

Shaping narratives for mobilization and international alignment for the war effort

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Executive Summary

***Mobilization** often observes a large wave of voluntarily enrolment at the beginning of a conflict that is perceived as a war for existential survival and is feed by strong nationalism. National sentiment is shocked into manifestation by radical changes such as an invasion while beforehand it is part of an assumed long term nation building strategy that is learned and assimilated, and therefore must be taught, shaped and grown.*

To the outsider, markers of nationalism present an alterity that often needs decoding, either in time by means of immersion or by way of intermediation. In the same time, messaging for support of the war effort aimed at an external audience benefits from intermediation for correct alignment between the coding and decoding edges of the communication process.

Divisions within society regarding compulsory mobilisation can be inferred from several mass media or social media materials. Messaging for support requires targeting and personalisation for one's own population and for external audiences that goes beyond the language aspect. Reports on the developments in Ukraine where national representatives are regularly presenting the situation on the ground are inevitably infused with an emotional side. This is to be avoided in a conflict competition for support, where rational interests appear to be equal. The communicated rationale for foreign alignment must remain that of strategical self – interest, whether in terms of direct or indirect costs, not that of support in the name of universal or shared values. The later soon proves to be a blunt instrument, as emotional support inevitably reaches saturation. Falling into the trap of transforming or portraying the war support efforts into a welfare system should be avoided. For efficient campaigns targeted at external audiences it is recommended to avoid the accumulation of repeated messaging iterations with low self – identification indicators due to growing weariness of external audiences towards messaging infused with non or low self identification imaging.

***Will to fight** is a multi-construct dynamic concept with dimensions ranging from state to individual level. An operationalization of the concept that facilitates transposition into actionable programs at different levels still proves challenging, not least because it requires longitudinal planning and anticipatory sustained action. The multi dimensional construct of will to fight thus proves difficult to translate into actionable measures that can be*



incorporated in strategy, education and training. Including the distinction between national and foreign fighters in the analysis on the will to fight brings additional value to military planning on tactical and operational levels.

Operationalization of the will to fight should avoid the error of treating the armed forces as a uniform whole, despite the implicit purpose of the army of having unity, predictability and esprit de corps. Foreign fighters are often presented as an amorphous mass, often referred to by international media, commentators and government representatives with the expression of “boots on the ground” which by now has become empty of meaning or blunt due to indistinguishable overuse. There should be said though that there is more than conceptual commodity in this regard.

Participation of foreign fighters in active conflicts brings the need for a theoretical reinvestigation of models for will to fight. Geographical representation and numbers of foreign fighters can act as indicators of the global relevance of the cause and the alliances it coagulated around it. The regenerative potential of the international pool of fighters indicates capability of maintaining the international rallying function in time, as well as uniqueness of location and conditions for conducting modern warfare and developing modern warfare knowledge and knowhow.

Values of the identified motivating factors are not equally distributed horizontally or vertically, nor are they immutable in time. Prolonged deployment, repeated and prolonged contact with the enemy and assimilated experiences on and behind the frontline can affect willingness to (continue to) fight in either positive or negative manner.

Maintaining ideological credibility is essential for maintaining international support and thus a careful balance is needed between operational efficiency and ideological purity. Prolonged exposure to erosion of internal motivators and will to fight can lead to tragic consequences that in time accumulate in patterns of systemic affliction within the military and its veterans.

The impact that technology has on the will to fight is a factor that requires reconceptualization in the context of the new way of war. If contact with the enemy affects the durability of several motivator factors of the will to fight, technology deployed on the battlefield changes the meaning of contact with the enemy and by means of cascading effects affects will to fight.



Introduction

While national mobilisation for facing existential conflict is enforced by law, in practice it faces several practical and moral challenges, especially during prolonged conflict. Military objectives are balanced with demographic interests, raising the need for exceptions regarding national mobilisation in order to avoid radical demographic decline. During prolonged conflict, both mobilization percentages and will to fight observe dynamic shifts induced by interdependent factors. An analysis of the will to fight should be conducted both holistically and looking at each constituent factor, both in the absence of war for setting a baseline and in its presence. A comprehensive analysis of the will to fight should also take into account the equivalent factors in the opposite forces as miscalculations of the will to fight of the opposite side have led to near catastrophes in the past.

Control over the narrative around the war effort is paramount in maintaining national and international support of the war effort, but requires separate channels and emitters in order to best calibrate the message to the targeted audience. Conflict “competition” and prolonged exposure to emotional calls to support can lead to audience de-sensibilization and thus control over the escalation ladder of the messaging is needed for external audiences. Both narratives for mobilization and for international support of the war effort change during prolonged wars of attrition, requiring constant re-calibration.

Narratives for mobilisation

Throughout history, governments have shaped nationalism into mobilization campaigns, whether for maintaining a reserve pool of ready deployable fighting force or for fast constitution of armed forces ready for war at home or abroad. Phrases such as *Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country* in the speech of J. F. Kennedy and the popular slogan *Your country needs you* on war posters are by now classic examples of rallying national sentiment for the war effort.

Reports from the first days of the full scale invasion in Ukraine relate feelings within the population and the (new) military that amount to manifestations of nationalism as cohesive organism opposing the invading forces. Nationalistic sentiment which feeds into mobilization campaigns, develops and exacerbates during conflict and is currently observed is a multitude of contexts in Ukraine, from constant streams of mass media messaging, to permanent and semi-permanent visual markers in the public space, and in nation shaping educational trajectories.

To the outsider, these markers present an alterity that often needs decoding, either in time by means of immersion or by way of intermediation. In the same time, messaging for support of the war effort aimed at an external audience benefits from intermediation for correct alignment between the coding and decoding edges of the communication process. This is done for



example by means of inverse intermediation – foreign presence relating on the developments on the ground.

