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UKRAINIAN WARTIME NATION BRANDING DURING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Favorable international image is indispensable for political, socio-economic and cultural well-being of a nation in the globalization era. At wartime, however, the issue of positive national brand becomes ever-more strategic as foreign political and military support directly hinges on the ability of the state to attract allies among foreign elites and the public. Therefore, this article examines how nation branding approach could be used by a state to construct favorable perceptions of itself among key foreign audiences in wartime.

Methodologically, critical discourse analysis was applied to analyze a case study of the Ukrainian government communication efforts during wartime (2022–2024). The author addresses three main questions: How and why did the sociocultural context of Russo-Ukrainian war influence Ukrainian government decision to engage in strategic nation branding efforts? What institutional factors shaped the production of wartime nation branding campaigns by the Ukrainian government? How did the nation branding efforts managed to construct Western elite and public perception of the new Ukrainian brand to sustain vital military and political support?

The results of the research reveal that Russian full-scale invasion and dependence over Western countries' military and political support have motivated Ukrainian government to strategically engage in creative nation branding. Institutional architecture of the communication consisting of effective state-private cooperation and personal branding created necessary conditions for the deployment of a tailored, emotionally imbued audience engagement tactic. Lastly, on the textual level, several examples are analyzed to illustrate how nation branding efforts benefited from the use of narrative tools and clever collaboration with a popular mass culture phenomenon.

Key words: *narrative, media discourse, discourse analysis, nation branding, Russo-Ukrainian war, public diplomacy.*

Statement of the problem. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was unable to get rid of the entrenched international image of a poor and corrupt post-socialist country. In contrast to Russia with its blooming economy of “energy superpower” and widespread international recognition in 2000s, Ukraine used to be severely underrecognized and misrepresented in the West with the US Ambassador Matlock calling Ukraine a “nowhere nation” [27]. And surely until 2022 no Ukrainian leader had ever had such levels of popularity abroad as did Russia’s Putin.

Two decades later Putin turned Russia into an international pariah by invading Ukraine in brutal WWII-style *Blitzkrieg* attack. Now it is Ukrainian president Zelenskiy who becomes *Time’s Person of the Year* and receives a prestigious *Charlemagne Prize* in Germany (awarded to the prominent Western leaders contributing to European unity and welfare such as W. Churchill) for the collective Ukrainian efforts to “support and defend European values” [11].

Thus, in wartime Ukraine managed to radically change the way Western politicians and publics perceived and recognized its statehood and society. It is

presumed that Ukrainian wartime public engagement campaign can be attributed to that radical change. Being a belligerent state with critical dependence on foreign assistance, the Ukrainian government managed to utilize wartime as a window of opportunity to implement an effective nation-branding strategy. In this article, we apply critical discourse approach to find out factors that contributed to the success of Ukrainian wartime nation branding efforts.

Analysis of recent research and publications. N. Kaneva defined nation branding as the introduction of tailored discourses and practices into the processes of national governance with the aim of reconstituting state- and nationhood both for internal and external purposes [24, p. 118]. In the 2000s, the world came to see a parade of catchily named nation branding campaigns made by creative agencies and financed by the governments (such as “Cool Britannia” or “Uniquely Singapore” [38]). States engaged in nation branding presumed that by establishing attractive national image, a country’s “intangible wealth” [6, p. 291], they will gain sociopolitical influence as well as material resources.

C. Browning viewed a nation's brand as a new security dimension because states are as much concerned with upholding and enhancing a sense of self-esteem and national dignity as with preserving their territorial sovereignty from physical threats of violence [8]. In a similar vein, W. Olins introduced wartime as a key context that have historically made nations so focused on reshaping their identities and conveying this change to the external audiences [30, p. 244]. For instance, P. Van Ham showed how negative place branding by other national and private actors could evenly undermine socioeconomic livelihood of a post-socialist transitioning country like Kazakhstan and an established liberal democracy like Denmark with governments of both treating the issue like a danger to national security [37]. Clearly, as RAND's analysts D. Ronfeldt and J. Arquilla postulated, nowadays states operate not only in terms of *Realpolitik* (physical survival), but also in *Noopolitik*. It is a discursive realm of "whose story wins", where values, concepts, ideas and images matter the most. To succeed in this world of ideational and cultural matters, a state must be masterful at designing resonating narratives and tailoring them to specific international contexts [33].

