

The public diplomacy of Ukraine in wartime: a path to reputational security

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Abstract

The paper deals with the study of Ukraine's public diplomacy in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The research looks into the environment, actors, and goals of the contemporary public diplomacy of vulnerable states and substantiates the high relevance of the concept of reputational security by Nicholas J. Cull for the better understanding and improvement of Ukraine's communication with foreign publics. Based on studying tripartite interaction (involving Ukraine, which carries out public diplomacy, target groups in foreign counties, and the enemy represented by Russia and its allies), seven levels of reputational security are identified. Each of them corresponds to a different reaction of foreign publics to events within the country, ranging from indifference to joint resistance to threats. A model of the country's reputational security, which combines its level of reputational security with recommendations for its public diplomacy and actions of a hostile third party, is developed.

Keywords: reputational security, public diplomacy, Russian-Ukrainian war, image of a country, propaganda

Introduction

Public diplomacy (hereinafter – PD) has repeatedly undergone significant transformations, both as a concept and as a field of practical activity. It has been changing according to the shifts in international relations, being a means of confrontation, an extension of traditional diplomacy, and a tool of intercultural dialogue (Brown, 2012). After the end of the Cold War, many countries of the world became interested in PD and it thus acquired characteristic national features. The rapid development of information technology since the 1990s has initiated radical changes in PD, and the relative stability and optimism in the international environment confirmed the attitude to PD as a means of image management to achieve practical and primarily economic goals (Anholt, 2006). However, the events of the early 2020s force us to once again reassess the importance and the role of PD. This applies to the growth of global challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as

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Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. All of them have led to the emergence of numerous studies that trace the impact of modern threats on PD. For instance, the issues of the impact of the pandemic are dwelt upon in the works of Ingram (2020), Manor and Pamment (2022), Pamment (2021) and the influence of Russian aggression in the research of Szostek (2020), Welslau and Selck (2024).

This paper deals with the study of the current trends and challenges in the field of PD based on the evidence and experience that the Russian-Ukrainian war provides us with. In particular, the practice of the Ukrainian PD and Russia's foreign information activities during the war make it possible to confirm and characterize in more detail a number of trends in PD, which the leading researchers in this field, i.e., Jan Melissen, Nancy Snow, Nicholas J. Cull, and Eytan Gilboa, have been asserting over the past decades. The time frame of our study generally covers the period since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, with the main focus on the events during the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been ongoing since 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and invaded Donbas.

The methodological foundation of our research is the modern theories of PD and soft power authored by Melissen (2005), Gilboa (2008; 2023), Pamment (2012), Arsenault (2009) and above all, the theory of reputational security (hereinafter – RS) by Cull (2019; 2022; 2024). We make an attempt to apply this theory to Ukrainian realities and contribute to its development, in particular, by identifying the levels of RS and by defining the characteristic features of PD focused on strengthening the country's RS at all levels. In addition, we use the approach to public diplomacy proposed by Pamment (2021), according to which the relations in this field are seen as involving a tripartite interaction between the actor conducting PD, target groups abroad, and a third party, which can be a hostile country or its agents. In this way, we can relate the country's PD aimed at increasing its RS to the activity of adversaries trying to destroy this country's reputation and image.

In general, the purpose of this paper is to substantiate the great relevance of the concept of RS for the public diplomacy of a vulnerable country like Ukraine and to determine ways of strengthening its RS by means of PD by taking into account the existing situation and other significant factors. In order to get closer to this purpose, we first need to understand the specifics of the environment in which modern PD unfolds and the characteristics of actors involved in this activity.

1. Environment

Since the early 2000s, some researchers have claimed that international relations are changing significantly, and this is causing the transformation and growth of the role of PD. For example, Melissen (2005) identified the signs of the so-called new PD including the increase in the number of participants and the change in their status due to the democratization of the information environment caused by the evolution of the Internet. At that time, attention was also paid to the establishment

of network structures, the strengthening of horizontal ties, and the blurring of boundaries between the internal and external audiences. Two decades later, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the changes that happened and to outline the features of the landscape of international relations which, according to Gilboa (2023, p. 1), is rapidly developing, constantly changing, and is full of crisis events. Attention should also be paid to the technological and political environment.

Today, hardly anyone deprives themselves of the pleasure to talk about the impact of information technology on politics. However, while at the dawn of the Internet, these technologies were mainly associated with the utopian images of a democratic, decentralized, and intellectually developed society (Toffler, 1980), nowadays, our reflections on the prospects are much more dystopian. Contrary to expectations, there is increasing evidence that the information society is moving towards de-democratization (Freedom House, 2023), de-intellectualization (Garfinkle, 2020), polarization, and the inability to overcome the burdens of the past in order to invent a better future. It is worth paying attention to how Cull (2022) dwells upon the latter: “at the very moment in which the world had the potential to open new possibilities, it closed around old certainties”. And this is not at all accidental, since such processes can be explained precisely by the influence of technology and algorithms that shape the foundation of virtual space.

In particular, Roy (2017) states that the algorithms and big data codify the past, rather than invent the future, since business and government empowered by technologies, based on the analysis of the data about the past processes, tend to preserve the existing system and their position in it, thereby deepening inequality and turning others into objects of subtle manipulation. Naughton (2017) claims that the potential for tyranny is built into the very nature of the current social media. One of the first to draw attention to the dangers of informatisation for democracy is Morozov (2011), who believes that democracy is inextricably linked to an era in which insufficient information arrives with a significant delay. Given all this, it seems no coincidence that various authoritarian leaders in the world, including Russian president Vladimir Putin, have been able to quickly turn technological progress to their advantage and significantly strengthen their position through internal and external propaganda and information manipulation of a new generation.

