



## Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Crisis Communication

# Understanding Crisis Communication dynamics: a comparative analysis of Russia and Ukraine during the first year of war

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Academic Year 2022/2023



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# INTRODUCTION

In the complex and entangled landscape of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the study of crisis communication strategies becomes an indispensable tool for understanding its dynamics and implications. The essence of crisis communication lies in its role in shaping perceptions, influencing actions, and steering public opinion during times of tension and uncertainty. In other words, it is one of the domains where the conflict is fought.

The objective of this thesis is to understand the communication strategies employed by Russia and Ukraine, evaluating, and comparing them taking in consideration the first year of the war. To conduct a better comparison the chapters regarding the two case studies are structured almost specularly, guided by the theoretical framework of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Before probing into the discussion of the two cases, the first chapter provides the reader with the tools necessary to better understand the analysis of the case studies.

The reasons for the clash between the two states are rooted in centuries of history and we need to study them to have a better understanding of the communication dynamics and narratives employed by the stakeholders involved, and this is exactly the starting point of the first chapter. The discussion of the main historical events that have seen Russia and Ukraine intertwine is fundamental not only to understand the reasons that lead to the conflict but also to comprehend why a certain narrative scheme is employed today. For example, the dialectic of the speech delivered three days before the invasion by Vladimir Putin the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2022 in which he recognized the independence of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, is filled with historical references to events that recall a legacy that dates back to the Kievan Rus', the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Following the historical background, it is presented the theoretical framework of the SCCT employed in the analysis. In the last paragraph of the chapter is presented the research methodology employed throughout the thesis.

In the following two chapters are discussed the case studies of Russia and Ukraine. Both have the same structure, first of all is discussed the role of the leader of the country, Zelensky and Putin, their rise to power, the characteristics of their communicative style,

its evolution before and after the war and for the Russian President is also present an analysis of his ideological framework. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of the strategies employed by both countries during the first year of the war, and the extent to which they were effective and why. In the last part of each chapter, these strategies are framed using the SCCT, following the steps described in the first chapter.

In the conclusions of the thesis, altogether with the final remarks, the two cases are compared in their main characteristics. Thanks to this comparison it will be possible to understand why the Ukrainian communication can be deemed as successful, while the Russian failed. It emerges that Ukraine was skilful in crafting its strategies, better adapting to the use of social media. Most importantly thanks to the comparison carried out by employing the findings obtained by the framing of the SCCT, it is highlighted how Russia communicative campaign was hampered by the crisis responsibility attribution for the beginning of the conflict.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **HISTORY, METHODOLOGY AND THEORY**

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with the necessary tools to better understand the following sections of this thesis. In order to do so, it will be discussed three fundamental elements, one for each paragraph: history, theory and methodology.

In the first paragraph, we will follow the threads of history that bind and intertwine the events of Russia and Ukraine in order to understand the current narratives. For the purpose of this research, we will just focus on landmark events that links the two countries and that are mentioned by the actors in the materials analysed in the following chapters.

In the second paragraph it will be discussed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory as the guiding theoretical framework. The SCCT (hereafter referred to by this acronym) provides a systematic lens through which crisis communication strategies can be evaluated and interpreted. This theory enables the assessment of the appropriateness, effectiveness, and potential impact of the crisis communication approaches adopted by the conflicting parties. It focuses on the situational factors, attributions, and response strategies, and helps to provide a comprehensive analysis of crisis communication within the specific context of the first year of conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, the last paragraph of this chapter introduces the methodology employed to collect and study the sources for this thesis.

By establishing the foundational principles of qualitative research and the application of SCCT, this chapter aims to pave the way for the subsequent chapters. Its objective is to construct a clear path towards a deeper understanding of crisis communication strategies in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

### **1.1 Historical context**

#### **1.1.1 The Kievan Rus'**

Conventionally the beginning of the history of Russia dates back to the founding of the first eastern Slavic State in the 9th century: the Kievan Rus'. According to traditional



chronicles, the Russian primary Chronicle, it was founded around 882 following the seizure of Kiev from the Viking ruler Oleg. The city became the centre and the capital of the Rus, due to its strategic position on the river Dnieper. The name “Rus” comes from its inhabitants, who were Scandinavian Vikings mixed with local Slavs population who used to call themselves Rus, name that followingly extended to the land. The archaeological findings do not confirm the legendary chronicles: the chronicle's accounts for example attempted to attribute these findings to Novgorod, but it's worth noting that Novgorod did not come into existence until around AD 950, well after the Rurik dynasty had already established itself in Kiev. Moreover, within Scandinavia itself, there is an absence of sagas detailing Viking triumphs and conflicts in Russia comparable to those chronicling the conquest of Iceland and the British Isles. What is sure however, is that the vast territory of the Kievan Rus' included, in terms of modern geography, the whole Belarus, the northern half of Ukraine and the centre and north-east of European Russia. The people of those three modern states share closely related languages derived from the East Slavic language of the Kievan Rus'. To the west, these States share historical neighbours with present-day Hungary, Poland, the Baltics, and Finland. Towards the north, Kievan Rus extended towards the Arctic Ocean, where Slavic farmers were just beginning to settle in the far north. Beyond the Slav populations in Bulgaria in the east, there was a small Islamic state in modern Tatarstan founded around 950.

In 980 ascended to the throne Vladimir the First, his reign is considered to be the golden age of the Kievan Rus, however his rule is remembered for the conversion from paganism to Orthodoxy. In the Chronicles there are different versions of how the conversion to orthodox Christianity took place, however probably none of them is true. What is sure is that Vladimir ordered to the people of Kiev to be baptized in the river Dnieper and the choice to follow the Christianity as understood in Constantinople determined the place of the Kievan Rus' and then of Russia and Ukraine in European culture for centuries, with huge implications in policy, culture and international relations.

The history of the Kievan Rus comes to an end following the Mongol invasions in the XIII century. The Mongols established the Golden Horde, a nomadic state centred on the lower Volga. The Mongols were tolerant towards other cultures and religions, for this reason life did not change much compared to the previous Kievan Rus'. The main goal of the Horde was to collect the tributes, which for sure was a huge burden for the local

principates but this did not stop the flourishing of the economy and the recovery from the previous devastation of the Mongols. During this period centre of importance of the Rus shifted from Kiev in favour of the rising Moscow. The city first appears in written sources in 1147 as a small fortress, but it seems to have been Daniil, Prince of Moscow (circa 1280–1303) and grandson of Alexander Nevsky who consolidated the small territory along the Moscow River. The Mongol conquest had devastated Kiev, leaving the Metropolitan of Kiev, the head of the Orthodox Church, without a home, therefore the figure moved to Moscow, furthermore the city was an important centre for the collection of taxes, granting a continuous flow of money and goods. By the mid-14th century, Moscow had consolidated its power sufficiently to assert dominance in regional politics, successfully assimilated numerous smaller principalities, and most importantly had the Metropolitans among the wooden walls of the Kremlin, meanwhile the importance of Kiev decreased as the years went by.

In the current narrative the history of the Kievan Rus, often intertwined with legend and folklore, occupies an important place in the narratives of both Russians and Ukrainians. When Putin defines Russia and Ukraine as “parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space” (Putin 2021) he finds the beginnings of this permanent bond in the Kievan Rus, meaning that for Putin Ukrainians can be considered Russian and Ukraine, or at least part of it, part of the Greater Russia (Velikaia Rossija).

On the other hand, for Ukrainians the Kievan Rus is a national pride, the cradle of their nation and not the land of the Russians, but the land of Rus’ pointing on the difference of those two people despite a common origin. The idea of the Kievan Rus as an early state with a distinct identity contributes to the narrative of Ukraine as a nation with a rich historical heritage and in the context of recent Ukrainian history it fosters a sense of independence and autonomy.

### **1.1.2 The Russian Empire and the gradual annexation of Ukrainian territories**

After the disruption of the Golden Horde and the inexorable loss of importance and centrality of Kiev, the Muscovy state began its mission of gradually annexing the old

territories of the ancient Rus'. In this arc a fundamental turning point is the 35 years long reign, from 1547 to 1584, of Ivan IV, went down in history as Ivan the Terrible. During his regency for the first time emerged some of the main patterns that characterized Russian and Soviet history both in internal and external policy.

In 1547 Ivan IV became the first ruler of the Muscovy to be crowned as Tsar in the Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral. The title of Tsar derives from the word "Caesar", title adopted by the Byzantine emperors. After the fall of Constantinople by the hands of the Ottomans, the rulers of the Muscovy adopted the role of protectors of Orthodox faith and since then Moscow has been regarded by Russians as the third Rome.

During Ivan's reign, a series of reforms were adopted, with the aim of centralizing the power in the hands of the crown, reducing the authority of the nobility, the boyars, whose harsh and bloody repression earned Ivan the nickname of "the Terrible". What stands out of Ivan's regency is the successful siege of the city of Kazan, capital of Tatarstan. For the first time was conquered a foreign reign inhabited by people of different ethnicity and religion, making the Muscovy a multiethnic and multireligious reign. In this instance Ivan employed policies that characterized the practices of all future rulers of Russia. Altogether with the centralization of power, Ivan applied the policy of co-optation of local elites. Despite in the years following the seize of Kazan there was an attempt of forced conversion, this practice was abandoned and instead the local elites were sent to Moscow in order to form themselves in the court of the Kremlin and then used to rule the territories conquered (Neuberger, J. 2014). In the image number 1, can be observed the extension of the Tsardom of Russia in 1598, almost 15 years after the death of Ivan IV. Despite the already impressive territorial extension of the reign, Kiev and most of modern part of modern Ukraine was not part of it yet.

The death of Ivan the Terrible was followed by a period of uncertainty, referred by historians as "Time of Troubles", characterized by famine, economic crisis, and conflict over the succession to the throne. This situation restrained the westward expansionist plan towards a powerful and rich enemy: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The domestic situation settled after the ascension to the throne of Mikhail Romanov, the first of the Romanov's dynasty which ruled over Russia until the revolution in 1917, and in 1648 the perfect occasion to pursue the territorial expansion presented itself.



Image 1, Tsardom of Russia, year 1598<sup>1</sup>

The Ukrainian territory, as mentioned, was under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a catholic reign that was not tolerant towards the Orthodox faith, declaring it illegal in 1596, therefore the Ukrainian population was oppressed and persecuted. To avoid serfdom and oppression some peasants accepted to fight as Cossacks at the border with Crimea. In 1648 the Ukrainian Cossacks elected a new commander, Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi, who started a rebellion and the facto proclaiming the relief from religious oppression. Khmel'nyts'kyi obtained significant victories on the field, however despite the Ukrainians were able to defeat the Poles on the battlefield, their commander was aware that their victory could not last without an ally. For this reason, they turned to the Tsar Aleksei, ascended to the throne after the death of Mikhail Romanov, begging

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/17874/ivan-iv-the-terrible-and-the-tsardom-of-russia-c-1/#:~:text=URL%3A%20https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldhistory.org%2Fimage%2F17874%2Fivan%20map%20of%20Russian%20Tsardom>

him to embrace the cause of the Orthodoxy. In 1648 an uprising in Moscow had been just put down, which is why it did not seem appropriate for the Tsar to support an uprising in a foreign country; moreover, his father Mikhail in his last year of reign had sought an alliance with the Poles against Crimea. For these reasons Aleksei hesitated for five years. In 1653 was sent another embassy in Moscow in which the Cossacks offered to the Tsar the overlordship over their military forces, and, also thanks to the insistence of the Patriarch, this time Aleksei accepted. Almost a year later, in January 1654, among the two parts was signed the treaty of Pereislav. Thanks to this agreement the Tsar took control of the Cossack army and their land, while he granted a high degree of autonomy under the tsardom and declared war to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The treaty of Pereislav is a turning point for the history of Eastern Europe. The thirteen years long war that resulted from the treaty resulted into a Russian victory and a fatal weakening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the war the population was divided between who was in favour of Russian occupation and who was not, highlighting a pattern that repeated throughout history in the following centuries. After a draining back and forth between the two armies, the Poles were forced to sign in 1667 the truce of Andrusovo, favourable to the Russians. Ukraine was split along the river Dnieper with Russian receiving the eastern part, including the city of Kiev.

Modern historiography is divided regarding the considerations about the treaty of Pereislav and it is one of the historical reasons at the roots of the modern conflict in Ukraine. In modern times the interpretation of the treaty was influenced by nationalistic sentiments both in Russia and Ukraine. For the Ukrainian nationalist narration, the treaty was a tragedy in national history that led to centuries of Russian domination. However, for Russian traditional historiography the treaty is the result of the voluntary union of the people of Russia and Ukraine, stressing their common cultural and historical ties. What is sure is that the treaty of Pereislav was conceived by Khmel'nyts'kyi as a military alliance due to the contingencies of that historical period, however it resulted with the consolidation of the influence of the Tsar over eastern Ukraine.

Following the end of the war the Cossack, as stated in the treaty, Kiev maintained a high degree of independence. They kept electing their commander, the hetman, who appointed the officers, applied the old Polish administrative law, administered its finances and

commanded the army, all of this without consulting the Tsar, who nevertheless maintained a number of troops in Kiev and other major cities and its commander exercised control over the towns despite they maintained their elected urban governments.

The remaining parts of modern days Ukraine fell under Russian control only two centuries later, during the 35 years long reign of Catherine the Great, between 1762 and 1796. During the first decade of her reign, her ability to manage foreign policy was immediately put to the test. After the death of the king of Poland in 1763, Catherina, thanks to bribery, intimidation of her opponents and aid from her Polish allies, placed on the throne of the weak kingdom her former lover Stanislaw Poniatowski, guaranteeing Russian influence over Poland. Catherine through her emissaries suggested to Poniatowski to enact a legal policy of tolerance towards religious minorities, who were German speaking protestants and orthodox Ukrainians. This policy led to a rebellion in 1768 from the catholic nobility, which was followed by a military intervention of the Russian army in Poland. The invasion of Poland triggered a declaration of war from the Ottomans, prompted by France, who feared a greater influence of Russia over Poland, endangering their interest in the area. Despite waging a difficult war on two fronts against a major opponent like the Ottoman Empire, Catherine emerged victorious and managed to get the Ottomans to sign a favourable armistice. With this victory, the Russian Empire not only gained great prestige on a European level, but above all obtained vast territories in southern Ukraine on the shores of the Black Sea, which today are referred to as "Novorossia", and gained control over the Crimean Peninsula even though nominally independent.

Almost 20 years after the first partition, Poland slowly strengthened itself and adopted a new constitution in 1791, which had, according to Catherine, the revolutionary France behind it. Since empires as the Russian and the Prussian could not afford a neighbour with such ideas, they once again invaded Poland, easily defeated its army, imposed a conservative constitution and in 1792 agreed for a new partition. This time Russia obtained the western part of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus. In response to this second partition in 1794 the Polish army officer Tadeusz Kosciuszko led a rebellion that spread to Warsaw. Fearing a Jacobin outburst Catherine sent the army and repressed the revolt. This time the powers, in a third partition, decided to put a definitive end to the experience of Poland as an entity and partitioned its remaining territories.

Following these events, the Russian Empire became a truly multinational empire, and although Catherine's intentions were not to wage war to unite the Eastern Slav population, she brought into her empire the whole of the old Kievan Rus' and all modern-day Ukraine.

### **1.1.3 The Soviet Union and its policies towards Ukraine**

During the era of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the central power in Moscow and the Ukrainian SSR was peculiar, characterized by periods of forced Russification alternated with periods of greater cultural autonomy, going through tragedies as the "dekulakization" and the Holodomor with the constant of the centralised government in Moscow.

During the years of the civil war, before the official constitution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine experienced a resurgence of national identity after the collapse of the empire. Following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 and the withdrawal of German troops, local Ukrainian nationalists led by Semyon Petliura declared the independence from the Bolsheviks and began a conflict with both the White and the Red Army. Despite competing with some successes against the two armies in a guerrilla war, this experience was cut short following the Polish invasion of Ukraine. The newly re-established Poland aimed to regain the territories lost after the three partitions and the Cossacks of Petliura sided with them, discrediting themselves to the eyes of the Ukrainian peasantry who saw the Poles as their enemies. Against the Poles, the Reds suffered a major defeat and were forced to sign a treaty that established a border that gave Poland large parts of western Belarus and Ukraine but retained the main cities as Kiev, Odessa, and Minsk. This division signed the Ukrainian people, whom in the following decades, until the reunification with the Soviet Union after the Second World War, lived different experiences that still nowadays mark the national collective memory.

After the end of the civil war, the policies regarding ethnic minorities, implemented by the new Soviet State in its first years, further intensified the nationalistic sentiments of the Ukrainians. The period of the Empire was characterized by a model of a single national majority (the Russians) with the other national minorities subordinated to the former. The Bolsheviks could not accept this model but at the same time rejected its

opposite: an internationalist state in which the legal concept of nationality would be eliminated, a model advocated by Rosa Luxemburg and within the Bolsheviks supported by Bukharin. Lenin instead chose to prompt the creation of a federal structure with a large number of national territories. This system was named as “strategy of ethno-territorial proliferation” and consisted in the extension of the system of national territorial units downwards into smaller and smaller territorial units “called national soviets” (Martin, T. 1999). This system in its intentions should have overcome national prejudice, but in practice had the opposite effect, mobilizing ethnic groups that feared to become a minority in their national Soviet, leading to a dramatic resurgence of ethnic conflict in the 1920s. This system was applied for the first time in 1924 in Ukraine, where, as mentioned, there was a strong sentiment of national identity. Ukrainian communists prompted a strong policy of Ukrainization with the support of the central government, creating between 1924 and 1929 as much as Ukrainian national soviets as possible reducing the minimum number of residents needed to form a soviet.

During Stalin's rule there were two events that indelibly marked the collective memory of the Ukrainian people: the collectivisation of land and the Holodomor. Ukraine was the breadbasket of Soviet Union; therefore, the government had an even more aggressive approach in comparison to other areas, reaching almost the 100% level of collectivization. When in 1928 Stalin launched the first five-year plan, the Communist Party mobilized its troops and local committees to enforce the order of collectivization, reorganizing the agriculture in collective farms, called Kolkhoz, or state farm administrations, called Sovkhoz. Kolkhozes were cooperative farm organizations that operated, theoretically, on a voluntary basis, while sovkhozes were farms completely owned by the state. In the case of sovkhozes, peasant farmers were employed as paid labour, effectively forming a rural working class (Bushkovitch, P. 2011). The process was brutal and harsh, characterized by a strong resistance of Ukrainians peasants. The government did not deny these contrasts, however transferred the narrative from the resistance of the peasantry to a class war against the rich Kulaks, labelling as such all the enemies of the collectivization, despite the real social status of the individual. The repression of Kulaks was horrific, their land and livestock confiscated, and they and their family were usually deported in penal colonies or executed on the spot as enemy of the proletariat. By conservative estimates, well over 2 million rural inhabitants were deported by the end of 1933, when the regime



ended the policy of forced mass collectivisation, and this does not include the unknown but surely large number of peasants who were executed, killed in outright fighting, or who died of harsh conditions even before they reached their places of exile (ibidem).

In 1932 several factors, as the forced collectivization, altogether with a poor harvest and high state grain procurement quota, caused a terrible famine in most of Ukraine, central Russia and northern Caucasus. This famine, which killed an estimated 5mln people, is called in Ukraine Holodomor. In Ukrainian this term refers to hunger related mass extermination, implying the intentionality of the event (Graziosi, A. 2005). Despite the etymology of the word, it is difficult for historians to demonstrate a purposely genocidal policy, however the responsibility of Stalin cannot be denied or minimized, labelling the event as a famine caused by natural circumstances. Stalin used the famine in order to punish Ukrainian peasant for having long resisted to the Soviet power and break their will to oppose to the collectivization. Despite the historical debate, the remembrance of the Holodomor is often accompanied by a strong sense of grievance and injustice, reflecting the profound emotional and cultural impact the Holodomor has had on Ukraine and its people. This event has become a key element of Ukrainian national history, shaping the country's narrative of resistance and survival against oppressive external forces.

