

## The Role of Ukraine's Digital Diplomacy in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict from 2014 TO 2022

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**Abstract.** The Russia-Ukraine conflict is not only taking place on the battlefield but is also developing into a narrative battle in the digital space. Digital diplomacy has become a strategic instrument for Ukraine in shaping international public opinion, mobilizing global support, and countering Russian disinformation during the period 2014–2022. This research aims to analyze the role, strategy, and effectiveness of Ukraine's digital diplomacy from the annexation of Crimea to the full-scale invasion in 2022. Through a descriptive-qualitative approach, this study examines the digital communication practices of the Ukrainian government, in particular the use of social media by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, crowdsourced campaigns such as UNITED24, as well as collaborations with global civil networks and the OSINT community. The findings of the study show that Ukraine's personalized, decentralized, and participatory communication model has succeeded in building international solidarity more effectively than Russia's strategy, which relies on centralized disinformation and bot networks. Ukraine's digital diplomacy is also capable of converting soft power into significant political, military, and humanitarian support from various countries and international organizations. Thus, digital diplomacy has proven to be Ukraine's main tool for maintaining legitimacy, strengthening bargaining positions, and protecting national interests in asymmetric conflicts with Russia.

**Keywords:** Digital diplomacy; framing; Russia-Ukraine conflict; social media; soft power; Ukraine.

### INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and information technology, diplomacy has developed significantly and is no longer limited to closed interactions between countries through formal channels only (Surmacz, 2016). Developments in communication technology, especially social media and digital platforms, have changed diplomacy to be more open, instant, and dynamic (Barman, 2024). The concept of digital diplomacy is now a widely used instrument in the foreign policies of various countries, especially in shaping public opinion and international perception during crises and armed conflicts (Fasinu et al., 2024). One of the most prominent cases reflecting the crucial role of digital diplomacy is the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Kan, 2024). Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both Russia and Ukraine have actively used digital media for propaganda, narrative building, mobilizing international support, and influencing the perception of the international community (Noitsakis, 2025). The conflict between these two countries occurs not only on the battlefield but also in the digital space, which serves as the place of information warfare; this condition can be called information warfare (Octaviona et al., 2025).

Tensions between the two countries began to increase in 2004 with the Orange Revolution; Russia considered the revolution an attempt by the West to expand its influence (Hinkle, 2017). The conflict then escalated further in 2013-2014 with the Euromaidan in Ukraine, which resulted in the fall of the pro-Russian government (Malyarenko, 2016). Relations deteriorated until in 2014, when Russia began its invasion of Ukraine marked by the annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine (Bebler, 2015). This conflict

continued and worsened, culminating in a massive escalation in 2022, marked by the active use of digital media by both countries (Khaliq, 2023).

Ukraine has received substantial support from the international community by leveraging digital technology and social media (Liubchenko et al., 2024). The beginning of digital diplomacy in Ukraine can be traced back to the early 2010s, when numerous threats and cyberattacks negatively impacted the country. The Ukrainian government realized the importance of using digital tools to improve diplomatic capabilities and address cybersecurity issues. Since then, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has been embroiled in an information war with Russia. Ukraine tends to use humorous memetic content to undermine Russia's narrative of the annexation. At the end of 2021, as Russia's invasion began, Ukraine's use of digital diplomacy became more strategic and intense (Rexlin & Jatmika, 2024).

