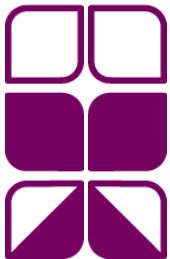


Annex 8. Ukraine's Voice in The World



Two Years On: How to Tell Ukraine's Story (more) Broadly, Differently, Strategically



6 March 2024

Dr. Kristie D Evenson

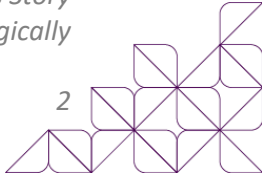
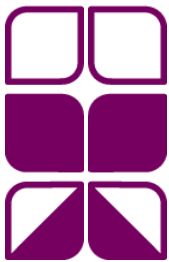
CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION..... 3

II. WHAT HAS WORKED?.....4

III. WHAT HAVE BEEN CHALLENGES AND GAPS?..... 9

IV. BEING MORE STRATEGIC ABOUT STRATCOMM:
POINTS TO CONSIDER 13



I. INTRODUCTION

Background: Since Russia's February 2022 invasion, ensuring continuous and adequate international solidarity, political, financial, humanitarian, and military support has become one of Ukraine's priority policies and a mission of many media and civil society organizations. To attain this objective, state institutions, media and civic actors actively reached out to international audiences to strategically communicate "Ukraine's story."

The extraordinary bravery of Ukrainians and the country's powerful strategic communication (StratComm) efforts have drastically changed the perception of Ukraine globally,¹ with many correlating Ukraine's successful StratComm with the unprecedented military, economic, political, and humanitarian support of Ukraine. Ukraine attracted nearly EUR120bn in financial support, over EUR10bn in humanitarian aid and over EUR80bn in military assistance;² entered formal EU membership negotiations, while as of September last year, 7 in 10 people globally want their government to support Ukraine against Russian aggression.³

Current Situation: Ukraine's StratComm achievements are undeniable. But as Ukraine enters the third year of the war, it is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain the same level of international attention, solidarity, and support. Periodic high-profile corruption scandals, internal political infighting, slow progress and pushbacks on the frontline, Ukrainians' declining trust in the President and growing disbelief that the country is moving in the right direction⁴ are some of the reasons for a growing fatigue amongst its Western partners and allies.⁵ Ukraine's international partners' own electoral processes as well global events, such as the Israel-Gaza war, are diverting foreign media, public and policymakers' attention from Ukraine. In November last year, for example, the transfer of US military hardware to Ukraine was at its lowest since the war began⁶, while the bill envisioning \$60bn in assistance to Ukraine has been stuck in Congress since October last year.⁷ The number of articles about Ukraine in major international online media as well as the social media buzz have been steadily and sharply declining since April 2023.⁸ Numerous polls across the EU indicate waning public support for Ukrainian refugees, and there are reports that Germany and Poland – the two major destinations of externally displaced Ukrainians – may be cutting funding for the migrants this year.⁹

The Challenge: Assuming, that current levels and potentially expanded, international support is vital for Ukraine's independent, democratic, and prosperous future, and assuming Ukraine's

¹ https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/32/Ukraines_Global_Perception_Report_2022.pdf

² <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

³ <https://globescan.com/2023/10/18/seven-in-ten-people-want-their-governments-to-support-ukraine/>

⁴ <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1368&page=1>

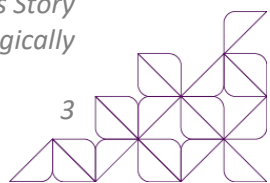
⁵ <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/ukraine-fatigue-and-the-challenges-facing-kyiv-in-2024/>

⁶ https://twitter.com/ukraine_map/status/1731330029613637745

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/will-congress-keep-ukraine-in-the-fight/>

⁸ <https://brandukraine.org.ua/en/analytics/>

⁹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-eu-refugees-fatigue/32730367.html>



state and non-state actors' strategic communication abroad has a direct impact on the level of such support, crafting a StratComm 2.0 to tell Ukraine's story is paramount. To support this effort, we unpack some of the factors for StratComm success to date, identity challenges and gaps in the effort, and suggest considerations when improving onward StratComm efforts.

II. WHAT HAS WORKED?

Compelling Strategic Narratives Directly and Widely Delivered

Shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy set the stage for Ukraine's future strategic communication with the West and key allies to secure political, military, financial and humanitarian support for the country's fight. Zelenskyy delivered key narratives in an unconventional and direct way¹⁰ as he symbolically adopted a military clothing style¹¹ and used his superior communication skills¹² to overwhelm Western audiences with factual statements, emotion, and allusions.¹³ Olena Zelenska's address to the US Congress "not as the first lady but as a daughter and mother" and subsequent appearance on the *Vogue* magazine's cover¹⁴ have completed a personal portrait of Ukraine's bravery for the international community. Appealing to both policymakers and voters in the West and key allies, Ukraine's highly personified strategic communication narratives revolved around five themes:

