FORUM: RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE

Zelens’kyi uses his communication skills as a weapon of war

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ABSTRACT

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelens’kyi’s communication skills have proven to be a powerful weapon against Russia’s disinformation war towards Ukraine. When Russia launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he began recording daily messages to Ukrainian society and reaching out to international audiences through live addresses. This paper analyzes Zelens’kyi’s speeches during the first 50 days of the intensified war. It examines the agenda-setting and framing methods, honed by his television experience, that he used to reach audiences, as well as their content. It suggests that these speeches made Ukraine’s narrative dominant in international media, dispersing the information fog Russia was trying to create whereby Ukraine needed to be “de-Nazified,” neutralized, and kept in Russia’s sphere of influence. They also helped consolidate Ukrainian society and strengthen international assistance.

KEYWORDS

Ukraine; Volodymyr Zelens’kyi; Russia; information war; agenda setting

Imagine living in a country where your head of state talks to you every day, letting you know what is happening and how he feels about it, offering you support and encouragement. This was Ukraine in early 2022. When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and began spreading rumours that the country’s leader had fled Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelens’kyi (Zelensky/Zelenskyy) took to Twitter. “Don’t believe the fakes,” he
tweeted on 26 February 2022. It was the second morning of Russia’s intensified invasion. Western diplomats were evacuating Kyiv, and it stood to reason that Zelens’kyi might have left too. So, he posted a selfie video – a selfie – of himself walking in the centre of Kyiv with the landmark House with Chimaeras behind him. He looked into the camera, with the morning sun shining, and said,

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.

This was classic Zelens’kyi: appealing directly to society to get his message across with short videos. He had successfully used this technique in 2019 to win a landslide presidential victory. It proved invaluable in 2022 in dispelling Russian propaganda, which intensified in step with its military assault on Ukraine.

Starting on 24 February 2022 at 1:43 am, the eve of Russia’s assault, Zelens’kyi recorded a video message to Ukrainians, saying, “As I promised, I will be brief but open. Every day. We have declared a state of emergency for 30 days on the entire territory of Ukraine.” And every day he recorded and shared video messages to society. He posted them on the presidential website as well as on social media. On Day 13 of the war, Zelens’kyi expanded his direct, personal outreach to international audiences: he began addressing parliaments and international organizations around the world via live video links.

This paper examines Zelens’kyi’s speeches from the first 50 days of the intensified war, from 24 February through 14 April 2022. It suggests that he successfully set the agenda to focus attention on what was really happening in Ukraine and that he effectively framed the issues to dispel Russian propaganda, help consolidate society, and strengthen international assistance.

Theories, data, and methods

Disinformation is a weapon that Russia has used against Ukraine for years. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began an undeclared hybrid war in the Donbas, Russia had the upper hand and successfully spread disinformation through global media. This situation changed dramatically in 2022, in part because of President Zelens’kyi’s actions and words, perhaps best captured by the CNN headline that quoted him saying, “I don’t need a ride, I need weapons.” His personal charisma, acting skills, and experience in television combined to help him get his, and Ukraine’s, message out.

Media and communications studies provide a number of theoretical tools with which to analyze information and disinformation. The dominant model used for studying the communications process is called the “Transmission Model of Communication,” which suggests that communications are made up of three components: 1) the message, which is constructed by the sender; 2) the medium through which the message is transmitted; and 3) the receiver or, in other words, the audience. This model suggests that information travels unidirectionally from the sender through the medium to the receiver. Cultural studies have expanded this model to account for audience reactions to messages and to argue that the communication process is interactive – that receivers process information...
through their existing value systems. This study, however, focuses on the first part of the communication process, namely the message as constructed by Zelens’kyi, and it makes only general observations on the medium and audience reception.

Another theoretical tool used in this study is the theory of agenda setting, as originally proposed by Malcolm McCombs and Donald Shaw. They suggested that media messages serve to set the public agenda, that they do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about. In other words, they play a key role in identifying which issues are the most relevant to society. Stories that appear in the news affect public perceptions of what is important; those that do not are largely considered less important. Countries that have more political power tend to receive more media attention than less powerful ones, and that inequality of news coverage also shapes public opinion. Zelens’kyi turned the tide in Ukraine’s favour: a relatively small country gained as much attention as a much larger one, in this case Russia.