Before discussing the relations between Russia and Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there is still another event that is worth to mention: the transfer of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 under the presidency of Nikita Khrushchev (Kramer, M. 2022). The official reasons given for this transfer are at the very least ambiguous and difficult to understand, and in reality, it was a manoeuvre of Khrushchev to strengthen his position as leader of the Soviet Union. The Soviet press in February 1954 announced the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine, citing two reasons. First of all it was a noble act from the Russians in order to commemorate the 300 years of the treaty of Pereislav to «evidence the boundless trust and love the Russian people feels toward the Ukrainian people»; the second reason was that the transfer represented «a natural outgrowth of the territorial proximity of Crimea to Ukraine, the commonalities of their economies, and the close agricultural and cultural ties between the Crimean Oblast and the Ukrainian SSR». Neither of these two reasons seems reasonable. First of all, the treaty of Pereislav did not constitute the complete unification of Ukraine to Russia, and Crimea was not contemplated in the agreement, so gifting the peninsula

did not make much sense. The second reason also appears ambiguous, Crimea was culturally more Russian, even more Russian following the Second World War, after the deportation ordered by Stalin of Crimean Tatars, and the ratio Ukrainians- Russian was 25-75 (Kramer, M., 2022). The real reason for this transfer was a political game of Nikita Khrushchev, whose position in 1954 was not consolidated yet in the competition to secure the succession of Stalin. Khrushchev was looking for allies in order to remove from its role his main competitor: the Soviet Prime Minister Georgji Malenkov. To achieve his goal Khrushchev was hoping to gain the support of the Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party Oleksiy Kyrychenko and Ukrainians party elites, so the decision of the transfer of Crimea was made in the optic of appease and gain the support of those elites. The transfer was executed through a relatively straightforward Soviet bureaucratic process, and at the time, it was not viewed as particularly significant given the centralized nature of the Soviet Union. In 1954 nobody thought about the consequence of this measure, simply because at the time nobody had foreseen or even imagined the possibility of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

What was unthinkable in 1954, happened in 1991, despite in March the 71% of Ukrainians voted in favour of a renovated Union. After the failed coup of August, the 24<sup>th</sup> of the same month Ukraine declared its independence which was confirmed by a popular referendum held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. The Ukrainian transition was successful thanks to a series of steps, as the dissolution of the Communist party, the ban of KGB, the institution of pluralism, but most importantly all individuals living on the soil of the Ukrainian socialist republic were granted citizenship in the emerging independent state, independently if they were ethnic Russians or Ukrainians.

#### **1.1.4 The relations between Russia and Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Russia faced several practical issues. At the time of the dissolution, a huge portion of Soviet nuclear arsenal was deployed in Ukraine, making the country the third nuclear power of the world in terms of the number of warheads, after Russia and the US. A similar problem arose with the Fleet

of the Black Sea, which was based in Sevastopol but whose officers were mainly Russians. On the other hand, Ukraine's main concern was its territorial integrity, especially the regions with a majority of ethnic Russians. Those questions were addressed by the two countries in the conference of Budapest in 1994. Ukraine handed back to Russia the nuclear warheads and the fleet of the Black Sea, in exchange Russia guaranteed the future territorial integrity of Ukraine, recognizing Crimea as part of it and renouncing to advance claims towards the Russophone regions in the east of the country. In the following years Russia tried to penetrate economically and politically in Ukraine, selling natural gas to a favourable price and corrupting political elites. Despite the Russian influence over Ukrainian policy is undeniable, the people were divided among pro Russians and pro Europeans, a clash, based mainly on ethnicity for the reason discussed in this chapter, that grew stronger in the first years of 2000' and lead to the civil war in 2014.

The dissatisfaction for the status quo in Ukraine grew among the population, tired of the corruption of the political class backed by the Kremlin, until it exploded in 2004 with the Orange Revolution (Kennan Institute, 2005). Following first round of Ukraine elections of 2004, in which competed 25 candidates, emerged Yanukovich (candidate backed by Moscow) and Yushchenko, leader of a coalition with a progressive and innovative agenda, both with around the 40% of votes. The runoff elections in November were won by Yanukovich, however, immediately after the results emerged thousands of accusations of electoral frauds. In several areas in the east of the country, the voting turnout resulted greater than 100%, according to a Ukrainian scholar, Taras Kuzio, government falsification caused faulty poll numbers when, in fact, less than 30 percent of the entire population supported Yanukovich (Ibidem). In the meantime, in Maidan square in Kiev started mass protest, characterized by the colour orange, the one of the coalition of Yushchenko, with more than one million of people taking part to the peaceful protest. Bolstered by the unyielding allegiance of the Maidan protesters and armed with hundreds of documented allegations of electoral frauds, Yushchenko appealed to Ukraine's Supreme Court, which subsequently nullified the election and ordered a new one, in which Yushchenko finally succeeded.

The Orange Revolution had a significant impact beyond the immediate political realm. It was a cultural renaissance, reigniting a sense of Ukrainian national identity and pride. It

galvanized a generation of young Ukrainians, many of whom had not been politically active before, and fostered a new sense of civic engagement and responsibility. Internationally, the Orange Revolution significantly altered Ukraine's geopolitical trajectory. It marked a clear shift towards Western integration, with aspirations for closer ties with the European Union and NATO. This reorientation had profound implications for Ukraine's relationship with Russia, which viewed the Orange Revolution as a Western-backed threat to its influence in the region.

Although it is called “revolution,” it is more an evolution of the Ukrainian system towards democratization, there was not a rupture within the institutions. (Karchanovski, I, 2008). The “revolutionaries” however, were not capable to fulfil their promises, indeed they were under Russian pressure, who raised the price of gas causing an enlargement of Ukraine debt, and furthermore they were plagued by numerous scandals. For these reasons, when the two blocs, pro-Russia and pro-Europe, faced again in the 2010 election, this time Yanukovich prevailed.

During Yanukovich’s presidency there was the possibility of joining the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme — set up to bring Ukraine, among others, closer to the European Union, an agreement that had massive support in the western part of the country. The Ukrainian president suffered massive pressure from Moscow and the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2013 he backed out from the European agreement and signed a backdoor deal with Russia to close its ties once again with its lumbering neighbour. This was the fuse that detonated the powder keg that Ukraine had become after centuries of history. As in 2004 hundreds of thousands of protestors stormed Maidan square, as not peacefully as during the Orange Revolution, demanding the resignation of Yanukovich. Euromaidan, as the protest was dubbed, became a round-the-clock encampment in central Kyiv, characterized by a strong sense of community, solidarity, and organization. The movement was not only about political alignment with Europe; it became a broad-based call for fundamental democratic reforms, the rule of law, and human rights. The government's response to Euromaidan was marked by increasing violence and repression. January 2014 saw the introduction of strict anti-protest laws, further inflaming tensions and leading to more violent clashes between protesters and security forces. The situation reached a climax in February when snipers opened fire on protesters, resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries.

Under immense pressure following a vote of impeachment, Yanukovich in late February 2014 was forced to flee the country and a new interim government lead by opposition leader Oleksandr Turchynov was appointed. Alongside the pro-Western protests of the Euromaidan, pro-Russian demonstrations have been growing in eastern Ukraine. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, a week after the departure of Yanukovich, masked soldiers without any recognizable insignia seized the Crimean parliament in Simferopol while a Russian flag was raised on top of the building. Pro-Russian lawmakers dismissed the sitting government and installed Sergey Aksyonov, the leader of the Russian Unity Party, as Crimean prime minister. On March 6<sup>th</sup> the Crimean parliament voted to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation, a decision confirmed with a popular referendum ten days later.

As Russia continued to strengthen its control over Crimea, augmented the economic pressure over Ukraine rising by the 80% the price of gas and move around 40.000 soldiers in state of readiness on the border. At this point the escalation was unstoppable, and in April heavily armed pro Russians stormed government buildings in the eastern part of the country, in the city of Donetsk, Luhansk, Horlivka, and Kramatorsk. Those events signed the beginning of the civil war that lasted until it became an open and total war between Russia and Ukraine following the recognition of the independence of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk by Putin and the subsequent Russian attack over Ukraine the 21 February 2022.

## **1.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

The aforementioned historical context behind the current crisis in Ukraine it is not sufficient to understand the communication dynamics employed by the actors involved, but we need a theoretical framework to analyse them. To accomplish this goal this paragraph introduces the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (from now on referenced as SCCT) from a general point of view and then how SCCT is intended to be applied to the case study in the following two chapters.

### **1.2.1 Theoretical foundations**

The SCCT is a theoretical model developed by Timothy Coombs, particularly well fitted to the analysis and comparison of the two cases, because it enables us to study the interaction between organizations, in this case the two governments, and stakeholders involved.

Coombs began developing the SCCT in 1995 as the “Symbolic approach to crisis management/ crisis communication.” The reputation of an organization or a government is a valuable asset, and communication strategies can serve to limit and repair a damage. For example, as in the case of Ukraine and Russia, the former, being the one invaded and the weaker from a military point of view, has a main goal to achieve: to obtain resources and support from foreign powers and keep high the morale of its population defending their country. On the other hand, Russian government needs to justify its actions in front of the international community and its citizens, demanding them to make a huge effort from the economic and also physical point of view.

This theory provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by crisis communication during and after a crisis (Coombs 2007). At the core of the SCCT is the understanding that not all crises are equal, and different crises require different communication approaches. The theory emphasizes the importance of three main aspects that the crisis manager needs to consider designing the best response for the crisis: initial crisis responsibility attributed to the organization, crisis history and prior relational reputation. Among those, the perceived responsibility of the organization acts as the sorting medium in the categorization of the crisis (Alshoabi M., 2021).

A crisis manager seeks to define or shape the perception of a crisis by highlighting certain cues. These cues can include factors such as determining whether an external entity or force triggered the crisis, whether it resulted from unintentional or intentional actions by individuals within the organisation, and whether the crisis was caused by technical or human error. Therefore, it does matter the way in which stakeholders perceive the event, whether as an accident, an act of sabotage or an instance of criminal negligence. The nature, or framing, of the crisis plays a key role in influencing how much responsibility stakeholders ascribe to the organisation. In fact, SCCT identifies three crisis cluster based

upon the level of attribution of crisis responsibility by crisis type (Coombs 2007) and determining in which cluster the current crisis falls into is the first step in assessing the reputational threat:

- 1) **The victim cluster**, characterized by a low level of attribution of crisis responsibility of the organization, is viewed as a victim of the crisis- this happens in cases of natural disasters for example.
- 2) **The accidental cluster**, it has minimal attributions of crisis responsibility, and the event is deemed as unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization.
- 3) **The intentional cluster**, it is attributed with the highest level of responsibility of the organization and the event is considered as purposeful by the stakeholders (e.g., accidents caused by human error).

Once identified in which cluster the initial responsibility of the organization is situated, the further step to complete the frame of the crisis is to assess the crisis history and the prior reputation of the organization. Crisis history is whether an organization had to deal with a similar crisis in the past, and if a similar crisis had already occurred, it is possible that the level of perceived responsibility is higher, because the organization may be deemed responsible for the repetition of the crisis or incapable of avoiding its repetition. Prior reputation is how stakeholders perceived the organization before the crisis, so how well, or poorly, the organization interacted with the stakeholders. Similarly, as crisis history, if the organization has a prior bad reputation, the level of responsibility attribution can be higher because the organization is deemed to be poor organized or incapable of facing difficult situations. Those two elements taken as a whole, directly or indirectly, affect the reputational threat of the crisis, because the stakeholders may have a prejudice towards the organization, triggering positive or negative emotions and behaviours. By increasing the level of responsibility attributed from these two elements, it is consequent a more difficult management of the current crisis, so a higher reputational threat, due to an increased level of responsibility attribution. (Coombs 2004)

The crisis can vary on three fundamental dimensions: perceived salience, immediacy, and uncertainty/ambiguity. The level of perceived salience is determined by the potential loss, or probability of loss, which influences how managers view the crisis. To effectively

address warning signs, crisis managers should emphasize the danger of disregarding warnings when presenting them to top management. Immediacy refers to the time pressure associated with the crisis, encompassing both the speed at which the crisis will occur and the level of stakeholder pressure for immediate action. Low-uncertainty problems can be resolved using existing organizational rules and procedures, while high-uncertainty problems require the focused attention that crisis management can provide.

Once the frame and the dimension of the crisis are clear, the SCCT provides two sets of response strategies, primary and secondary, each with its subcategories.

- Primary response strategies:
  - Deny crisis response strategies:
    - Attack the accuser: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.
    - Denial: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis and may invest their efforts in explaining why there is no crisis.
    - Justification: Crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. This can include stating there was no serious damage or claiming that the victims deserved what they received.
    - Scapegoat: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.
  - Diminish crisis response strategies.
    - Excuse: Crisis manager tries to minimize the organization's responsibility for the crisis. This can include denying any intention to do harm claiming that the organization had no control over the events that led to the crisis, or both.
  - Rebuild crisis response strategies.
    - Compensation: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.



- Full apology: Crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and ask for forgiveness, some compensations (see the point above) can be included in the apology.
- Regret: the organization states to feel bad about the crisis
- Secondary crisis response strategy
  - Bolstering crisis response crisis;
    - Reminder: crisis manager tells stakeholders about the past good work of the organization.
    - Ingratiation: crisis manager praises stakeholder and reminds them of the past good works by the organization.
    - Victimage: crisis manager reminds stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

The framing of a crisis analysed in this paragraph serves to understand the rationale behind a communication strategy adopted in mass media. Frames in communication help to shape frames in thought. The way a message is framed shapes how people define problems, the causes of problems, attributions of responsibility and solutions to problems.

The crisis type, crisis history and prior relationship reputation allow managers to anticipate stakeholders' behaviour, how they will perceive and react to the crisis. Understanding these reactions allows the crisis manager to anticipate the level of reputational threat a crisis poses. Research has verified the way crisis types, crisis history and prior relationship history shape stakeholders' reactions. In turn, these stakeholders' perceptions suggest which crisis response strategy or strategies will best serve to pursue the purpose of the crisis communication. Those strategies in fact are used to repair the damage that the reputation of the organization has suffered, shape the attributions of the crisis, change how the organization is perceived and reduce the negative effects of the crisis, both on stakeholders and on organization.

### **1.2.2 Application in case studies.**

In the following chapters, the SCCT will be applied to the two case studies and will be fundamental to their comparison in the last chapter. The two countries are in different positions with one be the invader and the other to be defending, so obviously they have different narratives, necessities, and strategies. Despite the differences, it is possible to compare them by adopting the framing and the steps offered by the SCCT, in doing so it will be possible to better understand how these two countries have managed and communicated through their respective challenges.

The first step will be to determine the cluster of the crisis and therefore the level of responsibility appointed to each actor, which depends on whether they are located in the victim, incidental or intentional cluster. Following this step, it will be considered the prior reputation and crisis history, in doing so it will be necessary to remember the historical context described in the first paragraph. Comprehending history and how the same dynamics have been narrated and how the same actors reacted to similar events is crucial to understand their behaviour in the current crisis and why a certain level of responsibility is attributed to a certain actor. Russia for example is not new in invading neighbouring countries that are more used to be under its sphere of influence, as it was the case of Georgia in 2008, and this increase the level or responsibility attributed to this specific actor.

When the framing will be completed, it will be possible to analyse the pre-crisis communication strategies and response strategies employed by Russia and Ukraine with a better understanding on why a certain strategy was chosen, or how they complementarily used different primary and secondary response strategies.

Unfortunately, in this thesis it will not be possible to analyse post crisis communication because the war is still ongoing in the moment of the writing and this work is focussed only on the first year of war. Thus, despite this limitation, we will consider the impact of the communication strategies on the stakeholders involved, how they helped the two governments in reaching their goals and how they affected the war effort.

### **1.3 Research methodology**

The methodology employed for this comparative analysis of Russia and Ukraine relies on a comprehensive approach that involves the collection and utilization of various sources to provide a thorough examination of their crisis communication strategies. To begin with, primary sources will be used to gather information directly from the official statements, press releases, and speeches of the governments of Russia and Ukraine.

This is the first large scale conventional war on the European continent since the end of the WW II, for this reason in the analysis of this thesis social media will have a paramount importance. The methodology incorporates the use of social media data and content analysis thanks to the filters provided by the platforms. Social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have played a significant role in disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and even serving as channels for official communication by government officials. By analysing the social media posts, hashtags, and content shared by key stakeholders, including government representatives, public institutions, media outlets, and the general public, we can gain insights into the dynamics of crisis communication in the digital age.

These primary sources offer valuable insights into the crisis communication strategies adopted by both countries, allowing for an analysis of their messaging, tone, and overall approach to managing the crises. By examining the official communications of the involved parties, we can gain a deeper understanding of their intended narratives and how they have sought to shape public perception.

In addition to primary sources, secondary sources will be extensively utilized. These include academic papers, reports from international organizations, news articles, and analyses by experts in the field of international relations and crisis communication. The secondary sources analysed offer valuable context and expert opinions that help frame the crisis situations in Russia and Ukraine, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, secondary sources can provide historical background, previous instances of crisis communication, and insights into how the international community has perceived these crises.

As mentioned it will be taken into considerations materials produced from just before the

beginning of the war until the first anniversary of the Russian invasion ( 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022-2023).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have laid the foundations on which the thesis is built. In the first paragraph we have recalled the one thousand years of shared history of the two countries, this context will be recalled several times in the following chapters, since this history is at the centre of both sides' narratives. Therefore, the understanding the historical background against which the current crisis unfolds is vital for appreciating the nuances and complexities that nowadays shape the communication strategies of both nations.

Alongside history in this chapter, we have analysed the other foundation of this thesis: the theory. The SCCT will enable us to navigate among the different strategies and approaches employed by the actors involved understanding the reasons why a certain strategy was chosen over another. The theory, furthermore, will allow us the possibility to study the two cases consistently with fixed parameters, making the comparison in the last chapter effortless.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **UKRAINIAN CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

#### **2.1 introduction to Ukrainian communication strategies**

Ukraine's approach and strategies employed during the first year of the war provided a fertile ground for crisis communication studies to understand how a besieged country manages communication during an unprecedented crisis. At first Ukraine seemed to be overwhelmed by a stronger opponent, public opinion, and analysts during the first days of the conflict had foreseen the Russian army at the gates of Kiev in few weeks from the beginning of the invasion, however this was not the case. During this period, Ukraine, facing an unsettling challenge, adopted various communication strategies to address both its internal population and the international public. The challenge was to keep the male population in the country willing to serve in the army, keep high the morale of non-fighting population, and keep on their side international public opinion, since the funding, weapons and supplies of foreign countries were, and are, crucial to keep the Ukrainian war effort alive. This chapter explores the dynamics, successes, and challenges of Ukraine's crisis communication during the first year of the conflict. In the last paragraph those communicative strategies will be analysed employing the framing of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

The context of the conflict in Ukraine is complex, as we have seen in the first chapter, characterized by geopolitical tensions, national and international interests, and a controversial shared history between Ukraine and Russia. These factors have shaped not only the nature of the conflict but also the communication strategies adopted by Ukraine. The importance of narrative in times of war cannot be underestimated, as it can influence public opinion, international support, and the morale of troops and civilians.

One of the most distinctive features of Ukraine's crisis communication has been the effective use of social media, which have become a vital platform for conveying information, countering misinformation, mobilizing international support, and maintaining national morale. The Ukrainian government and its armed forces have used social media not only to inform the public about the state of the conflict and provide

practical information, but also to share human stories that have reinforced the image of Ukraine as a resilient and united nation facing an aggression of such magnitude.

A critical aspect of Ukraine's crisis communication has been the management of misinformation. In an era in which information can be rapidly spread and manipulated, against a rival that has mastered the art of manipulation, the Ukrainian government had to face the challenge of countering false and misleading narratives, promoted by their enemy, and if, necessary, create disinformation yourself in order to hit the Russians fighting them on the same field and communicative layer.

Diplomacy and communication with the international public have played a crucial role. Ukraine has had to navigate a complex international landscape, seeking to gain support and solidarity from other nations and international organizations. The country's ability to present its case on the world stage, clearly outlining its needs and position, has been essential for securing external aid and backing. As we will see in the course of the chapter, the Ukrainian government, and Zelensky in particular, have been persistent in asking the support of its allies, adopting communication campaigns capable of emotionally move its audience.

The conflict in Ukraine is the first one on the European soil to be broadcasted on social networks, and the first in the era of the “memes,” as we will notice, it is impressive to observe how such a superficial and minimal format can be so direct, engaging, and effective in conveying a message. This format is now so commonplace that it is employed by social media managers of the institutions themselves, the one published by Ukrainian institutional Twitter accounts went viral just in the weeks before the Russian invasion.

The impact of crisis communication on the internal public opinion has been significant. With its public campaign, advertisement, video production, the government provided a sense of unity purpose and resilience. This aspect of communication was used not only to inform the citizens but also to offer them comfort and hope in times of extreme difficulties and despair.

Studying Ukraine's crisis communication during the first year of war reveals a mosaic of strategies, challenges, and innovations. Through the analysis of the different dimensions of this communication, it is possible to appreciate how Ukraine navigated an extremely

multifaceted context, managing to maintain internal cohesion and project an effective narrative internationally.