- ***Ukraine is fighting a just and existential defensive war against an unprovoked invasion.*** The overwhelming perception that Ukraine is fighting a just war to defend its territorial integrity, sovereignty and the very existence of the nation provides for a very strong narrative for communication abroad.
- ***Ukraine is an underdog fighting a heroic war.***¹⁵ As Ukraine has been withstanding the aggression of a much larger and better-resourced enemy, references to the David vs. Goliath myth have certainly won hearts amongst Western audiences and allies.¹⁶
- ***Ukraine is fighting for the future of the international order and in defense of democracy and freedom.***¹⁷ President Zelenskyy's statement that the "war in Ukraine is a war in

¹⁰ https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60855280?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA

¹¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/narrative-warfare-russo-ukrainian-war-comparison-between-blokker/>

¹² <https://theconversation.com/volodymyr-zelensky-how-acting-prepared-the-ukrainian-president-for-the-role-of-his-life-178955>

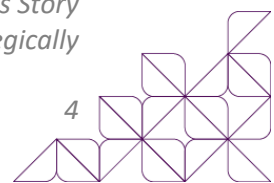
¹³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminnegallo/2022/03/17/zelenskys-audience-centered-speeches-connect-to-shared-values/?sh=2829cd676884>

¹⁴ <https://vogue.sg/ukraine-first-lady-olena-zelenska-vogue/>

¹⁵ <https://nypost.com/2022/02/28/heroes-of-ukraine-bravery-on-full-display-as-they-fight-russia/>

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/world/europe/at-a-security-conference-in-munich-zelensky-invokes-the-battle-of-david-and-goliath.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-60858611>



general for values: life, democracy, freedom. This is a war all over the world"¹⁸ has caught on¹⁹ to become one of key narratives towards Ukraine's Western partners and allies.

- ***Ukrainian society is united and resilient against the aggressor.*** Following the outbreak of the war, another of Ukraine's strategic narratives focused on unprecedented mobilization of the society that was united behind the common goal of defending the country.²⁰
- ***Unlike Russia, Ukraine belongs to the "civilized world"²¹ and is part of the European family.***²² Narratives that juxtapose exalted and brave Ukrainians by ignoble and barbaric Russians²³ (reaction to Alexei Navalny's death is the most recent example²⁴) have helped to drastically improve international perception of Ukraine²⁵ and made Russia's and Putin's global ratings plummet²⁶. On the European continent these narratives supported Ukraine's strategic priority of achieving candidate status for EU accession and the launch of formal accession negotiations.²⁷

Together all of these narratives landed well with Western audiences and allies²⁸ and would be later reinforced by other state actors and civil society organizations thus creating a whole-of-society strategic communication effort.

Nation Branding Amid the War

In addition to communicating key strategic narratives through diplomatic channels to secure international support, Ukraine has arguably become "the first country to launch an official nation branding campaign in the midst of war" as a response to military aggression.²⁹

¹⁸ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-voyuye-za-cinnosti-svobodi-i-demokratiyi-tomu-rozra-73273>

¹⁹ <https://news.stanford.edu/report/2023/02/27/ukrainian-leaders-one-year-since-russian-invasion/>

²⁰ <https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20220225-thousands-of-ukrainians-sign-up-to-fight-for-their-country-as-russia-invasion-continues>

²¹ <https://www.weforum.org/press/2023/01/zelenskyy-urges-speed-and-resolve-in-ukraine-conflict/>

²² <https://www.intellinews.com/ukraine-belongs-to-the-european-family-declare-eu-premiers-247749/>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/10/co-founder-of-russian-tech-giant-yandex-condemns-barbaric-war>

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/reactions-death-russian-opposition-leader-navalny-2024-02-16/>

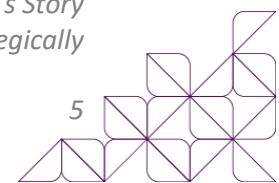
²⁵ https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/32/Ukraines_Global_Perception_Report_2022.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/large-shares-see-russia-and-putin-in-negative-light-while-views-of-zelensky-more-mixed/>

²⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/ukraine/>

²⁸ <https://theconversation.com/ukrainian-propaganda-how-zelensky-is-winning-the-information-war-against-russia-182061>

²⁹ <https://theconversation.com/with-bravery-as-its-new-brand-ukraine-is-turning-advertising-into-a-weapon-of-war-188408>



Launched in April 2022,³⁰ the *Be Brave Like Ukraine* campaign³¹ was designed to turn the value of bravery into international solidarity and tangible military and financial assistance to Ukraine. By relying on billboards, popular media and social networks, the campaign directly targeted citizens of foreign countries to make donations or pressure their governments to support Ukraine. The campaign reached more than 50 million contacts, was placed at about 11,000 digital screens covering more than 150 cities (in the USA, Canada, UK, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Sweden, Switzerland, Romania, Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, India, Belgium, Ireland, and Taiwan).³²

The Ukrainian state has not been the only actor in international nation branding. As part of the whole-of-society approach to Ukraine's external strategic communication described below, the *Brand Ukraine* civil society organization (CSO) has been helping develop a strong and sustainable brand of Ukraine in the world since February 2022.³³ Since inception, *Brand Ukraine* has implemented 7 international campaigns with a total reach of 100 million people addressing such issues as Ukraine's struggle, the importance of Ukraine's victory for the world, the country's future, countering Russia's disinformation and propaganda, as well as Ukraine's unique history and culture. In close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CSO operates the Ukraine.ua³⁴ – an ecosystem of official digital platforms of Ukraine that unites websites and social media pages that over the last two years engaged with over 600 million digital contacts and reached out to 1.1 million Instagram followers from among 190 countries.³⁵

