

УДК 316.77:355.01(470:477)"2014/2024"

**КУЗЬМЕНКО Г. О.**

*аспірант Могілянської школи журналістики, Національний університет «Києво-Могілянська академія», м. Київ, Україна*

Науковий керівник: **КВІТ С. М.**, доктор філологічних наук, професор, президент Національного університету «Києво-Могілянська академія», м. Київ, Україна

## **ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ СТРАТЕГІЧНОЇ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ РОСІЇ У ПОВНОМАСШТАБНІЙ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ВІЙНІ: ТРИ МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНІ РЕКОМЕНДАЦІЇ**

*Дослідження стратегічної комунікації Росії набуло значної важливості у повномасштабній Російсько-українській війні, зважаючи на спроби Росії легітимізувати її вторгнення, воєнні злочини та завдання шкоди цивільному населенню. В умовах динамічного воєнного медіапростору в українських і міжнародних медіа-фахівців є потреба здобувати валідні знання щодо російської стратегічної комунікації ще швидше, ніж раніше. Отже, ці тези пропонують три методологічні орієнтири, ціль яких — дозволити зробити дослідження стратегічної комунікації Росії з меншими часовими витратами: 1) фокусування на тезах посадових осіб Росії; 2) фокусування на стратегічних наративах (з використанням інтеграційних моделей) і 3) потенційне використання описового підходу (документування стратегічної комунікації).*

*Ключові слова:* стратегічні наративи, стратегічна комунікація, фреймінг, російсько-українська війна, шкода цивільним.

## **RESEARCH ON RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNIKATION IN THE FULL-SCALE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR: THREE METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Research on Russia's strategic communication has gained significant importance in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war while Russia attempts to legitimize its invasion, war crimes, and civilian harm. In the dynamic warfare media landscape, Ukrainian and international media specialists need to gain valid insights into Russia's strategic communication even faster than before. This conference paper thus suggests three methodological standpoints aimed to make the research on Russia's strategic communication less time-consuming: 1) focusing on the statements by Russian officials, 2) focusing on strategic narratives (using integrated models), and 3) considering the descriptive approach (documenting the strategic communication) for the research.*

*Keywords:* strategic narratives, strategic communication, framing, Russo-Ukrainian war, civilian harm.

**Introduction.** It could be argued that studying Russia's strategic communication is one of the most practically relevant research directions in media and communication studies currently (see, for example, studies by Aspriadis, 2023; Fridrichová, 2023; Bradshaw, Elswah, Haque, Quelle, 2024; Pupcenoks, Fisher, & Klein, 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). Furthermore, the ongoing full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war conditions the importance of conducting research on Russia's strategic communication even faster than usual. Firstly, for Ukraine and its allies, there is a practical need to counter Russia's strategic communication, disinformation, and propaganda attempts. Secondly, if the researchers do not put forward evidence-based interpretation of Russia's invasion, there are certain discourse-related risks. Then, in the future, the interpretation of the war in media and history books will be either based on less verified evidence or imposed by Russian communicators and propagandists themselves. This notion should raise even greater concern in the context of Russia's attempts of legitimizing its war crimes including civilian harm.

**Research aim.** This conference paper generally aims to facilitate the research on Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale war by suggesting baseline theoretical cornerstones. Here, three methodological recommendations for studying Russia's strategic communication are presented based on the scholarly literature and my own research experience. Hopefully, these ideas will become a time-saving tool for media and communication specialists who study Russia's information warfare.

**Results.** *Focusing on statements by the Russian officials.* Virtually, there are at least two common empirical approaches in studying Russia's strategic communication. The first one is based on collecting data directly from Russian media — the strategic communication-related content in messages, programming etc. (for instance, see Bradshaw et al. 2024). The second approach relies on collecting data from the official representatives, institutions, government bodies of the state, which potentially emphasizes that messages relate to the government's official position (for example, Aspriadis, 2023; Pupcenoks, Fisher, & Klein, 2024).

Both approaches may be applicable and show slightly different tracks of Russia's strategic communication. However, if one would wish to build the research design based on the principle of time efficiency, it could be more practical to focus on the statements by Russia's official actors (e. g. president, ministry of defense, ministry of foreign affairs, government spokespersons). As discussed in my recent research (Kuzmenko, 2024) grounding on Snyder's (2018) notions, strategic communication of Russia is the domain of Vladimir Putin and the collective Kremlin: there is an authoritarian system of government-backed media

specialists, propagandists, state media etc. who attempt to re-communicate (re-construct) reality. Hence, it would be helpful to look at Russia's officials' statements directly, because these are the messages that are likely to be spread by Russian media further (Kuzmenko, 2024).

*Focusing on strategic narratives but using integrated models.* Strategic narratives are perhaps one of the most useful analytical concepts in the context of Russia's strategic communication for two reasons at least. Firstly, ontologically, the studies of international relations, politics, and (political) communication are some of the original research fields where the concept of strategic narratives is used (see Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). In fact, with previous reference to Bernardi et al. (2012), Miskimmon et al. (2013) emphasize that strategic narratives are tools of communication (which is applicable to state communication): "Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (5).

Secondly, strategic communication refers to the deep-rooted, strategic cornerstones of a state's strategic communication. It could be argued that strategic communication is related to political and strategic culture of a state (Cornish, Lindley-French, & Yorke, 2011). In other words, by studying strategic narratives of Russia, one might have a more detailed outlook not only on the information warfare tactics, but the rationale behind it.

On the other hand, there are certain limitations to strategic narratives' scope. Strategic narratives are expressed in some way within strategic communication. However, suggesting that every message within Russia's strategic communication is a strategic narrative would be an overstatement. Alternatively, one might use "smaller scale" analytical concepts that would characterize strategic narratives. Hence, properties of strategic narratives could be induced based on more definite empirical cases and analytical elements. Such approaches might include focusing on themes (Drugă, 2023), rhetoric and sentiment evaluation (Pupcenoks, Fisher, & Klein, 2024), frames (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018), or other outputs of content-analysis and related methods.

