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The Nightingale Versus the Bear

What Persuasion Research Reveals About Ukraine's and
Russia's Messaging on the War



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About This Report

In this report, we examine Russian and Ukrainian state information campaigns related to the Russian war in Ukraine through the lens of persuasion research. We focus our analysis on official Russian and Ukrainian persuasive communication campaigns targeting each state's own public and military personnel, as well as those campaigns targeting the public and military personnel of its foe. We apply lessons gleaned from persuasion research to understand which characteristics of attempts by each state to boost its own morale while degrading that of its adversary may (or may not) have been persuasive.

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Contents

- About This Report iii
- Tables v
- Chapter 1. Introduction and Approach 1
- Chapter 2. Characterizing the Campaigns 5
 - The Backdrop 5
 - The Broad Strokes of the 2022 Invasion and Information Campaigns 10
 - The Specifics of Period 1: Russia’s Initial Offensive and the Battle for Kyiv 11
 - The Specifics of Period 2: Announcement of Russia’s Partial Mobilization..... 18
- Chapter 3. The Persuasiveness of the Campaigns 22
 - Defining and Measuring Persuasion 22
 - Were Ukraine’s and Russia’s Campaigns Persuasive? Period 1: Russia’s Initial Offensive and the Battle for Kyiv 32
 - Were Ukraine’s and Russia’s Campaigns Persuasive? Period 2: Announcement of Russia’s Partial Mobilization..... 36
- Chapter 4. Final Thoughts 38
- References 40

Tables

Table 1.1. Actors and Audiences Examined in This Study	2
Table 1.2. Periods of Analysis for Selected Incidents	2
Table 3.1. Factors That Affect Persuasion	24
Table 3.2. Selection of Findings on Effects of Factors on Persuasion	31

Chapter 1. Introduction and Approach

“Ukraine is winning the information war against Russia.”¹ So read the headlines of a slew of articles published by prominent Western outlets following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Western policymakers appear to have come to similar conclusions. Former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst has echoed, “Russia has lost the information war,” a sentiment shared by Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns.²

But these observations might not be telling the whole story. We simply do not know, in the absence of a deeper analysis, which side is prevailing in the information war. Moreover, these early hunches advanced by policymakers and the media offer few details on why Ukraine’s information campaigns may have been effective while Russia’s efforts may have fallen flat. Through this exploratory effort, we aim to start filling in these gaps by examining both countries’ campaigns through a more research-informed approach. Specifically, we set out to understand whether publicly available evidence could shed light on the following question: Are Ukraine’s information campaigns more persuasive than Russia’s, and, if so, what does the research on persuasion tell us about why this may be the case? Or, put in symbolic terms, has the call of the Ukrainian nightingale—a songbird commonly invoked as an icon of the Ukrainian people—outmatched the bark of the Russian bear?³

To date, much of the popular discourse on this subject, particularly in the West, has focused on Kyiv’s and Moscow’s attempts to shape foreign policymakers’ and the international public’s attitudes and behaviors toward the war.⁴ Observers have commented on the ability of Ukrainian

¹ Lauren Feiner, “Ukraine Is Winning the Information War Against Russia,” CNBC, March 1, 2022; John Thornhill, “Ukraine Is Winning the Information War Against Russia,” *Financial Times*, March 3, 2022.

² Brent D. Griffiths, “CIA Director Bill Burns Says Putin ‘Is Losing’ the Information War over Ukraine,” *Insider*, March 10, 2022; Peter Stone, “US Rightwing Figures in Step with Kremlin over Ukraine Disinformation, Experts Say,” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2022.

³ The Eurasian brown bear is often associated with the Russian state in popular discourse, including by President Vladimir Putin. See Max Fisher, “Putin’s Insane-Sounding Quote About Bears Is Essential for Understanding Russia Today,” *Vox*, December 18, 2014. Although Ukraine does not have an official national bird, the country and its people have frequently been associated with the common nightingale in folk songs and folklore. See Pearly Jacob, “The Ukrainians Using Embroidery to Stand Up to Russia,” *Al Jazeera*, January 22, 2023; “Soloveiko Songbird: First Ukrainian Installation for Eurovision 2023 Unveiled in Liverpool,” *Yahoo!Life*, May 1, 2023.

⁴ Mary Blankenship and Aloysius Uche Ordu, “Russia’s Narratives About Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa,” *Brookings Institution*, June 27, 2022; Sara Brown, “In Russia-Ukraine War, Social Media Stokes Ingenuity, Disinformation,” *MIT Sloan School of Management*, April 6, 2022; “Russia’s Latest Information War Tactic: Spoofing Foreign Media,” *Bloomberg*, February 7, 2023.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his team to artfully tailor messages and bring legislators to tears, pointing to the billions of dollars in aid he has secured as evidence of his oratory prowess.⁵

We take a different approach, focusing instead on each side’s messaging toward its own public and military personnel and those of its adversary. To do so, we examine Ukrainian-, Russian-, and English-language content produced and disseminated by official Ukrainian and Russian authorities and their affiliated institutions. We assume that the objective of each side’s messaging is to bolster—or at least maintain—the morale of its own people and soldiers while degrading the morale of its foe (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Actors and Audiences Examined in This Study

Target Audience	State Responsible for Messaging	
	Russia	Ukraine
Russian military personnel and Russian public	Russia targeting its own military personnel and public	Ukraine targeting Russian military personnel and public
Ukrainian military personnel and Ukrainian public	Russia targeting Ukrainian military personnel and public	Ukraine targeting its own military personnel and public

Given the eye-watering volume of content produced by Kyiv and Moscow since Russia launched its latest invasion on February 24, 2022, we have chosen to scope our period of analysis to examine two specific incidents. These are (1) Russia’s initial offensive and the Battle for Kyiv and (2) the announcement of Russia’s partial mobilization (see Table 1.2). For each, we examine Ukraine’s and Russia’s messaging in the week prior to the incident and in the two weeks following.

Table 1.2. Periods of Analysis for Selected Incidents

Incident Name	Incident Date	Related Period of Analysis
Russia’s initial offensive and the Battle for Kyiv	February 24, 2022	February 17–March 10, 2022
Announcement of Russia’s partial mobilization	September 21, 2022	September 14–October 5, 2022

For the Ukrainian aspects of this effort, we decided to center our analysis on messaging propagated by official Ukrainian government sources. Specifically, we examined content published on government websites and official social media channels affiliated with Zelenskyy, the Office of the President, the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff of the Armed Forces, and other government bodies. Because this is an examination of state information campaigns, we

⁵ Tanya Goudsouzian, “How Ukraine Won the Information War,” *National Interest*, October 23, 2022.

deliberately selected official channels that we are reasonably certain are affiliated with state actors and, therefore, whose messaging is likely sanctioned by the Ukrainian government.

By contrast, our initial investigations indicated that the volume of content disseminated by analogous Russian government websites and social media accounts on the war in Ukraine was considerably lower during the periods on which we focused. Because this content was simply too sparse, we were unable to use analogous sources for the Russian portion of our analysis.

Instead, we concentrated on another source: TV news programs broadcast on Russian government-operated television channels. As is now well established, Russia's most prominent TV news programs operate as a messaging arm of the Kremlin. Officials and analysts alike have documented the close and directive relationship that exists between Kremlin officials and state-affiliated television stations.⁶ As former insiders have revealed,

Each day, the Kremlin provides a list of talking points for broadcasters. The closely guarded document, known as the 'temnik,' is delivered to senior officials at V.G.T.R.K. [Russia's largest media corporation] and other organizations, outlining issues the Kremlin wants covered, positively or negatively.⁷

Therefore, it is reasonable to consider content disseminated via these channels to be government-sanctioned messaging.

Specifically, we focused on two of V.G.T.R.K.'s flagship TV programs: Russia-1's *Vesti Nedeli* (*News of the Week*; weekly news), featuring Dmitry Kiselyov, head of the state-owned Rossiya Segodnya news agency, and *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'jovym* (*Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*), featuring pro-Kremlin host Vladimir Solovyov.⁸ According to Russian state sources, *Vesti Nedeli* was reported as being the most popular news program in the country in 2022, and *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'jovym* retained its position as one of the most viewed shows by Russian audiences.⁹

By comparison, the dynamics behind Ukraine's TV media landscape are more complex. The country's top ten most viewed channels in 2021 and 2022 are owned by a handful of Ukrainian oligarchs who have been reported to use their holdings to vie for political influence and

⁶ European Commission, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the EP Plenary on the Social and Economic Consequences for the EU of the Russian War in Ukraine—Reinforcing the EU's Capacity to Act," transcript, May 4, 2022.

⁷ Paul Mozur, Adam Satariano, and Aaron Krolik, "An Alternate Reality: How Russia's State TV Spins the Ukraine War," *New York Times*, December 15, 2022.

⁸ Neil MacFarquhar, "What Russians See in the News: A War over Western Plans to Subjugate Them," *New York Times*, August 21, 2022.

⁹ "News of the Week Named the Most Popular Weekly Format in 2022" ["'Вести недели' назвали самым популярным еженедельным форматом 2022 года"], RIA Novosti, January 4, 2023.

economic advantage.¹⁰ Thus, while the content propagated by the TV programs hosted by these channels may align with government narratives at times when doing so serves the interests of the channels' owners, this may not always be the case. For this reason, we chose not to include Ukrainian TV in our analysis.

¹⁰ Anna Korbut, "Strengthening Public Interest in Ukraine's Media Sector," Chatham House, April 23, 2021; "Top Channels in December 2021 Age 18–54, Cities 50+," Television Industry Committee, 2021; "Top Channels in December 2022 Age 18–54, Cities 50+," Television Industry Committee, 2022.

Chapter 2. Characterizing the Campaigns

The Backdrop

By the time Russian forces were posturing along Ukraine’s borders in fall 2021 and Kremlin officials were publicly dismissing as “hysteria” claims that Russia was planning to mount a major operation, Ukraine and many of its Western partners had spent years experiencing, observing, and studying Russia’s playbook for initiating military operations.¹¹ Broadly speaking, Russia’s track record included the use of opaque operations that were deliberately denied or obfuscated by Kremlin leadership, paired with a torrent of misleading and often contradictory narratives about Russia’s role and the facts on the ground.¹² In cases in which Russia’s and its partners’ hands in operations were ultimately exposed, the Kremlin propagated messaging that cited fabricated or misconstrued evidence to rationalize its and its partners’ involvement.¹³

Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea serves as a shining example. In February of that year, so-called local little green men seized Crimean government buildings while soldiers, clad in “standard-issue Russian combat fatigues” without insignia and “armed with Russian weapons,” commandeered other strategic locations, such as airfields.¹⁴ Even in the face of these cues that linked the unidentified forces in Crimea with the Russian military, senior Kremlin officials vocally rejected the idea that these forces were Russians. Instead, Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted that these were “local forces of self defence.”¹⁵ When asked about photographs that had surfaced of military vehicles with Russian license plates in Crimea, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu dismissed the photographs as “nonsense,” calling them “provocations.”¹⁶

¹¹ Vladimir Isachenkov, “Kremlin Denies Plans to Invade Ukraine, Alleges NATO Threats,” Associated Press, November 12, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russians Scoff at Western Fears of Ukraine Invasion,” Associated Press, February 15, 2022.

¹² Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge University Press, 2019; Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, RAND Corporation, RR-1498-A, 2017.

¹³ Huw Dylan and Thomas J. Maguire, “Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War,” *Survival*, Vol. 64, No. 4, August–September 2022.

¹⁴ Anton Lavrov, “Russian Again: The Military Operation for Crimea,” in Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, East View Press, 2015.

¹⁵ “Russia’s Putin Denies Russian Troops Took Crimea,” Reuters, March 4, 2014.

¹⁶ “What Invasion? Russian Denials on Crimea Trigger War of Words,” NBC News, March 6, 2014.