Framing theory helps explain techniques used to construct media messages and their effects. This theory suggests that the manner in which information is framed makes a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. Framing is done by presenting or avoiding certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements to make a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies. Scholars are now extending framing theory to consider social media, for example the Twitter features of retweets and favourites as manifestations of frame sharing and resonance, or evidence of how the public is shaping the information environment. One example is how, when President Donald Trump created a buzz on social media, it prompted the traditional news media to discuss his influence, which gave him credibility and allowed him to reach a larger audience.

The data set used for this study are the speeches Zelens’kyi made during the first 50 days of full-scale war that are posted on the President of Ukraine Official Website and shared via social media: YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram. A total of 103 speeches are analyzed: 74 addressed to Ukrainian society and 30 to foreign audiences. One speech, on 24 March, was directed to both audiences – to “Ukrainians and citizens of all countries who value freedom.”

These speeches are examined using a mixed-methods analysis, by means of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The transcripts of all the speeches were uploaded to the data analysis software NVIVO, the most commonly used words were identified, and word clouds were generated from the results. The second step was a qualitative analysis of the topics and themes raised in the speeches, the tone and mood of the president’s delivery, and the rhetorical and literary devices used.

The speeches

The British reporter Luke Harding wrote that Zelens’kyi “has offered a masterclass in message,” one from which other world leaders might learn. He describes Zelens’kyi’s “punchy combination of frankness and emotional power,” providing “gripping viewing, an unvarnished real-time video blog from Europe’s bloody frontline.”
The reason Zelens’kyi’s speeches were so effective was that he crafted convincing messages and expertly delivered them. His goals were to establish Ukraine’s narrative, dispel Russia’s falsehoods, and frame the issues in a way that would galvanize Ukrainians and secure international support for Ukraine. His main messages were that Russia’s war against Ukraine was a violation of international law, that Ukrainians were strong and would successfully repel the aggressors, and that Ukraine needed help from other democracies. Towards this end, Zelens’kyi used various narrative, performative, verbal, and non-verbal techniques.

Zelens’kyi’s personal charisma, combined with his experience as an actor both on television and in front of live audiences, proved to be extremely useful in politics and war. With the help of his team, many of whom came from the entertainment world, he constructed his image as an ordinary, honest man who wants to improve society. This approach succeeded in landing him a landslide presidential victory in 2019. Three years later, it was skillfully adapted to conditions of massive invasion. The presidential suit and tie, which still appeared in his first video message on the early morning of 24 February, was swapped for a Ukrainian Armed Forces T-shirt by the evening. He maintained this look regardless of the audience. It served as a powerful non-verbal message that he was one of the people, with the soldiers, leading them but as part of a team. The clean-shaven president from the first early morning appeared with a five o’clock shadow at the end of the day, and the beard was allowed to grow, although regularly trimmed. When grey began appearing in his beard, it was not covered up.

Rhetorical devices were used, such as posing questions that directed audiences towards certain answers. Literary devices included creating images and the use of metaphors, symbolism, synonyms, repetition, irony, sarcasm, and occasionally humour to evoke emotion, which he did not conceal on his face. And he used his voice purposely, varying the pace, tone, and volume.

To convey his main message, the speeches had narratives that skillfully blended macro- and micro-issues, describing events of the day and placing them in a larger context. He adeptly made references to cultural and historical places and events that appealed to various segments of society, ranging from World War II to the Kyivan princes to the present day. Also, he personalized his messages by regularly mentioning the names of people, cities, towns, and villages under attack and, perhaps most importantly, naming individuals killed, with their stories, as well as those he awarded for bravery. Thus, he conveyed the message that he was following the fates of all Ukrainians, evoking empathy and emotion. Concepts such as justice, truth, evil, bravery, tyranny, democracy, power, leadership, friendship, treason, and God regularly appeared in these videos.

