

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION DURING UKRAINE'S INVASION AND ITS EFFECT ON PUBLICS

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Abstract: *Our paper examines the manner in which public opinion is affected by public communication in a very specific situation. The conflict in Ukraine has been on everyone's mind for the last three months not only due to its unreasonableness but also due to the Ukrainians mastery of communicating to the public, be it national or international. As the conflict has grown stronger in its intensity so has the public communication on the Ukrainian side which took any given chance to address the international political scene through President Volodymyr Zelenski's speeches in front of numerous Parliaments. While scrutinising the Ukrainian manner of communicating information and asking for humanitarian, financial and military aid, we will also inspect the manner in which the Russian side communicates. We will look into the effect that these addresses have had on the public opinion. The theoretical background of the paper includes the views on public opinion of Gabriel Tarde, Pierre Zémor's definition of public communication as well as Jürgen Habermas' communicative theory. These theories will assist us in our research to demonstrate which side communicates the better and which has the ability to use cultural references that support their message. Our paper studies an ongoing military conflict, i.e. the data that we have included so far could be interpreted differently later.*

Keywords: *public communication; public opinion; effect; conflict; international.*

The process of public communication, during the conflict in Ukraine, is managed differently by the belligerents. On the one hand, the aggressed part is actively using all possible media means to transmit the Ukrainians' messages to the publics, Ukrainian and international. On the other hand, Russians, identified as the aggressor, convey their messages mostly via television channels through which Russian propaganda is usually spread. Usually, these messages are aimed in their majority at the Russian public and less at the foreign public.

Our research is built around the concepts of public opinion and public communication in order to examine the effect of the two parties' public communication onto the public. Public opinion as a concept was first introduced by Gabriel Tarde, a French sociologist, who wrote a book entitled *L'opinion et la foule / Opinion and the crowd* (1901). This book was meant to be a critique of Gustave Le Bon's book *La psychologie des foules/ Psychology of crowds* (1895). Shortly, Gustave Le Bon considered that society acted like a crowd. Tarde's view was contrary to Le Bon's as the former considered that society could be brought together to support an issue. It could all result in collectively forming one or more opinions on certain issues. This meant that society could act as a group called "public" after having informed on an issue. As a result, we can state that public opinion appeared as a response to the acquired information. In Tarde and Le Bon's time, i.e. at the end of the 19th century, individuals could only find information by reading the newspapers. It was the written media that transformed the crowd into a public as individuals would acquire a collective opinion according to the conventions of the 19th century.

A well-known example which polarised public opinion in France was the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906). It became a real debate issue within the French society partly due to Emile Zola's article "J'accuse." The writer defended French officer Alfred Dreyfus who had been accused and convicted for treason. The article sparked the debate in such a vivid manner that there was one camp of supporters and one of accusers.

Public opinion is linked to public communication as the latter is mainly performed by public institutions that communicate to the people on social issues. It is mainly performed by designated communicators such as spokespersons or officials.

Public communication as a concept is directly connected to the institutions that communicate to the public. Pierre Zémor defines the former as “the formal communication, which is engaged in the exchange and sharing of useful public information and in maintaining the social connection that public institutions are responsible for” (27). The social aspect of Ukraine’s public communication is always present in the public messages, whereas Russians’ public communication is mainly driven by the desire to transform the Ukrainian society as it best fits to their interests.

According to Ion I. Ionescu who reiterates Jürgen Habermas’ communicative theory “communicating in a certain context represents the effort to dominate the situation, to exit it, to face it” (Pierre Zémor 1995) (7, my translation). Irrespective of the context, willing interlocutors to understand, who are interested in finding the way in which they can communicate through a channel that works both ways, they may achieve the state called permanent feedback (Wiener 1989). This means that only the interlocutors who listen to each other’s opinions can create a channel of communication and thus the successful transmission of information. This channel of communication is linked to the cultural change that should take place when communicating to an individual (Pierre Zémor 1995) (15)

Public communication is achieved with certain goals to be attained: (1) to inform, (2) to persuade, to motivate or to take action, and (3) to entertain. Taking into account the situation we chose for our paper, we can safely omit the last type of public communication.

The context that this paper portrays is different from the customary norms. That is why we discuss the public communication accomplished by the two belligerents in a discriminatory manner. On the one hand, Ukraine’s communicators are to be regarded as officials; this category includes the spokesperson of the government, the president, ministers, and members of parliament. On the other hand, Russia’s public communication is achieved by the spokesperson of the government, the president and ministers. Referring to Jürgen Habermas’ contextualisation of the communication process, we consider that only the Ukrainian side has shown interest in communicating to the international public so far, whereas the Russian side has only downplayed the accusations brought by the former and has mostly dealt with promoting propaganda messages meant to enforce Russia’s authoritarian position onto the Russian public.

Given the current context, public communication is filled with propaganda irrespective of who communicates. That is why, we will also focus on the effect that public communication has on publics. We consider that the customary background of public communication cannot be firmly applied to the way in which public institutions communicate during a military conflict. In addition, we should take into account all information coming from an official as public communication as the exceptional context of a military conflict impedes officials from managing the process of communication as expected. This special situation applies to Ukraine’s current status of invaded country and engaged country in a war.