Mass media narrative shaping

Mobilization messaging flows in a constant stream on public television in Ukraine. The dedicated military channel – APMIR TV – broadcasts military footage around the clock, combining video footage and analysis of battleground developments, interviews with members of the armed forces, detailed video materials on weapon handling and more. Often these programs serve a mobilization function even if indirectly so and shape the narrative over the development of the war effort. They are interrupted by shorter video spots with clear recruitment function or with nation shaping function. The messaging takes different forms, from the one underlying service for the country, society and family, to the self – development function.

Multiple short video spots broadcasted on Ukrainian national television showcase the transformative process of military service, with a focus on purpose fulfilling activity. In the same time they underline the military civilian relationship, in nation building underlying messaging. The same materials also serve as signal repeater between the military and civil society, enhancing the mobilisation message. The messaging is at times emitted by representatives of the cultural sector, such as musicians and writers, who act as intermediaries between the military and civilian sectors. The cultural front thus acts as intermediary between the military and civilian society in terms of popular narratives for mobilization.

The whole of society approach to the war effort is often underlined in media messaging by means of representation of the parallel experiences of the military and the civilians, and the unseen, stable connection between the front line and the home front (Figure 1)

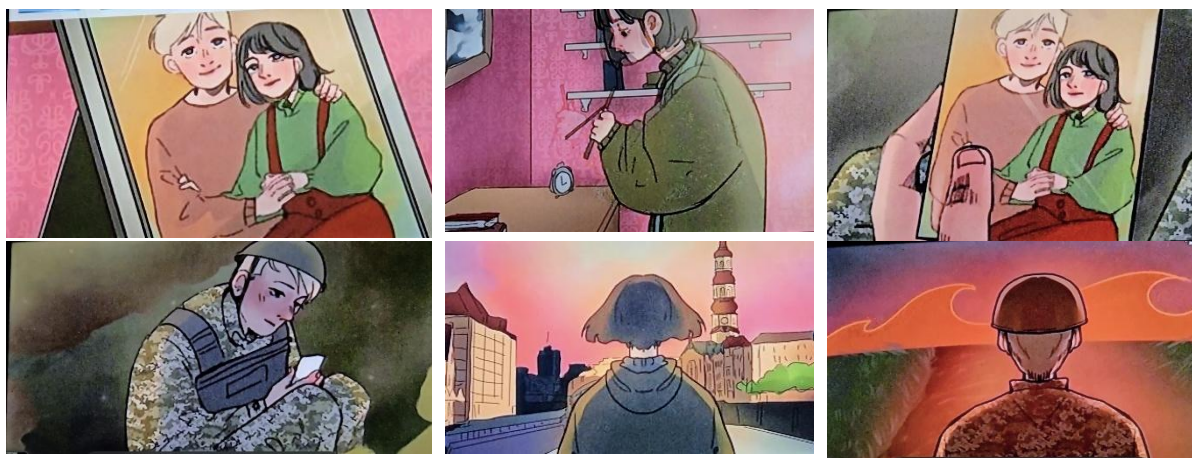


Figure 1. Video material on Ukrainian public television underlying the military – civilian relationship.



These spots also carry messages for influencing the will to fight, by controlling the narrative over the enemy: for the will to fight to be influenced, shaped and sustained, control over the perception of the enemy is needed. This is achieved in direct and indirect ways: dissemination of materials with damages inflicted by the enemy and image shaping of the enemy (Figure 2) similar to the graphical messaging portraying the enemy during World War II.



Figure 2. Shaping the image of the enemy. Video material on Ukrainian public television.

These animations are surpassed in quantity and frequency by video materials of strikes on the enemy on the battlefield and video footage of captured enemy soldiers. What contradicts expectations for the outsider viewer is the number of times video materials with the Russian president are showed on public television, in a context that seems initially meant as a cancel culture towards the enemy.

By means of inference, some of these spots also reveal existing underlying social and political tensions. Divisions within society regarding compulsory mobilisation can be inferred from several mass media or social media materials. One such example is the videoclip of the Cultural Forces Military entitled “What will you blow?” (Figure 3) broadcasted on the military television channel.

The Cultural Forces’s activity develops in 3 directions: civilian, military and international (Cultural Forces, 2026). Referred to as the “cultural front”, the military dimension manifests differently on the three directions: it brings the perspective of the frontline military under the civilian gaze, in the military direction it offers a channel of expression, it supports and shapes involvement in the military and creates a bridging opportunity between the military and civilian sides of society (Cultural Forces, 2026) while on the international dimension, art expression is exercised on international stages and locations by military uniformed personnel.

8 teams of the Cultural Forces deploy to unit locations on the frontlines. Their activities are meant to increase soldiers’ motivation, serve a psychological support function, enhance voluntary mobilization, and “counter enemy propaganda” (Cultural Forces, 2026).



Figure 3. Ukrainian popular culture with mobilisation function

Credit: Cultural Forces Music.

The video of the clip “What will you blow?” (Figure 3) broadcasted on the military tv channel surprises the eye of the outsider, in its combination of ludic and military elements, yet the message clearly comes across the language barrier. The action in the video plays out in a bar where the ones having a leisure time at the end of the consumption are served an army summons letter instead of the bill. A known musician who joined the armed forces dressed in uniform is passing on the message for mobilization for those still engaged in civilian life [and implicitly avoiding conscription]. The action afterwards transposes to a wintry forest background, with the same individuals now dressed in uniform. While the musical background remains the same and indications of continuation of behaviour are present, the change in stance and appearance of the characters again underlines the transformative function of the military service.