The word he used most often in the 103 speeches analyzed here was Ukraine (inclusive of Ukrainization) – 1062 times. The second most-used word was people (inclusive of peoples) – 952 times. These were followed by Russian (including Russians, 876 times), Russia (676 times), and wars (including war, 652 times). Rounding out the list of the top 10 most-used words were Ukrainians (including Ukrainian and Ukrainianness, 592 times), states (including state and states’, 556 times), city (including cities, 453 times), world (including worlds, 439 times), and peace (including peaceful and peacefully, 384 times) (see Figure 1).
Videos addressed to Ukrainians

Zelens’kyi’s daily messages to Ukrainians served the dual purpose of conveying information and maintaining personal contact with society. They created the effect that the president is every Ukrainian’s friend, regularly checking in to explain what has happened and how he is feeling about it. Sometimes there were a few videos per day, but always there was an evening one. Thus, he set the agenda to bolster morale and integrity and to provide information and support. He highlighted the strength of the Ukrainian people, demonstrated that their president was with them and doing everything to secure the victory that he assured them would come, and informed them about the support they were receiving from the democratic world. He framed these messages in an emotive, honest, and supportive manner.

Knowing the power of the opening statement, Zelens’kyi began his messages with a greeting or important information. On Day 1 he began by saying, “Great people of a great country!” – a salutation he would repeat on Days 9, 23, and 24. His evening address began with “Dear citizens of Ukraine.” On Day 2 he opened with “The second morning of a large-scale war” and went on to report about his conversation with the chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz. The evening started with “Glory to the Armed Forces of Ukraine!” Often his greetings conveyed a cheerful message: “Good morning, Ukrainian heroes!” (Day 5); “Good health to you, united country!” (Days 7, 8, 19). Many encouraging words were used: “Unbreakable people of invincible Ukraine!” (Days 8, 49, 50); “Free people of
a free country” (Days 10, 20, 26, 28, 30, 45); “Brave Ukrainians of an unvanquished country!” (Day 14); “Strong people of a steel/strong country!” (Days 17, 19, 23, 25, 33). On certain days there was no salutation. Day 12 began with “Monday. Evening.” On the day the atrocities in Bucha and other liberated towns were uncovered (Day 39), Zelens’kyi began, “Today this address will be without greetings.” The most common opening was “Dear Ukrainians,” saying both Ukraïntsi and Ukraïny, since in the Ukrainian language the word is gendered (Days 11, 15, 21, 36–39, 41–44, 46, 48). Day 30 had a special greeting: “Strong people of the best country in the world!” So did Day 50: “Unbreakable people of the bravest country!”

All the video messages were relatively short, perhaps catering to the shortened attention spans of many people, but they varied in length. The longest one was 12 minutes and 54 seconds. It aired on 7 April and was titled, “If there is no really painful package of sanctions against Russia, it will be considered by Moscow as permission to attack.” The shortest was only 2 minutes and 53 seconds long, on 25 March, entitled “If Russia had known what it would face in Ukraine, it would have definitely been afraid to come here.”

Most of the videos were recorded indoors. In the early ones Zelens’kyi stood at a podium with the president’s insignia behind him. On the night of Day 12 he took his audience on a walk with him. The video begins with the camera pointing out a window of the Presidential Administration building, showing Kyiv at night. And those are the words he first utters: “Vechirnyi Kyiv. Our Office.” He then turns the camera onto himself and begins walking down the hall, showing everyone the inside of the building where the president works. While walking he says, “Monday. Night. You know, we’re used to saying Monday is a difficult day.” He arrives in his office, and as he sits down at his desk he continues, “The country is at war. So, every day is a Monday.” And as he says that, the camera angle changes. He is shown putting down his phone and looking into another camera, where a crew was obviously waiting for him. Many (21) videos after that day are shot with him sitting at that desk, which people now know is in his office. Only eight videos show Zelens’kyi outside (on 11, 14, 19, 20, and 30 March and 1, 7, and 14 April), where he appears in various spots on the square in front of the Presidential Administration building (although these appear edited).

