

Book reviews/Discussions

DOI : 10.14746/pp.2024.29.2.9

The War in Ukraine: (Dis)information – Perception – Attitudes (International Relations in Asia, Africa and the Americas), vol. 17, eds. Magdalena Musiał-Karg, Natasza Lubik-Reczek, Peter Lang Publishing Group, Berlin 2023, pp. 228.

In October 1967, British politician Enoch Powell said that “history is littered with the wars which everybody knew would never happen” (*Enoch...*, 2016). These words seem to resonate well with the current situation along Poland’s eastern border. On 24 February 2022, Russia initiated an unwarranted and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, shattering peace in Europe and in the world. The aggressor’s army perpetrated war crimes by targeting civilian infrastructure, murdering civilians, including children, and forcibly displacing them to distant regions within Russia. Furthermore, they destroyed and plundered monuments and cultural heritage. This unquestionable tragedy that befell the Ukrainian people spurred research across various disciplines, including political and administrative sciences, security, and social communication and media, focusing on the current conflict. Notably, the reviewed monograph of the International Relations in Asia, Africa and the Americas series stands out for its interdisciplinary approach to the topic, ‘The War in Ukraine. (Dis)information – Perception – Attitudes’, published by the academic publisher Peter Lang in 2023. Edited by Magdalena Musiał-Karg and Natasza Lubik-Reczek, the publication includes a collection of articles by researchers from various Polish academic centres.

The first article authored by Magdalena Musiał-Karg and Agnieszka Łukasik-Turecka, addresses disinformation in the media landscape following the Russia’s attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The authors curate a selection of false narratives that emerged after the full-scale invasion, providing insights into political, economic and social ramifications stemming from the proliferation of misinformation. The authors correctly identify objectives behind the disinformation campaigns, including manipulation of societal attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine, attempts to justify actions contradicting international law, undermining efforts by the European Union and NATO against the Russian Federation, and eroding the morale of Ukrainian Armed Forces in their resistance against the aggressor. The nuanced approach to tailoring disinformation content depending on the target audience is commendable. Different themes emerged in Moldova, others in Romania, and still others in Slovakia. In retrospect, the significant impact of the disinformation campaign on the outcome of the Slovak parliamentary elections in late September 2023 became apparent, resulting in a change of government in Bratislava (Hülsemann, Nicholson, 2023).

The second chapter, by Natalia Kusa, discusses the evolving perception among Russians regarding the concept of “enemy” following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, particularly in relation to the United States and NATO. Through the meticulous analysis of data sourced from the Levada Centre, the author delves into changes of public perception in Russia, contextualizing these changes against the historical trends in conducting opinion polls on the subject. The research conclusions underscore the deterioration of Russians’ attitudes towards NATO and the United States in the period leading up to and during the invasion. Noteworthy is the observation that while Russian sentiment to the United States (as evidenced by data collected since 1990) has fluctuated and even showed some positivity in the first decade of the 21st century, perceptions of NATO (data collected since 1999) has consistently remained negative throughout this period. The reliability of these surveys stands as a separate and pertinent issue. Despite the Levada Centre’s

reputation as a relatively independent entity from the Russian authorities, doubt persist regarding the reliability of opinion polls within the Russian Federation post 24 February 2022.

The third part of the monograph, authored by Elżbieta Lesiewicz, titled *Canada's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, provides not only an overview of the Canada's response to the war in Ukraine but also a synthesized narrative tracing historical ties between Canada and Ukraine, stretching back to the late 19th century. The Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, accounting for almost 1.4 million people (*Ukrainians...*, 2022), exert a real influence on the social and political life of the country through various organisations, including the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC). The Canadian government, led initially by Stephen Harper and later by Justin Trudeau, has consistently stood in solidarity with Ukraine in its resistance against Russian aggression since 2014. It is noteworthy that the author's analysis extends beyond Canada's response after 24 February 2022, delving into the actions taken prior to this date, particularly since the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014.

The chapter by Aleksandra Gasztold addresses the issue of re-sexualisation of violence in the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. In her introductory remarks, the author expresses a significant concern regarding the cultural status and role of women amid warfare. She highlights that instances of rape and other manifestations of sexual violence during wartime not only devastate societies affected but can also be considered as cruel tactics aimed at weakening the enemy. Moreover, it is important to note that despite the Russian Federation's ratification of major international treaties prohibiting torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, ample evidence persists regarding sexual assaults against women and children from the occupied regions of Ukraine. The number of such incidents is undoubtedly influenced by the patriarchal system of values, which objectifies women, viewing them as mere instruments at the disposal of men and as rewards for warriors. This chapter serves as a critical study of an extremely significant and timely topic. It sheds light on an issue that appears to remain somewhat taboo, even within the Polish media landscape.