In retrospect, we know the provenance of these troops: After a year of disavowals, Putin revealed that the mysterious men that had occupied Crimea in 2014 were Russian forces.¹⁷ However, as these events unfolded in 2014, the secrecy, surprise, and speed of the operation created an environment in which Russia’s narratives could appear plausible to some. This allowed Russia to be able to exploit “differences of opinion within the European Union and NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] to deflect U.S. and British efforts to build a united campaign to counter Russia’s moves.”¹⁸

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the accompanying Russian information campaign were followed by other events that employed similar tactics, such as Moscow’s attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election or the Kremlin’s dissemination of contradictory narratives regarding the perpetrators responsible for poisoning former Russian spy Sergei Skripal on British soil.¹⁹ In the years since, government institutions, scholars and analysts, and civil-society organizations across the West have devoted appreciable resources and spilled considerable ink examining Russia’s playbook and devising countermeasures.²⁰ NATO, the European Union, and Western governments have established a constellation of civilian and military institutions charged with identifying, responding to, and studying information campaigns by Russia.

For Ukraine, Russia’s 2014 invasion and information campaigns spurred the country to “[take] dramatic steps to respond.”²¹ In 2017, for instance, Ukrainian authorities mandated that Ukrainian internet service providers ban access to Russian-owned social media and internet companies VKontakte (VK), Odnoklassniki, Mail.ru, and Yandex—a move that empirical research has shown reduced overall activity on VK despite users’ possession of technical mechanisms to circumvent the ban.²² The Ukrainian government also established a Ministry of

¹⁷ Carl Schreck, “From ‘Not Us’ to ‘Why Hide It?’: How Russia Denied Its Crimea Invasion, Then Admitted It,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 26, 2019.

¹⁸ Joshua Yaffa and Adam Entous, “Inside the High-Stakes Fight to Control the Narrative on Ukraine,” *New Yorker*, February 21, 2022.

¹⁹ Alexandra Ma and Kieran Corcoran, “Russia Is Pushing These 15 Mutually Contradictory Theories to Claim They Weren’t Behind the Nerve Agent Attack,” *Insider*, April 18, 2018; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections”: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*, January 6, 2017.

²⁰ Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, RAND Corporation, RR-4373/2-AF, 2022, pp. 107–128. NATO, for instance, has established the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, whereas others, such as the United States and its European partners, have reinvigorated or established government departments with this mission, such as the U.S. Department of State’s Global Engagement Center.

²¹ Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, 2022, p. 115.

²² Yevgeniy Golovchenko, “Fighting Propaganda with Censorship: A Study of the Ukrainian Ban on Russian Social Media,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 84, No. 2, April 2022; “Ukraine Bans Its Top Social Networks Because They Are Russian,” *The Economist*, May 19, 2017.

Information Policy and reorganized the Armed Forces' command-and-control structures to streamline responses to Russia's information campaigns.²³ For its part, the Ukrainian civil-society sector also mobilized, establishing organizations, such as InformNapalm and StopFake, devoted to fact-checking and debunking Russian disinformation.²⁴

Broadly, it is difficult to speak to the success of these response measures. Even so, having experienced and studied the Kremlin's approach to war and information campaigns, Ukraine and its Western partners had gleaned valuable lessons by the time Russian forces were postured on Ukraine's borders in early 2022. In the U.S. case, many of the senior national security officials sitting in the White House in January and February 2022 had previously served in the Obama administration when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine.²⁵

In response to Russia's increasingly bellicose behavior toward Ukraine in late 2021 and early 2022, U.S. officials, along with their British counterparts, decided to pursue a new strategy: pressing their respective intelligence communities to expeditiously release intelligence that exposed Kremlin plans related to Ukraine.²⁶ This included the public release of "processed-imagery intelligence of [Russia's] military build-up along Ukraine's border and strategic assessments of Russian plans to invade," along with evidence pointing to "Russian efforts to covertly subvert the government in Kyiv; . . . false-flag operations seeking to provide Moscow with a legitimate pretext for military action; . . . disinformation in support of these operations; and . . . Russian post-invasion plans to target prospective Ukrainian dissidents and install pliant leaders."²⁷ In addition to potentially frustrating the decapitation of the Zelenskyy government and possibly delaying the invasion, the preemptive release of intelligence undercut a tactic often used by Russia: the use of falsified information to legitimize bellicose behavior and shape audience support for Russia's actions. Some refer to this tactic of preempting a disinformation campaign by releasing factual information as *pre-bunking*.²⁸

²³ Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, 2022, pp. 116–117.

²⁴ In Ukraine, for instance, the nongovernmental organization Media Reforms Center, founded by the Mohyla School of Journalism at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla, has been operating StopFake, a fact-checking website that identifies Russian disinformation (StopFake, "About Us," webpage, undated). InformNapalm, established in March 2014, is a collection of volunteers hailing from more than ten countries (InformNapalm, homepage, undated).

²⁵ Yaffa and Entous, 2022.

²⁶ Yaffa and Entous, 2022.

²⁷ Dylan and Maguire, 2022, p. 34.

²⁸ Courtney D. Boman and Erika J. Schneider, "Finding an Antidote: Testing the Use of Proactive Crisis Strategies to Protect Organizations from Astroturf Attacks," *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 47, No. 1, March 2021, p. 3. *Pre-bunking* refers to a means of inoculating an audience proactively about an issue before the audience is exposed to disinformation or misinformation about that issue. It is based on inoculation theory in the persuasion literature. "It hypothesizes that individuals presented with, or inoculated with a forewarning message about an attack will be less affected by the persuasive attempt" (Boman and Schneider, 2021, p. 3).

As we explain below, these dynamics are significant in that they may have influenced the persuasiveness of Russia’s messages about the conflict writ large, at least among some audiences. For audiences who either (1) had not previously formed strong beliefs on the issue of Moscow’s aggression toward Ukraine or (2) already viewed Moscow’s behavior as hostile, Kyiv’s and the West’s efforts to paint Russia’s behavior as illegitimate and threatening early on may have had purchase.²⁹

By the time Russia mounted its offensive in February 2022, Russian forces had already been engaged in a protracted conflict with Ukrainian forces for years. The war had claimed the lives of more than 14,000 Ukrainians by the end of January 2021, and around 300,000 of the country’s citizens had seen combat on the front lines.³⁰ We do not have data regarding Ukrainian service member attitudes toward the Kremlin specifically. That said, we do know that, a few months before the invasion in November 2021, 76 percent of Ukrainians polled reported feeling “bad” about Russian leadership, whereas 11 percent said it was difficult to say.³¹ These data suggest that many Ukrainians may have had negative preconceived notions about Putin and Russian military leadership and would, therefore, be more receptive to early 2022 narratives from Ukraine and the West that exposed false-flag operations by Russia.

What is more, evidence indicates that existing linguistic, political, and ideational cleavages that divided the Ukrainian public for much of the post–Cold War period narrowed significantly following Russia’s invasion in 2014. For instance, in four of five regions polled (west, central, east, and south), Ukrainians’ self-identification as “citizens of Ukraine” when they were asked “Whom do you consider yourself first and foremost?” increased by a relatively significant margin between June–July 2013 and July 2014.³² When Ukrainians were polled again in August 2022, the proportion increased again: 80 percent or more of respondents self-identified as “citizens of Ukraine” across the country, including its eastern and southern regions.³³ (Notable exceptions are the Donbas and Crimea, where the annexation and ongoing conflict precluded researchers from conducting the survey.) Thus, any efforts by the Kremlin to exploit divisions among Ukrainians may have been less effective in 2022 than was the case prior to 2014.

²⁹ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, RAND Corporation, PE-198-OSD, 2016, p. 4.

³⁰ “The Ukrainian Army Has Got Better at Fighting Russian-Backed Separatists,” *The Economist*, November 30, 2021; “Ukrainian Military Is Long on Morale but Short on Weaponry,” NPR, December 10, 2021.

³¹ Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, “Attitude of the Population of Ukraine to Russia and the Population of Russia to Ukraine, November 2021,” press release, December 17, 2021.

³² Iryna Bekeshkina, “Decisive 2014: Did It Divide or Unite Ukraine?” in Olexiy Haran and Maksym Yakovlev, eds., *Constructing a Political Nation*, Stylos Publishing, 2017, p. 3.

³³ Bekeshkina, 2017; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, “Indicators of National-Civic Ukrainian Identity,” press release, August 16, 2022.

Still, for much of the Russian public and military forces, for some global audiences, and possibly for small segments of the Ukrainian public who have been steeped in Kremlin narratives on Ukraine, attempts to pre-bunk may not have resonated, if they were heard at all. Even when paired with authoritative intelligence, Western leaders' exposure of Russia's intentions may have fallen on deaf ears for those who were already entrenched in the world of Kremlin narratives.

Social science research tells us that people tend to be more accepting of information that confirms their existing attitudes and beliefs and tend to "ignore, downplay, or dismiss arguments and information that clash with their existing beliefs and attitudes."³⁴ Furthermore, for these audiences, claims that Russian military operations in Ukraine were necessary to thwart the oppression of ethnic Russians by fascists in Kyiv who were sponsored by the West were not new.³⁵ In fact, this had been a prevailing narrative promulgated by Russian officials and prominent news outlets since Ukraine's 2013–2014 Euromaidan movement.³⁶ Evidence indicates that Russian audiences may have accepted this narrative. In May 2021, when Russians were asked, "Who is the initiator of the aggravation of the situation in eastern Ukraine?" nearly half of respondents said the United States and NATO (48 percent), and 20 percent said Ukraine, whereas only 4 percent identified Russia as the aggressor.³⁷ If these figures reflect Russians' genuinely held beliefs, this finding suggests that by the time the United States and the United Kingdom began exposing Russia's attempts to set the narrative about the invasion, Russian audiences had already accepted the Kremlin's portrait of Ukrainian authorities as Western-backed fascists and were wary of trusting contradictory facts communicated by Western authorities.

Sir Jeremy Fleming, chief of the Government Communications Headquarters, a British intelligence agency, acknowledged the limitations of the West's efforts to pre-bunk for audiences predisposed to Russia's rendition of the facts: "When it came to Russia we had basically no impact," Fleming said.³⁸ "What we also saw was that we were not that impactful in other countries that had already taken on the narrative the Russians were pushing. When you are

³⁴ Markus Prior, Gaurav Sood, and Kabir Khanna, "You Cannot Be Serious: The Impact of Accuracy Incentives on Partisan Bias in Reports of Economic Perceptions," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2015, p. 513.

³⁵ Nabih Bulos, "Russian Disinformation Kicks into High Gear as Ukraine Crisis Drags On," *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2022.

³⁶ Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek, "Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse During the Ukraine Crisis," in Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, eds., *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, E-International Relations Publishing, 2015; Taras Kuzio, "The Origins of Peace, Non-Violence, and Conflict in Ukraine," in Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, eds., *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, E-International Relations Publishing, 2015.

³⁷ Levada Center, "Escalation in Southeastern Ukraine," webpage, May 19, 2021.

³⁸ Gavin Cordon, "Ukraine Marks 'Sea Change' in Use of Secret Intelligence Says Spy Chief," Yahoo News, December 29, 2022.

pushing out information to a population that is already skeptical of you it is much harder to gain traction.”³⁹

The Broad Strokes of the 2022 Invasion and Information Campaigns

After months of speculation and posturing, Moscow launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Although the two countries had been locked in a protracted war for nearly eight years at that point, Russia’s new assault marked a significant shift in the magnitude of the hostilities. In the hours and days after Putin’s announcement of the operation, salvos of missiles rained down on Ukrainian cities, Russian units attacked across four fronts, and Zelenskyy survived several attempts on his life. These kinetic manifestations of the invasion were accompanied by another tool Russia has frequently used in (and about) Ukraine, particularly since the 2014 incursions: information campaigns.

As Russian forces bristled on the Russian-Ukrainian border in the weeks before the operation’s launch, Kremlin officials publicly denounced what they perceived to be Ukraine’s unwillingness to participate in diplomatic resolutions to the pre-February 24 phase of the conflict and castigated Kyiv for supposedly “systematically violating human rights on a large scale.”⁴⁰ Senior Russian leadership also called for the “de-escalation of tensions around Ukraine.”⁴¹ Behind the scenes, Kremlin actors and proxies reportedly mobilized their informational instruments to manufacture “evidence” of a pretense for their ensuing invasion. In early February 2022, White House officials, armed with U.S. intelligence, revealed that Russia had “recruited players to stage a propaganda video depicting ‘graphic scenes of a staged false explosion with corpses, actors depicting mourners, and images of destroyed locations and military equipment.’”⁴² Other Russian attempts at false-flag operations surfaced in this period; Telegram channels believed to be linked to the Kremlin published “proof” of supposed Ukrainian provocations, including sabotage operations, shelling, and troop advances on Russian soil and in the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.⁴³ Kremlin officials and Russian state media sources then parroted these narratives, citing the same documentation as justification.⁴⁴

³⁹ Cordon, 2022.

