

Beyond Bullets: The Role and Effectiveness of Media in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Writer's Statement and Abstract

This paper analyzes the usage of media in the Russia-Ukraine conflict starting with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and follows the evolution of media usage up to the conflict in its form today. I first became interested in this topic after the expansion of the conflict in February of 2022, and was given the opportunity to explore the topic more in my composition UN 1015 class. The paper begins with an overall history of the conflict, then dives deeper into the methods and usage of media by both sides, describing their focuses, strengths and weaknesses. Following this, I examine the strengths and weaknesses of each side's methods, then determine which side is more effective both with and without considering external factors. As a result of my research, I have determined that without considering external factors, both Russia and Ukraine's methods are equally as effective; however, when taking into account other external factors, Ukraine comes out slightly ahead in terms of effectiveness. I wrote this article to get readers interested in the conflict and give some insight into just one of the many facets of this 21st century conflict.

History and Background

On February 24th, 2022, Russia launched an invasion, or what they called a 'special military operation,' into Ukraine. It quickly became one of the largest conflicts in recent history. After just a few weeks of fighting, it became clear that this conflict would be unlike any other conflict seen before in history. Both Russia and Ukraine are developed nations with ubiquitous access to technology, and this technology is what made, and is making, this a very different and unique conflict. Although nearly all aspects of this conflict are altered by technology, media access and availability are arguably the area most altered by technology. As a result of media access and availability, it has become a major factor in the conflict, with not only civilians using it, but both Russia and Ukraine using media to play to their advantage. While both sides effectively utilize media to their advantage when not taking into account external factors, neither side has a decisive advantage over the other as they focus their influence in the media in very different areas.

The beginning of the conflict didn't start in 2022; It started February 20th, 2014. On this date, Russia illegally annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea by seizing power of its local assembly. They then staged a referendum on union with Russia where Russian voting officials claimed that 95.5% of voters supported union with Russia. Along with this illegal annexation, Russia has been supporting separatists in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine since 2014, and those groups had gained some control prior to the invasion in 2022 (Walker, 2023). What Russian officials had originally expected to be a quick invasion and annexation has developed now into a more than 20 month conflict. Ukrainian casualties are nearing 180,000, Russian casualties nearing 300,000, and each side has lost 4,700 pieces of equipment and 13,020 pieces respectively as of August 18th and November 7th respectively (Barnes et al., 2023; Janovsky et al., 2022).

Since the annexation in 2014, both Russia and Ukraine have been developing, implementing, and refining different and new methods to utilize media in their favor, with varying degrees of success. As time passes, they refine their methods. While they may now use the same media platforms to spread their messages, their actual messages vary. In most cases,

Russia focuses more internally, trying to disinform and “uninform.” On the other hand, Ukraine is focusing its efforts more externally, trying to influence and persuade. Both of these areas of focus are effective for the goals that each side is trying to accomplish, so to understand which side utilizes media more effectively, the actual methods need to be better understood. Ukrainian Methods

Ukraine has a couple of highly effective and creative methods for projecting external influence: spreading propaganda in the form of memes, and using personal channels and accounts of Ukrainian government officials to ask for support rather than typical diplomatic channels (Tilton, 2023). How effective is it? As of July 31st, 2023, Ukraine has received \$237.9 billion in aid (Bomprezzi et al., 2023). Although all of this aid cannot be attributed entirely to the media persuasion campaigns, those campaigns are a major reason as to why Ukraine has received so much. Ukraine decides to focus their attention on getting external attention and aid due to their situation: compared to Russia, they are smaller by nearly every measure: land size, population, GDP, number of active military members, number of military equipment, and representation on the world stage. With a seemingly massive disadvantage when comparing numbers directly with Russia, Ukraine needs immense support from external sources, and that is garnered through their focus on the social media front. This focus can be evidenced by the refinement of the format and timing of their media activity. The Ukrainian people and accounts who are most focused on garnering this external attention post content in formats and languages that best fit the Western countries that are most likely to support them, along with following peak active times in those Western countries as opposed to the peak active times in Ukraine (Tilton, 2023). The effectiveness of these efforts is still being understood, but initial studies show that it is very effective, and at least in this specific area of external persuasion, far more effective than Russian efforts (Geissler et al., 2023).

Overall, Ukraine has demonstrated that they are very effective with selecting and executing their propaganda and influence externally over social media – far more effective than Russia – because they have been focusing more of their attention and efforts on this area.

Russian Methods

While Ukraine may heavily focus on effective external influence, Russia has shown that they both care less and are less effective in the area of external influence. Russia has procured weapons and ammunition from external sources, but it has mostly been an even trade through diplomatic channels, rather than a ‘gift’ that came about by support of the people of some Western country (Madhani, 2023). While Ukraine was focusing its external media campaigns on garnering support, the much smaller and less effective Russian external media campaigns have been entirely focused on directly discrediting Ukrainian campaigns. There likely have been some cases where Russia has been successful, but there is no evidence that it is widely successful, as can be seen by the amount of support Ukraine has received. On top of that, Russia lacked general support to begin with – despite the fact that both Russia and Ukraine stemmed from the former Soviet Union, Russia is most commonly associated with it, and existing prejudice towards them mostly outweighs the little discreditation there is. Russia’s external discreditation campaigns are very ineffective due to both their small size and lack of existing support prior to the campaigns.