One line in the lyrics states “If you don’t go to the [recruitment centre], it will come to you” – a message with a nudging function. On the social media video streaming platform the video is tagged as “dedicated to everyone who wanted to sit out the war on the couch”, revealing opposite views of what represents appropriate or desirable behaviour and implication in the war effort. This messaging sent through pop culture corroborates with social and political reality. The validity of this message is attested by international reports (1 Vandaag programme, 2026) on the activity of mobilisation units within the country. The existence of dedicated centres with stricter security rules where individuals that wanted to avoid or escape mobilisation reside is another example of this.

Returning to the narrative shaping function of mass media messaging, this is a very human military, showcasing individual personalities and apparently allowing manifestations of own personality. Again this underlines the difference between cases of national mobilization and cases of creating limited highly professional armies. The first does not exclude the second, but is in the same time not limited to it. For a whole of society approach and general mobilisation strategy, targeting of messaging and accommodation of personalities are required. Visual markers of personality come to complement the military attire: tattoos for example are



showcased by military personnel that appear in public media, meaning bearing and often with associations of combat.

The Cultural Forces (2026) overtly state that they operate for motivating civilians to voluntarily join the military and shape a positive image of the military. The messaging of the video works in two directions: that of shaping the image on the military that creates character and brings purpose driven sense of direction yet does not cancel out individuality. By shaping this image it shapes the narrative that encourages voluntary recruitment. It also serves an internal communication or reinforcement function towards already incorporated personnel: that of a reciprocal understanding between mobilized forces of the value of their service and the internal messaging that can be decoded only after immersion in military life.

Another relevant video material on public mass media shows a casually dressed young man in his home, trying to find mobile signal for his phone. While searching for signal he steps outside and sees a recruitment poster. The next frame shows the same young man in full combat gear while outside, with the previous slouching posture now replaced by a determined posture and gaze. This again showcases the transformative function of the military service, making appeals to the benefits of developing individual transversal skills and purpose serving or sense fulfilling activities.

Another video material broadcasted on national television depicts a family where the father departs for the front. The video plays out in parallel, with the young daughter thinking of her father during daily life and activities and the father/military on the front line thinking of the family back home. The end of the video is striking in its implications: the father, alone in a trench is facing the approach of a tank and preparing a grenade as means of ending his life in order to avoid capture. In the last moment the tank is showed to display the national flag, symbolizing salvation instead of death or capture. The final frame shows the father returning in the family unit. The video underlines the unseen connection or bond between the front lines and the family units, the indirect way war infiltrates in everyday life, in addition to direct kinetic means.

These examples showcase the interwoven social fabric of civilian – military relationship, with the formal military duty doubled by an assumed social contract between the military and whole of society, that extends beyond the immediate family unit. The civilian - military relationship is a dynamic one in terms of interdependent influence. This symbiosis becomes stronger in time, though does not remain immutable. Prolonged conflict reinforces and normalizes the relationship, flattening or averaging the relationship to the level of naturalisation that further allows for long term co-existence. As Connable et al (2018) show in the multi-construct concept of will to fight, the state and society influence will to fight at unit and individual level of the military forces. In this system of systems approach for the will to fight, “individual soldiers and units are the critical nodes in a network of interwoven relationships ranging up and out to the societal level” Connable et al (2018:37). The front line and the home front thus remain connected even if communication is temporarily broken. The home front is brought to



the front line through different representations and becomes a lifeline for physical as well as psychological support.

While some of the materials presented on mass media that serve a mobilisation function present a mix of popular culture and what might be perceived as ludic character, again as ways of targeted messaging in relation to population age and typology, other messaging targeting disinformation presents a stark tone and is deprived of the voluntary receiving character of televised or social media distributed content. Inferences regarding disinformation campaigns and infiltration attempts can be drawn from public messaging conducted via mobile services. Countering of infiltration attempts in the wider society is conducted by means of GSM location based messaging. Recent examples from Ukraine include warnings from state security agencies regarding attempts of recruitment of Ukrainian nationals for registration of Starlink accounts, or recruitment for terrorist attacks, accompanied by contact details for reporting such attempts.

Mass media messaging is reinforced by messaging in the open space, in different degrees of permanence and visibility.

Open space messaging

The public space is used as medium for communication through the use of national identity shaping symbols such as the colours of the national flag. In Ukraine buildings showcase light blue or yellow rooftops, doors or window frames and the national flag is observed in a multitude of contexts. Broadcasting of the national anthem across the country at 9.00 AM local time determines a standing still reaction in sign of respect.

Depictions of the war effort and the military – civilian relationship are observed in the public space on buildings (Figure 4). Regardless of whether these forms of social and political communication emerged naturally and developed organically or they were from the very beginning agency driven at different levels of organisation, they are now incorporated into organized and advertised messaging. The Cultural Forces label such form of public communication as “walls of culture” and “patriotic street art” on their website (Cultural Forces, 2026).



Figure 4. Examples of street art in Ukraine that reflect a mobilisation shaping function.

Shaping narratives for mobilization and international alignment for the war effort



A public message example with subtle nuances underlying inherent conflicts and potentially complex future social tensions comes from the Ukrainian public train transportation company. When reaching the end station the broadcasted message mentions in English:

“Thank you for travelling with our train. The Ukrainian rail hasn’t stopped since the beginning of the full scale Russian invasion. We deliver strategic cargo, the wounded and the disabled from the de-occupied areas. Presidents, heads of state [...] from all around the world [have travelled with our trains]. Still, our main mission lies ahead. To bring home all those 4 million Ukrainians evacuated by our trains. Thank you for your support. Our regional train is getting ready to board into Donetsk, Lugansk, Mariupol and .. And it will”.

Permanent visual markers of nationalism and expressions of or nudges for mobilisation are observed in addition to the audio message as observed in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Public messaging on Ukrainian national railways ways.



