

Opinion: Zelensky is going viral, but Putin is winning the information war that counts

By Eugene Robinson
Columnist

THE WASHINGTON POST

March 10, 2022 at 4:53 p.m. EST

It is outrageous that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would claim, as he did Thursday, that Russia “did not attack” Ukraine and is somehow a victim of NATO aggression. It is tragic that millions of people, in Russia and China, have no reason to disbelieve him.

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The war in Ukraine is being fought not only with tanks and missiles, but also with propaganda and censorship. It’s true that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s brutal and unprovoked invasion is not going well on the ground. And Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has given the performance of his life in videos that have kept the world riveted to his nation’s fierce resistance. But even so, Putin appears to be winning the information war where it counts: at home, and in China.

That might appear counterintuitive and too bitter to be true. The digital revolution, which allows information to flow and spread at the speed of light, was supposed to be a boon for freedom and a blow to despots around the world. But authoritarians, including Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, have become depressingly successful at walling off their populations from inconvenient truths.

As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Zelensky and his embattled administration have dominated the battle for public opinion. He received a standing ovation from Britain’s House of Commons when he addressed the body via video link and used words that echoed Winston Churchill’s famous “never surrender” speech.

These performances, however, can do only so much abroad. Zelensky’s pleas for enforcement of a no-fly zone have not persuaded the Biden administration or other NATO governments to take such a risky step, though they have succeeded in pressuring the West to explore ways of doing more and more to support the Ukrainian cause.

And all of Zelensky’s speeches, all the viral moments generated by ordinary Ukrainians, can have no impact at all in places where no one sees them.

Putin has shut down virtually all independent media in Russia and intimidated journalists with a new law making it illegal to report accurately on the Ukraine invasion — or even to call it an “invasion” rather than an antiseptic-sounding “special military operation.” His regime has erected a digital iron curtain.

The result is that, according to widespread reports, most Russians are seeing only the sanitized pictures from Ukraine that Putin wants them to see. From state-controlled media, they are hearing only Putin’s lies about the Ukrainian government’s supposed persecution of Russian speakers. They are given no reason to believe Russia is doing anything wrong.

China’s control of the information space, even more sophisticated and complete, includes an Internet “Great Firewall” that is strikingly effective at keeping out facts and opinions that might threaten the Chinese Communist Party’s hold on power. Since Xi has made an alliance with Putin and declined to criticize the Ukraine invasion — so far, at least — Chinese media, too, have presented a version of the

war in which Russians are liberators and spread conspiracy theories suggesting U.S. labs in Ukraine might be developing biological weapons.

Some truth does leak through the barriers. More than 10,000 brave Russians — that we know of — have been arrested for publicly demonstrating against the invasion.

But even to learn of the atrocities being committed in their name, Russians have to be tech-savvy and persistent. Early in the conflict, the Russian government blocked Apple's iOS App Store to prevent its citizens from downloading software to create virtual private networks they could use to evade government censorship. If those who give up, or those who never try, just watch television and visit approved websites — as most people probably do — they get a completely false picture of the war, one in which Russia is doing something admirable, not something deplorable. They have every reason to see the crippling sanctions being applied by Western nations as unwarranted and unfair.

As a result, Zelensky's masterful performance is doing basically nothing to generate domestic public pressure for Putin to back off, or for Xi to reconsider China's stance. Most Russian and Chinese citizens simply are not aware of Zelensky's heroism and eloquence.

Technology that empowers individuals with unprecedented access to information can also be used to amplify lies that authoritarian governments want their people to believe. The tools that were supposed to bring the world together can be employed to create strikingly different, and dangerously clashing, realities.

If the horrors of the war were being seen in China, would Xi risk public anger by supporting Putin? If Russians knew what was really happening in Ukraine, would Putin's hold on power be jeopardized?

Those questions, unfortunately, are academic. Finding ways to make them more than hypothetical would strike a mighty blow for freedom.