

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN UKRAINE'S INFORMATION WARFARE

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Information has become a decisive strategic resource in modern international relations, transforming power competition and national security paradigms. Hybrid aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine since 2014 has demonstrated how manipulation of information seeks to undermine democratic governance, destroy national cohesion, and weaken support for international alliances. In this context, strategic communication has become a crucial instrument of democratic defence, ensuring the protection of information sovereignty, resilience of citizens, and effectiveness of crisis governance.

This article examines the evolution of Ukraine's strategic communication system during 2014–2025, identifying transformations in institutional coordination, public messaging, media literacy initiatives, and international partnerships. Special attention is paid to the theoretical debate between «information warfare» and «public diplomacy», highlighting the risks of reducing communication to militarized messaging that treats audiences as targets rather than citizens. The findings demonstrate that Ukraine is shaping a new model of communication for democracies under attack: combining security measures with transparency, dialogue, and public engagement.

The methodological basis of the study includes content analysis of official communication strategies, international reports, and academic discourse, supplemented by the examination of practical initiatives implemented during wartime. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of how strategic communication contributes to national resilience, counters disinformation, and builds trust in public institutions. The article also defines key challenges for the next stage of Ukraine's recovery, including the need to balance operational secrecy with public accountability, to improve coordination among state and civil actors, and to integrate strategic communication into long-term democratic development. Ultimately, the research argues that Ukraine's experience forms an important reference for strengthening strategic communications of states facing external aggression and hybrid threats.

Key words: strategic communication, information warfare, hybrid aggression, national resilience, democratic governance, public diplomacy, disinformation.

Науменко М. М. Стратегічна комунікація в інформаційній війні України

Інформація у сучасному світі перетворилася на ключовий стратегічний ресурс, що визначає динаміку міжнародних відносин і змінює уявлення про силу, безпеку та управління. Гібридна агресія Російської Федерації проти України, розпочата у 2014 р., продемонструвала, що деструктивні інформаційні впливи використовується як інструмент підриву демократичного врядування, руйнування національної єдності та послаблення підтримки міжнародних союзів. У цих умовах стратегічні комунікації набули значення ключового інструмента демократичної оборони, покликаною забезпечувати захист інформаційного суверенітету, стійкість громадян і результативність кризового управління.

У статті проаналізовано еволюцію системи стратегічних комунікацій України у 2014–2025 рр., виявлено трансформації в інституційній координації, публічних повідомленнях, програмах медіаграмотності та міжнародному партнерстві. Окрему увагу приділено теоретичній дискусії між підходами «інформаційної війни» та «публічної дипломатії», що дає змогу окреслити ризики редукції комунікації до мілітаризованих повідомлень, у яких громадяни розглядаються як об'єкти впливу, а не як суб'єкти взаємодії. Результати дослідження свідчать, що Україна формує нову модель комунікацій демократичної держави в умовах агресії, поєднуючи безпекові заходи з відкритістю, діалогом та участю громадськості.

Методологічну основу дослідження становлять контент-аналіз офіційних стратегій комунікації, міжнародних звітів і наукового дискурсу, а також аналіз практичних ініціатив, реалізованих у період воєнного стану. Такий підхід забезпечує комплексну оцінку ролі стратегічних комунікацій у зміцненні національної стійкості, протидії дезінформації та підвищенні довіри до державних інституцій. У роботі також визначено ключові виклики наступного етапу від-

новлення України: необхідність поєднання оперативної секретності з публічною підзвітністю, удосконалення координації між державними й громадянськими акторами та інтеграція стратегічних комунікацій у довгострокову політику демократичного розвитку.

Зроблено висновок, що український досвід формує цінний орієнтир для посилення стратегічних комунікацій держав, які протидіють зовнішній агресії та гібридним загрозам.

Ключові слова: стратегічні комунікації, інформаційна війна, гібридна агресія, національна стійкість, демократичне врядування, публічна дипломатія, дезінформація.

