



Strategic Security Initiative (SSI)

ADVANCING INSIGHT ON GLOBAL SECURITY

POLICY BRIEF

FROM POST-SOVIET TO POST-COLONIAL:

Strategic Communications Lessons from Ukraine

JULY 2026

WWW.SSI-POLICY.ORG

FIRST PUBLISHED July 2026 by SSI
© Strategic Security Initiative 2026

Authors: Mariam Gamdlishvili, Mariam Megrelishvili, Louis Sandro Zarandia, Ketevan Jakeli
Editors: Salome Nadashvili, Ani Nadareishvili

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that strategic communications are not only about countering disinformation but also about shaping the conceptual frameworks through which conflicts are understood. This policy brief argues that the continued use of the **"post-Soviet"** paradigm has become increasingly inadequate for understanding contemporary Ukraine. While once useful as a transitional framework, it now risks reinforcing Russia-centred narratives that undermine Ukraine's political agency and sovereign identity.

The brief examines how Ukraine has increasingly adopted a **decolonial strategic communications framework**, presenting its struggle as one of resistance to imperial domination, defence of democratic sovereignty, and protection of national identity. It highlights how reforms in historical memory, language policy, cultural diplomacy, and strategic narratives have strengthened both domestic resilience and international support.

Drawing on Ukraine's experience, the brief identifies key lessons for democratic governments and strategic communication practitioners. It emphasizes the importance of sovereignty-centred framing, whole-of-society strategic communications, proactive narrative development, audience-specific messaging, and institutional coordination. Moving beyond outdated analytical frameworks is essential for strengthening democratic resilience and countering Russian information warfare more effectively.

Introduction

Contemporary conflicts are increasingly fought not only on the battlefield but also in the information domain, where competing narratives shape public opinion, political legitimacy, and international support. Strategic communications have become a core component of national security, enabling states to influence perceptions, strengthen societal resilience, and counter hostile information activities. In this context, the concepts and language through which conflicts are understood are not merely descriptive - they shape policy responses, media coverage, and public understanding.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that information warfare extends well beyond the dissemination of false information. Alongside military operations, Russia has systematically employed historical revisionism, identity politics, and imperial narratives to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and justify its aggression. At the same time, Ukraine has developed an increasingly coherent strategic communications approach that presents its struggle not simply as a territorial conflict, but as a defence of democratic sovereignty, national identity, and the international rules-based order.

Despite these developments, much of the Western analytical and policy discourse continues to interpret Ukraine through the framework of the "post-Soviet space." Developed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this paradigm originally provided a useful analytical shorthand for understanding the political and economic transitions of former Soviet republics. Over time, however, it has become deeply institutionalised across academia, policymaking, media, and think tanks. While once valuable for comparative analysis, the framework increasingly obscures Ukraine's political agency by defining it primarily through its historical relationship with Russia rather than through its own evolving national trajectory.

As Russia increasingly weaponizes history, identity, and memory as instruments of influence, the conceptual frameworks employed by Western institutions deserve renewed scrutiny. If strategic communications begin with the ways in which conflicts are framed, then reliance on outdated analytical categories may inadvertently reinforce elements of the very narratives democratic states seek to counter.

This policy brief examines whether the continued use of the "post-Soviet" paradigm remains fit for purpose in the context of contemporary Ukraine. It explores how Ukraine's emerging postcolonial framing challenges inherited assumptions, analyses the implications of this shift for strategic communications, and identifies lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen resilience against Russian information warfare.

The "Post-Soviet" Paradigm: Origins, Evolution, and Contemporary Limitations

The term "post-Soviet" space has been used for analytical work for over thirty years. The question worth asking now is whether that assessment has been accurate, or whether the framework has been producing a systematically distorted picture of the former Soviet republics. One that flattens the colonial structure underneath, hands Russia a vocabulary it did not invent but has learned how to exploit and leaves Western strategic communications perpetually one step behind.

The concept crystallised almost immediately after the USSR's dissolution, driven by three forces operating in parallel:

1. Western area studies departments, built around Soviet expertise, rebranded without restructuring: the scholars, frameworks, and Russia-centred assumptions remained in place.¹
2. Western policy institutions needed a planning vocabulary for what to do with that security vacuum and a presumed democratic transition; *post-Soviet space* provided one, conveniently grouping fifteen distinct societies and countries under a single analytical category.
3. Finally, Russia, far from resisting the term, actively weaponised it. Through the CIS architecture, the *near abroad* doctrine, and later the Eurasian Economic Union – to project Russia as the natural centre of gravity around which former republics would inevitably orbit.²

By the mid-1990s, the concept had hardened from descriptor into a doctrine. Area studies centres, journal titles (*Post-Soviet Affairs*,

launched in 1985, still publishing today), policy bureaux, and NGO programming all assumed its validity. Russia's primacy place within this space was not argued for, and it was built into the architecture of the field. The question of whether Ukraine might have a fundamentally different relationship to Russia than the framework implied had no place in a field that had already settled the answer.

