

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA ON CIVILIAN PERCEPTIONS OF
THE ACTORS INVOLVED IN ARMED CONFLICT**

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Abstract: *Throughout history mankind has faced various conflicts motivated by territoriality, natural resources, religion, geostrategic position, the desire to dominate and/or subdue the other, etc. The Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space was no exception, so I would like to bring to attention the battles fought by Burebista, Decebal, Gelu, Menumorut, Ștefan cel Mare, Vlad Țepeș, Mihai Viteazul and the list could go on until The Events of December 1989. Nicolae Iorga said that "a people that does not know its past is condemned to repeat it". The benefits brought to Romanians by Romania's accession to the E.U. (2007) and the N.A.T.O. (2004), as well as the Romanian people's confidence that a crisis situation could not happen again in our lands, led to the most diverse reactions when The Events in Ukraine escalated (2022) and I would mention with your permission only a few of them, as they were highlighted in the Romanian media: Passport queues [1] to be able to flee the war to another safer area; polls showing that Romanians are no longer willing to defend their state borders in case of conflict [2]; different reactions for Ukrainian [3] and Syrian [4] refugees, etc. An independent analyst of the above mentioned situations would say that it is natural for people to react and that this reaction cannot be unanimous, because we as individuals are also different. The question then naturally arises Why for them ONE is THE GOOD, and for the OTHERS the same people are THE BAD. Are perceptions influenced by a lack of knowledge of history, traditions, culture, values, etc.? Or is it all the result of media and social media activity? Another question that might arise is where do they get their information? Do they have correspondents in the conflict zone? Are they familiar with the reality of the conflict zone? Or does the media pick up a story from a trust and by the snowball method roll it up and each of those who pick up the story personalize it as their own? Is there a possibility that the media in a conflict situation will change its discourse according to certain interests, the involvement of certain actors in the daily life of the media? It is worth examining the situation and why the media are making value judgments and not presenting the situation impartially. Or is there a possibility that the media are paving the way for the power in each state to direct resources according to interests that are not always the most honest? We can remember an area of conflict where opinions are different at a somewhat limited interval. I would draw attention to the Events in Ukraine or as it is known Euromaidan (2013 - 2014) or Events in Ukraine (2022) or Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Euromaidan counted in the protest of citizens following the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the process of preparation to sign the Association Agreement with the*

European Union as well as the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union. Started by students, the protests were joined by opposition parties as well as various pro-European groups. As a result of the growing number of protesters on 30 November 2013, the government decided to suppress the movement by using special forces (Berkut or Golden Eagle) and a large number of people were injured, while others took refuge in Michael's Monastery in St Michael's Square. The action to suppress the movement had the opposite effect making the movement even more known among Ukrainians and worldwide, but the events of 30 November 2013 were also a point of change in the direction of the protests turning from pro-European protests to the much increased antigovernment ones. The events in Ukraine in 2022 consist of the invasion of Ukraine, after the Russian president had previously created the administrative regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent entities and sent military troops to these areas. These events have led to the escalation of fuel and energy prices, affected the mobility of people and goods and why not everyday life, with the end result that most families have seen their money become more expensive. Each time these events have divided the population, led to the impoverishment of a large mass of the population and those who have suffered from them are children, women and the elderly. In order not to fall into the propaganda of either side of the conflict and to analyse the situation objectively, we must bear in mind that propaganda exists in both democracy and dictatorship. It is worth remembering the situation in which the US administration delivered the war in Iraq to the population, the Nazi regime using propaganda to gain the confidence of the population in the correctness of the ideology promoted. Nowadays propaganda is often camouflaged and promoted through the media and social media. Conflicts in the media sell and make ratings, which can be an excuse for those who resort to rallying to one side or the other, because in the end they will only gain. Like it or not, war propaganda has the same goals every time. First and foremost it will seek to generate a sense of fear, with the aim that once people are frightened of losing their life savings or the risk of losing their lives, they will more readily support armed action. Another part of propaganda is censorship, which can be of three types: direct, indirect and self-censorship. Linguistic distortion is a third type of propaganda and with the help of bad words clear images of the adversary are built up, and with the help of good words people's positive feelings are appealed to. The fourth form of propaganda is the management of feelings through which emotions are controlled and favourable emotions for the party concerned are formed. Lying and deception are also a part of propaganda which uses a mixture of truth, more precisely half-truths and lies, in order to influence the population, and thus it is done repeatedly in order to gain as many followers as possible. Military entertainment as part of propaganda aims to gain as many followers as possible by delivering war films, serials, documentaries to the population, and this can be gained most successfully by delivering war video games to people of all ages. Populism, as part of propaganda, is political behaviour aimed at winning the sympathy of the population. Not least aestheticization is the part of propaganda, whereby the ugly side of an armed/military conflict is presented as much more beautiful and appealing than it really is. I conclude by recalling what the American sociologist Walter Lippmann said "propaganda is that branch of the lie which often deceives friends and never enemies".

