

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
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Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

**“Nobody Cheers for Goliath: How Ukraine Is Winning the Information War
Against Russia”**

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TIERSKY: Hello and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, I just want to start this episode by acknowledging that I think all of us have been horrified by the immense human suffering we are witnessing as a result of Russia's brutal assault on Ukraine. Those of us paying any attention at all, and if you're listening to this podcast I'd say it's safe to say you're paying attention. Those of us who are paying attention have seen a seemingly continuous stream of shocking photographs and video footage and first-person tales of really terror inflicted on innocent Ukrainians. That war, the war causing untold misery even today, as we record, is very much still underway.

But, listeners, the physical battle of tanks and bombs or territory gained and lost, it's only one part of this conflict. The war is also taking place in the media, on computer keyboards, and in the hearts and mind of people in Ukraine, people in Russia, and those of the rest of us around the rest of the world. This part of the war is one of information, of communication, of public diplomacy. And just as Ukraine has won important battlefield successes in the face of what appeared to be an overwhelming Russian force, Ukraine has also waged a highly sophisticated and, what many folks would suggest is a very successful, public diplomacy campaign to counter what many thought was a Russian strength.

In this episode, we will examine the fight over narratives around Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine, how it shapes how different audiences understand the war, and whether it ultimately has effect in the real world. Joining us today to explore these issues is Dr. Nicholas J. Cull, a pioneering scholar and educator in the field of public diplomacy and mass communication in foreign policy. Dr. Cull, Nick, thank you for joining us today.

CULL: Well, thanks for having me, Alex.

TIERSKY: I should note, Nick, you are a professor and a faculty fellow at the University of Southern California, where you're dialing in from. You've researched and analyzed decades of propaganda, public diplomacy efforts by various actors. You're a historian, you're a prolific writer, you're a fellow podcast host. I just want to start with giving you a chance to give us your kind of 30,000-foot view of this battle of narratives around the Ukraine conflict. How do you see it?

CULL: Well, my immediate reaction to the conflict is to see it through the window of a comparison. And that comparison is to what happened in 2014. Back in 2014, there was tremendous media confusion over the issue in Ukraine. And Ukraine lacked a kind of – well, people around the world, especially in Europe, didn't really understand what Ukraine was. It lacked a clear national narrative. In the absence of a clear narrative coming from Ukraine, I think the world was much more persuaded by the narrative coming from Putin, in its broadest terms, that Ukraine is some variety of Russia, that it is some extension of Russia chopped off by the circumstances of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And therefore, if Ukraine loses a province here, if it has separatist rebels being supported by an external power there, it isn't the end of the world, it isn't a major challenge to the European security order. So when I looked at the crisis in 2014, my feeling was that Ukraine lacked a reputation. And because of its lack of reputation, it lacked security. So I began talking about reputational security as an objective in public diplomacy. The better you're known, the more secure you are.

Now, flash forward to 2022 when the violation of Ukraine is the most significant issue in the world, when everybody knows something now about Ukraine, where the country is understood, where the internet is turned blue and yellow, and where there's tremendous sympathy for Ukraine and understanding of a national narrative. Something has happened in the meantime. Something has happened between 2014 and 2022. What happened was tremendous investment on the part of Ukraine in building up its public diplomacy capacity, in building up its cultural diplomacy capacity, so that it was telling stories internationally, in building relationships with foreign governments so the politicians cared about what was happened in and to Ukraine. And an awful lot of explanation of how media warfare works in the 21st century.

So when 2014 happened, we were collectively unprepared. We were unprepared for a return to disinformation, for the way in which disinformation warfare could be combined with troops moving on the battlefield. This became known as hybrid warfare. And it was like – pardon me for referring to a different kind of crisis – but it was like a virus to which the world had no immunity. And what's happened in the meantime is that there has been a lot of education about how disinformation works. Websites were set up within Ukraine to explain how the narrative was under attack.

So there's a terrific website called StopFake, which has really been a tremendous reference point for global media. And organizations like NATO and governments around the world have supported Ukraine in this effort. And they've upped their own game in countering disinformation. So 2022 is not 2014. And I think this was Mr. Putin's big surprise. That he thought it was all going to go exactly the same way. In fact, the reverse happened.

