

Media Manipulation in the Ukraine War: Glenn Diesen at the UN Security Council

Professor Glenn Diesen presents at the UN Security Council: "The Information Dimension of the Ukrainian Crisis: How Media Narratives Shape Conflict" Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

The following is my speech given at the UN Security Council in New York. I was supposed to be there in person, but my flight was canceled and there were no replacement flights to get me there on time. Nonetheless, here is my speech, and afterward I'll share some comments to expand on my argument.

#Narrator

And now I would like to give the floor to our first briefer. You will hear from Professor Glenn Diesen, a political analyst and expert on European security and Russian foreign policy, who has published extensively on geopolitics. Today, he will discuss how the conflict in Ukraine unfolds not only on the front line but also in the information space, examining how media narratives shape public perception and influence the risks of escalation. Mr. Diesen, we wanted to welcome you here in New York, but please, the floor is yours.

#Glenn

Thank you. I wish I could have been there in person, but thank you for the invitation. It's a great privilege to speak here today. I want to address how the conflict in Ukraine takes place, as you said, both on the battlefield and in the information space, and why we should be concerned about the media manipulating narratives and demonizing the adversary. Some of the most insightful literature on political propaganda comes from Walter Lippmann, following his work for the U.S. government during the First World War. Lippmann recognized that liberal democracies tend to present conflicts as a struggle between good and evil to mobilize public support for war.

The great risk, according to Lippmann, was that once the public believed the adversary was pure evil, then both the public and the politicians would reject any workable peace. In a struggle between

good and evil, compromise becomes appeasement, and peace demands that war be fought, as good must defeat evil. This is deeply problematic because the starting point in international security is the recognition of security competition—efforts by one country to enhance its security can diminish the security of others. The first step toward a common peace is therefore to place ourselves in the shoes of our opponent and recognize these mutual security concerns. However, in a struggle between good and evil, even trying to understand the opponent becomes treasonous.

We should therefore be alarmed that our political leaders, as well as the media, no longer even discuss the security concerns of adversaries. Those who try to see the world from the other side are simply denounced as Putinists, panda-huggers, or Ayatollah apologists. If the generations before us had shown this level of maturity, it's highly unlikely we would have survived the Cold War. It's very clear that the media does not always report objective reality. Convinced they're fighting the good fight, the media often constructs its own version of reality, and journalists become information warriors. For example, acknowledging the losses of the Ukrainian armed forces threatens to reduce public support for the war. Similarly, admitting that sanctions do not work threatens to reduce public support for sanctions.

So the media often ignores these realities and instead stays loyal to the narratives to ensure that the public remains committed to the conflict. But as Lippmann noted, by doing so they also remove all pathways toward a workable peace. We therefore see that Russia must play this dual role in the media, as we've all seen. On one hand, it has to be both hopelessly backward and weak, yet it's also an overwhelmingly powerful threat to the West. We're told that Russia is unsuccessful in Ukraine, yet it could also conquer Europe if we don't stop it. This is meant to communicate to the Western public that the adversary is very dangerous, yet also to reassure them that Russia can easily be defeated if we just keep the war going.

The foundational narrative in the media during this conflict has been the so-called "unprovoked invasion" by Russia. This is an important narrative because it implies that Russia is an expansionist and imperialist power, rather than a state responding to security threats. There are no debates about the "unprovoked invasion" narrative in the media, and any challenge to it is usually smeared or censored for allegedly legitimizing the invasion. I say that this narrative is dangerous because it implies that any compromise is appeasement that rewards the aggressor, which then incentivizes further aggression.

Thus, we're told that peace requires supplying weapons to raise the costs. As with any other conflict after the Cold War, the media describes the opponents as yet another reincarnation of Hitler, reminding the public that war is peace and diplomacy is appeasement. Or, as the former NATO Secretary General argued, weapons are the path to peace. Again, this is a dangerous narrative, because if this conflict was provoked, then we are escalating and becoming directly involved in a war against the world's largest nuclear power, which sees itself as being in an existential conflict.

And we've seen that since the 1990s, many leading Western politicians, intelligence chiefs, ambassadors, and other diplomats warned exactly about these consequences of expanding NATO. NATO expansion meant canceling agreements for pan-European security and instead re-dividing the continent, restarting the logic of the Cold War, and then fighting in the shared neighborhood over where to draw the new dividing lines. None other than George Kennan stated in an interview back in 1998 that NATO expansion would start a new Cold War. He predicted, "Of course, there's going to be a bad reaction from Russia. And then the NATO expanders will say, 'We always told you that's how the Russians are.' But this is just wrong."