On the one hand, Internet technologies do allow an actor of PD to reach various target audiences anywhere in the world with relatively little expenses and without owning large media outlets. This can help a small, rather poor and not very popular state build its own system of external communication with foreign publics, which can be considered as a certain democratization of this sphere (Melissen, 2005). On the other hand, the same factor strengthens the voices of various anti-democratic actors, namely, totalitarian states or radical and extremist groups (Pamment, 2021). Such an actor is, for example, North Korea, which manages to increase its propaganda influence through social networks, both in its region, primarily in South Korea and China, and in the West (Lee, 2018; Williams, 2020).

Information technology poses challenges, not only on behalf of actors, but on the side of target audiences as well. Garfinkle (2020) describes this negative effect of modern communication as the erosion of deep literacy, which leads to the situation where people's ability to make rational decisions and exercise democratic self-government is steadily decreasing. Their reasoning becomes less abstract, and the attention of citizens in politics becomes focused primarily on notable persons and bright leaders. This stimulates the spread of populism, radicalism, and authoritarianism; besides, it causes the advantage in international communication to be gained by those who spare no means to achieve their goals (Cooper, 2019). Within the societies of different countries, radicalization and strife are growing, which makes us recall McLuhan's (1997, p. 58) statement, expressed back in the 1960s: "The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points."

A factor that increases the tension is the fragmentation of the information space described in the work of Pariser (2011), which causes people to live in separate information and communication bubbles, without noticing what is happening around them. In Ukraine, this was manifested, for example, during the Euromaidan in 2014, when it turned out that the policemen who protected the power of president Yanukovich until the very end were the members of groups in Russian social networks, where Russian propaganda narratives were dominating for a long time (Dobys, 2019). Nowadays, the phenomenon of a technology-enhanced bubble should, as well, be taken into account when it comes to PD aimed at democratically inclined groups in an authoritarian state, which is supposed to lead to the strengthening of democratic voices in such a society. In reality, no constructive interaction between the authoritarian majority and the democratic minorities may occur, and PD aimed at the narrowly closed audiences (especially if they are located abroad, as in the case of modern Russia) may not have a noticeable general impact. Moreover, in case of an international conflict, such PD can, on the contrary, deepen the split between both groups of the population and lead to the firmly established image of traitors and "enemies of the people" for the latter (Lewis, 2020).

The change in the political environment is also related to technology. According to the research by Freedom House (2023), de-democratization processes have been observed in the world for almost two decades. And, even in democratic countries, the trust in democratically formed government is very often low (Ingram, 2020). Pandemics, wars, and dystopian images of the future increase fear, sense of powerlessness, and uncertainty about the future among the people (Ingram, 2018). All this adds up to establishing a favourable ground for the destructive influence of anti-democratic actors. As Ingram (2020) notes, that influence seeks to erode the "trinity of trusts," i.e. social trust, trust in authority/expertise, and trust in democracy. One of the most active players in this field is Putin's Russia, which uses a wide arsenal of both traditional and new tools for this purpose, including state-controlled TV, troll factories, foreign diaspora, etc. (Bräuninger & Marinov, 2022; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Manor & Pamment, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created extremely favourable conditions for undermining trust through the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-scientific myths. Using the example of Sweden, Pamment (2021) demonstrates how small non-governmental actors can undermine trust in government and actually destroy the state's reputation by claiming that the government's policy is criminal and equal to the genocide against its own population. Pamment (2021, p. 105) warns of the danger from the small groups of angry people who are able to disproportionately amplify their anger through the media but lack the professional skills to remain within the norms of a democratic society. The issue becomes even more acute since states like Russia and China tend to manipulate this kind of radicals in other countries to achieve their own goals (Ingram, 2018; 2020). In Ukraine, this is illustrated by the events that happened in the small village of Novi Sanzhary at the beginning of the pandemic, in February 2020. Then, the authorities, having evacuated Ukrainian citizens from Wuhan, decided to quarantine them in a sanatorium in this village. Frightened and incited through manipulative channels on social networks, hundreds of village residents attacked the convoy of the evacuees and tried to prevent them from entering Novi Sanzhary. All this could have been part of a broader Russian information operation against Ukraine with the aim of undermining trust and spreading chaos in the country (Barros, 2020). It is worth noting that, as a result of the implementation of the mentioned operation, all three types of trust are undermined: own fellow citizens turn into dangerous individuals who carry a new deadly plague while the experts and democratic authorities are portrayed as internal enemies who, in the spirit of conspiracy theories, solve their problems at the expense of the lives of ordinary people. At present, similar special operations of Russia are aimed at weakening its adversary during the war.

Thus, it can be concluded that the current technological and political environment of PD is complex, unpredictable, and not always favourable for an actor whose strategy is based on democratic values and norms. Therefore, PD in times of crises and conflicts can sometimes be similar to moving through a minefield where one should not forget about the activity of enemies and where every ill-considered step can cause disaster.

2. Actors

The active participation of non-governmental actors in PD has been discussed for several decades. Modern definitions of PD often directly indicate that it is carried out not only by the states, but by private entities, groups, and individuals, as well (Gilboa, 2023; Gibson, 2023). According to Cowan and Arsenault (2008), PD covers not only one-way communication but also two-way or multidirectional communication, together with collaborative relationship building. Obviously, the last two options assume a certain equality of the parties and an active participation

of all collaboration partners. Pamment (2021, p. 84) believes that, nowadays, the uni-directional model of PD has practically lost its meaning.

