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Denys Yurkovskyi,
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University
ORCID ID: 0009-0008-5096-3565

Ukrainian memes as a means of forming national resilience

Abstract. Modern interstate conflicts unfold not only in the military-political dimension but also in the informational one. The Russian-Ukrainian war is a clear example of a situation in which one party in the conflict uses propaganda resources on a large scale to gain victory over its opponent in its own informational space. At the same time, the Ukrainian internet audience demonstrates resilience to Russian propaganda by using content that, with slight modifications, mimics sources (images, videos, statements, etc.) and spreads massively online – memes. The article aims to define the role of memes that gained popularity among Ukrainian social media users during the Russo-Ukrainian war in shaping national resilience in the fight against Russian disinformation.

Keywords: meme, national resistance, information war.

Main content. One of the first memes of the Russian-Ukrainian war is considered to be the “Yarosh’s card.” This item was first mentioned in a statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the fighting near Sloviansk on April 20, 2014 (A complete collection of memes about the new hit of the Internet: Yarosh’s Business Card, 2014).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the aggressor state accused the “Right Sector” movement of organizing clashes, justifying it with the presence of the identification card of the movement’s leader, Dmytro Yarosh, found in a burnt-out car. The absurd and manipulative nature of the situation became the basis for a legendary internet meme that mocked fake news and manipulation by the Russian propaganda machine.

The “Yarosh’s card” meme appeared in various fictional scenarios – from financial jokes (the hryvnia exchange rate tied to the card) to covers of Time magazine or as a prop for the main character of the film The Fifth Element, Leeloo Dallas. Thus, it can be concluded that the meme performed several functions:

1. Debunking Russian propaganda messages and narratives, especially portraying the Ukrainian armed forces as brutal.
2. Providing emotional relief and helping users cope with wartime psychological stress.
3. Uniting Ukrainians in collective resistance to Russian propaganda through a common symbol.

These functions are also seen in other memes of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, in a Russian talk show, a participant claimed that Ukrainian schoolchildren were being taught to feed tits (birds) and hunt bullfinches in winter because the latter symbolized Russia (Fake Russian media. In Ukraine, schoolchildren are taught to kill bullfinches and protect tits, 2014).

Memes about “hunting bullfinches” became a tool to counteract Russian information influence and unite the Ukrainian online community, while also using humor to alleviate emotional and psychological tension caused by the war.

Memes about Ukrainian “cyborgs” – the defenders of Donetsk Airport – are also noteworthy. The term “cyborgs” originates from a post by a pro-Russian separatist on Facebook: “I do not

know who is defending Donetsk airport, but we have not been able to drive them out for three months... I am telling you, these are not people – they're cyborgs" (Borzov, 2025).

Despite the tragic events, the resilience of Ukrainian soldiers inspired awe, reflected in internet memes. These memes not only had humorous elements but also symbolic meaning. The entire defense of Donetsk Airport was encapsulated in the phrase: "You held out – the concrete didn't." Thus, memes about the "cyborgs" became a means of uniting society and celebrating patriotism, heroism, strength, and the defenders' self-sacrifice (Social media users admire the heroism of "cyborgs" in Internet memes, 2014).

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While trying to take control of large parts of Ukrainian territory, including Kyiv, the aggressor state faced massive resistance from the Ukrainian people, which was also reflected in memes.

On the first day of the so-called "special military operation", the Russian cruiser Moskva arrived at Zmiinyi Island, where Ukrainian border guards were stationed. The Russian command demanded their surrender, but the Ukrainian soldiers refused and responded with a now-famous phrase directing the enemy warship to a specific destination (Ukrainian Truth, 2022).

This phrase became the first meme of the full-scale phase of the war, highlighting Ukraine's determination to resist a more powerful adversary. It catalyzed national unity in the face of an external threat.

A special place among full-scale war memes belongs to the village of Chornobaivka in the Kherson region. The first mention dates to February 27, 2022, when Ukrainian defense forces thwarted a Russian landing operation. This was not an isolated defeat: throughout 2022, Russian positions in the area were repeatedly attacked, with 25-recorded strikes by July. These events inspired the creation of memes featuring Chornobaivka, debunking Russian propaganda narratives of the "second strongest army in the world" (Rodak, 2022).

Another source of memes was the legend of the "Ghost of Kyiv" – a pilot who allegedly shot down six Russian aircraft in the first 30 hours of the invasion. This image of a heroic Ukrainian defender became embedded in popular culture through memes. Although the Ukrainian Air Force later clarified that the "Ghost of Kyiv" was a collective symbol for the 40th Tactical Aviation Brigade, the legend remained central to Ukrainian and international cultural expressions (e.g., manga in Japan).

Conclusions. The Russian-Ukrainian war continues in both military-political and informational dimensions. Russia's propaganda machine aims to demoralize Ukrainians and break their will to resist. However, it encounters opposition from Ukrainian internet users. Memes have proven to be an effective means to debunk disinformation and relieve war-related psychological pressure. The characters featured in these memes have helped unite and strengthen society in the struggle against the enemy.

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