However, applying frame analysis could be one the most beneficial approaches due to the interrelationship between frames and strategic narratives: "understanding narratives help us understand why and how framing works. A news report may frame an event in a certain way, but it does not necessarily introduce past causes or future outcomes (though speculation is often a feature of news). However, the various components of a narrative must be framed a certain way, so framing must be taken into account" (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 7). Livingston and Nassetta (2018)

thus suggest an integrated approach: “Frames are less ambitious and are situated within the contours of strategic narratives; they are to strategic narratives what particular storms are to global weather patterns. Frame contestation emerges as struggles over the meaning of events within the contours of broader strategic narratives” (103). Therefore, using frames in studying Russia’s strategic communication also prevents oversimplifying the concept of strategic narratives.

*Documenting strategic communication.* It could be suggested that quantitative explanatory design has been valued considerably in social sciences, especially with the recent fast development of the computational science field (for the discussion of computational social science see, for example, Keuschnigg, Lovsjö, & Hedström, 2018; Lazer et al., 2020; Hofman, Watts, Athey et al., 2021). Nevertheless, descriptive research remains a highly valuable type of research design in the context of Russia’s strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. To elaborate, I do not suggest using descriptive approach instead of explanatory or predictive designs and neither do I advocate for quantitative or qualitative approaches. Research of various types as well as mixed-method studies could provide meaningful insights into Russia’s strategic communication.

However, descriptive approach might help make sense of the general categories of Russia’s strategic communication. Furthermore (and, perhaps, more importantly), describing Russia’s strategy in wartime communication could be considered “documenting” of a sort. Then, it might reduce the risk of forgetting and/or losing analytically important evidence of what communication Russia relied on in the full-scale invasion. After the end of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war (or rather its current stage), Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the collective West will most certainly continue in the future in some form (whether by military force/threat or largely in information warfare). Provided that, understanding Russia’s strategic communication and strategic narratives in the future as well as counteraction might require understanding of those phenomena today.

In fact, several studies emphasized on relation between Russia’s strategic communication since 2014’s hybrid invasion of Ukraine (including annexation of Crimea) and its communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war (Fridrichová. 2023; Pupcenoks et al., 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). Also, Fridrichová’s (2023: 286) research implies that Russia “had a palette of narratives before and after the start of the February 22, 2022, escalation” and “had been using those same narratives after the 2014 Crimea annexation, down to the issue-specific narratives about Ukraine”. Strategic narratives do not “necessitate creating messaging de novo” (Fridrichová, 2023: 283). Instead, during crisis, political actors might “fall back on established narratives” (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 19, as cited in Fridrichová, 2023: 283).

**Conclusions.** This conference paper suggested three methodological recommendations for a more time-efficient research of Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war: reviewing the statements by Russian officials, focusing on strategic narratives (using integrated models), and non-neglecting the descriptive approach (documenting the strategic communication). And while these could be practically useful solutions, methodology should be enhanced even further for evidence-based comprehensive research of Russia's information warfare and counteracting Russia's strategic communication, disinformation and attempts to legitimize civilian harm and war crimes overall.

## REFERENCES

1. Aspriadis, N. (2023). Preparing for War: Strategic Narratives and Disinformation in Leadership Rhetoric during the Ukraine War. *ESSACHESS — Journal for Communication Studies*, 16, 1(31), 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.21409/9037-1Y61>.
2. Bradshaw, S., Elswah, M., Haque, M., Quelle, D. (2024). Strategic Storytelling: Russian State-Backed Media Coverage of the Ukraine War. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 36(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae028>.
3. Bernardi, D. L., Cheong, P. H., Lundry C., and Ruston, S. W. (2012). *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism, and the Struggle for Strategic Influence*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.
4. Cornish, P., Lindley-French, J., & Yorke, C. (2011). *Strategic communications and national strategy*. Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
5. Drugă, D. (2023). War in Ukraine: Russian Propaganda Themes. *Strategic Impact*, 84, 80–93. [10.53477/1842-9904-22-18](https://doi.org/10.53477/1842-9904-22-18).
6. Fridrichová, K. (2023). Mugged by reality: Russia's strategic narratives and the war in Ukraine. *Defense & Security Analysis*, 39(3), 281–295. DOI: 10.1080/14751798.2023.2201018.
7. Hofman, J. M., Watts, D. J., Athey, S. et al. (2021). Integrating explanation and prediction in computational social science. *Nature*, 595, 181–188. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03659-0>.
8. Keuschnigg, M., Lovsjö, N. & Hedström, P. (2018). Analytical sociology and computational social science. *Journal of Computational Social Science*, 1, 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-017-0006-5>.
9. Kuzmenko, H. (2024). Russia's strategic communication in the full-scale Russo Ukrainian war: analysis using Lasswell's model of communication. [Manuscript in preparation].
10. Lazer, D. M. J. et al. (2020). Computational social science: Obstacles and opportunities. *Science*, 369, 1060–1062. [10.1126/science.aaz8170](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaz8170).
11. Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. New York and London: Routledge.

12. Oates, S., & Ramsay, G. N. (2024). *Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News*. New York: Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197696422.001.0001>.
13. Pupcenoks, J., Fisher, S., & Klein, G. (2024). Sentiment Shifts and a New Approach to Strategic Narratives Analysis: Russian Rhetoric on Ukraine. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 32(1), 85–112. <https://doi.org/10.53483/CNCS7362>.
14. Snyder, T. (2018). *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America*. Tim Duggan Books.