Filtered through a post-Soviet lens, Ukraine was legible primarily as a transition case. A country suspended between its Soviet past, and a Western Future it might or might not achieve, with Russia as the implicit reference point against which its progress was measured.

1. The "two Ukraines" thesis, which divided the country into a pro-Western west and east, handed Russia the vocabulary to speak for a Ukrainian constituency it had never represented, and pre-framed the 2014 Maidan revolution as civil conflict rather than a national assertion against colonial imposition.³
2. Institutional weakness and endemic corruption were attributed to Ukrainian political culture as opposed to the structural effects of decades of extraction and the deliberate preservation of Soviet-era oligarchic networks by Moscow's allied in Kyiv.
3. The academic apparatus compounded this: post-Soviet and Eurasian studies centres were overwhelmingly led by Russia specialists who "continued to claim expertise on the non-Russian countries" and some of whom reproduced the Kremlin's foundational narrative while analysing the regional phenomenon.⁴

¹ Taras Kuzio, "Academic Orientalism in Russia–Ukraine Scholarship," *E-International Relations*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/12/02/academic-orientalism-in-russia-ukraine-scholarship>

² Sergey Markedonov, "Goodbye Post-Soviet Space?," Russian International Affairs Council, December 16, 2015, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/proshchanie-s-postsovetским-prostranstvom/>

³ Taras Kuzio, "Why Western Scholars of Russia Were Unable to Understand Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," VoxUkraine, July 17, 2023, <https://voxukraine.org/en/why-western-scholars-of-russia-were-unable-to-understand-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine>

⁴ Mykola Riabchuk, "'Two Ukraines' Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence?," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2015): 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12120>

The government in Moscow made the post-Soviet frame not neutral, but political. The *Russkiy Mir* concept, introduced in 2001, operationalised the same vocabulary; repositioning Russia's colonial relationships as fraternal cultural bonds, and any Ukrainian turn toward Europe as a betrayal of shared civilisational identity.⁵ A rhetoric that we can see till Putin's 2022 Full-scale invasion speech.⁶

Western strategic communications had no adequate counter to this move, in part because they had accepted, without examination, the premise on which it depended.

Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging that the framework was not without utility. In the 1990s, grouping former Soviet republics enabled comparative analysis of institutional transition, mapped real path dependencies (shared legal systems, industrial structures, military doctrine) and provided a working vocabulary for NATO and EU enlargement debates. These contributions should not be dismissed.

But its structural failures are more consequential, and more consequential specifically for strategic communications. By making 1991 the analytic baseline, the framework rendered invisible Ukraine's pre-Soviet history: Kyivan Rus, the Cossack Hetmanate, the 1917 Ukrainian People's Republic, ceding that historical terrain to Russian revisionism by default.⁷

It defined states through their relationship to a collapsed Soviet centre rather than through their own political agency. It homogenised radically different trajectories: by 2014,

Estonia and Turkmenistan shared almost nothing analytically relevant, yet the framework continued to group them. And, most consequentially, it normalised Russian hegemony. The language of Russia's "legitimate interests in the post-Soviet space", reproduced without irony in Western policy documents, media commentary, and academic journals, gave Russian aggression a plausible analytical container constructed, and maintained, by Western hands.⁸

The Euromaidan revolution constituted a structural break that the post-Soviet framework could not accommodate. Survey data showed a dramatic consolidation of Ukrainian national identification and Ukrainian-language use, including in regions the framework had classified as inherently pro-Russian.⁹ ¹⁰ The EU Association Agreement placed Ukraine on an institutional trajectory with no parallel in the CIS space. Civil society developed into something dense and distinctly Ukrainian that the transitional typology had no tools to describe. The February 2022 full-scale invasion made that limitation definitive. Ukraine responded by constructing an alternative framework, in policy, in law, and in international communications. Within Western academia, the invasion triggered a belated self-critical turn: scholars called for "reconceptualization and decolonisation" of the entire cluster of disciplines that had sustained the post-Soviet framework for three decades.¹¹