One of the key elements enabling success of a nation's branding worldwide lies in resonance to achieve public engagement. P. Van Ham argued that values of the primary audiences are crucial for a nation branding campaign as values are leverages for reaching their hearts and souls [37]. For the states engaged in branding, convincing certain foreign audiences of having similar goals and values or, even more preferably, being an embodiment of some universally applicable desired values is incremental.

Task statement. Since its inception in the late 1990s, national branding research has been focusing on tracing down and evaluating success stories of pioneering countries that utilized corporate branding strategies to shape a better perception of their country (see e.g., *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index* [5]). However, the Russo-Ukrainian war has initiated important developments in the field by shaping institutional and discursive development of nation branding campaigns thus creating unique contextual factors of wartime environment. Naturally, Ukrainian wartime nation branding efforts have received some scientific attention [21; 26; 20; 9; 13]. These works emphasized unique wartime environment and specific discursive and technological strategies thus identifying nascent caveats in the literature. Therefore, it is necessary to fill in the existing gaps in the field considering a plentiful number of examples surfaced throughout 2 years of the war.

Methodologically, case study approach is used as we review a particular dimension of Russo-Ukrainian war, that is, nation-branding efforts of the Ukrainian government. Additionally, as N. Kaneva et. al mentioned, Ukraine employed different technological, narrative, and visual modes of communication (e.g., videos, photos, memes) to effectively address different audiences to achieve foreign policy objectives [22]. We attempt to approach those modes of communication using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (following a relevant adaptation of this method for nation branding research [23]). Wartime nation branding of the Ukrainian government is considered a "genre of discourse" with "texts"-rich "communicative events" [23, p. 509; 14, pp. 53–62]. Specifically, we start with a broader sociocultural picture of Russo-Ukrainian war, which, in turn, has shaped the factors that influence the institutional production of texts within the Ukrainian government. Lastly, texts are analyzed as separate events in the form of various modes of communication utilized during the Ukrainian nation branding campaigns.

Thus, there are 3 of our research questions that correspond with each level of Fairclough's model (from broader to narrower levels):

RQ1: *How and why did the sociocultural context of Russo-Ukrainian war influence Ukrainian government decision to engage in strategic nation branding efforts?*

RQ2: *What institutional factors shaped the production of wartime nation branding campaigns by the Ukrainian government?*

RQ3: *How did the nation branding efforts managed to construct Western elite and public perception of the new Ukrainian brand to sustain vital military and political support?*

Outline of the main material of the study.

RQ1: C. Browning postulated that lack of international recognition "can even challenge the symbolic existence of the group/nation" [8, p. 5]. In the same vein, N. Cull wrote that limited international reputation could be an exceptionally damaging factor for a nation-state [12, p. 413]. History and political psychology are inundated with examples of political decision making based on the deprivation a nation or a state of its right to exist within internationally recognized borders due to various personal reasons. Arguably, Putin's 10-year war against Ukraine has been based (in part, at least) on his inner justification of the deprivation of the Ukrainian right to exist as an independent nation state – as he himself demonstrated during the infamous interview to T. Carlson.

Historically, lack of agency and positive international reputation have been a crucial issue since Ukraine gained independence in 1991. From one side,

there certainly was a “negative” chauvinist branding tradition by the Russian propaganda machine oriented at damaging independent Ukraine’s image abroad. R. Szporluk stated that in 1990s false frames of reference were often used in academic circles by representatives of the Russian elite [3]. Since 2014 Russia ramped up its efforts to legitimize its hybrid warfare and annexation of Ukrainian regions. For instance, Y. Fedchenko systematized more than 500 examples of Russian propaganda, including those aimed at depriving Ukraine of its international agency (“Ukraine as a ‘failed state’”) and negative branding of the Ukrainian army [15, p. 159]. Additionally, S. Budnitsky noted that Russia belittled Ukraine as a “US puppet” with “corrupt, inept, and drug-addicted” elites [9]. Moreover, between 2014 and up until the full-scale invasion, some prominent decision makers and experts in the West did indeed voice claims that questioned Ukrainian state’s agency. For instance, in his 2016 interview to Goldberg, US President Obama conceded that Ukraine “is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do” [17]. After analyzing other examples of expert opinions on Ukrainian defense capability voiced by the prominent Western military and security experts before the war, Afanasieva et al. concluded that there was fear of the imminent Russian retaliation for providing Western weapons to Ukraine and significant undervaluation of Ukrainian military and state capabilities [4, p. 22].