Cull (2019) notes that one of the main trends in PD is a significant expansion of the range of actors who try to influence foreign publics to achieve their goals. This applies to cities, regions, corporations, NGOs, and the communities in social networks. Two out of the seven principles of PD identified by Cull (2019) directly relate to the active role of publics. The first states that public diplomacy begins with listening. This means that the PD which does not listen to its target audiences is doomed to failure. Thus, if the target audiences have the right to voice and are heard, then, they themselves become actors and can achieve their goals through interaction. And these goals may differ from the goals of the initiator of such PD. Krasnodębska (2018) explores an interesting example of an equal game between two parties of PD, namely the EU and the Ukrainians. She underlines that the goal of the EU's policy before Euromaidan was to achieve certain economic and security aims by signing an association agreement with Ukraine but not at the expense of complicating relations with Russia. On the other hand, the Ukrainians perceived the EU's rhetoric as a promise of the prospect of full integration with the Union, provided they support the democratic vector of development. After the Euromaidan's victory and the invasion of authoritarian Russia, they began to claim for comprehensive support from the EU in all possible ways, which created pressure on the Western politicians.

Another Cull's (2019) principle states that: "Public diplomacy is everyone's business." This means both that it is no longer possible to ignore the contribution of "citizen diplomats" as well as the "people-to-people" PD, and that a small group of "bad people" can cause significant damage. This principle finds numerous confirmations during the information confrontation that accompanies the Russian-Ukrainian war. From the very beginning of the full-scale invasion, a large number of Ukrainians, including politicians, cultural figures, intellectuals, scientists, journalists, influencers, and ordinary people, took their own initiative to promote the interests of their country in the face of an existential threat. They conveyed information to people abroad by all available means, and their goals were as follows: drawing attention to the events in Ukraine, highlighting the scale and brutality of Russian war crimes, refuting the messages and myths of Russian propaganda, achieving the severance of economic, cultural, and other ties with Russia, and attracting international support for Ukraine, including both humanitarian aid and fundraising for the purchase of warfare means (Lee, 2023). On the other hand, Russia's information activities are not limited to the state and near-state propaganda either. It is supported by cultural figures, athletes, and members of Russian diasporas abroad, who often publicly justify Russia's aggression and promote its propaganda messages and myths.

Another important aspect is the role of the Russians opposed to Putin's policy, who left their country (the so-called "good Russians"). This is a complex and ambiguous issue raising radically opposite opinions. In the West and among these

Russians themselves, the dominant position is that they are the natural allies of the Ukrainians in the fight against Putin's regime. Therefore, it is necessary to establish their contact with the Ukrainians by all means thus promoting further reconciliation and cooperation. In Ukraine, the prevailing opinion is that the real interests and directions of activity of these Russians may diverge significantly from the interests of Ukraine (not including those who clearly exposed the imperial essence of Russia and actively help Ukraine in the war), but people in other countries do not understand or do not take into account all the nuances of Russian propaganda and long-lasting Russian-Ukrainian relations and therefore tend to come to rather simplistic and wrong solutions (Hrudka, 2024; Sheiko, 2022). In any case, the "good Russians" and their structures should be considered as independent or relatively independent actors of PD.

Pamment (2021) points out that the current dominant understanding of PD still involves the interaction of two main principals, namely, Actor A (state, organization, community that conducts PD) and Actor B (target groups in another state, where PD is conducted). Although such a simplification may be justified in terms of achieving practical goals, one should keep in mind that the real relations are much more complex and usually involve the interaction of more than two parties. The research of Pamment (2021) deals with the study of the subversive role of the third parties which can be an enemy state, its agents or an organized advocacy group. It is obvious that the entire PD of Ukraine in recent decades should be considered precisely through such a scheme¹ in which Russia is the permanent "Actor C." However, the situation is even more interesting when the third party is an actor who is not directly involved in the confrontation but who, nevertheless, significantly affects the reputation that Ukraine is trying to gain abroad. For example, it could be the Amnesty International ("Ukraine: Ukrainian fighting", 2022) which, in its report, claims that the Ukrainian military units endanger the civilian population, thus violating international humanitarian law, although, at the same time, little is said about the crimes of Russia itself that are much more extensive.²

¹ Here, we should also consider the fact that although the Russian-Ukrainian war has been going on since 2014, even before that, Russia's foreign policy was quite aggressive towards Ukraine, which can be illustrated by the examples of "gas wars," Tuzla Island conflict, Russia's interference in the Ukrainian elections, etc.

² In response, Ukrainian president Zelenskyy said that Amnesty International is trying to justify the terrorist state and shift the responsibility from the aggressor to the victim (Savage, 2023). After the publication of the report, in order to express their disagreement with it, many employees resigned from the organization, in particular: the head of Amnesty Ukraine, the co-founder of Amnesty Sweden, and eighty members of Amnesty Norway (Posner, 2022). An independent commission of experts on international humanitarian law, which evaluated the mentioned report on request of Amnesty International, recognized that its provisions are not sufficiently substantiated and its language is "ambiguous, imprecise and in some aspects legally questionable" (Savage, 2023).