⁴⁰ President of Russia, “News Conference Following Russian-German Talks,” transcript, February 15, 2022a; President of Russia, “News Conference Following Russian-Belarusian Talks,” transcript, February 18, 2022b.

⁴¹ President of Russia, “Security Council Meeting,” transcript, February 21, 2022c.

⁴² Nicole Sganga, “U.S. Reveals Russian Plot to Use Fake Video as Pretense for Ukraine Invasion,” CBS News, February 4, 2022.

⁴³ Nash Miller, “Adaptive Russian Information Warfare in Ukraine,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 282, April 12, 2022, p. 3; Sébastien Seibt, “Ukraine Crisis: A Low-Cost Disinformation Campaign Aids Putin’s Playbook,” France 24, February 23, 2022.

⁴⁴ Miller, 2022.

For its part, in addition to the response Ukraine mounted on the battlefield, Kyiv launched its own offensive in the information space in the prelude to the conflict and in the first weeks of the war. In the weeks before February 24, 2022, top Ukrainian civilian officials, including Zelenskyy and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, highlighted demonstrations of Western states' solidarity with Ukraine, publicizing state visits and phone calls with foreign heads of state while underscoring the government's position supporting de-escalation.⁴⁵ In messages directed at the Ukrainian public, senior Ukrainian leaders also urged calm, tempering growing concerns about an imminent invasion. Their uniformed counterparts signaled the military's preparedness if Ukraine were attacked, advertised ongoing joint exercises with partners, named and shamed fake accounts masquerading as official Ukrainian ones, and debunked what they argued were false narratives propagated by Russian actors.⁴⁶

The Specifics of Period 1: Russia's Initial Offensive and the Battle for Kyiv

Russia's Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

Russia's messaging that targeted the Russian public and military personnel in the first weeks of the war centered on a narrative that long predated the conflict. For years, Russia has been actively promoting the idea that Ukrainian authorities, including military leadership and personnel, are Nazis. By casting Russia's enemies—in this case, Ukrainian authorities and military leaders—as fascists, Russian TV may have attempted to tap into the central role that Russia's victory in World War II (or the "Great Patriotic War," in Russian parlance) plays in the country's national identity. In Russia, this period of history is glorified through ubiquitous monuments and memorials devoted to Russia's victory, frequent references in popular culture and state-affiliated media, and grandiose annual celebrations of Victory Day in May.⁴⁷

From the first weeks of the war through the mobilization announcement in September 2022, Russian television consistently portrayed the enemy in Ukraine as a small, well-trained group of fanatics reinforced by foreign mercenaries financed by the West.⁴⁸ Russia's messaging distinguished between the "regular units of the armed forces of Ukraine" and what Putin referred to as "nationalist formations," which, the Kremlin leader claimed, "are directly responsible for

⁴⁵ Dmytro Kuleba [@DmytroKuleba], Twitter posts for the period of January 1, 2022–February 22, 2022; Volodymyr Zelenskyy [@ZelenskyyUa], Twitter posts for the period of January 1, 2022–February 22, 2022a.

⁴⁶ See, for example, General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine [@GeneralStaffUA], Twitter posts for the period of January 1, 2022–February 22, 2022a; Ministry of Defense of Ukraine [@DefenceU], Twitter posts for the period of January 1, 2022–February 22, 2022a.

⁴⁷ Lateshia Beachum, "What Victory Day Means for Russian Identity," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2022; "Russia's Monumental Tributes to the 'Great Patriotic War,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 8, 2020.

⁴⁸ Robert B. Cialdini and Noah J. Goldstein, "The Science and Practice of Persuasion," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2, April 2002, p. 46.

the genocide in the Donbass.”⁴⁹ According to Putin, Russia’s qualms were not with the Ukrainian military’s rank and file. Rather, Russian soldiers were being deployed to fight the “neo-Nazis” who had infiltrated the Ukrainian military at the behest of “foreign consultants, primarily American advisers,” and were using civilians as “human shields” in some places, such as Kyiv and Kharkiv.⁵⁰ Voices, such as those of Defense Minister Shoigu and prominent Russian TV personalities, echoed this narrative, noting that the Armed Forces of Ukraine were noble in their efforts to serve their motherland.⁵¹

While we cannot be sure of the objectives of Russian TV shows, their content in this period appears to have relied on other mechanisms to reinforce public support for the war by attempting to tug on Russian heartstrings and elicit negative emotions toward certain segments of the Ukrainian military and political leadership. Both programs that we reviewed repeatedly referenced vivid vignettes of atrocities reportedly perpetrated by the Ukrainian military. These include the “Madonna of Horlivka,” the story of a woman and child supposedly killed by shelling in eastern Ukraine, and the “Alley of Angels,” a memorial in Donetsk devoted to child casualties of fighting.⁵² No doubt, civilians in eastern Ukraine had been killed prior to February 2022 because of active hostilities; however, in many cases, debates over the perpetrators and intended targets remain. Still, Russian news programming in the first weeks of the war ignored these disputes, instead reporting that the Ukrainian military deliberately undertook these attacks to extinguish the population of the Donbas.

Russia’s Messaging Targeting Ukrainian Audiences

Efforts to vilify Ukrainian authorities and military leaders may have been designed with a second purpose in mind—that is, to degrade Ukrainian morale to fight and to exploit existing misgivings of those Ukrainian service members whose loyalty to their government was shaky at the outset of the war. Messaging aimed at Ukrainian personnel painted a portrait of Russia’s “inevitable victory” by consistently ridiculing the idea that Ukraine could win, or even resist, the Russian Armed Forces.⁵³ Russian TV programs framed the choice facing Ukrainian service members at the beginning of the war as a stark, binary one: defect and join the righteous, winning side, or face humiliation and death.

⁴⁹ President of Russia, “Meeting with Permanent Members of the Security Council,” news release, February 25, 2022e.

⁵⁰ President of Russia, 2022e.

⁵¹ “News of the Week, February 27, 2022” [“Вести недели, 27 февраля 2022 года”], video, February 27, 2022.

⁵² “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, February 24, 2022” [“Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым, 24 февраля 2022 года”], video, Russia-1, February 24, 2022a.

⁵³ “News of the Week, February 27, 2022,” 2022; “News of the Week, March 6, 2022” [“Вести недели, 6 марта 2022 года”], video, March 6, 2022.

According to Russian TV, defection served dual purposes for Ukrainian military personnel—survival and escape from the clutches of the “Nazis.”⁵⁴ As evidence, news programs reported on the alleged stories of many defectors who were safely in the comfort of the Russian authorities. Interestingly, messaging on this narrative leaned on the *bandwagon effect*—that is, the tendency for people to adopt attitudes and carry out behaviors in line with a majority even if these attitudes and behaviors are counter to their own.⁵⁵ A prevailing narrative in this period was that “everybody who is not a Nazi fanatic ‘knows’ that defection is the only way out”; Ukrainian military personnel were urged instead to “join the crowd.”⁵⁶ As the situation developed, these messages lost salience and were gradually replaced with the narrative that Ukraine’s Armed Forces had been eradicated and were keeping only Nazis and foreigners fighting in Ukraine.⁵⁷

Ukraine’s Messaging Targeting Ukrainian Audiences

The Ukrainian government’s approach to communicating with Ukraine’s forces and public may have been informed by Ukraine’s past experiences with Russian disinformation. As past RAND Corporation research found, “During the height of the fighting in Eastern Ukraine, for example, Russian disinformation efforts would capitalize on the Ukrainian government’s conflicting accounts of the fighting and casualties to depict the Ukrainian government as incompetent and the situation as more dire than it was in reality.”⁵⁸ What is more, in 2014, Russia had capitalized on the absence of consistent messaging communicated by authoritative sources, stepping in to set the narrative on developments in Ukraine and possibly shaping first impressions.⁵⁹

From the outset, the Ukrainian government produced a high volume of content related to Russia’s invasion, which it promulgated via communication channels. This content included frequent updates distributed via traditional and social media from Zelenskyy and his coterie of senior officials.

As we noted earlier, exposure to messages is a prerequisite for persuasion. Our observations suggest that the Ukrainian government adopted the strategy of disseminating its messages as

⁵⁴ “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, March 4, 2022” [“Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым, 4 марта 2022 года”], video, Russia-1, March 4, 2022b.

⁵⁵ H. Leibenstein, “Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumers’ Demand,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 64, No. 2, May 1950.

⁵⁶ “News of the Week, March 6, 2022,” 2022.

⁵⁷ “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, September 21, 2022” [“Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым, 21 сентября 2022 года”], video, Russia-1, September 21, 2022c.

⁵⁸ Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Joe Cheravitch, Alyssa Demus, Scott W. Harold, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Jenny Jun, Michael Schwillie, Elina Treyger, and Nathan Vest, *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media: Study Overview and Conclusions*, RAND Corporation, RR-4373/1-AF, 2021, p. 59.

⁵⁹ Paul and Matthews, 2016.

broadly as possible when communicating with its own forces and public. Dissemination platforms included traditional and online media, administration websites and social media accounts, the Ministry of Defense’s YouTube TV channel (Військове телебачення України/Viys’kove telebachennya Ukrayiny), radio (Армія FM/Armiya FM), and the official information agency (АрміяINFORM/ArmiyaINFORM). What is more, messages across these platforms appear to have been coordinated. As a result, audiences—whether they received their news from TV, radio, or the internet—were exposed to the same broad narratives. The government’s extensive use of social media and other online platforms was particularly important, given that 59 percent of Ukrainians report only turning to the internet and social media for their news, whereas only 11 percent of respondents report only tuning in to TV as their main source of news.⁶⁰ Even so, government officials still produced daily televised briefings and interviews to reach those who rely on television.⁶¹

In the two days preceding Russia’s invasion, February 22 and 23, 2022, the Office of the President published three video addresses directed toward the Ukrainian public in which Zelenskyy vowed to be honest with the Ukrainian people and keep them informed as the situation developed.⁶² Additionally, in the first hours of the war, Ukrainian officials encouraged the media to diligently verify the information they published, citing the continued “Russian information war against Ukraine.”⁶³

During this period, the prevailing narratives in official messaging were twofold: They were aimed at preventing panic among the public and bolstering trust in the country’s political and military leadership. Zelenskyy used his video addresses on February 22 and 23 to reassure the public of his government’s unwavering commitment to protecting Ukraine’s territorial integrity

⁶⁰ Internews, “Ukrainians Consume More News, Are More Resilient to Disinformation, and Trust Their Media More During Russia’s War in 2022,” November 28, 2022.

⁶¹ See, for example, Channel 24, “The Conflict May Last for Weeks, but the Active Phase Will Gradually Subside, Arestovych Said” [“Конфлікт може тривати тижнями, але активна фаза поступово стихатиме, – Арестович”], YouTube video, March 5, 2022.

⁶² Office of the President of Ukraine, “Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s Statement Following the NSDC Meeting (Sign Language)” [“Заява Володимира Зеленського за підсумками засідання РНБО (жестова мова)”], YouTube video, February 22, 2022a.