However, we can see that the media cannot recognize the obvious—that NATO expansion provoked this conflict—because admitting that would risk legitimizing Russian military actions. Yet NATO countries crossed the ultimate red line by pulling Ukraine into the NATO orbit and developing it into a frontline state against Russia. Keep in mind, Angela Merkel once acknowledged that offering Ukraine a Membership Action Plan for NATO would be interpreted by Moscow as, quote, a declaration of war. The former British ambassador to Russia, Roderic Lyne, said the following about pulling Ukraine into NATO: quote, "It was stupid on every level at that time. If you want to start a war with Russia, that's the best way of doing it."

In a note by CIA Director William Burns, he argued that attempting to pull Ukraine into NATO would likely trigger a Russian military intervention—something Burns noted Russia would not want to do. Now, this all seems like an excellent definition of the word "provoked," yet we cannot use that word. And in February 2014, NATO countries nonetheless backed a coup to pull Ukraine into the NATO orbit. Our media sold the coup as a democratic revolution, even though Yanukovich had been elected in a free and fair election. His removal, and even the riots on the Maidan, did not have majority support among Ukrainians and violated the Ukrainian constitution.

And for a brief moment in 2014, the Western media reported that the new authorities in Kiev were attacking Donbass, killing civilians who rejected the legitimacy of the coup. CNN even questioned whether the people of Donbass would ever again allow Kiev to rule over them. Yet soon after, full media conformity was imposed, and the resistance in Donbass was portrayed as merely a Russian operation aimed at opposing Ukraine's democratization. We later learned that, on the very first day after the coup, American and British intelligence agencies formed a partnership with the new intelligence chief in Kiev to rebuild Ukraine's intelligence services from scratch as a proxy against Russia. The Ukrainian general prosecutor even argued that the U.S. was running Ukraine as a fiefdom after the coup.

We learned that members of parliament were arrested, some were stripped of their citizenship, the media was purged, the Russian language was purged, the Orthodox Church was purged, and civilians in Donbass were killed year after year. Nationalist and Western-financed NGOs undermined the Minsk Two Peace Agreement and set clear red lines for Zelensky not to implement the peace mandate he had won in 2019. We also saw that a top adviser to the former president of France

argued that the signing of the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership in November 2021, quote, convinced Russia that it must attack or be attacked. I think it's safe to say that had Russia or China done any of these things—say, in Mexico—we would surely have defined it as provocative.

Yet we can't do this in our media. So, to sell the story of a Russian war of conquest, the media from day one promoted the notion of a full-scale invasion, suggesting that Russia was using its full military might to conquer Ukraine, rather than trying to force Ukraine to restore its neutrality. And for this reason, we see that the media can't inform the public that the low Russian troop levels and initial actions were completely inconsistent with conquest. Rather, they indicated an intention to keep Ukraine out of NATO. The media also can't tell the public that, on the first day of the invasion, Zelensky confirmed they had been contacted by Moscow to discuss peace negotiations based on Ukraine not joining NATO—something Zelensky agreed to.

The media can't inform the public that Zelensky himself said in March 2022, quote, "There are those in the West who don't mind a long war, because this would mean exhausting Russia, even if it means the demise of Ukraine and comes at the cost of Ukrainian lives." The media also can't inform the public about the sabotage of the Istanbul peace negotiations, after which the Turkish foreign minister concluded, quote, "I had the impression that there are those within NATO member states who want the war to continue. Let the war continue and Russia gets weaker. They don't care much about the situation in Ukraine."

So instead of having the media discuss a European security architecture that could mitigate the security competition and prevent Ukraine from becoming a battlefield in a redivided Europe, the media has instead demonized Russia as pure evil, selling the story that even diplomacy should be rejected, even as hundreds of thousands of men died in the trenches. The media pushed the narrative of Ukraine winning, of Russian efforts to restore the Soviet Union, downplayed the losses of the Ukrainian army, and ignored the de-Russification policies and the brutal conscription of Ukrainian men. All of this was done under the banner of "standing with Ukraine," regardless of what Ukrainians actually wanted.

Even as Ukraine now faces disaster and we could end up in a direct war with Russia, there's no willingness to recognize that Russia has any legitimate security concerns. Instead, everything happens in a vacuum, and the media remains committed to the narrative of an evil Russian enemy. The logical conclusion is therefore further escalation, rather than exploring paths toward a workable peace. So if you want to understand why it's become impossible to even discuss peace, why diplomacy has been criminalized, I'd advise you to look at the very dangerous media coverage and remember Walter Lippmann's warnings about simplifying conflicts into a simple struggle between good and evil. Thank you for your attention.

#Narrator

Thank you, Glenn, for your statement—not only for participating in this discussion, but also for your scientific and public work. I'd also suggest that colleagues take a look at your books, articles, and the podcast you host.

#Glenn

Let me add a few comments that there wasn't time for during my speech. Resolving conflicts and wars can be extremely difficult because human nature and the conditions for conflict resolution often clash. Human beings are group animals—we're largely organized by groups for meaning and security. It's also in our nature to divide ourselves into the in-group, "us," versus the out-group, "them," or "the other." When people experience an external threat, it's natural to seek solidarity within the group for security and survival, and we therefore create clear divisions between the in-group and the out-group by contrasting our own virtue with the opponent's supposed evil nature.

