



The war for Ukraine: reputational security and media disruption

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Abstract

This essay looks at the Ukraine crisis and war of 2022 through the prism of two of the author's recent analytical concepts: Reputational Security and Media Disruption. The first is a refinement of Soft Power which emphasizes the negative experiences of countries which fail to develop an adequate international reputation. The second refers to the problems in the international system associated with the coming of a hitherto unknown mass medium which is able to sway global audiences beyond the extent associated with established platforms. The essay notes how the idea for both phenomena emerged from the Ukraine crisis of 2014. It goes on to chart the generally successful attempts by Ukraine and its western allies to plug the gaps evident in 2014 and argues that the contrastingly strong performance of Ukraine in the west in 2022 shows that public diplomacy can both build reputational security and counter media disruption. Key elements of Ukraine's effort include the star appeal of Volodymyr Zelensky. Evidence of effectiveness include the spontaneous withdrawal of western businesses from Russia following the invasion. The essay notes the limits on Ukraine's reputational security including its lack of traction in the Global South: a phenomenon which conversely shows the enduring reputational strength of Russia. The essay concludes by arguing that the Ukraine war contains an agenda for further study with an emphasis on both Reputational Security and Media Disruption.

Keywords Reputational security · Media disruption · Innovation · Propaganda · Ukraine · Russia

In the spring of 2022 both the physical and digital public spaces of much of the world erupted in shades of sky blue and cornfield yellow in a show of support for embattled Ukraine. People of diverse nationalities, classes and backgrounds chose to fly flags both actually and virtually, to share memes online, and create ad hoc displays of sympathy for that country. Famous and obscure locations alike featured war-related displays. A hand knitted top featuring the Ukrainian colors and two doves of peace appeared on a pillar box in the small English cathedral city of Ely in a war-themed act of what is termed 'yarn-bombing'; a statue of the Virgin Mary outside Norte Dame de Paris acquired pro-Ukrainian decorations and messages; a street artist painted a concrete barrier in Amsterdam with the iconic image of a Ukrainian tractor towing away a broken down Russian tank; and so on from town to town and place to

place (Vidar 2022). Such memes in the real world were mirrored by memes shared in cyber space from demonization of Putin and valorization of Zelensky to more complex memes linking the war into the mainstream of Russian culture such as the volume of Tolstoy renamed 'Special Military Operations and Peace.' The creation and circulation of these messages constituted a remarkable intervention of the public into diplomacy but what is the implication of such displays and the wider response to the war in Ukraine for our collective understanding of public diplomacy in the twenty-first century? In this short essay, I consider this with specific attention to the implications of the war for two phenomena which I have recently posited. The first is a frame for understanding the strategic significance of images in foreign policy: Reputational Security. The second is the way in which disruption associated with a major change in media technology has played a largely forgotten part in previous of the cause of catastrophe in the international system. The Great War and World War Two are cases in point. My contention is that such moments of extreme disruption pass. Given time audiences acquire literacy in the new technology and learn to treat its messages with appropriate skepticism

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while governments learn to reign in their most destructive characteristics (Cull 2019, 2022, 2023).

The emergence of reputational security

The ideas of reputational security and media disruption both emerged from the crisis of the 2010s. First came the turn in Russia's media operations. Tightening of message-control at home—a key part of Putin's consolidation of power—became a global campaign along similar lines. Unlike its propaganda in the Cold War the Kremlin's new onslaught did not take aim at one political idea with an opposite political view, rather it operated to reject the idea that anything was knowable for sure. Peter Pomerantsev summarized the approach in his book title: *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (Pomerantsev 2014). In such a world the reflex was to trust the strongest person, which was the essence of Putin's approach. It underpinned his power at home and seemed like a viable tactic to deploy internationally. In 2014 Russia took its next step and attacked Ukraine. In the midst of carefully engineered fog of media chaos the world had difficulty working out what was going on and underreacted. Analysts spoke of the power of hybrid warfare. In the confusion Russia advanced and Ukraine lost territory including Crimea. The image-driven approach was felt both at the strategic level with the challenge to Ukraine's national narrative and questioning of its right to exist, and at the tactical level too with confusion stoked around incidents like the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner MH17 in July 2014.

The Ukraine Crisis of 2014 served as a watershed. I began to notice diplomats from other countries responding to the fate of Ukraine with a concerted effort to develop positive perceptions of their own country, not for vague reasons of trade advantage but for explicit and even desperate reasons of national security. I came to believe that the dominant understanding of Soft Power as some kind of bonus quality enjoyed by the most successful countries missed too much. For the most vulnerable countries that I visited like Kazakhstan or Kosovo the absence of the kind of admiration for values and culture from which soft power flows seemed an enormous liability. By this token interventions to boost international awareness of such countries' virtues and reduce the reality of their vices seemed a wise defensive move. The term Reputational Security sprang to mind (Cull 2017).