## **2.2 Zelensky's role and communicative style**

In this paragraph we will focus on the role of Zelensky, observe his rise to the Ukrainian presidency and observe his style of communication noting how it changed with the beginning of the war. Understanding his character, his political arc and how he evolved in the course of the years is fundamental to understand the dynamics in the Ukrainian crisis communication in the context of the war.

### **2.2.1 The rise of the Zelensky**

Before moving on the analysis, it is important to consider the style and the role of the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky, which is the maker and the centre of the communication strategies of the country. His party named "Servant of the People" can be defined as a "cyber party", which its main focus is the online engagement of its voters and militants (Doroshenko, L. 2022.), a phenomenon typical of populist parties and as a populist party. His communicative approach during the elections was characterized by three elements: pro-people, anti-elites and blame attribution. Already from this early phase of Zelensky's political arc, we can understand the centrality of social media platforms for the future Ukrainian president, an element that will be fundamental during the war.

His election arrived in a particular moment of the Ukrainian history. As we have seen, the event after the Euromaidan in 2014 left a scar in the Ukrainian society, in this context was elected Petro Poroshenko. He was an eminent figure of Ukrainian politics since the Orange revolution in 2004 and he was elected thanks to the vote of centre and western Ukraine, promising to bring the country closer to Europe and fight corruption. Five years following his election, Poroshenko failed to keep faith to his promises: corruption was still flourishing, Europe was still far away and Poroshenko, despite being nicknamed "the

chocolate oligarch”, continued to combine government and his businesses, all of which undermined his popularity.

In this stagnant environment, the appeal of the former stand-up comedian Volodymyr Zelensky grew. He became famous by criticizing the government in his shows and tv appearances and he was able to offer an anti-elite alternative to the Ukrainian voters. His electoral campaign was characterized since its early stages from a populist approach, with a comparison with the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo that becomes almost spontaneous among journalists and analysts, both for the approach and the tones adopted during his speeches. One of the most distinctive features of Zelensky's campaign was its reliance on social media platforms, rather than traditional campaigning methods. In an era where social media's influence in politics was rapidly growing, Zelensky's team skilfully exploited these platforms to reach a wide audience, especially the youth. His campaign was marked by a minimal presence in conventional media such as TV debates and interviews. Instead, Zelensky communicated with voters primarily through social media channels, using a mix of humour, informal dialogues, and direct engagement with the audience. This approach not only differentiated him from his opponents but also resonated with an electorate increasingly disillusioned with traditional politics (Temnycky M., 2020).

The content of Zelensky's campaign was as unconventional as its form. Rather than detailed policy proposals, his campaign focused on broad themes of change, reform, and national unity. This vagueness was both a strength and a weakness: it allowed a diverse range of voters to project their hopes and desires onto his candidacy, but it also led to criticisms regarding the lack of clarity and substance in his policy positions. However, this strategy worked and was functional in attracting voters tired of the status quo and looking for a new type of leader. Another element that augmented his popularity, alongside criticism, was his background as a comedian. The party's name, Servant of the People, was taken from a homonymous tv series in which Zelensky performed the role of the newly elected Ukrainian president. The electoral campaign went on during the airing of the second season of the sitcom, creating almost a magical mixture between reality and fiction. His avoidance of classical press conference and tv appearances and preference of social media marked his success among younger people. On YouTube he used to post vlogs, a popular format on the platform, regarding different points of his electoral



campaign, making it appealing to a younger audience, and engaging them, indeed among 325,000 citizens that volunteered during his campaign, the majority was under 30 years old.

His stances regarding foreign policy were not completely clear, however he touched the right chords within the Ukrainian electorate. He understood that the confrontational stance of his predecessor towards Russia was not appropriate, he proposed a more conciliatory approach and promised to seek a dialogue with the Kremlin in order to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict in Donbas, understanding the energetic dependence of the country from its neighbour. To understand his message of unity between the two main ethnic groups in Ukraine, it is important to remind an important fact about his biography, indeed he grew up in Kryvyi Rih as a native Russian speaker. On the other hand, he promised to continue the efforts to bring the country closer to Europe, a promise that intercepted a path that appears as a constant in Ukrainian policy since the Orange revolution in 2004. This more comprehensive stance allowed him to intercept the votes of progressives in the west of the country and votes from the Russophone electorate as well.

Following his election, Zelensky had to face the price of the ambiguity of his promises adopted during the electoral campaign, therefore can be observed an evolution in his style and approach (Minakov, M. 2022). During his first months in office, he pushed for a new anti-corruption legislation, the GDP increased by 3,5%, he negotiated prisoners exchange with Russia in December 2019 and attended the Normandy Summit. This positive situation deteriorated when a year later, in 2020, all the limitations and inexperience of Zelensky emerged. In March 2020 he appointed as his new chief of staff Andriy Yermak, suspected of economic ties with Russia. Afterwards he sacked his cabinet and appointed as new Prime Minister Shymal, a figure connected with old oligarchs, in the same instance were nominated as member of the cabinet individuals connected to the old presidency of Yanukovich; in other words, in Ukraine were reappearing the same faces. This political turmoil added to the difficult socio-economic situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, pushed Zelensky's approvals rate under 40%, forcing him to change his policies and behaviour. From this context emerged a new Zelensky, radically different from the one who won the elections in 2019. In his renewed strategic manoeuvring, he pushed for reforms that had little connection with the vague electoral promises and overall, he

appeared more resolute in decision making, strategic in dealing with other political forces and clearer in his drive to power (Minakov, M., 2022).

Those characteristics can be observed in “wartime” Zelensky. Since the beginning of the war his first objective became the defence of the country by all possible means. During the firsts dramatic days of the invasion, he refused to leave Kiev and presented himself dressed in military uniform. His presence was constant on all national and international media encouraging his people to resist. When the first troubled phase of the conflict has passed, he had to remodulate his communication, without ever abandoning this “though” aura that belongs to his figure since that moment.

The figure of Zelensky is multifaced, therefore extremely interesting to observe in his evolution. In the next paragraph we will follow this evolution, understanding the communicative scheme, tactics and patterns that make Zelensky’s communication unique, especially for a leader in a country involved in a conflict.

### **2.2.2 Zelensky’s communicative approach**

Volodymyr Zelensky's communication style, both as a presidential candidate and then as the President of Ukraine, is a fascinating case study in modern political communication, reflecting a blend of traditional rhetoric, media savvy, and an innovative approach to public engagement. One of the most striking aspects of Zelensky's communication is his use of informal, relatable language. Unlike many traditional politicians who often rely on formal speeches and political jargon, Zelensky's discourse is characterized by a conversational tone that resonates with a broad spectrum of the Ukrainian population.

The approachability in his language has been a key factor in building a strong connection with his audience, particularly among the younger generation and those disillusioned with conventional political rhetoric. Another key element of Zelensky's communication style as we have mentioned, is the extensive and strategic use of social media and digital platforms. Recognizing the power of these mediums, he has effectively utilized platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to reach out to citizens. This direct line of communication through social media bypasses traditional media channels, allowing Zelensky to deliver his message unfiltered and in real-time. This approach has not only

amplified his reach but also bolstered his image as a modern, accessible leader. This kind of perception is bolstered by his storytelling. He often shares personal stories, anecdotes, and narratives that make his messages more relatable and compelling.

This approach, honed through his years in entertainment, helps him to connect emotionally with his audience, making complex policy issues more understandable and relatable. Furthermore, Zelensky's communication is marked by a degree of transparency and authenticity rarely seen in Ukrainian traditional politics. He often addresses challenges and criticisms head-on, openly discussing the limitations and difficulties that his administration faces. This transparency has been instrumental in building trust and credibility, though it has also exposed him to increased scrutiny and criticism.

As we have seen, however, this style has its drawbacks especially when it comes to discuss specific policies, his vagueness and naïve tone are no longer effective when it needs to be pragmatic. Indeed, before the war, when he was put under the test of government, his appreciation rate significantly dropped after his first year in office. Ukrainian intellectuals often pointed out to his inconsistency and misleading nature, for example in her article in *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko explicitly warns against Zelensky's manipulative techniques by stating that, due to a "high level of society's emotional vulnerability", Ukraine cannot effectively "resist a media fairy tale with a positive message" (Liubchenko Y. et al, 2021).

### **2.2.3 Wartime Zelensky**

Following the Russian invasion, Zelensky had to re-arrange his strategies and the perception of his figure to adapt to the new and stifling wartime context, without however losing the main characteristics that distinguished him until the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022.

The first example of wartime communication brilliance from Zelensky can be found just a couple of days since the beginning of the Russian "special military operation", when it was rumoured that the Ukrainian president had fled the country. The CNN, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, revealed in its headline that Zelensky turned down the US offer to leave the country and citing the Ukrainian embassy in Britain, it was mentioned that the President responded to the American offer stating: "I need ammunitions, not a ride" and

“Ukrainians are proud of its president” (Braithwaite, S., 2022). Just a couple of hours before the publication of this article, Zelensky to stop any rumour, at 7am published on his twitter account a video selfie of himself walking in front of the House of Chimeras, a famous landmark in Kiev, writing in the caption “do not believe the fakes”. In the video, he is calm and uses with a firm tone of the voces and pronounces the following phrases without ever taking his eyes off the camera:

«Good morning, Ukrainians. Currently there are a lot of rumours appearing on the Internet. Like that I am asking our army to put down their arms and evacuate. I am here. We are not putting down arms. We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth, and our truth is that this is our land, our country, our children, and we will defend all of this. That’s all I wanted to tell you. Glory to Ukraine. »<sup>23</sup>

In this simple message of the length of only 40 seconds, can be appreciated the elements typical of Zelensky’s communication: he is direct and concise, and puts himself on the same level of his audience in order to empathize with them. His face shows clear signs of tiredness and sleep deprivation, a characteristic probably common to many Ukrainians that day, demonstrating that he had not left his post in Kiev he proved to be close to his people in a critical moment for the country. Once again, his personal charisma, acting skills and experience in communication helped him to deliver to his public his message. During his speeches, press conferences, and videos he adopts a wide range of rhetorical instruments, such as asking questions directly to his audience, metaphors in order to create images using his words, synonyms, repetitions irony and occasionally humour, changing his voice tone pace and volume purposely (Dyczok, M., et al. 2022).

Since the first critical hours Zelensky adopted forms of non-verbal communication, it has been as impactful and important as his spoken words, revealing much about his leadership style and the message he conveys both to his nation and to the international community. In his first ever appearance after the invasion addressing the country and calling the citizens to the arms at 4:30 in the morning, he still had a suit and a clean shaved face. Already in the evening he abandoned this look to wear what will be his typical olive-

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<sup>2</sup> Zelensky’s original tweet: <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1497450853380280320>

<sup>3</sup> Translation from the already mentioned article of the CNN

<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>

green T-shirt or hooded sweatshirt and trouser with the effigies of the Ukrainian army. He let his beard grow and when some grey hairs appeared did not cover them, recalling an ancient symbolism of beard and war. As himself apparently confessed to Christopher Miller, Financial Time's correspondent in Ukraine, he will not go back to wearing a suit and tie and shaving his beard until Ukrainian victory in the war<sup>4</sup>.

From that moment on, he adopted this clothing regardless the context, was him at a formal meeting with other institutions or was he recording a video to upload on his Facebook page. In this way he shows that he is only one of the thousands of soldiers at war and he shares the destiny and everyday life of its people and has no intention of leaving them, breaking the traditional barriers of formality that often separate political leaders from their constituents, projecting an image of accessibility and unity with his people (Gregić, M., Božić J., 2023). This choice of outfit is particularly significant when meeting foreign heads of state. In doing so he wants to highlight the peculiarity of the situation and what he is wearing reminds to the person in front of him, that usually gives to Ukraine financial and military support, the devastation, tragedy, and death that daily struck his country.

Zelensky's body language during public appearances and speeches has been another critical aspect of his non-verbal communication, aspect that he can skilfully manage thanks to his past career as performer. He often exhibits open and direct body language, with a posture that conveys confidence and resilience. During his addresses, he maintains steady eye contact with the camera, therefore with its audience, symbolizing his forthright approach, building confidence towards his leadership, and asserting his determination. In several speeches Zelensky holds his hands close to his chest, according to body language studies in public speaking this behaviour conveys honesty and sincerity (Kriaučiūnaitė, E. 2022). Moreover, concluding his speeches, he often shows his clenched fists shouting "glory to Ukraine" expressing the strength of the nation and its unity. Overall, these non-verbal elements have not only reinforced his verbal communication but have also helped establish him as a relatable, empathetic, and strong leader, both in Ukraine and on the international stage.

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<sup>4</sup> Tweet of FT reporter Christopher Miller in which he talks about this anecdote: <https://x.com/ChristopherJM/status/1605646333175422977?s=20>

As in his campaign, he was capable to maximize the engagement both in Ukraine and in other countries sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause. In internal communication he tries to achieve two main goals, first of all he needs to deliver useful and practical information, secondly, as his public persona is built, he needs to maintain a personal, emotional and close contact with the Ukrainian society. He appears close to its people, in his messages, both in written and video format, he constantly mentions individuals and places directly affected by the war. He calls by name people killed in acts of bravery defending their country, moving his audiences with emotion and empathy. He also recalls to emotions and concepts common to his people, Ukraine is the words that he uses the most, 1062 in the first 50 days of war, alongside justice, truth, evil, and God (Dyzcok, M., 2022).

Regarding his approach to international public opinion, as we will observe in depth in the next paragraph, his main objective is to impose his narrative over the Russian. Achieving this goal, from a communicative perspective, it is easier since Ukraine is the country victim of the invasion and Putin's rhetoric of "special operation for peace" and "denazification of Ukraine" never breached into Western public opinion. On the monthly anniversary of the invasion, he made worldwide online appeal to the international community to go in their streets and manifest their solidarity towards Ukraine against Russian invasion.

«I ask you to stand against the war [...] Show that you are standing, come from your offices, homes, schools, and universities, come in the name of peace [...]. Come to your squares, to your streets, make yourself visible. Say that people matter, freedom matters, Ukraine matters [...]. This is only the beginning for Russia on the Ukrainian land, Russia is trying to defeat freedom of all the people in Europe, of all the people in the world, it tries to show that only cruel force matters.»<sup>5</sup>

In this message emerges another of Zelensky's strategies: to make the war in Ukraine not about Ukraine itself, but to rise Ukraine as a symbol of democracy and resistance against the Russian invader that threatens the Western democratic ideals. The struggle of Ukraine needs to be the struggle of the whole free world, because, as Zelensky often recalls, or

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<sup>5</sup> Source of the video <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/24/zelensky-message-global-protest-ukraine/>

claims, the Russian will not stop with Ukraine, nevertheless it is their first step, therefore the Russians must be stopped in his country, and Ukraine cannot be defeated.

Convincing and keeping on his side international public opinion is crucial for Zelensky for several reasons. Gaining popular support through the world, he keeps international pressure high on Putin and Russia, feeding the public hungry of information regarding the development of the war on the field. The widespread international support also serves to legitimize Zelensky's leadership both domestically and abroad, showcasing him as a unifying figure capable of rallying global backing.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind the disparity of the military capabilities of the two countries. Ukraine, with its limited resources, finds itself in a David versus Goliath scenario against Russia's military might. To face the Russian army, Ukraine is almost completely reliant on foreign aid; without this support, sustaining a protracted conflict would be virtually impossible. This stark reality underscores the strategic necessity of Zelensky's approach in garnering continuous international support.

Furthermore, Zelensky must prevent the Ukrainian issue from losing its international prominence. In a world where news cycles are fast and public attention can be fleeting, maintaining the focus on Ukraine is a challenging but essential task. The strategy of engaging international public opinion through online and street activism should also be seen under this light. These forms of participation extend beyond mere expressions of solidarity; they are pivotal in keeping the plight of Ukraine in the global consciousness.

Thanks to those forms of participation, the governments that support Ukraine are encouraged to not diminish the economic, military, and strategic aid. This aspect is crucial, as international politics can be significantly influenced by public opinion. Governments, particularly in democratic countries, are often swayed by the perspectives and sentiments of their electorate. Therefore, a global populace that is empathetic and vocal about the Ukrainian cause can exert considerable pressure on their respective governments to continue their support.

Moreover, this sustained support is not just limited to military and economic aid. It encompasses a broader range of aspects including humanitarian aid, sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic efforts in international forums. The continuous flow of assistance

and support for Ukraine is thus intrinsically linked to how effectively Zelensky and his government can keep the international community engaged and invested in the outcome of this conflict. In essence, Zelensky's endeavour to maintain and bolster international public opinion is a multifaceted strategy. It involves not just the articulation of Ukraine's immediate needs and challenges but also the shaping of a narrative that resonates with a global audience. By keeping the international community continuously engaged, informed, and emotionally invested, Zelensky ensures that Ukraine remains a priority on the global stage, thereby securing the vital support necessary for the nation's survival and rise the hopes in an eventual triumph.

When addressing foreign institutions of allied states, Zelensky adopted a distinct and innovative approach, diverging notably from his usual communication style directed towards the general population of those nations. In delivering his messages, he framed it by positioning Ukraine as a subject of the international discourse, thereby making it a focal point in global policy discussions. Zelensky skilfully employed emotive language, adeptly crafted to resonate deeply with his prestigious audiences. He demonstrated remarkable capability in customizing each of his speeches to align with the specific audience of the parliament he was addressing at the time. This involved a thorough engagement with the history and national experiences of the country in question, allowing him to forge a powerful connection and evoke touching emotions rooted in their collective memory. He also creates a direct connection with world leader calling them by name. Once again, this behaviour breaks from the traditional, more formal diplomatic protocol, in this way he humanizes these interactions, reducing the distance often associated with international politics. By using first names, he subtly shifts the dynamics of the conversation, positioning himself and the other leader on a more equal and personal level, potentially leading to more effective diplomatic engagements. Furthermore it also reflects Zelensky's broader communication strategy, which often leans towards informality and approachability, a style that has defined his political persona.

In March Zelensky addressed ten parliaments in only two weeks and held 30 international speeches in the first 50 days after the invasion, in this virtual tour his main task was to maximize the support offered by his allies. The first appointment was in the Parliament of the United Kingdom on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, it is the first example of tailored speech that will become a constant in all the parliaments addressed (Dyczok M., Chung, Y., 2022).



He began his speech by praising the greatness of the people of Britain, then he cited Shakespeare and most importantly Winston Churchill's famous speech held on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1940 in the darkest hour of the country, paraphrasing it in order to fit the Ukrainian geography (Crace, J., 2022).

«We shall fight in the seas, we shall fight in the air, we shall defend our land, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight in the woods, in the fields, on the beaches, in the cities and villages, in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. And I want to add: we shall fight on the spoil tips, on the banks of the Kalmius and the Dnieper! And we shall not surrender! »

In drawing parallels between the Battle of Britain and the invasion of Ukraine, President Zelensky adeptly pursues a dual objective. Firstly, as noted, it is imperative for him to establish a deep emotional connection, in this case, with the people of the United Kingdom. The Operation Sea Lion stand as pivotal chapters in British history, that represent the courage, determination, and endurance of both the civilian population and the military forces. These events historically symbolize how the nation successfully prevented an invasion, showcasing resilience in the face of overwhelming odds. By invoking this powerful historical metaphor, Zelensky not only aligns Ukraine's contemporary struggle with these momentous events but also penetrates the collective imagination of the British audience. This strategic reference serves to provoke profound emotions, effectively resonating with their national identity and historical pride, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and empathy for Ukraine's situation.

On the other hand, by recalling this historical event, Zelensky is subtly comparing the Russians with the Nazis. This is a strategic attempt to challenge and revert the Russian narrative and use it against them, since One of the justifications for the invasion mentioned by Putin is the necessity of the de-Nazification of Ukraine. Zelensky's reference to a defining moment in World War II, where the British stood against Nazi aggression, subtly reframes the discourse, positioning the Russian forces in a similar light to that of the historical aggressors. Therefore, this tactic is not just a mere historical analogy to ingratiate the favours of the British people; it is indeed a deliberate effort to undermine the Russian narrative and expose its contradictions.

He concluded his speech by thanking the United Kingdom for its support and expressed his gratitude to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whom he called "Boris" and referred to him as "my friend" as he was really talking to an old friend (ibidem). This was only the first example of the canvas that was repeated in almost all the international speeches of that period, all distinguished by the same characteristics: historical analogies, empathy and emotional speeches, informality and most of the time calling the president of the hosting country by his first name.