From another, R. Horbyk and D. Orlova noted that during the hybrid stage of Russian war in 2014–2021 the effectiveness of Ukrainian governmental response to the issue of poor international perception was questionable due to predominantly reactive approach [20]. Most of the governmental and private initiatives concentrated on ‘righting the wrongs’ about Ukraine, effectively reducing Ukrainian narrative to countering Russian propaganda efforts. In the oft-twisted understanding of what Ukraine was among the Western publics and elites, these efforts did not help in branding Ukraine as a unique country with its own features, but rather created an impression of a country that is “not like what Russia tells us about”.

Yet, on February 24, 2022, started Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Essentially, wartime has profoundly influenced both institutional and contextual dimensions of Ukrainian foreign communication. When a weaker state faces a nuclear superpower’s *Blitzkrieg*-like invasion, the only rational decision would be to urgently seek political, military and financial support from foreign nations. Naturally, the government feels existential threat and perceives its apparent lack of international recognition

among foreign audiences ever more acutely. In such context, risks of not receiving or losing international support are considered unacceptable. Thus, the issue of (re)gaining and preserving elite and popular support within the countries on which a state depends on would likely become a strategic initiative for the government. Nation branding with its wide range of audience-engaging techniques is one of the communication approaches available to the government in war.

For Ukraine, Russian full-scale invasion has hinged the fate of its nationhood on stable flow of Western military equipment and macro financial assistance. As the war has been becoming larger in scale with every month, it has naturally been depleting Ukraine’s Soviet military stocks, more infrastructure got destroyed, millions of refugees had to flee the country – all of those war consequences have made the scale and quality of foreign to grow exponentially. Moreover, Ukraine has relied on support from the democratic states. In contrast to authoritarian regimes, democratic governments must approve military and financial assistance to foreign nations under the strict public and institutional supervision. Arguably, most of the elected officials there would not likely risk their political future by deciding against the wishes or sympathies of their electorate. Therefore, Ukraine had to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of both Western elites and publics to sustain a continuous flow of foreign support.

Lastly, in contextual dimension Ukrainian strategic nation branding efforts have been greatly amplified by a peculiar quality of the technology-driven era, that is, rapid and intensive social and traditional media attention to large-scale national tragedies. International attention is incremental for nation branding because it is vital to capture the ever-changing attention of modern audiences among the myriad of other events throughout the world. Arguably, this is one of the reasons why there is always such a fierce competition between states to hold the large international sporting events like Olympics or Football World Cups. In this regard, due to recent technological developments the largest war on the European subcontinent since WWII became the most media-covered and documented conflict the world has ever seen so far. Widespread, almost unrestricted access to the Internet, even on the fiercest battlegrounds in Ukraine (thanks to Western-supplied technology such as *Starlink*) made it possible for Ukrainian army, national and foreign media to promptly broadcast footages and messages to the world. As will be shown below, such technological advancements allow for the deployment of more clever nation branding toolboxes during wartime.

RQ2: Under such contextual circumstances, Ukrainian leadership's strategic priority has been to rebrand Ukrainian national image, that is, to replace the previous unfavorable perception of Ukraine with the one that would make it attractive for key Western audiences. Additionally, the goal has been to solidify widespread public and political support for the Ukrainian war narrative among Western partners. As a result, since the beginning of the invasion, Ukrainian government has been orienting its communication efforts to reinforce nation (re)branding.

In this section, we aim to elucidate institutional aspect of text production during wartime. However, it has to be noted that delving into Ukrainian government decision making procedures and details is almost impossible due to obvious wartime reasons. Except for those stories published and framed directly by the government, so far only a handful of journalists and insiders have had access to the Ukrainian 'inner kitchen', such as an American journalist S. Shuster with his 2024 book *The Showman* [34] or, albeit indirectly, a Polish insider Z. Parafianowicz with his 2023 book *Poland at War* [31]. Therefore, it is obvious that more detailed, verifiable, and rich in detail analysis could be possible after enough time passes or the war comes to an end.