Whole-of-Society Approach to Strategic Communication

The Ukrainian external strategic communication has been a whole-of-society effort, where extensive engagement of civil society has been one of the factors contributing to the success of StratComm in the West and with key allies. Despite the government's centralization of communication inside Ukraine, key narratives abroad have been distributed and amplified in a “heterogenous and creative manner.”³⁶

Often lacking formal coordination with the government or amongst themselves, civil society groups intuitively adhered to the “one-voice” approach to communicate a shared Ukraine's story of bravery, heroism, uniqueness of the country's culture and civility. Remarkably, such highly decentralized communication created a polyphony of messages and channels that were all geared towards the same objective – Ukraine's victory. Examples below attest to the extraordinary communication effort by Ukrainian civil society groups, although the lack of data

³⁰ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/buti-smilivimi-ce-nash-brend-budemo-poshiryuvati-nashu-smili-74165>

³¹ <https://brave.ua/en.html>

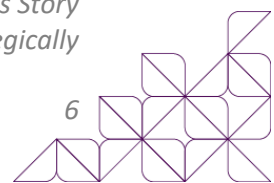
³² [https://dentsu.com.ua/en/news/eng/2022/05/Bravery to be Ukraine campaign implemented worldwide by dentsu Ukraine became the most expensive campaign of Ukraine](https://dentsu.com.ua/en/news/eng/2022/05/Bravery%20to%20be%20Ukraine%20campaign%20implemented%20worldwide%20by%20dentsu%20Ukraine%20became%20the%20most%20expensive%20campaign%20of%20Ukraine)

³³ <https://brandukraine.org.ua/en/>

³⁴ <https://ukraine.ua/>

³⁵ [https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/65/Brand Ukraine - Annual Digest 2022 UihvmKg.pdf](https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/65/Brand_Ukraine_-_Annual_Digest_2022_UihvmKg.pdf);
[https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/123/annual digest ENG.pdf](https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/123/annual_digest_ENG.pdf)

³⁶ <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE>



makes it impossible to determine which of the messages, approaches or channels have been most effective. Understanding that cause-effect relationship could be a crucial topic for a conversation with civil society actors as Ukraine enters the third year of the war and requires international assistance more than ever.

Exposing Russia's War Crimes: An alliance of Ukrainian private foundations, independent media and state institutions used the mediums of exhibits and performance in key geopolitical events in Europe and the US to socialize audiences to Russia's war crimes in Ukraine.³⁷

Campaigns for International Accountability Mechanisms for Russia's Crimes: Ukrainian CSOs supported the government in its initiative to set up a Special Tribunal on Crime of Aggression by implementing various campaigns.³⁸

Campaigns to Seize Russia's Assets: Key CSOs³⁹ have focused on urging the G7 countries and EU member states to hold Russia accountable by confiscating over \$300bn of frozen Russian assets and transferring them to Ukraine.

Expert Diplomacy: Several CSOs have focused on wider policy influencing, writing briefs and media commentary, and conducted 100s of meetings with policy makers and experts in the EU, US, and Japan.⁴⁰

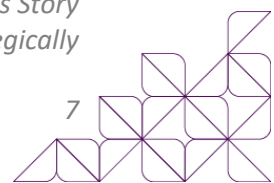
³⁷ This includes venues like the World Economic Forums in Davos, UN General Assembly session in New York, NATO Summit in Vilnius and the Munich Security Conference. And the Ukrainian Leadership Academy have staged performances in Cologne, Bonn, Brussels, Strasbourg, and Vienna to present a *Crime without Punishment* book about the 6,000 Ukrainian children who have been abducted by the Russian occupiers See:

<https://www.russianwarcrimeshouse.org/>; <https://ual.ua/en>;
<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/05/3/7400514/>

³⁸ These include: the Tribunal for Putin initiative by a coalition of Ukrainian human rights groups, the “people’s court,” and the World Needs Security by the Center for Civil Liberties advocating for accountability mechanisms to prosecute Russia’s crimes. See: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Special%20Tribunal%20for%20the%20political%20leadership%20of%20Russia%20-%20Just%20Punishment%20for%20War%20Crimes.pdf>

³⁹ These include the Center for Civil Liberties, the Anti-Corruption Action Center, and the International Center for Ukrainian Victory. Please see: <https://ccl.org.ua/en/about-the-ccl/>; <https://antac.org.ua/en/>;
<https://ukrainianvictory.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/makerussiapay>; <https://ccl.org.ua/en/about-the-ccl/>

⁴⁰ The New Europe Center promoted Ukraine’s European integration through an independent analytical monitoring of Ukraine’s implementation of EU recommendations called [Candidate Check](#) and conducted over 100 meetings with policymakers in the EU, the US and Japan. The Democratic Initiatives Foundation provided over 500 expert commentaries to foreign media on issues of Russia’s aggression and war crimes, NATO membership prospects, European integration and internal politics in Ukraine reaching a potential audience of over 1 million people. ICUV released over a dozen policy papers targeting ally decision makers and has been a key actor on the international stage advocating for F-16s. http://neweurope.org.ua/en/podiyi/?utm_source=eSputnik-promo&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Newsletter_27.12.2023&utm_content=1008552789