⁶³ Office of the President of Ukraine, “Briefing on the Situation in Ukraine” [“Брифінг щодо ситуації в Україні”], Facebook video, February 24, 2022d; Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Dear Fellow Citizens, Especially Those Who Live in the Temporarily Occupied Territories! Militants . . .” [“Дорогі співгромадяни, особливо ті, хто мешкає на тимчасово окупованих територіях! Бойовики . . .”], Facebook video, February 18, 2022a; Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Russian propaganda continues to spread fakes, blaming the Armed Forces of Ukraine and inflaming the situation” [“Російська пропаганда продовжує поширювати фейки, звинувачуючи Збройні Сили України та нагнітаючи ситуацію”], Facebook post, February 19, 2022b; Security Service of Ukraine, “WARNING! ANOTHER FAKE FROM RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA!” [“УВАГА! ЧЕРГОВИЙ ФЕЙК ВІД РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ПРОПАГАНДИ!”], Facebook post, February 24, 2022a. Pre-bunking took place before Russia launched the full-scale invasion, and attempts to warn publics and decisionmakers about Russian propaganda have continued throughout the war.

and sovereignty. Kyiv, he said, would not surrender. Importantly, the president was careful to distance himself and his administration from predecessors, such as Kremlin sympathizer Viktor Yanukovich and even Euromaidan darling Petro Poroshenko, who was facing treason charges in January 2022. “We are not people of 2014 but people of 2022; it’s a different country, different army,” Zelenskyy reassured viewers.⁶⁴

The government’s strategy of regularly producing and disseminating video addresses from senior Ukrainian leaders intensified when Russia launched its invasion. Early in the morning of February 24, Zelenskyy posted a short video, which appeared to have been recorded on a phone camera, in which he directly addressed the Ukrainian public, informing them about the attack and reassuring them that he was alive and committed to the cause.⁶⁵ Daily videos like this one quickly became Zelenskyy’s hallmark.⁶⁶ Shortly after the first bombs rained down over Ukraine, the Office of the President announced that it would be providing hourly updates from its press room; many of these were transmitted live on social media.⁶⁷ These communication mechanisms were not limited to the president; Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces General Valeriy Zaluzhnyy also addressed the Ukrainian people and the Armed Forces.⁶⁸

Thus, by the end of the second week of Russia’s full-scale invasion, the administration appears to have established a somewhat regular communication pattern. Zelenskyy addressed the country twice a day—from the briefing room in the morning and from his office in the evening—to provide a high-level update and boost public morale. Operational-level military updates were also provided by the General Staff of the Armed Forces twice a day (typically) in the form of YouTube videos and daily video digests, which combined imagery shot from military drones with amateur social media videos and call intercepts by the Main Directorate of Intelligence.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, civilian representatives of Zelenskyy’s administration broadcast regular updates regarding the military situation.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022a.

⁶⁵ Office of the President of Ukraine, “Address of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy” [“Звернення Президента України Володимира Зеленського”], Facebook video, February 24, 2022c.

⁶⁶ Megan Garber, “The Grim Stagecraft of Zelensky’s Selfie Videos,” *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2022; Andrew E. Kramer, “With Speeches to Ukraine, and the World, Zelensky Shapes Narrative of the War,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2022.

⁶⁷ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022d.

⁶⁸ Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Honorable generals, officers, sergeants, and soldiers! . . .” [“Шановні генерали, офіцери, сержанти і солдати! . . .”], Facebook post, February 24, 2022c.

⁶⁹ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Briefly, the War, Day 15. Video Digest” [“Коротко. Війна. День 15. Відеодайджест”], YouTube video, March 10, 2022e.

⁷⁰ For instance, Oleksii Arestovych, an adviser to the Office of the President, provided twice-daily briefings. Iryna Vereshchuk, Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories,

Once Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Ukraine’s messaging converged around two themes. The first was the message of national unity. The second underscored the speed with which Ukraine expected to achieve victory over invading Russian forces. Messages that appeared to be aimed at communicating national unity—not only among government officials but also among civilian and military leadership, the public, and Ukraine’s international partners—remained a cornerstone of Ukraine’s informational campaigns targeting the Ukrainian people and soldiers. We infer from the content of these messages that they were designed not only to preserve morale but also to motivate tangible action in support of territorial defense. This is to say that much of this early messaging encouraged enlistment in the Territorial Defense Forces and prompted civilians to support the Armed Forces by reporting the movements of Russian troops, removing road signs, or destroying marks left by Russian reconnaissance for following troops.⁷¹

Relatedly, Ukraine’s messaging relied heavily on appeals to humor.⁷² Official government sources, such as the General Staff, frequently referenced popular culture, posted memes, and communicated in an informal tone—an approach that might be characterized as inappropriate for a government agency in another setting. The Ukrainian General Staff shared a video in which residents of Odesa can be seen shouting the same expletives at Russians that the now-infamous defenders of Snake Island used.⁷³ On other occasions, official accounts have been used to mock Russia. For example, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention informed the Ukrainian public that the agency does not require citizens to declare captured Russian military equipment because it is worthless.⁷⁴ The same agency also published a letter to Shoigu, thanking him for making the Ukrainian military’s job easier by embezzling funds earmarked for military modernization.⁷⁵

Finally, the Ukrainian government has chosen to selectively report news on combat operations. From the first moments of the Russian assault, official communications have focused, almost exclusively, on Russian losses, on the “occupier’s” prisoners of war who

provided daily briefings on the humanitarian situation. Denys Shmyhal, Prime Minister of Ukraine, provided daily briefings on the country’s economic situation.

⁷¹ Security Service of Ukraine, “MAXIMUM SHARE! CHAT-BOT AGAINST THE TROOPS OF THE RF” [“МАКСИМАЛЬНЕ ПОШИРЕННЯ! ЧАТ-БОТ ПРОТИ ВІЙСЬК РФ”], Facebook post, February 26, 2022b.

⁷² Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century*, 4th ed., Routledge, 2010, p. 176.

⁷³ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “DAY 6 RUSSIAN AGGRESSION” [“ДЕНЬ 6 РОСІЙСЬКА АГРЕСІЯ”], Facebook video, March 1, 2022b.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, “Captured a Russian tank or armored personnel carrier and are worried about how to declare it?” [“Захопили російський танк або БТР та переживаєте про те, як його декларувати?”], Facebook post, March 1, 2022d.

⁷⁵ Valeriia Radchenko, “Ukraine’s Corruption Prevention Agency Praises Russia’s Minister Shoigu for Corruption in the Army (Video),” National Agency on Corruption Prevention, March 10, 2022.

supposedly did not want to fight, and on Ukraine's successes, avoiding such issues as Ukrainian casualties.⁷⁶

Ukraine's Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

On February 23, Zelenskyy posted a video addressing the Russian public in Russian. In it, he debunked the prevailing Kremlin narratives on Ukrainian Nazism and attacks on civilians in the Donbas, highlighted the horrors of the war, and called on the Russian people to protest against it.⁷⁷

As for messaging that targeted Russian military personnel, Ukrainian officials and agencies tried to communicate with this audience in the prelude to the war and in the conflict's first weeks. Ukraine's messaging directed at Russian personnel emphasized the realities and horrors of the war, at least as they existed through the Ukrainian lens. For instance, former Zelenskyy adviser Oleksii Arestovych highlighted Russia's treatment of Russian military personnel as cannon fodder, citing as evidence Russia's decision to send lightly armored units into large, well-defended cities. The internet, he said, is full of images of dead Russian soldiers. According to Arestovych, this was a factor motivating Russian requests to surrender. Importantly, Ukrainian officials, including Arestovych, framed the decision to surrender as a righteous, honorable one.⁷⁸ Surrender, said Arestovych, is superior to "being a puppet of a half-mad dictator, who is not aware of [the soldiers'] situation."⁷⁹

These initial emotional appeals to Russian soldiers' fear and pride were reinforced with appeals to rationality in the form of a promise of financial reward for those who surrendered with weapons and vehicles.⁸⁰ Ukrainian officials also vowed to treat Russian soldiers well, promising to return them to their families after the war.⁸¹

Finally, Ukraine's messaging was targeted at the families of Russian soldiers. In the first days of the war, the Ukrainian government launched a hotline, "Come Back Alive," for Russian families, where relatives could inquire about the status of their loved ones. If a loved one had

⁷⁶ Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "The Invaders Surrender . . ." ["Загарбники здаються в полон . . ."], Facebook video, February 24, 2022d; Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "Today, February 24, at 5:00 a.m., the armed forces of the Russian Federation started active shelling of our units in the east . . ." ["Сьогодні, 24 лютого, о 5.00 збройні сили Російської Федерації розпочали активні обстріли наших підрозділів на сході . . ."], Facebook post, February 24, 2022e.

⁷⁷ Office of the President of Ukraine, "The President of Ukraine—On Strengthening the State's Defense Capabilities" ["Президент України – про посилення обороноздатності держави"], YouTube video, February 23, 2022b.

⁷⁸ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022d.

⁷⁹ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022d.

⁸⁰ Oleksii Reznikov, "Dear Ukrainians!" ["Шановні українці!"], Facebook post, February 28, 2022b.

⁸¹ Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, "#StopRussia," Facebook post, February 24, 2022b.

been captured, the hotline allowed family members to pass on brief messages. If the loved one had been killed, the hotline offered details on where and how to collect the body.⁸² In this vein, official Ukrainian social media accounts also published images of captured Russian soldiers with appeals designed to target their mothers.⁸³ With this audience as well, Ukrainian officials relied on appeals to fear. In one of his addresses, Defense Minister Reznikov called on Russian women to protest against the war and to hide their husbands and sons to prevent them from being sent to certain death in Ukraine.⁸⁴ Finally, the Ukrainian General Staff published a series of videos titled “He Is Not on Exercises,” which featured Russian prisoners of war talking to their families or Ukrainian Security Service officers about how they had been lied to by the commanders, what they had seen since they had arrived in Ukraine, and how they were being treated in captivity.⁸⁵

The Specifics of Period 2: Announcement of Russia’s Partial Mobilization

Despite having devoted blood and treasure to Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, Russia’s military struggled to make significant headway on the ground in the first months of war. Because the Russian Armed Forces had suffered significant casualties, Putin dusted off an instrument that had not been used since World War II: a large-scale mandated mobilization.⁸⁶ Nearly seven months after his televised announcement of the operation’s commencement, Putin used the same medium to reveal that he had signed a decree ordering a partial mobilization of the country’s reservist forces on September 21, 2022. According to Defense Minister Shoigu, up to 300,000 Russian reservists could be called up to serve. This development was met with protests and a sizable exodus of Russian men to neighboring countries.⁸⁷

Russia’s Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

We know, from such evidence as leaked video footage of Russian mercenary groups recruiting in prisons, that the Ministry of Defense has struggled to recruit forces.⁸⁸ Although the

⁸² Oleksii Reznikov, “Starting today at 7:00 PM!” [“Від сьогодні з 19:00!”], Facebook post, February 26, 2022a.

⁸³ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Russian Mothers!” [“Российские матери!”], Facebook post, March 1, 2022c.

⁸⁴ Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, “Address of the Minister of Defense of Ukraine Oleksii Reznikov” [“Звернення Міністра оборони України Олексія Резнікова”], Facebook post, February 25, 2022c.

⁸⁵ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “HE IS NOT IN TRAINING part 4” [“ОН НЕ НА УЧЕНИЯХ частина 4”], YouTube video, March 3, 2022d; Security Service of Ukraine, “Some More ‘Mom, Dad—We Didn’t Want It!’(c)” [“Ще кілька ‘мама, папа—мы не хотели!’(c)”], Facebook video, February 26, 2022c.

⁸⁶ Karl Ritter, “Putin Orders Partial Military Call-Up, Sparking Protests,” Associated Press, September 21, 2022.

⁸⁷ “Factbox: Where Have Russians Been Fleeing to Since Mobilisation Began?” Reuters, October 6, 2022.

⁸⁸ Ritter, 2022.

Kremlin has not explicitly stated as much, many observers have speculated that this struggle to recruit forces was a principal motivating factor in the Kremlin's decision to call for partial mobilization. U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said of the decision, "It's definitely a sign that [Putin] is struggling. He has suffered tens of thousands of casualties. He has terrible morale, unit cohesion on the battlefield. . . . He's got desertion problems and he's forcing the wounded back into the fight—so clearly manpower is a problem."⁸⁹ Even so, Putin's decision to conscript reservists was seen by experts as a potentially incendiary one. The mobilization and associated casualties would impose additional costs on the Russian public when the country's economy was already flagging from wartime sanctions. It was against this backdrop that Russia's messaging on the mobilization was designed and promulgated.

Perhaps to temper any fear and uneasiness elicited by the announcement—feelings acknowledged even by ardently pro-Kremlin Russian TV personalities—and to boost morale, the programs we reviewed aired stories of "real" men who had jumped at the opportunity to serve their country. Reports of motivated patriots clamoring to join the military and the bureaucratic obstacles they faced became common.

