to achieve strategic goals.
The focus of the article is made on the period after February 24, after full-scale invasion.
The Ukrainian experience is unique and is thoroughly learnt in the whole world. The 2022 full-scale invasion proved the importance of strategic communications.
The Ukrainian experience is not like any other country, with mistakes and achievements, involving all levels of communication, strategic communications elements.
In fact, it is practical demonstration of combination of strategic communications and military operations.

Key words: strategic communications, narrative, lessons learned.

The aim of the article is to study Ukrainian lessons learned based on open sources. The Ukrainian Strategic Communications lessons learned in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war equal unique, impressive, and practical efforts. They reflect how Ukraine managed to mobilize not only the Ukrainian nation but the whole world to repel the Russian aggression, fight against the Russian propaganda, debunk Russian narratives and fakes, develop resilience to Russian disinformation, demonstrate the Ukrainian achievements on the information front. The main lesson learned means a strong sense of national unity and resilience, a whole-of-society effort and the enemy's propaganda aims to break this unity in any possible ways. The topic is actual and is researched by Ukrainian and foreign scientists, such as D. Dubov, T. Syvak, V. Kushnir, I. Ekman, P.-E. Nilsson, S. Koziej etc.

Strategic communications: the Ukrainian approach

«No matter what their field, all strategic communications professionals use the same principles to plan a communication strategy that conveys key messages via communication channels like social media to a target audience», Lucien Formichella, New York-based writer and editor [1].

Thus, the selection of communication channels largely depends on the target audiences. And we understand that for any audience we encapsulate our messages within the strategic narrative.

The strategic narrative of Ukraine is provided in the Constitution of Ukraine. And today this statement is very actual and applicable.

Constitution of Ukraine, Chapter I. General Principles. Article 2:

«The sovereignty of Ukraine extends throughout its entire territory.

Ukraine is a **unitary state**.

The territory of Ukraine within its present border is **indivisible** and **inviolable**» [2].

In view of the full-scale aggression the main goals of Ukraine within the known narrative are:

- to restore sovereignty within recognized 1991 borders;
- to bring the guilty to justice; and
- to have international guaranties for Ukraine.

And the country conducts its activities and actions within these goals.

How to understand in simple words the strategic communications? You have the strategy based on the narrative and you need to promote it and communicate about it in order to achieve your strategic goals.

The official definition in Ukraine means «strategic communications is coordinated and appropriate use of state communication efforts such as public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, informational and psychological operations and any other necessary efforts to achieve state goals» [3], which is included into the Ukrainian legislation and is based on the NATO approach.

Following this approach and definition the strategic communications mean interaction with different target audiences through the appropriate channels (surely, the list is not exhaustive) (*Table 1*):

Table 1

Strategic communications alignment with target audiences and channels

Target audiences	Strategic communication elements	Channels
International community	Public Diplomacy	Key leaders' engagement International media
Own public	Public Information / Affairs	Key leaders' engagement Mass media Social media Experts Influencers ...
Own Military	Military public affairs	Key military leaders' engagement Mass media Social media Experts Influencers ...
Ukrainian people on temporarily occupied territories	Public Information/Affairs	Social media Youtube etc. Personal contacts ...
Enemy's public	Information operations Psychological operations	Social media (Telegram etc.) Youtube etc. Leaflets Russian language information ...
Enemy's military	Information operations Psychological operations	Social media (Telegram etc.) Youtube etc. Leaflets Russian language information ...

As it was mentioned the strategic communications always is focused on interaction with target audiences. And application of all elements of strategic communications helps us to reach different audiences through different channels. Meanwhile, the interaction with the enemy's audiences is also very important.

Development prior to 2/24

Before the full-scale invasion Ukraine moved forward in developing its strategic communications efforts. It developed the system (or some elements of the system) within the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine trying to concentrate communications efforts, establish communication

coordination and synchronization. In fact, earlier Ukraine had a similar approach, but it was more appropriate for political and social spheres. Even foreign analysts evaluate the process of evaluation of the idea of Russian threat in information environment and focus on the development of these efforts from the point of view of our European partners:

«Ukrainian civil society has since 2014 played a very important role in communications, often filling roles that in other countries would be carried out by state institutions. During the years prior to 2022, a deep and complex relationship between the Ukrainian state and civil society also developed. During this time, a few civil society organisations analysed the threat Russia posed in the information environment, which appears to have had a direct impact on Ukrainian government policy» [4].