Mobilisation is not only a state strategy but also an issue reflecting existing social and political tensions around voluntary enlisting. Resentment between those who voluntarily choose service in the army and those who did not is observed and implied from different public interventions and messaging. This observes a complexity of nuances and shades and it is difficult to generalize from one case to another. Much like the world post WWII observed generational consequences in relation to positions taken during the war that became subject of books and film, so too this war will most likely reveal its social and political consequences in artistic creations for years to come.

Another example underlying existing and most likely enduring tensions regarding mobilization is observed in the intervention of a member of the Ukrainian military at the international conference *Solidarity: Within and Beyond Ukraine* held at Harvard University in January 2026. During his intervention he mentioned the case of the Ukrainian nationals who left the country at the beginning or during the war and opened business abroad. When they will return to Ukraine upon the end of the war, they are expected to want to continue their business in the country and want to employ the ones who served in the army during the war. This was considered as unfair by the one relating the case. Despite absolute income increases and redistribution in terms of redistributive justice, it is envisioned that on a wider scale, social tensions will arise and multiply between segments of society who engaged differently in the war effort.

These social tensions are also openly acknowledged through projects like the Cultural Forces: periods of long absence from civilian life of military personnel pose the risk of societal segregation (Cultural Forces, 2026) and the formation of separate perspectives on the developments of events between civilian and frontline deployed military personnel. Dialogue intermediated through culture is then meant to function in narrowing this gap and combating escalation of internal conflict.

Nation shaping trajectories

Agency driven nation shaping starts at a young age. In Ukraine, children drawings depicting tanks or weapons are not rare. Some of these drawings are based on templates: standardized printed contours of the main subject with national or military theme and the shape of the flag, leaving the content to be filled in with colour (Figure 6). Templates depicting soldiers, carrying weapons in non-aggressive manner with the national flag in the background, suggest a defensive posture rather than an offensive posture. The implied idea is *jus ad bellum*. These images also serve an additional purpose: that of reinforcing the will to fight in the armed forces through remembrance of the connection between the home front and the front lines.

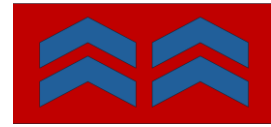


Figure 6. Drawings depicting mobilization and national sentiment.

These depictions bear additional less positive implications regarding the impact of the conflict in the psychic of the population. These are overtly showcased in public media messaging. A video material broadcasted on public television shows a child drawing images of war and destruction and expressing waves of anger while doing so. While these printouts are meant to serve a nation building function, when being an expressed projection, they reflect the psychological impact of the exposure to conflict and its consequences at a young age.



Narratives for international alignment for the war effort

Messaging for alignment requires targeting and personalisation for one's own population and for external audiences that goes beyond the language aspect. Foreign representatives present on the ground against the same background bridge the alterity gap and balance the messaging. Mediation for the Western audience is needed if objective of the messaging for support of the war effort is to be achieved as desired. Podcasts relating the developments in Ukraine where national representatives are regularly presenting the situation on the ground are inevitably infused with an emotional side. This is to be avoided in a conflict competition for support, where rational interests appear to be equal. The communicated rationale for foreign alignment or support must remain that of strategical self – interest, whether in terms of direct or indirect costs, not that of support in the name of universal or shared values. The later soon proves to be a blunt instrument, as emotional support inevitably reaches saturation. Falling into the trap of transforming or portraying the war support efforts into a welfare system should be avoided.

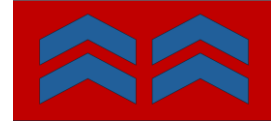
For efficient campaigns targeted at external audiences it is recommended to avoid the accumulation of repeated messaging iterations with low self – identification indicators due to growing weariness of external audiences towards messaging infused with non or low self identification imaging. Images of total destruction (Figure 7) and with elderly people being evacuated present a reality that is too distant from the reality of the international audience, in both background landscape and portraited civilians.



Figure 7. Image of wartime urban destruction in Ukraine on Ukrainian public television.

Credit :Ukrainian Witness.

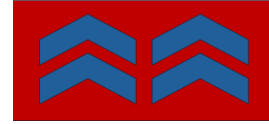
Wrong choice of narratives for gathering and maintaining foreign support – such as images of the victims and visual alterity (different cultural typologies) achieves the opposite of the desired result: it distances the audience from the message. For emotional messaging to serve its function, there must be partial or unconsciousness identification with the affected individuals or alignment with the cause. It is regrettable that messaging for the international audience predominantly focuses on casualties and their stereotypical representations: the elderly, women and children. Images that would constitute familiar heroism would far better serve the rallying



function. In the programme *Ukrainian Witness*, video materials from the front line villages or urban areas on the background of torn anti drone netting and damaged but not completely destroyed houses, where small fighting units are accompanied by a young Ukrainian woman reporting on the fighting in a casual manner despite the sound of shooting close by from and against the unit she is with, are a much more convincing immersive experience. Youth, health and a combination of military defensive gear (bulletproof vest and helmet) and modern civilian clothing and footwear of the woman reporting the material make the experience of war recognizable, palpable and leave room to the audience for individual response and positioning. With the exception of the lack of firearm and military backpack, there is little other visual differentiation between the outlook of the reporting woman and the fighting forces, again suggesting to the idea of whole of society approach to the war.