Additionally, TV programming devoted to the partial mobilization continued to echo the theme of Russia's "inevitable victory," wholly sidestepping the likely rationale motivating the mobilization: the country's struggle to deliver a swift triumph over Ukrainian forces. Instead, both programs that we observed fixated on the national pride associated with mobilization and society's contributions to the fight. These included the contributions of the conscripts, their parents, their wives, their primary school teachers, and other segments of society that may have had a hand in the prospective soldiers' journeys to the front lines.⁹⁰ Moreover, the programs underscored the Russian military's high level of professionalism and victories on the battlefield while dismissing any contradictory reports as propaganda from Ukraine and the West.

At the same time, narratives devoted to the heroic nature of military service highlighted the material virtues associated with serving one's country (an appeal to rationality). Adding the caveat that money is never the chief motivator for Russian soldiers (unlike their Western counterparts), Russian TV advocated for increased compensation and comprehensive benefits, citing the argument that soldiers' mortgages should be covered by the government.⁹¹ These policy changes were presented as likely but finite.

⁸⁹ "World Reacts to Putin's Partial Mobilisation Plans in Ukraine War," Al Jazeera, September 21, 2022.

⁹⁰ "News of the Week, September 25, 2022" ["Вести недели, 25 сентября 2022 года"], video, September 25, 2022.

⁹¹ "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, September 21, 2022," 2022c.

Ukraine's Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

On the heels of the mobilization announcement, Zelenskyy seized the opportunity to address the Russian public directly in several of his daily video posts. He once again reached out to Russian audiences with messages aimed at fomenting discontent between the Russian public and military personnel and Kremlin leadership. In these videos, Zelenskyy framed the mobilizations as “one man’s [Putin’s] decision” that put the lives of all Russian men at risk.⁹² Rhetorical questions aimed at highlighting the costs of the war on average Russians, such as “Why should Dagestani men die in the Kharkiv region?” were peppered throughout these communications.⁹³

Claiming that Moscow would not stop at its announced mobilization of 300,000 reservists, Zelenskyy argued that the Kremlin would instead call up 1 million Russian men.⁹⁴ He painted a bleak picture of the choices facing Russian soldiers: Fight and risk dying, or avoid the fate already suffered by 50,000 Russian soldiers by avoiding mobilization, protesting, or surrendering.⁹⁵ In another address, Zelenskyy appealed to soldiers’ rationality. He guaranteed service members certain conditions in exchange for their surrender. According to Zelenskyy, Ukraine would treat soldiers according to international conventions, conceal their identities to avoid later recriminations, and offer defectors the opportunity to remain in Ukraine after the war.⁹⁶

In his communications, Zelenskyy referenced the mistreatment of regular Russian soldiers whom, he argued, the Kremlin regarded as expendable. The president cited Russia’s use of such practices as sending soldiers into battle without name tags and bringing cremation trucks to the front lines to conceal the country’s casualty figures. Russian officials, Zelenskyy said, protected their own children at the expense of average Russians.⁹⁷ Zelenskyy even adopted a Russian colloquialism for the mobilization in his communications targeting Russians: *mogilizatsia*, a portmanteau combining the Russian words for *grave* (*mogila*) and *mobilization* (*mobilizatsiya*).⁹⁸

Caveats

Readers will notice that this section does not address Russian government messages targeting Ukrainian audiences or Ukrainian government messages targeting Ukrainian audiences on the

⁹² Office of the President of Ukraine, “War Against Ukraine Has Entered Every Russian Home. Address by the President, 22.09.2022,” YouTube video, September 22, 2022e.

⁹³ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022e.

⁹⁴ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022e.

⁹⁵ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022e.

⁹⁶ Office of the President of Ukraine, “Glory to All Our Heroes! Glory to Our Indomitable People! Address by the President,” YouTube video, September 24, 2022f.

⁹⁷ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022e.

⁹⁸ Office of the President of Ukraine, 2022f.

issue of Russia’s mobilization. While both types of messaging no doubt existed, these were far less prevalent than communications attempting to shape Russian attitudes on the Kremlin’s decision to mobilize reservists. For this reason, we do not cover these in detail here. What is more, our second period of analysis coincides with the liberation of Kharkiv region—a significant event for Ukraine that its messaging highlighted.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky” [“Президент України Володимир Зеленський”], Facebook post, September 14, 2022g.

Chapter 3. The Persuasiveness of the Campaigns

Defining and Measuring Persuasion

Measuring the effectiveness of an informational campaign outside a controlled experimental setting is a notoriously thorny challenge.¹⁰⁰ Doing so amid an active conflict is a near impossibility. That said, experimental research on persuasion and influence offers relevant insights about the characteristics associated with “successful” influence campaigns and the conditions under which efforts intended to influence are most persuasive. We draw on this scholarship, having distilled its findings, which we use to examine both Russia’s and Ukraine’s messaging during the two selected periods of analysis.

The literature on persuasion is vast and complex, spanning multiple disciplines, from communication to psychology to marketing to political science, among others.¹⁰¹ Further complicating matters, scholars hailing from these fields of study examine unique facets of persuasion using distinct methods. For instance, some explore the role of neurological mechanisms tied to influence using imaging techniques to observe brain activity, while others design experiments to understand the role of psychological and cognitive variables, such as the message receiver’s cognitive biases, on the message receiver’s susceptibility to persuasive messaging.¹⁰² Yet other scholars focus on factors external to the receiver, such as the perceived credibility of the communicator. This is to say that designing and presenting a framework that exhaustively captures the nuances of this scholarship succinctly is an infeasible task. Thus, our approach is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather incorporates the major features of the relevant literature.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Jon Bateman, Elonnai Hickok, Laura Courchesne, Isra Thange, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Measuring the Effects of Influence Operations: Key Findings and Gaps from Empirical Research,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Daniel J. O’Keefe, *Persuasion: Theory and Research*, 3rd ed., Sage Publications, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁰² For examples of a neurological approach to the study of persuasion, see Antonio Aquino, Francesca Romana Alparone, Stefano Pagliaro, Geoffrey Haddock, Gregory R. Maio, Mauro Gianni Perrucci, and Sjoerd J. H. Ebisch, “Sense or Sensibility? The Neuro-Functional Basis of the Structural Matching Effect in Persuasion,” *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, Vol. 20, No. 3, June 2020; Stefano DellaVigna and Matthew Gentzkow, “Persuasion: Empirical Evidence,” *Annual Review of Economics*, Vol. 2, 2010, p. 654; and Yukihiro Yomogida, Madoka Matsumoto, Ryuta Aoki, Ayaka Sugiura, Adam N. Phillips, and Kenji Matsumoto, “The Neural Basis of Changing Social Norms Through Persuasion,” *Scientific Reports*, No. 7, 2017.

¹⁰³ Our selection was guided by a review of the relevant literature, including a survey of graduate-level textbooks on persuasion to identify the key theories discussed, triangulation of the scholarly literature to identify any convergence on theories and topics, and discussions with experts.

Defining Persuasion

As might be expected, the robust literature on persuasion offers a dizzying array of definitions for the concept, each with its own nuances. Even so, there are core commonalities that persist across these. In its purest incarnation, *persuasion* is characterized as an effort to effect attitude and behavior changes via the transmission of a message. This message often invokes verbal and nonverbal symbols, such as a cross or, in the case of the war in Ukraine, the now-infamous *Z* emblazoned on Russian military equipment.¹⁰⁴ Scholars largely agree that efforts to persuade must be deliberate; that is, the influencer must intend to sway their chosen audience. Likewise, the intended target must have some ability to exercise their own free will and alter their beliefs and behaviors in response to the persuasive messaging, as opposed to being induced to alter their behaviors by force. For the purpose of this work, we adopt the definition of *persuasion* offered by scholar Richard M. Perloff, as it most closely embraces these core pillars:

a symbolic process in which communicators try to [deliberately] convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice.¹⁰⁵

Factors That Affect Persuasion

Although this report is focused on a specific case of persuasion—Kyiv’s and Moscow’s use of information campaigns to shape the morale and behaviors of their own people and those of their adversaries—this does not mean that the processes or factors involved are wholly unique. Rather, research on persuasive communications has identified enduring characteristics across cases and contexts. The factors and processes relevant to this case are, in many ways, similar to those at play when people are bombarded with attempts to entice them at a shopping mall, although the degree to which people are persuaded by any given factor varies across contexts and circumstances.¹⁰⁶ The literature on persuasion has identified the prevailing factors, or independent variables, that affect attempts at persuasion, the dependent variable. Table 3.1 elaborates on these factors.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 3rd ed., Sage Publications, 1999, p. 27; Perloff, 2010, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Perloff, 2010, p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo, Alan J. Strathman, and Joseph R. Priester, “To Think or Not to Think: Exploring Two Routes to Persuasion,” in Timothy C. Brock and Melanie C. Green, eds., *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*, Sage Publications, 2005, p. 83.

¹⁰⁷ William J. McGuire, “An Information-Processing Model of Advertising Effectiveness,” in Harry L. Davis and Alvin J. Silk, eds., *Behavioral and Management Sciences in Marketing*, Wiley, 1978.

Table 3.1. Factors That Affect Persuasion

Factor Type	Explanation of Factor Type	Related Factor(s)
Source	Who is sending the message, and how do their attributes influence (or not)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility (expertise, trustworthiness) • Authority • Social attractiveness
Message	What is being communicated, how is it structured and presented, and how might this influence (or not)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message structure • Message content • Message language (e.g., verbal and nonverbal symbols used)
Receiver (audience)	Who is receiving the message, and how might their characteristics affect persuasion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring individual audience differences (e.g., personality traits) • Temporary audience states (e.g., mood) • Susceptibility to persuasion
Channel (medium)	How (through which medium) is the message communicated to the receiver (audience)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal versus nonverbal medium (e.g., print versus video content) • Direct versus mediated • Number and type of media

SOURCE: Features information from McGuire, 1978; William J. McGuire, "Public Communication as a Strategy for Inducing Health-Promoting Behavioral Change," *Preventive Medicine*, Vol. 13, No. 3, May 1984, p. 314; William J. McGuire, "Input and Output Variables Currently Promising for Constructing Persuasive Communications," in Ronald E. Rice and Charles K. Atkin, eds., *Public Communication Campaigns*, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 32; O'Keefe, 2016; and Perloff, 2010.

Single-Process, Single-Effect Models of Persuasion

Although philosophers, orators, and rhetoricians have long theorized about the persuasive effects of certain variables on one's ability to influence, scientific exploration of these questions did not begin in earnest until the 20th century.¹⁰⁸ Early research on persuasion examined how factors, such as those outlined above, did or did not affect persuasion. The first generation of scholars hypothesized that factors believed to effect attitude change—such as an influencer's perceived credibility—"had a single and unitary effect on persuasion."¹⁰⁹ In other words, individual factors were believed to *always* increase or undermine persuasion regardless of the context or circumstances. Likewise, this initial generation of scholars theorized that persuasion was the result of a singular mental process. The models developed by this generation of researchers have since been classified as "single-process" and "single-effect" models.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Richard E. Petty, "The Evolution of Theory and Research in Social Psychology: From Single to Multiple Effect and Process Models of Persuasion," in Craig McGarty and S. Alexander Haslam, eds., *The Message of Social Psychology*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997, p. 270.

¹⁰⁹ Richard E. Petty, Derek D. Rucker, George Y. Bizer, and John T. Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," in John S. Seiter and Robert H. Gass, eds., *Perspectives on Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining*, Pearson, 2004, pp. 65–66; Petty, 1997, pp. 268–272.

¹¹⁰ Petty, 1997.

However, as research in persuasion progressed, scholars began to observe that single factors, such as those in Table 3.1, had the ability to *both* enhance *and* reduce the persuasive effect of a message under different circumstances.¹¹¹ For instance, one study in 1976 found that audiences who were deliberately distracted were persuaded in instances when the arguments put forth were weak. However, when the arguments were strong, those same attempts to distract had the opposite effect; they undermined the persuasive effect of the messages.¹¹² Additional exploration revealed that the same outcome could be generated by different mental processes.¹¹³ Such experiments demonstrated the limitations of single-process, single-effect models in explaining the persuasive effects of specific variables.