What Russia lacks in its external influence, it nearly makes up for in its internal influence; the Russian government has nearly total control over the media available, what media can be created, and how media is represented within the country. Russia has many media-related laws in place that are very restrictive on reporting and access, making it essentially impossible to report on or give access to any information the Russian government doesn’t want its citizens to see. Following the beginning of the wider conflict in 2022, “Russia [blocked] or [censored]

another estimated 3,000 websites and independent news outlets” on top of the “200,000 websites in 2021” (Sloane, 2022, 20). Their actions show the lengths Russia will go to to misinform its own citizens, just to keep its war going smoothly. The idea is that if their people don’t understand the conflict, they won’t question it. Thus far, this method has been mostly effective (Geissler et al., 2023). While their attempts have been mostly effective, they haven’t been entirely successful – the use of VPNs (virtual private networks) tools to access websites and apps that are blocked, have skyrocketed in Russia. There has been an ongoing ‘battle’ between VPN providers and the Russian government, with the Russian government finding ways to detect the VPNs, then the VPN providers finding ways to circumvent that detection (Reuters, 2023). This smaller ‘battle’ and many others like this, where the Russian government is going back and forth with private Western companies, have been an additional exhaustion point on Russia’s resources that it could otherwise be dedicating to focus on media influence.

Another method Russia employs to exert their internal influence is hiring programmers to make immense numbers of bots to spread their misinformation through multiple different media channels. The bots are simple programs and scripts that will post, repost, and give attention to other Russian propaganda. Because these bots are so rudimentary, they will inevitably spread outside of Russia, and the unintentional influence here is arguably more effective than Russia’s dedicated external media campaigns, at least in certain areas (Asmolov, 2018, 71).

Overall, while Russia has been fairly effective in their internal influence, it isn’t quite perfect. This stems from the general difficulty of convincing an entire people and the need to focus their attention on many more areas than Ukraine, in order to achieve a similar level of internal success that Ukraine achieves externally.

Contrasting Each Side

While Russia is quite effective at internal misinformation, Ukraine is also effective at informing its citizens. Both sides have robust communication networks in place, and they both use them to their advantage. Despite being structured very similarly with both countries stemming from the Soviet Union, they focus their attention on different areas of the conflict and bend the truth to support their side more. Although documentation of TV reporting on the broader conflict is lacking, reporting within the two countries following the 2014 annexation highlights how they are similar and how they differ. While Russia is often focused on the political side of the situation at hand, Ukraine is more often focused on the military side of it. This is often because the Ukrainians see these affairs as much closer to home than Russians do. Russia has been involved in global affairs for centuries, and is a strong player on the global stage, unlike Ukraine, which wasn’t even a sovereign state until 1991 (Dolgova, 2023, 337). Despite this difference in reporting, both sides tend to bend the truth at least somewhat to make themselves look better, and as a result, Russia’s TV reporting is generally more effective because their citizens have less access to credible sources, so there is less reason to not believe what is reported on TV (Parshina-Kottas et al., 2022). Essentially, even though Russia and Ukraine focus their TV reporting on different areas, Russia is slightly more effective in this area because they can bend the truth a little more without consequence due to the lack of existing information available to the people.

Final Analysis and Conclusions

After understanding the dynamic of media usage and effectiveness in different areas, it appears that there is no definite clear winner between the two when looking at what each country alone can do. Russia appears quite strong in the internal influence due to their laws and policies, and they play this to their advantage, bending the truth more in reports, and focusing more of their social media influence on internal misinformation and disinformation. On the other

hand, Ukraine is quite effective in influencing third parties to support itself, and it plays its more limited resources and assets very effectively. When considering just the effectiveness of the actual campaigns, it appears that Russia may come out slightly on top due to both their numbers and internal policy control advantages; however, there is more at play here.

While Russia may appear to have an advantage over Ukraine in simple terms, this conflict is not actually that simple. There are additional external factors that come into play when looking at this media conflict. Ukraine doesn't need to focus nearly as much effort on keeping its people supportive as Russia does, as Ukraine already has very strong morale in defending its land, but many Russians who have not been as influenced by Russian media campaigns see it as a useless conflict (Johannesson, 2020, p. 256). On top of that, Ukraine benefits from the pre-existing bias against Russia due to the strong association of Russia with the former Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union dissolved over 30 years ago, Russia was the largest Republic in the Soviet Union with the capital of Moscow residing there, and after the dissolution, nearly all weapons, treaties, trade deals, and positions within groups such as the United Nations were directly transferred to the new Russian government. All of this adds up to cause many Western countries and peoples to still associate it with Russia, making Ukrainian external influence far more effective. When all external factors related to media are taken into account, Ukraine comes out ahead due to the existing discreditation of Russia and the much higher base morale existing in Ukraine as opposed to Russia.

In summary, when strictly comparing media usage and effectiveness without considering outside factors, Russia and Ukraine appear to be nearly equivalent in terms of effectiveness, with Russia coming out slightly on top. However, when taking into account existing external factors directly relevant to media campaign effectiveness, Ukraine ends up coming out ahead. Although it is hard to directly compare the effectiveness of each campaign when their methods focus on completely different geographical regions, it can be concluded that, with external factors like preexisting bias and morale, Ukraine does come out ahead in overall effectiveness. This is seen in the immense support they receive from Western countries compared to little to no additional support Russia's media usage provides to the campaign. The distinct variance between Russia's assumed strength and actual effectiveness of media campaigns could forecast a potential outcome of the conflict in Ukraine, especially when considering the additional external factors at play that don't influence the media campaigns.

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