Keywords: conflict, propaganda, war;

1. Justification of the chosen theme

In the context of the *liberalization of information in the 21st century* when each of us has, one could say, instant access to global events, and most of the time we acquire information about them without verifying their veracity from credible sources, the question may arise, we consider it natural, whether it is truth or manipulation. As the theme of our event was Wartime Speeches for many of us the question may arise *What is war?*

Our study will take place within the boundaries of the concepts of war, armed conflict and media versus social media.

The first concept we turned to for our study was war. Boudon et al (1996) stated that war is "violent conflict between various forms of political organisation". War is seen by Zamfir & Vlasceanu (1993) as the type of "social interaction between two or more communities, carried out in the form of violent conflict, usually armed and based on strictly determined rules". Tzu (2013) reports on war as "a matter of vital importance to the state, the domain of life and death, the path leading to survival or destruction". War can also be said to be "a state of hostile armed conflict, usually open and declared between states or nations" [5] or as Orend (2019) mentioned that it should be understood as "real, intentional and widespread armed conflict between political communities". Perhaps one of the most pragmatic definitions of war was made by Clausewitz (2017) who stated that war is "an act of force to compel your adversary to do your will". These definitions can be said to need to be adapted in the context of the current evolution of humanity because in the 21st century the characteristics of war have become increasingly complex, and war is fought in an interconnected global society, engagement or involvement in war is increasingly widespread, and a significant proportion of states support one actor or the other according to their own interests, and not least wars also need to be analysed in terms of future conduct and gain.

For our study, we will turn to the most topical conflict in the media, namely the one that has antagonised relations between Russia and Ukraine. We have chosen to use the term conflict rather than war for our study, not because of the importance of one over the other (both are to be frowned upon, as the innocent and collateral victims alike, time and time again, are children, women and the elderly), but for the simple fact that we wish to have a complete puzzle for our study that encompasses the historical development of relations between the two states. When we talk about conflicts, these in the view of Boudon et al (1996) are those "manifestations of open antagonisms between two entities (individual or collective) with incompatible interests at the moment, regarding the possession of goods - material or symbolic". Zamfir & Vlasceanu

(1993), on the other hand, state that conflict is "open opposition ... struggle between individuals, groups, social classes, states with divergent or incompatible economic, political, religious, ethnic or racial interests with destructive effects on social interaction".

A final concept used for our study was that of mass media, and we have chosen to refer to it in contrast to social media, because in 21st century conflicts these two are intertwined. Thus Marshall & Scott (2014) stated about mass media that it "is defined as large organisations using one or more of these technologies (print, radio or television) to communicate with others". Mills (2000) mentioned about mass media that it has "two important sociological characteristics: first, is that a small number of people can communicate with a very large number of people; second, the audience has no way of responding at hand". Proffess & McCombs report on the mass media as "the major primary sources of national political information ...for most media provide the best and most reliable readily available approximation of changing political realities". Bruns (2008) and Benkler (2006) noted that mass media "has traditionally functioned as an intermediary system between society and political institutions", whereas social media "allows both citizens and politicians to bypass the media and influence each other". At the same time, social networks, as Pătrut & Pătrut point out, support "a kind of democratisation of knowledge and information, transforming people from content consumers into content producers".