Purpose of the Study. Information as a domain of confrontation has increasingly shaped the structure of global politics, becoming a key arena where states compete for influence and security [1; 4]. Unlike traditional wars focused on material destruction, information warfare seeks to undermine a society's psychological resilience and its ability to mobilize resources for defence. By attacking shared meanings and collective identity, adversaries aim to erode trust in institutions, diminish national cohesion, and weaken the legitimacy of state decisions [2]. This approach allows hostile actors to achieve strategic results without large-scale kinetic operations – turning information into a decisive weapon for shaping geopolitical outcomes.

Ukraine has become a frontline state in this transformation, facing the most intensive and prolonged information aggression in Europe since 2014. Russia has systematically targeted Ukraine's media space and digital platforms through narratives designed to manipulate public perceptions, deepen internal polarization, discredit democratic institutions, and weaken the country's partnerships with international allies [2; 6]. These operations have combined propaganda, cyberattacks, psychological pressure and the instrumentalization of historical memory, regional differences, and linguistic issues – all to destabilize the Ukrainian state from within.

Following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, strategic communication evolved into a core wartime capability essential for maintaining situational awareness, ensuring effective crisis governance, and consolidating society around the shared goals of resistance and survival. Ukrainian authorities, civil society organizations, and independent media developed a coordinated system of communication intended to counter disinformation, strengthen morale, and preserve

public trust under extreme conditions. In this context, strategic communication functions as a safeguard of democracy – not a tool for its restriction – as it relies on transparency, public accountability, and citizen engagement even in times of armed conflict [8; 9].

Therefore, studying Ukraine's communication response is crucial not only for understanding its national resilience but also for developing a broader theoretical framework for democratic states confronting hybrid aggression. Ukraine's experience offers important insights into how open societies can defend their information sovereignty while upholding democratic values – and strengthening international solidarity – in the face of authoritarian threats.

Strategic communication in the Ukrainian context is defined as a coordinated system of actions aimed at strengthening state resilience – ensuring timely crisis information, protecting the information environment, fostering morale, and upholding the legitimacy of democratic institutions throughout wartime conditions [3; 4]. This system is implemented through integrated cooperation among governmental authorities, civil society actors, independent media, and international partners – a model that reflects a multi-actor approach to security governance that emerged as a necessity under hybrid aggression [5; 7].

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Modern security studies emphasize the shift from hard power to influence power, where the ability to shape the information environment becomes a decisive component of geopolitical competition [1]. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that transparent communication, credibility in messaging, rapid counteraction to manipulation, and sustained trust between state and citizens are not merely

supporting functions – they are existential for national defence. The erosion of public cohesion directly weakens a country's capacity to resist aggression, making communication a strategic battlefield in its own right.

The conceptual debate on whether war-time communication should be conceptualized primarily as «information warfare» or as a continuation of «public diplomacy» remains ongoing. Szostek argues that excessive militarization of communication risks oversimplifying audiences as operational «targets», reducing success to persuasion metrics and neglecting the ethical foundation of democratic engagement [8]. Instead of falling into one extreme, Ukraine has built a hybrid model that integrates protective measures against information threats with transparency, dialogue, and civic partnership – a balance that preserves fundamental freedoms even during full-scale war [9].

Democratic resilience literature identifies four interconnected dimensions strengthened through communication activities: cognitive resilience – the ability of citizens to detect manipulation; emotional resilience – maintaining motivation and willingness to resist; institutional resilience – sustaining trust in decisions taken by the authorities; and international credibility – securing and reinforcing global support for Ukraine's struggle [3; 5]. The evolution of public attitudes from 2014 to the present confirms that exposure to information threats can generate adaptive learning at the societal level, mobilizing people to defend democratic sovereignty and national identity rather than weakening them.