Firstly, there has been a huge focus on state and private partnership as conventional nation branding theory prescribes. Designing attractive narratives for modern audiences is a skill that is "akin to art, rather than a science" [33]. Therefore, bureaucracy-staffed state apparatuses have started to contract the services of creative agencies to develop such narratives and implement successful campaigns. For Ukraine, in less than a month since the war started, the Office of President of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, and the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine appointed a local branding company *Banda* to develop an urgent nation branding campaign "*Be Brave Like Ukraine*". After its official start at April 8, 2022, it would mainstream in 15 countries worldwide being displayed at biggest streets and the websites of the Western world. Elaborating on war-inspired international media attention, Ukrainian government and *Banda* engaged in active promotion campaign, getting support from the renowned global media to utilize their surfaces and audiences to push through a braver, rebranded version of Ukraine. N. Kaneva applied a critical discourse approach to this initiative, noting that Ukraine appropriated those values and concepts, among Western audiences that would resonate with them, such as protection of democracy against evil

(entrenched in Western *Cold War* narrative) or universal values of heroism and bravery [21]. In the end, such a campaign is an example of the swiftness of the Ukrainian government response to the emergent need of rebranding in the face of growing dependency on Western support in long exhausting war against Russia.

Secondly, the Ukrainian government has put a greater emphasis on the role of leadership and personality of Ukrainian President V. Zelenskiy. G. Lee stated that individuals who are perceived as international heroes and celebrities serve as role models working over "certain universal values" as well as "setting an international agenda to achieve certain national or international goals" [25, p. 398]. Even before his election in 2019, V. Zelenskiy himself has effectively served as a marketer of new Ukraine by ridiculing older generations of corrupt politicians predominant in the post-Soviet states (albeit tailored for limited post-Soviet audiences). Since the start of the war, international media and researchers naturally emphasized on the fact of rapid transformation of President Zelenskiy into immensely popular world leader [20].

Wielding sufficient media and symbolic authority in Ukraine and over the Post-Soviet space, almost immediately after the war V. Zelenskiy has taken the role of "normative entrepreneur" for the sake of bolstering Ukrainian government communication and national brand. Being a derivative from a wider economic theory of entrepreneurship and rationality, normative entrepreneurship is a process of construction, framing and persuasive conveying of norms in international relations (IR) by state or private, collective or individual actors [28, p. 483]. By norms in IR C. Wunderlich understood behaviors that are socially appropriate and thus permitted for actors in complex social environments [40]. As norms are prone to change, some charismatic individuals are able to change and set those standards in respective fields, such as those with Martin Luther King with individual rights movements [35]. Lastly, proactive norm distribution was identified as a useful strategy for smaller states that are looking for a niche and visibility in international relations [7, p. 48].

Right after the full-scale invasion, V. Zelenskiy's skilled team of PR-managers and speechwriters recognized the opening window of opportunity in the niche of international moral leadership at the time of war. Arguably, his personal image of young, fit, brave, and truthful president of a small country under existential threat perfectly met the demand for a 'hero fighting evil' archetype universal in every culture, specifically in the West. Most importantly, his personal image and messages he directed outwards reflected his actions.

The Western elites and wider publics were impressed with his famous phrase “I need ammo, not a ride” in the early days of the war, yet there are other examples, such as regular visiting the frontline (where he also gave an interview to the US *Fox News*) or his emotional display after experiencing the site of the *Bucha massacre* in April 2022. Moreover, in his official communication, V. Zelenskiy appealed with morally imbued statements not only to his counterparts from the Western countries, but also directly to mass support rallies organized by the Ukrainian refugees and local governments throughout big and small European cities. Overall, he embodied those values featured in the “*Be Brave like Ukraine*” campaign.

As a result, international perception of the Ukrainian government officials started to shift from an image of corrupt post-Soviet elites to the young sympathetic leader. In his book “*Poland at war*”, Z. Parafianowicz supported this claim by stating that since April 2022, Ukrainian government has been effectively utilizing V. Zelenskiy’s personal image and a unique context of the capital Kyiv freed from the siege and memorable places (such as Bucha or Irpin) to elaborate on a Western political trend. V. Zelenskiy was happy to invite eager foreign leaders to Kyiv and to share with them a bit of his moral and emotional image in exchange for more weapons and official statements in support of Ukraine’s Euro Atlantic aspirations. At those meetings, Ukraine forged valuable institutional and personal bonds with many foreign leaders that previously were at best indifferent to Ukraine [31]. As J. Nye added, V. Zelenskiy managed to achieve “... not just Western sympathy but a substantial increase in deliveries of the military equipment that Ukraine needed for the hard-power task at hand” [29].