None of this has dislodged the framework from Western institutional practice. Chatham House continues to house Ukraine analysis

⁵ Alexander Meinenberger, "The Concept of the 'Russkiy Mir': History of the Concept and Ukraine," *Euxeinos* 13, no. 35 (2023): 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.55337/35.QLPT4607>

⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

⁷ Erica Resende, "Contested Memories and the Social Construction of the Term 'Post-Soviet,'" *Lawfare*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/contested-memories-and-the-social-construction-of-the-term--post-soviet>

⁸ Cristina M. Arribas et al., "Information Manipulation and Historical Revisionism: Russian Disinformation and Foreign Interference through Manipulated History-

Based Narratives," *Open Research Europe* 3 (2023): 121, <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16087.1>

⁹ Rating Group, "The Sixth National Poll: The Language Issue in Ukraine (March 19, 2022), <https://www.ratinggroup.ua/en/news/language-issue-in-ukraine-march-19th-2022>.

¹⁰ Razumkov Centre, "The Identity of Ukraine's Citizens: Trends of Change (June 2024)," <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/research-areas/surveys/the-identity-of-ukraine-s-citizens-trends-of-change-june-2024>

¹¹ Volodymyr Kravchenko and Marko Robert Stech, eds., *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies* (Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2024)

inside a “Russia and Eurasia Programme”¹² The International Crisis Group’s February 2025 report uses “post-Soviet space” as an unexamined descriptor.¹³ The Mearsheimer school of realist analysis treats Ukraine as an object of Russian-Western competition in a sphere of influence, rather than a sovereign actor with its own agency.¹⁴ It remains influential in U.S. and German policy circles, providing Russian information operations with analytical cover from within Western discourse itself.¹⁵ Major Western media outlets have reduced their use of the term since 2022 but have not replaced it with a more coherent alternative: they have tended to retreat into purely military and security framing, which evacuates historical and cultural context rather than correcting it.

The persistence of the usage of the term is not simply inertia. It reflects institutional stakes: careers, departments, funding streams, and policy architectures built around a framework that cannot easily be revised without acknowledging how much it got wrong. That acknowledgment is overdue and Second part of this brief shows why its cost, measured in the quality of Western strategic communications on Ukraine, is still compounding

Beyond the Post-Soviet Frame: Russia's Strategic Narratives and Ukraine's decolonial transformation

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine sought to free itself from the Russian and post-Soviet imperial legacy and emerge

as a European state - with its own identity, political choices, and national security interests. The transformation process requires profound societal changes, a high level of national consolidation, and resilience, which Ukrainian people have repeatedly proven to possess. Ukraine's decolonial transformation is challenged by Russia through never-ending information influence activities conducted for more than three decades. These activities aim to undermine the existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state and justify Russia's aggressive expansionism under the guise of "historical justice"¹⁶ by portraying Russians and Ukrainians as “one people/one nation”.¹⁷¹⁸

Historical narratives are among the most powerful tools used in Russia's information war against Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly instrumentalised historical narratives to justify Russia's invasion and challenge Ukraine's sovereignty.¹⁹ The “one people/one nation” narrative is one of the most powerful narratives used against Ukraine, where Ukraine and Russia are portrayed as one nation by shared history, culture, and religion.²⁰ This narrative first and foremost targets Ukrainians defending their homeland and aims at demoralising them. However, the narrative also targets international audiences and helps Russia frame the largest military conflict in Europe since the World War II as an internal, brotherly, separatist conflict rather

¹² Chatham House, “Russia and Eurasia Programme,” <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments-and-programmes/russia-and-eurasia-programme>

¹³ International Crisis Group, *Ukraine and Beyond: Shaping Europe's Security Future*, Europe Report No. 272 (February 1, 2025)

¹⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 21 (Summer 2022): 12–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48686693>

¹⁵ Cristina M. Arribas et al., “Information Manipulation and Historical Revisionism: Russian Disinformation and Foreign Interference through Manipulated History-Based Narratives,” *Open Research Europe* 3 (2023): 121, <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16087.1>

¹⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Interview to China Media Group,” *President of Russia*, October 16, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72403>.

¹⁷ Björn Alexander Düben, “Revising History and ‘Gathering the Russian Lands’: Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian Nationhood,” *LSE Public Policy Review* 3, no. 1 (2023): 4, <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.86>.

¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” *President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁹ Benton Coblenz, “History Is a Key Battleground in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Atlantic Council*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/history-is-a-key-battleground-in-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

²⁰ Maria Domańska, “Putin’s Article: ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-07-13/putins-article-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians>.

than an unprovoked and unjustifiable full-scale invasion of a sovereign neighbouring state.²¹

Another prominent historical narrative, “historical unity” claims that Russians and Ukrainians are supposedly parts of one historical people. To support this argument, Putin frequently appeals to Kyivan Rus and shared historical roots.²² Part of this narrative claims that modern Ukraine was artificially created by the Soviet Union, notably by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.²³ The narrative uses the shared past to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty, independent identity, and Western political choice, as well as to justify the restoration of Russia’s sphere of influence.

Furthermore, Kremlin narratives frequently portray Ukraine as an “anti-Russian project”, allegedly controlled by the West, while presenting the country’s rapprochement with the West as something imposed on the Ukrainian people rather than as an expression of their own political choice.²⁴ Through this narrative, Russia seeks to portray Ukraine as a hostile proxy actor for the West and thus serve as *Casus Belli* for Russia’s aggression.

The protection of the Russian-speaking population, which once again highlights the Kremlin’s imperial intentions, is a widely disseminated narrative by Russia. It was precisely under this pretext that Russia justified the annexation of Crimea and blatantly violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another country, claiming to protect its own “compatriots.”²⁵ Russia doubled down on this narrative in May 2026 when Russian Duma adopted a law allowing President Putin to deploy armed forces abroad

to protect Russian citizens facing prosecution by international courts in which Russia doesn’t participate.²⁶

Ukraine’s response went beyond debunking Russian historical narratives and increasingly developed an alternative decolonial framework through which its relationship with Russia came to be understood in terms of imperial domination, resistance, and political emancipation. This shift found formal legal expression in the 2023 Law “On Condemning and Prohibiting the Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonization of Toponymy” is not merely symbolic legislation.²⁷ It constitutes a statement of political ontology: Ukraine formally defines its relationship with Russia as colonial and draws institutional consequences from that understanding. Ukraine also developed regional strategies for Africa and Latin America that position Ukraine as a formerly colonised nation and seek to build solidarity with postcolonial states on that basis.²⁸ This represents a strategic communications innovation that the post-Soviet framework would have made conceptually difficult, if not impossible.

This turned out to be a cornerstone for the Ukrainian people to reunite their national identity around their language, culture, history, sovereignty, and European political orientation. Against the backdrop of remarkable resistance and resilience, the Ukrainian people began to actively reaffirm Ukraine’s freedom, sovereignty, and European identity.²⁹

²¹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” *President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

²² Ibid

²³ Maria Domańska, “Putin’s Article: ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-07-13/putins-article-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians>.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Agnia Grigas, “Russian Talk of Protecting Compatriots Masks Putin’s Imperial Ambitions,” *Atlantic Council*, March 10, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-talk-of-protecting-compatriots-masks-putins-imperial-ambitions/>.

²⁶ Russia Passes Law Enabling Military to Protect Citizens from Foreign Prosecution,” *TVP World*, May

14, 2026, <https://tvpworld.com/93243633/russia-new-law-empowers-military-to-protect-citizens-abroad>.

²⁷ Oleksandra Terentyeva, “The Right to Freedom: State-Driven Institutionalization of Decolonization Through Memory Politics in Ukraine (2022–2024),” *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2025): ksaf107, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsg/ksaf107>

²⁸ Anna Anisimova, “New Report Examines Ukraine’s Strategic Communications in Africa,” *FREE Network*, June 29, 2026, <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2026/06/29/new-report-examines-ukraines-strategic-communications-in-africa/>.

²⁹ Jadwiga Rogoża, “New Ukraine: A Breakthrough at Great Cost,” *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-02-22/new-ukraine-a-breakthrough-great-cost>.

One major manifestation was Ukraine's attainment of religious sovereignty and its break from dependence on the Russian Orthodox Church.³⁰ Gaining autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was crucial for Ukraine's political independence³¹ and for rejecting the Russian historical narrative of "one people,"³² where religious ties functioned as an important instrument for preserving Russian influence in Ukraine. Ukraine's actions directly challenge this narrative, demonstrating its ability to define its own spiritual space and at the same time gain international recognition of its spiritual independence from Russia.