In turn, Western reports, such as those of the BBC, present a more balanced perspective and Western attuned perception and identity in relation to the development of the conflict in Ukraine. BBC reporting on the 24th of February 2026 on the ground in the country capital Kyiv is another example of semi-immersive experience. Choice of interviewees presenting their perspective is also essential: uniformed military personnel might be perceived as unfamiliar by the general foreign audience while vulnerable individuals, either displaced, injured or affected by war might again only temporarily resonate with the emotional side. The chosen interviewee - an individual who resonates in profile, posture and language with the targeted audience - is much more likely to pass on the convincing message. The message comes across stronger because the emitter serves dual roles: that of politician and member of the military, a double function which seems inevitable given national mobilization. It becomes then relevant that the perspective is not given from the primary role of a member in the armed forces. Serving in the military becomes a given, a natural function, not the main weight for the perspective presented. It becomes sine qua non condition for credibility of the emitter of the message. Having the right balanced tone strengthens declared determination and is a reflection of having engaged in fighting. It is this internalized and naturalized experience of fighting that has been levelled into “cool headed” rationalized posturing that proves the right balance for convincing rational messaging for external audiences. The addition of details on the wider geopolitical relevance of the conflict further strengthens the rationale for the foreign receiver of the message for acting in self-interest when supporting the war effort.

Another example of intermediated messaging backed by immersive experience is observed in a Dutch media report in the programme *1 Vandaag* from the 23rd of February, on the situation in Ukraine. The presented perspective is that of a Dutch citizen living and having set a family in the country. The reporting mentions scarcity of information received from relatives deployed to the front line and the impact this has on the family, indicating again to the military – civilian relationship through personal accounting of the lived experience, in the native language of the audience the messaging is meant for. This is another example of how alterity can be bridged for external audiences. This intermediation activity translates observed and lived experiences for the “foreign gaze” while consciously or unconsciously upholding the outsider lens and thus bridges emitter and receiver of the message. Familiarity and identification with the emitter or



the message contributes to message appropriation. It is the neophyte gaze, who struggles to first make sense of what it sees that unconsciously can distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar, between impact through surprise and detachment through unaware alienation, thus conveying a resonating message.

Dutch international reporting preceding the 24th of February 2026 mentions the activity of mobilisation units active in Lviv. This corroborates with the mass media recruitment campaigns mentioned above containing the message “if you don’t go to the recruitment office it will come to you”. International media resonates with this subject for several reasons: combat capacity has implications for the international support in terms of the war effort on the front line in Ukraine. In Western countries, internal political accountability of the incurred costs for support sent to Ukraine is then exploited by parties opposed to this support by means of interrogation of its critical character. Especially in right wing parties, the official support in terms of international troops present in Ukraine has often made the argument of national conscription numbers inferior to their actual potential, making international involvement appear as non-critical.

Numerous reports on the developments in Ukraine that relate or show the devastation on urban infrastructure make appeal to the emotional side rather than the rational side of the audience. Yet controlling the narrative and levels of escalation of the public messaging is needed. Fighting de-sensibilization of the audience intuitively requires escalating the messaging, therefore premature escalation leaves little room for further message calibration on the escalation ladder. The need for maintaining control over the narrative remains constant during wars of attrition and should be carefully dosed.

De-sensibilization of the audience is not unique - neither in time nor geography. Faced with multiple sources of drama or prolonged exposure to reports of conflict (“speaking of unpopular facts” or “telling the truth to the point of indecency”) can modify thresholds of emotional response. The drama must be sanitized, shaped into a recognizable aesthetic act in order to become palatable and give way for actionable response that offers soothing and reinforces the feeling of righteousness for the individual undertaking the action in relation to the given case.

In addition to control over the narrative and the escalation ladder of the messaging, when purposefully conducting a campaign for alignment and rallying international support for the war effort, having a clear defined objective is needed for choosing the right communication channels and shaping the narrative. Overtly defining what is needed and wanted in terms of international support serves as check list for evaluating the efficiency of the campaign and achievement of the assumed objectives. Lacking such directional ownership of the desired effect leads to mission creep and any result can subsequently be labelled as success by the giving side. Opacity regarding impact of initiatives can weaken further support. Expressions such as “boots of the ground” have become empty or by now blunt due to indistinguishable overuse. The spoon feed aid offered by the international community to Ukraine during 4 years of war has offered just enough to hold on but not enough to have a decisive victory. This has had backfiring effects for Europe in economical and political terms, straining budgets and



alliances. Its assumption as a rational chosen strategy would bring less damage in terms of reputation and upheld values than its interpretation by means of inference as a result of internal conflict and conflict of priorities.

The latest conflict in the Middle East has observed an offer of support from Ukraine in terms of air defence against Shahed drones. Turning into an exporter of war technology serves as counter-balancing example against the perception of constant recipient of international support for the war effort. This transactional approach, much criticized when seen as overruling all other criteria, was and remains the constant driving force in international relations, with accompanying opportunity and transactional costs shaping alliances and degrees of involvement in a certain region.



Factors and stages of will to fight

In the case of Ukraine, high voluntary mobilisation at the beginning of the conflict is reported by both national and international channels and narratives. After 4 years of conflict, maintaining the necessary mobilization numbers is challenging, reflecting not only the demographic numbers of the age eligible cohort and its regeneration potential but also internal tensions regarding voluntary mobilisation. The inherent social and political conflicts mentioned above regarding voluntary mobilisation are transposed in the will to fight, with an implicit direct correlation between negative values of both variables, but not a direct correlation between the positive values of the two variables. Addressing civilian mobilisation and will to fight together or rather as part of a continuum is relevant in a whole of society approach for state defence: the first feeds into the second not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of calibrating initial set expectations to lived experiences against combat exhaustion including emotional exhaustion stage, as detailed below.

Intangibles such as combat moral or will to fight become essential during stalemates or general prolonged conflict such as wars of attrition. As Connable et al. (2018) show, will to fight is a multi-construct dynamic concept with dimensions ranging from state to individual level. The model developed by Connable et al. (2018) emphasises a system-of-systems approach. Yet, an operationalization of the concept that facilitates transposition into actionable programs at different levels still proves challenging, not least because it requires longitudinal planning and anticipatory sustained action. In addition, as Connable et al. (2018:4) note, “disposition to fight and human agency defy meaningful quantification”. When reflecting on the different levels of the motivating factors and their cumulative effects, the actual possibility of measuring will to fight in individual soldiers and cumulative at unit level is still challenging in practical terms. The multi dimensional construct of will to fight thus proves difficult to translate into actionable measures that can be incorporated in strategy, education and training.