The quest for Reputational Security was clearly not just about impressing western publics or global elites. There was a regional struggle for reputation: a UN-focused game and a struggle for basic recognition. Diplomats from Kosovo and Taiwan spoke of opinion in individual developing countries being critical to gaining or maintaining recognition.

The experience of Ukraine in 2014 demonstrated the damage that could come from a lack of reputational security.

Despite having had 22 years of restored independence the country lacked the kind of meaning in the global imagination enjoyed by its neighbor Poland, for example. Ukraine was understood in the West primarily through the lens of the breakup of the Soviet Union as a former Soviet Socialist Republic somehow reincarnated as a nation state. Putin's denials of Ukraine's legitimacy seemed plausible. Evidence of the lack of a clear Ukrainian narrative included confusion over the country's name. In 2014, it was still widely referred to in English according to Russian usage as *The Ukraine* and its capital called Kiev rather than the Ukrainian spelling urged by Ukrainian embassies: Kyiv. Since independence Ukrainians had argued that the definite article needed to go as such grammar was used for regions and not for sovereign countries. More explicitly referring to Ukraine as *The Ukraine* preserved the Russian etymology of the country as meaning *the border* whereas from the Ukrainian point of view it was the center of itself (Geoghegan 2012).

The emergence of media disruption

At the same time as the vulnerabilities of a limited reputation became clear, it seemed apparent that disruption associated with the arrival of new media technology was at work. Historical parallels were alarming. In 1914 audiences had been susceptible to the new medium of mass circulation newspapers playing on a populist/nationalist message at the expense of neighbors. Tragedy followed. In the 1930s the new media of radio and newsreel had given an unprecedented material reality to the claims of extreme regimes like those in Germany and Italy. Again, the associated political disruption exacerbated international tensions and catalyzed the deterioration of the international scene. The 2010s seemed to be bound to similar course. By 2014 audiences seemed peculiarly susceptible to the new social media: ready to share disinformation based on its emotional impact and a fit with personal niche politics, with astonishingly little skepticism. Here too Ukraine paid the price.

Lessons learned: the road back post-2014

Nation states and their agencies concerned with the issues of public diplomacy worked to reign in the chaos of new media technology disruption even as agitated publics delivered poll-defying shock results in votes such as the BREXIT referendum in Britain or 2016 presidential election in the USA. Programs cobbled together to curb the disruptive power of social media included a host of fact checking initiatives including programs associated with the EU, US AGM and state-supported NGOs like the StopFake site in Ukraine. Indications that NATO countries were learning to adapt to



disinformation tactics included the successful British government handling of digital messaging around the Skripal affair in March 2018 during which Russian agents used the novichok nerve agent in an attempted murder on British soil. The British foreign office found that it achieved traction by simply tracking and drawing attention to the absurd range of denials and counter explanations proffered by the Russian embassy in the wake of the attack, undermining any vestige of credibility that the Russian diplomats might have and successfully rallying European partners behind collective action (Cull 2020).

Initiatives to boot media literacy flourished. Ukraine itself worked to develop its reputational security through a number of mechanisms including a new and concerted attention to communicating the national narrative and culture overseas. A key figure in this process is Dmytro Kuleba, a diplomat who chaired the country's cultural diplomacy agency in 2013 and became foreign minister in early 2022. As Ambassador at Large from 2014 Kuleba worked to develop not only Ukraine's cultural visibility but its capacity for digital diplomacy, strategic communication and public diplomacy. In 2019 he published a book on the subject the title of which translates as *War for Reality*, which left no doubt of his personal conviction that image and reputation were central to the survival of a country like Ukraine. The pandemic year 2020 saw a number of clear indications that Ukraine was working to manage its reputation ranging from its bid to host the World Expo in 2030 in Odesa to a series of conferences designed to build capacity in cultural projection.

The implications of 2022

From this foundation the events of 2022 come as a check on the state of the struggle. Considering the issue of Reputational Security it seemed clear that Ukraine entered the new crisis in a very different situation to that which had prevailed in 2014. In 2022 the country's narrative was now widely known. Audiences seemed confident in the rights and wrongs of the situation. Few doubted that Ukraine had a history and culture distinct from that of Russia and the print and broadcast media now routinely used preferred Ukrainian spellings of placenames. Cultural icons with links to Ukraine were flagged as such from celebrities like Mila Kunis or Liev Schreiber to artistic works like the Carol of the Bells (a reworking of the Ukrainian folk song *Shchedryk*). Ukraine's national investment in international communication paid off with multilevel messaging across platforms communicating an unclouded story of an innocent country violated by a savage neighbor and rallying itself in acts of defiance and unexpected resilience. These people/things were just as Ukrainian in 2014 but the connection passed either unremarked

or failed to resonate. By 2022 Ukraine mattered and was relevant to western publics as never before.