A second manifestation was the liberation of Ukrainian culture and language from the ideological and institutional frameworks of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. The Russian historical narrative of "one people" also framed Ukrainian culture and language as part of Russian. In response, Ukraine began actively promoting its own culture to distance itself from this narrative. This included encouraging a broad shift toward the use of Ukrainian and reinforcing the recognition that Ukrainian is the country's sole state language.³³ The strengthening of the Ukrainian language became an important factor in consolidating national unity.³⁴ It is also noteworthy that Ukrainian writers who had previously written in Russian began to switch

to the Ukrainian language. For them, this shift was not merely a means of communication with their readers, but also a way to establish an emotional connection, affirm a sense of security, and consciously distance themselves from Russia.³⁵ Furthermore, the Ukrainian Institute plays an important role in the promotion of Ukrainian culture by strengthening Ukraine's cultural identity through cultural diplomacy and advancing its representation as an independent component of European culture.^{36 37}

A third manifestation was the decolonisation of Ukraine's historical memory through the removal of Russian imperial symbols from public spaces. These symbols had long been present in Ukrainian cities, shaping perceptions among vulnerable segments of society by evoking nostalgia for Russian imperial glory. At the same time, their presence functioned as a symbolic demonstration of Russian control. The monuments of Soviet leaders and symbols associated with the Russian Empire were removed from Ukrainian cities,³⁸ and streets and squares were renamed.³⁹ Ukraine revised parts of its educational curricula to reduce inherited Russia-centred interpretations and to reassess the place of authors and historical narratives associated with imperial and Soviet cultural dominance.⁴⁰ This reform emphasized that Ukraine possesses its own independent

³⁰ Kadri Liik, Momchil Metodiev, and Nicu Popescu, "Defender of the Faith? How Ukraine's Orthodox Split Threatens Russia," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 30, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/defender_of_the_faith_how_u_kraines_orthodox_split_threatens_russia.

³¹ Ibid

³² Myroslaw Tataryn, "Ukrainian Autocephaly: Subverting the Russkiy Mir," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, Georgetown University, December 14, 2018, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/ukrainian-autocephaly-subverting-the-russkiy-mir>.

³³ Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, "Identity Speaks: How Language Ideologies Are Reshaping Ukraine," *Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS)*, July 16, 2025, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/identity-speaks-how-language-ideologies-are-reshaping-ukraine>.

³⁴ Marko Pavlyshyn, "Identity Shifts in Wartime Ukraine," *Australian Academy of the Humanities*, February 2023, <https://humanities.org.au/power-of-the-humanities/identity-shifts-wartime-ukraine/>.

³⁵ Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, "Identity Speaks: How Language Ideologies Are Reshaping Ukraine," *Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS)*, July 16, 2025, [https://www.zois-](https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/identity-speaks-how-language-ideologies-are-reshaping-ukraine)

[berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/identity-speaks-how-language-ideologies-are-reshaping-ukraine](https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/identity-speaks-how-language-ideologies-are-reshaping-ukraine).

³⁶ Ukrainian Institute, "Mission," *Ukrainian Institute*, accessed July 1, 2026, <https://ui.org.ua/en/mission-2/>.

³⁷ Ukrainian Institute, "Decolonization. Selected Articles Published in the Aftermath of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Ukrainian Institute*, accessed July 2, 2026, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/en-projects/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

³⁸ Bohdan Ben, "Pushkin Monuments Disappear from Ukrainian Streets Following Lenin, as DE russification Is Underway," *Euromaidan Press*, May 4, 2022, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/05/04/pushkin-monuments-disappear-from-ukrainian-streets-following-lenin-as-decolonization-is-underway/>.

³⁹ DE russification of Ukraine as Cities Remove Symbols and Culture from Soviet Era," *Euronews*, August 29, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/29/derussification-of-ukraine-as-cities-remove-symbols-and-culture-from-soviet-era>.

⁴⁰ Pushkin, Tolstoy, Lermontov, and Other Russian Authors Will Not Be Studied in Ukrainian Schools," *Institute of Mass Information*, June 17, 2022, <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/pushkin-tolstoy-lermontov->

history and should not be understood as an annex to Russian history.⁴¹

At the same time, the re-examination of historical traumas that had been distorted by Russian imperial narratives became a major element in restoring Ukraine's national memory and strengthening its distinct national identity.⁴² Ukraine is actively integrating the memory of the Holodomor⁴³, Bucha,⁴⁴ and Mariupol^{45 46} into public discourse, museums, and educational programs. This process is not merely a reminder of historical and recent traumas, it also plays an important role in strengthening national identity and showing both domestic and international audiences that Ukraine's struggle is not only about territory, but also about defending its history, memory, and right to exist.