Thirdly, Ukrainian embassies around the world have actually utilized both “*Be Brave like Ukraine*” campaign and V. Zelenskiy symbolic power to organize supplementary campaigns in the other crucial fields, such as attracting foreign fighters to help Ukraine repel Russian invasion. While this government effort surely had military purposes in the first place, it did in fact produce tangible results in the sphere of positive branding of Ukraine.

On February 27, 2022, President Zelenskiy formed an institution of the International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine, which obtained a dedicated website and promotion campaign by the government featuring co-aligned messaging resonating with “*Be Brave like Ukraine*” campaign. It supplemented private volunteer organizations already fighting in Ukraine since 2014, such as the *Georgian Legion*. International Legion’s main goal was to bolster Ukrain-

ian army with combat-seasoned fighters and, importantly, to give additional legality and predictability to the volunteering. However, as one of the Legion’s members recalled, initially a recruitment criterion was rather loose, allowing in “those who just wanted to do photo-ops with a gun” also known as “*TikTok soldiers*” [39]. Leaving out military and organizational reasons and consequences of such an approach, from communicative standpoint it reflected the need of the Ukrainian government to bolster international recognition via people-to-people diplomacy, to have foreign citizens share their unique, emotionally-rich stories and experiences about the war in Ukraine.

For instance, S. Ting Lee drew attention to the foreign fighters with large social media follower pools that transmitted Ukrainian realities of war and crowdfunding initiatives among previously unreachable audiences [26]. She mentioned a South Korean military blogger with 700,000 *YouTube* followers who got arrested in his country for fighting and getting injured in Ukraine, thus gaining additional sensational visibility worldwide. After returning home, those volunteers typically keep their close emotional and organizational connection to Ukraine. Some of them even engage in “people diplomacy” by influencing their governments to bolster up support to Ukraine. For instance, US Army veteran J. Roberts who is currently volunteering in Ukraine approached US citizens and specifically US House of Representatives’ speaker M. Johnson with an emotional plea to continue supporting Ukraine amid Congressional deadlock [32].

Interestingly, the Ukrainian initiative of encouraging the deployment and simplifying the procedures for foreign volunteers indirectly contributed to the creation of a curious online organization. Elaborating on the international salience of the Russo-Ukrainian war and establishing social links with foreign volunteers on the ground, social media users from *X* created *NAFO* (North-Atlantic Fella Organization). Since then, *NAFO* has been increasingly instrumental in amplifying Ukrainian messages in Western social media, countering Russian propaganda, and fundraising for the Ukrainian military and volunteers, being a perfect example of Horbyk and Orlova’s “memetic warfare” concept [20]. Ukrainian government even participated in *NAFO* social media campaign: Then-defense minister O. Reznikov upon request changed his profile picture to align with the organization and acknowledged that “*NAFO expansion is non-negotiable!*”, receiving a large amount of coverage and reposts in *X* [2]. Arguably, such move from the Ministry of Defense’s PR-team intended to present the institution as contemporary and responsive as well

as to gain additional salience to Ukrainian military and volunteering efforts in the Western social media.

RQ3: In this section, some of the successful discursive nation branding tactics used by the Ukrainian government are critically approached.

Wartime emotional discourse

In our previous article [4], we argued that despite historically entrenched misconceptions among Western policy and security experts about the lack of competence of Ukrainian soldiers regarding mastering advanced Western military capabilities, Ukraine still managed to obtain modern air defence systems from its Western allies in autumn-winter 2022, such as US-made *Patriot*. Some experts were sure that those systems would escalate relations with Russia or were just too complicated for weak, post-Soviet Ukrainian army – and this misconception translated into official decision to deny official Ukrainian request to buy the system. After the full-scale invasion started and against the background of the Russian indiscriminate bombings of the Ukrainian cities, Ukraine framed its plea for modern weapons by appealing to emotions and compassion.