Cultural Diplomacy: CSOs have been using festivals and music conferences to spread the narratives, spread Ukrainian culture, and raise funding for Ukraine.⁴¹

Street Rallies: Street rallies have been an important instrument for externally based civil society organizations to amplify Ukraine's story abroad.⁴²

Campaigns to Isolate Russia: CSOs have organized events advocating for stronger sanctions and international isolation of Russia.⁴³

Debunking Fakes and Countering Russian Propaganda: Specialize CSOs have been working to identify information threats from Russia.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Music Saves UA presented Ukraine's story at 13 international festivals and over 25 music conferences through creative narratives devoted to the war, Ukraine's resilience, and its unique culture. In May 2023, Music Saves UA organized an interactive area called *See, Hear, Feel Ukraine* during the Eurovision festival in Liverpool, UK, to celebrate Ukrainian culture and music with over 37,000 guests attending. Docudays has been raising funds to tell the world about Russia's crimes in Ukraine, support those who are producing some of the international award-winning documentaries and introduce the world to contemporary Ukrainian culture.

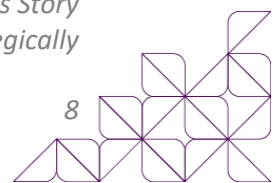
<https://musicsavesua.com/#main>; <https://eurovision.tv/story/liverpool-ukrainian-culture>;
<https://docudays.ua/eng/help/>; <https://festival.idfa.nl/en/news/audience-award-votes/>

⁴² Brussels-based Promote Ukraine Hub organized more than 70 street manifestations, while dozens of rallies in support of Ukraine around the world were coordinated by Warsaw-based International Center for Ukrainian Victory (ICUV) and gathered tens of thousands of people. At the time of writing of this paper, ICUV and its partners are gearing up to mark the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion with mass actions in Brussels, London, Warsaw, Rome, Copenhagen, Los Angeles, Toronto, Berlin, Munich, Tokyo, and other cities calling on Western governments and allies to transfer \$300bn of frozen Russian assets to Ukraine.

<https://www.promoteukraine.org/overview/>; <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/mass-rallies-around-the-world-in-support-of-ukraines-invitation-to-nato-301874289.html>;
<https://ukrainianvictory.org/publications/announcement-pro-ukrainian-rallies-marking-the-second-anniversary-of-the-russian-invasion-updated/>

⁴³ Under the #TurnOffRussian campaign, the Ukrainian Security and Cooperation Center organized 300 international events involving nearly 100,000 participants to advocate for stronger sanctions against Russia, its exclusion from the UN Security Council and further isolation of the aggressor state in economic, political, media and sports spheres. Kyiv School of Economics together with IT volunteers have been implementing the #LeaveRussia campaign calling on international companies to leave the Russian market thus cutting off funding for the aggressor's war machine. <https://uscc.org.ua/en/turn-off-russia/>; <https://leave-russia.org/about-project#whyleave>

⁴⁴ Ukrainian Crisis Media Center's Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group has been working to identify ongoing information threats from Russia, and to notify national, European, and American stakeholders of the ways to negate its influence on democratic processes in their respective countries and regions. Detector Media has been documenting real-time chronicles of the Kremlin disinformation about the Russia's invasion, while the Ukrainian Toronto Television has been running an English-language YouTube channel with regular videos debunking Russian propaganda and exposing the oppressive Russian culture with a potential reach of nearly 9.5 million viewers abroad. <https://disinfo.detector.media/en>; <https://www.youtube.com/@UkrainianTorontoTelevision/videos>



III. WHAT HAVE BEEN CHALLENGES AND GAPS?

Explaining and Telling the Complex Narratives

StratComm narratives have amply pointed out the themes that highlight the positives from the heroism to the resilience of the people sharply contrasted against the horrors of the war. Narratives have been less agile in crafting explanations for the complexities and ongoing challenges in two key areas.

Namely narratives have fallen short in explaining what the ‘fight for democracy’ has meant for internal democracy. From continued martial law and centralization of communications through the TV Marathon, to delays in elections, speculation about eroding domestic democratic standards have been circulating for months.⁴⁵ This has been compounded by corruption reporting which has been primarily focusing on the narrative of general progress (even if pointing out the deficits), while Western media describes new scandals and challenges,⁴⁶ and Russian disinformation throws in spicy details about alleged high corruption directly targeted Western political actors.⁴⁷

Secondly, narratives have splintered from earlier success in presenting a ‘united Ukrainian house that has a clear trajectory of war-time progress as the good guys.’ Counter offensive faltering and coverage of this,⁴⁸ and the Zaluzhny and Zelensky story has meant that much of the ‘blame game’ has been seen as a Ping pong match where Zelensky blames others (his own team or the West).⁴⁹ This undermined the image of Ukraine as grateful and effective, making both civilian and military leadership seem churlish and less reliable than before. Zaluzhny’s interview in November with *The Economist* admitting that the war was at a stalemate⁵⁰ may have been less detrimental to the narrative than Zelensky’s reaction and the ensuing speculation about the internal political struggle and the eventual removal of Zaluzhny; all this has increased perceptions that Ukrainian leadership is not a coherent and united force, and this may have clear consequences for future support.⁵¹