Operationalization of the will to fight should avoid the error of treating the armed forces as a uniform whole, despite the implicit purpose of the army of having unity, predictability and esprit de corps. Values of the identified motivating factors are not equally distributed horizontally or vertically, nor are they immutable in time. Prolonged deployment, repeated and prolonged contact with the enemy and assimilated experiences on and behind the frontline can affect willingness to (continue to) fight in either positive or negative manner. Prolonged wars of attrition can affect disposition to fight in terms of absolute values of the constituting factors and subfactors. High durability of a motivating factor does not equal immutability. Durability is affected by contact with the enemy, an exogenous factor to the model.

The specificities of foreign fighters

Reflecting on the participation of foreign fighters in Ukraine, what the model proposed by Connable et al. (2018) does not account for is the distinction between types of fighters –



foreign or domestic. This while the motivators for the will to fight can have significantly different values for national soldiers and foreign soldiers in active combat theatres that accommodate such participation. It is worthwhile thus to take this element into consideration when analysing the components for the will to fight and their durability in time against changing external variables and when making an assessment of the will to fight of the different typologies that can serve as base for decision making by CC.

Foreign fighters are often presented as an amorphous mass, often referred to by international media, commentators and government representatives with the expression of “boots on the ground” which by now has become empty of meaning or blunt due to indistinguishable overuse. There should be said though that there is more than conceptual commodity in this regard. There are different reasons for this positioning, most often connected to concerns regarding the potential for overspilling and escalating conflict, operational security and personal security of the foreign fighters. Foreign fighters in what initially was the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine are currently integrated in national units (thus are not one distinct and separate partner force). Dispersed incorporation avoids the formation of large foreign fighters groups that become visible in the signals space for example and can thus become an easy and high impact target for the enemy. This dispersed incorporation serves not only an instrumental function by filling in organisational gaps but can have the potential of a symbolic function for present and future alliances, given assumed or implied function of representation of foreign fighters based on factual realities. Dispersion enhances the representation function when singular, rare or exactly unique by means of visible increased volume. It also prevents juxtapositions that could have negative effects or lead to internal changes of power balances. More on this representation function in the section on identity related factors.

However, foreign fighters should not be treated as a uniform cohort. They are rather a heterogenic group, presenting different profiles and motivators. Fighters from South America often are professional military or have some kind of previous military training. The economic motivator is relevant in this case, in light of relation of income to home country income levels. An interesting observation is noted in terms of choice of words when Western commentators and analysis refer to different sub-typologies of foreign fighters, with characterizations such as “mercenaries” being used for fighters from South America.

A transversal typology is that of individuals with former experience in civil defence, such as fire fighters, civilian defence, army in the family or some form of previous military training although not necessarily previous deployment or active combat experience. Analysis of the will to fight provides a unique contribution in the case of foreign fighters who are not part of these categories and often only have a civilian background.

The 5 levels of factors and subfactors that constitute the will to fight in a bottom – top approach: individual, unit, organization, society, state and the durability of each factor and subfactor (Connable et al, 2018) can have different values for nationals of the country in conflict and foreign fighters. Including the distinction between national and foreign fighters in the analysis brings additional value to military planning on tactical and operational levels. This separate



evaluation partially overlaps with what Connable et al. (2018) label as assessment of partner effectiveness. Even if foreign fighters are dispersed and incorporated in national units, identifying, acknowledging and exploiting their distinct characteristics continues to bring strategic advantages when agency driven. Knowledge of these differentiators regarding different typologies of the foreign fighters can help military command best plan, integrate and deploy foreign fighters.

In the case of foreign fighters then, an interrogation of the validity of the integral construction of the concept for the will to fight is needed. Since foreign fighters are not driven by the compulsory character of national mobilization imposed by law, it is not hazardous to assume that the constituent factors of the will to fight model as presented by Connable et al. (2018) manifest differently in their case, have different values per factor and different levels of durability. In the case of foreign fighters, it seems natural to assume that initial motivating factors are different, since mobilisation has an observed voluntary character and often implies deprivation.

Factors in the will to fight

Individual motivators in Connable's model include desperation, revenge, ideology, economics and individual identity, all having high durability levels. From these, motivators reflecting ideology and individual identity can be seen as value driven or intrinsic motivators. Ideology can be affected by exposure to prolonged conflict and is one of the motivating factors that can be eroded by participation in prolonged conflict and prolonged immersion in the wider conflict environment. It can lead to recalibration of expectations in relation to investments and positions towards the conflict especially when transposed from a different environment.

Value driven will to fight presents a series of characteristics that can be seen as manifesting oxymoronicly. Value driven willingness to fight is one of the most constant or stable fundamentals for long term active participation in fighting. Values themselves present different layers of depth: from the unconscious level of espoused beliefs, to the intermediary one of declared values and the exterior one of observed behaviours. Values expressed at each level thus observe different durability, with the espoused beliefs being the "most" (SIC!) stable ones. Values represent an intrinsic motivator. Intrinsic motivators of the will to fight assume human agency. In case of national mobilization during martial law after prolonged conflict, when voluntary mobilization rates decrease, the nation shaping narrative becomes essential for coagulating will to fight and by means of its instrument function – enlisting. The mass media video materials described above as means of narrative shaping for national mobilization make appeal to the social level factors influencing will to fight: social identity (factor with high intensity) and social integrity.

