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## **RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE FULL-SCALE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR: ANALYSIS USING LASSWELL'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION**

### **СТРАТЕГІЧНА КОМУНІКАЦІЯ РОСІЇ У ПОВНОМАСШТАБНІЙ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ВІЙНІ: АНАЛІЗ З ВИКОРИСТАННЯМ МОДЕЛІ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ ЛАССВЕЛЛА**

While the context of Russia's strategic communication has changed since the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, the research need for its conceptualization reemerges. This study aims to describe the key features of Russia's wartime strategic communication. Harold Lasswell's (1971) classical model of communication for the analysis (deductive approach) of five elements in Russia's communication: the communicator, the content, the receiver, the channel, and the effect. The analysis highlights the multi-faceted structure of Russia's strategic communication as well as its major inconsistencies and flaws. The study thus provides a theoretical ground for further research on Russia's information warfare.

**Keywords:** strategic communication, strategic narratives, Lasswell's model, Russo-Ukrainian war.

Оскільки з початку повномасштабної Російсько-української війни змінився контекст стратегічної комунікації Росії, знову виникає дослідницька потреба в її концептуалізації. Це дослідження націлене на опис ключових характеристик стратегічної комунікації Росії воєнного часу. У межах цієї роботи класична модель комунікації Гарольда Лассвелла (1971) застосовується для аналізу (дедуктивний підхід) п'яти елементів комунікації Росії: комунікатора, контенту, отримувача, каналу й ефекту. Аналіз висвітлює багатосторонню структуру стратегічної комунікації Росії, а також її значні суперечності

та прогалини. Дослідження надає теоретичне підґрунтя для подальших досліджень інформаційної війни Росії.

**Ключові слова:** стратегічна комунікація, стратегічні наративи, модель Лассвелла, Російсько-українська війна.

## Introduction

*Introduction (relevance).* Russia's strategic communication and information warfare have been in the spotlight of media studies for several years, especially after Russia's hybrid invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018; Fridman, 2020). As suggested by Godzimirski & Østevik (2018: 1), "Russia's use of communicative tools to promote the country's strategic objectives" at that time "has posed a new strategic challenge to the Western policy-making community." Then, it could be argued that new contexts and challenges have emerged since February 24, 2022 — the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Research on Russia's current strategic communication is crucial for understanding the larger picture of its warfare strategies. However, efficient in-depth research of how Russia operates in the current information warfare requires conceptualization of its strategic communication — at least, preliminarily.

*Literature review.* The concept of strategic communication may be used in various research fields, but for this paper, the focus is on the communication of a state (namely, Russia). Strategic communication could be defined as "coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives" (Paul, 2011: 17). A common definition by Farwell (2012: xviii-xix) reads that strategic communication is "the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinion of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives."

Russia's own strategic communication has been characterized as information warfare (Fridman, 2020) and/or as a tool in Russia's general hybrid warfare (Chivvis, 2017). As described by Fridman (2020: 1-2), "According to the Russian conceptualisation of this phenomenon, information war uses a combination of military and non-military means to influence the informational-psychological space of a targeted audience to achieve certain political goals" (here, Fridman mirrors Farwell's (2012) definition of strategic

communication). Fridman (2020: 2) also calls Russia's information war "the Russian counterpart to Western strategic communications," even though Russia's government might not use the label of strategic communications explicitly. As generalized by Godzimirski & Østevik (2018: 2) based on (Liik 2017; Radin and Reach 2017), there were a few "mainstays of Russian foreign policy objectives: defense of the country and the regime; influence in the near abroad; a vision of Russia as a great power; non-interference in domestic affairs; and political and economic cooperation on equal terms with other great powers." At least, these ideas were identified as Russia's foreign policy goals prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022. Furthermore, Russia's strategic communication involves exposure of disinformation, propaganda, narratives, psychological operations, and overt information operations (Lange-Ionatamishvili, Svetoka, & Geers, 2015; Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018; Fridman, 2020).

Overall, there is a considerable number of publications regarding Russia's strategic communication and even attempts to describe its actors, methods, and goals (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018). However, it could be argued that since the beginning of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, there is a reaffirmed "need for a more nuanced understanding" (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018: 1) of Russia's strategic communication as the context of Russia's war evolved. Moreover, there should be a structural description of Russia's strategic communication, which may be provided by Lasswell's model (1971).

According to classical conceptualization by Harold Lasswell (1971: 84), a "convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer" 5 questions: "Who?", "Says What?", "In Which Channel?", "To Whom?", "With What Effect?" Lasswell's model has been used for analysis of complex communication-related phenomena, including strategic communication (see, for example, Peng, 2015; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). This implies that Lasswell's model could be a useful tool in analyzing Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war as well.