Another vivid example concerns the accusations of xenophobia and racism against the West after European countries heartily welcomed Ukrainian refugees from the war in contrast to the previous waves of refugees from Afghanistan and Syria (Düvell & Lapshyna, 2022). Although in this case, Ukraine is not directly accused of any wrongdoing, its reputation and image suffer, and the attitude towards its citizens abroad may deteriorate. It is worth paying attention to how Mark Leonard (2022) writes about it: “Many European countries that slammed their doors during the 2015 Syrian crisis are now offering a warm, open-ended welcome to the blond, blue-eyed refugees fleeing from Ukraine.” Such a fragment clearly draws parallels between the current situation and the racial theories of the Nazis and generates negative associations related not so much to the European authorities as to the Ukrainians who are probably guilty of being “blond and blue-eyed” (in fact, this statement is manipulative as well since, traditionally, the image of Ukrainians is “black brows, brown eyes,” as it is sung in a famous song).

3. Goal

Taking into account the changes in the environment and the role of new actors in PD, as well as the current crisis in international relations, we will try to answer the question of what goal of their PD should countries like Ukraine set for themselves. States that have become independent recently seldom inherit a good image and a solid reputation. As a rule, in the first years of their independence, they face numerous political, economic, security, and other difficulties which further undermine their reputation and image abroad. In the worst case, no one mentions them or remembers them at all.

As a rule, PD is associated with soft power. From various studies, we can establish that there is a two-way dependence between them: PD helps to increase soft power and soft power is used in PD to achieve foreign policy and security goals (Gilboa, 2023). However, what should be done by those states for whom the acquisition of soft power is not very likely, especially if they face much bigger and closer challenges? In the study of flagship in PD, Zhu (2023) draws attention to the most effective examples, such as the British Council or the Fulbright Program, and points out that such flagship depends on time and resources. But as for the vast majority of the world’s states disposing of very limited resources and time, where should their efforts be directed? Snow (2020) associates soft power with three factors, among them, access to multiple communication channels, through which it is possible to influence the coverage of issues in global news media and a country’s credibility, which is enhanced by its behaviour. However, many countries and peoples find themselves in a reputation pit from which it is not easy to get out, and influencing global communication channels is an almost impossible task for them. They are doomed to be losers on the soft power field simply because they belong to a lower league in this game.

Cull's (2019; 2022; 2024) concept of reputational security provides answers to these questions. To justify it, he uses Ukraine and Kazakhstan as examples and shows the importance of this factor in the past, in particular when Czechoslovakia and Poland became victims of aggression in the middle of the 20th century. Gilboa (2023) defines RS as an "ability of states to achieve legitimacy to their sovereignty over territory in international public perception." However, it seems that this phenomenon is broader and involves more aspects. RS is most important for vulnerable countries, especially in times of significant crises and challenges. As Cull (2019, p. 29) points out, it is "a place on the high ground in global imagination" which determines the active reaction of the international community in case of danger for a country. In other words, when war or natural disaster come, "the world cares" (Cull, 2019, p. 30).

Therefore, under the current conditions,³ achieving a high level of RS can be considered the main task of Ukraine's PD. When considering RS, we can figure out that it is not about the presence or absence of a certain quality but rather about different levels of the country's security which depend on its reputation and each of which corresponds to a different reaction of foreigners to the events taking place in it. The lowest zero level is obscurity. It is typical of a country that few people have even heard of outside of the region in which it is located. Publics abroad will not pay attention to such a country and will not remember it even if they see a mention of it somewhere in the media. This state of affairs can be illustrated by the curious case of the reaction of many Americans when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. Many of them thought that it was about the American state of Georgia and actively discussed it on social media (Chivers, 2008). Obscurity can be overcome through an active media presence.

The first level means visibility, but not the kind that is based on attractiveness and achievements. Such a country is more likely to be avoided. In the imagination of foreigners, these are often "wild lands" where chaotic processes occur, unrelated to civilization and originality. This is how Afghanistan, which has the reputation of "the Graveyard of Empires," is perceived in the West, and this, according to Cull (2022, p. 414), was one of the factors that caused the West to ignore the emergence of the extremist Taliban movement there in the 1990s. The transition to the second level means that a country is finally beginning to be perceived as independent and viable, and its nation as capable of self-government, but few people abroad are interested in it.

We can talk about RS of the third level when a country manages to form and present a distinct identity. Its image is familiar to most people, and it raises considerable interest in the world. A clear example of this is North Korea. The public

³ According to the Fragile State Index, as a result of a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine moved from the 92nd to the 18th place in the vulnerability rating (The Fund for Peace, 2023). In 2013, before the beginning of the Russian aggression, it occupied the 117th place.

appearances of its leader and members of his family, including their symbolic actions, such as inspecting missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads or participating in pompous parades and celebrations, are widely covered by media and bloggers in many countries. Public interest allows a country to convey its messages, conduct propaganda, and gain supporters abroad without spending a lot of money on it. That is why North Korea succeeds in its modern propaganda strategies, using an “army of beauties” at the Olympics or children’s blogs on social media (Lee, 2018; Williams, 2020).

Starting from the fourth level, the country acquires real RS based on a shared history and joint activities. The example of pre-WWII Poland mentioned by Cull (2022, p. 413) is best suited here. At that time, the country had already been an integral part of the long history of Europe and its cultural achievements were widely known in the West. Its RS was noticeable but insufficient, and although Britain and France entered the war after Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939, six years later, it fell under the rule of the Kremlin for half a century. Thus, a country with the fourth level of RS can count on sympathy and empathy which allows it to influence the international environment and to convey its messages and implement projects abroad much easier. However, this does not guarantee material assistance and active lobbying by foreigners in critical situations.