Paradoxically though, values driven will to fight can erode from within, if the essence of those values is attacked or if it is eroded by means of exposure to internal decay of the system. This is valid in the case of national fighters. In the case of foreign fighters, exposure to value eroding



elements can observe different results, depending on the level of the certain motivating factor. It is at this stage that the **unit and organizational factors** come into play when considering factors that can influence durability of different factors of the will to fight.

One factor mentioned in the model proposed by Connable et al. (2018) that has the potential to affect will to fight is actual or perceived corruption. Corruption (and how it is dealt with) affects will to fight and is a factor placed at organisation and state levels. Real or perceived corruption can affect will to fight, most often in relation to received equipment – in quantitative or qualitative terms or combat pay. Actual difficulties and delays of centralised war time procurement can exacerbate perceptions of corruption. Ukraine observes an orientation towards what can be labelled as entrepreneurship at unit level. This is observed in the public media space through televised campaigns of different individual units in terms of advertising, recruitment and fundraising. Changes in the legislation such as resolution 176 allow for procurement to be realized at unit level, where military units can make purchases individually, instead of going through the state centralised procurement process. A more speed acquisition process is not the only advantage here. Wars of attrition between entities with different resource pools can turn one side to irregular or asymmetric warfare methods in order to maximize efficiency of strikes. This is strengthened by a network led model of fighting, where simultaneous or parallel nodes of coordination enable overall system survival despite attacks that can take out parts of the network.

Value erosion elements can also lead to opposite results: that of hardening of willingness to fight, either by radicalisation, change in ways of fighting (for example by moving towards irregular warfare methods) or extension of the range of the perceived and assumed fight. It can also serve as a disengaging factor. An ideological deficit, caused by either internal or external factors, can impact will to fight, especially where will to fight is shaped by value driven or intrinsic motivators. Operational deficits can accumulate into ideological deficits if regularly unaccounted for or perceived as consequences of erosion of ideological purity (Blair & Potter, 2023). Internally, narrative control and constantly reinforcing of ideological or value driven motivation should be purposefully conducted. Externally, maintaining ideological credibility is essential for maintaining international support and thus a careful balance is needed between operational efficiency and ideological purity. This does not reflect only in choice of means and methods, but in actual efficient and just use and dispersal of resources.

When erosion of internal motivation occurs, there can be a tendency of averaging outliers. This can happen in the case of exposure to other's will to fight, for example when integrated within a unit, leading to flattening effects of motivating factors. As Connable et al (2018) point out, it is impossible to separate individual and military unit when addressing will to fight. However, the idea that individual will to fight cannot be understood without understanding unit dynamics and vice versa must be reconsidered in the case of foreign fighters that join a (predominant) national unit: the factors for their motivation to fight might have different values when joining, and they might go through an adaptation process within the certain unit. As most experts underline, for unit cohesion, the training with the unit that one will deploy with to the combat



zone is what sets the base for unit cohesion, being more important than individual training. This translates into task cohesion (with an instrumental function) and social cohesion at unit level. The moment of transfer to a combat ready unit is of extra importance in the case of foreign fighters due to assumed high value initial motivators that can erode in time and when exposed to erosion factors. For foreign fighters, changing levels of will to fight and adaptive reactions might change the initial and the essential reasons for getting involved in the fighting. Prolonged exposure to erosion of internal motivators and will to fight can lead to tragic consequences that in time accumulate in patterns of systemic affliction within the military and its veterans.

Life expectancy of a certain unit should also be taken into consideration here. When units suffer massive casualties on the battlefield and their remaining members are incorporated into other units or when reorganisations lead to short unit lifecycles, unit cohesion is weakened and individual will to fight can be negatively affected. Individual soldiers have to go again through the socialisation process at unit level. This is not only time and energy consuming, but it can be emotionally consuming for the individual soldiers, either in light of loss of former comrades or as source of frustration when caused by reorganisations that observe no top-down explanation as to their rationale. Revenge – one of the individual factors - increases in intensity during prolonged conflict and wars of attrition, given constant increase of exposure to enemy inflicted losses. This accumulates to historical grievances and it is worth distinguishing between national and foreign fighters in terms of individual or historical revenge motivators.

Frequency of unit rotation or transfer can shape the perception of the fighting experience, since several factors of the will to fight can be influenced by the external dimensions that manifest down from organisation and unit level. Assuming different roles within the same unit or within another unit impacts the experience as well, as does location of deployment, since different sections of the front observe specific combat patterns. In this, experiencing just one front line, role or unit can remember of the metaphor of the blind men feeling different parts of an elephant and forming a different mental image of what that animal is depending on what one part they got to touch.

When considering the integration of foreign fighters in national armies, cultural clashes or a collision of mismatching expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities at different levels of the unit, organisation or state can occur. High intensity levels of motivators are best suited to short – medium term involvement but they can be negatively affected by a mismatch between initial expectations and exposure to environmental factors, means and intensity of actual involvement in the fighting. Medium or low intensity levels of motivators are better suited for long term involvement or participation, as they can prove more stable and impervious to environmental factors.

The **social identity factor** manifests at the society level in the model proposed by Connable, but in a society that observes national mobilization in prolonged conflict it overlaps with the civilian- military dimension presented at state level. If for operationalization reasons, the state – society level distinction is beneficial, in a case of prolonged symbiotic co-existence between

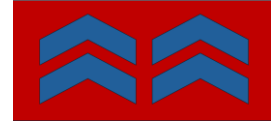


the civilian and the military such as is the case of Ukraine, it is worth reconsidering the state – society division as overlapping dimensions or parts of the same continuum. Again, the civil-military relationship is often conceptualized when looking at societies existing in conditions of peace. In the case of Ukraine, it is a lived, integrated, horizontal experience, not a theoretical vertical or parallel one. Civil- military relations have high durability not only because they are not affected by single combat as Connable points, but also because during prolonged conflict they reinforce each other. However, as was pointed out in the previous section on narratives for support of the war effort, in Ukraine internal social and political conflicts do exist regarding the perceived right implication in the war effort in the active stages of the conflict – most often in terms of mobilisation, and these will most likely continue or even develop with an envisioned return of the population from abroad once a form of ceasefire is place.

