

Interpreting Reality

Information Wars in Ukraine

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I. Introduction

A balanced assessment of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is a rather challenging task for policy-makers. This is in large part because the views and data collected from both sides comes under the influence of two opposing public discourses. On the one hand, Russia is perceived as the aggressor breaking the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but on the other hand, it is claimed that the Ukrainian government is implementing a crackdown on civilians of Eastern Ukraine who disagree with central government policies and wish to secede. In attempting to shape public opinion these conflicting discourses form two opposing realities in Ukraine and Russia. These have gradually penetrated the Western media, creating an 'information war' between the two states.

Sustained analysis of Ukrainian and Russian public discourses on recent events in Ukraine is crucial for several reasons: Firstly, in differentiating political discourse from reported fact; Secondly, it explains how Ukraine and Russia use political discourses to influence public opinion within and beyond the domestic sphere; Finally, it examines underlying policy behind these discourse and evaluates their efficiency.

II. Background

Recent and ongoing events in Crimea and Eastern-Ukraine are a dramatic result of the November 2013 – February 2014 Ukrainian political crisis. Despite its illegality under Ukrainian and international law, the Crimean referendum on “reunification” with the Russian Federation took place on March 16 with the presence and support of Russian military troops, but without recognition on the part of the United Nations, the EU and the US.

The Crimean crisis was followed by a protest wave in Eastern Ukraine which expressed dissatisfaction with the new Ukrainian government and articulated a will of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to separate from Ukraine. However, unlike the Crimean case, the Russian Federation did not move to annex the regions in the same manner as it had in Crimea. Proponents of secession forcibly took over local government authorities and formed armed militias. The conflict further escalated when military troops of unidentified origin crossed the Ukrainian border from Russia to support the secessionist groups. In response, the Ukrainian government launched an 'Anti-terrorist operation' in April 14, which is ongoing.

Following the initial Ukrainian protests, escalating tension between Ukraine and Russia has been firmly on the agenda of international decision-making. EU and NATO members were expected to provide a balanced assessment of the

conflict and elaborate a constructive response to it. However, the Western response to the crisis has been significantly tempered by energy and economic dependence on Russia.

III. Quasi-war

The Ukrainian-Russian conflict is now being referred to as “hidden war” or “quasi-war.”¹ These terms indicate that the conflict does not correspond with the traditional criteria of a war. For instance, neither Ukraine nor Russia have officially applied force against each other, the diplomatic relations between the two states are not broken and trade relations are sustained. Notably, the rhetoric of Ukraine’s and Russia’s brotherhood is retained²

However, despite these facts and that Russian involvement in the conflict is not officially recognised, it is increasingly recognised that military actions are taking place in Eastern Ukraine with the involvement of both states. Another feature of this quasi-war is ‘information warfare’ between Russia and Ukraine, which started at the time when Maidan protests were escalating.³ The information war implies that the public discourses, influenced by each conflicting side, provide two opposite interpretations of

¹ Pocheptsov G. Kvazivoina i kvaziimperiya, kotoryh vrode net, no kotorye est, 22nd June 2014, <http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/material/31905>

² Ibid

³ Gudkov L. Interview, 10th May 2014, <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/ukraine-russia-eu-us-crimea/1912033.html>

events.⁴ Public discourse has a power to fix the meanings of certain terms and concepts in the public opinion and link them to emotional associations.⁵ Once the links are established, they can be effectively referred to by the media evoking the familiar emotional images in people’s minds.

An analysis of Ukrainian and Russian public discourses on the recent events in Ukraine is crucial in the current circumstances, as it shows how the information strategies of the two sides escalated the conflict and explains how the two public discourses identify different conclusions from the same scenarios.

IV. Revolution of Dignity or Coup d’état

In Ukrainian public discourse, the Maidan protests have been titled as the ‘Revolution of Dignity’ - implying a civic movement against the incumbent authorities aimed at systemic reforms of the Ukrainian state.