There are a few other self-taped videos. On the evening of Day 22 (17 March), Zelens’kyi’s tone was sombre, but he made a surprise ending. After the traditional concluding phrase “Slava Ukraïni” (Glory to Ukraine), he said, “I wasn’t the only one working late.” He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial tone, said, “let me show you,” and turned the camera to show his key people sitting around a large boardroom table. On 25 March, Day 30, the video was short, but that night Zelens’kyi’s tone and demeanour were optimistic. “We’re working,” he said. “The country must move towards peace, move forward. With each day of our defense we are bringing the peace we need so much closer. We are bringing victory closer. Because in this war it is simply impossible for us not to win.” He ended with a smile.

The main content of all the videos is a recap of the events of the day or previous night, with an emphasis on the successes of Ukrainians and examples of bravery, as well as the barbarity of Russia’s assault and its destruction of Ukraine’s civilians, cultural heritage, and infrastructure. On Day 13 Zelens’kyi reported that 52 children had been killed and said, “I will never forgive that.” When, on 22 March, the Holocaust survivor Borys Romanchenko was killed in Kharkiv, Zelens’kyi focused on the fact that he was a former prisoner of four Nazi concentration camps. “He was 96 years old. Think about it [...]. He survived
Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, Peenemünde and Bergen-Belsen [. . .]. And he was killed by a Russian projectile that hit an ordinary Kharkiv high-rise [residential] building."\(^{21}\) Another common feature was the announcement of awards handed out to Ukrainian servicemen and servicewomen, with the most prominent ones named.

**Speeches to foreign audiences**

In his speeches to international audiences, Zelens'kyi used many of the same communication techniques as to Ukrainian society, although his goal with these speeches was different. He aimed to get Ukraine’s message out to the world and garner international support – in other words, to shift the agenda away from discussions of Russia’s security concerns and NATO, its false narratives that Ukraine needed to be neutralized and “de-Nazified,” and to focus it on a discussion of Ukraine as a subject, not an object, of international affairs. He kept repeating that Ukraine was a sovereign, democratic state that was being destroyed by a Russian war that violated international law, and how this war threatened European and global security. That Ukraine would defend itself and would not surrender, but that it needed help from other democracies – that it was not only the right thing to do, but also in their interests.

Zelens’kyi framed and delivered this message in a rather unconventional manner. He appeared before the world’s legislatures and powerful institutions in his army T-shirt rather than the standard suit and tie. He used emotive language to describe what Ukraine was being subjected to and presented details, such as the number of children who had been killed and atrocities uncovered in Bucha. Expertly tailoring each speech to his audience, he referred to national events and traumas, referencing historical events, people, and places of specific countries. He constantly expressed gratitude for the help and support that had been offered but repeatedly asked for more, making concrete requests and proposing solutions. At times when the response was slow in coming, he did not shy away from shaming techniques, and regularly he used the personal touch, addressing many world leaders by their first names.

The first international speech was on Day 13 of the war, on 8 March. Prime Minister Boris Johnson invited Zelens’kyi to address the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Zelens’kyi began formally, saying, “Mr. Speaker! Mr. Prime Minister! Members of the government, Parliament, Lords. I’m addressing all the people of the United Kingdom. All the people of Great Britain. Great people. With a great history.” He then quoted Shakespeare and reached into their hearts by comparing Ukraine’s current situation to the Battle of Britain. “Just as you did not want to lose your island when the Nazis were preparing to start the battle for your great power, the Battle for Britain,” he said, “I want to tell you about our 13 days. Thirteen days of fierce war, which we did not start and did not want. But we are waging it. Because we do not want to lose what we have, what is ours – Ukraine.” After he described each day of the war, he paraphrased Winston Churchill’s famous speech:

> 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!
He thanked Great Britain for its support and then added a personal touch: “And I am especially grateful to you, Boris, my friend!” But he made the point that Ukraine could not win alone; he appealed for increased sanctions and military aid, and he ended, “Do what the greatness of your state and your people obliges you to do.”