The fifth level means close ties based on shared values. Here, the matter of protecting the country and its people becomes not only its internal issue but also a real concern of the international community, because it is about the same values that, if damaged in one place, can ultimately collapse on a global scale. Therefore, foreign countries and their citizens actively support such a country in various ways and on their own initiative. The highest level of RS is solidarity, which means the tendency of the broad masses of the population to support the decision to help a foreign country even in spite of considerable sacrifices on their own part. As Cull (2019) points out, a similar attitude towards Great Britain was formed in the United States at the beginning of World War II.

4. Activity and warfare

Having determined the levels of RS and the reaction of foreign publics that corresponds to each of them, we can now examine the current situation in Ukraine with the help of this framework and establish the features of the relevant PD strategy at each of the levels. At the same time, we must keep in mind that Ukraine’s obtaining RS is far from a two-sided game. Therefore, the international influence of Russia, as well as its propaganda strategies, which depend on the level of RS of the country targeted by aggression, should also be taken into account.

4.1. Overcoming obscurity

After gaining independence, Ukraine, like many other new countries, has faced the problem of obscurity. In order to overcome it, any presence in the global media is suitable. An interesting example here is Kazakhstan, which was caricatured in the 2006 satirical mockumentary film *Borat* as an extremely backward and unattractive country. Although, at first, Kazakhstan was dominated by negative attitudes towards the film, over time, there came understanding that its international influence is more positive than negative as it places the country “on the mental map of Western audiences” (Cull, 2019, p. 31). On the other hand, if we are talking about countries with a higher level of RS, then, such a negative distortion already works in a different way.⁴

As for Ukraine, it is probably difficult for people in the West to imagine the enthusiastic reaction of Ukrainians in the 1990s and early 2000s when their country was at least mentioned somewhere in a Hollywood film or series. Such fragments of references were edited into separate videos and aroused great interest. The situation improved somewhat after the Orange Revolution of 2004 and finally changed after Euromaidan and the invasion of Russia in 2014, when Ukraine became visible on a global scale.⁵

The enemy’s best strategy for a country it wants to send back into obscurity is silence and distraction. At worst, one can express sarcastic surprise. For example, let us consider the 1929 propaganda poem “My Soviet Passport” by the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. It describes the reaction of foreign, probably Western officials to the passports of various states. When they see Poland’s passport, despite its centuries-old history and ten years after gaining independence, their reaction is as follows: “they dolefully blink and wheeze / in dumb / police elephantism - / where are they [passport holders] from, / and what are these / geographical novelties?” (Mayakovsky, 1982).

⁴ For example, the portrayal of Slovakia in the films *Hostel* 2005 and *EuroTrip* 2004 as an extremely poor and backward country, where crime and prostitution flourish, is hardly in its favour.

⁵ For illustration, we can use Google Trends (n.d.-a) data which show the number of queries for the keyword “Ukraine” in the USA. In the period from 2004 to 2013, these queries are all the time at a minimum level (1 point) with the exception of the Orange Revolution (3 points). Euromaidan and the invasion of Russia cause a significant increase in attention to Ukraine in 2014 (6-14 points) and, after that, until 2022, we can observe periodic surges of interest (up to 3 points). After the full-scale invasion of 2022 (100 points), attention has been at level 4 to 13 points for two years with a trend towards gradual fading.

4.2. Viability

In the early 2000s, Ukraine was known in the world primarily in connection with Chernobyl, famous athletes, and the Orange Revolution. This was already a certain level of visibility, but the next problem was to shape its image as an independent and viable state whose people are capable of self-government. Like many others, Ukraine tried to raise the level of visibility and to improve its image by holding large international events such as the Eurovision Song Contest 2005 in Kyiv and the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine. At that time, they were regarded precisely as a proof of state capability. However, in order to present something to others, one needs to understand oneself and construct one's own identity. This was a significant problem for post-Soviet Ukraine whose population struggled with the trauma of a totalitarian and colonial past. And paradoxically, it was the Kremlin's intervention and aggression that helped Ukraine move to the higher levels of RS significantly destabilizing the situation internally (Brand Ukraine, 2023).

Russia's strategy has always been aimed at preventing the shaping of the image of Ukraine as a capable state. Russian officials, agents, and propagandists never tire of talking about Ukraine as a failed state and an uncontrolled space of chaos, where radicals and adventurists are in power, and the system is hopelessly corrupt and doomed to economic and social collapse (Yurkova, 2018). This is said despite the realities in Russia itself, where the level of support of radical ideas is incomparably higher, corruption is by no means less, and the success of the economy directly depends on oil and gas export. Separately, it is worth mentioning the pseudo-historical justifications for Russia's right to rule over Ukrainian lands and its people. For example, in February 2024, in an interview with American journalist Tucker Carlson (2024), Putin justified Russia's aggression against Ukraine with the events of the Middle Ages, letters of the Ukrainian hetman of the 17th century Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, and historical fabrications that the Ukrainian nation and statehood are artificial and arose as a result of the actions of Russia's enemies or was created by Lenin and Stalin. All this caused confusion both among the audience in the West and for Tucker Carlson himself, and it seems completely inappropriate in 2024, when the best proof of the viability of Ukraine is the two-year successful resistance in the war against a much stronger enemy.

