

## What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication

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Discussions about state-sponsored communication with foreign publics are increasingly framed in the language of “information war” rather than “public diplomacy,” particularly in Eastern Europe. For example, media projects supported by Western governments to engage Ukrainian audiences, and Ukrainian government efforts to engage international audiences via the media, are considered necessary responses in the information war with Russia. This article highlights several potentially problematic assumptions about communicative influence that are embedded in the language of information war. First is the assumption that communication can be targeted like a weapon to achieve a predictable impact. Second is the assumption that audiences engage with communication from an adversary because they are “vulnerable.” Third is the assumption that “winning” in an information war means getting citizens to believe particular facts. Although these assumptions may hold to some degree, this article argues that adopting them uncritically can have detrimental consequences in policymaking.

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It has always been possible to choose from a range of terminologies when discussing how the media and state-sponsored communication contribute to the global order. Extensive literatures on public diplomacy (Cull, 2019; Melissen, 2005) and soft power (Hayden, 2012; Nye, 2004) coexist and to some extent overlap with work on propaganda (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019) and psychological operations (Narula, 2004). Definitions and understandings of these terms vary, but all can refer to communication being used by states in pursuit of international influence or advantage. Conceptual language from political communication, such as framing, is also used to discuss the effects of media on attitudes about international issues when strategic intent or state interests are not the main focus (Entman, 1991). Meanwhile, analyses by political geographers use the language of popular geopolitics to explain how the media contribute to the

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(re)production of geopolitical knowledge (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008). Their work emphasizes the “construction of meaning” from media and popular culture rather than “media effects,” reflecting a constructivist epistemology, contrasted against the positivism of most political communication research. Scholars working in different branches of the social sciences thus share an interest in how the media and mass communication affect international politics and the global order, but use very different language to frame their questions.

Lately, the language of “information war” (Bjola, 2019; Hellman & Wagnsson, 2017; Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016) has become prominent in the crowded basket of conceptual options that are available to those who study and write about mechanisms of communicative influence in international affairs. The language of information war is particularly salient in Eastern Europe, where Russia is understood to have “weaponized” information, and Western governments are supporting media initiatives to fight back against Russian influence. State-sponsored communication aimed at shaping the attitudes of foreign citizens—whether through advocacy, education, transnational media, or the promotion of culture—is now regularly framed as an activity with profound security implications. References to information war in Western capitals and Eastern Europe echo language used in Moscow, where officials and analysts have long described international influence via the media as a zero-sum game in which they must fight their hostile Western rivals for supremacy (“Voyennaya Doktrina,” 2014).

The language or concepts that we use to describe and analyze phenomena matter greatly. For a start, concepts tend to reinforce boundaries between different communities of scholars and branches of scholarship. Researchers who study soft power, researchers who study the framing of international issues in the media, and researchers who study information war are all working to explain how perceptions of different countries take shape. Yet they may lack awareness of each other’s work because the different concepts they use define the limits of the literature they read and try to build on. This relates to the more general problem of disciplinary boundaries, which reduce incentives and opportunities for scholars to look beyond their own field (each with its own theories, conferences and journals) when tackling research questions.

Conceptual choices also matter because there can be assumptions implicit in the language used to describe phenomena. For example, describing an international broadcaster as a “soft power resource” implies that it is benign and nonthreatening (suggested by the word “soft”), while also capable of impact (suggested by the word “power”). The assumptions implicit in concepts that frame research are always worth unpacking and questioning.

The primary aim of this article is therefore to highlight how the language of information war is laden with assumptions about how communicative influence works that are not always valid. Three assumptions that can be problematic are discussed. First is the assumption that communication can, like a weapon, be targeted to achieve a predictable impact. Second is the assumption that receptiveness to communication from an adversary among certain audiences should be attributed to the “vulnerability” of those audiences. And third is the assumption that “winning” in an information war is a matter of getting citizens to believe particular facts. Although these assumptions may hold to some degree, this work argues that adopting them uncritically can be detrimental in policymaking. The article addresses these three assumptions in turn, showing (a) how each one has become embedded in discussions and policies relating to the “information war” with Russia, (b) why each assumption can be questioned, based on extant research

and relevant empirical evidence from Eastern Europe, and (c) how each assumption risks propelling governments into pursuing communication policies that are suboptimal from the viewpoint of effectiveness and security.