Dual-Process, Dual-Effect Models of Persuasion

In response, scholars developed dual-process, dual-effect models of information processing, the most prominent of which are the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model.¹¹⁴ Of these two approaches, we focus on the ELM because it has been the subject of a larger body of empirical research and, therefore, has a more robust set of findings associated with it.

At its core, the ELM posits that “the amount and nature of the thinking that a person does about a persuasive message,” or what the architects of the model, Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, call *elaboration*, “is a very important determinant of the kind of persuasion that occurs.”¹¹⁵ By “likelihood,” Petty and Cacioppo are referring to the probability that people will dissect an argument in detail (engage in *high elaboration*) or not (*low elaboration*). The ELM theorizes that people devote varying degrees of mental resources to process incoming messages, along what is referred to as an *elaboration continuum*, and that persuasion can occur anywhere along the continuum. This is to say that people can be persuaded when they marshal significant mental resources to examine an argument, or when they devote few, through different mechanisms.¹¹⁶

For simplicity’s sake, Petty and Cacioppo examined the ways in which people process persuasive messages on two specific points on the elaboration continuum. These are the *central*

¹¹¹ Petty, 1997, pp. 270–280.

¹¹² Richard E. Petty, Gary L. Wells, and Timothy C. Brock, “Distraction Can Enhance or Reduce Yielding to Propaganda: Thought Disruption Versus Effort Justification,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 5, November 1976, pp. 874–884.

¹¹³ Petty, 1997, p. 286.

¹¹⁴ Perloff, 2010, p. 130.

¹¹⁵ Petty et al., 2005, p. 81; Perloff, 2010, p. 130.

¹¹⁶ O’Keefe, 2016, p. 150.

route and the *peripheral route*.¹¹⁷ When message recipients “process information centrally, they carefully evaluate message arguments, ponder implications of the communicator’s ideas, and relate information to their own knowledge and values.”¹¹⁸ In these instances, if the argument is “well reasoned, data based, and logical (i.e., strong)” and its evaluation leads to favorable thoughts in the audience, then it will persuade.¹¹⁹ If the argument is weak or it engenders unfavorable thoughts, the message will likely fail to effect attitude change. Moreover, when people closely examine messages via the central route, factors outside the argument, such as the perceived credibility of the communicator, will have little sway on whether the target audience is persuaded.

A concrete example from the ongoing war in Ukraine illustrates these abstract concepts. In his remarks on February 24, 2022, announcing Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, Putin addressed the very audiences we focus on in this report: Ukrainian and Russian military personnel, the citizens of Ukraine, and his fellow Russian “compatriots.” From his desk in the Kremlin, Putin stared into the camera and spoke first to the people of Ukraine, in Russian, noting, “in 2014, Russia was obliged to protect the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol from those whom you, yourselves call ‘Nazis.’”¹²⁰ He then turned to Ukraine’s military personnel:

Comrade officers, your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people’s adversary which is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people. I urge you to refuse to carry out their criminal orders. I urge you to immediately lay down arms and go home.¹²¹

Assuming any Ukrainians were viewing the speech, it stands to reason that they would have seen the issues as profoundly personally relevant (an increase in *motivation* to elaborate). After all, nearly 200,000 bristling Russian troops were massed at Ukraine’s border, following eight years of war and months of thinly veiled threats of a new Kremlin assault.¹²² Having endured years of protracted conflict with Russia, most Ukrainians—particularly Ukrainian military personnel—were knowledgeable about the situation in the Donbas, Ukraine’s fraught relationship with Russia, and the broader geopolitical context (an increase in *ability* to elaborate). The ELM posits that the presence of these two factors—motivation to elaborate and ability to

¹¹⁷ Petty et al., 2004, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ Perloff, 2010, p. 133.

¹¹⁹ William D. Crano and Radmila Prislin, “Attitudes and Persuasion,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 57, January 2006, p. 348.

¹²⁰ President of Russia, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” transcript, February 24, 2022d.

¹²¹ President of Russia, 2022d.

¹²² Patrick Wintour, “Russia Has Amassed up to 190,000 Troops on Ukraine Borders, US Warns,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2022.

elaborate—might suggest that Ukrainian audiences viewing the speech are likely to have scrutinized Putin’s arguments, though, as we explain below, other factors complicate this hypothesis.¹²³

Assuming Ukrainian audiences were motivated and able to carefully evaluate Putin’s message and had not already tuned out because of preexisting negative perceptions of the Russian leader, the ELM suggests that they would have focused on his arguments. The narratives underpinning Putin’s declaration of war would have been familiar to Ukrainian audiences in February 2022. Russia had long been casting its annexation of Crimea and incursions into the Donbas as virtuous efforts to spare ethnic Russians and Russophone Ukrainians from the fascist authorities in Kyiv.¹²⁴ We know from public opinion polling that, as early as February 2015, Ukrainians largely rejected this justification, given that 87 percent of respondents of a survey rejected Putin’s claim that he had “the right to intervene . . . to protect Russian citizens and Russian speakers.”¹²⁵ The speech also referenced two other commonly invoked Kremlin tropes: Russia’s victory in World War II and the purported “historical unity” shared by Russians and Ukrainians.¹²⁶ This survey suggests that, on the whole, at the time of Putin’s remarks in February 2022, Ukrainian attitudes did not align with Kremlin narratives. Thus, for those Ukrainians who were motivated and able to dissect Putin’s arguments, the ELM tells us that those audiences would have found Putin’s arguments weak and, thus, less persuasive. That said, as we discussed earlier, research also tells us that those Ukrainians who had negative preexisting perceptions of Putin may have dismissed any of his messages out of hand without devoting significant mental resources to his arguments.

On the other hand, if people do not possess the *motivation* and *ability* to dissect a message, they will process it peripherally. In these instances, message recipients rely on mental shortcuts (*heuristics*) or focus on factors external to the argument, such as a communicator’s perceived credibility (*peripheral cues*). They may also evaluate arguments, but they will do so superficially.¹²⁷

This raises a question: If both routes can result in persuasion, why distinguish between the two? There are several reasons. First, research has found that attitude change resulting from the

¹²³ It is also possible that, faced with the prospect of an overwhelming invasion, Ukrainian viewers may have been distracted (a decrease in *ability* to elaborate).

¹²⁴ Marco Sidi, “The Ukraine Crisis and European Memory Politics of the Second World War,” *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2017, pp. 465–479.

¹²⁵ Steven Kull, Catherine M. Kelleher, Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis, Eric Pierce, and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, *The Ukrainian People on the Current Crisis*, Program for Public Consultation and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, March 9, 2015, p. 13.

¹²⁶ President of Russia, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2021.

¹²⁷ Crano and Prislin, 2006, p. 348; Perloff, 2010, p. 133.

peripheral route is more fleeting than persuasion achieved via the central route.¹²⁸ Furthermore, shifts in attitudes inducted by the careful consideration of a persuader's arguments (the central route) tend to be more predictive of future behavior. That is, people are more likely to act on attitudes shaped via the central route.¹²⁹ Lastly, attitudes formed via the central route are more impervious to competing messages and are more accessible, meaning the argument is easier for the intended audience to later call to mind.¹³⁰ This is to say that if a persuader wants to leave a lasting, resistant impression and influence their audience's subsequent behaviors, they should aim to encourage central route processing.

Central or Peripheral Processing?

Given the important differences in outcomes just discussed, it is critical to consider the factors that affect which of the two routes audiences are likely to take when confronted with persuasive messages. No one person possesses the cognitive bandwidth to process all incoming persuasive information centrally. Rather, it is hypothesized that people scrutinize some persuasive messages while deferring to mental shortcuts for others. Although the exact balance of the two processes is largely idiosyncratic, researchers have found that certain factors are associated more with one route than the other.

These factors fall into two broad categories: factors that affect an audience's *motivation* to closely dissect persuasive messages and factors that affect an audience's *ability* to do so. If a person perceives that a message is *relevant* to their own beliefs, values, goals, and so on—particularly if the issue is deeply important to their sense of self—they will be more motivated to scrutinize the argument being presented rather than rely on peripheral cues.¹³¹ Furthermore, if the argument holds up to close examination and elicits favorable thoughts in the audience, then the ELM tells us that it is likely to engender enduring, resilient attitudinal (and possibly behavioral) shifts.

Motivation is only half of the equation, however. The ELM stipulates that audiences must also possess the ability to process the message carefully (the central route). Research has identified several determinants of a person's ability to process; of these, the *degree of prior knowledge* and the *degree of distraction* have received the greatest attention in experimental scholarship. By *degree of prior knowledge*, we are referring to the magnitude of a person's

¹²⁸ Robert B. Cialdini, Richard E. Petty, and John T. Cacioppo, "Attitude and Attitude Change," *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 32, 1981, p. 365.

¹²⁹ O'Keefe, 2016, p. 151.

¹³⁰ Petty et al., 2005, p. 85.

¹³¹ Richard E. Petty, Curtis P. Haugtvedt, and Stephen M. Smith, "Elaboration as a Determinant of Attitude Strength: Creating Attitudes That Are Persistent, Resistant, and Predictive of Behavior," in Richard E. Petty and Jon A. Krosnick, eds., *Attitude Strength: Antecedents and Consequences*, Erlbaum Associates, 1995, p. 96.

existing familiarity with the issues being communicated. It stands to reason that the “level of knowledge needed to evaluate a particular message may constrain the degree to which participants are able to elaborate.”¹³² Even so, knowledge is not a guarantee for central processing. If an audience is flustered by the presence of distracting stimuli, such as air raid sirens or enemy fire in the case of civilians and combatants in Ukraine, no level of prior knowledge is likely to override this acute diversion of attention.

In our example, Ukrainians viewing Putin’s February 24 remarks may have been too distracted by the prospect of an imminent invasion to carefully examine the merits of the speech’s arguments (a decrease in *ability* to elaborate). If so, they may have turned to peripheral cues and heuristics. In this case, Putin himself may have served as a cue, triggering the *persuasive intent heuristic*, for instance. Research has found that when people suspect that they are being presented with information that is intended to persuade or manipulate, they tend to question the credibility of the source and its message.¹³³ Thus, the presence of certain cues or, in this case, signals that prompt suspicion about the intent of the communicator “seems to elicit an immediate defense mechanism that leads people to mistrust information without further scrutiny,” thereby reducing any persuasive effect of the message.¹³⁴

The Kremlin’s use of persuasive messaging to manipulate audiences has been the subject of significant global public discourse, including in Ukraine, since Russia began using this tool to interfere in Western elections in 2016.¹³⁵ We also know that, when asked about their views on Putin in September 2021, 80 percent of Ukrainian respondents said that they felt “completely negative” or “rather negatively” about the leader.¹³⁶ Both trends suggest that Ukrainian audiences are likely aware of Russia’s intent to persuade. Moreover, these trends indicate that Putin had low credibility among Ukrainian audiences in February 2022 and that his mere presence could have triggered those Ukrainians processing his communications peripherally to shut down and ignore any information he was communicating.

Relatedly, research shows that when communicators serve as cues, “they produce persuasion in the same direction as their valence,” meaning that “likable, attractive, similar, or expert sources produce more persuasion than dislikeable, unattractive, dissimilar, or inexperienced

¹³² Steve Booth-Butterfield and Jennifer Welbourne, “The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Its Impact on Persuasion Theory and Research,” in James Price Dillard and Michael Pfau, eds., *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, 2002, p. 159.

¹³³ Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Ryan B. Medders, “Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 60, No. 3, September 2010, p. 432.

¹³⁴ Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders, 2010, p. 432.

¹³⁵ Clint Watts, statement prepared for “Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns: Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the U.S. Senate,” March 30, 2017.

¹³⁶ Sociological Group “Rating,” “Assessment of Certain Issues of International Policy. September 2–4, 2021” [“Оцінка окремих питань міжнародної політики. 2–4 Вересня 2021”], briefing slides, September 9, 2021.

sources.”¹³⁷ If, as the polling cited above suggests, Ukrainian audiences felt overwhelmingly negatively about Putin, this would suggest that they would be less likely to be persuaded by him when processing peripherally.