For instance, at the end of his first wartime speech in the US Congress on March 16, 2022, President Zelenskiy’s main goal was to urge US to close the skies over Ukraine. To amplify his message, he showed a 2 and a half min long emotional video [41]. We observe a quick sequence of visual images that underline a sharp contrast between peaceful, the ideal situation (Ukraine without war, with a clear sky) and grim war times (war and dangerous sky). Peace scenes are shot on a background of summer sunny days: panorama of Ukrainian cities, a child plays with doves (a symbol of peace), a family of three is seen happy, holding hands (a symbol of support and unity). Then, there is a part of grim war time as Russian indiscriminate rocket attacks on the same Ukrainian cities are shown. From one side, we observe a surveillance footage of ordinary civilian witnessing missile attacks and running for their lives, frightened. Surveillance footage provides additional credibility to the scene as well as adds a factor of human compassion as typically people tend to sympathize with other’s suffering. From another side, there is a visual emphasis on showing abstract destruction such as blazing fire and disintegrating buildings.

Next, sparkline storytelling is used to underline contrasts between current wartime and desired peacetime to engage the audience with emotional storytelling. For example, viewers could see a 2-second sequence featuring a street that changes from a sunny tourist destination to the barricaded, black-and-white battlefield with soldiers. In the same vein, in the

first shot we see a child running over a playground’s bridge – in the next shot, a child loses its agency as its mother carries it to safety over a broken road bridge. A smiling father holds his son in his arms, in the next shot it is a Ukrainian police officer with a crying child in his arms. Audio component of the video also works for generating emotions of compassion among the audience as it contains contrasting sounds of children laughing and crying. M. Skoryk’s *Melody*, often called a soul of Ukraine, was used as a soundtrack. Crucially, it has sad and tragic motives along with a more optimistic, life-affirming direction at its climax. It has been performed during emotionally imbued public diplomacy events, such as the 2022 “Concert for Peace” in Amsterdam. Overall, this audiovisual product clearly appeals to emotion and compassion to human tragedy and loss, showing the realities of war in Ukraine and emphasizing on the desired way-out of the unacceptable situation, that is, Zelenskiy’s core message to the US Congress – to close the skies over Ukraine.

Utilizing Western weapons as a nation branding tool

Eventually, Ukraine managed to receive Western air defense in the autumn of 2022, following Russian tactic to destroy civilian energy infrastructure in Ukraine. Arguably, this contextual factor of deliberate civilian targeting by Russia added resonance to the Ukrainian emotional messages as the depiction of Ukrainian schools and hospitals without electricity and heat contributed to the matter. After receiving the systems, Ukrainian government started using them not only for immediate purpose of protecting its skies against Russian attacks, but also in the sphere of nation branding.

Ukraine used US-made *Patriots* to rebrand its military’s image of old-fashioned force incapable of dealing with modern systems. Firstly, US media reported the impressions of US instructors who called Ukrainian trainees highly motivated, experienced, “impressive and absolutely a quick study” as they were able to fix those complex systems faster than their US counterparts [10]. Secondly, after US *Patriots* started to protect the skies over the capital Kyiv against most modern Russian hypersonic missiles, Ukraine utilized this fact to underline the increasing capabilities of its military. Unique institutional organization allowed for the creation of dedicated military stories in the social media featuring the images of the *Patriot* system that downed Russian missiles and awarding the Ukrainian officers. Remains of the hypersonic rocket were obviously shown to the foreign press. Moreover, the first case of successful interception, publicly verified by US military, was framed by Ukraine as a “historic success”, and a commendable example of the Ukrainian

American cooperation. Ukrainian Air Force Commander even publicly claimed that “it is impossible” for Russian hypersonic missile to destroy the American system [36]. Not only did that messaging countered previously entrenched misconceptions about Ukraine and its military in the Western social media, but also effectively marketed Western technology as highly capable and dependable to initiate a wave of patriotism and engagement among the Western audiences.