A second, related aim of this article is to discuss what (if anything) distinguishes information war from public diplomacy—conceptually, and in practical terms. The term “public diplomacy” entered circulation during the Cold War as an American euphemism for propaganda (Cull, 2013). If the distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda might be questioned on those historical grounds, so, too, might the distinction between public diplomacy and information war. Is it valid to distinguish between engagement in public diplomacy and engagement in information war, particularly in the current climate of hostility between Russia and the West? Is public diplomacy still, essentially, a rhetorical device for painting Western attempts at influence in a more benign light than comparable attempts by the West’s rivals? Do differences in language used to describe international communicative influence—“diplomacy” as opposed to “war”—reflect meaningful differences in how such influence is approached? To address these questions, the article begins by reviewing the logics of public diplomacy, which are then contrasted against the logic of information war throughout the article.

The article concludes by discussing the merits and challenges of retaining a diplomatic approach to international communication at a time when the language and logic of information war are becoming increasingly dominant. While recognizing overlap in how information war and public diplomacy are defined and practiced, it argues that public diplomacy can potentially represent distinct ideals for international communication that are worth defending, even (especially) when the climate of international politics is adversarial.

### **The Logics of Public Diplomacy: Publics, Success, and National Interest**

Public diplomacy is understood as work to inform and engage people in foreign countries, with the aim of improving “understanding of and influence for” the sponsoring country “in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long term goals” (Carter, 2005, p. 8). This is how public diplomacy was defined in a 2005 report commissioned by the British government, and it is in line with a more recent academic definition of public diplomacy as “the practices through which international actors—predominantly nation-states—engage in purposive communication with foreign publics to advance foreign policy objectives or otherwise cultivate conditions among foreign publics that support diplomatic relations” (Sevin et al., 2019, p. 4815). The activities typically associated with public diplomacy include advocacy (via press briefings and social media posts, for example), cultural diplomacy (such as international exhibitions), exchanges (of students, sports teams, or others), international broadcasting, and—ideally, at least—listening to the views of foreign publics (Cull, 2019).

Zaharna (2009) identified two “perspectives of communication” that underlie the various practices labelled as public diplomacy. The first perspective views communication as a linear process of transferring information. The second perspective views communication as a social process of building relationships and fostering harmony. There are different goals associated with each perspective: The first (“information transfer”) perspective is often aimed at policy advocacy or image enhancement, whereas the second (“relational”) perspective is aimed at building relationships, not simply to enhance national images but as

an “end in itself” that contributes to a better international environment (Zaharna, 2009, p. 91). Snow’s (2009) distinction between “tender-minded” and “tough-minded” approaches to public diplomacy echoes Zaharna’s argument.

Expectations of the public(s) vary depending on the perspective of communication adopted. From the “information transfer” or tough-minded perspective, publics are construed as passive targets. Although they may provide feedback, the sponsor may not respond to it (Zaharna, 2009). In contrast, the “relational” or tender-minded approach treats publics as active participants and stakeholders, with whom links are to be developed over the long term. Such publics are not just recipients of the sponsor’s ideas, but also generators of ideas in a process of mutually beneficial dialogue and learning.

There is similar variation in the criteria used to evaluate the success of public diplomacy. From an information transfer or tough-minded perspective, success typically means “changing public opinion, beliefs, behavior, expectations, perspectives, and the like” (Pratkanis, 2009, pp. 112–113) in support of the sponsoring state’s foreign policy. Commonly used indicators of this kind of success include public opinion polls, which track changes in audiences’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors vis-à-vis the preferences of the sponsoring state. From a relational or tender-minded perspective, success is more about achieving smooth international relationships and mutual understanding—which may or may not lead to agreement. This kind of success is hard to quantify, but can potentially be assessed by the duration of relationships or reported satisfaction among the parties (Zaharna, 2009). It might also be assessed by the progress achieved when working together toward shared goals. Sevin (2017) argues that the only meaningful success criterion for a public diplomacy project should be “its contribution to advancing national interests” (p. 879), as articulated in national foreign policy goals. The indicators used to evaluate success in public diplomacy vary depending not only on how national interests are defined and how communicative influence is believed to work but also on pressures and organizational culture within diplomatic institutions (Pamment, 2014).

During the 2000s, practitioners and scholars of public diplomacy shifted increasingly toward endorsement of the relational approach to public diplomacy on the basis that “shouting out core messages and top lines, louder and louder” was likely to be less effective than “genuine engagement” (Murphy, 2008, p. 10). However, this shift in emphasis did not mean the information-transfer approach was abandoned. Rather, countries have tended to maintain a mix of activities, some oriented more toward information transfer and others toward relationship building.

It should also be noted that the shift toward endorsing dialogue with foreign publics was not accompanied by much explicit consideration of what a relational approach to public diplomacy implies for the “national interest.” The relational approach is based on the logic that the sponsor’s national interest is served by accounting for the interests of foreigners, by learning about their interests through public diplomacy, and sometimes adjusting elements of foreign policy accordingly for the sake of smoother relations. In contrast, tough-minded information-transfer public diplomacy expects smoother relations to follow foreigners’ acceptance of the sponsor’s foreign policy, and the national interest is formulated domestically to be advanced—not coconstructed—internationally.