*Research goal.* The goal of this research is to conceptualize Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war in terms of highlighting its general features. It should be noted that this paper is not aimed at proposing a detailed model of all of Russia's strategic communications components, background, and outcomes. However, it is aimed at providing a more general description. In the practical context, it is believed

that this description would be useful for those researchers who would like to have a grasp of what Russia's communication is and to find a starting point for further studies.

### **Methods**

Deductive logic is applied within this research. Specifically, Lasswell's (1971) approach is used to break down Russia's strategic communication into five elements: communicators, content, media channels, audiences, and effects. For these purposes, relevant scholarly literature (on the matters of Russia's strategic communication, strategic narratives, propaganda, media system etc.) and empirical evidence are considered.

It was pre-assumed that Russia's methods, content, channels and other means of strategic communication, as well as its effects, might differ slightly depending on the target audience. Respectively, the Lasswell's (1971: 84) "To Whom" element of communication is analyzed subsequently after the "Who" element. Division by audiences is then used in the analysis of other communication elements.

### **Results**

*Who.* There is one central figure of "Who" in Russia's strategic communication — the state lead by Vladimir Putin. Firstly, as derived from Farwell's (2012) theses, the state could be considered the key "Who" of the state's communication. Secondly, as broadly described by Snyder (2018), the Kremlin's system of political communication is a system of various state-related speakers, communication specialists, propagandists, and state media organizations that aim to re-create Kremlin-favorable reality. It could be pre-assumed that Russia's strategic communication originates directly from Vladimir Putin's administration, and Russia's government representatives are usually the ones to issue important statements. Accordingly, Russian media will probably spread and amplify the same pieces of information. Nevertheless, the key communicators or rather media mirrors of Russia's "Who" could be distinguished as: 1) Russia's state officials and government proxies, 2) Russian state-backed media (both as individual journalists, including top-propagandists, and as media organizations), and 3) Russian formally non-governmental media.

Speaking of *Russia's state officials*, as the head of the state, Putin delivers some of the most major messages in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. Aspriadis (2023) analyzed the rhetoric of Russia's president Vladimir Putin to outline some of the strategic narratives aimed at legitimizing Russia's full-scale invasion. Also, the initial official statement regarding the

full-scale invasion was also issued by Putin himself in the “On conducting a special military operation”<sup>1</sup> speech on February 24, 2022 (some pieces of this statement were also analyzed by Aspriadis, 2023). Other Russia’s officials who participate in the strategic communication include, for example, the Kremlin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, minister of defense Andrey Belousov (and, formerly, his predecessor Sergei Shoigu) or ministry of defense’s (MoD) spokesperson Igor Konashenkov. It could be argued that as Russia’s proxy heads of illegitimate administrations on the occupied territories of Ukraine could be the faces of Russia’s communication as well.

Russian *state-backed media* basically refer to TV presenters, hosts, etc. under this umbrella. Some of the notable names include (see e. g. Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018; Snyder, 2018 for more data) top propagandists like Dmitry Kiselyov (head of the state media group Rossiya Segodnya), Margarita Simonyan (editor-in-chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya simultaneously), and Vladimir Solovyov (TV presenter at Russia-1).

*Russian formally non-governmental media* is another example of Russia’s communication proxies. These are the military correspondents and other media representatives who are the so-called “Z-bloggers” (Shevchenko, 2023; Siedin & Zadyraka, 2024): they are formally autonomous from Russia’s government yet de-facto serve the cause of the state’s strategic communication and propaganda. Some of the major Z-bloggers and channels like Semyon Pegov (“War Conzo”), Alexander Kots, “Grey Zone” (believed to be Wagner Group-affiliated), or “Alex Parker Returns”, have hundreds of thousands of subscribers (Shevchenko, 2023; Siedin & Zadyraka, 2024). As discussed by Oleinik & Paniotto (2024), Russia’s government has used military correspondents’ potential to promote its propaganda.

*To Whom.* Fridrichová (2023) induces that Russia’s strategic communication has been focused on four key audiences: 1) Ukrainians, 2) the West (primarily, Europe and the US), 3) Russian domestic audience, and 4) other audiences of the world — here, the focus is made primarily on “the third world audience” (284). Overall, these four audiences were mentioned in several other publications on this topic (for example, see Drugă, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024). Though, it is argued by Fridrichová (2023) that from some point in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia’s strategic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959647?v=pdf>.

communication focused primarily on the internal audience, discouraging international audiences. Furthermore, Ukrainian audiences generally turned away from Russia's media since the beginning of the full-scale war (Fridrichová, 2023) — perhaps, to even greater extent than since 2014. Hence, the further analysis will have more emphasis on the other three audience categories.