Lack of recognition as an advantage in discursive realm: David v. Goliath approach

Thanks to its lack of agency and recognition, just before the full-scale invasion Ukraine found itself being an international underdog facing a military defeat by the nuclear power. Yet, Ukraine managed to subvert the expectations as after the first month of the war it became clear that Putin will not have swift victory. Having withstood the initial attack, Ukraine then constructed its communications around the “narrative arc of David versus Goliath” [20], a well-known story of a human defeating a giant against all odds. By utilizing this approach in the social media, Ukraine effectively managed to discursively turn previous lack of recognition from weakness to strength. Therefore, we critically approach two distinctive governmental nation branding efforts that are using this toolbox.

State Border Service of Ukraine



Fig. 1. Russian missile boat “Ivanovets” blocks a light Ukrainian Border Guard boat

One of the perfect examples of David v. Goliath arc in the Ukrainian government communication is a case of State Border Service of Ukraine (SBSU). In Figure 1, we observe a photo published by this institution on February 02, 2024. On that day, Ukraine managed to destroy a Russian missile boat “Ivanovets” near Crimea. Being a massive military achievement for Ukraine per se, the SBSU amplified it with David v. Goliath-like narrative:

“On the photo: Balaklava bay, February 2014, “Ivanivets”, armed with anti-ship missiles, is steaming, puffing, and intimidating a boat of the SBSU: “i am ruzian military ship...[?]””. And the boat,

despite being small, yet shines defiantly and with full confidence that everything will be [?] Ukraine” [1].

From a mere visual point of view, viewers observe just a small Ukrainian boat (featuring Ukrainian national flag) facing a much larger ship. However, being posted almost 10 years later, after the bigger ship got sunk by small unmanned vessels, the image perfectly fits narrative tropes of David v. Goliath story, reproduced by the small Ukrainian boat and big “Ivanovets” ship destroyer. The text of the post indeed underlines, even ridicules Russian ship (“steaming, puffing”) with an attempt to impersonate it, to give it a human-like agency (“intimidating a boat”). In contrast, the Ukrainian boat is sacralized and heroized, e.g., “shines defiantly”. Notice also an extensive use of informal *emojis* that reflect and amplify the characteristics given both to the Russian and Ukrainian ships. In some aspects, this post also elaborates on previous symbols of Ukrainian resistance, such as world-famous “Russian warship go **** yourself” story, in which despite the initial lack of resources, Ukraine eventually restored historical justice with *Moskva* cruiser.

UNITED24 and cooperation with popular cultural phenomenon

R. Horbyk and D. Orlova introduced the concept of “memetic warfare”, explaining how Ukrainian wartime values of courage and resistance could be embodied in simple and catchy symbols [20] with notable examples of *Patron the Dog* or *Ghost of Kyiv*. However, generally it is harder for new brand symbols to have the same cultural resonance and universal appeal to wider audiences as the deeply entrenched ones. Rational actors in IR seek to utilize already entrenched ones, according to M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink [16, p. 906]. Following this trend, Ukraine has been approaching Western audiences by linking its values to the universally popular symbols that in certain cases even amplified its own discourse.



Fig. 2. A post by Mark Hamill on his official X page

Government fundraising initiative *UNITED24* is a good example of state-private partnership. Using V. Zelenskiy's personal image, Ukraine has been successfully cooperating with brand ambassadors among the Western leading public figures to increase the outcomes of fundraising and nation branding. Mark Hamill is better known to millions of *Star Wars* fans as *Luke Skywalker*, a fictional *Rebel* hero who confronts evil *Empire* to save the universe. Discursive resonance between Ukrainian cause and *Star Wars* works on multiple levels: on macro level, weaker Ukrainian state successfully resists against the nuclear power, thus reflecting *Star Wars* narrative of "good Rebels" against "evil Empire". On microlevel, by supporting Ukraine M. Hamill aligns his fictional character *Luke Skywalker* with a good side. M. Hamill constructs his messaging accordingly: In his X post from February 26, 2024, he directly replied to Russian embassy in South Africa that "the Ukrainian people are the Rebels-YOU are the Evil Empire" [18]. Surely, it is natural for him to be a Ukrainian brand ambassador and fundraise drones for the Ukrainian army.