What needs to be taken into account when analysing information, both media and social media, is propaganda and its vehicles. Bernays (2017) defined propaganda as "the vast and ongoing effort that is undertaken to capture minds in the interests of a policy, product or idea ... in either case it is good or bad, depending on the merits of the cause and the accuracy of the information". Pratkanis & Aronson (2001) noted that while originally propaganda was defined as "the dissemination of biased ideas and opinions, often through the use of lies and deception ... it is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of getting the recipient of the conversation to voluntarily come to accept that opinion as their own". Propaganda depending on the actors involved (pro or con) can be in the service of upholding ideals or on the contrary, in the service of eroding them, because as Stanley (2015) reminds us "all social and political movements struggle to create a favourable space for ideological actions, beliefs and alternative movements". In fact propaganda is a competition in a global theatre that is often played out in a closed theatre. In most cases politics and mainstream media join forces against the identified adversary for common goals (power, money, influence, persuading citizens etc.), we can recall the bringing of coalition troops into the Iraq conflict as reported by Rutherford (2004), but also the case of the discrediting of the British miners' union during the Thatcher

government as reported by Milne (2005). News in the area of an armed conflict becomes the most important part of the daily routine of television, and for credibility it involves experts, official experts expressing their views, their own views in many cases and conveying to the general public what to think, and deviation from this position sometimes brings a wave of criticism from certain interest groups, publicists and authorities, but it should be borne in mind as Curtis (2003) noted that in some cases news "is not neutral and a natural phenomenon ... are rather the manufactured output of an ideology".

As a conclusion to the above we can state that against our beliefs, but also against the good faith of the media, actors involved in any armed conflict will want to influence the general public first and foremost to get the media to certify their actions regardless of which side they are on, i.e. the attacker or the attacked.

2. Brief overview of the evolution of human relations in the area of the last armed conflict.

The history of mankind is littered with numerous conflicts, which have erupted for various reasons, each with the power of one actor over the other at its core. Thus, starting with the Old Testament, which reminds us of the first break in relations between Cain and Abel, we recall the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (with roots dating back to the Ottoman period), the Kashmir conflict (India and Pakistan), the Kurdish-Turkish conflict (between Turkey and Kurdish insurgent groups), The Syrian Civil War (caused by the failure of political and economic reforms), but also the Russian-Georgian War (2008), the Transnistrian War (Moldovan Republic and the self-proclaimed Moldovan-Nistrian Republic), the Crimean Crisis (anti-government protests from 2013-2014) and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

It is significant what Boler (2008) recalled about armed conflict that "ordinary people do not want war ... but it is the rulers of a country who determine policy and it is always a simple matter to attract people, whether it is a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, a parliament or a communist dictatorship ... people can be persuaded to do the bidding of the leaders ... it's easy, all you have to do is tell them they are under attack and denounce the pacifists for their lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger ... It works the same way in every country".

For our study we chose the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. After an entire troubled history of the Ukrainian nation, on 24 August 1991 the Ukrainian Declaration of Independence was adopted, and as a result the current Ukrainian state was formed. By 1999 Ukraine was facing a recession, with inflation escalating year on year. Since 2000 the country has been experiencing economic growth. In 2004, the Orange Revolution began (protests and strikes following the

announcement of the results of the presidential elections, in which Viktor Yanukovich was declared the winner). In 2014, the Crimean Peninsula, part of Ukraine, was annexed by the Russian Federation. Also worthy of attention are Euro Maidan (2013 - 2014) and the events of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The evolution of the Ukrainian nation we believe is the right of historians, but our study from a sociological point of view aims simply to analyze the study of social life as a result of the conflicts between Russians and Ukrainians. The study aims to analyze the two actors with their good and not so good sides and if possible to identify lessons from this conflict, but also to learn what could be useful for us to avoid future conflicts.

As Menon & Rumer (2015) note "Russia remains a special case due to its size, geostrategic position and long imperial tradition. The crisis in Ukraine is undoubtedly a pivotal event for Europe". Ukraine is a symptom of a big problem for Europe, namely Russia. The main challenges are political, security and economic, and for the coming years will be developing a new strategy to deal with its giant neighbour. This strategy must be built on a realistic understanding of Russia, rather than what the West wishes it were and hopes it will one day become. Unless it is approached with the ruthless realism and serious resources it deserves, stability and security in Europe will prove increasingly shaky. What the world powers unfortunately do not understand is that in recent times, as Toal (2017) noted, is that "world politics has long been characterised by contentious battles over space". Interestingly, Yekelchuk (2015) mentions in his paper that "although Russian and Western interests have clashed in parts of the globe as far apart as Venezuela and Syria, Ukraine's geographic location and its special place in Russian history have much to do with this country becoming the main site of growing tensions between Russia and the West". On the current events in Ukraine we recall what Plochy (2015) stated in his paper, namely that "whatever the outcome of the current crisis in Ukraine, on its resolution depends not only the future of Ukraine, but also the future of relations between Eastern and Western Europe - Russia and the European Union - and therefore the future of Europe as a whole". Of the conflicts in Ukraine, Yurchenko (2018) said that "ideological, ethnic or linguistic parities are often ideological/political, effective and manipulated rather than causal ... being fuelled by the political discourses that accompany them".