Ukraine's fundamental transformation has significantly reshaped international perceptions of the country, strengthened its position on the international stage, and situated its struggle within the broader context of defending freedom, dignity, and European security. However, some Western institutions and media outlets still interpret Ukraine as part of Russia's sphere of influence, as an arena of Russia - West competition, or as belonging to a broader "post-Soviet space." This does not mean that they regard Ukraine as Russian territory, but such perceptions often relegate

Ukraine's independent political agency to a secondary position.

Ukraine's Western partners and many other states have demonstrated strong solidarity with the Ukrainian people, acknowledging their courage, determination, and sacrifice.⁴⁷ Ukraine's security is also increasingly viewed as an inseparable component of wider Euro-Atlantic security⁴⁸. The European Union's decision to open the first cluster of accession negotiations with Ukraine⁴⁹ further confirms that Europe increasingly regards Ukraine and its people as part of the European family rather than as belonging to the Russian-dominated political and civilisational space represented by the concept of the "Russian world."

This shift in international perceptions has not been driven solely by Ukraine's political and military development or by the resilience it has demonstrated throughout the war. It also reflects the country's ability, even under wartime conditions, to communicate its national identity through clear and emotionally resonant strategic narratives. In this context, the "Be Brave Like Ukraine" campaign,⁵⁰ launched in 2022, became an important instrument for communicating Ukraine's identity to both domestic and international audiences. The campaign sought to transform the courage of the Ukrainian people into concrete military, financial, and

[and-other-russian-authors-will-not-be-studied-in-ukrainian-schools-i46266.](#)

⁴¹ Serhii Koniukhov, "Specific Features of the Process of Decolonisation of Modern Textbooks on the History of Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs* 32, no. 6 (2022): 39–45, [https://doi.org/10.46493/2663-2675.32\(6\).2022.39-45](https://doi.org/10.46493/2663-2675.32(6).2022.39-45).

⁴² Liubov Halukha, Pavlo Lysianskyi, Olha Harmatiy, Svitlana Verezomska, and Oksana Voznyuk, "The Role of Historical Memory in the Formation of National Identity: A Study of the Ukrainian Case," *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología - Serie de Conferencias* 4 (2025): 682, <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf2025682>.

⁴³ National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, "Home," *National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide*, accessed July 2, 2026, <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/>.

⁴⁴ National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, "'Wounds of Bucha's Soil,'" *War Museum*, November 13, 2025, <https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/en/news/show/wounds-of-buchas-soil>.

⁴⁵ M86. Chronicle of Mariupol Defense, 'Created with Support of Mariupol Reborn, Was Presented in Kyiv,' *Mariupol Reborn*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.remariupol.com/en/news/m86-chronicle->

[mariupol-defense-created-support-mariupol-reborn-was-presented-kyiv.](#)

⁴⁶ Conservation of Memory and Perpetuation of the Heroes. Mariupol Reborn Holds Exhibitions Dedicated to Memorialization," *Mariupol Reborn*, December 1, 2024,

<https://www.remariupol.com/en/news/conservation-memory-and-perpetuation-heroes-mariupol-reborn-holds-exhibitions-dedicated>.

⁴⁷ European Commission, "Ukraine Compact," *European Commission Press Corner*, July 10, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ro/s_tatement_24_3753.

⁴⁸ Group of Seven, "G7 Leaders' Statement on Geopolitical Issues," *G7 Évian* 2026, June 17, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/G7evian/2026/06/17/g7-leaders-statement-on-geopolitical-issues>.

⁴⁹ Council of the European Union, "EU and Ukraine Open First Accession Negotiations Cluster," *European Council / Council of the European Union*, June 15, 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/06/15/eu-and-ukraine-open-first-accession-negotiations-cluster/>

⁵⁰ *Be Brave Like Ukraine*, 2022, <https://brave.ua/en.html>

moral support.⁵¹ At the same time, the historic slogan “Slava Ukraini,” meaning “Glory to Ukraine,”⁵² became a powerful expression of solidarity with Ukraine, gained widespread international recognition, and acquired renewed communicative significance during the war.⁵³ These examples show how Ukraine successfully connected the redefinition of its national identity with the courage of its people and their struggle for freedom and dignity, turning identity itself into an effective instrument of strategic communication and international image-building.