The following 30 international speeches from those first 50 days were equally well crafted and delivered. Zelens’kyi’s second speech was to the Polish Sejm, on Day 16, 11 March. He began with, “Dear Mr. President, my friend Andrzej!” and praised Poland for everything it was doing to help Ukraine. He made references to Pope John Paul II, to the Smolensk air disaster, and to Lech Kaczyński’s 2008 speech in Tbilisi. He was frank about the complicated history between the two countries but said there were “no more borders between us, between our nations.” Then he singled Poland out as a European leader and friend of Ukraine, saying, “Today, I cannot be sure of all the leaders of all European nations, but I am sure that we will definitely be with you in defending freedom,” and he ended with a religious phrase, “May God help us win!”

When addressing Canada’s joint Houses of Parliament four days later, Zelens’kyi began with the personal:

Dear speakers! Mr. Prime Minister! Dear Justin! Before I begin, I want you to understand my feelings, the feelings of Ukrainians. Imagine that at four in the morning each of you hears explosions. Terrible explosions. Justin, imagine that you hear it. And your children hear it. Hear missile strikes at Ottawa airport. Imagine you are looking for words to explain this to children.

He referenced Canada being the first Western country to recognize Ukraine’s independence, in 1991, with the phrase “It is already the first to do what other countries come to later,” and, after asking for more help, he said, “I know you can handle it.”

A day later, Zelens’kyi appeared before a joint session of the United States Houses of Congress. In that speech he referred to Pearl Harbor, Mount Rushmore, Martin Luther King, Jr., and 9/11, again using words intended to evoke emotion and empathy. “Remember September 11th. A terrible day in 2001, when evil tried to turn your cities into a battlefield. When innocent people were attacked,” and he showed a powerful, if graphic, video of how Ukraine, a peaceful country, was being destroyed. Moving away from diplomatic language, he pleaded, “We ask for a response. For a response to terror. Is this too much to ask?” Zelens’kyi thanked President Joe Biden but appealed for more help, “now, in the darkest time for our country, for the whole of Europe, I urge you to do more! Weapons, sanctions.” He ended by appealing to US leadership: “Being the Leader of the world means to be the Leader of Peace. Take the lead!”

A similar appeal for leadership was Zelens’kyi’s message to Chancellor Scholz during the 17 March address to the German Bundestag. After thanking the German businessmen who “put morality and humanity above accounting,” he asked for a full embargo on the Russian economy, and he referred to Ronald Reagan’s Berlin speech to Mikhail Gorbachev: “Chancellor Scholz! Tear down this wall. Give Germany the leadership you deserve. And what your descendants will be proud of.”

The speech to Israel’s Knesset on Day 25, 20 March, was particularly intense. Zelens’kyi began by saying how Ukrainian and Jewish communities have always been close and intertwined, and he referred to “a great woman from Kyiv, whom you know very well,
Golda Meir.” He invoked the bombing of Uman, and he compared Hitler’s Final Solution to what Putin was doing in Ukraine. He spoke pointedly: “One can keep asking why we can’t get weapons from you. Or why Israel has not imposed strong sanctions against Russia.” He made the issue one of moral choice, comparing it to Ukrainians saving Jews during World War II.

But it is up to you, dear brothers and sisters, to choose the answer. And you will have to live with this answer, people of Israel. Ukrainians made their choice 80 years ago. They rescued Jews. That is why the Righteous among the Nations are among us. People of Israel, now you have such a choice.27

Italy’s Chamber of Deputies also heard a tough message from Zelens'kyy, which he delivered on Day 27, 22 March: “Don’t be a resort for murderers!” he appealed emotionally, referring to loopholes in sanctions against Russia. Building on the theme of Italy being a great place to visit, he said that he, too, loved visiting the beautiful country with his family. Then he used that as a bridge to talk about family and children – that a week earlier, when he spoke to an Italian audience in Florence, Russians had killed 79 Ukrainian children. “Now it’s 117. Thirty-eight children more in the course of these days. This is the price of delay,” and he repeated his plea for faster sanctions against Russia, ending with “Grazie Italia!”28 It is worth noting that, while in most parliaments Zelens’kyy was welcomed with standing ovations, in Italy at least 20 lawmakers boycotted his speech. Reuters quoted the anti-EU senator Gianluigi Paragone as saying, “We have already heard Zelens’kyy’s preaching and if we did what he wanted, it would lead us straight to war in Europe.”29