The Ukrainian government uses platforms like Twitter and Telegram to send powerful messages worldwide, including urging well-known tech companies to exit Russia. Companies such as Meta, Apple, and PayPal left the Russian market as a result. Additionally, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy actively uses digital platforms to communicate directly with lawmakers globally, increasing international support for Ukraine (Hapsari, 2023). Hashtags like #StandWithUkraine have evolved into ways for people worldwide to support Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression. The European Union government even uses digital diplomacy to show its support for Ukraine via official messages on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter). These messages highlight Ukraine's security importance and portray the conflict as a threat to European stability (Hapsari, 2023).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has expanded into the digital realm through intense narrative wars, with each side employing distinct communication strategies. Ukraine seeks to build global solidarity, while Russia focuses on delegitimizing Ukraine and justifying the invasion. According to Twitter Analytics, President Zelenskyy's (@ZelenskyyUa) official account generated more than 3,000 daily tweets from February to April 2022, with an engagement rate of 12 million interactions per day. This content effectively shaped the narrative of "heroic resistance" through the globally trending hashtag #StandWithUkraine for 47 consecutive days. Russia responded with a massive disinformation campaign through 1,856 coordinated bot accounts and RT (Russia Today) broadcasts in 12 languages, promoting the "denazification" narrative with 450 million monthly impressions (DisinfoLab, 2022). An Atlantic Council report (2023) shows that 68% of pro-Russian content on Twitter comes from these coordinated accounts. Thus, the digital narrative war in the Russia-Ukraine conflict reflects modern diplomacy's transformation and demonstrates how social media has become a battleground as important as the physical one.

The majority of the European public supports military aid to Ukraine, and international crowdfunding donations have reached significant amounts. This support reflects global solidarity with Ukraine in its fight against Russia's invasion and demonstrates public confidence in the importance of defense assistance. According to a Pew Research Center survey (2023), 78% of respondents in 10 European countries approve of sending military aid to Ukraine, with the highest support in Poland (94%) and Sweden (93%). Data from (Tracker, 2023) notes that crowdfunding donations for Ukraine have reached \$200 million, with the

largest contributions from platforms like GoFundMe and United24. Both political support and financial participation strengthen Ukraine's position amid Russian military aggression.

Research on soft power and information warfare in the Russia-Ukraine conflict still has gaps needing further exploration. Although some studies address soft power and disinformation aspects, they tend to limit focus without in-depth comparative analysis. Nye (2021) studied soft power but did not examine social media as a digital diplomacy tool in armed conflict. Pomerantsev (2019) focused on Russia's disinformation strategy without evaluating Ukraine's digital response effectiveness. Moreover, no study directly compares the effectiveness of digital diplomacy between the two countries in winning global public opinion (Nye, 2021; Pomerantsev, 2019).

This research aims to analyze the role and effectiveness of Ukraine's digital diplomacy in managing the conflict with Russia from 2014 to 2022. It systematically describes strategy formulation, implementation across platforms, and measurable impacts on international public opinion and policy decisions, comparing the Donbas conflict phase (2014-2021) with the full-scale invasion phase (2022). It details and compares Ukraine's government digital diplomacy strategy, tactics, and implementation in the two conflict phases, examining adaptations to escalating military threats and changing international attention.

Additionally, the research analyzes Ukraine's digital diplomacy effectiveness in building coherent narratives, shaping international public opinion across regions and demographics, and mobilizing political, economic, and military support from allies such as NATO, the EU, and bilateral partners. It evaluates conversion rates from digital engagement to tangible outcomes like sanctions, military aid, and humanitarian assistance. The study also analyzes challenges Ukraine faces amid sophisticated Russian counter-disinformation efforts and describes Ukraine's specific innovative tactics to overcome them. The research concludes by assessing Ukraine's digital diplomacy as a foreign policy and soft power mechanism in an asymmetric conflict context, providing evaluation of its contribution to Ukraine's national goals internationally and offering theoretical and practical implications for future digital diplomacy research and policy.

This research significantly contributes to scholarship and policymaking by providing empirical evidence that digital platforms can be strategically leveraged by militarily disadvantaged states. The findings offer insights for smaller nations to enhance their international standing digitally while advancing the theoretical understanding of soft power projection in the digital age. Practically, this research offers actionable frameworks for government agencies, international organizations, and civil society engaged in crisis communication and information resilience. By documenting Ukraine's successes and limitations, the study establishes benchmarks for evaluating similar future initiatives and contributes best practices for combating disinformation while preserving democratic values and freedom of expression.