TIERSKY: Sure. Nick, what a terrific overview and great place to start. You've given us a lot of areas to dive into. Of course, 2014 being when Putin illegally moved in and lopped off essentially Crimea from Ukraine's sovereign territory, something we certainly don't recognize and will not recognize. But of course, also the year that the initial war in the east of Ukraine, in the Donbas, was begun by Russian forces and by Russian leaders. You credit the Ukrainians with essentially having learned a number of lessons, it sounds like, from 2014, and developed a capacity that they're using today.

So let's dive in a bit to the Ukrainian perspective here because, as I said in the introduction, I think there's a sense, and it would seem that you would agree with this, there's a sense that the Ukrainian government or maybe it's Ukrainian society, that as a whole the Ukrainian story, if I could put it that way, is being told effectively and is being told in a way that is mobilizing action on the part of the supporters of Ukraine. Talk to us a little bit about what you see the main elements of the Ukrainian messaging campaign.

CULL: First thing to say is that historically if your messaging campaign is going to work you need to have somebody in charge of it who, A, understands how communication works and, B, has the absolute confidence of the chief executive. And so I think Ukraine is super fortunate to have Dmytro Kuleba as foreign minister because he cut his teeth as the guy in charge of Ukrainian cultural diplomacy. So I've heard him speak, and he absolutely affirms this idea that without a good reputation you don't have security. And so the foreign ministry of Ukraine was incredibly active, especially over the last two years, in not letting any slander or any slight against Ukraine go unremarked.

So let's think back to November, which now seems like a century ago, but do you remember the [Ukrainian] foreign ministry went after Netflix for having a Ukrainian criminal teenager character in *Emily in Paris*? You may say, what are they doing, going after a TV show? But they understood that a slight against reputation undermined perception of the country. So it was significant for them to say, no, we're not like that. Don't talk about us that way. And I think it was just a little insight into how a cumulative campaign works. But I would credit Kuleba absolutely as one of the really important figures.

TIERSKY: Uh-huh. Let me ask you, since we're talking about individuals, I think even a casual observer would have seen any number of times that President Zelensky himself has played a crucial role. Can we talk a bit about President Zelensky as a comedian by career, an actor, his skillset, the ability that he has demonstrated to convey a message in a time of crisis? Can you talk to him about – even the fact that he's a native Russian speaker. What do these things allow him to do?

CULL: Well, I think that President Zelensky has gotten an awful lot of press, and so I wanted to start with Kuleba – (laughter) – just to say that it's more than a one – it's much more than a one-man show, and it wasn't built in a day. This is a multi-person achievement. Now, I think it's really important, if you want to relaunch the image of a country in a crisis and to say, well, you know, things were difficult in the past, this is a new day to have a dynamic leader. And Zelensky has been an ideal person, an ideal figurehead for the country. And he knows how to perform.

If you look at his TV show, in fact, a number of things that his character does on the TV show he has been doing – which is from 2015 – he is doing now in the person of the president. There's a scene, I think episode three, where he puts down his script and says, oh, I'm not going to use a script. I'm going to speak from my heart. And he meets the ghost of Abraham Lincoln at one point and Lincoln says to him, you know, just be yourself. And so that idea of performing yourself and speaking from your heart has been very much what he's doing. And I think it works in that situation. And he has been a tremendous asset to the country.

It's interesting how just, you know, a few months ago Ukrainians were not terribly comfortable with him. They were disappointed with the economy. And I think for Zelensky, the runup to the invasion was mainly about damping down invasion figures because, A, they didn't think it was going to happen and, B, they thought that telling people there was going to be an invasion was the play. The idea was that the Ukrainian economy would be so destabilized by the threat of invasion that investment would decline, the economy would tank, and Ukrainians would

want a different leader. So he had two reasons for playing down the possibility of an invasion in January and February of this year.

But he's, obviously, become an astonishing figure. As a historian, it reminds me very much of the role that Churchill played for Britain, and also the way in which Churchill was embraced by audiences around the world as a figurehead, and made it possible for people to let go of their previous ideas of Britain as being this class-ridden empire country and to instead reimagine Britain in 1940 as this classless society fighting bravely alone against a savage and merciless enemy.