Strategic Communications Lessons

The abovementioned decolonial framework interprets relations between Russia and Ukraine through the lenses of imperial domination, resistance, and liberation. Within this framework, communication strategies emphasise Ukraine’s political agency, the protection of the Ukrainian language, culture, historical memory, and the country’s right to determine its own European future independently. The removal of Russian imperial symbols, the decolonisation of toponymy, the strengthening of the Ukrainian language and culture, and the reinterpretation of Ukraine’s relationship with Russia as a colonial experience all constitute practical expressions of this framework.

The accurate interpretation of perceptions surrounding Ukraine is of great importance, with language and framing playing a central role in this process. They shape how policymakers, media representatives, and the wider public understand the nature of Russia’s war against Ukraine and the necessity of international assistance and support. It is therefore important to formulate descriptions accurately from the outset. For example, referring to Ukraine as part of Russia’s “sphere of influence” may implicitly legitimize Russia’s actions, whereas describing Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state, foregrounds its political agency and its right to make its own choices.

Framing is also crucial for mobilising international support for Ukraine. When Ukraine uses messages that clearly present its struggle as connected not only to the defence of its own statehood, but also tied to European security, protection of international law and the rules-based international order, political and financial support acquires a broader strategic meaning. By contrast, Russia actively employs historical language and framing as strategic instruments, seeking to portray its aggression as the restoration of an alleged historical unity.

Language and framing therefore have a significant influence on how the conflict is understood, who is perceived as the aggressor, whose political choices are regarded as legitimate, and why the international community should continue supporting Ukraine. Despite the ongoing full-scale war, the Ukrainian people have succeeded in widely popularising their history, culture, and language. They have made it clear that Ukraine should no longer be perceived as part of the “Russian World” but should instead be firmly recognized as a European state. The lessons learned extend beyond Ukraine and offer practical guidance for governments and strategic communication practitioners working to strengthen democratic resilience and counter information warfare.

Analysis of the Ukrainian Strategic Communications provides us with several vital lessons. One of the most significant lessons from Ukraine’s communication strategy since 2022 is that effective strategic communication requires a coordinated, whole-of-society approach rather than isolated government messaging. Ukraine institutionalised strategic communication by integrating government agencies, security institutions, civil society organizations, independent media, and technology actors into a shared information ecosystem. This coordinated model enhanced the state’s capacity to respond rapidly to disinformation, align strategic narratives across institutions, and strengthen societal resilience. Rather than treating strategic communication as a standalone public affairs

⁵¹ Nadia Kaneva, “With ‘Bravery’ as Its New Brand, Ukraine Is Turning Advertising into a Weapon of War,” *The World from PRX*, August 25, 2022, <https://theworld.org/stories/2022/08/25/bravery-its-new-brand-ukraine-turning-advertising-weapon-war>

⁵² Kate Tsurkan, “The Origins of ‘Slava Ukraini,’” *The Kyiv Independent*, August 31, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/the-origins-of-slava-ukraini/>.

⁵³ Ibid

function, Ukraine embedded it within its broader national security architecture, demonstrating that institutional coordination and multi-stakeholder cooperation are essential prerequisites for effective communication in contemporary information warfare.⁵⁴

Another important lesson from Ukraine's communication strategy is that effective strategic communication must be grounded in comprehensive Target Audience Analysis (TAA) and a thorough understanding of the narratives that shape public perceptions. Understanding audiences - their motivations, identities, perceptions, and information needs is a prerequisite for designing effective communication strategies. The effectiveness of information campaigns depends not only on disciplined messaging but also on the ability to tailor narratives to the historical memory, identities, and emotional concerns of different audiences. Consequently, audience analysis should be integrated throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication campaigns, enabling governments to identify vulnerabilities, detect hostile narratives at an early stage, and develop credible alternative narratives before disinformation becomes entrenched. For democratic states, Ukraine's experience demonstrates that successful strategic communication depends not on uniform messaging, but on continuous audience analysis, proactive engagement, and communication strategies adapted to evolving information environments.⁵⁵ Taken Together, these lessons illustrate that successful strategic communication depends not only on how messages are delivered, but also on how conflicts are conceptually framed. This makes the language and terminology used by governments, media, and policy institutions a strategic issue rather than merely a semantic one.