Thus, the term "public diplomacy" is not free from contradictions and contests over its meaning. The rest of this article will nonetheless argue that the language and logics of public diplomacy have advantages over the language and logic of information war when it comes to the study and practice of international communicative influence.

### **The Logic of Information War: Assuming That Information Can Work Like a Weapon**

Political elites in Western capitals and Eastern Europe now widely accept that Russia has weaponized information and that weaponized information threatens national security no less than conventional weapons. The United States' National Security Strategy for example, states that "America's competitors weaponize information to attack the values and institutions that underpin free societies" (The White House, 2017, p. 34). The theme of Russia deploying information with the intent of achieving weapon-like destructive impact runs throughout Ukraine's Doctrine of Information Security which begins by saying that Russia "uses the latest information technologies of influence on the consciousness of citizens" ("Doktryna," 2016, para. 1). The idea of weaponized information is finding its way into academic analyses, too. Recently published research refers to "the deliberate weaponization of information by state and non-state actors" (Bjola & Pamment, 2019, p. 1) as an issue that merits attention.

Assertions that information is being used as a weapon are understandable, given the strong evidence that the Russian leadership does think of information as a kind of weapon. Russia's Doctrine of Information Security talks extensively about certain (other) countries "using information technologies for military-political goals" ("Doktrina," 2016, para. 15). The doctrine emphasizes Russia's need to defend itself against weaponized information rather than to develop offensive capabilities. However, Russia possesses structures that are clearly designed to deploy information against foreign targets for military-political purposes. In 2017, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu publicly announced the existence of "information operations troops" (*войска информационных операций*) within the Russian Armed Forces (Latsinskaya, Braterskiy, & Kalinin, 2017).

Yet, despite this evidence that Russia regards information as a weapon and has specialist forces to use it as such, it is important to recognize the limitations of the information-as-weapon analogy. Information differs significantly from the conventional weapons to which it is likened. Conventional weapons can usually be directed toward a target, and the type of impact they will have can usually be estimated in advance with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In contrast, targeting information at an intended audience while bypassing other audiences is often impossible, and the impact of information tends to be less consistent and predictable across different recipients than the impact of a bullet or bomb. The main problem with likening information to a weapon, therefore, is that it implicitly exaggerates the degree of control communicators can exert over the communicative process and its outcome(s).

The validity of assuming that information can be targeted internationally varies by medium. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, facilitate the targeting of information at selected demographic groups in particular geographic locations (Kim et al., 2018). However, broadcast communication is much harder to target at defined audiences. Much of the most emotive and misleading Russian claims about Ukraine appear first on Russian state TV channels. Russian citizens within Russia are the primary intended

audience for these channels because state television is deployed above all to protect the power of the incumbent Russian leadership, justifying its actions and discrediting its critics (Shlapentokh, 2011).

Thanks to satellite, Internet, and (in some countries) cable, content from the federal channels of Russian state television is available internationally, and it has observable effects on audiences in other countries (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018). The impact of this content outside Russia is not, however, the result of careful targeting or a deliberate foreign policy strategy. It is necessarily incidental rather than calculated, because the nature of the broadcast medium means that TV content cannot be calibrated both for the domestic audience and for the multiple, diverse national audiences that fall within its reach—and the Russian domestic audience always takes precedence.

The impossibility of calibration and targeting means that if Russia's federal television channels are international weapons, they are clumsy ones. Internationally, the narratives on Russian TV channels have sparked a range of reactions, including a great deal of backlash. In Ukraine, polls indicate that less than 2% of the population trust what Russian television says about the conflict in Donbas (MediaSapiens, 2017). Strong negative reactions and counternarratives prompted by Russian television in many parts of Eastern Europe and beyond are evidence that Russian television's international impact is not under the control of the Russian authorities and does not always work in their interests.

To shift political outcomes toward predefined objectives through communication is difficult, even when vast resources are invested. A recent meta-analysis looked at the effect of campaign advertising and contact on how Americans vote and concluded that the average effect was probably zero (Kalla & Broockman, 2018). Responses to political information are highly contingent on people's existing knowledge, attitudes, and values (Levendusky, 2013; Newton, 2006; Zaller, 1992) and on contextual factors such as the level of pluralism in the media environment (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). This pertains to the other important breakdown in the analogy between information and conventional weapons: The latter tend to be much more consistent than information in the impact they have on targets and less affected by contextual variables.