On the Ukrainian side, the most prominent communicator is President Volodymyr Zelenski as he has held speeches in front of various Parliaments, international reunions and has given interviews. There are as many as twenty pages of President Zelenski’s addresses beginning with the day of 24th of February 2022, the first day of the invasion (Wiener 1989). We will examine these addresses minutely in the lines to come.

President Zelenski’s addresses could be categorised both as informing and giving compelling arguments in order to make the decision-makers assist Ukraine with humanitarian, financial and military aid. His speeches were held in Ukrainian and translated live into that respective country’s language or into English when he addressed multi-national reunions. His

addresses can be discriminated on the basis of the prior connections Ukraine had with those countries. For instance, in case there had been little activity between Ukraine and a certain country, the address contained specific details concerning that respective country's history and culture. This was the case of the speeches he gave in the British Parliament, in the US Congress and in the French National Assembly. On the contrary, when addressing the Parliament of a neighbouring country, Zelenski's address contained specific details and / or issues that the two countries had previously experienced. For instance, in his address to the Romanian Parliament on the 4th of April, President Zelenski acknowledged the issues that have kept Romania and Ukraine at odds for some time now, but, at the same time, he expressed the willingness on the Ukrainian side to try to find common ground and solve the respective differences.

An important element of the process of giving speeches is the speaker's ability to speak in front of large audiences. In President Zelenski's case, one should recollect that he became popular in Ukraine for playing, in a well-known Ukrainian series, the role of a teacher who became the President of the country and fought against the corruption. His Russian counterpart, for a long time, has promoted himself as being strong and tough. Regarding his speeches, Vladimir Putin has portrayed the exact coldness in his interactions with the press as he did through his actions. The recurrent image of Putin sitting at the possibly longest table that only two officials have ever sat have become iconic of Putin's cold relations with Western foreign officials.

Apart from the Russian President, there have been only a few other persons to deliver the messages of the Russian side. The most prominent figures are Dmitry Peskov and Daniil Medvedev, who have reiterated Putin's messages on any given occasion. Putin's messages that were meant to frighten the Western nations regarding the use of nuclear bombs have also been repeated multiple times by TV anchors who, in their turn, threatened the Western countries.

We ought to beg the question what effect these speeches have had on the public opinion in each of the countries where such addresses were organised. The main consequence was that the public opinion supported the additional spending for the humanitarian and military aids as well as the assistance for Ukrainian refugees. Although these aids did not arrive as quickly as demanded by the Ukrainian government, they consisted in military support that helped, has helped and continues to help the Ukrainian army to fight against the Russian army, financial assistance that is meant to aid Ukraine's economy. In addition, President Zelenski's addresses and interviews have given him the opportunity to demand Russia be sanctioned and isolated by the international community. Thus, he has maintained pressure on the international community which has also been pressured by the public opinion as a result of the successful public communication managed by Ukrainians.

We believe that this demonstration shows the way in which the three elements of communication come together and create a circular process of communication: sender, receiver, and witness. It is this interconnected relationship that propagates information and thus, eventually, public opinion can become an important asset within society.

In the beginning of the invasion there were several officials of the Ukrainian government and parliament who did not leave Ukraine after its invasion by the Russian army. On some occasions they were interrupted during their interviews by the Russians' attacks (www.youtube.com/watch?v n.d.) One such Member of Parliament was Lesia Vasylenko who was interviewed on CNN. The message she delivered was identical to the one transmitted by President Zelenski, i.e. she demanded that Ukraine be assisted by its partners, Russia be sanctioned, Ukraine be delivered more weapons and its sky to be closed. As 'normal' as it appears that people's lives be disturbed during attacks, viewers are shocked. As a result, such

an interview affects public opinion into taking sides; even though individuals in general tend to favour the weaker or, in our situation, the invaded side.

Taking into account the modern means of communication, readers and viewers alike can easily find new information on this conflict. We consider it necessary to examine the effect of the news coming from the belligerent countries on the public in general and on the public opinion in particular. The public in its majority showed its disapproval of Russia's attack on social networks and on TV and radio. What is more, the public acted as quickly as possible to assist Ukrainian refugees who were fleeing the war-torn areas or who were afraid for their and their families' lives. This was the case of Romanian volunteers who swiftly went to the borders in Sighet, Isaccea and Siret to help the Ukrainian refugees who were entering Romania as early as the 25th of February, only one day after the Russians' attack had begun (romania.europalibera.org/ n.d.).

It is the quick action and organisation that underline the fact that the Romanian public acted as a close-knit group. As a consequence, Romanian public's opinion was to help the refugees in any way they could, be it by supplying the latter with the basic products for personal hygiene, blankets, clothes, food, water, and even finding accommodation for them. The public opinion in this case acted more promptly than the government which needed several days to organise the assistance meant for refugees.

The previous instance demonstrates the fact that it is the public who can act as one in order to make their beliefs known and taken notice of as Gabriel Tarde underlined the importance of common interests for the public (in the case of nowadays press) built on the information received from the media to come together.

We have examined the manner in which public communication has been achieved by the Ukrainian President and other officials, on the one hand, and the Russian government and the Russian President on the other. We have observed that the Ukrainian President made use of cultural references, historical and cultural connections to other countries in order to successfully achieve their public communication. As regards their Russian counterparts, their messages contained the same propaganda information that has been employed to reinforce the belief that Russia can become once again an important power in the world.

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