In democratic societies, legitimacy is inseparable from accountability, free access to credible information, and the co-creation of meaning between state and citizens. Communication becomes not simply a channel of influence but a mechanism through which authority is justified, contested, and reaffirmed. Therefore, in Ukraine's case, strategic communication operates as a source of legitimacy – reinforcing not only military capabilities but also interpretive authority over national

reality, ensuring that the narrative of resistance, sovereignty, and democratic future remains owned collectively by the Ukrainian people and recognized globally.

The Russian Federation has developed a systemic and long-term strategy of information pressure against Ukraine, aimed not at communication per se but at the deliberate transformation of public consciousness and political behaviour in ways that undermine democratic statehood [1; 2]. This multidimensional aggression pursues several strategically interconnected goals: weakening the political legitimacy of Ukrainian authorities, demoralizing citizens by fostering fear and uncertainty, fracturing national identity through divisive narratives, diminishing Ukraine's credibility in the international arena, and provoking internal conflicts to reduce cohesion and stability [2; 6]. The purpose is not simply to disseminate false messages but to systematically shape the interpretive frameworks within which Ukrainians perceive themselves and the war – shifting public emotions, beliefs, and actions in favour of Russian objectives.

Russia's influence operations are distinguished by persistence, multi-platform implementation, covert infrastructure, emotional manipulation, and rhetorical imitation of democratic discourse. Their continuity since 2014 gradually produces fatigue and normalization of aggression; the use of television, Telegram channels, and dark-social networks ensures penetration into diverse segments of society; the reliance on proxies, pseudo-activists, and hidden media structures helps conceal direct involvement of Russian actors; the exploitation of trauma and despair aims to suppress rational decision-making; and the appropriation of language about «rights» and «protection» attempts to shift moral blame for war consequences onto Ukraine. Taken together, these components reflect a model of information confrontation in which psychological damage becomes more destructive than cognitive distortion. Instead of convincing audiences of a specific lie, the Russian

approach often aims to destroy trust in any information – a phenomenon referred to as strategic nihilism.

One of the core mechanisms of this strategy is systematic targeting of societal vulnerabilities that have historical or war-time roots – including collective trauma caused by invasion and displacement, lingering distrust associated with corruption, regional and linguistic heterogeneity, and emotional exhaustion from continuous alerts and instability. By activating these vulnerabilities, adversarial messaging seeks to erode solidarity and reduce willingness to engage in collective defence.

A further dimension is the creation of alternative «realities» in which Ukraine is framed as an «artificial state», internally divided, fully dependent on external actors, responsible for escalation, or incapable of self-governance [1; 6]. The strategic goal of these narratives is the denial of Ukraine's agency – internally by discouraging democratic participation and externally by challenging international recognition of Ukraine as a sovereign decision-maker.

Presentation of the Main Research Material. Since 24 February 2022, Russian information warfare has become even more explicitly synchronized with kinetic military operations. Disinformation campaigns are deployed to sow panic in cities under attack, sabotage humanitarian evacuations by spreading false alerts, justify war crimes through dehumanizing propaganda, and erode trust in Western partners – one of Ukraine's most critical enablers of defence. These actions demonstrate that information aggression is not a supplementary or parallel conflict – it constitutes a full-fledged operational front designed to destroy national resilience at its psychological and political core.

Ukraine's response to information aggression has undergone a profound transformation since 2014. What initially developed as fragmented and reactive crisis communication has evolved into a holistic and institutionalized capability that now functions as a core component of national security. This evolution rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars: cen-

tralized state coordination, active civil society participation, and strong, strategically oriented international partnerships – together forming an integrated ecosystem of information resilience capable of countering hybrid threats in real time [3; 7].