And the importance was to develop a new approach to communication: «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» [4].

The pivoting moment in development of strategic communications was in 2014 after the Russian aggression against Ukraine: temporary occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. On 21–22 September 2015, the Strategic Communications Partnership Roadmap was signed between the National Security Council of Ukraine and the NATO International Secretariat, which initiated a partnership between Ukraine and NATO in the field of strategic communications aimed at implementation of comprehensive support of our state in the field of strategic communications, in particular countering Russian propaganda and informing the public about events in Ukraine.

The general goals of the Partnership in the field of strategic communications were defined as follows:

• development of the capabilities of state authorities in the field of strategic communications and all its components at the strategic and operational levels by providing advisory and practical support;

• support of Ukraine's cooperation with experts who have relevant experience in the field of strategic communications;

• promoting the development of the culture of strategic communications in Ukraine at the institutional level, supporting closer cooperation between non-governmental entities and developing their ability to implement strategic communications in the interests of Ukraine; and

• maintaining and achieving the highest standards of accuracy and ethics to ensure trust in the state communication policy.

The roadmap of partnership in the field of strategic communications became the first action plan in the field of strategic communications, which provided for a full analysis of the regulatory and legal support of strategic communications, its improvement, development of the strategic

communications system, ensuring the appropriate level of training of strategic communications specialists, etc.

2017 – Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of Ukraine Capabilities Catalogue, Strategic Communications Concept of the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The strategic communications capabilities were included in the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of Ukraine Capabilities Catalogue. It meant the need to develop these capabilities within Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of Ukraine to be effective and be compatible with NATO approaches and principles.

In the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine there was developed the Concept of Strategic Communications of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The main goals of the development of strategic communications of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces are: «building the trust of the Ukrainian society in the military policy of the state, supporting reforms in the military sphere and the course of Ukraine's acquisition of NATO membership; coordination of the actions of state bodies and other participants in strategic communications during objective information of society on issues related to the defence of the state, training and use of the Armed Forces» [5].

In **2018**, Ukraine tested the One Voice Initiative to build up its strategic communications infrastructure following the UK model [6]. In fact, it started to do it earlier but this year it included the initiative into the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine documents.

In **2020**, the first document covering all basic aspects of strategic communications of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was adopted. This is the Doctrine of Strategic Communications of the Armed Forces of Ukraine [7]. It outlines the role and place of strategic communications within the Armed Forces of Ukraine and implements NATO principles and approaches of strategic communications in support of goals and tasks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Within the permanent information warfare against Ukraine the country should develop its information resilience, debunk fakes, and ensure appropriate education in strategic communications, as well as mobilize the international community for fighting against malicious propaganda.

To counter disinformation at state level there was founded the Centre for Countering Disinformation of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine.

In its turn, the Centre for Strategic Communications under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine raises the level of media literacy of own population which is highly important today. The enemy thoroughly monitors Ukrainian media, social media, and different chats, knows very well pain points of the society and communities, and presses them in order to disseminate disinformation.

In defence sector, the Strategic Communications Training and Research Centre of the National Defence University of Ukraine is responsible for strategic communications education, training, and research and lessons learned accumulation.

Development after 2/24

24 February 2022. It was a new challenge not only for Ukraine but for the whole world. Morning of 24 February changed information landscape and speeded up a lot of information sphere processes. The huge crisis required immediate response within operational security. The partners of Ukraine also underscore the importance of these efforts and synchronization of communication in 2022:

«Since the start of the invasion, the strategic communication of the Ukrainian authorities regarding the military situation has been coordinated by the presidential centre. Statements by representatives of the Presidential Administration, ministries, General Staff, and local authorities form a coherent whole and are aimed at maintaining the high morale of society and the armed forces. The aim of these activities is also to persuade the international community to better support Ukraine in opposing the Russian aggression and to inform about war crimes committed by the Russians, such as the massacre of civilians in Bucha» [8].

«Ukrainian state institutions have worked proactively with information security management and have reached a 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» [4].

After the full-scale invasion some important steps were taken:

• streamlining of TV channels under the «One Information Policy under Martial Law» [9];

• guidance for media interaction with military, media coverage of military activities [10] – it was very important step when the previous system proved to be ineffective and the public interest was very high, a lot of journalists wanted to tell the story about the war and there was an urgent need to regulate the process;

• Law on Media aims to balance the freedom of speech/press and national security;

• Communication Strategy of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; and

• establishment of a new strategic communication infrastructure across the country.