And so – and I think that you can't really understand what's happening now in the information struggle between Russia and Ukraine without going all the way back to archetypes. And there is an archetype that you might call the David and Goliath struggle. That anybody in the world, when they see somebody without power or with limited power being pummeled by somebody who has a lot of power, that is deeply, deeply unattractive. And we all know whose side we're on in that situation. Nobody cheers for Goliath. And this has been America's problem in previous conflicts, but right now Russia has inherited that in full force, and seems like the most reprehensible bully even without committing this level of, you know, Nuremberg-level atrocities.

TIERSKY: Right. Well, Nick, let me – let me ask you. The David and Goliath archetype, as you describe it, is certainly – it seems to me, has been effective with Western audience, broadly speaking, Western audiences. But of course, Zelensky is – Zelensky, Kuleba, I think, and all of those around them – again, without wanting to be too reductive to any one individual or even two – they're not just communicating externally. They're also communicating with their own population, right? And this gets into some of the conversation that we had earlier about what was happening in the runup to the war and the desire to avoid panic, as opposed to preparing the nation for war. Can you talk about how you see the messaging externally and internally? How it might be different and how well you think the Ukrainian, let's say, broadly speaking, leadership or messaging is seen as doing with those.

CULL: Well, I think internally you can see dynamics working where, for example, the Russian-speaking political presence in Ukraine has just evaporated. So the two leading Russian-speaking politicians left the country just before the invasion started. And the people who were supportive or sympathetic, I think their feelings had been changing anyway in the runup to the invasion, but nobody wants to identify as a Ukrainian sympathetic to Russia. And perhaps the war in Donbas had already convinced people in places like Mariupol that they didn't want to be saved by Putin, that working within Ukraine was better than being saved by Moscow.

Externally, I've been struck by the way in which Ukraine has used multiple platforms with messaging not only on Twitter but on TikTok, and how memes have proliferated, and how stories are known in so many places in the world. I had a meeting earlier this week with some journalists from Kosovo. And of course, I asked them what they were thinking, how did they feeling watching the images from Ukraine. And their feeling was, oh, it's terrible that this is all happening again, that they had very similar experiences. But they also felt a little bit of envy because they said, oh, if only we'd had social media, if only we'd had this level of transparency,

maybe things would have worked better for us. Maybe we wouldn't have gone through all the suffering that we went through. And I thought, well, that's a super interesting reaction.

TIERSKY: I've certainly seen the current conflict, the war, as described as among the most well-documented in real time, given the availability of cellphone video and everything else. And as you said, a lot of these are being turned into memes or TikTok videos. I could cite any number of them that have been absolutely heartbreaking and compelling in different ways. The young girl singing "Let It Go" from "Frozen" from the basement because she was hiding from bombs, to various, frankly, humorous memes that are poking fun at the failure of Russian forces. But let me actually ask you about the use of various platforms.

You started your analysis by underlining the importance of a leadership structure or an executive structure to really direct the messaging and organize the messaging. I'm really curious whether you have a sense of the extent to which, particularly on social media, a lot of this, the memes, the various stories that we're talking about, are those directed from Ukrainian officials? To what extent is this a civil society or just individual Ukrainians, possibly even refugees who are participating in the production and dissemination of this content? And does it matter where the content comes from, in a sense?

CULL: Well, I think it's both. I think that, you know, you can see that Kuleba and also the internet minister have tremendous presences themselves and are tweeting and circulating material. But I also think you have civil society. And sometimes the civil society presence can be a problem because they can latch onto something that isn't true. They can repeat rumor. And we've seen some stories being tracked back. You know, the sailors on Snake Island were supposed to have all been murdered – or been wiped out. And then they cropped up later.

TIERSKY: The sailors, of course, who were said to have sworn at – or, they were recorded swearing at the Russian warship in words I can't repeat on the podcast.