Following the escalation of hostilities in February 2022, Ukraine significantly strengthened its state-level strategic communication architecture. Key institutions such as the Government Communication Coordination Center, the Centre for Countering Disinformation [6], the Strategic Communications Department of the Armed Forces, and the Ministry of Digital Transformation became central actors in safeguarding the information domain. Each performs a distinct function: unifying official narratives and crisis messaging to prevent panic and sustain trust; detecting and suppressing hostile influence to ensure information sovereignty; ensuring military communication tailored to the needs of defence and morale; and countering cyber threats while strengthening digital resistance to disinformation. These institutional capacities operate according to several fundamental principles – proactive communication rather than delayed reaction, strict adherence to accuracy as credibility becomes a weapon of democracy, a human-centered narrative emphasising dignity and unity, as well as high operational speed reflected in daily briefings and instant debunking.

Yet state coordination alone would not be sufficient without the decisive contribution of Ukrainian civil society, which has become a multiplier of national resilience. Independent actors and volunteer networks continue to play a leading role in monitoring manipulation, especially on digital platforms; developing media literacy programmes for youth and adults; supporting trauma-sensitive communication; and acting as trusted mediators between state institutions and citizens. Notable initiatives – including StopFake, Detector Media, and VoxCheck – have established international credibility as pioneers in open-source fact-checking since 2014. Their partnership with the state is cooperative rather than subordinated, preserv-

ing democratic legitimacy while expanding the reach of truthful information.

Ukraine's resilience has also been strengthened through strategic diplomacy and deep cooperation with international partners. Collaboration with the EU East StratCom Task Force [7], NATO institutions such as CCDCOE, UN platforms dedicated to media freedoms, and leading global outlets including BBC, DW, AFP and Associated Press has positioned Ukraine as a reliable source of verified information. Cooperation with major technology companies – Meta, Google and Telegram – supports rapid content moderation and disruption of hostile disinformation networks. As a result, Ukraine has secured recognition as a frontline defender of the free informational world, providing the international community with accurate reporting and visual evidence of Russian war crimes, which reinforces accountability mechanisms and narrative dominance in global public opinion.

All these components form a systemic architecture in which governmental, societal, international, technological and local community actors operate as interconnected layers rather than isolated units. This multilevel synergy has produced significant results by 2025: a marked rise in civic identity expressed through unity across regions and languages; consistently high trust in defence institutions, surpassing 90% according to research [2]; strengthened international narrative that frames Ukraine as a defender of Europe and democratic values; reduced reach of hostile propaganda networks; and the institutionalization of media literacy education, with more than three million citizens taking part in resilience-building initiatives. Collectively, this experience demonstrates that an open democracy, grounded in transparency and social participation, can prove stronger and more adaptable than an authoritarian regime that relies on coercion and manipulation.

Ukraine has therefore shown that information resilience is not only a protective measure – it is an active capacity that empowers society to resist aggression while preserving democratic iden-

tity and legitimacy even under existential threat.

Strategic communication during wartime inevitably operates at the intersection of security imperatives and public diplomacy. The urgency of defending the information domain often prioritizes swift persuasion and rapid operational decisions, as delaying communication may create vulnerabilities that adversaries readily exploit [4]. Yet democratic systems cannot fully adopt the "zero-sum" logic that underlies authoritarian information warfare, because such an approach risks eroding the very foundations – pluralism, accountability, and respect for citizens – that they are defending [8]. Therefore, Ukraine's experience indicates that communication aimed exclusively at changing people's beliefs or behaviour is insufficient in the context of democratic defence. Instead, strategic communication must simultaneously enable informed choice, support emotional resilience, protect human dignity, and empower society to co-produce security in partnership with state institutions.

The primary goal of wartime messaging in a democracy is not merely to convince – but to preserve the interpretive capacity of society: the collective ability to understand events, make autonomous decisions, and maintain trust in shared reality. In this regard, Ukraine's communication strategy places the emphasis on transparency, clarity of information, public-facing explanations of state decisions, and inclusion of diverse voices from all parts of the country. By doing so, the government and civil society help ensure that resilience arises not from imposed unity, but from conscious agreement on the necessity of resistance.