*Says What.* The content of Russia's wartime communication has been approached from various perspectives like messages, narratives, themes, propaganda, disinformation, fake news, or psychological operations (Johansson-Nogués, Şimanschi, 2023; Fridrichová, 2023; Drugă, 2023; Soares, Gruzd, & Mai, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024). However, to give the general understanding of the ideas Russia communicates, the focus could be made on strategic narratives. According to Snigyr (2023: 4), Russia has three major strategic narratives in the full-scale war: 1) “The international order is changing, and the West (the liberal world) is trying to preserve its hegemony”; 2) “Russia is a sovereign, self-sustained, original civilization, based on traditional values, a center of Russian World / a leader of regional integration (sphere of influence, Big Eurasia)”; 3) “The new world order requires conceptual, systemic and structural changes.”

Moreover, it could be deduced from Fridrichová's (2023) research that Russia has applied its typical strategic narratives for years and to all four audiences. Consequently, such practice turned out to be inefficient at least for the Ukrainian and Western audiences (Fridrichová, 2023). On the other hand, sub-narratives of Russia's claimed goodwill and attempts to unite the world for peaceful resolution were targeted on both the Western audience and other world audiences (Bradshaw et al, 2024). Furthermore, anti-Western sentiment sub-narratives were directed at the Global South audience (Bradshaw et al, 2024).

*In Which Channel.* Russia's strategic communication relies upon a set of media channels that is congruent with its key communicators. This includes TV channels, social media groups and channels, as well as other news platforms. Russia's communicators and media platforms might combine several types of media channels to facilitate the outreach and audience targeting. Say, Drugă (2023) mentions that Russia's RT (the example of Arabic RT branch was provided) and RIA Novosti are present on all or almost all major social media like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Rutube, and VKontatke. Consequently, it might be slightly challenging to provide an analytically useful classification of Russian media by,

for example, its technical form. Then, an alternative thematic classification could be suggested based on practical convenience: 1) media channels of Russia's state officials, 2) internal and 3) external state-backed media platforms, as well as 4) Telegram channels of formally independent Russian propagandists.

*Media channels of Russia's state officials* could be the official source of some of the messages within Russia's strategic communication. Russia's bodies of government, military command, and other state bodies use their own websites, social media pages/channels, and other channels to issue official statements, comments, articles etc. For example, Putin's pseudohistorical propagandist article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (in which ideological ground for the 2022's invasion of Ukraine was de-facto laid out) was published originally on the Kremlin's official website on July 12, 2021<sup>2</sup>. Russia's MoD also posts battlefield updates on their official webpages and social media. Then, other types of Russia's media might spread the messages from Russia's officials further. Hence, directly or not, media channels of Russia's state officials might interact with various audiences.

Perhaps, in the media and communication studies, *Russian state-backed media platforms* are among the most researched channels of Russia's communication. Yet, it would be reasonable to distinguish between *internal* and *external* types of these media platforms. While they all serve the same general purposes of Russia's strategic communication and information warfare, internal and external channels focus on different audiences — Russian domestic audience and international audiences accordingly. There are several internal state media (like TASS, Rossiya 1, or Channel One), yet even formally private-funded media (like *Komsomolskaya Pravda*) are under absolute state control and thus serve the strategic goals of Russia's government (see BBC, 2023 for Russia's media guide).

Then, after the major restructuring of Russia's international media<sup>3</sup> in 2013, there are at least two large media groups that have target *international audiences* (Godzimirski & Østevik, 2018; Snyder, 2018): firstly, Rossiya Segodnya, represented by the media *Sputnik News* and *RIA Novosti* (led most notably by Dmitry Kiselyov and Margarita Simonyan), and,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.epra.org/news\\_items/new-package-of-eu-sanctions-targetting-russian-state-owned-channels](https://www.epra.org/news_items/new-package-of-eu-sanctions-targetting-russian-state-owned-channels); <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvglrrz95zzo>.

secondly, TV-Novosti, represented by the *RT* (led by Margarita Simonyan). All of these media platforms used to have intercontinental coverage, reaching several Western audiences as well as audiences of the Global South (see Drugă, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024). Yet, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, several states, including members of the European Union and the US, have imposed sanctions and/or a ban on Russian international media.

