

Ukraine's Fightback Starts With the Truth

Article by Sofia Oliynyk

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The Russian invasion sparked a mobilisation across all of Ukrainian society, with citizens pitching in to contribute to the effort in whatever way they could. Sofia Oliynyk explains how her first impulse was to contribute to getting information to people both within and outside the country about events on the ground. This "information resistance" has been a crucial front in the war, aiming to counter the false and damaging narratives spread by the Russian authorities and reclaim space for Ukrainians themselves to shape the representations of the conflict and their own identity.

Green European Journal: How did the Russian invasion change the media landscape in Ukraine? Which were the most immediate challenges that were presented?

Sofia Oliynyk: The crucial thing is that in Ukraine, we have independent media which developed quite significantly over the last eight years. The mere fact that it exists and operates is very important – even if it is not perfect.

Like many people, I get my information from the online media and Telegram, which has many different news channels providing instant updates from a number of recognised media outlets. Before the invasion, I would rarely use Telegram to check my news. But now many media outlets, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, have Telegram channels specifically for communication around the war in Ukraine. It's great that you can have this continuous reporting on what's happening, but disinformation is still a big problem. Especially on social media, Telegram or Viber groups. To counter this, there is a Centre for Strategic Communications, an official structure that provides explanations about the government's work. Every public institution now runs a Facebook page, and all the ministries now publish more information in both English and Ukrainian, to go beyond Ukraine and provide direct access to information.

In Ukraine, the media narrative also needs to keep morale high among the people. You cannot remain untouched by the tragedies that are happening so how you communicate this news to the people is important. Another problem is how the war is communicated to those outside of Ukraine. The Russian narrative is very professionally managed and well-funded. It's been integrated into different countries across different channels for years. With more people getting their news online, it's more important than ever for the sources of information to be questioned and scrutinised.

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After the invasion, you launched an online journalism platform called Share the Truths which publishes regular news on the war in various languages. Can you tell us about this initiative?

We are not journalists. We are not media. We are just people who are passionate about what we do. We provide a bulletin on the main developments in political security, foreign policy, healthcare, culture and so on, from the perspective of human security; always giving a reference to the source so the person can go and read more. Our research pools information from different institutions, ministries, and media we consider reliable. From this pool, we make a selection, highlighting the human cost of the war as our North Star. For us, it's important to highlight that the war is not just shooting; it impacts everyone. It's also an opportunity to promote Ukrainian media resources or official institutions.

On the third day of the invasion, we felt compelled to do something. We have family and friends all across the world and work with international partners regularly. They all kept asking us what was happening. So, we came up with the idea of sharing information about the situation in Ukraine with this close circle. We understood very early on that information was critical in this war; Russia was already distorting the facts of its invasion and presenting Ukraine as a hostile neighbour. We started with writing just a page about the situation in Kyiv and then in the regions. But then we realised that it could be something more, something properly shaped and distributed among those who might be interested.

We also realised that there was a lot of expertise in our network, which we wanted to engage with. The experts from our network provide briefs on topics like European energy dependence, cyber security, culture, and so on, which we would use to create factsheets that people could easily distribute. There were many protests at the start of the war, for example, where these factsheets would be distributed.

What has been the response to the initiative in Ukraine and elsewhere?

We have a high number of visitors from the US, Canada, Germany, and Poland. People are keen to get involved in the project, which has been possible through translations. Within the first months, the briefs were translated into 17 languages, including Russian. We hesitated with Russian at first, but we decided to translate it as a way of disseminating alternative content to Russians who decide to look for it.

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The project has also been welcomed by civil society and international organisations, especially those tasked with developing programmes about Ukraine and the region. The briefs save research time and provide them with the main facts.

An important part of your work is countering colonialist narratives about Ukraine from Russia. Why are these so damaging and have Western narratives been complicit in spreading these ideas?

You often hear in the West, “well, you were always brotherly nations, very well integrated...”. The roots of this narrative are deep. Our goal is to show that this is the brother that kills, rapes, and bombs Ukraine every single day. This brotherly love has been suffocating Ukraine for years. We understand that what Russia has been doing to Ukraine is a matter of many years of their integrated influence in various sectors. This assessment inspired our decolonisation series of articles. Our focus on colonialism is not only for Ukrainians, but also Westerners who might be familiar with discussions about colonialism from their own histories, but accept the narrative of “brotherly nations”.