Although scholars have identified a constellation of factors associated with persuasion, two issues preclude us from being able to present categorical rules for each factor and its role in promoting or undermining persuasion. First, the relationships between these factors and persuasion are often examined in carefully controlled experimental settings where conditions can be manipulated and controls engineered. Even so, many of the experiments studying these factors have resulted in contradictory findings.¹³⁸ Second, the ELM is predicated on the premise that “any one persuasion variable (e.g., source expertise, a person’s mood) can assume more than one role in influencing attitudes.”¹³⁹ This is to say that “a variable can serve as persuasive argument in some situations, act as a peripheral cue in others, and affect the extent or direction of argument elaboration in still other contexts.”¹⁴⁰

Take the use of *evidence* in persuasive communications, for instance. Experimental research has found that messages that incorporate evidence tend to be successful in persuading audiences, in multiple ways. Evidence can persuade as both an argument and a peripheral cue, depending on the circumstances (see Table 3.2). In cases in which messages are *highly relevant* to an audience and the audience possesses *prior knowledge* on the issues, the audience will be motivated and able to evaluate the integrity of the argument, including the evidence presented, closely. If the evidence presented is sound, the audience is more likely to be persuaded by the argument. Still, researchers have found that evidence can persuade when motivation and ability to dissect the argument are low, through a different mechanism. In this case, evidence will serve as a *peripheral cue*. Rather than evaluating the evidence itself, the audience will decide whether the presence of evidence makes the communicator, and, by extension, their message, seem authoritative and credible.¹⁴¹

Even though the scholarship does not offer a catalog of factors that are known to always be associated with persuasion, the field has converged on important findings that are relevant to the cases we examine in this report. Rather than attempt to characterize the breadth of research on

¹³⁷ Pablo Briñol and Richard E. Petty, “Source Factors in Persuasion: A Self-Validation Approach,” *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2009, p. 53.

¹³⁸ Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, “Source Factors and the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 1984.

¹³⁹ Petty et al., 2005, p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo, Constantine Sedikides, and Alan J. Strathman, “Affect and Persuasion: A Contemporary Perspective,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 31, No. 3, January–February 1988, p. 360.

¹⁴¹ Perloff, 2010, p. 189.

persuasion, we have selected a handful of factors that are most relevant to this report. These are outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Selection of Findings on Effects of Factors on Persuasion

Factor Type	Factor	Effects on Persuasion Given Other Mediating Factors
Source	<p>Source credibility: “the <i>believability</i> of a source, [which] rests largely on perceptions of the trustworthiness and expertise of the information source as interpreted by the information receiver” (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013, p. 211; emphasis in original)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A highly credible source is commonly found to induce more persuasion toward the advocacy than a low-credibility one” (Pornpitakpan, 2004, p. 244). • Personal relevance: For issues that are highly relevant to audiences (central route), source credibility is a less significant factor in influencing attitudes; for issues that are less relevant, source credibility is a more significant factor (O’Keefe, 2016, p. 195). • Degree of prior knowledge: Source credibility has been found to matter most when audiences have “poorly formed attitudes and little background knowledge” (O’Keefe, 2016, p. 195). • Message position vis-à-vis audience attitudes: When messages promote positions counter to an audience’s existing attitudes (counter-attitudinal messages), higher-credibility sources tend to be more persuasive. But when messages promote positions already held by audiences (pro-attitudinal messages), low-credibility sources tend to be more persuasive (O’Keefe, 2016).
Message	<p>Appeals to emotion (e.g., fear, humor, anger; Hornik, Ofir, and Rachamim, 2016, p. 197): the employment of arguments intended to stimulate audience feelings (as opposed to arguments that appeal to audience rationality)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional appeals tend to be more persuasive than rational ones, particularly if they are positively valenced (Colombetti, 2005, p. 103).^a • Appeals to humor tend to be more persuasive than appeals to fear, which have been found to be relatively ineffective at persuading (Hornik, Ofir, and Rachamim, 2016; Jäger and Eisend, 2013; Perloff, 2010, p. 196).^b In some cases, medium-intensity fear appeals have been more persuasive than high- or low-level fear messages (Rhodes, 2017). • Appeals to anger tend to be more persuasive when audiences are motivated to evaluate a message’s arguments, when the anger elicited is low or moderate, and when arguments are strong. If the anger elicited is too intense, an audience’s ability to thoughtfully process (and persuasion) is likely threatened (Walter et al., 2019, p. 88).
	<p>Use of evidence: the use of “factual statements originating from a source other than the speaker, objects not created by the speaker, and opinions of persons other than the speaker that are offered in support of the speaker’s claims” (McCroskey, 1969, p. 170; see also Perloff, 2010, p. 188).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of evidence in persuasive messaging results in “general[ly] persuasive effects that appear surprisingly stable,” particularly when the evidence is attributed to a credible source and is plausible and novel (Perloff, 2010, p. 189). • When personal relevance and prior knowledge on the issue are high, then audiences will be motivated and able to evaluate the argument, including evidence, closely. In this case, the integrity of the evidence matters more than when audiences are not motivated and able to evaluate arguments. • Evidence can still persuade when motivation and ability to dissect the argument are low, through a different mechanism. In this case, evidence will serve as a peripheral cue; rather than evaluating the evidence itself, audiences will decide whether the presence of evidence makes the communicator, and, by extension, their message, seem authoritative and credible (Perloff, 2010, p. 189).
	<p>Rhetorical devices, heuristics, and cues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research has shown that the use of straw man arguments “seems not to be universally effective. Rather, the technique seems to be relatively effective when people are disinclined to carefully process a message” when personal relevance is low (Bizer, Kozak, and Holterman, 2009, p. 224).

Factor Type	Factor	Effects on Persuasion Given Other Mediating Factors
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarcity appeals are a tactic used to increase the perceived desirability of an object or opportunity by highlighting its scarcity (e.g., a limited-time offer). Research has found that items and opportunities that are in short supply or unavailable tend to be more desirable.

SOURCE: Features information from George Y. Bizer, Shirel M. Kozak, and Leigh Ann Holterman, “The Persuasiveness of the Straw Man Rhetorical Technique,” *Social Influence*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2009; Giovanna Colombetti, “Appraising Valence,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 12, Nos. 8–10, 2005; Jacob Hornik, Chezy Ofir, and Matti Rachamim, “Quantitative Evaluation of Persuasive Appeals Using Comparative Meta-Analysis,” *Communication Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2016; Tilmann Jäger and Martin Eisend, “Effects of Fear-Arousing and Humorous Appeals in Social Marketing Advertising: The Moderating Role of Prior Attitude Toward the Advertised Behavior,” *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2013; James C. McCroskey, “A Summary of Experimental Research on the Effects of Evidence in Persuasive Communication,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 1969; Miriam J. Metzger and Andrew J. Flanagin, “Credibility and Trust of Information in Online Environments: The Use of Cognitive Heuristics,” *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 59, Part B, December 2013; O’Keefe, 2016; Perloff, 2010; Chanthika Pornpitakpan, “The Persuasiveness of Source Credibility: A Critical Review of Five Decades’ Evidence,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 2, February 2004; Nancy Rhodes, “Fear-Appeal Messages: Message Processing and Affective Attitudes,” *Communication Research*, Vol. 44, No. 7, October 2017; and Nathan Walter, Riva Tukachinsky, Ayellet Pelled, and Robin Nabi, “Meta-Analysis of Anger and Persuasion: An Empirical Integration of Four Models,” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 69, No. 1, February 2019.

^a According to Giovanna Colombetti, “‘Valence’ is used in many different ways in emotion theory. It generally refers to the ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ character of an emotion, as well as to the ‘positive or ‘negative’ character of some aspect of emotion” (Colombetti, 2005, p. 103).

^b We adopt Perloff’s definition of *fear appeals*: “a persuasive communication that tries to scare people into changing their attitudes by conjuring up negative consequences that will occur if they do not comply with the message recommendations” (Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century*, 6th ed., Routledge, 2017, p. 389).

Were Ukraine’s and Russia’s Campaigns Persuasive? Period 1: Russia’s Initial Offensive and the Battle for Kyiv

Russia’s Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

Russia’s efforts to cast some Ukrainians as Nazis—a loaded and evocative term that conjures an array of emotions—may have served several purposes. For Russian audiences, evidence indicates that this approach may have been used to amplify popular support for the war and boost morale among service members in this initial period. By painting the “operation” as a fight against Nazism, Russia was implicitly drawing a thinly veiled analogue between the war in Ukraine and the fight against Nazi Germany—a bloody struggle in which the Soviets lost approximately 25 million people but ultimately prevailed. In some cases, the parallels were more overt. According to TV programming, Russian soldiers were likened to their grandfathers as heroes protecting Russia (and the world) from the revival of Nazi ideology. TV programs inserted imagery of Donbas residents welcoming Russian soldiers as *evidence* of the operation’s virtue.

Surveys conducted by Russia’s state-controlled polling outfit, Public Opinion Fund, on Russian perceptions of World War II offer insight into the types of emotions Russians identify with the war. In 2017 and 2020, when Russians were asked what “feelings, thoughts, or

associations” came to them first when they heard the phrase “Great Patriotic War,” the most frequently cited response was “pride for the country, for the people, a sense of patriotism”; this was followed by “victory” and “tears, grief, sorrow, and regret.”¹⁴² Interestingly, in the May 2022 installment of the survey, “fear and horror” became the second most-cited feeling after “pride.”¹⁴³

What do these emotions tell us about the persuasiveness of Russia’s messaging targeting Russian audiences? Because the surveys were state-sponsored, we can assume that the questions posed reflect Kremlin concerns and that Russian leaders were apprised of the results.¹⁴⁴ If so, the Russian government may have been attempting to capitalize on feelings of pride and patriotism as the overwhelming emotions tied to World War II prior to the February 2022 invasion. Research tells us that “emotions can serve as simple cues when elaboration is low,” meaning when people are not motivated and able to dissect the integrity of a message.¹⁴⁵ In these instances, people’s attitudes largely mirror the emotions triggered by the cues. So, for those Russian audiences processing peripherally, allusions to the “Great Patriotic War” in the context of the February invasion may have cued feelings of pride and patriotism, boosting morale among soldiers and support for the operation among the public. We know less about Russian feelings toward the term *Nazis* specifically. However, because Nazis were the chief enemy of the Soviet Union, it stands to reason that Russians would have negative associations with the term and negative attitudes toward any Ukrainian authorities labeled as such.

The ability to persuade is also predicated on the ability to reach one’s audience. We know, from surveys conducted by the Levada Center, an independent polling firm, that over 60 percent of Russians reported getting their national and global news from TV in 2022.¹⁴⁶ Forty-three percent of respondents reported getting their news from Rossiya-1, the channel hosting the two programs we reviewed for this study; the other most popular TV channel, of the channels readily available to Russians, was Channel-1.¹⁴⁷ These figures alone tell us little about the persuasive

¹⁴² Public Opinion Fund, “War and Victory” [“Война и Победа”], webpage, May 8, 2017; Public Opinion Fund, “The Memory of the War” [“Память о войне”], webpage, May 20, 2020. As has been noted by many, results from state-controlled polling organizations should be taken with a grain of salt. That said, it is believed that they do offer a general sense of public opinion and are consulted by the Kremlin.

¹⁴³ Public Opinion Fund, “On the Occasion of the 77th Anniversary of the End of the Great Patriotic War” [“К 77-й Годовщине Окончания Великой Отечественной Войны”], webpage, May 7, 2022b.

¹⁴⁴ Farida Rustamova and Maxim Tovkaylo, “What Secret Russian State Polling Tells Us About Support for the War,” *Moscow Times*, December 9, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Richard E. Petty and Pablo Briñol, “Emotion and Persuasion: Cognitive and Meta-Cognitive Processes Impact Attitudes,” *Cognition and Emotion*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2015, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Levada Center, “Russians’ Main Sources of Information” [“Основные источники информации россиян”], webpage, November 10, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Public Opinion Fund, “Information Sources. The Television” [“Источники информации. телевидение”], webpage, February 17, 2022a.

effects achieved by the messages promulgated via these programs. But they do suggest that, at the very least, a significant proportion of Russian viewers were exposed to the messages included in our analysis.