Finally, *Telegram channels* might be worth mentioning as one the crucial media platforms of Russia's strategic communication. Namely, Telegram's effectiveness in facilitating Russia's propaganda has been associated with Russia's (proxy) military correspondents (Oleinik & Paniotto, 2024: 17): "Compared with the other social media, Russian and Western alike, Telegram is the least regulated. Military correspondents, the so-called 'voenkory', capitalize on this relative freedom by disseminating information that could not be found elsewhere through Telegram channels." From an often harsh, aggressive anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, it could be deduced that these channels are used primarily for Russia's domestic audience (see Shevchenko, 2023). Though, this content may be shared by different media for different audiences. Since most of the formal Russia-backed media was banned in Ukraine, it could be also assumed that some of the Z-channels could be used to demoralize the Ukrainian audience.

**With What Effect.** Evidence regarding the effects of Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, Russia's strategic communication attempts are considered to lack effectiveness (Fridrichová, 2023). On the other hand, there are details related to specific audiences and contexts. And, as already implied above, by focusing on the internal audience, Russia made its communication even less effective in regard to Western audiences (Fridrichová, 2023).

Despite long-lasting exposure, Russia's strategic communication and propaganda has been characterized as ineffective within the Ukrainian audience (Fridrichová, 2023; Erlich & Garner, 2023). Overall, Ukrainians have been able to distinguish Russia's propaganda, although members of this audience who have stronger identification with Russia and its political ideology are more likely to believe in its propaganda (Erlich & Garner, 2023).

Rather common conclusions could be made for Russia's strategic communication within the *Western audience*. As Fridrichová (2023: 284) elaborates,

“as far as action is a measure of audience loyalty, Russia lost a significant portion. Sweeping sanctions and active narrative contestation are prevalent now in many news sources, even though they have not been previously.” Mandić & Klarić’s (2023) study of Russia’s disinformation regarding the participation of foreign mercenaries on Ukraine’s side showed that while the disinformation caused considerable political reaction in the media fields of countries like Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, it did not change state politics or public opinion. Yet, some audience segments might lean towards Russia’s propaganda more. For example, the national survey of Canadian adult population by Soares et al. (2023: 1) shows that “belief in Pro-Kremlin disinformation is politically motivated and linked to users who: (1) hold conservative views, (2) trust partisan media, and (3) frequently share political opinions on social media”, while it also correlates positively with belief in disinformation.

Then, *Russian domestic audience* has been receptive of the Kremlin’s strategic communication and support Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Johansson-Nogués, Şimanschi, 2023; Fridrichová, 2023; Oleinik & Paniotto, 2024). The overwhelming majority of Russians supported the full-scale invasion as of September 2024 (The Kyiv Independent, with reference to the data by Russian Levada Centre). This evidence is rather congruent with Snyder’s (2018) discussion on the relationship between Russia’s communication of its 2014’s invasion of Ukraine and the position of internal audience: Putin and its administration attempted to unify the Russian audience by disinformation and distortion of truth — and the audience was willing to accept it.

Finally, empirical evidence implies that Russia’s strategic communication efforts have been effective to a certain extent in the context on other world audiences, particularly the Global South. Authors of Detector Media’s report “War and The Battle of Narratives: Understanding Russian Propaganda in the Media Landscape of the Global South” (Pivtorak, Bidochko, Khudish, 2023) conclude:

*“As Russian propaganda targets Asian, African, and South American countries, the messages align with the official stances of India, South Africa, and Brazil, which abstain from endorsing UN General Assembly resolutions supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity or condemning Russia. This implies that Ukraine’s strategic communications sector and diplomats will need to make significant efforts to shift perspectives on Ukraine.”*

Though, it should be noted that pro-Russian media content in the Global South's media is frequently based on anti-western sentiment (stance) that omits Ukraine from the central discussion of Russia's invasion (Pivtorak, et al. 2023), focusing on "broader topics such as Western colonialism, trade wars, sanctions, globalization" instead.

### Conclusions

The analysis using Lasswell's model of communication implies that Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war is a multi-faceted communication process driven by the state or, more precisely, Vladimir Putin's regime. Russia's communication, which is based on its strategic narratives, targets the internal Russian audience, yet it also makes attempts to reach out to the audiences of the West, the Global South, and Ukraine. For this purpose, Russia uses a system of state-backed media in various formats. This study suggested the general description of Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale invasion, which might be useful as a theoretical base for further studies. Such studies, in their turn, could be directed at obtaining deeper knowledge of various elements in the chain of Russia's strategic communication.

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