One example we’ve written about is Russian colonialism in art. It is still common to come across international exhibitions, whether in Paris or Amsterdam, that claim to show Russian art. These are amazing, fantastic collections. Then you notice the label reads “Russian painter Malevich”. But Malevich is not a Russian painter. He lived there, but he was born in Ukraine. A lot of what is labelled as Russian art is actually, Georgian, Armenian, Ukrainian, and so on.

This erasure is a function of Russian colonialism and serves its propaganda; it forces everyone onto the same page and makes everyone a Soviet – that is – a Russian person.

What is the role of civil society, NGOs, and activists in the overall war effort?

Civil society actors are using their channels to inform people about what’s happening here, to make sure that the war does not just become another uncomfortable event in the East. There are others who have been key to the humanitarian response to the war. In a day, one organisation changed from their usual operations to supplying bulletproof vests – that’s flexibility and readiness to respond.

We’ve observed over the last months, how our partners (such as the Heinrich Boell Foundation office in Kyiv) combined, switched, or put on hold their main projects, to move to collecting and delivering humanitarian aid and urgent supplies to the most affected regions. Some were fundraising for bulletproof vests and first aid kits to support their colleagues who went to the frontline. Now, along with volunteering, most of them focus on their organisations’ activities that can respond to the conditions imposed by the war.

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democracy should be armed, but now I do.*

One of the buzzwords that have emerged from how Ukrainians have responded to the war is “resilience”. When you have the desire to save your life and country, you’ll put in any amount of effort and do anything to make it.

What does this resilience mean for Ukraine’s democracy and its future?

When I think of resilience, I imagine everyone carrying a heavy backpack. Although

burdensome, it contains new skills and knowledge to endure any situation. I wish we would have a different experience of resilience than we are having at the moment, but it's forcing everyone to develop a crisis response and also think long-term. When we plan projects at Share the Truths, for instance, we think about how it responds to the war but also how it can help with better decision-making in the future. The lessons learnt will only strengthen Ukrainian society and democracy in the long term.

Some environmental organisations are already looking ahead to the reconstruction of Ukraine in a way that includes elements of a just transition. Do you see already the process of imagining that future for Ukraine being mapped out?

Recently, we have had discussions about reconstruction. Other actors like Ukrainian architects are discussing how to make cities better. This is the time to think about a green recovery if we want to help Ukraine build back better. Not many countries have this opportunity to start from scratch. We, now, unfortunately, have to start from scratch. But this is also the opportunity to come up with something better.

It's challenging to say that something has been mapped out and set in stone, as we see that the situation is changing on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the Lugano Conference and a number of working groups currently operating in areas related to the reconstruction set the orientation. What is essential is for civil society to be engaged in the process in order to ensure expertise and oversight.

How can the media and policymakers in Europe support Ukraine?

When we talk about the support from the West, we are not asking you to fight instead of us, but to support us so that our people can fight, live, and work. One important way to do so is to provide us with arms. Before the war, I would never have said that democracy should be armed, but now I do. We cannot make reconstruction plans if we can't defend ourselves – because there will be no one left to reconstruct for.

Granting Ukraine EU candidate status boosted morale to some extent and recognised the efforts the country has made. It's important to support and proceed further with European integration. It represents our shared values and what we have been fighting for in the last eight years. It is also motivation to push for a better reconstruction.

Telling the story of both resilience and suffering is important. We're seeing Ukrainians show solidarity and fight for human rights. We're also seeing some momentum for gender equality, with women being admitted into the army and the adoption of the Istanbul Convention. The international press must tell these success stories to show that, in times of war, Ukrainian society didn't give up. It's also important that they document the war crimes and atrocities Russia is committing, to prosecute them and counter the narrative Russia pushes on the international stage.



Sofia is the coordinator of the Programme “Democracy Support and Human Security” at the Heinrich Boell Foundation Ukraine. She is dealing with support of the grassroots initiatives in the field of urban and sustainable mobility development; promotion of critical historical discourse and introduction of the concept of “human security” in public discourse.

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