A common blunder made by governments, media, and policy institutions is relying on reactive, generalized narratives rather than

strategically developed, audience-specific communication. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that effective strategic communication depends on coherent institutional coordination, proactive planning, and communication strategies tailored to diverse audiences. Communication approaches that resonate strongly within the West cannot automatically be expected to achieve the same effect in the Global South, where different information environments, historical experiences, and political priorities require context-specific narratives. Likewise, fragmented institutional communication and the absence of long-term strategic planning weaken narrative coherence and reduce the effectiveness of strategic messaging. Governments, media, and policy institutions should therefore avoid reactive communication, inconsistent framing, and one-size-fits-all messaging. Instead, strategic communication should be built on coherent narratives, continuous audience analysis, and sustained engagement capable of maintaining international support while reducing opportunities for Russian information operations to exploit conceptual ambiguity.⁵⁶

Ukraine's experience demonstrates that countering Russian information warfare requires more than responding to individual disinformation campaigns. Effective resistance depends on sustained investment in strategic communication capabilities before crises emerge, including resilient institutions, trusted partnerships between government and civil society, media literacy, and mechanisms for rapid detection and response to hostile narratives. At the same time, countering disinformation cannot rely solely on debunking false claims after they have been disseminated. Proactive narrative development, pre-bunking, and continuous public engagement are equally important for reducing the influence of hostile information operations. Finally, the Ukrainian case illustrates that international support constitutes a critical information battlespace. Sustaining political, military, and public

⁵⁴ Halyna Padalko, *Lessons from Ukraine's Information Defense for Democratic Resilience* (Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation, Digital Policy Hub Working Paper, 2025), 3-9

⁵⁵ Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine: Examining Non-Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine from a Strategic*

Communications Perspective (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2015), 30-34.

⁵⁶ Ivar Ekman and Per-Erik Nilsson, *Ukraine's Information Front: Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, FOI, 2023)

support therefore requires communication strategies that are adaptable to different audiences and capable of maintaining trust over time.⁵⁷

Taken together, these lessons demonstrate that countering Russian information warfare requires strategic communication to be institutionalised as a permanent component of democratic resilience rather than employed only as a reactive response during periods of crisis. For Western governments, the principal lesson is that strategic communication must be treated as a permanent component of democratic resilience and national security, rather than as an improvised response once an information crisis has already emerged.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis presented above, the recommendations outlined below aim to further strengthen Ukraine's strategic communication capabilities, improve coordination among relevant actors, and sustain international support for Ukraine. Their successful implementation would contribute to the development of more proactive, audience-tailored, and evidence-based strategic communication, strengthening institutional coordination through whole-of-society strategic communication approaches.

- **Institutionalise long-term strategic communications** by moving beyond reactive crisis messaging and embedding strategic communications as a permanent component of national security. This should include continuous monitoring and evaluation, proactive narrative development (including prebunking), and sustained institutional coordination among governments, civil society, independent media, and technology platforms.
- **Strengthen audience-centred communication strategies** by conducting comprehensive Target Audience Analysis (TAA) and tailoring messaging to different regional contexts, particularly in the Global South. Communication should reinforce long-term political, military,

and public support for Ukraine through coherent, audience-specific narratives.

- **Adopt sovereignty-first language and historically accurate terminology** across government institutions, international organization, academia, and media. References to Ukraine should emphasise its political agency and avoid terminology that implicitly reinforces Russia-centred frameworks or spheres of influence.
- **Gradually replace the "post-Soviet space" framework** in policy, academic, and media discourse with approaches that better reflect the distinct historical and political trajectories of former Soviet republics. Government-funded research centres and think tanks should justify the continued use of the category on a country-by-country basis rather than applying it as a default analytical framework.
- **Support the decolonisation of knowledge production by encouraging universities, research centres, journals, and think tanks to reassess** Russia-centred analytical frameworks. This should include reviewing area studies curricula, editorial practices, and institutional structures, as well as considering the separation of Ukraine-focused research from broader "Russia and Eurasia" programs where appropriate.
- **Expand Ukraine's cultural, historical, and public diplomacy by promoting Ukraine's own decolonial narrative internationally.** This includes supporting translations of Ukrainian scholarship and policy documents, integrating pre-Soviet Ukrainian history into educational and briefing materials, and strengthening cultural diplomacy initiatives that communicate Ukraine's independent historical trajectory to international audiences.
- **Strengthen international information resilience** by investing in partnerships that improve democratic societies' ability to detect, counter, and

⁵⁷ Todd C. Helmus and Khrystyna Holynska, *Ukrainian Resistance to Russian Disinformation: Lessons for*



SSI

Strategic Security Initiative (SSI)

ADVANCING INSIGHT ON GLOBAL SECURITY

JULY 2026

WWW.SSI-POLICY.ORG