Let me ask you – we are in a new age of memes, urban legends, myths. Talk to us a little bit about the power of that type of content specifically, if you could. I mean, you've already described this as a particular strength of the current communication around the conflict on the Ukrainian side, at least. Why are these types of tools so particularly powerful today?

CULL: Well, I think that they've always been powerful. And what we see is a constant in human history of culture and narrative being a force multiplier in warfare. And in fact, smart militaries through history have had a rumor about how they were super strong, and a rumor – circulated rumors about how their enemy was weak and going to collapse. And you can see how this has been used to strengthen or weaken armed forces historically. And I've got lots of examples if you're interested.

But what we see right now is a kind of electronic empowering of the process of rumor in war, where a myth that is initially shaped and circulated locally to help a small community feel better, like the idea of this ace pilot, the Ghost of Kyiv, who was shooting down the Russians. That suddenly was energized and heard all around the world. In previous wars, there have been stories like that. My great uncles who were in the First World War believed that angels had

appeared to fight on the British side during the Battle of Mons. And had seen it. They said they saw something they couldn't explain in the sky, and this was God entering the British side in the First World War.

So, you know, these sorts of stories can circulate and make people – they fill a need, all right? And it's very important that people don't circulate a story without any purpose. It has to meet their inner need or serve their own social purpose – make them seem smarter, more attractive, funnier to their social circle, or make them seem more compassionate. And then that story then has a good chance of being circulated by the next person for the same reason.

If I was looking for a difference between memes that Ukrainians are pushing and commenting on and ones outside, I think that Ukrainians are very – this is going to be a statement of the obvious – but Ukrainians are very angry with Russians and are unprepared for the good Russian memes that a lot of Americans are latching onto. And particularly there is an utter lack of sympathy or admiration for the Russian journalist who held up the sign during the news broadcast. All the Ukrainians I'm in touch with think she's a phony, thinks that she's guilty of 10 years of propaganda for Putin.

And they don't want to hear right now about, oh, a brave Russian journalist. They see opinion polls saying that Putin's level of support is increasing as a result of the war. And their take is that this is a – more than just a problem with a bad leader in Russia. It's a problem – fundamental problem with Russian – how Russian culture is understood by the mass of the population. That's very different from the way in which the war is being talked about, the memes that are circulating in the West predominantly, which are much more shaped around sympathy for Ukraine, and maybe a few jokes about Russians stealing stuff, or being ineffective, or too easily defeated.

TIERSKY: Let's talk about the Russians then, Nick. You started this particular segment, I would say, by talking about instances in which messaging has been around the strength of soldiers and, you know, we would say 10 feet tall. And perhaps we have seen in recent weeks that the Russians soldiers may not be 10 feet tall after all. Let's talk about the Russian side of this information campaign, if we could. As I said in the introduction, I hope you would agree with me that we have traditionally seen Russia, at least in recent years, as particularly sophisticated in the use of information tools. How has that perception evolved as a result of what we've seen in recent weeks?

CULL: Right. OK. So I think what happened in the run-up to the war is very, very significant, because the West had intelligence from various sources that an invasion was going to happen. But in warning about the invasion, it also predicted the information strategies. So we were so confident about the Russian way of 21st century warfare that we could point out individual information operations that they were going to conduct.

Now, this actually echoes the great insight from American counter-disinformation work in the 1980s, was that if you're really tuned into disinformation, you can use it to discredit your main adversary. You can say – you can take their disinformation and use it to show that they're not an honest speaker, that they are in fact saying ridiculous things which makes them seem

absurd. Especially if you take a rumor intended for one audience and you repeat it in a different part of the world and can show that this is a thing that the Russians are saying. You can turn them into a laughingstock.

And this was done, to some extent, in the run-up to the invasion. An important part of the messaging was: And we must expect disinformation. We must expect false flag operations. We must expect claims of Ukrainian provocation. And this meant not only the world was ready for this to happen, for these techniques of information warfare, but when they happened, they detracted from the credibility of Russia. So by proceeding according to plan, not only did things look better for Ukraine and for the West, but Russia discredited itself. So it dug a hole for itself. And there was a tremendous backfiring.