Do these limitations of the information-as-weapon analogy matter? The impact of information that Russia disseminates can be highly disruptive in places like Ukraine, even if it is not always precisely controlled or strategically planned. Describing Russian media as weapons and information as "weaponized" is a way to generate a sense of urgency about the need for remedial policy action.

The analogy becomes problematic, however, when remedial action proceeds on the assumption that information and the media work like conventional weapons. There is a risk of policy makers embracing "arms race" thinking in response to their adversary's communication. In other words, they may rush to expand their own "arsenal" of media outlets, without paying due attention to context or to the diversity of responses that those media are likely to provoke. Many media environments in which states want to operate are highly saturated. This is true of major cities across Eastern Europe, where access to the Internet and cable TV is the norm. In highly saturated media environments, news outlets that are run or sponsored by foreign states must compete for attention against dozens of commercial outlets, which tend to place greater emphasis on marketing themselves and catering to audience preferences. Unless states invest considerable thought, effort, and funding into the task of capturing audience attention, news media they sponsor for the

purpose of challenging an adversary are likely to have limited reach beyond a politically interested minority. Moreover, achieving credibility in a context of competing narratives, where the media are routinely used as political tools, is no easy task. Contrary to popular wisdom, factual accuracy and consistency are not enough to ensure the credibility of media and narratives. Rather, audiences judge the credibility of media and narratives against the yardstick of their existing beliefs, values, and personal experiences (Gunther, 1992; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010).

"Arms race" thinking can be seen in some of the policy recommendations produced by Western think tanks about the problem of Russian information warfare. Common among the recommendations are calls to create new counterweights to pro-Kremlin media. A report published by RAND, for example, advised offering "alternative TV, social media, and other media content in the [East European] region that can effectively displace the pro-Russia media narrative" (Helmus et al., 2018, p. xiii). Reports published by the European Endowment for Democracy and the think tank CEPA called for the creation of a new Russian-language news agency and a "content hub" to generate Russian-language entertainment shows (European Endowment for Democracy, 2015; Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016, p. 50). These recommendations have since been implemented (Content Fund, n.d.; "Russian-Language News," n.d.). What the reports and policy recommendations neglect to explain in detail, however, is how the newly created media resources should secure attention and credibility among the audiences at which they are aimed. By failing to discuss the challenge of securing attention and credibility, the reports imply that desired audience responses will follow automatically from the deployment of the new media resources. Media resources are expected to work as weapons would: unproblematically reaching their targets and having an impact. Although Western funding for good-quality Russian-language media content can certainly deliver important benefits (supporting journalists in holding politicians to account, and raising the level of media pluralism), it is questionable whether it will achieve the goal of displacing Russian content from audiences' media diets. The language of information war encourages resource-focused policy thinking, when audience-focused thinking, addressing the challenges of attention and credibility, would be more appropriate.

Do the language and logics of public diplomacy ensure that greater attention is directed toward the challenges of attention and credibility? Not necessarily. As Zaharna (2009) notes, it has long been a dominant Western assumption that "communication problems can be solved by providing more or better information, countering misinformation, or even trying to build relationships through information" (p. 97). However, the rhetorical shift that occurred during the 2000s toward emphasizing dialogue in public diplomacy did at least reframe publics as active interlocutors rather than passive targets.

### **The Logic of Information War: Assuming That Audiences Are "Vulnerable"**

A related problem in the language and logic of information war is that the behavior and motivations of audiences receive far less analytical attention than the behavior and motivations of the adversarial communicator (e.g., Darczewska, 2015; Kulakov, 2017). When audiences are mentioned, groups that seem most likely to engage with communication from the adversary are often described as "vulnerable." For example, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2017) is supporting "the emergence of stronger, independent Russian-language media so that vulnerable audiences in Russia's near abroad have reliable access to reliable information" (p. 16).

Studies conducted in Ukraine and the Baltic states indicate that citizens of those countries who predominantly speak Russian or identify as Russian are more likely than others to use Russian news sources and to support narratives disseminated by the Kremlin (Dougherty & Kaljurand, 2015; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2015; Szostek, 2017). Russian speakers and ethnic Russians could therefore fairly be described as relatively *receptive* to communication from Russia. To say that they are vulnerable, however, implies that these audiences are unable to withstand the persuasive power of Russian communications because of their own lack of defenses—such as a lack of critical thinking or lack of access to more reliable information sources. These kinds of problems can partially explain the use of Russian media and reception of Russian narratives among some ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers—but they do not constitute a full or satisfactory explanation.

Emphasizing the “vulnerability” of Russian-speaking or ethnically Russian audiences obscures several important points. First, it obscures the diversity of these audiences in terms of the range of media they access and their capacity for critical thinking. Second, it obscures the prevalence among these audiences of skepticism toward all media, including Russian media. Third, it obscures the fact that responses to contradictory (geo)political narratives are determined not only by media exposure and cognitive ability, but also by personal experiences, priorities and values.