With the beginning of the full-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the heads of regional military administrations or their representatives also became an important source of information. Every day they informed and continue to inform citizens about events in their regions. In February – April, this form of communication with citizens was very important, because it

was through them that you could get the most up-to-date information. And it is also about a sort of some psychological effect: if you see this person in the region it means the region is still Ukrainian. Information was necessarily provided in the morning and in the evening in the format of a video message (if it was not possible to do so, then a corresponding post was necessarily made), but during the day, in the event of an aggravation of the situation or a sharp change, corresponding messages were also made. They were quickly posted and are posted on their official pages, on the official pages of regional military administrations on social media (Facebook, Telegram, etc.), and later on regional military administrations websites. «At the beginning of the great invasion, the Ministry of Defence developed clear recommendations for all local authorities on how to submit this or that information. «From the first days, Maliar (*Deputy Minister of Defence of Ukraine, responsible for information policy in the field of defence*) personally had telephone contact with most of the mayors and heads of state administrations» [11]. In addition to regional military administrations representatives, mayors of cities, which were sometimes busy, or their assistants became commentators.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine continued the practice of publishing official sitreps: as of 06.00 a.m. and 06.00 p.m., 0.00 and 12.00. Daily information about enemy losses became innovative, inspiring both soldiers and all citizens.

The active communication of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine about the most relevant events related to the first and breakthrough successes of the Ukrainian army also played its role. And this is a message about the successful use of the Turkish strike operational-tactical medium-altitude unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) with a long flight duration «Bayraktar TB2 (Taktik Blok 2)» (Bayraktar TB2 (Taktik Blok 2), Ukrainian anti-tank missile complex «Stugna-P», broken enemy columns, liberation of settlements, sinking of the Soviet and Russian project 1164 missile cruiser (code «Atlant» according to NATO classification) «Moskva», etc.

There are also a lot of informal speakers who provide expertise in military operations, work in favour of the national interests and people believe them more than official statements.

Peace and war strategic communications, what is the difference? We have been developing our strategic communications in permanent war. At first Russia occupied Crimea and a part of Eastern Ukraine. Now we speak about the full-scale aggression. How to motivate people? How to inspire them? How to mobilize the whole country for defence? How to keep people informed and keep the line of operational security. It is really a challenge for anyone.

There is a clear line and difference between strategic communications in peacetime and wartime, when emphasis must be placed on the rules of communication, considering the state of audiences in such conditions. How to keep the trust of the audience and not cross the line of observing the operational security? There are many such challenges facing any country, many in terms of repelling armed aggression.

Strategic communications in today's dynamic world is a complex process, the purpose of which is to develop, promote, and spread the necessary principles and narratives of the organization in order to form and consolidate its positive image, to convey its intentions, positions, and main tasks to target audiences. It is a powerful multidisciplinary tool for achieving one's goals, as well as countering disinformation in the information field. The proper, coordinated, and integrated application of strategic communications contributes to the fight against modern challenges and threats.

During a war any nation faces complex challenges. And the strategic communications can help to solve them based on trust.

A lot of interconnected issues are necessary to be solved such as humanitarian issues, international issues, military aspects, psychological aspects, social cohesion, countering disinformation, economic consequences, etc.

A great problem is how to achieve the unity, how to keep confidence. And Ukraine managed to do it. Its coordinated efforts forced the enemy to change its information war in order to discredit Ukraine at the world's level, diminish support and assistance provided to Ukraine, break the national unity, etc.

The president of Ukraine became the key narrative disseminator in the world. His foreign visits and online speeches all over the world contribute to impact on the war's course.

«The president's daily news releases are carefully designed for the Ukrainians' consumption but also to motivate foreign allies and break the aggressor's spirit. Mr. Zelenskiy proves a very effective operator in strategic communications – international and domestic» [12].

«The harsh effects of such a war are further compounded by the winter now underway. The media, traditional and social, provide countless images of the war drama. The defensive will of the Ukrainian people is being put to another grave test. Which raises the second major challenge facing wartime strategic communications: how to sustain the nation's spirit in such a drastic situation?» [12].

«President Zelenskiy's visit to the U.S. may also prove helpful in this respect. The visit's public resonance has given additional hope to the Ukrainians: they saw they were not left alone, that the biggest power of the Western world stood resolutely in their support and that there were chances to survive this dark period to win in the future. Anything that sustains the defensive determination of the Ukrainian people helps» [12].