In his speeches, another noteworthy element, albeit less frequently used than the previously mentioned strategies, is President Zelensky's occasional recourse to undiplomatic language and the tactic of invoking shame towards his audience. This was exemplified in his address to the US Congress on March 16th, where initially he repeated the same scheme, citing the "American Dream," the memorial on the Mount Rushmore, citing the founding values of the country, democracy, freedom independence. Then he recalled two terrible and unexpected attacks suffered by the US: Pearl Harbour and the 9/11 attacks, when «An evil tried that tried to turn your cities into a battlefield<sup>6</sup>», and then showing images from the bombed Ukrainian cities (Wolf Z., et al. 2022). In the conclusion however he changed tone, almost accusing the negligence of the US in assisting Ukraine, he thanked for the support but asked for more. He highlighted the role of the US as leader of the free world and urged them to act as such:

«We ask for a response. For a response to terror. Is this too much to ask? [...] Being the Leader of the world means to be the Leader of Peace. Take the lead!<sup>7</sup>»

A similar pattern was followed in his address to the Italian Chamber of Deputies. In this case a part of the constitutional arch boycotted the speech of the Ukrainian president, to be precise 19 deputies and one senator. During his speech Zelensky reprimanded the Italian political class asking to "not be a resort for murderers (Guerzoni M., 2022)," referring to the loopholes in sanctions against Russia and hosting people members of Putin circle in vacations, shaming and schooling the audience. This statement served not only as a call to action but also as a form of public censure. Zelensky's choice of words

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<sup>6</sup> Source of the video <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/03/16/volodymyr-zelensky-congress-american-values-ukraine-russia-invasion-nr-vpx.cnn>

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem

was a deliberate attempt to provoke a sense of moral responsibility and to highlight the incongruities in Italy's stance towards the Russian elite amidst the ongoing conflict.

As the president of a nation under an unprovoked invasion, Zelensky has arguably positioned himself, or at least perceived himself, to be on a pedestal of moral superiority. In this position, he seemingly assumes the mantle of a moral arbiter, a stance that could be justified given the circumstances his country faces. From his point of view, it becomes imperative to awaken the conscience of his international audience and invoke a strong moral and ethical response even employing a non-orthodox, controversial, and undiplomatic communication approach towards his closest allies.

This approach is not just a choice but a necessity under the extraordinary pressures and responsibilities of leading a country amidst such turmoil (Adams P., 2022). To understand his behaviour, it is important to note that despite Zelensky is able to speak a good English overall, he held his international speeches in Ukrainian, because despite he was talking directly to a foreign audience, he was also addressing his own people. By rising the tone of his voice in this context wants to demonstrate that he has a certain level of credibility also abroad and that he is able to bring the Ukrainian instances in the international arena and at the centre of the international debate.

Overall, it can be argued that the strategies employed by Zelensky proved to be functional in reaching his objectives. He always asked for more respect what his allies can grant him but in doing so he at least gained something useful in the struggle of Ukraine against the Russians. For example, during the already mentioned address to the US Congress, and in general it is a request forwarded several times, he asked for a no-fly zone over Ukraine, knowing that it would be impossible for his allies to grant a similar demand due to the risk of causing a war between NATO and Russia. When the allies officially refused to enforce a no-fly zone he brought up a more viable alternative: a reliable air-defence system to defend the Ukrainian skies from Russians MiG, which in fact was the best option Zelensky could realistically obtain, and it was granted to him (Adams, P. 2022).

In this paragraph we observed how Zelensky's communication strategies during the Russian invasion of Ukraine had a critical role in establishing his leadership and how it helped him in achieving his goals at the beginning at the conflict in time of severe crisis. His approach, characterized by directness, authenticity, and strategic narrative

construction, has been instrumental in maintaining national resilience, rallying international support, and keeping the Ukrainian struggle relevant on the global stage. His leadership and communication style not only reflect his personal charisma and skills but also highlight the evolving nature of statecraft in the 21st century, where the battle for hearts and minds is as crucial as the battle on the ground, or at least, as the case of Ukraine, to keep the battle on the ground alive. Zelensky's strategies provide valuable lessons in crisis communication, demonstrating the power of a well-crafted message to influence, motivate, and sustain support in the face of overwhelming challenges.

In the next paragraph we will observe the communicative strategies employed by Ukraine globally, noting as they intertwine with the figure and the approach of Zelensky as we have understood in this section.

### **2.3 Ukrainian communication strategies: the use of social media for propaganda and tactical purposes.**

From the strategic point of view in information Ukraine has the “advantage” to be an invaded country, therefore building its narrative and impose it on the mainstream discourse is an easier task. However, it's crucial to recognize that successfully integrate this narrative into the global conversation requires more than just the inherent sympathy that comes with being the invaded party, it demands indeed a high level of strategic planning and execution.

In this paragraph we will focus on the communication strategies employed by Ukraine in order to shape its narrative, with a particular focus on the use of social media platforms and internet in general as a mean to spread propaganda. Maintaining the control over social media discourse is fundamental in this war, since it is the first that can be defined as a citizen social media war. Unlike other major conflicts as the war in Vietnam or in Iraq or Afghanistan, where the storytelling was filtered and controlled by the headlines of journals that exercised a strong function of gatekeeping, in this context every person can include its personal narrative (Bracciale R., Agliotti Colombini J., 2023). In the days following the beginning the invasion social media platforms have been flooded with first

hand videos and personal experience of the invasion, consequently the war become a constant in the discussion within those platforms generating an immense number of interactions. Without any form of gatekeeping in social media the crucial part is controlling the flow of the general narrative around the issue

In this context Ukraine's communication strategies were studied and oriented towards achieving several critical objectives. As outlined in the previous paragraph, a primary goal was to assert and sustain their narrative within the global discourse. This narrative framing was not merely about shaping perceptions, it was therefore a strategic move designed to secure and maintain the crucial economic and military support from allied nations. Additionally, another significant aim of Ukraine's communication efforts was to bolster the morale of both its military personnel and civilian population. From this point of view an effective communication played a crucial role, offering regular updates, inspirational messages, and assurances of support, all of which helped to keep spirits high against the adversity of war. Moreover, Ukraine had to fight against Russia also in the information war on two fronts. First of all, countering the Russian narrative and dismantle each point of their justifications for the beginning of the war, and on the other hand they had to fight the spread of misinformation and fake news.

### **2.3.1 The use of memes by Ukrainian governmental official pages**

To lighten the tone of this dissertation we are going to start by analysing a tool widely employed by the Ukrainian propaganda already before the beginning of the war: the memes. Defined by the Oxford as an «image, a video, a piece of text, etc. that is passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous<sup>8</sup>», it is an extremely informal and frivolous tool of communication, however considering the context in which it is used is equally interesting.

The use of this format with the adoption of the right layouts and forms demonstrates the acute attention regarding social media dynamics of the social media management of the Ukrainian institutional pages. The use of memes in conflict is not new, the first examples

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford dictionary definition of meme

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/meme?q=meme>

can be found during the Arab Springs, however it is the first time that this format is adopted by official institutional pages. This approach reflects a keen understanding of the current media landscape, where memes can be as influential as traditional forms of communication in shaping public opinion and narrative, however this is no news, as we already observed the capability of Zelensky and his team of understanding and using the whole social media landscape.

Due to their structure and simplicity, memes are perfect to capture the attention of the users and due to the structure of the algorithms of the different platforms are perfect to go viral and enlarge the audience itself. Memes are made purposely to be replicated with slight changes adopted by the single user, in base of his fantasy, encouraging the participation with ease due to the availability of templates and applications for smartphones. Another important trait is that, usually, they are funny and entertain the audience and behind this coloured façade they contain the significance attributed by the creator, influencing the user stance without him noticing, in fact they can be defined as “fast food media” in the realm of politics, making them easily digestible (Denisova, A. 2019). Another element that makes those memes almost automatically viral within the platforms is that they come from official pages of the Ukrainian government. Being an unusual behaviour coming from an institution, usually perceived as grey aseptic entities, if a user sees a meme against Russia posted by the official page of the Ukrainian government it is likely that he will share it with his contacts.

The memes proposed by the Ukrainian government’s pages were so effective that their example was followed by other institutional pages with the same format. For example, the official account of the US embassy in Kyiv posted on February 22 a meme published in response to Putin who claimed that Ukraine was a product of Soviet Union. The tweet is without any caption and the meme highlights the historical evolution of the city of Kyiv between 996 and 1108, compared to the non-existence of Moscow in the same period (figure 1).



Figure 1: tweet posted by the US embassy in Kyiv

<https://twitter.com/USEmbassyKyiv/status/1496115593149358081>

To understand the different functions played by the memes in the narrative of the invasion and how they engage the public, can be cited the classification adopted by Agliotti Colombini and Bracciale in an article of April 2023, in which they identified four different clusters:

- **Cluster 1: conversational memes**, characterized by positive emotions and the use of light irony to entertain.
- **Cluster 2: cathartic memes**, the less uses among the four clusters, contains memes about the reaction of ordinary users to the historical event of the war.
- **Cluster 3: critical memes**, referred to the role and behaviour of other states and international organizations towards the conflict.

- **Cluster 4: counter-memes**, characterized by a more aggressive tone in comparison to the other clusters and reflect the outraged reaction to the outbreak of the war.



This is not a 'meme', but our and your reality right now.

9:43 AM · Feb 24, 2022

Figure 2: tweet posted by the account of the Ukrainian government the 34/02/2023 <https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1496767831182041089>

The use of this format was so eradicated in the Ukrainian government communication scheme that the beginning of the invasion itself was commented through a meme. In the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, the official account of the Ukrainian government tweeted an image of Hitler caressing the face of a caricatured Putin writing in the caption “this is not a meme, but our and your reality right now” (figure 2). Behind the simplicity and the conciseness of this message there is a deep comprehension and the tool and how to deliver a message. In this particular case is clear the effort to counter the Russian narrative of denazification of Ukraine by juxtaposing Hitler and Putin and at the same time try to emotionally move the audience creating repulsion towards the figure of the Russian president.

Employing this format of course comes with some drawbacks. Being unserious in a serious context could mine your credibility in the international context and taken out of their context some content could be misinterpreted, causing diplomatic embarrassment.



Another disadvantage is inherent to the nature of this kind of content: the simplicity. Despite being immediate, for obvious reasons the memes tend to oversimplify a complicated subject. This oversimplification can lead to misinterpretations by the users, especially among audiences less familiar with the nuances of the conflict (Cuppens T., 2023), therefore, by joking about the conflict there is the risk of desensitizing the audience. Over time, people might begin to view the situation as a source of entertainment rather than a grave humanitarian crisis, diminishing the empathy and urgency the memes initially sought to evoke.

Notwithstanding those drawbacks, the use of this unorthodox and innovative tool served the purpose of the Ukrainian narrative, countering Russian propaganda and engaging audience worldwide. Indeed, by effectively utilizing social media platforms, Ukraine has not only communicated its message but has also engaged in a form of digital diplomacy, influencing international public opinion and policy. Balancing the appeal and accessibility of the memes with the seriousness of the subject matter is crucial to ensure they serve as effective and respectful tools in communication strategies, and Ukrainian social media manager have found this balance, being able to use this tool in such a difficult context.

### **2.3.2 Creating myths and propaganda.**

The invasion of Ukraine was unexpected in its proportions by the military and the population, therefore in the first days shock and confusion were huge. Russian troops were advancing fast towards Kiev and the risk that the army and the morale of the citizens would crumble under the pressure was high. What was needed in that phase were examples, heroes to fuel the flame of hope, and this is what Ukrainian propaganda provided at the beginning of the invasion.

The twitter accounts of the Ukrainian government and the Minister of Defence flooded their feed with posts and stories of heroic military feats and acts of bravery, some of them true, others completely fabricated. The main example of this form of misinformation with the objective to boost the Ukrainian morale is the tale of the Ghost of Kyiv. Ukrainian aviation was heavily outnumbered in the defence of airspace over the capital and their

MiG-29 outdated in comparison to most of the Russian fighter jets and the fear of a capitulation were at its highs. In this context were spread rumours regarding a mysterious pilot nicknamed as “the Ghost of Kyiv.” On February 27<sup>th</sup> the official account of Ukraine posted a video on twitter with the following caption:

«People call him the Ghost of Kyiv. And rightly so — this UAF ace dominates the skies over our capital and country, and has already become a nightmare for invading Russian aircrafts<sup>9</sup>. »

In the video proposed are shown images of Russian jets shot down claiming to be footages of the Ghost of Kyiv in action, responsible of 10 of them, making him the first ace since the Second World War. In the following weeks this myth was debunked, and it was confirmed to be fake even by the Ukrainian Air Force itself (Galey P., 2022), responding to the rumours surrounding his presumed death, stating that:

«The Ghost Of Kyiv is alive, it embodies the collective spirit of the highly qualified pilots of the Tactical Aviation Brigade who are successfully defending Kyiv and the region<sup>10</sup>. »

At the time however, due to the grave context, for the Ukrainian government the veracity of the history was not an important feature. This story was shared to mythologize the valour of one of its own fighters, it offers a tale that provides hope in the midst of despair (Boatwright B., Pyle A., 2023).

The use of propaganda in Ukraine during the conflict did not always necessitate the creation of fabricated stories of heroism. In fact, real acts of valour and defiance emerged naturally in these times of crisis, and such instances were duly celebrated and amplified by official channels.

A prime example of this typology of storytelling is the standoff at Snake Island. During the first day of war a Russian warship approached the strategic Snake Island on the Black

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<sup>9</sup> Tweet of the account @Ukraine  
<https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1497834538843660291?lang=it>

<sup>10</sup> Tweet of the Ukrainian Air Force  
[https://twitter.com/KpsZSU/status/1520572588560470016?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1520572588560470016%7Ctwgr%5Eb47bcf6dbfd960e28d5f6e6979a619f7be113f9a%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fiframe.nbcnews.com%2FhMA3ePn%3F\\_showcaption%3Dtrueapp%3D1](https://twitter.com/KpsZSU/status/1520572588560470016?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1520572588560470016%7Ctwgr%5Eb47bcf6dbfd960e28d5f6e6979a619f7be113f9a%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fiframe.nbcnews.com%2FhMA3ePn%3F_showcaption%3Dtrueapp%3D1)

Sea, contacting the 13 Ukrainian guards ordering them to lay down their weapons to avoid a bloodshed. In the audio made public by the Ukrainian army, the guard Roman Hrybov responded to this request from the Russians by insulting them and refusing to carry out their order. The Snake Island standoff swiftly became a symbol of Ukrainian resilience and the unyielding will to resist the invader. Ukrainian social media accounts and official channels repeatedly highlighted this episode, showcasing it as a testament to the bravery and steadfastness of their forces, as Zelensky commented “All border guards died heroically but did not give up. They will be awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine posthumously,” (Lendon B., 2022). This event became a symbol of the disparity of the two contenders in the conflict, reinforcing the image of Ukraine as a nation of resolute defenders standing up against a powerful and overwhelming adversary.

As the war evolved into a prolonged conflict of attrition, the Ukrainian communication strategy gradually changed. Recognizing the long-term nature of the conflict, there was a deliberate move towards a more professional and measured style in the dissemination of information and narratives. This shift marked a departure from the initial reliance on exaggerated or largely fabricated myths and legends, which had characterized the early days of the conflict. Instead, the focus shifted to highlighting the courage of ordinary Ukrainians who committed small and more achievable acts of bravery against the Russian invasion (Meaker M, 2022).

This new approach reflected the understanding of the new context of the war since in a long-term scenario, credibility and sustainability of the narrative become paramount. By spotlighting the everyday heroism of its citizens, from soldiers on the frontlines to civilians contributing to the war effort in myriad ways, Ukrainian communication sought to foster a sense of collective resilience and determination. To cite an example, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March the twitter account of the Ukrainian government posted a five minute long video with the caption “don’t mess with Ukrainian farmers<sup>11</sup>.” The video begins with a description and footages of the Russian invasion, then is portrayed a farmer towing away with his tractor a disabled Russian tank and its equipment, with the words appearing on the screen stating, “Ukrainian farmers contribute too in the way they can.” In the same days the feed of the account was flooded with videos and photos of the same typology, as

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<sup>11</sup> Link to the original tweet <https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1500875024386899972?lang=it>

people chanting while sheltered in the underground of Kiev or ordinary citizens preparing Molotov bottles.

This new approach was designed to appeal to both national and international audiences. For the domestic audience, these stories provided a source of inspiration and a sense of connection, reinforcing the national spirit and resolve. This typology of engagement on the individual level helps in establishing an inclusive sense of national identity, leading to further collective actions and a higher possibility of emulating the behaviours portrayed, both in an active form but also sharing on social media the content proposed (Boatwright B., Pyle A., 2023). For international audiences, these narratives offered tangible, humanized accounts of the conflict, furthering empathy and support for Ukraine's cause. By showcasing the determination of ordinary people in the face of adversity, Ukraine reinforced its image as a nation united and determined in its resistance.

### **2.3.3 Responses to Russian actions**

Since when the Russian troops started to advance in the Ukrainian territory begun another war, not fought with weapons but with words, with the main objective to control the storytelling of the conflict and disrupt the narration of the counterpart. In the last decade Russians have mastered the art of spreading misinformation and fake news on the internet, influencing events in foreign countries, for example it is demonstrated the Russian intervention during the American presidential elections of 2016 and the Brexit referendum held the same year. From this point of view Ukraine was prepared to face a challenge of this magnitude.

The man behind the design of Ukraine communicative strategy and technological innovation is Mykhailo Fedrov, minister for Digital Transformation. Before the war he led a huge effort to bring in the country high tech jobs, developing a sector that it is now estimated to constitute the 4% of the Ukrainian GDP (Serafin T., 2022). Thanks to those ties with the Silicon Valley, Fedrov was able to implement a series of tactics to undermine the Russian efforts on the internet. One of the first action taken by the Ukrainians were to reach to Google and Meta, asking to prevent Russians to accede to their platforms. As in other cases already considered in earlier paragraphs, also in this instance the

communication style and vocabulary are direct and undiplomatic. For example, in addressing his request to Meta, on February 27<sup>th</sup> Fedrov twitted:

«Mark Zuckerberg, while you create Metaverse – Russia ruins real life in Ukraine! We ask you to ban access to Facebook and Instagram from Russia- as long as tanks and missiles attack our kindergartens and hospitals!<sup>12</sup>»

Meta was not the only company targeted, in the first weeks the efforts of Fedrov focussed on calling out all the companies that still continued to do businesses with Russia, in his posts were counted 50 of them (Zakrewski C., De Vynck G., 2022).

By excluding Russian accounts to post on social media, the spread of misinformation by bot and trolls can be limited, however it is not a definitive solution since it is enough a VPN to circumvent this limitation. The drawback of this approach, however, is that by preventing the access to mainstream social media to avoid interference from Russian actions, regular Russian citizens are deprived from a significant source of counterinformation, that could be used by Ukrainian themselves to fuel internal dissent.

The main weapon to contrast the misinformation spread by the Russians were their official account. Systematically the Ukrainian communication machine picked the most common and diffused fake news surrounding the conflict and debunked them. For example, when the Ukrainian army regained control over Bucha and the atrocities committed there emerged, the Russians claimed that the videos depicting those brutalities were staged. Nevertheless, in the days following this claim the official account of Ukraine posted several videos confirming the accusations towards Russia.

Another fundamental tactic employed by the Ukrainians, is the call for collective action. If Russian accounts are fast and omnipresent in spreading their vision, it is important to have on your side an army of national and international profiles ready to prompt your narrative. To achieve this goal in its communication the direct engagement of the public was at the centre of the scheme. Already in the first day of the conflict the Ukrainian account asked to its followers to make tweets tagging the account of the Kremlin and to tell them what they think, this resulted both in serious and colourful responses, but the

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<sup>12</sup> Link to the tweet of Fedrov

<https://twitter.com/fedorovmykhailo/status/1497941029055606791?lang=en>

goal in this case was not the content itself but the generation of it and the engagement of the audience.

This scheme was followed also after shocking news as the just mentioned facts of Bucha. The fifth of April the Ukrainian account posted an image consisting of a blank background with a text in caps lock stating: “No photos from Bucha here. You saw all the photos. Act now<sup>13</sup>.” This style of communication aims to provoke strong emotions in its audience, disgust, horror, and indignation for the killing of innocent civilians, therefore the user is encouraged to do his own part to stop those atrocities. If the user is based abroad, he is pushed to pressure his own government in order to aid Ukraine. The caption of this specific tweet is thought for this purpose, since it is asked to the user to demand to his government to support Ukraine furnishing weapons, augmenting the economic sanctions towards Russia, and cutting all trade ties with that country.

Regarding the Ukrainian civil population, the government encouraged its citizen to publish as many contents as possible, stories, photos, footages, everything is used to portray the situation in the country and show to the world the destruction brought by the Russian army. The content produced and posted by the citizens was used by the government to debunk Russian fake news. Thanks to this network of citizens, it was possible to have a constant flow of content from the war scenarios mainly interested by the propaganda of both sides, allowing the Ukrainians to cherry-picking the materials needed to their purposes. Of course, the fact that potentially every content posted by Ukrainians could go viral on social media, resulted in the spread of fake news also from the Ukrainian side, both voluntarily and not.