The first point—the diversity of Russophone audiences—is demonstrated in research conducted by Vihalemm, Juzefovičs, and Leppik (2019) in Estonia and Latvia. Based on focus groups, they developed a typology of Russian-speaking audiences that distinguishes among “loyalists” who have firm geopolitical allegiances, “neutrals” who prefer not to take sides, and “apoliticals” who profess little interest in or knowledge of international disputes. Only one subtype within their typology corresponds to the popular perception of the “Russia-minded” audience in the Baltic states, with a narrow media repertoire and strong confidence in pro-Kremlin media. Other subtypes are characterized by their endeavors to seek out a range of information sources and opinions, or by the desire to avoid disturbing news streams as much as possible.

The second point—that Russian-speaking and ethnically Russian audiences tend to be distrustful of the media rather than excessively credulous—is supported by evidence from numerous opinion polls, particularly those conducted in Ukraine. For example, surveys commissioned by USAID in 2015 and 2016 found that most of the small proportion of people across Ukraine who got news from Russian TV channels did not consider them to be objective or reliable sources (“Media Consumption Survey,” 2016). A nationally representative survey conducted by KIIS in 2018 estimated that “practically everyone” who got information from Russian media was getting information from Ukrainian media as well (Detektor Media, 2018)—thus strongly indicating that support for pro-Kremlin arguments among parts of the Ukrainian population cannot be explained by a lack of awareness of counterarguments from the pro-Kyiv side.

If audiences considered most “vulnerable” to Russian information warfare do not particularly trust the Russian media and have alternative sources available, why, then, do they continue to tune in? Research on this question suggests a range of motivations, from habit and the convenience of Russian Internet portals, to dissatisfaction with national news sources and the conviction that no side tells the whole truth, so only by taking information from both sides can one work out what is happening (Orlova & Shutov, 2018; Szostek, 2018). Some users of Russian media could be described as passive in the sense that they do not invest much thought into



where they get information. Others, however, actively select, avoid, and compare news sources in an effort to stay well informed. Explaining the attitudes of such individuals as a function of their “vulnerability,” implying weakness and gullibility, thus overgeneralizes and misrepresents the nature of the problem.

The third point obscured by the assumption of “vulnerable audiences” is that media exposure and cognitive ability do not fully explain people’s attitudes relating to international politics. Discussions of information war emphasize the effects of adversarial communication to such an extent that other explanations for the views held by audiences are neglected. Besides knowledge derived from the media, political attitudes are also based on experiential knowledge, knowledge acquired from acquaintances and deep-seated values (Gamson, 1992; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). For many of the Russian speakers and ethnic Russians described as “vulnerable” to Russian propaganda, Russia is not just a remote foreign country or protagonist/antagonist in international news. Rather, it is a place they know from personal experience—where they may have lived, worked, studied, visited family, and built up memories and continuing personal connections. Such experience, memories and connections continue to inform their values, their views vis-à-vis relations with Russia and their interpretation of narratives which describe Russia as hostile (Szostek, 2017).

The assumption that “vulnerability” accounts for audiences’ engagement with hostile propaganda leads logically to policymaking focused on addressing the perceived vulnerabilities. In Eastern Europe, this has meant measures to provide Russian speakers with additional information and good quality journalism. For audiences who lack access to diverse media and awareness of different perspectives, such measures seem appropriate. In Estonia, for example, there are Russian speakers who struggle to understand the mainstream media because of their insufficient Estonian language skills. However, such measures are less likely to work among audiences who already draw information from diverse sources, but regard it all skeptically. This applies to much of Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population, almost all of whom can comfortably understand Ukrainian-language sources. If citizens are choosing news sources based on the principle of listening to all sides, no amount of additional information is likely to displace the Russian side from their media diets. Likewise, if citizens’ views and preferences vis-à-vis relations with Russia are based on fondly held memories and personal connections, it is questionable whether additional information or arguments offered by the media will be able to substantially shift them.

At present, Western objectives vis-à-vis audiences in the “information war” with Russia seem centered on raising awareness of Russian disinformation—and there is an expectation that disengagement from propagandistic Russian media will follow, along with greater support for Western narratives of international politics. Holmqvist (2013) summarizes this approach succinctly in her critique of strategic communication, where she writes that

any opposition to the message communicated is conceived of as a communication problem, not a problem of genuine difference or dissent. . . . The “problem” to be dealt with is simply an instrumental one of how hearts and minds can be won most effectively, not whether those hearts and minds can, in fact, be won in the first place. (p. 637)

The problem with this approach is that it does not answer the question of how to deal with people who are aware of Russian disinformation, but nevertheless favor values and priorities promoted by Russia, such as preservation of the "Russian world" and moral conservatism.