Scholars warn, however, that democracies implementing strategic communication in wartime may face two significant ethical risks. The first involves the weaponization of communication, where messaging becomes coercive rather than informative – a risk Ukraine mitigates through strict transparency and verifiable accuracy in official briefings. The second relates to paternalism, when authorities treat

citizens as passive “targets” rather than partners in shaping the public agenda [3]. Ukraine’s reliance on collaboration with independent media and civil society organizations demonstrates that it is possible to defend the information space without reducing individuals to objects of influence, maintaining their role as active contributors to national resilience [8; 9].

A crucial dimension of strategic communication is the safeguarding of morale, which functions as a security resource rooted in hope, trust, shared purpose, and belief in a democratic future. Ukrainian communication continuously connects defence efforts with protection of values – freedom, dignity and life – reinforcing the understanding that armed resistance is not only a military necessity but also a moral obligation to defend the society’s identity and rights. Such narrative framing strengthens motivation, counters despair, and sustains public readiness to endure hardship, ultimately contributing to the psychological dimension of resilience that authoritarian regimes frequently underestimate.

The international dimension of Ukraine’s strategic communication is increasingly visible as the country positions itself as a global security communicator. Ukraine has become a central actor in shaping the global discussion on hybrid threats, resilience, disinformation defence, and media literacy – bringing a democratic perspective into what was long considered a technical or security-only domain. At the core of Ukraine’s messaging lies the conviction that Ukraine defends not only its own freedom but the security order of Europe. Through clear and honest communication, Ukraine succeeds in maintaining sustainable support from allies, counteracting attempts to shift responsibility for the war, and ensuring that the aggressor is held accountable. EU institutions confirm that Ukraine has become the principal beneficiary of European support for strengthening information resilience in the context of Russian propaganda [10].

A distinctive hallmark of Ukraine’s external communication is what can be

defined as diplomacy of evidence. By systematically documenting war crimes, communicating about humanitarian catastrophes, and highlighting the civilian dimension of war, Ukraine produces informational evidence for international courts, global media, and the collective historical record – a struggle for truth that underpins international law. Recent research emphasizes that Ukraine’s information security resilience is strongly reinforced by legal and institutional measures designed to manage the informational dimension of warfare [11; 12].

Furthermore, Ukraine’s experience increasingly influences the architecture of global information security policy. Ukrainian lessons are already applied in the reform of EU strategies regarding information sovereignty, while simultaneously becoming a reference point for other democracies exposed to hybrid aggression. Scholars describe information resilience as the «crux of survival» in wartime Ukraine – thereby transforming the country into «a laboratory for democratic resilience under insecure times» [13]. In this sense, Ukraine today stands not only as a case of resilience but also as a driver of normative change in the evolving international order.

Despite extreme and prolonged pressure, Ukraine demonstrates continuous progress in key parameters of democratic resilience rather than decline – underscoring the strategic role of communication as both a stabilizing and mobilizing force. One of the most significant outcomes is the unprecedented level of social cohesion that has emerged during the war. Cross-regional solidarity has deepened around national sovereignty and democratic values, accompanied by wide participation in volunteer initiatives and strong interpersonal trust. These trends confirm that national identity has consolidated rather than fragmented under conditions of aggression [3]. Wartime communication grounded in dignity, empathy and shared responsibility directly contributes to this unity.

Institutional trust has also increased. Transparent crisis communication reduces

the risk of panic and destructive emotions and supports confidence in decision-making. Public opinion surveys show extremely high support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine – above 90% – as well as growing trust in local authorities, emergency management structures, and volunteer organizations [2]. Legitimacy is thus continuously co-produced through open, consistent and fact-based communication.

A further dimension is psychological resilience, where Ukrainian strategic messaging emphasizes the protection of life, justice, and a democratic future. This value-driven framing sustains motivation to resist even during traumatic moments and uncertainty, reinforcing citizens' understanding of their role in collective defence [5]. Communication, therefore, becomes a moral and psychological capability that directly supports defence operations.

