

# How Ukraine uses strategic communication to beat Russia on the information front

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A defiant Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskij proclaiming, "I need ammunition, not a ride"; a seemingly endless line of Russian trucks stuck outside of Kyiv; the bodies of a family killed in Irpin; an injured

pregnant woman carried on a stretcher following the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol; or a video of a young girl singing "Let it Go" from Disney's "Frozen" while sheltering in a basement. These are just a few of the many videos clips and images from the war against Ukraine that have been broadcast around the world and helped rally support for the beleaguered nation both at home and abroad.

A new FOI report, titled "Ukraine's Information Front—Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," has now analyzed Ukrainian [communication](#) efforts during the first year of the war.

"We wanted to better understand what has made the Ukrainians successful, the challenges they have faced and what the rest of the world can learn from their efforts," says FOI analyst Ivar Ekman who co-wrote the report with researcher Per-Erik Nilsson.

The report focuses on Ukrainian communication efforts—ranging from official speeches to [social media posts](#)—from the perspectives of four different sources: the government, the military, the [news media](#) and civil society. In it, the authors detail the conditions each institution had going into the war, how they re-allocated resources following the invasion, what content they actually produced and what successes and challenges they experienced.

"When we began looking at what was happening in Ukraine, it right away became clear that the communication endeavor included all of society, and to leave one part out would just make the picture incomplete. In addition, from a Swedish point of view this resonates with our concept of a 'total defense,'" says Per-Erik Nilsson.

## **Better prepared**

It is important to remember, the report notes, that Russia has been waging war against Ukraine since 2014, including in the information domain. In response to a growing wave of Russian disinformation, several initiatives aimed at strengthening Ukraine's national capabilities, improving coordination and building resilience were launched from 2015–2021. As a result, the Ukrainians were relatively well prepared when Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022.

"It was clearly shocking when the full-scale war broke out," Ivar Ekman says. "But the existential threat of the Russian invasion made those involved in the communication effort—from state institutions to volunteering civilians—come together to make the best of the resources at hand. One of our respondents called it a 'bee hive,' where everyone almost instinctively knew what needed to be done."

## **Proactive instead of reactive**

The researchers interviewed several individuals ranging from high-ranking government officials to members of the media and civil society experts. They cite four main reasons why Ukraine's communications efforts have been so successful: preparations, coordination, speed, and transparency.

Instead of reacting and responding to Russian disinformation, the report concludes, Ukrainian authorities have instead focused on proactive and reliable information, often anticipating and pre-empting Russia's next move.

## **Humor, memes and trolling**

Another factor contributing to the success is the "well-calibrated" communication style of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, first lady Olena

Zelenska and several high-ranking government officials.

The ability of the Ukrainian government to make use of the many tools in today's media landscape, the authors write, "stands in stark contrast to Russian communications."

"The Ukrainians have used humor, sarcasm, affect, bullying, and defiance; packaged in memes, snappy one-liners, and even trolling," says Per-Erik Nilsson. "The [political leadership](#) and state agencies have been quick in picking up communicative trends in social media and to amplify and adapt them to specific target audiences."

Flexibility and speed have also been crucial in wrangling control of the narrative at the onset of the invasion instead of having to debunk falsehoods after they already become widespread. This agility, the authors note, is both the result of organizational preparation and flexibility as well as a high level of trust between different actors.

## Challenges

The story of Ukraine's information response is not without its shortcomings. Although Ukrainian authorities had some time before February 2022 to prepare, several interviewees describe the chaos of the first weeks following the invasion. In addition, as the war continues there is a risk that different state bodies develop "separate communications capabilities that might end up competing for resources instead of pooling them together," the report notes.

"It is also clear that the Ukrainian side has thus far been successful in reaching audiences and rallying support mainly in the West," says Per-Erik Nilsson. "But the picture looks different in other parts of the world. In 'Global South,' the Russian portrayal of the war have had a much bigger impact, depriving Ukraine of important outside support."

Going forward, another challenge will be to maintain the level of trust and generate continued interest and support as the conflict drags on. The report only analyzes the first year following the invasion.

"The war is still ongoing, and its outcome is far from certain," says Ivar Ekman. "Given that Ukraine's war effort is very much dependent on continued outside support, the sustained success on the information front is of the utmost importance. Russia, on the other hand, might be able to claim victory if the support for Ukraine falters."

**More information:** Ukraine's Information Front—Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine.  
[www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/repo... .html?reportNo=FOI-R—5451—SE](http://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/repo... .html?reportNo=FOI-R—5451—SE)

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