However, considering Russia's vast resources and experience, its efforts to destroy Ukraine's image of a viable state are large-scale and quite successful. For example, Russia continues to spread disinformation claiming that it is not waging an aggressive war against Ukraine, but the West is waging war against Russia on the territory of Ukraine (EUvsDisinfo, 2023). This means that Ukraine, as a separate actor, allegedly does not exist. Also, Russian propaganda constantly talks about the "civil conflict" in Ukraine, and many people in the world consciously or unconsciously retranslate its messages and myths. This can be illustrated even by the

example of the terminology used in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Until 2022, the most common term for these events in the world was the “Ukraine crisis”, which provided the basis for Russian manipulations regarding the “civil war” and “self-determination of the peoples of Crimea and Donbas.” In 2022, it was superseded by the “War in Ukraine” (it is also unclear who is at war with whom) and “Russian invasion of Ukraine.”⁶ The latter also fits into the myths of Russian propaganda about a “special military operation” and creates parallels with the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, which corresponds to Russia’s manipulative claims about the symmetry of its actions in the international arena.

4.3. Distinct identity

Moving to the third level of RS turns a country or organization into a real actor on the field of PD but still does not help much in terms of security. Its PD activity is finally starting to turn into real gains. The world’s significant attention allows it to experiment with PD strategy and practice and to see the results in near real time. The third level is also a solid foundation for further growth because upward movement becomes directly dependent on one’s actions and the probability of downward movement is significantly reduced: one who has attracted general interest cannot easily be pushed back into the zone of obscurity and oblivion. In this regard, Ukraine made a real breakthrough in 2022. This is evidenced by the Soft Power Index 2023 by Brand Finance (2023) in which it rose by 14 positions in a year (more than any other country) and now ranks 37th in the world. It is even more revealing that Ukraine’s greatest growth was recorded in the Familiarity indicator, according to which it rose by 32 positions and now ranks 15th in the world. In addition, it ranks 3rd among the countries whose affairs people follow the most (Brand Finance, 2023).

These achievements are not exclusively the result of the Russian aggression. To a large extent, this is the merit of the Ukrainians themselves who have managed to spread a lot of bright images and ideas over the past two years. For example, president Zelenskyy, with the help of his attractive image and active PD, unexpectedly turned into one of the most visible world leaders. The report by the Brand Finance (2023, p. 34) states that his popularity along with his ministers’ and advisors’ has resulted in the nation’s rise to 12th place among “internationally admired leaders.” According to the Gallup Poll Social Survey, in July 2023, Zelenskyy ranked second in the rating of the favourable attitude of Americans, which includes both domestic politicians and foreign figures (Saad, 2023). Many other successful projects were implemented by the Ukrainian authorities, civil society, and

⁶ These statements can be confirmed by Google Trends (n.d.-b) data regarding requests from Americans. March 2014: “Ukraine crisis” - 16 points, “War in Ukraine” - 6 points, “Russian invasion of Ukraine” - 3 points, “Russo-Ukrainian War” - <1 point. February 2022: “War in Ukraine” - 85 points (100 points in March 2022), “Russian invasion of Ukraine” - 36 points, “Ukraine crisis” - 20 points, “Russo-Ukrainian War” - 3 points.

business as a result of their collaboration. For example, Cull (2024) mentions the Ukrainian Brave campaign implemented by the advertising agency Banda with the support of the government (Kaneva, 2022). In addition, the efforts of Ukrainians in the field of digital public diplomacy and countering Russian disinformation can be considered innovative and effective (Cull, 2024).

In more usual circumstances, to bring the country to the third level of RS, one can use the concept of competitive identity by Anholt (2006), which is based on three key elements: strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. At the same time, the enemy tries to undermine the foundations of the competitive identity by using various means. In the case of Russia, one of the most effective of them is the erosion of Ukraine's identity which is achieved through the propagation of imperialist myths about the "one nation" (which includes Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians with the former in the role of the "elder brother"), "three brotherly nations" or "Slavic Orthodox civilization" (Kappeler, 2003; Kuzio, 2019; Laruelle, 2008). People abroad, often without realizing it themselves, contribute to the spread of Russian propaganda trying to restore "fraternity" between Ukrainians and Russians or calling for their reconciliation at a time when Russia is massively destroying the Ukrainian people and is not going to stop. They do not take into account the fact that the main reason for the war is precisely the Ukrainians' efforts to free themselves from the centuries-old close embrace of the empire that does not want to let them go. A contradiction arises when Ukrainians massively support integration into Western structures, such as the EU and NATO,⁷ and individual Western actors under the guise of good intentions try to shove them back into the niche of "Eastern Europe"⁸ where Russia ruled for centuries.

Emphasizing the imperial roots not only of Russian statehood but also of Russian culture, Ukrainians often react quite negatively to the efforts of bringing together Ukrainian and Russian cultural and other figures at various events (Hrudka, 2024). The main problem here is not what kind of Russians take part in these events, but in the format itself, which does not serve to strengthen the Ukrainian identity and contributes to the restoration of the former status quo beneficial to Russia. An example could be the initiative to seat Ukraine's First Lady Olena Zelenska near Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, at the 2024 State of the Union Address, which was generally not accepted by the Ukrainian authorities or civil society (Hudson & Pager, 2024). However, in other cases, the Ukrainians have to compromise for the sake of achieving a more important strategic goal. This applies to the acceptance of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize by the Ukrainian human rights organization Centre for Civil Liberties together with the Russian

⁷ According to the Rating Group (2023) study, in July 2023, 85% of Ukrainians were in favour of joining the EU and 83% were in favour of joining NATO.