We can conclude that regardless of the aims of one side or the other, at least at the time of our study, no religious, political, military etc. leader or influencer adopts the discourse of peace between the two actors. It seems that they only want to identify the culprit versus the perpetrators and that no one wants to place the two actors involved in the conflict at the peace

table because a large part of the population - children, elderly people and women - suffers and society loses from material destruction and loss of life. Many of us look at many of those involved as being young, inexperienced in the career of arms, but they probably overlook the fact that, as is the case all over the world, in any conflict, the front line is always the youngest, and that is because it has been said in society, including ours, that armies are made up of professionals. In Romanian society, for example, many of us know that the compulsory army has been abolished, but the reality is that, as stated in Law 395/2005, "as of 1 January 2007, the performance of compulsory service as a military officer on term and military officer on reduced term is suspended", but "during the state of war, the state of mobilisation, and during the state of siege, the performance of military service becomes compulsory, under the terms of the law", and according to Law 446/2006 "Romanian citizens have the right and the obligation to defend Romania", and "upon the declaration of mobilization and state of war or the establishment of a State of siege, the performance of military service as a military term becomes mandatory for men between 20 and 35 years of age, who meet the criteria for military service".

3. Study methodology

The approach of our study was based on the fact that any topic of study, research requires an underlying paradigm, and in this case we used the qualitative study (Lapan, Quartaroli, Riemer, 2012, Tracy, 2013, Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Study design

The fundamental objective of the study is to understand the ways in which the media influence the civilian population's perception of the actors involved in the armed conflict.

Secondary objectives

In order to achieve the fundamental objective of our study we set the following secondary objectives:

- a) determining the actual involvement of the media in influencing perceptions of actors involved in armed conflict;
- b) establishing how the media works with actors involved in an armed conflict to influence perceptions.

Survey questions

The questions that have been the basis of the approach to the present study have been established in accordance with the fundamental objective and the secondary objectives of the study. These are:

a) What are the concrete ways in which the media are directly involved in influencing perceptions of actors involved in an armed conflict?

b) What is the representation of the civilian population in determining the media's relationship of influence for actors involved in an armed conflict?

Research stages

In order to carry out the study, we went through the following steps:

Phase 1 involved semi-structured interviews with a population of 11 persons (5 foreign nationals, female, in special situations, from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine, hosted by individuals, and 6 persons, 3 female and 3 male, who hosted foreign nationals, female, in special situations, from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine). The sampling method used to select the population was one of the most commonly used in sociological research: we analysed the initial interviews and identified individuals who could constitute the initial categories that formed the basis of the study.

Phase 2 took place after the 11 interviews had been conducted and involved, in the first phase, the production of transcripts. The second phase of this stage involved a reflective process on the data obtained. The content analysis took into account the theme and the study questions. We discovered clues and keywords that led to the coding of categories in order to achieve the objectives of our study. The data obtained from the interviews were correlated with the observation sheets we completed during the course of each interview.

Phase 3 involved processing the data obtained and building models on the basis of which we progressively developed the theory.

For our study I chose to use qualitative research because it allows us to understand experiences, attitudes, behaviour and I believe that the most important aspect is to understand people's interactions.

For our study we turned to data-driven theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, Corbin & Strauss, 2008, Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) because it uses a set of procedures and techniques to construct an inductively derived theory about the phenomenon, in our case about the influence of the media on civilian perceptions of actors involved in armed conflict. And perhaps not least for our study we turned to data-driven theory because it looks at real-world phenomena and

analyses the information gathered by the researcher without preconceived ideas or assumptions.