To contrast the online actions of the Russians, the Ukrainian government used for of “hactivism,” calling for the aid of worldwide groups of hackers. The IT groups called out by Fedrov targeted Russian online infrastructures as railways, but also did their part in social media warfare by identifying Russian bots and generating bots themselves (Shore J.,2022)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Link to the original tweet of the official Ukrainian account

[https://twitter.com/search?lang=it&q=Bucha%20%20\(from%3AUkraine\)&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?lang=it&q=Bucha%20%20(from%3AUkraine)&src=typed_query)

<sup>14</sup> Link to the article <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/11/russia-cyberwarfare-us-ukraine-volunteer-hackers-it-army/>

In conclusion, it can be argued that Ukraine's strategic use of digital platforms and social media in this context war represents a paradigm shift in how modern conflicts are fought and narrated. The Ukrainian government's approach illustrates a sophisticated understanding of the digital battlefield. This approach, while not without risks, has been crucial in shaping the international narrative, mobilizing global support, and countering adversary misinformation. As the conflict continues, the lessons learned from Ukraine's digital strategy will undoubtedly contribute to a broader understanding of the evolving nature of communication and propaganda in modern warfare.

## **2.4 Evaluation according to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

In the last paragraphs we have discussed the strategies adopted by Zelensky and Ukraine general in the context of the war against Russia. In order to complete this analysis is necessary to consider those strategies in the framing offered by the situational crisis communication theory discussed in the first chapter.

In the SCCT framework, the Ukrainian government, under the leadership of President Zelensky, is considered the "organization" in question. This organization's primary responsibility, as we have seen, is to craft and implement effective communication strategies that are appropriately tailored to the wartime context. These strategies are not just about disseminating information; they are crucial in shaping perceptions, rallying support, and managing the narrative of the conflict both domestically and internationally.

On the other hand, there are multiple stakeholders involved. First and foremost, among these stakeholders are the Ukrainian citizens, who are directly impacted by the war and whose support and morale are vital for sustaining the national effort. Their needs, perceptions, and reactions are central to the effectiveness of the government's communication strategy.

Another significant group of stakeholders is the international community, which, as observed, plays a fundamental role. Public opinion at the global level is a critical arena where Ukraine needs to garner sympathy, support, and assistance. The way the

international public opinion perceives and reacts to the conflict directly influences the level of support Ukraine receives, making it a key target of the communication strategy.

Finally, another group of crucial stakeholders are international institutions and governments supporting Ukraine. Their backing, both in terms of political support and material aid in forms of economic fundings and supply of military equipment, is indispensable for Ukraine's war effort. The communication strategies employed by the Ukrainian government are thus also designed to maintain and strengthen these alliances, ensuring continued support and aid. The failure to secure and sustain the support of those stakeholders could have drastic consequences, potentially leading to a fatal weakening of Ukraine's position in the face of the Russian offensive.

As we have seen in the first chapter, the first step in the SCCT evaluation is to determine the initial level of crisis responsibility attribution, based on the classification of three different clusters: victim, accidental, and intentional (Coombs T., 2007). The reasons that lead to the war are intricated and rooted in centuries of history. Ukraine itself since the dissolution of the Soviet Union has an internal division based on ethnicity, ethnic Russian speakers in the East of the country who pushed for a closer relation with Russia and ethnic Ukrainians in the west who pushed for an integration in the European context. As we have seen this contrast brought to a civil war, also fuelled by Russian backing of separatists, however in the context of the civil war after 2014 Ukraine was not exempt from atrocities and was object of criticism from international community. If before the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 there were some doubts regarding the Ukrainian position, this paradigm changed after the invasion.

The Russian intervention appeared as completely unprovoked and disproportioned in its intensity in respect to the Ukrainian threat posed to the Russian boundaries. The attack was not limited, as could be expected, to the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk interested by the internal conflict, whom independence was recognized by Putin only two days earlier, instead it was lunched a full-scale attack and a total war against Ukraine targeting cities all over the country. Considering those characteristic regarding the beginning of the crisis, Ukraine falls in the victim cluster, therefore has a minimum level of attribution of crisis responsibility conferred by all stakeholders, in fact, as we will observe in the next chapter the highest crisis responsibility is attributed to Russia. Since the position of



Ukraine was unanimously recognized as the victim of the crisis, the organization was able to build its communication strategies with the methodologies corresponding to this cluster of responsibility attribution.

Now that it is understood in which cluster is situated the initial responsibility of the organization, to complete the frame of the crisis is necessary to assess the crisis history and the prior reputation of the organization. Of these two characteristics, the former is the most difficult to determine. Ukraine, as a sovereign nation, has a relatively brief history, having gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union just over 30 years ago. In its three decades of independence, until February 2022, Ukraine had not encountered a crisis of the scale and magnitude as the current conflict, neither was responsible for being engaged in a military intervention in a foreign state. The only comparable crisis in its independent history might be the internal conflict that erupted following the events of 2013-2014, known as the Euromaidan protests and the subsequent unrest in Eastern Ukraine that led to the civil war.

In this context, as in 2022, the Ukrainian government was not considered responsible for the beginning of the crisis, rather, it highlighted the nation's internal divisions and the complex dynamics of its post-Soviet identity and orientation. The current war is in many ways an extension and escalation of the tensions and conflicts that have been simmering since the Euromaidan protests. This ongoing conflict represents a continuation of the struggle for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence. Given this context, it remains challenging to assign a definitive historical evaluation to the events of the civil war, especially considering the ongoing nature of the conflict and the evolving geopolitical landscape. On the other hand, if we consider the prior crisis history on the Russian side, the consideration changes keeping in mind the history of Russia and its numerous interventions in neighbouring states, however we will analyse in dept this topic in the next chapter dedicated to Russia.

Taken into account those elements we can come to the conclusion that if we consider Ukraine, the prior history per se is not influential in the perception of the organization towards the stakeholders. If instead is considered the history crisis face to face with Russia and its historical recurrence, the level of blame attribution to Ukraine is minimal and is not held responsible for the extension of the crisis began in 2014.

Considering the second element of this part of the framing, prior reputation, it is intended as the perception of Zelensky's government before the Russian invasion. Zelensky was elected in 2019, therefore obviously had no role or responsibility in the beginning of the civil war, however, as we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, after his election he brought a shift of paradigm in the management of the crisis. He adopted a more conciliatory approach respect his predecessor, engaging in a dialogue with Russia, proactively implementing the agreements on withdrawal of forces and ceasefire regime, and conducting successful negotiation for the exchange of prisoners. This approach and attitude increased Zelensky's credibility towards international actors. On the domestic side however, despite a surprising electoral result in 2019, his approval rate and credibility at the eve of the invasion had plummeted, due to the political turmoil, the allegations of corruption to his cabinet, and the consequences of the pandemic as mentioned earlier in this chapter, furthermore despite the intentions, the efforts in managing the internal crisis, also due to lack of cooperation from the Russian side. Because of all those elements, the prior reputation of the Ukrainian government was not at his highest, however this did not reflect in an increase in the crisis responsibility attribution, neither it stopped the international community in aiding the country while suffering an aggression.

The last elements necessary to conclude the framing, perceived salience, and immediacy, are straightforward and easy to identify. Being an invasion from a foreign army on national soil, a direct threat to the existence of the nation and to the lives of its citizens, it is understandable that the perceived salience and the immediacy attributed to the crisis are at the highest possible level. Since the beginning of the invasion, this crisis has been the principal, if not the only, element on the political agenda on which all the efforts of the organization are focussed. Furthermore, the time pressure associated with the characteristic of immediacy is at its highest, since from a prompt response it is possible to save lives, counterattack and obtain vital support.

Now that the frame and dimension of the crisis is completed and we have all the elements needed, it is possible to consider the response strategies already analysed in the optic of the categorization offered by the SCCT.

Regarding primary response strategy, "attack the accuser" is the most extensively employed. In the first chapter we have describe it as "crisis manager confronts the person

or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.” In this context it needs to be intended as the strategies employed by Ukraine to counter the Russian narration that tried to portray Ukraine as a fascist country controlled by nazis. The organization needed to counterattack, and it was done on the same narrative layer. Several times the behaviour of Russia was compared to the one of nazi Germany during the Second World War, and the figure of Putin compared with Hitler. In general, the strategy focussed on attacking Russia for starting the war and calling them out regarding the atrocities committed on the Ukrainian soil.

Alongside the "attack the accuser" strategy, Ukraine also employed another primary strategy that we have described as "scapegoating" tactic, with Russia being the evident target. This approach involved placing the entire blame for the crisis squarely on Russia, positioning it as the sole instigator and perpetrator of the conflict. By identifying and consistently highlighting Russia as the antagonist in the narrative, Ukraine aimed to clarify and remind the origins of the crisis and rally both domestic and international support against the aggressor.

Alongside those primary response strategies, the organization employed all three secondary response strategies in order to bolster its responses capability. The strategy of reminder is adopted to recall the progress made by the organization in managing the crisis, compared to the situation at the beginning of the war, when the Russian forces appeared to be overwhelming, therefore the Ukrainians were able to halt the Russian blitzkrieg turning the war into a war of attrition. The Ukrainian army after months of fighting, also thanks to a change in Russian military strategy, was able to regain control over vast areas of the country, especially in the north and nearby Kiev, liberating cities and its population. In recalling those success, the organization underlined its merits and how it is trustworthy in managing the crisis.

The organization is also keen to recognize and praise the merits of its stakeholders, in the frame of the second secondary strategy, ingratiation. Without the courage and resilience of Ukrainian people and the support of foreign allies the Ukrainian war effort would have been ineffective, and as we have seen praising and bolstering those elements was a central characteristic in the communication strategy.

This strategy of ingratiation towards foreign stakeholders extends beyond mere acknowledgment of their merits; it also comprehends a declaration of an ideological alignment with Western values, particularly democratic ideals. Through various channels of digital diplomacy and through the addresses made by President Zelensky, Ukraine has consistently expressed its affinity and commitment to these ideals. This approach serves not only to fortify the bonds with existing allies but also to attract further international support aligned with these shared values. For instance, in his address to the U.S. Congress, President Zelensky evoked the concept of the American Dream, remarking that it is a shared aspiration, stating “it is also our dream,” or to cite a further example, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July the official Ukrainian twitter account posted a tweet praising the values that this recurrence represents for the American people.

A last tactic left to be mentioned is the victimage strategy. From the communicative point of view, Ukraine extensively leveraged on being the victim of a vile and unprovoked aggression, pressuring on a moral level its allies on the necessity to receive support. This moral pressure was exercised by showing the images portraying the atrocities committed towards civilian and reminding to other states that if Ukraine is not victorious other countries could be victim in the future of a similar aggression. If someone appeared reluctant in granting support to Ukraine or maintained ties with Russia it was shamed by Ukrainian channels using this narrative.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have discussed the communication strategies employed by Ukraine and its president in dealing with a serious and unexpected crisis. It was observed the evolution in the communicative approach both before and after the beginning of the crisis, but also how those strategies changed in base of the evolution of the crisis context. The organization was able to tailor the right strategies depending on the phases of the conflict, from the necessity of having myths and great unknown heroes at the beginning of the conflict to praise the courage of common citizens when it was clear that the conflict would last for years to come. Zelensky was able to change the perception and appearance of his figure, appearing resolute and gaining credibility towards internal and international public

opinion both with his words and actions, for example refusing to leave Kiev in its darkest hour.

The capability of using social media platforms and understanding its potential were fundamentals in delivering the message and engage a large audience on the international level and winning its support. Those characteristics already emerged during the 2019 electoral campaign, however the ability to flawlessly convert the use in a wartime context was remarkable.

From the communicative point of view, Ukraine had the advantage to be perceived as the victim and had a low level, if not zero, of crisis responsibility of attribution. For those reasons, for the organization was an easier task to tailor its narrative and impose it on the mainstream discourse, also due to the negative perception of its opponent. Despite this facilitation, it was not easy and granted to elaborate an effective strategy to keep the internal morale high and the flow of foreign aid constant.

Taken into consideration the elements previously discussed, it is possible to affirm that Ukraine's communication strategies in the first year of the war have been remarkably effective in meeting its objectives. As we will explore in the next chapter, part of this success can be attributed to the shortcomings in the Russian approach, however the strategic communication tactics and approach employed by Ukraine stand out as a compelling case study of successful wartime communication.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RUSSIAN CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

#### **3.1 Introduction to Russian communication strategies**

In the last chapter were analysed the communication strategies and tactics employed by Ukraine, in the following paragraphs it will be discussed the other side of the coin of the conflict: the case study of Russia.

It will be described a different perspective and approach to the same events, and how they are portrayed by the nation responsible for the beginning of the conflict. Being held accountable for the beginning of the war is the main communicative challenge faced by Russia. The international community has been vocal and unanimous in condemning the Russian behaviour and Ukraine has been skilfully capable in advocating its position. Therefore, despite being on the attack on the battleground, since the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, Russia has always been on the defensive from the communicative point of view, in the attempt to justify its actions, impose its narrative and countering Ukrainians accusations. The main elements of the Russian storytelling are the confrontational stance with the West due to the encirclement syndrome suffered by Russia due to the expansion eastwards of NATO; the continuous recall to the shared history with Ukraine and how they are the same people as the Russians, and on the other hand, it was stressed several times the necessity to defend the ethnic Russians in the regions in the east of the country against what is described as a government with ties with nazi elements as the Azov Battalion. Therefor the term “war” or “invasion” has not been employed by official communication, instead the intervention has been presented to the public as a special operation to bring back peace in the region and protect its citizens.

The communication strategies employed by Russia resulted less innovative and incisive compared to the Ukrainians. Social media have been used more indirectly and more to undermine the efforts of the counterpart through the spread of misinformation, rather than advocating for its own objectives, this is also due to the limitations imposed by social media platforms towards Russian accounts. For obvious reasons a prominent role in the Russian communication sphere is held by its president, Vladimir Putin. In his case, his

main focus is on internal communication, Russian public opinion has an inferior weight compared to other countries with a higher degree of democracy, however it was still important to keep the population willing to suffer the consequences of the war from the economic point of view and keep high the morale of the segment of the population conscripted. The two fundamental categories of internal stakeholders however are the army and the economic and financial elites, two elements that are fundamental in keeping the Putin's regime steady since his rise to power in 1999.

In order to carry out the comparison as accurate as possible, in this chapter we will follow almost specularly the same structure outlined in the former. Therefore, first of all it will be discussed the characteristics of the communicative style of the leader of the country, in this case Vladimir Putin, and how his approach changed before and after the beginning of the conflict. Putin's presidency has been characterized by a tightly controlled media landscape, where the state exercises substantial influence over the narrative disseminated to the public. Understanding Putin's communicative tactics is essential for comprehending the broader strategies employed by Russia in the context of the war. His ability to project strength, stability, and resolve, both within Russia and to the international community, has always been of fundamental importance throughout his leadership. This chapter, therefore, will initially delve into the persona of Putin, analysing how his image and rhetoric changed during the war and how it shaped Russia's narrative around the conflict.

Subsequently the chapter will focus on the communicative strategies employed in general by the country during the first year of the war. This analysis will include several elements, including the use of state-controlled media, digital propaganda efforts, and the dissemination of misinformation, furthermore, will be observed how the Russian government attempts to control the narrative not only within its borders but also on the global stage. This includes an investigation into how Russia has sought to justify its actions, counteract international condemnation, and influence public opinion in favour of its military and political objectives, in the attempt to unravel from a intricately disadvantaged situation from the communicative point of view. Those struggles will also be taken into consideration since Russia had to confront itself with an adversary capable to obtain the sympathy of international public opinion.

The understanding of the use of digital platforms and social media will have a prominent role in the analysis of the case study, since Russia's approach to digital propaganda, cyberattacks, and control over the information space represents a critical component of its wartime strategy. These platforms are exploited in order to deliver the narrative built by the Kremlin, and this storytelling will be another piece that will be discussed in the same paragraph. This includes the portrayal of the conflict as a defensive measure, the invocation of historical grievances, and the framing of Russia as a besieged fortress standing against Western aggression.

In the last paragraphs, with the same approach employed in the previous chapter, all those elements will be analysed adopting the framing of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

### **3.2 Putin's role and communicative style**

Since ascending to power in 1999, Vladimir Putin has indelibly marked the Russian political landscape, assuming the reins of leadership at a critical moment for the country and subsequently shaping the trajectory of Russia and its institutions according to his will and vision. During his presidency he moulded the perception of Russia both within and outside its boundaries, rebuilding the national identity and national pride that was lost following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Putin built his narrative and ideology evoking the past greatness of Russia, highlighting the struggle against the West that surrounded Russia expanding to the states that used to be in the Soviet sphere of influence. This narrative construction is not merely about past glory but is strategically employed to justify policy decisions, rally public support, and frame Russia's actions on the international stage as defensive and sovereign imperatives.

Moreover, Putin's control over of media and public relations has allowed him to cultivate an image of a strong, decisive leader, capable of restoring Russia's dignity and standing in the global arena. Through carefully orchestrated appearances and speeches, he has communicated a vision of Russia that is resilient, independent, and deserving of respect on the world stage. This controlled media environment not only amplifies his message



but also ensures that dissenting voices are marginalized, creating a cohesive national narrative that supports his leadership and policies.

By understanding his multifaced figure, how he conquered the hearts of Russians and its institutions it is possible to comprehend fundamental elements that shaped his crisis communication during the war.

### **3.2.1 The rise of Putin**

Although Putin's rise to power is chronologically distant from the current events of the war in Ukraine, already from 1999 and his first months of presidency, can be distinguished those characteristics that marked his modus operandi during his two decades of rule.

Putin can be defined as a “self-made man,” his parents were not rich, and his grandparents were even listed as peasants. When the Berlin wall fell, he was in Dresden as a KGB official and this event that changed his life, since his childhood dream was to become the chief of the agency, however he had to reinvent himself and his career. In 1991 he left the KGB to cover different roles in the communal administration of Saint Petersburg, becoming a strict collaborator of its mayor, Anatolji Sobčak. In 1996 the political career of the mayor was disrupted following a corruption scandal, apparently also Putin was involved, however there was not any proof against him, so he kept his name clean, a significant advantage in the Russia of those years. In the same year he was called to Moscow by the President Boris Yeltsin to enter in his staff and in 1998 he was appointed as head of the FSB, the heir of the KGB.

Between 1991 and 1999 the political, economic, and social situation in Russia was in complete disarray. The conversion from the Soviet planned economy to the free marked had failed. The shock therapy of the wild liberalization of the national companies caused a rise of the inflation that destroyed the savings of the Russians and enriched what are commonly defined as “oligarchs,” the new enriched class that de facto was ruling Russia, exasperated form the national debt and in need of liquidity. In August 1999, a new crisis erupted in the Caucasus: multi-ethnic force headed by Chechen commander Shamil Basaev invaded the Russian republic of Dagestan, claiming Dagestan’s liberation from

Russian imperialism as their cause. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September the war arrived in Moscow when 62 people died in the explosion caused by a Chechen bomb in a building, in the further terrorist attacks, perished almost 300 Russian citizens, causing chaos among civil population.

On his side, Yeltsin was crumbling under the political pressure, scandals, coup attempts and his difficult relation with alcohol. He needed a successor that both kept steady the path or institutional reforms and that, more pragmatically, granted him immunity from trials and seizure of assets. For those reasons and in this context, Yeltsin nominated as prime minister the almost unknown Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, replacing Evgenij Primakov. With this nominee, it was clear the investiture of Putin as his successor, since accepting a future presidency of Primakov would have meant a defeat of Yeltsin's reforms. The last step to the ladder to the power was taken on the New Year's Eve, when Yeltsin formally resigned, and Putin was appointed as interim President of the Russian Federation. This event was announced by Putin himself, who addressed the country in the new year's speech. Despite its importance, the address is less than four minutes long and it does not convey any particular emotion, it merely delivers the message without any political statements. There is only one element that allows us to recognize what will be the future Putin and is when, thanking Yeltsin, he refers to Russia as a strong and independent nation, shortly after promising that no vacuum of power will be left before the elections and that the constitutional legality will be respected (Putin V., 1999).