⁸ A similar situation concerns the dissatisfaction of the citizens of the Baltic states or Poland when their countries are referred to the region of Eastern Europe, which in the past meant belonging to the bloc led by the Soviet Union.

organization Memorial and the Belarusian activist Ales Bialiatski, that is, representatives of the “three brotherly people” according to the theories of Soviet and Russian propaganda.

4.4. Involvement

The first tangible benefits from RS appear at the fourth level, which means the involvement of the country and its nationals in cooperation with partners abroad. This gives it an opportunity to spread its culture and achievements and reserve a place for itself in the common history. As noted by Cull (2022, p. 415), RS is obtained by someone who “is being seen to be good over a long period” through participation in sustained collaboration. One way of achieving this is to conduct long-term PD; however, its success depends not only on activity and resources, but also on many other factors.

As a result of the Russian full-scale invasion, Ukraine received very favourable conditions for collaboration with Western countries. Its cultural and intellectual figures suddenly became interesting and in demand abroad, which was not the case before. In the 1990s, Zabuzhko (2011), one of the most famous Ukrainian writers, vividly described the extreme difficulty of promoting a Ukrainian cultural product abroad: “even if you did, by some miracle, produce something in this [Ukrainian] language ‘knocking out Goethe’s Faust,’ ... then it would only lie around the libraries unread, like an unloved woman, for who knows how many dozens of years until it began ‘cooling off’ ..., this same thing has happened with most of Ukrainian literature.” It is quite a different matter with Russian literature and culture, as well as with the involvement of this state in international politics over the centuries. Thus, Russia has long been firmly entrenched at the fourth level of RS and it is extremely difficult to dislodge it from this position (Simons, 2014). Ukrainians never stop trying to do so emphasizing the close connection of the Russian culture and history with the ideas of imperialism and therefore, with the ideology and policy of the present Russian regime (Batuman, 2023; Thompson, 2000). Related to this is the “cancel Russia” campaign, which is perceived differently in the West and with the help of which the Ukrainians and their partners try to lower the level of Russia’s RS taking into consideration the state’s disregard for the principles of humanity and the international legal order (Sheiko, 2022).

However, the events in the recent decades show that Russia is too deeply engaged in various international processes, including those in the West. This allows it to easily spread its propaganda and conduct special operations. The West’s reaction to all Russian abuses has always been too weak and the sanctions have not been tangible enough. Such a reaction can be compared to an insufficient dose of antibiotic that does not destroy the disease but only contributes to the emergence of antibiotic resistance and further exacerbation. Even the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 had practically no effect on Russia’s RS. It is also

important here that, at that time, Ukraine had a much lower level of RS (Cull, 2022; 2024). Still, what Ukraine cannot do Russians themselves have done with their own hands. The continuation and expansion of Russia's aggression in 2022, including its barbaric acts against the civilian population (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2022) significantly worsened its image and undermined its reputation to such an extent that now, Ukrainians can already compete with it in many respects and even achieve tangible results. That is why, in the influential media, more and more voices are calling for a reassessment of the Russian culture taking into account the imperial ideas embedded in it (Batuman, 2023) that still significantly influence international politics.

The main reaction of foreign publics in response to threats to the country that has the fourth level of RS is sympathy and empathy. During the full-scale war, Ukraine has acquired some elements of RS of this level and can now attract people abroad to spread its own messages and counter the Kremlin's propaganda and cultural policy. With this, it can not only significantly increase the number of voices but also enhance credibility because "more credible voice is not your own" (Cull, 2019, p. 27). The main method of the adversary in such a situation (especially the one like Russia, which has vast experience, contacts, and resources at its disposal) is competitive displacement by pushing its own projects.⁹ Ukrainians are aware of the threat and demand the removal of Russians from all formats of international cooperation with their participation.

4.5. Common values and solidarity

Ukraine badly needs the fifth level RS, which means active involvement of other countries in its struggle on the basis of common values that need to be protected. Its main task is to prove and show the value bases of the current war in which, on the one hand, there is democracy, human rights, the right of nations to self-determination, international humanitarian law and, on the other hand, authoritarianism, imperialism, the right of force, and the undermining of the international legal order. Therefore, it is beneficial for Ukrainians to fit the war into the framework of opposing good against evil or heroes against villains, which allows the use of ready-made patterns and symbols (Laineste & Fiadotova, 2023). It is equally important that the dominant image in many countries portrays not only president Zelenskyy, but also other Ukrainian leaders, soldiers and ordinary people on the side of good (Laineste & Fiadotova, 2023). As for the other side, different alternatives compete here. It can be Putin himself, his entourage, or Russia and Russians in general. If it is only Putin with his entourage, and the Russians, once

⁹ Authors and executors of these projects can also be foreign citizens, including citizens of Ukraine, whose activities are coordinated by Russia. Therefore, it is very difficult to establish how the system of Russian political and cultural influence abroad is organized.

again in their history, are very unlucky with the regime, then Ukraine loses its advantage. The level of its RS is decreasing while the attachment of foreign publics to Russians is increasing, and the latter not only remain participants in all kinds of international collaboration but also acquire the image of victims of the regime.