Are there advantages to adopting the language and logics of public diplomacy in this regard? A diplomatic framework at least offers greater scope than a war framework for acknowledging the diversity and agency of people who engage with the content of concern. Ideally, a diplomatic approach not only would try to correct errors in citizens' factual knowledge but also include policies to build bridges among citizens who have diverging values, while recognizing that differences may persist. Rather than striving to maximize support around a single "fact-based narrative," objectives within a diplomatic framework would include facilitating peaceful, informed deliberation among citizens who hold different views. The tendency for the language of information war to marginalize listening, dialogue, and relationship building within understandings of influence is one of its problematic features.

### **The Logic of Information War: Assuming That "Winning" Means Securing Belief in Facts**

The language of information war implies that communication involves battles that are won or lost. This idea is not uniquely associated with the framework of information war. In his books about "soft power," Joseph Nye (2010) wrote that success in the information age depends on "whose story wins" (p. 8). However, the language of information war raises the stakes: It associates communicative battles with an existential threat, not just relative success or failure.

What does it mean to be winning or losing in an information war, and how can one tell which side has the upper hand? Claims that one side or another is winning occur frequently in media reports. Western news headlines have claimed that "Russia is winning its non-stop propaganda war on America" (Satell, 2014), or that "Russia is winning the propaganda war" ("How Russia Is Winning," 2014), citing as evidence that misleading Russian arguments are being repeated by journalists or public figures, or supported by sections of the public.

Logically, a state's success in an information war should equate to achieving the tactical or strategic goals that its communications were designed to serve. The presumed goals of Russian communications are discussed extensively in analyses of Russian information warfare. They are most frequently described as subversion and destabilization, via the intermediate goals of "influencing mass consciousness" and "causing confusion and doubt" (Giles, 2016, pp. 33, 37), "sap[ping] morale," "increas[ing] partisanship," or keeping audiences "passive and paranoid" (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016, pp. ii, 5), and "inflict[ing] damage to the West's core institutions—NATO and the EU" (Milo & Klingová, 2017, p. 3).

At the same time, Russian international goals are presumed to include more tangible outcomes such as election victories for preferred parties and candidates (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017), a pro-Russian lobby in Europe (Darczewska & Żochowski, 2017), reduced support for sanctions ("Congress: Putin's Asymmetric Assault," 2018), and obstructing Ukraine's accession to NATO while also regaining some control over Ukrainian policymaking (Snegovaya, 2015, p. 15). These international goals

are understood to coincide with the domestic goals of regime stability and self-enrichment for Russia's incumbent leaders ("Congress: Putin's Asymmetric Assault," 2018).

Western goals in the information war are generally formulated in a way that equates to countering the abovementioned Russian goals. The European Union's (2015) Action Plan on Strategic Communication, produced in response to Russian disinformation campaigns, specifies three objectives: (1) "effective communication and promotion of EU policies and values toward the Eastern neighborhood"; (2) "strengthening of the overall media environment including support for independent media"; and (3) "increased public awareness of disinformation activities by external actors, and improved EU capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities" (European Union, 2015, p. 2). The EU's subsequent Action Plan on Disinformation (European Commission, 2018) highlighted the further goal of preserving the integrity of elections. The UK, similarly, is aiming to counter "disinformation directed at the UK and its Allies from Russia" (Duncan, 2019, para. 1) via the intermediate goals of strengthening civil society, independent media and public awareness of disinformation.

It is difficult, however, to use any of these goals—those ascribed to Russia, or those mentioned in Western policy documents—as benchmarks against which success in the information war can be judged. Where Russia's (ascribed) goals are concerned, the difficulty is that problems such as "confusion and doubt" and "low morale" among Western publics are unlikely to result solely from Russian communications, and it is almost impossible to empirically establish whether or to what extent Russian communications are exacerbating them. Even when goals ascribed to Russia are more tangible, such as election outcomes, the impact of Russian communicative activities tends to be a matter of speculation.

Where Western goals are concerned, there is a different kind of difficulty in using them as benchmarks for success or failure in information war. It is noticeable that many of the Western goals described above make little reference to audiences. Unlike the goals ascribed to Russia, which are largely formulated in terms of impact on audiences ("confusion," "division," and so on), Western goals are formulated in ways that largely hedge around the issue of what kind audience responses would constitute success. They avoid aiming explicitly for audience "certainty" or "unity," which would be the logical antithesis of what Russia is understood to be aiming for. They mention that audiences should be "aware" of disinformation, but awareness is not guaranteed to resolve the societal threats of division and weakening faith in Western institutions. Like the assumption of "vulnerable audiences," the formulation of Western goals suggests that the "information war" is just a battle over facts, and that if audiences only had the facts right, their support for Russian narratives and values would fall away. This reflects a lack of recognition in Western policy thinking that audiences place different importance on different facts based on their values. For example, two individuals might concur on the fact that Russia violated international law in annexing Crimea, yet disagree over whether that violation was justifiable, based on the varying value they place on demonstrations of Russian strength or reunification of Russian-speaking peoples.