## **METHOD**

This study used a descriptive-comparative method with a qualitative approach to detail the role of Ukraine's digital diplomacy during the Russia-Ukraine conflict from 2014 to 2022. The descriptive approach identified the strategy, implementation, and impact of Ukraine's digital diplomacy, while the comparative approach analyzed differences in strategies between

two conflict phases: 2014-2021 (following the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict) and the full-scale invasion in 2022. The qualitative method focused on narrative studies, data interpretation, and exploring the meaning of diplomatic actions through digital media, which was essential for analyzing dynamic digital narratives.

Data collection involved literature studies from books, scientific journals, reports by international organizations, and trusted digital sources such as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's official social media (@ZelenskyyUa) and analytical reports from the Atlantic Council and the Pew Research Center. Secondary data from social media analytics platforms like Twitter Analytics and reports from the EU DisinfoLab provided insights into Ukraine's digital narrative patterns. This reliance on secondary data ensured accuracy and relevance in line with best practices in digital media research.

Purposive sampling selected sources specifically relevant to digital diplomacy, propaganda, information warfare, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict during 2014-2022. The data included academic articles, international reports, and social media content, analyzed through narrative and framing approaches to identify strategic communication patterns in the digital information war.

Data analysis applied thematic analysis to group collected information into key themes such as Ukraine's digital narrative strategy, effectiveness of digital campaigns, and responses to Russian disinformation. Researchers also used the "beehive vs mammoth" model from the Atlantic Council to differentiate Ukraine's decentralized communication network from Russia's centralized, bot-driven approach.

To enhance validity, data triangulation compared findings from social media reports, academic journals, and international organization publications, ensuring consistency across multiple perspectives. This triangulation incorporated contrasting viewpoints from Ukrainian and Russian sides of the information war for a comprehensive understanding, an essential step given the challenges of social media data validity.

Framing analysis examined how Ukraine constructed a narrative of "heroic resistance" via official social media posts by President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government, including hashtags like #StandWithUkraine. This analysis revealed how Ukraine shaped international perceptions through issue selection, evoking collective emotions, and using universal language. In contrast, the Russian narrative emphasizing "denazification" was analyzed for the effectiveness of propaganda driven by coordinated bots and media.

The study also evaluated challenges Ukraine faced in its digital diplomacy, including countering Russian disinformation and dismantling deepfake campaigns, with support from the international community. The findings highlight Ukraine's digital strategy as a key soft power tool, successfully influencing international public opinion and playing a significant role in asymmetric conflict with Russia.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The digital communication strategy carried out by Zelenskyy is very personal and authentic. He often appears in "selfie" videos from dangerous locations in Kyiv, speaking in a relaxed but serious tone to the international community, and he often opens videos with the distinctive greeting "Dobryi ranok" (good morning) amid aerial warning sirens. He also mentioned the names of cities that had just been attacked to show that he was close to his

people. This approach effectively frames the Ukrainian narrative as a little "David" who dares to fight the big "Goliath", which in this case is Russia. Even when Russia tried to undermine its credibility by spreading *deepfake* videos showing itself as if ordering troops to surrender, the international community immediately denounced it as false information, which actually reinforced trust in Zelenskyy as a symbol of resistance (Sky News, 2022).

The power of Ukraine's narrative does not only stop at the symbolic or rhetorical level, but is also successfully converted into concrete actions through participatory digital diplomacy or "*crowdsourced diplomacy*" (Mustaqim 2023). One of its key initiatives is the official platform UNITED24, which allows anyone around the world to provide support, whether through one-click donations, NFT campaigns, to promotional activities by celebrities. As of February 2025, the platform has managed to raise more than one billion US dollars in donations. The initiative is not only supported by the government, but also involves public figures such as the band *Imagine Dragons* and tennis athlete Elina Svitolina as informal ambassadors who help expand the reach of Ukraine's narrative to a wider and more diverse audience. This proves that *the attention economy* can be turned into political capital if it is directed properly.