Initially, apart from Yeltsin, very few believed that Putin could succeed. He displayed little charisma, had no backing from any political party and never had to run for office. In his first month in charge, his approval rating hovered in the single digits, by the end of the year, however, his popularity had soared to well above 70 per cent (McFaul M). This was possible because Putin understood that in order to gain consensus, he needed to focus primary, if not solely, on the ongoing war with the Chechens. Russians needed to feel safe after the terrorist attacks in Moscow, furthermore a success on the battlefield after years of struggle could project an image of regained strength boosting national pride. Opinions polls conducted in autumn 1999 (*ibidem*) showed that Russians were grateful with Putin for accepting this responsibility, appearing as a leader who take charge in difficult time and emerged successful, delivering his promise to bring stability and security.

Other elements that helped Putin in his success in this early stage of his career were his youth, he appeared energetic and new compared to his predecessor, and arriving to the 2000' presidential election he was also unknown except for his policies in Chechenia, therefore he was a blank canvas that allowed the electorate to portray him as they preferred. He also benefitted from the economic conjuncture, from 1998 oil prices begun to rise, and furthermore he was aided by positive coverage of media, most of which was still owned by the state or was friendly to the Kremlin.

Thanks to this early experience, Putin learned fundamental lessons that brought with him throughout the decades of rule. In his first years he shaped his approach to governance, media manipulation, and public relations, framing his strategies for maintaining power and control. He learned the value of cultivating a strong, decisive image, the importance of economic stability as a pillar of political support, and the power of media in shaping public perception. However, the most important lesson learned by Putin during his first months is the use of aggressive war in order to strengthen and obtain consensus. Nationalism and militarism are fundamental in Putin's ideology, a swift victory on the military field can portray the country as strong, is functional to the relationship with the army, and boost the sentiments of common citizens. This is a pattern that Putin's regime repeated different times during its history, for example the events in Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia in 2008, in this context it is possible to understand the approach and methodology adopted by the Russian president as one of the many reasons behind the intervention in Ukraine.

### **3.3.2 Putin's ideology.**

Before discussing Putin's communicative approach, it is important to understand his ideology, because those two elements are strictly intertwined, with the former influencing and moulding the latter. Furthermore, his ideological framework not only defines Putin's approach to governance but also reflects Russia's aspirations and challenges in the post-Soviet era. Understanding Putin's ideology is crucial for comprehending the internal dynamics and the motivations behind Russia's actions on the global stage and in particular during the intervention in Ukraine.

According to the elaboration made by Laruelle in 2021 Putinism is closer to Reaganism and Thatcherism, rather than Marxism, not in its content but for how it is structured. It is not a fully developed all-encompassing ideology, it is more correct to consider it as a system of rule and a guiding mentality. This set of rules, rather than ideological principles, is based on a set of habits and emotions; the shared belief among Putin ideologues is that Russia in order to survive in the adverse global context needs a strong state, needs to be a great power abroad and needs an uncontested internal regime.

The relation with Russian citizens, despite the authoritarian traits of the regime, is based on an implicit social contract in constant evolution, it is not a case that the government spends millions of dollars in order to supervise the evolution of public opinion in the attempt to control and manipulate it. The fluid ideology is also reflected in the internal configuration of the regime, that, rather than a unitary entity, is composed by a conglomerate of competing and conflicting opinions. To give an analogy, it is useful to recall the comparison made by the founder of Russian political communication, Gleb Pavlosky: “The Kremlin’s politics looks like a jazz group: an uninterrupted improvisation as an attempt to survive the latest crisis” (Eidlin F. 2016). In this metaphor, every member of the group, attains to a main theme, however, is free to improvise.

This ability to improvise newly adapted ideological frames is also due to the structure of the Russian governance itself, composed by three fundamental elements in competition: the Presidential administration, the military-industrial complex, and the Orthodox realm (Laruelle M., 2021). The interaction among those three spheres results in a constant balancing act between coherence and adaptability, centralization and improvisation, control, and responsiveness enacted by Putin.

The military-industrial complex is constituted by all the power agencies, such as the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interiors and security agencies. Among the three elements this is the one in major continuity with the former Soviet regime, it defends geopolitical principles that have not changed since its dissolution, except for the adaptation to the new economic context. This complex seeks to maintain ideological control over society, prompting a model of ideal citizen as “healthy patriot” and rises the youth with a patriotic military indoctrination.

The other realm addressed by Putin is the Orthodoxy's, it is less structured than the military-industrial, lacks concrete economic and industrial aims and has at its core the Church and the Patriarch (Skladanowski M. et al 2023). This realm has been trying to regain its influence and its values after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and insists in Orthodoxy as a spiritual backbone of Russia. More than religious per se, its approach is ideological and not based on faith, characterized by long term goals of re-Christianization of the country seeking a privileged relation with the state in order to advance its agenda.

In the past two decades Putin has unravelled among those three realms, pursuing an ideational policy. The first dimension that can be identified in this policy is the use of symbolism, employed to reconnect with the society and to calm the political animosity following the turmoil and instability that characterized the years of Yeltsin's presidency. Secondly, despite being productive in the ideological field, other ideologies were tolerated, following the principle of non-intrusive state. Other ideological values were functional to the regime, for example the controlled opposition of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, led by Gennadij Zhjiuganov, that for years apparently represented its main rival during presidential elections, however its opposition was managed thanks to economic interests.

Regarding his stance towards the legacy of the Soviet Union, he is ambivalent and conciliatory, his position can be summoned up by citing a famous quote of his published on the New York Time in the year 2000: "Anyone who doesn't regret the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart. Anyone who wants it restored has no brains" (Ratcliffe S. 2017). He recalls the Soviet Union for its might, from the military point of view, and for the prominent role in the geopolitical arena. He never referenced or expressed any sympathy for the former ideology of the state, Marxism. This nostalgia is strategically employed to recall the successes of the USSR, especially the imaginary of the Second World War, in Russia referred to as the "Great Patriotic War" or the "Sacred War." The celebrations each 9<sup>th</sup> of May in the Red Square are an occasion to show off the military forces in a huge parade, with the symbols of the past days, and in general, the success against the Nazis, as we will see, still in the context of the war against Ukraine is often recalled.

Despite referring to himself as an a-ideologic leader with its main objective to the stabilization and resurgence of Russia, at the centre of its ideas there is patriotism, therefore there is one ideology that cannot be tolerated: political liberalism. This approach turned to the worse especially after his return to the presidency in 2012, following the Bolotnaya mass protests. From that moment emerged a more aggressive rhetoric and an increased emphasis regarding the stance against the West, anti-liberalism, on the greatness of the country and the infallibility of its leader (Laurelle M., 2021). Therefore, Putin took the monopoly of representing the interest of the country and became more persistent and aggressive in the repression of the liberal agenda with the systematic persecution of opinion leaders. Even in this context it is possible for Putin to choose among a wide range of stances depending on the context, without abandoning the core of patriotism.

Notwithstanding this evolution, the state ideology remains vague, characterized by nationalism, anti-Western and anti-American stances in particular, followed by Soviet-nostalgia, militarism, Orthodox values and a state centric view of the country despite its federalist organization. This complex and intricated form of conservatism, is aimed to protect the status quo from the disruptions brought about by contemporary societal changes and global influences that could undermine Russia's traditional structures and international position. In this approach adopted by Putin and its administration it is easier to understand what is to be rejected rather than which stances are to be adopted.

### **3.3.3 Putin's communicative approach.**

The ideological approach just outlined is reflected in all its element in the communicative style adopted by the Russian President and how he shaped the perception and portrayal of his figure. When he appeared on television for the first time as President of the Russian Federation, he was unknown if not for his 4 months as prime minster, he appeared not incisive and did not display a particular personality. However, in the course of the years this perception drastically changed with the emergence of his resolute and charismatic attitude that struck the Russian people. The adoration of the Russian electorate, altogether with his grip on mass media and ties with oligarchs, left him and his party "United Russia" without any serious opposition, if not the functional opposition of the Russian Communist

Party. Even the mass protests of the Bolotnaya held in Moscow against his return to the Kremlin in 2012 left him unhinged.

During his presidency he tried to rebuild the image of Russia as a strong country with a global influence after the struggles suffered during the 90' and the fall of the Berlin's wall that he perceived as a shame. A powerful weapon employed to achieve his objective, was his image on which he projected the portrayal of strength that he desired for his country, according to Gleb Pavlovsky, his political strategist and key architect in building his persona until 2011, in fact "in a weak state you need to create an image of power" (Troianovsky A., 2018).

A tactic employed to achieve this goal was to show the president performing various athletic activities, for example sparring judo, riding horses, hunting with a rifle, or even driving a Formula1 car. In some of those situations he is portrayed shirtless prompting his masculine image. According to a study focussed on "real men" in Russian politics conducted by Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, the 44.8% of the surveyed sample, choose Putin as their first answer (Raibov O., Raibova T., 2014), showing that despite his age he is not perceived as ridiculous, even in American media despite those images are often used in a satiric contexts, the image that the Russian president wants to show is still successful (Kanzler K., Scharlaj M. 2017). This is not a new strategy and throughout history was adopted by other leaders with authoritarian traits, for example Benito Mussolini that used to be portrayed by propaganda in similar instances. Around this image of modern "strongmen" the Kremlin has built a political brand expendable not only in Russia but also among certain political areas in the West, especially among conservative electorate. The success of this brand has captivated the interest of anti-establishment and anti-American politicians all over the world and despite in the course of the years grew in its codification there were left some black spaces to be filled with the imagination of the audience (Troianovski A., 2018). This strategy has been praised by Putin's spokesperson Dimitrij Peskov, highlighting Putin's unicity calming:

«People around the world are tired of leaders that are all similar to each other. [...] There's a demand in the world for special, sovereign leaders, for decisive ones who do not fit into general frameworks and so on. Putin's Russia was the starting point. (ibidem) »

This aura of strength is also reflected during his speeches and public appearances, for example when he walks, he keeps his right arm close to his body while the other arm is free to swing, a walk typical of former KGB agents that reminds of Putin's past. Furthermore, when he speaks, he adopts a firm tone of voice, it is not unusual to hear bold and aggressive statements, and never hesitates when answering questions. Verbally and with his body language is less eclectic compared to Zelensky, he maintains his composure and his image of bureaucrat and statesman rather than political leader. Even in the context of the war, he has not dismissed his formal style, aiming to appear to the eyes of his citizens in control of the situation and unwavering in his conviction about the objective of the military operation (Rizzuto A., Hinck R., 2023).

In Putin's narrative and strategic communication are omnipresent references to history, as we will see at the end of this paragraph, his speech that preceded the beginning of the war is a clear example. Putin's recalls both to the heritage of the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union, however, is the latter that haunts most modern Russia. The sentiment of nostalgia is strong among the Russian population and Putin is skilful in exploiting it with recalls to its past greatness, however the legacy that is physically tangible are the so called "frozen conflicts." Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Donbas, and Crimea are all areas of instability emerged following the fall of the Soviet Union that finds their roots in the history of the USSR itself (Kazantsev A. et al 2020). Therefore, it is natural for Putin addressing those issues recalling the historical narrative, shaping its storytelling in the attribution of past responsibilities that lead to those conflicts, and the case of Eastern Ukraine makes no exception. By framing the narrative around historical issues and the legacy of Soviet policies, Putin not only appeals to a sense of nationalistic pride and nostalgia but also shapes the contemporary understanding and justification of Russia's actions in these regions. Referring to Ukrainian citizens Putin does not adopt an adversary vocabulary, Instead, he invokes historical ties dating back to the Kievan Rus,' emphasizing the deep-rooted connections between Ukrainian and Russian people. By highlighting this shared heritage, Putin aims to portray Ukrainians and Russians as essentially one and the same, united by a common past that predates the divisions of the modern era, ignoring however tragedies that the Ukrainians suffered under the Soviet Union and the Russian empire that shaped Ukrainian national identity.



In identifying the enemy Putin focusses on the Ukrainian government rather than its people. In its search for the enemy around which unify the country, following the mentioned events of 2012 there was a resurgence of anti-Americanism and a more confrontational approach towards the West despite attempts of reconciliations at the beginning of 2000s. Putin blamed the United States to fostered fostering the Bolotnaya protests and in general the pressure around the borders exercised by the expansion of NATO in countries of the former Eastern bloc had become unsustainable for Russia undermining what was perceived as its traditional sphere of influence (Gregić M., Božić J., 2023). His narrative of encirclement and containment feeds into a broader discourse of anti-Americanism, positioning the U.S. as the principal antagonist in Russia's quest to reclaim its status as a major global player.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 Putin attended the plenary session of the 25<sup>th</sup> St Petersburg International Economic Forum, delivering a speech almost one hour and half long. This only one of the many occasions in which he ferociously criticized the American imperialism recalling the events of Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libia, stating:

«They crudely and shamelessly imposing their ethics, their views on culture and ideas about history, sometimes questioning the sovereignty and integrity of states, and threatening their very existence. » (Putin, V., 2022)

Referring to how Russia is treated defined as a «Rebel state that cannot be pacified», using a strategy of victimage, he states that the country is isolated, or “cancelled” to use a term familiar to the western public, denouncing forms of Russophobia (ibidem). During the speech he stresses how the country is surrounded and under attack, but despite this the efforts to crush Russia, also economically through sanctions, have failed. This approach serves to unite the stakeholders giving them an enemy and a scapegoat to justify the struggles of the country, reinforcing the nationalist and patriotic sentiment around which the main narrative is built.

Before moving to the strategies employed by Russia, it is crucial to examine a fundamental moment in which all the elements previously described of Putin’s communication are summoned up: the address that he delivered the nation on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2022 (Putin V., 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2022). In this significant speech, Putin

recognized the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, an act that effectively paved the way to the beginning of the invasion only three days later.

He begins the address by talking directly to his audience affirming that the situation is at a critical stage, and he will explain the decisions that have been taken, namely the recognition of the two republics. Most importantly he highlights the importance of Ukraine in the history of Russia defining it not as a simple neighbour but as «an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. [Ukrainians] are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. » He justifies this sentence by recalling by the common historical roots and Orthodox faith and then to explain to his audience the current issues in the region he starts an historical digression.

The first historical responsibility is attributed to the Soviet Union, that shortly after the revolution, created the entity of modern Ukraine, severing what historically has been Russian land without asking for the opinion of the millions of people living there. In the context of the civil war, Lenin made concession to the nationalists, defined as “independent,” in his idea he was building a confederative state and in the foundation of the USSR was incapsulated the concept of self-determination. Putin criticise this approach stressing several times that that were historically Russian lands, accusing the Bolsheviks to do everything was necessary to stay in power, even accepting the humiliating treaty of Brest-Litovsk, despite the outcome of the war was foregone due to the German economic and military situation. The process of fabrication of Ukraine was later completed by Stalin, who incorporated parts of Poland and Romania after the Second World War, and in 1954 by Khrushchev who gifted the Crimean Peninsula to the Ukrainian SSR. Therefore, in Putin’s conception, Ukraine is an artificial state created by Soviet leaders mutilating Russia and other states, separating the same people.

In some parts of the speech he adopts and aggressive vocabulary, for instance since Ukraine is a communist product for the reasons above, if they want decommunization they should not stop halfway and they are « ready to show what real decommunizations would mean for Ukraine. »

After analysing the dynamics during the Soviet Union and its dissolution, stating that Ukrainian nationalists had no merits in achieving independence, he focussed on the

relation between Russia and former soviet countries after its dissolution. Putin highlights how Russia supported financially Ukraine, providing natural resources as natural gas, despite the difficult socio-economic situation of the country itself. In this way he underlines the ingratitude of Ukrainian institutions, fostering his adversity towards its attitude. He enforces this statement employing official data, stating that between 1991 and 2013 Ukraine thorough trade preferences adopted by Russia benefitted of 250 billion dollars. It is important to underline how, despite attacking and expressing his dissent, almost disgust, towards the Ukrainian government and its official, Putin never refers to the Ukrainian people in a negative sense, at the contrary he praises it, hoping to obtain its favour.

Followingly, he shifts the focus of his speech towards the West and the Ukrainian oligarchs. Their pro-Western civilisational choice was not aimed at creating better conditions in the interests of people's well-being, but at keeping the billions of dollars that they have stolen from the Ukrainians and are holding in their accounts in Western banks, while reverently accommodating the geopolitical rivals of Russia, stressing how the Euromaidan did not bring Ukraine closer to democracy, but was a coup d'etat orchestrated by nationalists. From this point of view, alongside all the other critics to the Ukrainian statehood, he justifies the choice of Crimean people to join the Russian Federation.

Putin denounces to his people how Ukraine is a threat to the survival of the nation, since there is the possibility that the state acquires access to weapons of mass destruction joining NATO, with the American army that already impudently uses the Ukrainian theatre to execute military exercitation to intimidate Russia.

Another fundamental part of the speech is when he confesses that in the year 2000, he asked to the American president Clinton if there was the possibility for Russia to join NATO, of course an instance that was refused. In this way the demonstrated that the only purpose of existence of NATO is endangering Russia and enumerates occasion in which the organization displayed a Russophobic attitude. Moreover, he describes the encirclement syndrome due to the enlargement of the Western bloc as we pointed out earlier in the chapter. In this way he tries to instil fear and hatred towards NATO, pointing to the danger and injustice that the country faces. He seeks to move emotionally his

audience, depicting Russia as a persecuted country, funnelling the hatred and resentment of the Russians toward the enemy, in this case NATO and Ukrainian government.

After this long premise, taking into consideration all those elements discussed, he finally arrives to the central point of the address. He uses all those narratives to justify the recognition of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. He promises to aid and protect the people oppressed in the region, massacred by the Ukrainian army and its nazi elements, backed by the West. Considering those elements, he refers to this act as necessary and as a Russian responsibility to protect the citizens of those regions, shifting the blame of an eventual bloodshed to the Ukrainian government:

« We want those who seized and continue to hold power in Kiev to immediately stop hostilities. Otherwise, the responsibility for the possible continuation of the bloodshed will lie entirely on the conscience of Ukraine's ruling regime. »

By this point the decision to launch a full-scale invasion in Ukraine was already taken, however he wants to appear forced to take action, shifting the blame on the invaded country. The speech is concluded by asking the support of Russian citizens and “all the patriotic forces” of the country. This appeal is aimed to consolidate national support, framing the invasion as a collective effort driven by patriotic duty rather than an aggressive act of unilateral decision-making.

### **3.3 Russian communication strategies**

In the analysis of Russian communicative approach, it is important to note its propensity towards wayfinding rather than a meticulous planification through a preidentified objective. One of the features of Russian strategic thinking is the importance of the prevailing situation in strategy-making, prioritizing flexibility, and responsiveness to the immediate context over rigid adherence to pre-established plans. The objective of strategy is to engage in warfare at a particular moment and to address it based on the existing circumstances (Friedman O., 2023). This involves setting a pragmatic target and mobilizing all resources and efforts to attain this goal as swiftly and efficiently as possible, minimizing sacrifices in the process.

In the speech analysed above, are present all the elements of Russian narrative employed before and during the conflict. Patriotism and nationalist rhetoric, victimage, blame attribution for the beginning of the conflict to the West and Ukrainian government, accusations towards them of war crimes in Donbass and presence of nazi elements among its army. In this paragraph it will be discussed how those narratives are built and which strategies are employed by Russia in its strategic communication during the conflict in Ukraine. We will focus on the use of social media to spread propaganda and misinformation, but also traditional mass media in order to analyse the internal communication in Russia. Finally, it will be important to observe how those tools are employed in order to fight the informative war, a conflict parallel respect to the one fought on the battleground, in the attempt to impose its own narrative depicting the enemy, in this instance President Zelensky and his administration, in a negative light.

### **3.3.1 Narrative building and the use of television and traditional mass media in internal communication.**

Compared to Ukraine, in Russia traditional media and in particular television, have a more prominent role in internal communication therefore its use during the phases of the war for prompting propaganda has been intense. Television holds a primary role in Russian information system, where a person has an average screentime of 3,5 hours per day. According to a survey carried out by the Levada Centre in January 2020, television serves as a major news source for 73% of Russians, while the internet is a major source for 39%. At the same time, 52% of Russians say they trust television news (Venclauskienė L., et al 2023).

Since the election of Putin in 2000' he started a campaign of appropriation of private television broadcasters, tightening the governmental control of the information. Following the invasion of Ukraine all the independent media were declared to be foreign agents and were blocked, restricted, or hampered in any possible way, de facto obtaining the monopoly of the information in mainstream media. Therefore, the content of informative campaigns is managed directly by the public administration and the Russian

special services, FSB and GRU, that use those channels to foster and spread its narrative throughout the nation.