It also has been juxtaposed against attacks on Russian targets in Russia or in the occupied territories which have blurred the narrative of Ukraine as the only good guys. On one hand the

⁴⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/02/05/ukraines-democracy-in-darkness>

⁴⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/28/world/europe/ukraine-corruption-defense.html>

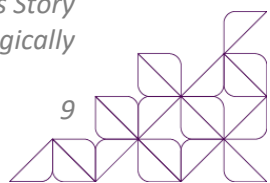
⁴⁷ For example, see: How pro-Russian ‘yacht’ propaganda influenced US debate over Ukraine aid.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67766964>

⁴⁸ Noticeably international coverage of the counter-offensive decreased and made up only a small portion of news on Ukraine. During several months, 5% of the international stories on Ukraine were on the counter-offensive. See:
https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/105/Media_Report_September.pdf

⁴⁹ https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60855280?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA

⁵⁰ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/01/ukraines-commander-in-chief-on-the-breakthrough-he-needs-to-beat-russia>

⁵¹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/zelenskyy-removes-top-general-in-ukraines-biggest-shakeup-of-the-war/>



attacks appeared to demonstrate Ukraine military prowess. On the other hand, lack of Western media access to sites in Russia where attacks took place meant that (primarily) Russian media was capturing the images and the stories, and these were mostly just circulated by Western media with descriptive narrative of what had taken place, often in the same article with Russian attacks in Ukraine.⁵²

Overall, in both areas, Ukraine has literally been on the StratComm defensive rather than directing the complex narratives, and this in turn has decreased confidence in the Ukraine story and opened the wider narrative to show their discrepancies.

Skimming Over Tough Actors and Political Interests in ‘Friendly’ Countries

StratComm efforts have mostly focused on building solidarity not on effectively addressing domestic political issues and geopolitical realities that have been undermining solidarity in different countries of the West and allies. Most of the EU and Western world has strongly supported and advocated for Ukraine since the February 2022 invasion. However, this support has not been even across the EU or even within the U.S. Almost from the beginning, apparent spoilers like Prime Minister Orban in Hungary⁵³ and domestic political interests including those protecting internal agriculture markets⁵⁴ and syndicates have thwarted EU solidarity.⁵⁵ In the US, strong initial support became partisan as domestic politics began to instrumentalize the war to the point that a Republican Senator from a state that has a tank factory benefitting from arming Ukraine publicly came out against more funding.⁵⁶ As these counter narratives have evolved, gained voice, and exposure, most responses coming from Ukraine have kept to the general talking points of geopolitical solidarity and values or blamed Russian disinformation (which clearly is significant) or even suing three EU countries over import bans.⁵⁷ There has been little recognition that geopolitical arguments have limits when domestic political interests are at stake even with allies.

Global South Messaging

The other key challenge in StratComm is Ukraine’s attempts to reach the whole world with the same StratComm formulas that it used with the West and allies. 2022 data suggests that populations that are neutral or that support Russia are significantly higher in key Global South

⁵² <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-odesa-drone-strikes-missiles-zelenskiy-aid/32734096.html>

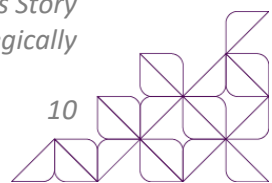
⁵³ How Hungary played spoiler to Ukraine’s biggest backer <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2305965635975>

⁵⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-slovakia-extend-grain-bans-despite-blocs-lift/> ; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/farmers-pressure-eu-for-more-safeguards-on-food-imports-from-ukraine/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/04/explained-why-truckers-are-blockading-the-eus-eastern-border-with-ukraine>

⁵⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/opinion/israel-gaza-war-ukraine.html#commentsContainer>

⁵⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-sues-poland-hungary-and-slovakia-over-import-bans/>



Countries,⁵⁸ and it is likely that 2023 data would show even a higher trend. Several factors appear to be at play.

Tone Deaf/Insufficient narrative framing in key Global South Countries

First, Ukraine has faced an uphill battle in being ‘known’ in much of the Global South in comparison to Russia.⁵⁹ And this has been compounded by the fact that its messaging has been untargeted, awkward, or misaligned with audiences. Defending democracy and geopolitical arguments of protecting Europe have less resonance in countries where the US and other Western European actors still have neocolonial labels.⁶⁰ Targeting BRICS countries with these arguments particularly seemed to miss the point that BRICS countries see themselves as an evolving world order set of actors not countries needing to automatically line up with the West.⁶¹ While some of the messaging has been adjusted and tailored from the summer of 2023 onward,⁶² most of the messaging circulating in the Global South was still the dominant freedom focused narratives.