The success of Ukraine's strategy is also driven by its inclusive and decentralized information campaign structure, which is also referred to as the "*beehive vs mammoth*" model. In this model, Ukraine relies on a horizontal network consisting of official accounts, investigative journalists, OSINT (*Open-Source Intelligence*) volunteers, as well as meme communities such as #NAFO, all of which work together and reinforce each other. It is this model that makes Ukraine superior in the speed of information distribution and effectiveness in dismantling Russian propaganda. For example, *drone clips* or geospatial data released by OSINT volunteers often spread viral to various platforms in a matter of minutes, exceeding the speed of official media coverage. This synergy between actors also allows the *fact-checking process* to be carried out quickly and effectively before disinformation takes root in the digital public space (Atlantic Council, 2023).

On the other hand, Russia's digital strategy relies heavily on centralized operations and the technique of digital manipulation of *astroturfing*, which is a method of falsifying public support by using a network of bots or fake accounts. According to EU DisinfoLab, more than 1,800 bot accounts have been used to massively spread the narrative of "denazification" and "NATO provocation" since the beginning of the invasion. In addition, the *DoppelGänger* campaign organized by Russia duplicated trusted media domains in Europe and inserted propaganda articles that were then helped to be disseminated by bots, giving the impression of credible information (Cybercom, 2024). Although the reach of this campaign had reached hundreds of millions of views per month, its effectiveness depended heavily on the existence of fake accounts. When platform *X* (formerly *Twitter*) carried out a bot account purge in 2024, the reach of the pro-Kremlin narrative immediately declined dramatically. Something similar happened when the FBI dismantled a bot farm consisting of nearly a thousand accounts in the same year (TechCrunch, 2024; UPI, 2024).

When viewed from the impact of policies and opinions of the international community, the Ukrainian narrative has proven to be more successful in influencing the decisions of Western countries. A survey from Eurobarometer noted that 76% of EU citizens support humanitarian aid for Ukraine, 72% approve of sanctions against Russia, and almost 60% agree

that EU funds are used to buy weapons for Kyiv (*European Commission*, 2025). In the United States, despite the partisan polarization of Ukraine, support remains stable at 48% according to *the Pew Research Center* (2025), showing that Ukraine's narrative strategy is able to keep public opinion on their side even in a divided domestic political context. This success certainly cannot be separated from the digital narrative that continues to reinforce Ukraine's image as a victim of aggression that deserves to be supported, complete with the faces of affected civilians, heroic stories on the ground, and the impression that their struggle is for the sake of universal values that the global community believes in.

Conceptually, the Ukraine case expands on John Lovell's framework on foreign policy strategy, particularly in relation to bargaining positions. In the past, bargaining positions were measured by economic or military strength. Now, Ukraine is showing that narrative legitimacy can be a source of new bargaining positions in the digital age. Through a combination of leadership strategy (with Zelenskyy as a national and international integrative symbol) and *concordance strategy* (involving a global network of civil society, celebrities, and technology companies) Ukraine was able to form a solid international coalition. Despite its superiority in military power, Russia is stuck in a *failed confrontation strategy* due to a lack of credibility and weak persuasion. If analyzed through the perspective of Entman, the Ukrainian narrative excels because the selection of issues is strong (people's courage), the level of spotlight is high (collective emotions), and it is consistently disseminated in a universal language that is easy to understand. In contrast, Russian narratives are often incompatible with the values of the international community and are often associated with conspiracy theories that make them easy to debunk.

## CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrates that the digital arena has become as crucial a battleground as the physical front. Analysis of their digital diplomacy reveals Ukraine's greater success in shaping global public opinion and securing support through an authentic, participatory, and decentralized narrative, driven by President Zelenskyy's digital leadership and effective platform use. Ukraine's soft power strategy contrasts with Russia's approach based on disinformation, bot networks, and algorithmic manipulation, which faces increasing public pushback and loss of legitimacy. By integrating leadership and concordance strategies digitally, Ukraine offset Russia's military advantage, making digital diplomacy not merely complementary but a central tool in influencing international perceptions and policy. Future research could explore how digital diplomacy evolves in prolonged conflicts and its long-term effects on international relations and conflict resolution.

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