



Putin's Last War: Narratives, Counternarratives, and Early Lessons Learned

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Abstract: In the early hours of February 24, 2022, the armed forces of the Russian Federation and armed formations of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics attacked Ukraine from the north, east, and south. In parallel, Russia conducted massive cyberattacks and propaganda campaigns. To the surprise of many analysts, Ukraine demonstrated exceptional cohesion, resilience, and will to fight. The raging war is already influencing the international security environment and the thinking on societal preparedness, military capabilities and operations, and will continue to do so in the coming decades. This editorial article presents the early lessons learned from the war, with a focus on Russia's propaganda narratives and information warfare and ways to counter them, the role of professional military education, and combat medical support.

Keywords: forecasting, propaganda, disinformation, narrative, resilience, information warfare, professional military education, Global Health Engagement, interoperability

In the turmoil in the spring of 2014, immediately following the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's President Vladimir Putin ordered an attack on Crimea and instigated and supported the separatist activities in Donbas. Encouraged by Russia's

early successes in its war on Ukraine and the lukewarm approach of some Western countries to imposing sanctions, Putin ordered the massive February 2022 invasion, initially focused on Ukraine's capital and leadership. To his surprise, Ukraine showed outstanding resilience and will to defend its sovereignty and integrity at any cost, and the democratic world became more, rather than less, united in helping Ukraine and sanctioning the aggressor.

In the authors' view, Putin's miscalculations and the united response of the Ukrainian society and the West will likely turn the Russia-Ukraine war into Putin's last war. In the meantime, the raging war is already influencing the international security environment and the thinking on societal preparedness, military capabilities, and operations. Moreover, the war experience will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Therefore, drawing and implementing lessons is a continuous, long-term endeavor.

This special issue of *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* is dedicated to some of the early lessons learned from the war, focusing on Russia's propaganda narratives and information warfare and ways to counter them, the role of professional military education, and combat medical support.

In "Political Analysis or Fortune-Telling by Crystal-Ball? Western Think Tanks' Challenges with Forecasting Putin's War," two Ukrainian authors analyze publications of the most influential Western think tanks and media channels. Davlikanova and Kompantseva found out that policy think tanks have discussed at length the factors contributing to the likelihood of a large-scale invasion but have practically dismissed their impact on Putin's decision to invade, at least in the near-term perspective. In contrast, major US and UK media outlets regularly informed their readers about the possible invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine. The authors conclude by recommending that political analysis of statements and events is set in the local cultural context and tracks markers of impending conflict in the media since "changing narratives, messages, and lexical signals are unmistakable evidence of the real situation."

Then, Erik Fagergren discusses "Russia's Gambit to Redefine the Current World Order." Based on the analysis of a series of national security documents of the Russian Federation and the views of President Putin, the author concludes that pacifying Ukraine is just Kremlin's intermediate objective, while Russia aims to redefine the world order and reassert its position as a major player in countering the liberal democracy. However, what Putin achieved is to unite the West against a shared common threat and strengthen its determination to counter it "through unprecedented sanctions, increased national defense spending, and military deterrence options."

The third article, "Excessive Brotherly Love? – 'Fraternity' of Russians and Ukrainians as a Russian Propaganda Narrative," takes on the myth that the two people are very similar. Based on the findings of several surveys, Maryna Starodubaska demonstrates that although there are some similarities, the differences between the two cultures are considerable. Hence, the claim for "fraternity" just serves Kremlin's propaganda, as it turned out – temporarily.

The remaining three articles present early lessons learned from the war, respectively, on the role of professional military education, countering information warfare, and providing combat medical support.

In "The Impact of War on the Ukraine Military Education System: Moving Forward in War and Peace," Major General Serhii Salkutsan and Dr. Al Stolberg demonstrate how the reforms of the system of professional military education of Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity have provided agile and resilient military leadership. The ability to exercise mission command turned into the main advantage of the Armed Forces of Ukraine against the numerically superior and technologically more advanced aggressor. And while in wartime, educational institutions need to adapt rapidly and emphasize practical training, once the war is over, they must deliver the academic courses required by the national higher education standards. The authors conclude with a call to align educational reforms with other evolving components of the military system, incorporate lessons learned from the war, and continue the cooperation with NATO and European Union states.

Notwithstanding the brutal invasion of Ukraine violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and international law, many countries and individuals have expressed their support or sympathy for Russia and criticized the Western leadership. In "Distorting Your Perception of Russia's Aggression: How Can We Combat Information Warfare?" Ho Ting (Bosco) Hung seeks the explanation in the information warfare waged by Russia and supported by China. By reviewing the academic literature, the author identifies strategies that make this type of warfare effective, provides data on its impact, and suggests countermeasures that can be applied at individual and governmental levels.

The article by John Quinn wraps up this special issue by drawing lessons for NATO and Ukraine in providing medical support. The author emphasizes the need for global health engagement that covers the continuum from prehospital care in a battlefield environment to rehabilitation and promotes readiness and interoperability.

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As the war continues to rage across Ukraine, *Connections* will continue to present rigorous and objective analyses and lessons drawn from organizing for, fighting, and supporting the war efforts. Of particular interest are the ways Ukraine, and the democratic world supporting it, managed to sustain the armed forces, maintain cohesion and enhance resilience.

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The next issue of the journal will be dedicated entirely to the Russia-Ukraine war. We will welcome your contributions to future issues of *Connections* on the

topic that is shaping the European and global security environment, defense, and deterrence for the coming decades.

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Disclaimer

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