Researchers Joanna Rak, Kamila Rezmer-Plotka and Joanna Marszałek-Kawa tackle the phenomenon of diverging approaches towards two recent migration waves in Poland: Muslim immigrants following 2015 and refugees from Ukraine subsequent to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Their chapter examines narratives disseminated through public media channels, explaining the underlying motivations driving their creators. The authors indicate that both migration waves were orchestrated by the ruling team to enhance its domestic and international public image, and to secure its electoral success. While Muslim immigrants, representing a different culture and religion, were depicted as foreign interlopers posing threat to national security, the image of war refugees from Ukraine emphasised cultural kinship and underscored the suffering experienced by the Ukrainian people, as well as the need to help them.

The next article, by Dominika Narożna and Alina Balczyńska-Kosman, provides original insight into the discipline of social communication and media. Their study focuses on three Polish magazines with distinct profiles: "Newsweek Polska", "Polityka" and "Gazeta Polska". Notably, the authors outline the purpose and methodology of their research, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of their investigative approach. Furthermore, they place their analysis within a robust theoretical framework, incorporating various definitions of image and offering an in-depth exploration of the concept of stereotype. This creates a clear picture of the research subject. The authors present a shift in the portrayal of Ukrainian women, who were previously depicted primarily as caretakers staying at home. However, with the onset of war, media representations have evolved to encompass the image of women as victims, as well as empowered individuals working and fighting for their country and loved ones. The authors rightly noted that the trend in the media diminishes overtime as the number of articles on the subject has been decreasing.

In their chapter, Natasza Lubik-Reczek and Izabela Kapsa delve into the attitudes among Polish university students towards the war in Ukraine. Through questionnaire surveys covering students of various nationalities, they examine a range of pertinent issues, including the topic of war, disinformation, aid to Ukraine, and potential forms of resentment towards other nationalities following the outbreak of war. The comprehensive approach provides a nuanced and broad understanding of students' attitudes towards the war. The results are presented in tables, separately for each question, to facilitate their understanding.

Alina Kaszukur and Magdalena Mateja focus on the attitudes of heads of government towards the escalating conflict. Their analysis delves into media statements by prime ministers of the Visegrad Group (V4) countries, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, sourced from their official social media profiles. This selection of information proves very apt, as posts on this topic published by prime ministers tend to be more frequent than their televised statements on the war in Ukraine. An added value of the article is that the authors examine and compare emotions expressed by the prime ministers on top of their political decisions and forms of aid offered to Ukraine.

The topic of institutional forms of assistance to victims and refugees was taken up by Agnieszka Bejma and Beata Pająk-Patkowska who tackle the principles and legal foundations underpinning European institutions' provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Their article offers a comprehensive overview of the various forms of humanitarian assistance extended by the European Union. This includes support through direct aid as well as the provision of funds to EU member states. During the period from 14 February 2022 to 30 June 2022, the Union allocated a staggering total of more than 22 billion euros to countries providing shelter to Ukrainian refugees (p. 183). The final two theoretical subsections of the chapter provide meticulous examination of the legal and governmental frameworks underpinning assistance measures extended to Ukrainians in Poland. By narrowing the territorial framework, the article offers a valuable insight into general conditions and the way humanitarian aid is provided.

In the final chapter of the monograph, Dorota Kowalewska addresses the plight of the Ukrainian minority in relation to the escalating conflict in their homeland. The focal point of her analysis is the Union of Ukrainians in Poland, the largest organisation representing Ukrainians in the country and advocating on their behalf. The author describes the Ukrainian national minority in Poland before the war to visualise the magnitude of the subsequent influx of refugees. The exponential rise in the Ukrainian minority population in Poland necessitated a wider action on the part of pro-Ukrainian organisations across various spheres, as elucidated by the author. Through a clear and structured presentation in tabular form, the researcher delineates the input resources of the organisation, reasons for their augmentation, and the impact of various activities. This cause-and-effect sequence offers readers a coherent understanding of the organisational response. Other spheres in which activities needed to be intensified, such as improving the competence of leaders or fostering cooperation with partners, were also briefly described and supported by statements from activists, thereby enhancing the scientific value of the text.

Particularly since 24 February 2022, the Russian-Ukrainian war has become a focal point of research across numerous fields and disciplines. While it is impossible to comprehensively cover all the significant aspects in a single publication, the reviewed monograph undoubtedly addresses some of the gaps through the topics explored by the authors. The timeliness of the research, along with the diverse array of approaches to the subject matter, deserve high appreciation. An important aspect was that some of the authors offered suggestions for future research within their respective areas of study. This provides valuable guidance for other researchers intending to delve further into the topic of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is worth considering extending the subject matter addressed with security and defence studies, as it may provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the context and consequences of the conflict. This conflict involves not only an information war and humanitarian crisis but also an armed struggle.

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Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist

(Sprzeczne interesy: Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieją żadne sprzeczne interesy)