Furthermore, StratComm has underestimated the power of Russian cultural dominance and its influences. Ukraine has been trying to decolonize through removal of Russian political and cultural influences, but in the process failed to understand how Global South Countries themselves might understand the destruction of Pushkin statues, etc. which Russia can then spin to their advantage as a protector of world culture and supporter of Global South cultures.⁶³ This then easily feeds into Russian disinformation that these removals of Russian cultural symbols are an expression of “Nazism” which in turn requires Russia to respond.⁶⁴

⁵⁸In seven Global South countries (China, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Turkey, and UAE). 34% of people surveyed had a clear pro-Ukrainian position, with a further 46% being neutral to Ukraine or Russia, and the rest 20% positive to Russia. This contrasts with around 80% of the population in Europe and North America who claimed they supported Ukraine and roughly 15% had a neutral position. Overall, the support for Russia and neutrality were higher in the countries of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America — 25% and 15% on average, respectively. https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/32/Ukraines_Global_Perception_Report_2022.pdf

⁵⁹For example, only 31% of those surveyed in BRICS countries said they were familiar with Ukraine’s culture, 35% with its politics, and 31% with its history.

https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/105/Media_Report_September.pdf and <https://www.economist.com/international/2022/09/22/how-russia-is-trying-to-win-over-the-global-south>

⁶⁰ For example, 38% of the respondents agreed with the statement that ‘Ukraine is fighting for freedom, democracy, and sovereignty’ (46% in Turkey, 45% in India, and 44% in UAE).

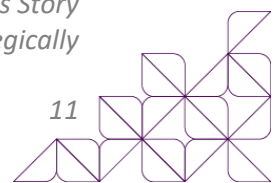
https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/32/Ukraines_Global_Perception_Report_2022.pdf

⁶¹ See this set of takeaways from the recent Munich Security Conference which considers how Global South countries view security in broader terms. <https://www.dw.com/en/msc-2024-no-international-security-without-the-global-south/a-68288812>

⁶² This refocused messaging included focusing on Russia as a colonizer and attention on issues like the kidnapped children from Ukraine.

⁶³ <https://iz.ru/1460936/2023-01-27/zakharova-sravnila-otnoshenie-k-pushkinu-v-afrike-i-psevdotcivilizovannykh-stranakh> and <https://vseruss.com/v-kamerune-poyavitsya-pamyatnik-aleksandru-pushkinu/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news/war-propaganda-russia-is-saving-ukrainians-from-self-destruction>



Insufficient Attention to Combatting RU Disinformation Mechanisms in Global South Countries

Awkward and imprecise messaging ill effects have particularly been compounded by Russian disinformation efforts around the world. In general, Russian disinformation strategies have linked with already existing anti-Western sentiment⁶⁵ and then been tailored to specific conditions in groups of countries in the Global South. For example, Russian narratives point to Western sanctions on Russia (rather than Russia's Black Sea blockade) to explain why the price of bread and fertilizer have become so expensive in many Global South Countries. The fact that sanctions did not include these commodities gets lost in the campaigns, and both state actors (sometimes intentionally to shore up populist sentiments) and publics in many countries of the Global South understand the war as one where, 'the West is again making them suffer.'⁶⁶ Also, absent is much information or exposure to the "Grain from Ukraine Initiative"⁶⁷ which would counter some of these concerns. Overall, the Russian-dominated messages are propagated by sophisticated aggregators of messaging through RT and Sputnik in Spanish as well as Arabic and related stations and social media throughout the Global South.⁶⁸ Narrative dissemination is further helped by Chinese as well as Venezuelan *TeleSur* in Latin America and the Global South.⁶⁹

Insufficient Identification of Global South Peer Influencers to Spread the Narrative

Ukrainian civil society has spent significantly less time engaging with their counterparts/peers in Global South countries than in the West, and consequently have been missing domestic advocates to actively shore up the Ukraine narrative. CSOs have recognized the need for strategic partnerships with peers and have been forging these links, but the fact remains that few think tanks, academics, independent media, or civil society policy influencers in Global South Countries deviate from the dominant narratives playing out in their countries. Partly, this may be because they may not see the war as a priority for them or they have mixed understanding and attitudes towards the war, if influenced by the Russian (or even Chinese or Indian) world view. Hence, there are few voices in important BRICS countries to challenge the official foreign policy leanings. This need not necessarily be pro-Russian; neutrality of position is often just enough, and such is a key strategy of Russian disinformation.

New Global War Outrages and Context for Understanding War in Ukraine

Finally, the beginning of the Israel-Gaza war in October 2023 overnight changed Ukraine's global StratComm context. The war quickly captured international headlines and 'replaced' Ukraine as

⁶⁵ <https://www.economist.com/international/the-invasion-of-ukraine-is-not-the-first-social-media-war-but-it-is-the-most-viral/21808456>

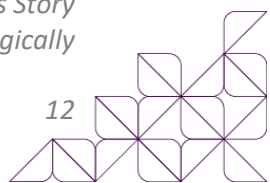
⁶⁶ One of the author's field research in Peru in May 2023 highlighted this disinformation narrative in Peru and surrounding countries.