Star messenger: Volodymyr Zelensky

In this whole process the image and messaging of President Volodymyr Zelensky assumed a special salience. Zelensky was a media professional: actor/comedian turned successful anti-corruption candidate. Perhaps it helped his image that he was already known outside the country thanks to his role in the previous year's US political drama: the Ukraine-gate scandal of 2019 and the associated unsuccessful impeachment of President Donald Trump in early 2020. Zelensky proved a master of both old and new media. His words and actions seemed readily adapted to memes while his formal statements made in carefully crafted appeals to parliaments around the world were expertly crafted with allusions chosen to resonate with the nuances of local political culture. His messaging to the EU made it clear that Ukraine was not simply fighting for its own life but was the front line of a collective struggle for democracy which all would face in due course (Gallo 2022).

Gauging impact

The value of this work to Ukraine was soon obvious. In NATO member states, public opinion in 2022 supported both arms shipments and sanctions wholly beyond the levels possible in 2014. Especially noteworthy was the way in which corporations rushed to please audiences by falling into line and suspending otherwise profitable business activity in Russia. By June 2022 the Yale School of Management—tracking the exodus—reported that 'over 1,000' companies had 'curtailed operations' in Russia (Yale School of Management 2022). Reputation had become an obvious multiplier of Ukrainian security, assisting the country in its defense and providing a headwind in the Russian attempt at conquest.

Limits on the reputation of Ukraine

There were limits to the success. Russian narratives retained traction in many countries further afield particularly where vested interest underpinned maintaining trade links or where citizens still remembered the role of the Soviet Union as an ally in the struggle against colonialism. India went its own way and pushed back against calls to take an 'ethical' stand on the crisis. Like India, UAE abstained from the UN vote censuring Russia. China maintained links with Russia and even increased them as western sanctions created



new opportunities but scale of international sympathy for Ukraine was such that the country risked the ire of Russia and joined in donations of aid.

Easing media disruption

What then of the disruption associated with the emergence of a new media platform? 2022 provided further evidence that it was possible to blunt the weapons of hybrid warfare. In the run up to the invasion of 24 February, as evidence mounted of Putin's intentions, NATO member messaging paid careful attention not only to reports of Russian propaganda gambits in circulation but began predicting likely media strategies to accompany any invasion. Predictions included false flag operations designed to shift culpability for the invasion onto Kyiv. The strategy reflected a foreign policy application of an approach used to combat disinformation during the COVID 19 pandemic which was widely dubbed 'pre-bunking' by which a population could be successfully inoculated against a particular argument or allegation by being warned that it was coming (Vivion 2022). The effect in the context of Ukraine seemed undeniable. The prediction of Russian falsehoods drew attention to that aspect of Kremlin statecraft and then the boldfaced use of the anticipated tactic confirmed the untrustworthiness of Russian messaging and made Russia even less credible as a voice.

Russian propaganda became a major news story of the way with coverage of the 'z' meme and Putin's historically resonant claims to be 'denazifying' Ukraine. International media was quick to note that President Zelensky had Jewish heritage, though wise outlets conceded that there really were some far right elements in Ukraine, which the government worked to marginalize. To leave such things unsaid would have been to present an avenue of attack to the enemy (Ripp 2022).

An enhanced reputation for Ukraine and the blunting of Russian propaganda evened the odds as the war raged on but Ukraine still faced the challenge of winning of the ground. As of writing it seemed all too clear that while Ukraine had established reputational security in the global west, it had still to convince the global south, where Russia retained a reputational advantage. It was also clear that maximizing reputational security and reestablishing the territorial integrity of Ukraine were two different things.

Implications for the practice and study of public diplomacy

What then are the implications of the Ukraine War for the wider practice and study of public diplomacy? Certainly, the opening months of the war underscored the value of public opinion in foreign policy: an endorsement of the relevance of the field. More than this the notion of reputational security as manifest in the experience of Ukraine has demonstrated that investing in a good image is not simply a luxury for the wealthiest countries but should be a priority for all, and especially those facing a contest over their sovereignty. For scholars there is work to do pondering the relative contribution of reputational security to each state's circumstances and tracking its course in other theatres. The concept may help to explain past behavior in foreign policy such as the west's initial reluctance to help Afghanistan in the 1990s as against its readiness to rally to Mali in 2012. Mali had successfully established a cultural relevance as an epicenter of music and home to sites like Timbuktu. Afghanistan—in contrast—was known primarily as the graveyard of empires and a place to avoid. Mali had reputation as an element in its national security. Afghanistan did not.

I do not believe the Ukraine war and the dawn of an era of reputational security mean that public diplomacy is doomed to morph into a practice or discipline focused only on online strategic messaging. Reputations by their nature need to be broadly founded especially if they are to appeal to broad swathes of international opinion. Reputational Security does not render redundant the concept of New Public Diplomacy with its emphasis on citizen-to-citizen contact and cultural exchange, rather it gives a new logic to this work. In a dangerous world, cultural diplomacy becomes an act akin to a kidnapped person telling their captor their name and showing family photos: it is a fast-track strategy to establish empathy. The conflict has also shown the stirrings of an end to the new media technology disruption seen during the period from 2014 to 2020. Scholarship can play a role in marking this: affirming best practices and bracing the world for the next media shock.

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