This centralisation is carried out through the use of so-called *temnik*, a term that can be translated as agenda, which are strict instructions and directives for the coverage of current events, which have been issued to the heads of these media by the administrations of the president. For example, a former employee of the VGRTK media holding affirmed that days after the annexation of Crimea, the hosts who appeared on-screen were given a list of names to call the Ukrainian government and army, for example “junta” or “Banderovites” (ibidem). It is not a case that the same communicative scheme and vocabulary was repeated by Putin himself eight years later just before the invasion of Ukraine. In his address televised while the invasion was beginning, and the Russian missiles were already striking Ukrainian cities he stated:

«We will pursue the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, as well as bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation. » (Putin V., 2023)

Putin adopts an emotionally charged vocabulary, rallying the population channelling its hostility towards the Ukrainian government. He highlights the moral superiority of Russia against an adversary who committed a genocide for the past eight years against its own people, backed by Western powers. A further example is the referral to the Ukrainian administration as “Hitler’s accomplices,” a curious comparison since on the other side Ukrainian communication employed the same metaphor as we have seen in the previous chapter. This propaganda tactic seeks to foster internal support by depicting the other side involved in the conflict as a menace that commits atrocities and needs to be stopped (Rizzuto A., Hinck R., 2023).

Another strategy employed with the same goal is enforcing the narration of the strong Russia in an existential conflict against the West. Russia cannot feel safe with the expansion of NATO and is forced to be involved in the conflict in Ukraine due to the existential threat posed to its borders. This narration is furtherly enforced by the mention of a possible use of nuclear weapons. According to Russian doctrine, the use of nuclear warheads is possible only in situations in which the national territory and the existence of

the nation is endangered. By recalling the possibility of the nuclear war, Russian propaganda wants to stress the importance for the survival of the country in the eyes of its citizens, and on the other hand intimidate and threaten its opponents (Ven Bruusgaard K., 2023). On the other hand, a shortcoming of this communicative approach is the possibility of causing panic among the population and appear weak, frustrated, or dangerous to the eyes of international public opinion.

In addressing his population, Russian internal communication exploits the power of history and common imaginary. To justify the referendum for the annexation of the new regions of Eastern Ukraine of the so called “Novorossiya” in 2022, Putin refers to the Russian Empire and how those territories were considered as part of Russia. He recalled past foreign invasions and the name of famous Russian commanders who fought and against Turks, Poles, and French for the control of the area emerging victorious. Furthermore, Putin highlighted the historical establishment of cities within these territories by Russian Tsars (Reid A., 2022), thereby weaving a narrative that not only glorifies Russia's imperial past but also legitimizes contemporary geopolitical ambitions through the lens of historical continuity and national identity restoration. The reference to the example of the ancestors which is a “demonstration to our unity and to our motherland during a very difficult path,” serves to highlight how the same struggles were overcome in the past, and the same must be repeated in the present, prompting a sense of pride, a call to the duty of being a “good Russian.” This mythology links the past with the present offering to the narrative a specific context in framing the internal communication.

The employment of history Russian rhetoric is also enforced by the use of symbolism. Following the invasion appeared everywhere the letter “Z”, often alongside the Saint George ribbon, from the thanks advancing in Ukraine, to the billboards in major Russian cities to the announcements in television. The ribbon recalls the narrative surrounding the Second World War, a recall to the victory against Nazism and frames the intervention against Ukraine as a fight for the defence of the population against a resurging form of Nazism that once again must be beaten. From this point of view, it can be understood the importance of words in this framing, and why in all sources of information, television in particular, referring to the events in Ukraine all the other terms except for “special operation” were strictly forbidden.

Albeit to a lesser extent compared to what we will observe on social media, also in television were employed tactics of manipulation and misinformation. Since the large use of television of Russians and the monopoly of the government in this field, television became the ideal channel to spread fake news functional to the governmental rhetoric, due to the absence of opposition. The main tools adopted were false flag operations, manipulation of statistics, of historical and actual events on the battlefield.

Thanks to this approach, the state-controlled media apparatus in Russia sustains a constant flow of information, characterized by a carefully curated collection of narratives that employ engaging storytelling techniques, consistently applied over the years. This strategy involves not just the repetition and recycling of established narratives but also a dynamic process of adaptation depending on the context and its evolution. This flexibility allows the propaganda and disinformation machinery under Putin's regime to evolve, introducing new storylines, scripts, and messages that are meticulously crafted to align with the audience's values, interests, and biases. Through this approach, the media ensures that its content remains relevant and persuasive, effectively resonating with and influencing the public's perceptions and opinions.

In the study published in 2023 by Laima Venclauskienė on the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, it is possible to observe the evolution of the narrative televised in Russia before and after the beginning of the war. Between October 2021 and February 2022, the content broadcasted on Russian networks focussed on the moral corruption of the West and how it encourages the escalation in the region, the incapability of Ukraine in keeping faith to its commitments under international law, how Ukraine its preparing to launch a military attack against Russia, and how an informational warfare is waged against Russia. Immediately after the beginning of the war, the period taken in consideration is between the 24<sup>th</sup> of February and the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2022, it can be noted a shift in the narrative pushed by Russian televisions. The focus moved from the previous bullet points to Ukrainians war crimes, its failure to uphold democratic standards and the rule of law. Referring on narratives presents already before the beginning of the war, decreased the use the narrative of the West fuelling the conflict and its moral corruption, while increased the one referring to the informational war waged against Russia. To take in consideration a practical example, before the beginning of the war on Russian televisions the Ukrainian armed forces were portrayed as weak and



unprofessional, often ridiculed. Following the 24<sup>th</sup> of February it was not possible anymore to depict the Russian army struggling against a weak adversary, therefore the communication focussed on stories of Ukrainian soldiers surrendering to the advancing Russian army or tales regarding acts of heroism made by Russian soldiers.

Due to the governmental control and monopoly over information in Russia and lack of reliable and unbiased data, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of those strategies in internal communication. It can be presumed that thanks to this system of control of public opinion and control over the narrative, the Russian government is able to keep at bay the public opinion, however it is only possible to make speculations regarding the real appreciation rate on the operate of Putin and its administration. It is possible, however, a more in-depth analysis on the use of social media and its impact on communication oriented outside Russia, which is, as in the case of Ukraine, a fundamental source of information and centre of state propaganda.

### **3.3.2 The use of social media and the spread of misinformation.**

As we have described for Ukraine, also for Russia, the use of information and propaganda through social media is incredibly important, however due to the position of Russia it had to employ different and also deceptive tactics. The narratives employed in the social media sphere are the same mentioned in the paragraph above, however the target is wider, the strategies are different and adapted to tools taken in consideration. Alongside the objective to rally internal support, non-official communication on social media is used as preferred instrument to influence international public opinion. From this point of view, Russian agents accumulated throughout the years a significant experience in influencing events and political opinion in foreign countries, as is well documented the influence of Russian bots and propaganda on social media in the occasion of the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum in UK.

The primary goal of Russian communication tactics on social media through the dissemination of fake news, is not solely to gather consensus around its actions but rather to disrupt and weaken the efforts of its adversaries. A critical aspect of this strategy is to target the international support towards Ukraine, which is fundamental in sustaining its

war effort. By casting fake news that instil doubts on the legitimacy and integrity of Ukraine's position, the Russian propaganda machine aims to erode the global backing that bolsters the Ukrainian military. Consequently, the fabrications and misleading narratives propagated by Russia are meticulously crafted to depict Ukraine under a negative light. This strategic dissemination of false information is designed to influence international public opinion, reducing the level of support and solidarity with the Ukrainian cause. Through these means, Russia seeks to indirectly weaken Ukraine's defensive capabilities by attacking the international public opinion which is the foundation of international cooperation and assistance that sustains its resistance (Geissler D., et al. 2023). Another pragmatic reason and topic behind the use of fake news is to prompt the idea in the international public that the economic sanctions imposed on Russia negatively affect their own countries and that they should be removed.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, thanks to Ukrainian political and moral pressure, the access to the main social media was restricted to Russian accounts, but this did not prevent Russian bots and trolls to flood those social media with fake news. Following the ban and the beginning of the war, the demand for news regarding the conflict. After February 2022 the platform Telegram has become the main vector to spread information and disinformation regarding the war since it was not affected by the restrictions and for its nature the platform is ideal to spread questionable content.

In this scenario emerged a new group of content creators defined as “pro-war bloggers” (Michlin-Shapir V., 2023), which, crafting their content, followed the agenda and narrative framing proposed by the Kremlin, establishing an online ecosystem functional to spread Russian propaganda within and outside its borders. This ecosystem, despite being ideologically tied to the Russian government, operates in a quasi-independent manner (ibidem). The strategy employed by the content creators involved, does not imply the construction of an independent storytelling, on the contrary its main focus is on responding to Ukrainian communication and competing with it.

The Russian online communicative ecosystem is constituted by a mix of human user and bots. According to e study conducted by Dominic Geissler published in 2023 pro-Russian messages have been spread by 132,131 accounts. In analysing those accounts and determine if it were managed by humans or bots and classifying them, was employed a

system called “Botometer.” Depending on the interaction of each account was attributed a value between the 0 and 1, which can be interpreted as the level of automatization of the account. Choosing as 0,5 as threshold above which an account is classified as a bot, emerges that the 20,29% of account spreading pro-Russian propaganda is constituted by bots. Account classified as such, tend to have been created more recently with a peak close to the beginning of the invasion. The content created by those accounts tend to be less viral compared to the content generated by Ukrainian users, however, contribute consistently to noisemaking and spread of the Russian narrative.

This communicative system was harshly challenged in late March when the Russian attempt of a blitzkrieg against Ukraine failed, and they were forced to retreat from the area near Kiev and northern Ukraine. As the retreat was completed and the Ukrainian forces gradually reclaimed control over those territories, the atrocities and war crimes committed by the Russian military against Ukrainian citizens in Bucha emerged and were well documented with photos and videos in international media outlets. By that time, Ukraine had already successfully consolidated its strategic communication, and the disorganized Russian propaganda could not keep up. In this particular instance the Kremlin initially did not issue any official statement, however the Russian social media ecosystem mobilised in the attempt to “debunk” and counter the Ukrainian communication labelling the photos and videos circulated as faked, issuing fake proofs sustaining their thesis. They accused Ukrainians to be responsible for the massacre, affirming that they shelled the city before the Russian retreat, furthermore they pointed to the video posted by the mayor of Bucha in which he appeared smiling, happy for the Russian retreat without ever mentioning the massacre of civilians, prompting the narrative that this was a planned media campaign aimed to slander Russia.

To foster this narrative, they diffused videos in which the corpse appeared to be moving, however also this theory was debunked by Ukrainian counter propaganda and the emergence of further proofs. In this context pro Putin influencer displayed a certain grade of autonomy in crafting their discourse, such as the main channel, Kots, pursued a narrative that was subsequently droved by the official statements of the Russian government. Kots showed evidence that the people killed in Bucha were members of the Russian army because of the withe band on the arm of the corpses, used by Ukrainians to identify Russians POW, the day after this content was published on his channel, the

Russian ambassador at the United Nations presented the same narrative in justifying the events of Bucha. The same approach and operative methodology were repeated in other key moments of the war, for example in the instances of the occupation of Kherson and the battle of Antonov Airport, highlighting a consolidated communicative strategy.

Another main target of Russian propaganda is the man that is more exposed in the narrative of the counterpart: president Zelensky. As we have seen in the previous chapter in his early stages of his presidency adopted a conciliatory approach with Russia and on several occasions called for the unity of Ukraine also due to his personal biography. This situation changed when in 2020 Zelensky understood that this approach could not find popular support and his stances changed in his general policy shift discussed in the previous chapter. His new approach made him the target of Russian propaganda who consistently spread fake news to undermine his figure, misinformation that augmented in its volume following the beginning of the war. In the portrayal of Russian propaganda Zelensky is described as an illegitimate leader, a puppet in the hands of the West, USA in particular. He is accused of supporting groups of far right and unleashing them against the citizens in Donbass. Russian propaganda furthermore focuses on his failures in his pre-war stages of his presidency, for example is mismanagement of the Covid pandemic, labelling him as an incapable and unreliable leader, even accusing him of being a drug addict (Fedorenko K., 2023). In addition to these narratives, Russian propaganda frequently employs disinformation tactics, such as fabricating stories about Zelensky's actions and statements or manipulating images and videos to misrepresent events.

## **2.4 Evaluation according SCCT**

The strategies employed by Russian propaganda analysed in the previous paragraph resulted ineffective in reaching their goals of influencing the international perception of Russia in the conflict, to understand the reason of this failure it is necessary to apply the framing of the SCCT.

As in the case of Ukraine, also for Russia identify the organization is a straightforward task. The responsible for crafting the narrative and use it to justify its actions in front of the stakeholders is the Russian government, more precisely Putin and his administration.

He is the gatekeeper of the narrative surrounding Russia and the events in Ukraine, he controls what and how is said within the nation and the agents that spread his narrative outside the borders acts in a unitary way without contradicting guidelines of the “temink” provided by the central administration, although enjoying a certain grade of autonomy.

The main stakeholders addressed by Putin in the internal communication are: the public opinion, the main economic entities that sustain the war effort, and the army. The management of those three elements has been for Putin the key to maintain power for more than 20 years and in this context of total war does not make an exception. The control of public opinion through the instrument and modalities previously taken in consideration is fundamental in order to keep the national morale high and keep the citizen willing to face the economic consequences of waging a war against Ukraine and, most importantly, keep the order and avoid political turmoil in a delicate moment for the country. As for Ukraine is vital the foreign support, in the same way is necessary for Putin to keep the oligarchs and their interest at bay, since they are often intertwined with state policies. Lastly another fundamental internal stakeholder is the army and its morale, the managing of communication and propaganda needs to be functional in keeping high the morale of the troops, since they are not fighting to defend their homeland, but they are invading another country. For this reason, soldiers, especially the conscripted need a strong motivation and a well-crafted propaganda to be kept willing to fight.

Regarding international stakeholders, for some extent, even if obviously for different reasons, the stakeholders that refers to Russia overlap the Ukrainians one. In his international communication the Kremlin need to push its narrative in the international public opinion, also in the countries that are allied and support Ukraine. Despite those countries are hostile towards Russia and imposed economic sanctions against the country, the Russian propaganda machine still needs to justify its actions to the eyes of the international community, undermine the Ukrainian efforts in the attempt to diminish the support received by the rival and seeking and alleviation of the economic sanctions. This difficult scenario underlines the difficult position in which Russia found itself in crafting its communication strategies, a position worsened by its role in the conflict. In the analysis of this paragraph, since the difficulties of assessing the efficacy of communicative strategies within Russia, we will focus on the relation and crisis responsibility attribution face to face with the international stakeholders, the same that we have discussed for

Ukraine, following this approach it is possible to achieve a better comparison between the two cases.

Now that the organization and the stakeholders taken into consideration are established, it is possible to assess the first step of the framing of the SCCT, namely determine the cluster of initial responsibility attributed to Russia. Despite the tensions in the area begun eight years before the invasion and in those years, Ukraine was also responsible to atrocities towards the population, the Russian response appears disproportionated. The beginning of the invasion during the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> of February completely shocked the international community that unanimously condemned the Russian initiative. Russia appeared as the solely responsible of a wicked and total attack that threatened the existence of an independent country. This sentiment was fostered by the images of the destruction caused by the Russian warheads to the major Ukrainian cities and the terrifying images of columns of tanks that extended for kilometres advancing in Ukrainian territory.

Due to these characteristics of the crisis and how it began, it is natural to put the Russian case under the label of the intentional cluster. The organization is held without any justification as responsible for the beginning of the crisis, therefore it is attributed to the cluster with the highest level of initial blame attribution. This severe level of crisis responsibility undermined the efficacy of any communicative strategy employed by the organization towards its international stakeholders.

Now that it is established the cluster of crisis responsibility attribution, the further step to complete the framing is to assess the crisis history and prior reputation of the organization. Describing the rise to power of Putin we noticed how in the first months of his presidency he employed the war against Chechnia as a political tool to consolidate his prestige and position in the Kremlin. Another instance in which the Russian administration used war as a political mean was in 2008, this time against Georgia. When the events unfolded the President of the Russian Federation was Dimitrij Medvedev, however it can be considered an actor in continuity with the organization taken in consideration due to the influence that Putin maintained in the role of Prime minister. In that occasion the Russian intervention was not labelled as an aggression, however it resulted in a disproportionate display of power to avoid that Georgia could join NATO, because Russia had long viewed

the South Caucasus region as within its sphere of influence. The prospect of Georgia moving closer to the West, potentially joining NATO and the European Union, was seen by Russia as a threat to its strategic interests, therefore the war was an attempt to reestablish the dominance in the area. The Russian intervention therefore was perceived by the international community as a coercive action against the will of an independent nation to determine its future and position in the international arena.

Another past crisis that of course needs to be taken in consideration are the events occurred in Ukraine in 2014 following the Euromaidan. As we have discussed, it is difficult to assess historical responsibility due to the secular division within the country, however the role of the Kremlin in foster this division is clear to the international community. The Kremlin supported the separatist in the Eastern regions of Ukraine and the putsch conducted by the “little green men” in Crimea, was managed by Russian soldiers operating without insignia. Furthermore, the referendum held after seizing power in the region to officially make Crimea part of the Russian Federation, was never recognized by international community, retaining it invalid due to electoral fraud conducted by the Russian officials.

Considering those elements and instances of previous crisis history, we can come to the conclusion that it affects negatively the perception of the organization and enlarge the crisis responsibility attribution for the current crisis. There is also another factor that affects the last part of the framing: the previous reputation of the organization. Already before the beginning of the war, the Russian government was perceived as an authoritarian entity that suffocate and persecute the internal dissent, through violent means and even resorting to assassinations. Over the years Putin built himself the aura of the strong man, often fostering the perception of Russia as a menace to world peace. To the international community Russia is an authoritarian and undemocratic regime, and this furtherly worsen the reputation of the organization. These two elements of the framing considerably enlarged the crisis responsibility attribution and hampered irretrievably the communication strategies employed by the organization.

Now that the framing is complete, it can be taken in consideration the primary and secondary strategies, understanding, thanks to the previous framing why they were not successful in achieving its communicative goals. Regarding the primary strategies, were

mainly employed the ones comprehended in the cluster of “deny crisis response strategies.” One of the main strategies employed is the “attack the accuser,” by accusing Ukraine to integrate in its army groups with a nazi ideology, to have committed war crimes against civil population in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk between 2014 and 2022 and polluting the public debate by spreading fake news. Practical examples of the employment of this tactic are the rhetoric against the Azov battalion or the accusation of staging the massacre of Bucha by using fake corpse ore the ones of Russian POWs.

Labelling the invasion as a “Special operation” is a display of the strategy of “justification”. In this case the organization tries to minimize the perceived entity of the crisis avoiding the use of terms like “war” or “invasion.” A similar strategy employed in the attempt to reduce the blame attribution to the organization is the “excuse,” the Russian government seeks to appear forced to intervene in Russia pushed by the suffering of the population in the eastern part of Ukraine and by the relentless expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe threatening the existence of Russia itself. This concept is also at the centre of the last primary strategy employed by Russia, the “scapegoat,” identified in this case in the Ukrainian government and NATO, held responsible for the beginning of the crisis by the organization. It is important to notice how the organization did not employ any strategy classified under the label of “rebuild crisis response strategy,” therefore there was not any display of compensation, full apology, or regret.

Regarding secondary response strategies, it can be observed a wide use of the victimage, claiming that the country is persecuted, highlighting events of Russophobia and how Russia has been gradually surrounded by the expansion of NATO. The secondary strategy of ingratiation instead, is reserved only to an internal purpose, with the constant praise and exaltation of patriotic values, the courage or Russian people and the might of its army.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have discussed the characteristics of the Russian communication strategies and now that we have completed the framing of the SCCT it can be understood why Russia was not successful in imposing its narrative outside its borders. Russia is held responsible for the beginning of the conflict, with a high level of blame attribution, this



situation is worsened by the crisis history and prior reputation of the Russian government that puts it in an adversary stance face to face with the stakeholders taken into account.

In Russian communication there are several interesting points, for example the role of history in Russian narrative building, and in the complex the communicative apparatus has been well consolidated during the two decades of Putin's rule, however those efforts are nullified by how untrustworthy the organization is perceived by the international public opinion. Russia was considered a serial spreader of fake news and disinformation already before the beginning of the war, as it was demonstrated its influence in several foreign elections, this diminishes the possibility for the actor to genuinely breach in the mainstream discourse and needs to resort to a further spread of disinformation in practices of noisemaking in the attempt to hamper the efforts of the counterpart.

Altogether with his bias of the Russian perception among the international stakeholders, needs to be acknowledged the remarkable success of the Ukrainian communication strategies. Ukraine has successfully countered Russian narratives in almost every occasion, leveraging a broad spectrum of communicative strategies to assert its own perspective. The agility and adaptability of Ukraine's communication have enabled it to not only defend against the disinformation spread by the Russian propaganda machine, but also to proactively shape and impose its narrative to the stakeholders interested.