⁶⁷ <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/-Grain-from-Ukraine-continues-to-ensure-global-food-security~560964#:~:text=President%20Zelenskyy%27s%20%22Grain%20from%20Ukraine,recipient%20countries%20is%20a%20priority.>

⁶⁸ For a study on Russian disinformation in global settings, please see:

https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/sr_525-russian_influence_campaigns_latam.pdf

⁶⁹ <https://www.economist.com/international/2022/09/22/how-russia-is-trying-to-win-over-the-global-south>



the international hotspot.⁷⁰ Daily war outrages from one war zone replaced another. This combined with almost two years of war in Ukraine made for steadily declining international coverage of Ukraine in general, and the war in particular. Overall, by the end of 2023 international coverage continued to decrease and global searches about Ukraine had reached January 2022 pre-invasion levels.⁷¹

Ukraine's support of Israel has also created new rifts with much of the Global South. While Russian disinformation has been working overtime to ultimately link Ukraine to Israel and the US and to killing babies in Gaza,⁷² Ukraine's open support of Israel has also cost it potential allies. Overall, the world has become more and more divided about being 'for' or 'against' Israel and having solidarity with the victims from the war on Gaza and from the October 7th Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. New Ukraine victims, unfortunately, have been partially subsumed in this hyper polarized information tsunami.

IV. BEING MORE STRATEGIC ABOUT STRATCOMM: POINTS TO CONSIDER

While Ukraine's state and non-state StratComm efforts seem to have helped garner substantial international support, now at the beginning of the third year of the war it may be the time to revisit some of the narratives and approaches to external communication to make Ukraine's StratComm (even) more effective. We pose a few points for consideration.

FIRST IN RELATION TO CRITICAL MESSAGING:

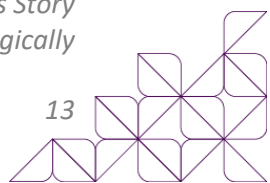
Consider shifting to a 'united' but 'complex' narrative for all external messaging: Much of Ukraine's StratComm success abroad has been owed to the narratives of national unity and unprecedented bravery and resilience of the society. External perception of Ukraine as a nation of one voice and common fight may have been shaken by reports of internal political infighting, declining public support of the country's leadership (for the first time since the start of the war) and demoralization of the society due to unpopular policy decisions (e.g. mobilization). Given this now may be the time to shift this narrative to grapple with complexities of the situation. A key focus should be to reinvent strategic narratives to convey that Ukraine, despite complexities, remains united and has its 'house is in order' and ready to continue to fight. Civil society organizations, by virtue of lacking political ambition, may be best suited to craft and convey those narratives through wider alliances and coalitions.

⁷⁰ It is noteworthy that within a few days the BBC World News Topline Category News read "Israel-Gaza war" and "War in Ukraine" was shifted to the right. Similar dropdown categories or live updates replaced Ukraine coverage in the *New York Times*, CNN, Al Jazeera etc. By the end of 2023, Ukraine had disappeared from Google's top trends search summary to be replaced by "war in the Middle East."

<https://trends.google.com/trends/yis/2023/GLOBAL/?hl=en-US>

⁷¹ https://brandukraine.org.ua/documents/132/Ukraine_in_Global_Search_2023_e6hclyL.pdf

⁷² <https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/Virtual-Manipulation-Brief-2023-2.pdf?zoom=page-fit>



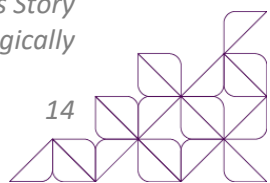
Consider military support (still) as an existential StratComm priority for Allied Audiences: The war is far from over as Russia has been increasing its assault capabilities and gaining new offensive momentum in the skies and on the ground, while Ukraine has been experiencing shortage of ammunition, military leadership reshuffle and decreasing morale. In these circumstances, securing sustainable international military support for Ukraine is as crucial as ever and should arguably be a priority for state and non-state StratComm abroad. This particularly pertains to securing the delivery of F-16 jets, air defense systems and ammo, longer-range missiles, and heavy artillery so that Ukraine can withstand new waves of Russia's aggression.

Consider new scenarios of what could happen if Ukraine loses for Allied Audiences: It may be timely to shift narratives from Ukraine's inevitable victory to explain what could happen in case Ukraine loses the war because of inadequate international support. Focus on the *what ifs* and what this could mean for Ukraine and its allies from the security concerns for NATO countries to the realities of long-term refugee populations in Europe.⁷³

Consider revisiting StratComm priorities when it comes to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration for Western Audiences: Following the results of the Vilnius Summit, investing in NATO membership advocacy no longer seems to be a priority. With formal EU membership negotiations now open, civil society may consider adapting their StratComm efforts to the reality that Ukraine needs to enhance its capability to engage in and lead the accession talks and undergo a complex path of reforms. This includes aligning with the EU's vast *acquis*, encompassing everything from economic and trade policies to education, public finance, tax policy, and agricultural rules. Importantly, rule of law, anti-corruption and transparency are cross-cutting themes across all sectoral negotiations, closely monitored both internally and externally throughout the journey to membership. Achieving this alignment will demand robust engagement from Ukraine's civil society and could be a central piece of its external StratComm.