Finally, the rise of media literacy has contributed to a unique culture of critical information engagement. Citizens actively identify manipulation, share verified knowledge, and participate in community-driven educational efforts, turning media literacy into a core component of national security. It becomes not merely an educational tool but cognitive infrastructure embedded within society – strengthening resilience against hybrid threats.

Thus, across social cohesion, institutional legitimacy, psychological endurance and information literacy, empirical indicators confirm that communication is a strategic driver of Ukraine's national resilience.

Ukraine's experience demonstrates that a democratic state is capable of defending itself without resorting to the methods associated with authoritarian information warfare. Strategic communication plays a fundamental role in sustaining the legitimacy of resistance – explaining why defence is necessary, strengthening confidence in strategic goals, and framing participation in defence as a shared civic mission. Legitimacy is upheld through a truth-first approach, including honest acknowledgment of challenges and losses, which ensures that public support is built on trust rather than coercion. Recent anal-

yses highlight that democratic resilience is not only preserved but actively reinforced under wartime conditions in Ukraine [14].

A distinctive feature of Ukraine's communication is its human-centric character. Instead of demonizing the adversary or reducing citizens to passive recipients, Ukrainian messaging prioritizes personal stories, community voices, acknowledgment of trauma, and protection of vulnerable groups. This approach maintains human dignity – a core dividing line between democratic and authoritarian systems – while strengthening motivation and a sense of civic agency. Studies of Ukraine's strategic narrative emphasize its connective nature, linking individual experiences to collective identity and thereby reinforcing democratic legitimacy [15].

Looking ahead, strategic communication will remain essential for addressing key post-war challenges. These include healing social trauma, rebuilding trust in communities affected by occupation or displacement, and ensuring inclusive engagement of veterans and internally displaced persons in public life. Long-term defence of truth will be crucial to prevent historical revisionism and attempts to legitimize aggression. Internationally, Ukraine must counteract emerging "war-fatigue" narratives that threaten sustainable allied support, while ensuring continued accountability for war crimes. Communication is therefore not only a tool of war – it must remain a strategic investment in peace and democratic recovery [14].

Conclusions. This article examined the evolution of Ukraine's strategic communication during the 2014–2025 period, demonstrating its transformation into a crucial component of national defence, international diplomacy, and democratic resilience. The findings indicate that communication is not a secondary or supportive activity, but an essential element of state power in conditions of hybrid warfare. Control over narratives, perception, and credibility directly influences Ukraine's capacity to resist aggression and sustain operational coherence under extreme pressure.

Strategic communication has proved fundamental to protecting information sovereignty. By maintaining trust in democratic institutions and countering attempts to erode national unity, Ukraine prevents the destabilizing effects that hostile influence operations seek to provoke. Crucially, democratic defence in Ukraine relies on public participation: instead of coercive messaging, authorities and communicators promote civic agency, transparency and collaboration with society. This shared commitment strengthens both legitimacy and morale.

The role of civil society has emerged as a decisive multiplier of national resilience. Volunteers, educators, independent media and fact-checking initiatives significantly limit the effects of disinformation and ensure that truthful information circulates rapidly and credibly within communities. Their efforts highlight that resilience

is co-produced by state and non-state actors working in partnership.

Finally, Ukraine is shaping an evolving normative standard for democratic security. Its experience illustrates how democracies can defend themselves against authoritarian hybrid warfare without sacrificing the values they seek to protect. By integrating ethical responsibility with strategic messaging, Ukraine contributes to the development of global approaches for safeguarding information sovereignty and upholding truth in the international arena.

Defending truth therefore becomes synonymous with defending freedom – and with preserving the right to a democratic future. Ukraine's strategic communication model stands not merely as a national response, but as a global example, proving that democracy is capable of strength, adaptability and victory even under the most complex hybrid threats.

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