On the 28th day, on 23 March, Zelens’kyy gave two international addresses: to the Parliament of Japan, where he raised the spectre of nuclear disaster, and to a joint meeting of the French Senate, the National Assembly of the French Republic, and the Council of Paris, where he invoked the national motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.” Towards the Japanese audience he was respectful, conscious of the country’s traditions, starting with “It is a great honour for me, the President of Ukraine, to address you for the first time in the history of the Japanese Parliament.” He also thanked Japan for its aid and leadership in Asia, appealed for help in reforming international institutions and creating a global trade embargo against Russia, and ended with “Arigato gozaimasu!”30 His tone towards the French was more mixed. Although there were expressions of gratitude for what France had done, there were many graphic descriptions of the suffering Ukrainians had suffered, including details from the recent bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol. “And another woman … she had a shattered pelvis. Her child died before birth.” But the main emphasis was on the fact that France was not doing enough, including references to the failed Normandy Format and to those “whose hands are still trying to get money from Russia.” He appealed to the leading role France could play in ending the war and said, “That is why we expect from you, we expect from France, from your leadership, that you will be able to make Russia seek peace.”31

The following day, Zelens’kyy delivered three speeches: to NATO, the G7, and the Riksdag in Sweden. He was quite tough with NATO, saying,
we feel like we’re in a grey zone. On 24 February I addressed you with a perfectly clear, logical request to help close our skies. In any format. Protect our people from Russian bombs and missiles. We did not hear a clear answer.

While thanking individual NATO members who had supplied Ukraine with military aid and saying, “I do not blame NATO – I want to be clear. NATO may be afraid of Russia’s actions,” he asked for more: “You have at least 20,000 tanks! Ukraine asked for 1%.” He also emphasized the fact that Russia was unlikely to stop in Ukraine, that helping Ukraine was protecting European security. Demonstrating confidence, he said, “Never, please, never tell us again that our army does not meet NATO standards.” Zelens’kyy ended by saying, “we need peace now, all offers are on the table,” and “I am thankful to those who help us!”

The tone to the G7 was different. It was framed as an appeal “to the world’s greatest democracies.” Praising them on their unity, he continued to requests. “I am grateful to you for the unprecedented unity. I believe we can do it. We will be able to make your Group of Seven not just the Great Seven, but the Great Seven Peacekeepers.” He proceeded to lay out the already familiar appeals for intensified, coordinated sanctions, a full trade embargo, and cutting off Russia from the global banking system. “The sooner this happens as we ask, the sooner there will be peace in eastern Europe. This is in our best interest. This is in your best interest,” were his exact words before mentioning the threat of global food insecurity.

In his address to Sweden, Zelens’kyy drew attention to the fact that the two countries have the same colours on their flags, saying “Now the blue and yellow flag is probably the most popular in the world!” He also dropped historical references, referring to Russia occupying Sweden’s Gotland Island in 1808, and he thanked the country for being one of the first to come to Ukraine’s aid.

In the following 20 days, Zelens’kyy delivered 14 more speeches. He addressed the UN Security Council, the European Council, the Folketing in Denmark, Ireland’s Oireachtas, Finland’s Eduskunta, and parliaments in Norway, Australia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and South Korea. On Day 49, 13 April, Zelens’kyy addressed Estonia. He thanked Estonia for being one of the first to provide Ukraine with necessary assistance, including defensive aid. “I am grateful to you for abandoning Russian energy,” Zelens’kyy added – something that the small country was the first to do. It was also one of the first to send its head of state to war-torn Ukraine. “The Presidents of the three Baltic states and the President of Poland will arrive in Kyiv in a few hours.” The speech ended, “Thank you, Estonia!”