In contrast, following the ousting of V. Yanukovich, the official Kremlin, and consequently, federal Russian media generated four key messages about the events in Ukraine. Firstly, Maidan protests were planned and directed by the West. Then, Maidan was dominated by ultra-nationalists, Nazis and

⁴ Pocheptsov G. Pervaya smyslovaya voina v mire (Ukraina, Krym, Rossiya), 1st June 2014, <http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/material/31194>

⁵ Pocheptsov G. Pervaya smyslovaya voina v mire (Ukraina, Krym, Rossiya), 1st June 2014, <http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/material/31194>

fascists who committed a coup d'état and raised a nationalist junta to power. Thirdly, the Ukrainian state is falling apart and thrown into chaos. Finally, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who live in Ukraine are in danger and, therefore, have to be protected by Russia.⁶

After the Maidan protests, Russian public opinion was strongly influenced by these discourses: emotionally derived images were formed of a Ukraine taken over by "banderovtsy" (the followers of S. Bandera, who was a leader of Ukrainian Nationalist Organisation in early 1940s) and Right Sector (a nationalist movement that emerged during Maidan protests). According to the opinion polls conducted by the Levada-Centre in early February 2014, 84% of Russians evaluated the Ukrainian events as a 'coup d'état', while 41% believed that the Ukrainian protests were influenced by the West.⁷ These results illustrate the efficiency of the messages pushed onto public opinion in Russia.

V. Annexation or Reunification

Ukraine officially claimed that the Crimean referendum was illegal. According to Ukrainian law, territorial changes are ratified by national referendums, therefore, the outcome of a local Crimean referendum could not be legally valid.

⁶ Gudkov L. Interview, 10th May 2014, <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/ukraine-russia-eu-us-crimea/1912033.html>

⁷ Levada-Centre website, 27th June 2014, <http://www.levada.ru/11-02-2014/opros-rossiyane-schitayut-protesty-na-ukraine-gosudarstvennym-perevorotom>

The presence of military troops from Russia before and during the referendum was instead pointed to as evidence of Crimea's annexation by Russia. Additionally, the referendum took place only two weeks after its announcement, which was portrayed in the Ukrainian media as further evidence the referendum was "pushed" and "held at gunpoint of Russian military troops."⁸ The referendum results were described as falsified and unrepresentative.

Following four key messages about Maidan events, Russian federal media added another statement: Crimea belongs to Russia historically and, consequently, has to be reunified with it.⁹ On June 24 at a press-conference in Vienna, V. Putin admitted having used Russian military troops in Crimea "in order to guarantee the freedom of choice to the Crimeans, to prevent Ukrainian military troops from violating the will expression and not to have any victims."¹⁰ This statement illustrates the strategy to justify Russia's obligation to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea, which, in the eyes of the public, reinforces a historical right for 'reunification' with moral principles.

VI. Separatists and Terrorists or People's Militias

⁸ Kanal website, 16th March 2014, <http://www.5.ua/tema-dnya/item/373424-bez-vyboru-na-vybir-nevyznanyi-referendum-v-krymu>

⁹ Pervyi Kanal website, 22nd March 2014, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/254738>

¹⁰ The President of Russia website, 24th June 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/46060>

Ukrainian official rhetoric on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine was determined by the launch of an 'Anti-terrorist operation'. Declarations of independence from the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk are perceived as “self-proclaimed” and established by “terrorist organisations.” Ukrainian officials and media convey several messages to the public. Firstly, “separatist” movements in the Eastern Ukraine are small in number of followers. Secondly, Russia provides human, military and financial support to “separatists”. Finally, the presence of “terrorists” in the Eastern Ukraine brings chaos, looting and uncontrolled crimes.

Having constructed a meaningful image of Maidan events in public opinion, the Kremlin has utilised the same rhetoric in its language surrounding the crisis in Eastern Ukraine.

The interests of ethnically Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians of the Eastern Ukraine are argued to be neglected by the “illegal” and “illegitimate” Ukrainian government. Moreover, their safety is endangered by “far-right” organisations. These motives brought “people’s militias” of the Eastern Ukraine to “uprise”. In an official statement, the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry on April 24 claimed that “the unpredictable situation in Southern-Eastern regions of Ukraine, where permanent military forces, special divisions and ultra-nationalist paramilitary forces are thrown against civilians, requires urgent actions that would restrain the

Kyiv government, which is patronised by the US, from using force.”¹¹ Opposed to an 'anti-terrorist operation', Russian federal media refers to Ukrainian government actions as a “punitive operation against people’s militias”.