In the case of foreign fighters, their sense of own individual and social identity come to interact with that of the identity of the unit, and these various identities come to influence will to fight in time and in terms of values of each factor. The social identity factor can present an influencing effect in a context that allows for accommodation of alterity or – more importantly – does not impose radical adaptation in terms of behaviour. This is a question of cultural distance in as much as alterity accommodation. The social identity factor allowing for accommodating alterity influences chances of (positive) long term presence. In this regard, the experience of fighting (and living) in Ukraine as a foreign fighter has the potential to be very different from its role equivalent in the Middle East in deployment theatres such as Afghanistan or Iraq.

At individual level, the identity element is comprised of the cumulative and intersecting effects of the personal, social, cultural, organisation and state levels, through the process of immersive past experiences or what is called acculturation. Returning to the system of system approach, if each soldier is also a system reflecting cultural influences (Connable et al, 2018), then not only are foreign soldiers immersed in the cultural system of the receiving country, but they bring with themselves their own system of values, determining a reaction of cultural interaction intermediated or bridged by army commonalities. This statehood and cultural representation function is acknowledged and reinforced by own feelings of identity and nationalism and – equally if not more so important – accepted, valued and propagated as such by the unit and its supra-structures and wider society.

Finally, being based on durable horizontal ties, **the society level** can serve a compensating function when trust in the government or state level is affected. The society factor can prove more durable than the state factor, since unlike the government it is not subject to formal internal or external interrogation and contestation regarding taken decisions.



Stages of the will to fight

The actual level of the will to fight can be influenced by several factors, leading to pattern forming oscillations or unanticipated modifications. In other words, an anticipated or natural lifecycle of the will to fight is observed, as well as outlier events with pattern disturbing effects.

The model of combat effectiveness degradation proposed by Artelli (Artelli, 2007 apud Connable et al, 2018) observes a curve pattern of combat effectiveness, with a peak reached between days 10 and 30 after first contact with the enemy (not in absolute terms but in terms of the specific mission or operation). From day 30 onwards a two stage period of combat exhaustion begins, with a hyperactive and overconfidence phase between days 30 and 40, followed by the combat exhaustion stage that includes the emotional exhaustion stage and ends in a vegetative phase. Of note here is the fact that the model refers to an assault situation (D – Day) and as was pointed out previously, assault requires a higher level of energy and higher levels of will to fight. Defending and holding a position for a prolonged timeframe might observe a different pattern.

The active manifestation of the will to fight at unit level also observes a lifecycle pattern that reflects the different stages that the unit is in – ready state, combat state and recovery state (Connable et al, 2018) and within the combat state the individual energy levels, with peaks of optimal levels being reached between day 10 and 30 after first enemy contact. This can however be affected by major losses at unit level or reorganisations, as mentioned above. The timespan of a conflict or its perception can have a calibrating effect on the intensity of the will to fight. Perception of a conflict becoming permanent can level will to fight in preparation for long term conflict. A combination of multiple organisational changes in terms of role changes, transfers, or down time, cumulated with combat losses and exposure to other types of value eroding factors can cumulate in a perceived sense of (own) mission creep, that more exacerbated in case of value or ideology based voluntary mobilisation.

What drastically affects the calculation in equal measure for national and foreign fighters (in relation to moment 0 of any such individual or related exposure) is the change in meaning of enemy contact brought forward by technology on the modern battlefield. **The impact that technology** has on the will to fight is a factor that requires reconceptualization in the context of the new way of war. If contact with the enemy affects the durability of several motivator factors of the will to fight, technology deployed on the battlefield changes the meaning of contact with the enemy and by means of cascading effects affects will to fight. The meaning, intensity and frequency of enemy contact is changed by the drone warfare. Contact with the enemy is intermediated by payloads dropped by drones or by so called kamikaze drones. In the drone “kill zone” moving to and from position is the most dangerous moment for military personnel and thus rotation occurs rarer, with time spent on position longer. In this kill zone, the enemy is more often heard than seen. This has a strong psychological affect on troops often not under hard cover from drone attacks.



In the case of drone pilots, emotional exhaustion can be replaced by de-sensibilization. In the same time, lower levels of direct exposure to immediate threat (when compared to infantry men) and the perception of inflicting increased damages on the enemy by sheer time investment in finding and hitting new targets further permanentizes the low intensity – extensive time pattern of combat, with combat effectiveness being influenced by more evened out levels of will to fight. Will to fight then observes a more flatten bell curve pattern, developing in a low intensity form manifesting over a longer time period.

Closing remarks

Participation of foreign fighters in active conflicts brings the need for a theoretical reinvestigation of models for will to fight. This separate analysis can bring operational, tactical and strategical advantages if carefully operationalized and internalized at scale by command and control structures. In a wider perspective, participation of foreign fighters in active combat areas serves a knowledge and know-how transfer function on new ways of warfare, such as drone or electronic warfare. Participation of foreign fighters has the potential to reveal value driven alliances, driven by different level motivators. As is often the case in inter-state conflict, state of facts and patterns of participation will be subject of investigation for history. At present, geographical representation and numbers of foreign fighters can act as indicators of the global relevance of the cause and the alliances it coagulated around it. The regenerative potential of the international pool of fighters indicates capability of maintaining the international rallying function in time, as well as uniqueness of location and conditions for conducting modern warfare and developing modern warfare knowledge and knowhow.



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