Many (including the present authors) wondered who Zelens’kyy’s speech writers were. The BBC’s diplomatic correspondent Paul Adams and The Guardian’s Luke Harding provided the answer. “Many of Zelenskiy’s senior advisers come from television,” Harding wrote, but his main writer is the 38-year-old former journalist and political analyst Dmytro Lytvyn, part of the president’s inner team. In an interview, Lytvyn described himself as just a co-author: “The president always knows what he wants to say, and how he wants to say it.”

**Conclusion**

Ukraine succeeded in shifting the tide of Russia’s disinformation war in its favour in early 2022, in part thanks to the efforts of President Zelens’kyy. Whereas in January media
reports often began with stories presenting Russia’s perspective, by late March they were regularly quoting Zelens’kyi, often from his videos to Ukrainians or international audiences. He effectively displaced Putin as the global newsmaker in the Russia–Ukraine war. It is difficult to establish a direct causal link between the speeches and the effectiveness of Ukraine’s war effort coupled with the increase in international support for Ukraine, since many factors were involved. However, Zelens’kyi’s effective communication style, in contrast to the demagogic manner of the Russian president, was doubtlessly one. It contributed to shifting the international media narrative away from “the Ukraine Crisis” to “Russia’s War against Ukraine,” and the Western political discussion from how not to antagonize Russia to how to increase sanctions against the aggressor state and what kind of weapons to supply to Ukraine. Zelens’kyi became one of the best-known and most respected politicians globally.

Although pro-Russian narratives did not disappear completely and continued to be voiced by certain intellectuals, such as John Mearsheimer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, they became the minority view. Their persistence is an example of what communications scholars call the media–democracy paradox, where, despite media presenting society with information that dispels false narratives, some individuals continue to hold onto previous beliefs. One could add that such views on Russia’s war in Ukraine are also shared by large groups – not only individuals – outside (and sometimes within) Western countries.

Certain media outlets, such as the American Fox News, for a while had continued “propagandizing for Russian President Vladimir Putin while disparaging Ukraine and its allies,” but gradually they also shifted their approach; Fox News invited Zelens’kyi for an exclusive interview on 4 May. The headline was “Zelenskyy to Fox News: Russia is ‘following the concept of Goebbels’ with Hitler comparison,’” quoting Ukraine’s president criticizing Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.

The impact of Zelens’kyi’s video messages to Ukrainian society is somewhat harder to assess. Professor Mikhailo Vynnytskyi of the National University of Kyiv–Mohyla Academy compared Ukraine’s response to Russia’s full-scale invasion to a beehive: “Bees that are defending their hive need no instructions – no formal leadership. They organize themselves.” In other words, he emphasized the power of the people in addition to the role of the president. The Ukrainian journalist Andrii Kulykov also observed that Ukrainians did not mount such an effective defence against Russia because of Zelens’kyi’s motivational videos, but rather that their actions inspired him, which explains his enthusiasm in addressing them as “unbreakable people,” “brave Ukrainians,” and “strong people.” That said, Kulykov remarked that the videos served as an important vehicle for bringing the president closer to society, to foster unity and a sense of connectedness between the people and their leader.

An illustration of this relationship occurred on Day 81 of the war, 16 May. When the first unit of Ukraine’s Territorial Defence forces reached the Russian border near Kharkiv, its soldiers posted a video message to Zelens’kyi. The grainy video shows a group of fully armed men in fatigues standing by the border post, saying,

Mr. President, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Reporting! Today, 15 May, the 227th Battalion of the 127th Brigade of the Territorial Defence of Ukraine reached the border line – the separation line with the Russian Federation, the occupant country. We made it, Mr. President! We are here!
Zelens’kyi took the time between meeting world leaders to reply with a short velfie of his own. “Guys! Kharkiv!” he said and named their unit. “Thank you very much from all Ukrainians, from myself, my family!” He told them to take care of themselves, then thanked their parents “and all Ukrainian fighters like you, you’re great” – smiling broadly the entire time. 45