For the whole world the key role in communication is played by the Ukrainian President and they always focus on this importance in many analysis and articles:

Figure 1. Faces of the Ukrainian military
(https://www.facebook.com/AFUkraine/photos?locale=uk_UA)

Figure 2. War Memes
(https://warmemes.com.ua/)

«Ukraine's coherent information policy is also addressed to the international community, with President Zelensky playing the key role. In his speeches to important political bodies, including the Polish National Assembly, the U.S. Congress, the Bundestag, the European Parliament, and the Israeli Knesset, he sharply presents the situation in Ukraine and asks for military assistance, skilfully adapting the message to the audience of the given country» [8].

Russia disseminates its narrative about fascists and Nazis in Ukraine trying to tell its story about alleged liberation of the Ukrainian territory from this «dust». The Ukrainian response is obvious and clear. The Armed Forces of Ukraine launched a particular branding page of the armed forces. It shares real stories of the Ukrainian military who joined the army to defend their home and families from occupants. There are businessmen and businesswomen, artists, musicians, IT-specialists, lawyers, teachers and faculty, technicians, etc. among military. Behind every photo there is a real private story. Every soldier defends his or her own. And all of them are patriots of their land and nation.

Their faces are nice and full of kindness (*Fig. 1*).

Strong messages of Ukraine are also encapsulated in so called national symbols: stamps and memes (Fig. 2).

«On the first day of the invasion last year, Ukraine's small military contingent on the island of Zmiinyi, or Snake Island, found itself in the crosshairs of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Surrounded, the Ukrainian defenders received an ultimatum from the Russian vessels, including the Black Sea Fleet's flagship Moskva, to surrender or be bombed to submission. The Ukrainian defenders replied succinctly, with a phrase roughly translating to, «Russian warship, go f- yourself.» The story and Hollywood-esque one-liner not only galvanized the Ukrainian people but also became an influential message used to build international support» [13].

Patriotic memes, stamps, murals, etc. became very popular in 2022 and joined people, provide them hope and emotional support.

«The information policy of the Ukrainian authorities with respect to their own citizens and residents is aimed at building unity in the face of the Russian aggression and maintaining readiness to engage in military activities. New myths (urban legends) are used effectively, such as the purported story about a Ukrainian MiG fighter called the «Ghost of Kyiv» defending the capital's sky or an excerpt from a recording of a conversation between border guards on Snake Island and a Russian warship. These messages usually also are accompanied by well-made graphics, including posters or symbols» [8].

Any nation needs heroes, especially in crisis people need to understand that there are really some unusual strong people who can defend them. It inspires them to be mobilized and be united.

During first days the morale was not in good condition and military needed some emotional and informational support. There were produced a number of inspiring posters and memes with heroes (*Fig. 3*).

Figure 3. Inspiring posters
(picture form the Internet)

Remembering the need to address the enemy's audiences too. During the first days it was important to reach the Russian population, especially military. That's why there were made several videos in Russian language addressing the military. Thus, «on his Facebook page, ex-deputy commander of the Air Force Lieutenant General (retired) Arkadii Vashutin recorded a video message to the Russians. He was born in Siberia, a combat veteran of the Su-24M bomber. He served for a long time in Western Ukraine, so tales about nationalists and people from Bandera always caused laughter… Arkadii Vashutin appeals to the understanding of the Russian officers, by his silence allowing the murders of the Ukrainian people» [14]. There were also addresses from active Ukrainian generals and some videos addressing Russian soldiers and appealing them to stop fighting and coming to Ukraine for saving their lives.

Meanwhile, the strategic communications revealed some problematic issues to be resolved, such as:

• peace-war time procedures gap (guidance, coordination, cooperation, etc.);

• strategic communications personnel training; and

• developing communication strategies for Ukrainians in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, Crimea during and after temporary occupation.

Conclusions

As a conclusion it is possible to define the strengths of the Ukrainian strategic communications, its lessons learned: flexibility, creativity, unpredictability, speakers in regions, formal and informal speakers, strong public diplomacy which contributed to mobilization of the whole country and the whole world in order to defend and support Ukraine.

Ukraine for sure gained a new experience and lessons learned which could be grouped in the following manner:

1. Complex challenges to wartime Strategic Communications.

2. Focus on own strong narratives (messages).

3. Accuracy over time pressure.

4. Peace-war time procedures gap (guidance, coordination, cooperation, etc.).

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