VII. Comparing Strategies

In projecting these separate discourses, there have been some identifiable conclusions. Russia’s federal media strategy of portraying the Ukrainian events has been consistent and well-managed:

1. All the negative connotations are tied with emotionally strong labels, such as “Nazis” or “ultra-nationalists”.
2. Russia’s part in the Crimean crisis and Eastern-Ukrainian conflict has historical and moral justification.
3. Public polls on the Ukrainian events conducted among Russians reflect the influence of federal media.
4. There might be a certain correlation between the efficiency of official public discourse and the level of V. Putin’s support. After several months of information campaign on Ukrainian events the support for Russian president

¹¹ Russian Federation Foreign Affairs Ministry website, 24th April 2014, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/8a15b43ae2d7c96443256999005bcbb8/ea5c1b92f2681c6d44257cc400677641!OpenDocument

reached its second high point after the Georgian – Russian war of 2008.¹²

At the same time, Ukrainian information policy has arguably not been as consistent or consolidated as its Russian counterparts.

1. The government has not been able to clearly present itself as having a monopoly on “the voice of the Ukrainian state” in domestic and international media.
2. The Council on National Security and Defence recognizes the threat to the national information security and the need to protect Ukraine’s information space by:
 - establishing a regime of special information coordination starting from April 2014;
 - elaborating a strategy on information security protection.¹³¹⁴
3. The Crimean crisis created a dissonance in the Ukrainian public opinion: the official condemnation of the referendum as “illegal” is not underpinned by “real”

¹² Gudkov L. Interview, 10th May 2014, <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/ukraine-russia-eu-us-crimea/1912033.html>

¹³ Ukrayinska Pravda website, 5th March 2014, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/03/5/7017710/>

¹⁴ Ukranews website, 13th May 2014, <http://ukranews.com/uk/news/ukraine/2014/05/13/122556>

actions of the Ukrainian state to “return Crimea”.

4. The public discourse on Eastern-Ukrainian conflict is not efficient enough in de-escalating the social tension and uniting the society.

Both sides are striving for media control over Eastern Ukraine, because public support from the local population is a significant factor for the outcome of the conflict. After Crimea’s separation from Ukraine, Russian television channels replaced the mainstream Ukrainian channels in Crimea. As a response, the National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio broadcast has resolved to stop broadcasting Russian federal channels within the territory of Ukraine.¹⁵

Furthermore, due to the lack of appropriate think-tank and state media infrastructure in Ukraine, many potential government measures cannot be fully taken at the moment.

These information campaigns have had the anticipated effect of deteriorating attitudes of Ukrainians and Russians towards each other. According to the results of joint Ukrainian-Russian sociological research in May 2014, 35% of Russians expressed a positive attitude towards Ukrainians compared to 66% in January 2014. At the same time, 52% of Ukrainians have a positive attitude towards Russians, whereas in February

¹⁵ Ukrayinska Pravda website, 11th March 2014, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/03/11/7018397/>

2014 this number was 78%.¹⁶

VIII. Policy Implications

The information war has clear implications for international political actors and analysts with regards to the current crisis in Eastern Ukraine.

1. Not only do the two discourses target public opinion, but they are also aimed at gaining external support from the influential political actors, specifically the EU, the United Nations and the US.
2. The awareness of two conflicting discourses might ensure a more balanced approach to assessing the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, including a careful selection of data sources.
3. Policy-makers should take into consideration the fact that the information transmitted to Ukrainian and Russian public from the West is interpreted differently. For example, the portrayal of the G7 not to participate in the G8 summit in Sochi, and the G7 statement on Ukraine, was portrayed by the Russian media and Foreign Ministry as flawed and unreasonable.¹⁷ However, Russian exclusion from the G8 was widely debated in Ukrainian media.

4. When addressing the public, it should be kept in mind that opinion on the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has been shaped by various sources and discourses, many with a clear agenda.
5. In order to de-escalate current tensions, it might be efficient to raise the public awareness of the information war between the two states.

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¹⁶ Kyiv International Sociology Institute website, 17th June 2014, <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=347&page=1>

¹⁷ Pervyi Kanal website, 25th March 2014, <http://www.1tv.ru/newsarchive/tags/15432/>