The enemy's main strategy of turning the unfavourable image around is related to this. For example, in order to destroy the image of Ukrainians as defenders of good and victims of aggression, Russia amplifies in various ways those voices that talk about the suffering of Russians themselves (Harlan, 2022) and the abuse of the Ukrainian government. The latter concerns the previously described case with Amnesty International and the former can be illustrated by Putin's interview with Carlson in February 2024. As stated in the report of the Institute for the Study of War, in the interview, Putin tried to "absurdly reframe Russia as the wronged party and not the initiator of Russia's unprovoked war of conquest against Ukraine" and, once again, portrayed the war "as a defensive campaign aimed at protecting Russian people and the Russian nation" (Bailey et al., 2024). The image of persecution of Russians abroad is also used for the same purpose. In addition, methods of disinformation, distortion, and destruction of reputation are widely applied. For example, in order to undermine Zelenskyy's reputation, the Kremlin is conducting large-scale disinformation campaigns (Belton, 2024). The situation is complicated by the fact that, in the current media environment, being on the side of good is much more difficult than being on the side of evil because, in this case, all your actions are examined under a magnifying glass and every misstep can be used to strengthen the position that "not everything is so clear-cut in this confrontation" or "there is abuse on both sides." At the same time, conventional evil can afford to do almost anything without much damage to its image and even maintaining a certain appeal to specific groups.

At all levels of RS, including at the very top, the enemy's strategy is aimed at provoking divisions within societies and on the international arena. That is why Russia maintains a high level of activity in spreading disinformation and myths concerning a large list of topics: from the coronavirus to sexual minorities (Bräuninger & Marinov, 2022; Ingram, 2018; 2020). These actions are aimed at destroying European solidarity, the unity of the democratic world, and trust and stability in the societies of Western countries. The main root of the problem is that the complex technocratic system of governance in democratic states is incomprehensible to the people and detached from them. In contrast, dictatorships speak in plain language and offer simple explanations and solutions. With the deepening of global crises, this problem will become more acute. Therefore, values should be brought to the forefront of politics and governance (Zhang & Swartz, 2009). Otherwise, it may turn out that, at a critical moment, the population, disoriented by complex and unexpected changes and clouded by hostile propaganda, will choose the wrong path that leads to disaster.

As for Ukraine, in the current conditions, it needs to strengthen the value foundations and global agenda in its PD. As Cull (2019, p. 27) points out, "Public

diplomacy is not always ‘about you’,” that is, the solution to one’s own security problems must be combined with international collaboration in order to develop and promote a common vision of the preferable future for everyone. This will contribute to the consolidation of the democratic world and the creation of a unified front against anti-democratic adversaries (Ingram, 2018).

As a result of our research, we can build a model of reputational security (Table 1). In it, the level of RS of a specific country (Actor A) depends on the way of its perception in other countries (Actor B). The goals of this country’s public diplomacy, as well as the strategy of its adversary (Actor C) depend on the existing level of its RS. In general, the PD of Actor A is aimed at raising the level of its RS and the activity of Actor C is aimed, on the contrary, at lowering this level. However, the measures used by the adversary only roughly correspond to the level of RS of Actor A, since in today’s international relations, many of their participants do not hesitate to use any means, even contradictory ones, to achieve their goals.

Table 1. Model of Reputational Security

Level of RS (Actor A)	Perception (Actor B)	Adversary’s strategy (Actor C)	Objective of PD (Actor A)
6. <i>Solidarity</i>	Joint resistance to threats	Provoking divisions, Reputation destruction	
5. <i>Common values</i>	Active support and help	Turning an image around, Distortion	Affirmation of solidarity
4. <i>Involvement and shared history</i>	Sympathy and empathy	Displacement	Global agenda, Value basis
3. <i>Distinct identity</i>	General interest, support of certain groups	Erosion of identity, Ridicule	Stable collaboration, Integration
2. <i>Viability</i>	Recognition of the right to independent existence	Myths about non-viability	▼ Competitive identity
1. <i>Visibility</i>	Don’t care	Distraction, Suppression	Coherent positive image
0. <i>Obscurity</i>	Don’t know		Media presence

Source: authors’ representation

Conclusions

The analysis of the environment, actors, and trends of recent decades, allowed us to establish the high relevance of the concept of RS to vulnerable states. Based on the study of the peculiarities of PD and information confrontation in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, seven levels of RS were identified: obscurity, visibility, viability, distinct identity, involvement, common values, and solidarity. Each of them corresponds to a different reaction of foreign publics to events within the country ranging from indifference to joint resistance to threats. The PD aimed at strengthening RS must necessarily take into account the activity of real or potential

adversaries, which for Ukraine are, obviously, Russia, its allies, and agents. The enemy's strategy is aimed at lowering the level of a country's RS, while each level corresponds to a certain set of tools and means used by the enemy. Among them, Russia most often resorts to: distraction, spread of myths about non-viability, erosion of identity, displacement, turning the image around, destruction of reputation, and provoking divisions.

Various strategies and means of PD are aimed at increasing the country's RS and should correspond to the level of its RS in a specific period of the country's history. Otherwise, its PD may be ineffective, and the resources spent will be much greater than the results obtained. In the first decades of independence, Ukraine's RS was at its lowest levels, and the main tasks of its PD were limited to increasing media presence and forming a coherent positive image. Russia's aggression contributed both to the acceleration of transformations within Ukraine and to the improvement of Ukraine's image and reputation abroad. As a result, Ukraine is currently trying to gain a foothold at the fourth level of RS and is making some attempts to move to the fifth one. It urgently needs this to confront the aggressor and in order not to lose the gains of the last years regarding its image and reputation.

The developed model of RS, which combines a country's RS with the perception of foreign publics, the actions of a hostile third party, and the objectives of this country's PD can be improved by taking into account the experience of other international actors. It can also be used to analyse other conflicts and find practical solutions to pressing problems of our time.

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