# CONCLUSION

## Comparison and final remarks

In this thesis we have discussed the communication strategies employed by the two actors directly involved in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Taking into account the strength and weaknesses of the two cases and comparing them in their similarities and differences, it is possible to understand why Ukraine emerged as successful from this point of view while Russia struggled.

The first element that it is important to underline is the approach of the two presidents. Zelensky is eclectic in its communication and vocal about the Ukrainian cause, he constantly seeks the engagement of its population and international public opinion in order to gain support and material aid, appearing extremely proactive. For this reason, in the first weeks of the conflict he addressed several parliaments of allied countries using a moralistic approach to push those countries to not stay silent. He changed his appearance and communicative style after the beginning of the war, he stayed close to his population in the darkest hour of the country not leaving his post in Kyiv bolstering the morale by prising acts of bravery from common Ukrainians. On the other hand, Putin did not have the same necessities as Zelensky, for him it was not necessary to seek the military or economic support of other nations or engaging his public opinion, already managed by the experienced propaganda machine. Putin maintained the usual portrayal of his persona, as every change could have been poorly precepted by his stakeholders. As always, he presented himself as a strong leader in complete control of the situation, capable to bring back Russia to its past glory, however maintaining at the same time his perception as a bureaucrat serving his country rather than a political leader. His narrative is backed by an ideological structure, it is not well-defined and blurred, however this allows to better adapt to the singular cases that the communication faces, offering a general framing in which storytelling is built. This is an element that lacks in Zelensky, who appeared vague from this point of view since his electoral campaign, focussing more on the issues while they were presented to him rather having a general structure to sustain his discourse, however allowing him to freely interpret every situation.

Ukrainians mastered the use of social media, making the spread of content within the platforms the centre of their communicative approach. This was a characteristic typical of Zelensky's style during his electoral campaign, and the same know how and methodology were repurposed, with the due adaptations, to the context of the war. Thanks to social media, Ukrainian communication was able to engage a worldwide audience, also thanks to unorthodox tools as the memes, that despite may appear almost as a frivolous method of communication it instead displays a deep understanding of social media and their trends. Through social media, Ukraine not only narrated its story but also fostered an active, global constituency against the aggression, demonstrating the profound impact of digital platforms in amplifying a nation's voice and rallying international support in times of crisis. In fact, the engagement created was reflected also in concrete actions in the real world, as calls to all the people close to the Ukrainian cause to take the streets of their cities and protest against the Russian invasion, pushing their national governments to support Ukraine.

On the other side, instead of seeking engagement to prompt its storytelling, Russian communication employed social media to disrupt Ukrainian efforts. The online ecosystem that gathered in social media as Telegram was functional to spread the communicative agenda prompted by the Kremlin and was constituted by influencers, real accounts and bot as well. The lack of a constructive approach and the continuous spread of fake news, also in impracticable cases as following the events of Bucha, worsened the already strong perception of Russia as a serial spreader of misinformation, undermining the credibility of the organization.

Another interesting aspect to be observed is the difference in the use and crafting of symbolism and myths. Ukraine being such a young nation, had to create its heroes when the war started in order to bolster the morale of its population. In a first instance were generated fake ones, as the ghost of Kyiv, and shifting when the war stabilized in searching for "heroes" among common Ukrainians, highlighting and prising act of heroism by simple people, as for example the farmer towing away a Russian tank. Historical narrative was not employed extensively if not to remind the crimes perpetrated against the Ukrainian people, as the Holodomor. Russians did not need a similar approach since their myths are found in the history of the country. The echoes of Russia's past greatness resonate in the addresses of Putin and as we have seen is one of the focal points

of his narrative building. The letter “Z” painted on the vehicles advancing in Ukrainian territory has a great visual impact and expendable in propaganda campaigns, while the Saint George ribbons recalls to the victory of the Great Patriotic War and the fight against Nazism, as the denazification of Ukraine was one of the early justifications for the invasion.

The two organizations acted in a opposite way in the approach to the framing of the crisis. In presenting its case, Zelensky tried to put Ukraine as a subject of the international arena and not an object at the mercy of the events. The war was not about Ukraine itself but about the values the country and the struggle that is facing represent. The war is about the democratic values, the respect of international order and international law, therefore democratic countries are morally obliged to intervene, and who hesitates is publicly reprimanded by the Ukrainian president. On the contrary Russia has put itself at the centre of the narrative. The war is presented as an existential conflict that the country is forced to face because surrounded by enemies and because it cannot remain silent in front of the suffering of ethnic Russians in the East of Ukraine. The existential nature of the conflict is underlined by mentioning the possibility of the employment of nuclear war, that according to Russian doctrine is possible only when the survival of the nation is endangered.

Those taken in consideration are all interesting elements that help us in understanding the complex scenario and strategies employed by the actors, however the most important element in our analysis is the comparison between the findings following the framing executed by applying the SCCT. In this context it is possible to understand why Russian communication failed. Altogether with strategic deficiencies, what affected most the credibility of Russian communicative campaign is the crisis responsibility attribution. As we have seen Ukraine can be placed in the “victim” cluster, while Russia in the “intentional” cluster. Russia is considered the responsible for the beginning of the crisis, a perception worsened by the crisis history and prior reputation of the Russian government intended as the organization. This perception definitely hampered every possibility of success for Russian communication, with Ukraine being overall more skilful in crafting its communication, and facilitated in imposing its narrative by the fact of being victim of the invasion.

This concept becomes more evident if we compare the strategies employed face to face by the two actors according to the SCCT. Both Russia and Ukraine employed the primary strategies of attack the accuser and scapegoating. Both organizations mutually accused each other of being nazi or supporting nazi groups. From this point of view Ukrainian communication has been more impactful thanks to their social media communication, for example posting drawings portraying Putin next to Hitler, facilitated by the modalities Russian intervention that reminded of nazi blitzkrieg. Adopting the strategy of scapegoating was a success for Ukraine because in this way they highlighted the responsibilities of Russia, however when Russia tried to employ the same tactic did not appear as credible. The images of the bombing of Ukrainian cities and the columns of Russian vehicles are vivid in the mind of the stakeholders, therefore when Russia tries to communicate that the country intervened in Ukraine because it was forced, its message is not received positively. The same reasoning can be applied when taking in consideration the secondary strategy of “victimage.”

Russia was not able, or willing, to adapt its narrative scheme and strategies to the context of social media, using those platforms mainly to spread misinformation but not in a positive and proactive way. Altogether with the capability of Ukrainian communication to advocate for its stances, crisis responsibility attribution and its effect on the efficacy of communication, resulted in a major defeat from the communicative point of view for the Russians. On their side, this victory allowed the Ukrainians to increase the support received from their foreign allies, both from the ideological point of view, allowing Ukraine to get closer to the Western field, but most pragmatically from the material point of view, receiving ammunition, weapons and military know how, giving to the country the possibility to defend itself against what appeared to be overwhelming forces. This analysis highlights the importance of crisis communication and its strategic use in a context of warfare, without the skilful strategies employed by Ukraine or if the Kremlin had been able to impose its narrative and isolate Ukraine, the war would already have had a different outcome.

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## SUMMARY

In the complex and entangled landscape of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the study of crisis communication strategies becomes an indispensable tool for understanding its dynamics and implications during the first year of the war. The essence of crisis communication lies in its role in shaping perceptions, influencing actions, and steering public opinion during times of tension and uncertainty. In other words, it is one of the domains where the conflict is fought, in the so-called Information Warfare.

The objective of this thesis is to understand the communication strategies employed by Russia and Ukraine, evaluating and comparing them. To conduct a better comparison the chapters regarding the two case studies are structured almost specularly, guided by the theoretical framework of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

The first chapter is to provide the reader with the necessary tools to better understand the following chapters of this thesis. In order to do so, are discussed three fundamental elements, one for each paragraph: history, theory and methodology.

The historical dissertation begins with the foundation of the Kievan Rus', the first Eastern Slavic state, considered by Russians and Ukrainians as the cradle of their nation and civilization. This era links the two people, furthermore the reason of their common Orthodox faith dates back to that era, when Vladimir the First during the Golden Age of the Rus' embraced this new religion, forcing the conversion of the population from paganism. Following the Mongol invasion and the Golden Horde, the city of Moscow rose in its importance as a centre of tax collection and began to conquer neighbouring khanates, while the importance of Kiev was diminishing.

After the disruption of the Golden Horde and the inexorable loss of importance and centrality of Kiev, the Muscovy state began its mission of gradually annexing the old territories of the ancient Rus'. In 1547 Ivan IV was the first ruler of the Muscovy to be crowned as Tsar in the Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral, under his rule for the first time the Muscovy conquered a Khanate that was not part of the old Rus', following the successful siege of Kazan it became a multiethnic and multi religious reign. In managing the ethnicity were established practices that become common throughout the history of the Russian Empire. At that time, the Ukrainian territory, was under the rule of the Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth, a catholic reign that was not tolerant towards the orthodox faith. Following a rebellion prompted by Ukrainian Cossacks, led by Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi, the Tsar Aleksei signed the treaty of Pereislav and declared war to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Thanks to this agreement the Tsar took control of the Cossack army and their land, while he granted a high degree of autonomy under the tsardom. The treaty of Pereislav is a turning point for the history of Eastern Europe. The thirteen years long war that resulted from the treaty resulted into a Russian victory and a fatal weakening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. After a draining back and forth between the two armies, the Poles were forced to sign in 1667 the truce of Andrusovo, favourable to the Russians. Ukraine was split along the river Dnieper with Russian receiving the eastern part, including the city of Kiev. The remaining parts of modern days Ukraine fell under Russian control only two centuries later, during the 35 years long reign of Catherine the Great, between 1762 and 1796.

During the era of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the central power in Moscow and the Ukrainian SSR was peculiar, characterized by periods of forced Russification alternated with periods of greater cultural autonomy, going through tragedies as the "dekulakization" and the Holodomor with the constant of the centralised government in Moscow. The birth of moder day Ukraine in fact is a product of the Bolshevik revolution and the agreements and concession that Lenin had to make to Ukrainian nationalists in the context of the civil war. After the end of the civil war, the policies regarding ethnic minorities, implemented by the new Soviet State in its first years, intensified the nationalistic sentiments of the Ukrainians that were already growing during the disintegration of the Tsardom. Altogether with dekulakization and the Holodomor, another element of Soviet history that deeply affected the moder days scenario in the region, is the transfer of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954. This transfer was made due to political contingencies, and not for economic, social or cultural reasons, in fact Khrushchev needed the support of Ukrainian party elites to consolidate his succession to Stalin.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the two countries had to face several problems, as the management of Soviet assets, that were handed to Russia in exchange for the promise of the Ukrainian territorial integrity. During those years Russian influence was strong in Ukraine through corruption and economic penetration, while the country was



ethnically divided in east and west between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. The dissatisfaction for the status quo in Ukraine grew among the population, until it exploded in 2004 with the Orange Revolution. From that moment Ukraine began to slowly shift towards the European Union, however the tensions between the two parts of the country were not over and erupted once again in 2013-2014 with the events of the Euromaidan, that resulted in the civil war in the eastern region of the country and the putsch in Crimea that was annexed to the Russian national territory following a referendum.

The theory employed in the analysis of the two cases is the Situational Crisis Communication theory (SCCT), which is performed by following a set of steps. First of all it is necessary to identify the organization (the actor that builds the communication strategies) and the stakeholders (the actors to whom the communication is addressed). Followingly the SCCT identifies three crisis clusters based upon the level of attribution of crisis responsibility, therefore determining in which cluster the current crisis falls into is the first step in assessing the reputational threat. The three clusters, each with its level of crisis responsibility attribution are, the victim, intentional and accidental cluster. Once identified in which cluster the initial responsibility of the organization is situated, the further step to complete the framing of the crisis is to assess the crisis history and the prior reputation of the organization. Once those steps are addressed it is possible to analyse the strategies employed by the organization following a list of different possible approaches, divided in primary and secondary response strategies with their subcategories.

The methodology employed for this comparative analysis relies on a comprehensive approach that involves the collection and utilization of various sources, both primary and secondary, to provide a thorough examination of their crisis communication strategies.

The two chapters that delve into the analysis of the case studies follow the same structure. The second chapter begins by discussing the figure of Volodimir Zelensky, starting from his victorious 2019 electoral campaign. Already from this occasion can be appreciated elements that will become fundamental during Ukrainian communication during the war. The content of Zelensky's campaign was as unconventional as its form. Rather than detailed policy proposals, his campaign focused on broad themes of change, reform, and national unity. This vagueness was both a strength and a weakness: it allowed

a diverse range of voters to project their hopes and desires onto his candidacy, but it also led to criticisms regarding the lack of clarity and substance in his policy positions.

Volodymyr Zelensky's communication style, both as a presidential candidate and then as the President of Ukraine, reflects a blend of traditional rhetoric, media savvy, and an innovative approach to public engagement. One of the most striking aspects of Zelensky's communication is his use of informal, relatable language. Unlike many traditional politicians who often rely on formal speeches and political jargon, Zelensky's discourse is characterized by a conversational tone that resonates with a broad spectrum of the Ukrainian population. The approachability in his language has been a key factor in building a strong connection with his audience, particularly among the younger generation and those disillusioned with conventional political rhetoric. Another key element of Zelensky's communication style is the extensive and strategic use of social media and digital platforms. This direct line of communication through social media bypasses traditional media channels, allowing Zelensky to deliver his message unfiltered and in real-time. This approach has not only amplified his reach but also bolstered his image as a modern, accessible leader.

Following the Russian invasion, Zelensky had to re-arrange his strategies and the perception of his figure to adapt to the new and stifling wartime context, without however losing the main characteristics that distinguished him until the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. The first example of wartime communication brilliance from Zelensky can be found just a couple of days since the beginning of the Russian invasion, when it was rumoured that the Ukrainian president had fled the country. In response he posted a video walking into the streets of Kiev inciting his people to keep fighting. Since the first critical hours Zelensky adopted forms of non-verbal communication, it has been as impactful and important as his spoken words, revealing much about his leadership style and the message he conveys both to his nation and to the international community. For example, he started to wear military shirt and tracksuit and let his beard grow. He kept this style regardless of the context, showing that he is only one of the thousands of soldiers at war and he shares the destiny and everyday life of its people and has no intention of leaving them, breaking the traditional barriers of formality that often separate political leaders from their constituents, projecting an image of accessibility and unity with his people.

Regarding his approach to international public opinion, his main objective is to impose the Ukrainian narrative over the Russian. Achieving this goal, from a communicative perspective, it is easier since Ukraine is the country victim of the invasion and Putin's rhetoric of "special operation for peace" and "denazification of Ukraine" never breached into Western public opinion. Zelensky actively seeks to engage the international public, for example asking to the people close to the Ukrainian cause to manifest their solidarity into the streets of their cities. In doing so Zelensky's tries to make the war in Ukraine not about Ukraine itself, but to rise Ukraine as a symbol of democracy and resistance against the Russian invader that threatens the Western democratic ideals. This strategy is functional on maintaining international pressure on Russia high and fostering the support of allied countries.

In Ukrainian communication the use of social media as a mean of propaganda has been of fundamental importance. A primary goal was to assert and sustain their narrative within the global discourse. Another significant aim of Ukraine's communication efforts was to bolster the morale of both its military personnel and civilian population. From this point of view an effective communication played a crucial role, offering regular updates, inspirational messages. Moreover, Ukraine had to fight against Russia also in the information war on two fronts. First of all, countering the Russian narrative and dismantle each point of their justifications for the beginning of the war, and on the other hand they had to fight the spread of misinformation and fake news.

An interesting format employed by Ukrainian communication is the use of "memes" published by official accounts. The use of this format with the adoption of the right layouts and forms demonstrates the acute attention regarding social media dynamics of the social media management of the Ukrainian institutional pages. Despite it may appear as an unserious method of communication, its use was instrumental to spread the Ukrainian narrative engaging national and international audience and attacking Russia in the meantime.

The invasion of Ukraine was unexpected in its magnitude by the military and the population, therefore in the first days shock and confusion were huge. Russian troops were advancing fast towards Kiev and the risk that the army and the morale of the citizens would crumble under the pression was high. What was needed in that phase were

examples, heroes to fuel the flame of hope, and this is what Ukrainian propaganda provided at the beginning of the invasion. For this reason, in the first phase of the invasion were crafted myths as the Ghost of Kyiv, when the situation on the battlefield stabilized Ukrainian propaganda shifted towards highlighting acts of bravery performed by common Ukrainians.

Applying the framing of the SCCT, the Ukrainian government was pointed as the organization and its population, international public opinion and the allied governments as the stakeholders and its case labelled in the victim cluster. Ukrainian prior history per se is not influential in the perception of the organization towards the stakeholders. If instead is considered the history crisis face to face with Russia and its historical recurrence, the level of blame attribution to Ukraine is minimal and is not held responsible for the extension of the crisis began in 2014. Regarding the prior reputation of the organization before the war was not at his highest, however this did not reflect in an increase in the crisis responsibility attribution, neither it stopped the international community in aiding the country while suffering an aggression. Following this analysis emerges that the primary strategies employed by Ukraine were attack the accuser and scapegoating, while all three secondary strategies were adopted.

This same scheme was repeated for the case of Russia, that begins with an analysis of the figure of Putin, beginning from his rise to the Kremlin from former agent of the KGB. His ideological framework is closer to Reaganism and Thatcherism, rather than Marxism, not in its content but for how it is structured. It is not a fully developed all-encompassing ideology, it is more correct to consider it as a system of rule and a guiding mentality. This set of rules, rather than ideological principles, is based on a set of habits and emotions; the shared belief among Putin ideologues is that Russia in order to survive in the adverse global context needs a strong state, needs to be a great power abroad and needs an uncontested internal regime. The ideological approach is reflected in all its element in the communicative style adopted by the Russian President and how he shaped the perception and portrayal of his figure. During his presidency he tried to rebuild the image of Russia as a strong country with a global influence after the struggles suffered during the 90'. In order to achieve this objective, a powerful weapon was his image itself on which he projected the portrayal of strength that he desired for his country. In Putin's narrative and strategic communication are omnipresent references to history, constantly recalling the

historical legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In recalling the USSR, it is not expressed any sympathy towards Marxism, the nostalgia is used to recall the past greatness of the country to prompt nationalism. Furthermore, by framing the narrative around historical issues and the legacy of Soviet policies, Putin also shapes the contemporary understanding and justification of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

In the analysis of Russian communicative approach, it is important to note its propensity towards wayfinding rather than a meticulous planification through a preidentified objective. The objective of strategy is to engage in warfare at a particular moment and to address it based on the existing circumstances.

Compared to Ukraine, in Russia traditional media and in particular television, have a more prominent role in internal communication therefore its use during the phases of the war for prompting propaganda has been intense, in fact television holds a primary role in Russian information system. Over the years the Russian government obtained the monopoly over televised information, therefore this makes it the perfect medium to the spread of propaganda within the country.

As for Ukraine, also for Russia, the use of information and propaganda through social media is incredibly important, however due to the position of Russia it had to employ different and also deceptive tactics. Alongside the objective to rally internal support, non-official communication on social media is used as preferred instrument to influence international public opinion. The primary goal of Russian communication tactics on social media through the dissemination of fake news, is not solely to gather consensus around its actions but rather to disrupt and weaken the efforts of its adversaries. A critical aspect of this strategy is to target the international support towards Ukraine, which is fundamental in sustaining its war effort.

In the analysis conducted applied the framing of the SCCT are considered the same international stakeholders of Ukraine, and the organization is located in the intentional cluster, with the highest level of crisis responsibility attribution. This situation is worsened by the crisis history and prior reputation of the Russian government that made ineffective the strategies employed. Among primary response strategies were used attack the accuser, scapegoating (that were also adopted by Ukraine), justification, and as secondary strategy victimage.

Comparing the two cases, emerges that Russia was not able, or willing, to adapt its narrative scheme and strategies to the context of social media, using those platforms mainly to spread misinformation but not in a positive and proactive way. Altogether with the capability of Ukrainian communication to advocate for its stances, crisis responsibility attribution and its effect on the efficacy of communication, resulted in a major defeat from the communicative point of view for the Russians. On their side, this victory allowed the Ukrainians to increase the support received from their foreign allies, both from the ideological point of view, allowing Ukraine to get closer to the Western field, but most pragmatically from the material point of view, receiving ammunition, weapon and military know how, giving to the country the possibility to defend itself against what appeared to be overwhelming forces. This analysis highlights the importance of crisis communication and its strategic use in a context of warfare, without the skilful strategies employed by Ukraine or if the Kremlin had been able to impose its narrative and isolate Ukraine, the war would already have had a different outcome.