



ADMM Cybersecurity and  
Information Centre of Excellence

# UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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## Influence of Political Narratives

### INTRODUCTION

1. Political narratives are omnipresent in political discourse. According to *Academic-Accelerator*, political narrative is a term used in the humanities and political science to describe how storytelling – with the intent to promulgate a certain agenda, goal or ideology – can shape public opinion and influence an individual’s understanding of reality. This is because our understanding and perception of reality is viewed through the lens of the social and political environments that we live in. Such methods can be use by anyone, including government authorities, state or political holders as a tool to achieve certain strategic goals, mobilise support and drive policy decisions.

#### *The Influence of Political Narratives*

2. It has become increasingly common for political groups to leverage social media platforms as a channel to communicate with their followers. The ease of getting messages out to large groups makes it an attractive tool for groups to spread their preferred messages over Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, TikTok, and Instagram. By framing events, issues and policies in specific ways, these messages aim to shape public opinions and influence peoples’ perceptions of politicians, their actions and decisions. Often, there are two sides to the same coin. For example, a favourable political narrative may portray a particular individual as a hardworking problem solver. There can also be contrasting narratives that portray the same individual as being out of touch with the people.

3. Beyond the military conflict, the Russia-Ukraine crisis is also a war of competing narratives. Russian politicians and media claim that Russia is fighting against “Nazis” in Ukraine – who have usurped power in the 2014 coup and pushed the country towards an alliance with the West – which is perceived as a direct threat to Russia itself. The Russians argue that they are protecting the Ukrainians, Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians from fascism, just as their ancestors did during World War II. However, the Ukrainians view Russia’s actions as seeking to reinforce Kremlin’s power. For Ukrainians and most people in the West, this Kremlin-inspired narrative is patently false. Their counter-narrative is that Ukraine wants to be a fully sovereign, democratic and independent state. Hence, the Ukrainians continue to resist Russia’s unprovoked attack on their country.

4. Both Moscow and Kyiv have framed their narratives as existential. For Russia, the war with Ukraine is portrayed as a struggle against the “neo-colonialism” of the West. According to the Conversation, President Vladimir Putin further justified the conflict with Ukraine as Russia’s challenge to America’s claim to a global hegemony, which has reduced Russia’s power. The threat to Russia’s security becomes more evident as Ukraine gravitates to the West. For Ukraine, the war is a representation of the very existence of Ukraine, which Putin is seeking to undermine. Ukraine’s narrative is strongly supported by the West.

5. According to *Cepa*, it seems that the narratives pushed out by Russian politicians and media are successful, as many people in Russia believe that the war is inevitable, and that, Russia is a victim forced to attack Ukraine in self-defense. This perception is supported by survey results<sup>1</sup> published by wilsoncenter, where public support for the war remained relatively consistent between 2022 and 2023. Alongside the group of core supporters<sup>2</sup>, is a relatively large majority – roughly 55% of respondents – who maintain a non-resistant attitude towards the war. This notwithstanding, there are others who prefer to sign a peace treaty and end the war. While the Putin regime has been able to sustain an “imposed consensus” about the war in Russian public sphere, the level of support for the war can vary, and continue to shift as political narratives continue to influence the public’s understanding and interpretation of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

<sup>1</sup> The results were obtained from a total of 300 interviews.

<sup>2</sup> About 35%-38% of the respondents exhibited declarative support for the war.

6. *ABC news* has reported that the manner in which Ukraine President Zelenskyy framed his addresses and conveyed his messages has garnered international aid and support effectively. Zelenskyy has appeared in a continuous stream of selfie-style videos since the start of the war. He uses these videos to address the Ukrainian people as well as the international audience, who rely on these broadcasts as a daily source of information. By always showing up in a simple green T-shirt, Zelenskyy sends a strong symbolic message that he is standing in solidarity with the Ukrainians soldiers fighting in the war. In contrast to Russia's narratives, Ukraine has humanised the conflict, eliciting empathy and concern for Ukraine. For instance, a group of Ukrainian volunteer medics made a documentary to show the gruesome daily reality of the medic battalion's efforts, to rouse global awareness on the sufferings and difficulties during the war (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Snapshot of Ukrainian Volunteer Medic's Film that offers Uncensored View from the Frontline of Conflict



7. As *NPR* highlighted, Zelenskyy previously had a controversial reputation, having been accused of surrounding himself with 'yes men'. However, his decision to remain in Kyiv following Russia's attack has led to a notable shift in public opinion. According to a report by *newsweek*, Zelenskyy's approval rates grew significantly over the past few years, with over 90% of respondents expressing approval for his handling of the ongoing conflict

## ASSESSMENT

8. In essence, political narratives are intricately woven webs of ideas and perspectives that wield the extraordinary power to shape opinions, mold ideologies, and even redefine collective truths. In other words, political narratives, i.e., how the story is told and received, is rooted in one's emotions, experiences, cultures and values. As evident in the Russia-Ukraine war, narratives tend to be multi-dimensional and shaped by various stakeholders to control present perceptions, and even to influence historical memory of future generations. Thus, political narratives often raise questions about the nature of truth, the malleability of reality, as well as the ethical boundaries of persuasion.

9. As the Russia-Ukraine conflict rages on, competing narratives have taken centre stage, each vying for supremacy in molding the understanding of events, historical context, and the roles of the involved parties. Individuals may find themselves to be both the creators and recipients of these narratives, and to determine whether the narratives are authentic expressions of personal convictions or products of artful storytelling. When confronted with such narratives, individuals should employ the tools of philosophical inquiry to dissect narratives, question the authenticity of sources, the coherence of arguments, and the underpinning biases. By striving to comprehend the broader implications of political narratives, individuals can then contribute to a more enlighten and socially conscious discussion.

## CONTACT DETAILS

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at [ACICE@defence.gov.sg](mailto:ACICE@defence.gov.sg)

Prepared by:

**ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence**

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