Notes

1. Volodymyr Zelens’kyi (@ZelenskyyUa), “Ne virte feikam,” Twitter post, 26 February 2022, https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1497450853380280320.
2. Ibid.
3. Zelens’kyi, “Address … on Strengthening the State’s Defense Capabilities.”
4. Dyczok, “Ukraine Story.”
5. Braithwaite, “Zelensky Refuses US Offer.”
6. Feiner, “Ukraine Is Winning”; McMurd, “Ukraine Has Been Winning.”
7. Shannon and Weaver, Mathematical Theory of Communication.
8. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding.”
9. McCombs and Shaw, “Agenda-Setting Function”; McCombs, “Look at Agenda-Setting.” See also iyengar and Kinder, News That Matters.
10. Entman, “Framing.”
11. Chadwick, Hybrid Media System.
12. Meeks, “Defining the Enemy.”
13. Zelens’kyi, “Address … to Ukrainians and the Nations of the World.” There is a degree of inconsistency in the dates and times of the videos posted on the presidential website and on YouTube; it appears that the videos were first uploaded to YouTube, then posted on the site. During the first 50 days, Zelens’kyi made numerous short videos that do not appear on the presidential site, like the one cited in note 1. They are not included in this analysis, nor are the numerous media interviews given by Zelens’kyi during this time.
14. For information about the software, see the proprietor’s website: https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home.
15. Harding, “How Zelenskyy’s Team.”
16. For the data search in NVIVO we used a three-character minimum, and a “word” included stemmed words in groupings (e.g., war, wars).
17. Ofis Prezydenta Ukrainy, “Zvernennia … vvecheri dvanadtsiatoho.”
18. Ofis Prezydenta Ukrainy, “Zvernennia … za pidsumkamy.”
19. Zelens’kyi, “If Russia Had Known.”
20. Zelens’kyi, “World Does Not Believe.”
21. Zelens’kyi, “It Was Another Day.”
22. Zelens’kyi, “Address … to the Parliament of the United Kingdom.” Zelens’kyi always delivers his speeches in Ukrainian, though occasionally he drops in some foreign words.
23. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland.”
24. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … in the Parliament of Canada.”
25. Zelens’kyi, “Address … to the US Congress.”
26. Zelens’kyi, “Address … to the Bundestag.”
27. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … in the Knesset.”
28. Zelens’kyi, “Address … to the Italian Chamber of Deputies.”
29. Amante and Balmer, “Not All Italian Lawmakers.”
30. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … in the Parliament of Japan.”
31. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … at a Joint Meeting of the Senate, the National Assembly of the French Republic and the Council of Paris.”
32. Zelens’kyi, “Speech … at the NATO Summit.”
33. Zelens'kyi, “Address ... to the Participants of the Group of Seven Summit.”
34. Zelens’kyi, “Speech ... at the Riksdag in Sweden.”
35. Zelens’kyi, “Speech ... in the Riigikogu, Estonian Parliament.”
36. Adams, “Shame on You”; Harding, “How Zelenskyy’s Team.”
37. See note 15 above.
38. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis”; Mearsheimer, “John Mearsheimer on Why”; Fitzpatrick, “Will Ostracising Russia?”
39. McChesney, Rich Media, Poor Democracy.
40. Calmes, “Tucker Carlson Shills.”
41. Norman, “Zelenskyy to Fox News.”
42. Wynnyckyj, Mychailo, “Thoughts from Kyiv – afternoon 16 March” Facebook post, 16 March 2022, https://www.facebook.com/mychailo.wynnyckyj/posts/5445749638809675.
43. Phone conversation with M. Dyczok, 7 May 2022. Kulykov is the Head of Hromadske Radio and the Chairperson of the Commission of Journalistic Ethics.
44. Yuriy | Ukraine.DAO (@garbanzo0813), “Diakuiu za Vashu robotu!” Twitter post, 16 May 2022, https://twitter.com/garbanzo0813/status/1526081060932669440.
45. Xendan, “They have forced Russian forces to withdraw from Kharkiv,” Facebook post, 16 May 2022, https://www.facebook.com/xendanweb/videos/725710768851082.

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