So I think that it was like having vaccinated the population, you could say, but going ahead with those weapons made the weapons backfire and damage – make Russia reputationally insecure because of the weapons they had been using. And this had been building up, and building up, and building up. And you can think about the number of conversations that we've had about Russian influence operations, about Russians mixing up in Brexit and being involved in America political discussions. And so it took a lot of conversation. It took a lot of preparation to have the world as ready as it was in February 2022.

But it also meant, I think, defying the preferences of the intelligence agencies, which would have rather these things not be shared in public. But that's not a – you know, the CIA didn't want Kennedy to show the U-2 photographs of installations in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The world was just asked to take his word for it. This is the point, a crisis like this is the point where you put your cards on the table. And this, putting the cards on the table, predicting what Russia was going to do, this was a brilliant play on the part of the governments in the U.S., and the U.K., and the other governments that were – NATO. A very admirable play. And, you know, so I take my hat off to those guys for that particular response.

TIERSKY: Let me then flip the similar question to what I asked you about the Ukrainian perspective. So you give, broadly speaking, the West a lot of credit for what you describe as a kind of vaccination campaign in the information space. I really liked that analogy. That was very successful in the runup to the invasion. But to my mind, I think there's an interesting distinction to be made between the contesting of the information space, let's say in the West or in the rest of the world, including, you know, South Asia, China. And, to my mind, the communication campaign of the Russian leadership seems to be more aimed at its own public.

CULL: Absolutely.

TIERSKY: Can you give us a kind of compare and contrast between those two campaigns?

CULL: Sure. Well, what I see when I look at the situation in Russia is a classic play of dictatorship. And that is, that information has to be controlled. And so you see both censorship on one side and you see propaganda on the other. So insisting that the war is talked about in a particular – avoiding the word “war,” for example. Controlling closing down independent media

outlets, these are classic censorship plays. The other side, cranking up the main power narratives in Russia, which are we're refighting World War II. So we're going after Nazis. We're defending the motherland. We're defending ethnic Russians. We're living out what it is to be a Russian, fulfilling our historical mission in the world.

I was very struck that Arch-Patriarch Kirill was so supportive of the invasion, and make that absurd speech about, oh, it's important to go to Ukraine to stop those gay pride parades. And the troubling thing to me is not that Putin is saying this stuff, but what we have to understand is the reason he's saying it is because people already believe it. I think the most common thing that I have to explain to people, talking about propaganda, is that we frame propaganda in terms of information that you are told. So we see – mistakenly, we see propaganda as a form of education or, like, miseducation. It isn't.

What propaganda, in this sort of situation, is it tells you things you already believe but it links the articulation of things you already believe to political activity in the present and future. So Putin's able to say because I believe, like you, Russia is special, because I believe Russians have suffered, that's why we have to do this thing. So a lot of his propaganda is affirming the prejudice of ordinary Russians.

TIERSKY: That doesn't leave a lot of hope for optimism. If we wanted to believe that the Putin regime was essentially convincing or duping the Russian public, that would be almost more hopeful for the future than what you're telling us, which is a lot of what is going on in Ukraine is actually a Russian societal conviction being acted out on by the Russian leadership.

CULL: Sure. But everybody has – we all have the darker angels and the better angels of our nature. And it's equally possible to appeal to society in terms of similarity. And Russia has also historically worked well around ideas of brotherhood, fraternity, ideas of peacemaking. And it's possible to connect – and shared prosperity. These things can be reference points too. But at the moment, I'm afraid there's a tendency in the U.S. to see all wars as being caused by individual evil leaders and to avoid thinking in terms of deeply flawed publics. And part of the reason for that is when you're a nation which includes people who've migrated from those publics, it's kind of historically been very difficult to manage those tensions.

I'm thinking here about the way in which German Americans were treated in World War I, Japanese Americans in World War II. It's easier for the United States to think of bad leaders and good people, and if only we could connect to the good people things would be better. And maybe there'll be a time for that. But right now is not the time. Now is the time to focus on support for Ukraine in this terrible moment of need. And Ukrainians are telling me they do not feel they've had sufficient support.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Well, speaking of the United States, since you raised kind of perceptions by people in the United States, that takes me to kind of the next basket of issues I wanted to talk to you about, which is we've talked about the Ukrainian successes, the different perspectives that the Russians are trying to influence as well. What is our role in the United States, the role not just of the United States, of course, but the United States and its allies and partners in this battle over narratives and information in this particular conflict?