Russia's Messaging Targeting Ukrainian Audiences

As for the persuasiveness of Russia's messages targeting Ukrainian audiences in the first period, it is unclear that they would have reached their intended audiences: Ukrainian military personnel and the Ukrainian public. Prominent Russian TV channels, including Rossiya-1, have been banned in Ukraine since 2014.¹⁴⁸ If the messages had reached their intended audiences, the data we discuss suggest that Ukrainians, likely including Ukrainian military personnel, would have already possessed negative preexisting perceptions of the Russian government by the start of the war. Because deeply held beliefs are resilient, this would suggest that Russia's messaging would have fallen on deaf ears in Ukraine during this period.

Furthermore, because senior Kremlin officials do not speak Ukrainian, their communications targeting Ukrainian audiences have all been transmitted in Russian. While most Ukrainians are bilingual and can certainly understand messages promulgated in Russian, language has emerged as a political statement and has been a core element of Ukrainian national identity since 2014. The results of nationwide surveys indicate that while the proportion of Ukrainians who self-identified as speaking only Ukrainian at home remained relatively constant (between 43 and 51 percent) between November 2011 and March 2022, the proportion of those who identified as speaking both Ukrainian and Russian grew from 15 to 32 percent in this period.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, the proportion of respondents who identified as Russian-only speakers at home decreased from 40 percent in 2011 to 18 percent in 2022. Thus, the Russian language may have immediately demotivated Ukrainian audiences from messages propagated in the Russian language, thereby serving as a negative cue for Ukrainian audiences.

Ukraine's Messaging Targeting Ukrainian Audiences

When communicating with their own forces and public, Ukrainian officials appeared to employ one of the factors that persuasion research has devoted considerable attention to: the use of *evidence*. Zelensky and other high-ranking officials frequently posted selfies and videos of themselves taken in the streets of Kyiv as evidence that they had refused U.S. evacuation offers, had not abandoned the country, and were in the trenches, so to speak, with the Ukrainian

¹⁴⁸ "Ukraine Hits Back at Russian TV Onslaught," BBC News, March 12, 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Sociological Group "Rating," "The Sixth National Poll: The Language Issue in Ukraine," presentation slides, March 19, 2022.

people.¹⁵⁰ Relatedly, when possible, higher echelons in the Ukrainian military incorporated information supplied by units on the ground in their communications with the Ukrainian public.¹⁵¹ Here too, Ukrainian government sources relied on evidence—in this case, news from the front lines—to bolster the credibility of their messages.

As outlined in Table 3.2, research has determined that messaging that presents evidence generally tends to be persuasive, particularly when the evidence is attributed to a credible source and is plausible.¹⁵² In cases in which *personal relevance* and *prior knowledge* on an issue are high and the audience is motivated and able to evaluate the argument and evidence, the integrity of the evidence matters more in persuasion than in cases in which the audience is not motivated and able to evaluate the argument. As discussed above, polling has shown that the loyalties of Ukrainian audiences—with the exception of Ukrainians in the occupied territories in the Donbas and Crimea, for which data are unavailable—were considerably less divided in early 2022 than was the case prior to Russia’s initial invasion in 2014; by early 2022, the majority of respondents identified as citizens of Ukraine first and foremost.¹⁵³ This suggests that the majority of Ukrainians across the country may have been receptive to messages from Ukrainian officials, even in the first weeks of the war.

That said, it should be noted that evidence can still persuade when motivation and ability to dissect the argument are low, through a different mechanism. In this case, evidence will serve as a *peripheral cue*; rather than evaluating the evidence itself, the audience will decide whether the presence of evidence makes the communicator, and, by extension, their message, seem authoritative and credible. For the segment of Ukrainians whose sympathies lay with the Kremlin at the outset of the 2022 invasion, the evidence presented by Kyiv may have been less convincing.

¹⁵⁰ Volodymyr Zelensky, “We are here. We are in Kyiv. We protect Ukraine” [“Ми тут. Ми в Києві. Ми захищаємо Україну”], Facebook video, February 25, 2022b.

¹⁵¹ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, “Trophy” [“Трофей”], Facebook video, March 10, 2022f. This video, posted by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, offers an example. It shows a destroyed Russian T-72 tank on the front lines that appears to serve as evidence of small Ukrainian victories on the battlefield.

¹⁵² Perloff, 2010, p. 189.

¹⁵³ Bekeshkina, 2017, p. 12.

Were Ukraine's and Russia's Campaigns Persuasive? Period 2: Announcement of Russia's Partial Mobilization

Russia's Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

In communications with their own public, Russian authorities offered material inducements for those willing to join the military and fight in Ukraine.¹⁵⁴ As we describe above, these policy changes were presented as likely but finite. By framing these supposed benefits as limited-time offers, the TV programs appear to have been making a *scarcity appeal*, a tactic used to increase the perceived desirability of an object or opportunity by highlighting its scarcity. Research on persuasion has found that

items and opportunities that are in short supply or unavailable tend to be more desirable to us than those that are plentiful and more accessible. This often adaptive mental shortcut is one that naturally develops, since we learn early on in our lives that things existing in limited quantities are hard to get, and that things that are hard to get are typically better than those that are easy to get.¹⁵⁵

It stands to reason that for many Russian viewers watching, messages about conscription would have been highly personally relevant given the size of the population expecting to be mobilized. That is, viewers would have been *motivated* to carefully examine the arguments presented. That said, it is unclear that this audience would have been in a position to (*able* to) evaluate the veracity of the argument that soldiers would soon receive higher compensation for their service, along with the praise and respect of their fellow countrymen. Although Russians' trust in TV programming as an information source has declined over the past decade, nearly half of respondents still cited television as the most trusted source as of February 2022,¹⁵⁶ meaning that these audiences may not have had a reason to question the messages. What is more, for those Russian viewers who were struggling financially, concerns that inaction could mean missing out on a monetary opportunity could have served as a push to persuade them or their families to act quickly.

Ukraine's Messaging Targeting Russian Audiences

Zelenskyy's messaging aimed at Russian audiences in this period appeared to exploit the long-standing grievances of Russia's ethnic minorities, seemingly to undermine Russian national unity. Positioned in front of a memorial of a Dagestani hero in Kyiv in a video released days after the announcement of Russia's partial mobilization, Zelenskyy stressed that ethnic

¹⁵⁴ "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, September 21, 2022," 2022c.

¹⁵⁵ Cialdini and Goldstein, 2002, p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ Public Opinion Fund, 2022a.

minorities are disproportionately affected by the mobilization.¹⁵⁷ As was the case in the first period of analysis, Ukraine’s messaging sources targeting Russian audiences relied on a mix of *appeals to fear*, *appeals to rationality*, and *appeals to anger* to subvert the Kremlin’s attempt to replenish Russian ranks with patriotic and compliant personnel.

Experimental scholarship has demonstrated that *appeals to humor* tend to be more persuasive than *appeals to fear*, which have been found to be relatively ineffective at persuading.¹⁵⁸ Our observations indicate that, at least for the periods we examined, appeals to humor featured more prominently in official Ukrainian communications than did appeals to fear. For Russia, the opposite appears to be true. Likewise, the content of Ukraine’s messages at this time indicates that authorities were attempting to tap into Russians’ frustrations with the mobilization by making appeals to anger, which capitalized on existing organic discontent. This distinction between Ukraine’s and Russia’s emotional appeals is important. It suggests that, for those messages built around appeals to fear and humor, Ukraine’s communications may have been more persuasive than Russia’s.

¹⁵⁷ Office of the President of Ukraine, “Volodymyr Zelenskyy Addressed the Peoples of the Caucasus” [“Володимир Зеленський звернувся до народів Кавказу”], YouTube video, September 29, 2022g.

¹⁵⁸ Hornik, Ofir, and Rachamim, 2016; Jäger and Eisend, 2013, pp. 125–134; Perloff, 2010, p. 196; Rhodes, 2017.

Chapter 4. Final Thoughts

Our exploratory effort suggests that the popular discourse, which professes that Russia has lost the information war while Ukraine has prevailed, oversimplifies the issue at hand. According to the existing literature on persuasion, the dynamics underpinning persuasion are highly nuanced and contextually dependent. So, rather than answer the core question of whether Ukraine's information campaigns have indeed been more persuasive than Russia's with a purely categorical response, we instead have to say that it depends. It depends on the audiences at which specific messages are aimed at and the broader context in which the audiences have been steeped.

Despite attempting to communicate with the same audiences (that is, their own publics and military forces and those of their foe)—an assumption we make based on the content of their messaging—Russia and Ukraine have taken divergent approaches to their respective information campaigns. Broadly speaking, Ukrainian military and civilian leaders have been highly vocal, communicating frequently with their intended audiences using all available instruments, from social media to radio, and relying on informal, colloquial, and, in some cases, what might be deemed untoward communications. By contrast, Russian officials have been significantly more buttoned-up. The Russian government has leveraged state-run TV as the central conduit for its information campaigns. Official Russian government communications have been predominantly staid affairs in the form of press conferences and prerecorded remarks by Putin. That said, this approach is in sharp contrast to the hyperbolic, repetitive, and emotionally charged character of the Russian TV programming we reviewed. While both states have employed appeals to fear, which research tells us are generally unpersuasive, Ukraine has also leaned heavily on appeals to humor and, to a lesser extent, appeals to anger, an approach that more-recent persuasion scholarship has found to be associated with successful attitudinal change.

Our observations indicate that, at least for the periods we examined, both sides appear to have miscalculated when messaging their adversary's people and military personnel. Russia's information efforts directed at Ukrainian audiences neglected a core tenet of persuasion: the significance of intimately understanding one's audience. In the first weeks of the war, Russian soldiers revealed that they were told to expect a warm welcome from the Ukrainian public, which, the soldiers were told, was waiting to be liberated from fascist oppressors.¹⁵⁹ This appears to have been more than mere lip service; after all, Russia's opening military posture indicates that Russian leadership was expecting to face little resistance. As we now know, these

¹⁵⁹ Luke Harding, "Demoralised Russian Soldiers Tell of Anger at Being 'Duped' into War," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2022.

predictions did not come to fruition. Instead, Ukrainians mounted a fierce resistance, labeling Russian soldiers as “occupiers,” “enemies,” and “fascists.”¹⁶⁰ This suggests that, at least early in the war, Russian civilian and military leaders fundamentally misunderstood their Ukrainian audience. Thus, any messaging devised using this skewed schema would have likely fallen flat for many Ukrainians.

By the time the first new Russian boots hit Ukrainian soil in February 2022, the Ukrainian people had already endured eight years of protracted conflict with their neighbor—a period during which Ukrainian opinions of the Kremlin and its military had soured considerably, according to the survey data outlined above. Moreover, Russia chose to recycle many of its tricks of the trade, such as manufacturing evidence for false-flag operations and propagating fictitious narratives about fascist Ukrainian juntas, tactics with which the Ukrainian public was all too familiar. As the persuasion literature tells us, these deep-seated negative perceptions would have been challenging for Russia’s messaging to overcome. This suggests that even slick and sophisticated Kremlin campaigns targeting Ukrainian audiences may have had little effect in persuading Ukrainians to lay down their arms or submit to occupation, as Putin requested of them in his February 24 speech.

Ukraine’s attempts to reach Russian audiences appear to have been somewhat more nuanced in their approach, but they may have still failed to account for some important underlying audience dynamics. On the one hand, Ukrainian authorities communicated with Russian audiences in Russian and built their campaigns around truthful facts about the war, including by painting a realistic portrait of the situation on the ground. Even so, research suggests that the truth does not always prevail, particularly when it contradicts audiences’ existing beliefs. Of Ukraine’s campaigns that targeted Russian audiences, the messaging specifically tailored to certain marginalized groups acknowledging existing grievances may have been the most persuasive. Still, although Ukraine’s messages may have resonated with these audiences’ existing positions on the Kremlin, these audiences likely possessed little agency to change their behavior given the restraints imposed by Russia’s existing system. What is more, evidence indicates that a sizable segment of the Russian public had long been steeped in the Kremlin’s simulacrum of events. These preexisting beliefs would have been a high bar to overcome.

Ultimately, our conclusions are broad and equivocal. Given the volume of content propagated, the number of actors involved, the variety of narratives, and the fact that any persuasive factor can both enhance and frustrate attempts at persuasion under different circumstances, new, detailed research is required to untangle the question at the heart of this report in a more detailed way.

¹⁶⁰ Harding, 2022.

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