Even though Western officials seem unwilling to make explicit reference to public opinion when formulating their information war goals, they regularly use public opinion polls as indicators of success or failure in the information war. In Ukraine, Western donors have funded multiple public opinion polls to assess support for political claims made by Russia relative to support for political claims made by the Ukrainian and Western

governments. For example, polls conducted between 2015 and 2019 with funding from the Danish Foreign Ministry asked respondents whether Russia or the Ukrainian government were responsible for starting the war in Donbas, whether the change of government in 2014 was a “fascist coup” (as Russia claims) or a “people’s revolution” (as it is viewed in Kyiv), and so on (Detektor Media, 2019; MediaSapiens, 2017).

Are opinion poll responses to questions like these good indicators of who is “winning” in an information war? They do provide a basic indication of which side has the more convincing strategic narrative (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013), and a state that achieves high public support for its strategic narrative can expect lower resistance against its policy goals. However, if one of Russia’s principal goals in the information war is to cause destabilization, while a major goal of Ukraine and Western states is to strengthen societal stability, then overall levels of support for one narrative over the other might be less important than levels of polarization among supporters of the different narratives. In other words, numbers of people blaming different sides for starting the war in Donbas matter less for stability in Ukraine than the intensity of mutual dislike or anger felt by citizens who hold different views on the issue. Relatedly, overall levels of support for different narratives arguably matter less for stability than citizens’ willingness and ability (whatever their political views) to handle disagreements within the framework of democratic institutions, rather than resorting to violence.

The language of information war is therefore doubly problematic when it comes to thinking about what it means for states to intervene successfully in a foreign media environment. First, Western states seem hesitant to specify their own end goals in relation to audiences when communication is framed as a type of warfare. They describe their goals loosely in defensive terms—strengthening the media environment, raising awareness of disinformation—but avoid talking explicitly about the kind of public responses (in values, attitudes, or behaviors) they would like to see, perhaps fearing that to do so might have “propagandistic” undertones. But this reluctance to define (or think through) the kind of influence on audiences they hope to achieve results in underspecified policy objectives, which hamper development of appropriate policy interventions. Second, the language of information war seems to encourage use of opinion polls as indicators of success because they allow for an easy comparison of public support for different sides in the conflict. However, this approach to evaluating success is overly narrow and based too heavily on the premise of “beating” the adversary, rather than on making progress toward more strategic goals of Western foreign policy.

Opinion polls are used to assess the success of public diplomacy too, so is there any advantage to the language and logics of public diplomacy in this regard? Although the “information transfer” approach to public diplomacy does interpret success as shifting audiences’ attitudes toward the preferences of the sponsoring state, it places less emphasis on winning against an adversary. This arguably leaves more room to use indicators that look beyond relative levels of support for competing narratives.

### **Conclusion**

The recent years of tension with Russia have sparked heightened interest in the influence that states can exert internationally via communication and the media. Russia is understood to be waging information war against its neighbors and Western states. The language of information war increasingly frames discussions

about how those neighbors and Western states should respond. However, this article has attempted to demonstrate that the language of information war is laden with assumptions that are potentially problematic for policymaking. The assumption that communication can be targeted like a weapon to achieve a predictable impact exaggerates the degree of control that can be exerted over the communicative process and its outcome(s), and glosses over the challenge of securing attention and credibility in saturated media environments. The assumption that "vulnerability" explains receptiveness to the adversary's communication obscures the fact that audiences described as vulnerable vary considerably in their knowledgeability and habits of media consumption. It also overlooks the importance of values, personal experiences, and personal connections in determining how people respond to narratives about international politics. Finally, the assumption that success in an information war can be judged by the balance of public opinion is only partially valid because the balance of public opinion may be less consequential for stability than the degree of polarization and antipathy between citizens holding different views.

The article has also argued that policy makers are better approaching international communicative influence as a form of diplomacy than as a form of war, irrespective of the hostile intent attributed to Russian activities in this area. Although public diplomacy is underpinned by contradictory logics ("information transfer" and "relational"), the language of public diplomacy is still less liable than the language of information war to obscure the challenges of securing attention and credibility, and the agency and diversity of publics targeted by state-sponsored communication. It is also less likely to push policy makers toward reductive measures of success.