Other *Star Wars* symbols of resistance have been also utilized in a meaningful way to give Ukrainian nation-brand additional recognition and power. For example, in 2022 M. Hamill posted an image, on which Rebels' *X-Wing* fighter in Ukrainian colors confronts hundreds of mighty Empire's *Star Destroyers* in Russian colors with a slogan "RESIST: Stand with Ukraine" [19]. The slogan bolsters up the image, tying it to the Ukrainian narrative and ultimately making it a part of the new Ukrainian nation brand. Yet again, not only this image builds upon universally known symbols of the pervasive *Star Wars* franchise. It also recreates the narrative trope of David v. Goliath by demonstrating an uneven battle and yet leaves out no doubts who will be the victor (as in *Star Wars* 'good guys' always defeat the 'bad guys').

Conclusions. In this article, critical discourse analysis has been used to approach the issue of wartime nation branding efforts of Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Specifically, Ukrainian govern-

ment wartime communication aimed at rebranding its historically entrenched lack of agency and recognition worldwide has been analyzed in 3 intertwined dimensions of sociocultural practice, institutional dimension of text production, and the content and tactics of the nation branding campaigns themselves.

On the sociocultural level, it was found that wartime has effectively created a window of opportunity for the Ukrainian government to strategically prioritize (re)branding efforts. Long and exhausting full-scale war with a more resource-rich enemy has put Ukrainian government into critical dependence on Western democracies. Democratic decision making in those countries underlined the urgent need for sustaining wide elite and public support for Ukraine and its constructed image abroad.

On the institutional level, resourceful state-private partnership and personal branding and diplomacy of President Zelensky could be attributed to form the basis for wartime nation branding efforts of Ukraine. Government initiatives included conventional cooperation with local branding agencies, such as world-famous *Banda* company with the "Be Brave like Ukraine" campaign. Importantly, they resonated with carefully constructed image of President Zelensky that pushed through the same values and desired behaviors (bravery and truthfulness) as branding initiatives and therefore attracted Western leaders to form valuable political bonds.

Lastly, on a textual level, several cases were presented to illustrate discourse practices Ukraine used in nation branding campaigns. To acquire modern aid defense, emotional appeal was used to generate compassion among the US Congress' members. Moreover, Ukraine utilized successful application of those systems as a communication tool to rebrand the international image of its military as an effective force and instigate Western patriotism. Moreover, narrative trope of David v. Goliath has been used to discursively switch previous weaknesses of international image of a weak incapable state facing a 'superpower' into advantages with each military victory or clever collaboration with popular sci-fi franchise.

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Омельченко М. В. НАЦІОНАЛЬНИЙ БРЕНДИНГ УКРАЇНИ В ПЕРІОД РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ

В епоху глобалізації сприятливий міжнародний імідж незамінний для політичного, соціально-економічного і культурного добробуту держави. Втім, у воєнний час забезпечення позитивного національного бренду є стратегічною необхідністю, оскільки зовнішня політична та військова підтримка безпосередньо залежить від здатності держави залучати союзників серед іноземних еліт та громадськості. У цій статті автор висвітлює використання державою інструментарію національного брендингу для побудови сприятливого сприйняття з-поміж ключових іноземних аудиторій під час війни.

Методологія дослідження полягає у застосуванні критичного дискурс-аналізу до кейс стаді комунікаційної політики України у воєнний час (2022–2024 рр.). Автор відповідає на три дослідницьких питання: Як і чому соціокультурний контекст російсько-української війни вплинув на рішення українського уряду застосувати національний брендинг у зовнішній комунікації? В якому інституційному середовищі відбувалося створення та реалізація урядових кампаній з національного брендингу? Як українські урядові кампанії з національного брендингу конструювали сприйняття нового українського бренду з-поміж західних еліт та громадськості для забезпечення життєво важливої військово-політичної підтримки?

Результати дослідження доводять, що російське повномасштабне вторгнення та залежність від військової та політичної підтримки західних країн мотивували український уряд залучитися до креативного національного брендингу. Інституційна архітектура зовнішніх комунікацій, що складається з ефективного державно-приватного співробітництва та персонального брендингу, створила необхідні умови для розгортання індивідуальної, емоційно-зabarвленої тактики залучення аудиторії. Нарешті, на текстуальному рівні розглядаються кілька прикладів для ілюстрації практичного застосування інструментарію національного брендингу, зокрема наративних засобів та креативної співпраці з популярним явищем масової культури.

Ключові слова: *наратив, медіа дискурс, дискурс аналіз, національний брендинг, російсько-українська війна, публічна дипломатія.*