The aim of this study, from an ethical point of view, was to find a common boundary, that something that brings together both respect for the rights of the subjects of our study, knowledge, but also the development of science by understanding the phenomenon proposed for study.

4. Study results

Any armed conflict will, unfortunately, bring suffering, loss, destruction, etc., from which large populations will lose. Decisions will be taken by the political class and in which, contrary to the wishes of the population, it will be directly involved, and we say this bearing in mind the last two conflicts that have been in the media spotlight and as a result of which mankind has been faced with the wave of Syrian refugees [6] and the flow of refugees from Ukraine [7], as well as unimaginable violence. Direct violence is visible, while cultural and structural violence are usually invisible. If direct violence harms the body, then cultural violence is responsible for harming the mind. Suppressing direct violence, on the other hand, is in the realm of political negotiation. Ending structural violence requires the elimination of structural injustices, but eliminating cultural violence implies a need to change attitudes and perceptions. The artefacts of cultural violence have been perceived as powerful tools that not only incite conflict but also spread discrimination. Within this theoretical framework of cultural violence, the influence of the media on both conflict and peace takes a prominent role. In the field of cultural violence, the media becomes a place that can give life to artefacts of conflict and ideas for peace. While propaganda research has confirmed the negative effects of cultural violence, it seems that the elimination of cultural violence could be addressed through a similarly positioned peace-oriented media intervention.

Instead of clashing head-on with the power of journalists, armed forces participating in armed conflicts have adapted to the media game, offering openness to the media in order to reduce public and media vigilance. The procedure is the same in any armed conflict: actors involved in military conflict claim to limit censorship to what is necessary for strategic effectiveness and force protection, discourage journalists' access without actually banning it, dominate the procedure by staging the action if necessary, but without doing so excessively. Like other entities in the public eye, the parties to the conflict have fully adapted to the demands of the media society and have understood the need to professionalize the mechanism by which they communicate with journalists. The media has unwittingly become part of the armed

conflict. Often military operations are accompanied by media plans, media relations are managed by professionals, and the forces involved in the conflict invest in internal training to make their participants aware of the need to master the media process and maintain good relations with journalists. Conflict participants have acquired the know-how to provide products (reporting, on-the-scene broadcasts, etc.) that meet the needs of journalists.

In response to the title of our study, i.e. whether civilian perceptions of actors involved in a military conflict can be influenced by the media, it was found that:

a) when people approach material, whether written text or images and media messages, they interpret that material based on their own knowledge and experiences, interpretations that may differ according to age, gender, race, ethnicity and religious background.

b) While a few elites in large media trusts may exert significant control over what news media produce and distribute, personal perspective plays a stronger role in how audience members interpret these messages;

c) although the media and propaganda have often been used as tools to generate hatred and perpetuate conflict, the interest of politicians involved in armed conflict is to understand how it can be used as a tool to maintain and rebuild peace;

d) The transmission of information by the media and social media can impact human thinking, both positively and negatively, which is why it is said that there are two sides to every coin; the most telling example of the role of the media in shaping public opinion is the COVID pandemic -19 when people consumed information about it, often from the media and social media, without checking it in most cases;

e) There are cases where the media has played a role in changing public perception and I would recall the Vietnam War, when images presented to the public questioned the actions of the US government and brought to the public's attention that the US government was lying and the population went from being pro-government to anti-government;

f) The media is considered an important pillar of democracy, and politicians around the world use the media as a tool to shape public opinion on their agenda; and in conflict with politicians they want their effort to be certified for the support of one of the actors involved, even if at the national level the battle with the price gouging seems to be lost;

g) Inevitably people all over the world rely heavily on mass media, all sorts of information is accessible at the click of a button on their smart devices; 21st century mass media relies heavily on ads, and with ads you can win people over very easily;

h) Mass media is used as an important medium to build perception about public awareness, because today the message conveyed by the media is accessible to the masses, and public messages are often promoted in newspapers, on television, radio and social networks; worthy of attention is the idea of by whom it is used and especially for what purposes.

We would like to conclude by saying that it is not wrong to say that the influence of the media is growing every day, the message we receive through the media shapes our opinion to an extent that changes both our attitudes and our behaviour. Media influence can be positive and negative, it all depends on how people around the world perceive the messages.

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NOTES

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