Is it feasible, though, to avoid the language and logic of information war while Russia continues to project disinformation and aggressive criticism of its rivals via the media? Or does the current adversarial context of international politics mean that the practice of public diplomacy by Western states is bound to become subsumed within information warfare and regarded as part of the "fight"? And is the language of information war in fact necessary to describe realities within contemporary media environments?

At present, some Western states and institutions are using the language of public diplomacy and information war simultaneously to describe their own international communication. For example, Olsson, Wagnsson, and Hammargård (2019) describe how NATO has put structures in place to conduct information warfare alongside public diplomacy. But they warn of tensions in this dual approach: an organization or state that is known to engage in information warfare may end up damaging its capacity for public diplomacy, by making itself appear hostile rather than open to honest dialogue.

The language of information war could perhaps be considered appropriate to describe aggressive or underhand methods in international communication, and to maintain a distinction between such methods and more acceptable methods associated with public diplomacy. Hacking and leaking, disinformation and fake social media accounts—all methods associated with Russian information warfare—do not fit the conventional understanding of "diplomatic" behavior. Information war could therefore be understood in some contexts as shorthand for particularly unethical forms of communication. It is difficult, however, to maintain a clear conceptual distinction between information war and public diplomacy based on ethics and methods because most definitions of public diplomacy do not mention either—and history contains plentiful

examples of activities that were labelled as public diplomacy yet lacked transparency or fell short on other ethical standards (Peace, 2010).

The language of information war might also be considered necessary to describe forms of international communication that pose a severe security threat. These are not always the flagrantly unethical types of communication mentioned above. Ukraine, for example, has banned many Russian movies and TV dramas as a defensive measure against Russian "information aggression," partly because the norms and historical narratives embedded in that fictional content are considered subversive to Ukrainian nationhood (Siumar, 2017). Again, though, it is hard to maintain a conceptual distinction between public diplomacy and information war based on the threat that communication poses. Perceptions of threat are highly subjective, and almost any communication can be deemed threatening if it delivers advantages for a powerful rival or promotes the values of an adversary. This is why Russian activities that resemble conventional public diplomacy (the elite Valdai Club discussion forum, Russkiy Mir educational centers) are regularly included in Western accounts of the Kremlin's information war "toolkit" (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

The language of information war is certainly indicative of a media environment in which unethical methods are widely used and perceptions of threat are high. It does not, however, capture a type of communication that is clearly distinguishable from public diplomacy—or from other related concepts that this article has insufficient space to discuss, such as psychological operations and strategic communication. At the same time, widespread use of the language of information war makes it harder to achieve public diplomacy goals such as the cultivation through communication of mutual understanding. This is because war invites scrutiny and skepticism in which all communications are regarded as serving the interests of one side or the other (Pratkanis, 2009). Citizens are more likely to rally around their own flag, as loyalty takes on a higher value than open deliberation and critical debate. The Russian government actively encourages its citizens and supporters to believe it is in a state of information war with the West, because this justifies the passing of restrictive laws against "foreign interference" in the media environment and helps to discredit foreign news sources. Thus, when Western governments adopt the language of information war, they are effectively reinforcing this Kremlin line in a way that undermines their objective of communicating effectively with "pro-Kremlin" populations.

Perhaps the only respect in which the language of information war is not bad news for public diplomacy is that by framing international communication as an urgent security problem, it has convinced governments to increase the resources they devote to working with foreign publics. Cull (2019) suggests that public diplomats sometimes "speak a language of threats, counter-campaigns and unilateral influence when presenting their work to their political masters" (p. 26) because this seems to please those who control the purse strings. But in practice, more relational and "diplomatic" understandings of influence inform at least some of the work that takes place.

The different terminologies used to describe international state-sponsored communication thus reflect differences in threat perceptions, ethical ideals, and institutional incentives more than consistent differences in practice. Public diplomacy can potentially represent a distinct set of ideals for international state-sponsored communication: reciprocity, mutual learning, and the search for common interests. Although these ideals have not always been upheld in the practice of public diplomacy, they are, in my opinion, worth defending against

the logic of information war, which reduces publics to targets and success to achieving relative gains over an adversary. Adopting the language of information war is not a necessity, even when other states adopt aggressive tactics and rhetoric: State-sponsored lies and deception can be condemned as lies and deception, without references to weaponry and war, which undermine conditions for rational deliberation. The broader point this article has tried to convey is that researchers and practitioners with an interest in international communication ought to reflect critically on the concepts that frame their understanding of how international influence works. Whichever conceptual lens is adopted, careful consideration should be given to the assumptions that underlie the language used, and their implications for policymaking.

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