Consider how to reframe narratives that resonate with the Global South Countries: UA needs to develop narratives that resonate with Global South histories, needs, and policy priorities. This could be framing the fight against Russia's aggression with independence and decolonization. Further framing the fight in relation to international law principles and as a global struggle against oppression with shared interests in sovereignty, human rights, and a fairer international order provides actors in these countries space to be in solidarity and provides a value-based narrative that can garner wider support. These narratives could be further strengthened by focusing on Ukraine contributions to food security, etc., in ways that are relevant to the intended audiences.

⁷³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andysemotiuk/2024/02/19/possible-20-million-ukrainians-will-migrate-if-putin-wins-in-ukraine/?sh=7c227b6375b5>; <https://ukrainianvictory.org/publications/what-is-at-stake-in-ukraine/>



SECOND IN RELATION TO STRATCOMM APPROACHED AND METHODS:

Consider stronger coordination on StratComm 2.0 objectives while maintaining decentralized communication: To date, Ukraine's state and non-state communication efforts have been decentralized but intuitively synchronized to pursue shared talking points under a broad objective that were relevant during the first two years of the war. Given that a decentralized approach seems to have worked in the past, this should continue, but with a more intentional set of StratComm objectives. It might make sense for civil society and the state to develop a "master script" of StratComm objectives and narratives together but that they then can continue to present these through different communication tactics, channels, and audiences.

Consider how to better balance internal and external StratComm: In the end, international assistance will be meaningless without trust and support of Ukrainians themselves. For example, the narrative of "Ukraine is fighting for democracy and freedom" will be hard to sustain if its own citizens and international audiences are raising concerns about the state of democracy and corruption in Ukraine. Similarly external narratives of bravery, heroism, and resilience may lose credibility amidst reports on massive public resistance to government mobilization efforts. Civil society and media will need to consider how to balance pushing for reforms while building also communicating to building internal and external support.

Consider how to adapt StratComm to evolving external political and geopolitical realities in the West and the Global South: This year's elections to the European Parliament, elections in the US and other countries should provide an important context for shaping Ukraine's critical external narratives, outreach strategies and communication channels. Context-relevant approach to StratComm in those countries and regions will be crucial to minimize risks and/or capitalize on opportunities for continued support to Ukraine, while scenario planning could help determine most effective ways of investing limited state and non-state StratComm resources. Upcoming elections as well as such geopolitical events as the Israel-Gaza war will draw international attention away from Ukraine and polarize public attitudes towards it, which suggests a need for StratComm dynamism and pivot-level readiness whether in cultural or policy diplomacy.

Consider which Global South Country engagement to prioritize as linked to key geopolitical influence points sought: There is a tough uphill battle for Ukraine StratComm in the Global South. There are certainly both narratives and manners which can make StratComm more effective as noted above, but before pursuing these, a clear-eyed examination of influence possibilities and geopolitical policy objectives of these linked to Global South countries needs to be delineated. How might India play a constructive role for Ukraine? How might South Africa be a further source for much needed weapons? And how might it influence other African or global actors if more positively affected? How likely is Brazil or any of the others to see beyond traditional Russian relations to be proponents for Ukraine on the world stage? These are all necessary questions to ask when deciding how to commit resources towards StratComm in the Global South.



AND IN RELATION TO THIS IF COMMITTING RESOURCES,

Consider how to better understand Global South country specific policy priorities and design communication outreach efforts to key policy actors that correspond to these: For example, Global South countries want predictable food security from the market, they care about global warming, want more seats at the table of UN and world agencies, etc. Ukraine support of key policy areas in identified priority countries along with outreach and engagement with their peer domestic think tanks and other policy actors who are aligned on these issues could build more meaningful policy relationships and support for Ukraine.

Consider and recognize that RU disinformation mechanisms are dominant in the Global South, but also study some of their dissemination techniques: RU bundling of (dis)information through local language television channels and social media cannot be contained, but dissemination methods (not content) can be copied (to a point) if there is a clear reason for amplifying a specific narrative in specific regions. Specifically, consider how to use current and planned messaging in Global South Countries more effectively aggregating messaging through better linking up with popular mainstream local language media – cable, YouTube, etc., in the countries which may have regional audiences or bundling (such as with Spanish in South America) and focus on better use of key social media sites and amplifiers to get Ukraine related news and messaging wider exposure.

AND FINALLY,

Consider how to better set and track StratComm influence objectives more systematically: The Ukrainian state has been praised by pundits for masterfully crafting and delivering wartime strategic communication, while civil society's StratComm effort abroad has been impressively massive. Yet, despite the depth and breadth of the effort, it is difficult to reliably assess its direct impact on public attitudes in or policy decisions of Ukraine's international allies. Did civil society's briefings, policy papers, street rallies, exhibitions or social network campaigns have a direct impact on decisions to lend Ukraine military, financial, political, and humanitarian support? Would Western and allied support be less or slower had civil society not engage in StratComm at all? Could allies' support be more or faster had civil society done less but in a more intentional and targeted way?

While the answers to these and similar questions are yet to be learned, civil society could consider setting ambitious yet realistic StratComm objectives and better track communication impacts to understand the correlations between their efforts and the influence. This could enable them to capitalize on the narratives, approaches and audiences that are working and pivot when and where necessary. This in turn allows StratComm to truly be as strategic as possible for the support of Ukraine.