CULL: Well, I think that the United States has a tremendous role to play communicating with Russians, to be obvious. Both the U.S. and U.K. have historically been a communication lifeline for Russia through international broadcasting, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, BBC World Service. These channels have been tremendously important. And so I would say are these channels in the United States properly supported? They feel, not so much. So I would start to look into how can the United States do a better job of communicating with Russians?

Bearing in mind, Russians may not welcome hearing opinion from the United States. What they would welcome is hearing objective fact. And some of it will be uncomfortable facts. To go back historically, the great moment for Western international broadcasting was when the news of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster was broadcast by Western media in Russian a week before the Russian government was prepared to talk about anything having happened. And knowing that your own government is prepared to be that deceitful, that profligate with your safety, it was very damaging for the Kremlin regime at that time.

So even if people in Russia don't embrace the U.S. worldview, they would welcome the facts, especially when the facts are – as the facts become their realities, it would help for them to be aware of that. We need to invest in broadcasting and other ways of getting material or getting news – not views, not hearing, oh, we think Putin's horrible, but getting news into Russian language space.

TIERSKY: I have two thoughts or maybe reactions to that. One, I wonder to the extent that you were describing earlier the authoritarian playbook that is currently shaping Russian society and the Russian information environment, the extent to which there is still space for some factual information actually to penetrate that information space, number one. And, number two, I hear you talking about making investments in our ability to do that kind of thing. What precisely is missing, and what would help?

CULL: Well, you know, to be honest, neither British international broadcasting or U.S. international broadcasting have had a great few years. They've both been used as political footballs. And I think that the wider context in U.S. public diplomacy needs to be addressed. I'm very aware that there's no director of the U.S. International Broadcasting, the USAGM. The directorship is held up in nominations at the moment. There's no undersecretary of state for public diplomacy. Someone hasn't yet been nominated by the Biden White House. So we need to move these things forward. If the United States is to have a credible voice, to have credible leadership in world affairs and a voice that can be heard in Russia, it needs to have people in these positions.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Nick, Dr. Cull, as we get to the end of our time with you here on this episode, I'd just – I'd love for you to reflect a bit with your historian's hat on, and maybe give us a sense of how you understand what's happening today around the Russian war against Ukraine in the information space, kind of in the broad sweep of history, to give us a sense of how we might see this going forward. Please, any thoughts you'd like to leave us with.

CULL: Oh, well, I think it's been very interesting to see the way in which this is being framed as a confrontation between the forces of chaos and democracy, the way in which countries which would rather be neutral on this situation have been forced, somewhat against their will, to take a stand.

I don't think this is a moment for the United States to stand back. And I don't think it's a moment for internal political argument. For me, this is a moment for bipartisanship. And I'm so happy to be talking to the Helsinki Commission, which I think is just such a great example of cooperation between parties and cooperation between the houses of government. And I wish there was more of that kind of acceptance that what's happening now is too serious for people to score political points. And so I'm glad that you, at least, are moving forward in a bipartisan manner.

There's a chance that the world will come to its senses, that this will be a great wake-up call, this is not how we want to behave, that audiences around the world will see the value in negotiating and settling things in different ways, and that Putin, by going so far beyond what is acceptable in the 21st century, will trigger a swing back to the other pendulum point. Because, you know, to me history is this swing from countries thinking about themselves, asserting their independence and might making right, and countries swinging into interdependence and thinking about the need to cooperate and the need to work together.

TIERSKY: Well, some inspirational words to end on. Dr. Nicholas Cull, thank you so much for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill. You've given us some extraordinary historical context. You've provided some brilliant analytic clarity. And, of course, we're always grateful for some kind words about the Helsinki Commission. Thank you again for joining us, Dr. Cull, Nick. Thank you for being here.

CULL: Oh, it's my pleasure.

TIERSKY: With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Thanks again for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.