When the white gets whiter and the black gets blacker, the gray area disappears. This is what prevents individuals from diverging too much from the group. Essentially, people conform to their own in-group and don't even discuss the concerns or interests of the out-group, since that could be seen as showing sympathy for the adversary. This instinct in human nature can be further exploited by political propaganda, which is largely organized around developing stereotypes for the in-group versus the out-group.

All the complexities of a conflict are simplified into a mere struggle between the good guys and the bad guys. This is human nature. The problem is that this framing prevents conflict resolution. As I said in my speech, the point of departure in international security is to reduce security competition. And to do that, we have to recognize the security concerns of the opponent—especially when you're fighting a nuclear power that sees itself as facing an existential threat and fighting a war for survival. A key case study is the First World War, when the U.S. government portrayed Germany as pure evil in order to mobilize a reluctant public for war.

This was sold to the public as a war against the ultimate evil—the dehumanized German adversary. It was called, quote, "the war to end all wars," the war to make the world safe for democracies. Essentially, with such framing, only total victory could create peace. And this is why people like Walter Lippmann went from being, to a large extent, supporters of propaganda to becoming critics—because it led to ignoring possible diplomatic solutions to end the war, what Lippmann called a "workable peace." Even after Germany had been defeated, we saw that this prevented lasting peace.

Because when you fight pure evil, you can't restore a balance of power, like when France was brought back to the table after the Napoleonic Wars. Instead, we saw that the Germans had to be properly defeated. It was a humiliating defeat after the First World War, and it was also a defeat intended to keep Germany permanently weak. As we later learned, this set the conditions for another world war. So while it might seem very patriotic to present the adversary as pure evil in

order to signal loyalty to the in-group, it actually goes against our own interests, to the extent that it undermines the ability to create a lasting peace. Now, let me quote some of the work of Raymond Aron, who famously warned in 1962 about dividing states into good and evil. He wrote, "Idealistic diplomacy often slips into fanaticism."

It divides states into good and evil, into peace-loving and bellicose. It envisions a permanent peace through the punishment of the latter and the triumph of the former. The idealist, believing he has broken with power politics, exaggerates its crimes. Now, this has also been my main concern after the Cold War, when the West established itself as a collective hegemon and insisted it was a force for good. All conflicts were then framed as liberal democracies versus authoritarians, which is basically a stand-in for good guys versus bad guys. Indeed, after I gave my speech at the UN Security Council, some critical comments predictably came from the European delegations. And to summarize, this was essentially me making excuses for Russia. The West is not the problem, and the decision to go to war was made solely by Russia.

In other words, the entire assessment is: what are you saying, which narratives are you pushing? The only way they're assessed is by asking, are you legitimizing us or them? But my point is, this is not about taking one side or the other. It's about the inability to even discuss the security concerns of our opponents. Taking those concerns into account is necessary to predict their reactions and to calibrate our foreign policy accordingly, in order to maximize our own security. It's been very hard to convince anyone that the policies we've pushed have actually enhanced our security or done anything good for Ukraine. There's also this assumption that the West doesn't do propaganda, because the West consists of liberal democracies—and propaganda is what authoritarian states do.

Now, this is an amazing demonstration of propaganda itself, because propaganda used to be considered a normal part of statecraft. People would even refer to themselves as propagandists, and it only became a dirty word after the Germans used it in the 1930s. Edward Bernays, who is considered the main author of the early literature on political propaganda, essentially helped rebrand it as public relations. Because what our adversaries do is called propaganda, while what we do is called public relations. And this, to a large extent, is what propaganda also does—it changes the language to convince the public, instead of relying on rational arguments.

So we create one set of language for what we do, and another for what our adversaries do. Again, it helps boost the legitimacy of the in-group and delegitimize the out-group, which is good for internal solidarity but terrible for resolving conflicts if we can't even compare our policies with our opponents. It can also be said that there was near-complete consensus among the original scholars of political propaganda a century ago that liberal democracies were actually more reliant on propaganda. Because when sovereignty is transferred to the people, it becomes more necessary to manage the masses. From Edward Bernays to Walter Lippmann, this was not a controversial statement.

Indeed, there was a clear correlation between expanding voting rights and the need to simplify political discourse—to present the complexity of politics as a simple struggle between good and evil.

We saw this correlation as it became more challenging to manage the masses. Even during the Cold War, many scholars recognized that the US and the UK had more efficient propaganda, because a key component of propaganda is source credibility. While the Soviets relied only on the state apparatus, and everyone could see who was delivering the messages, the British and the Americans could whitewash or channel their propaganda through non-governmental institutions and private industries. And indeed, this is how propaganda is done today.

We use non-governmental organizations and other institutions to make it sound more credible. And lastly, let me just say that it's extremely frustrating for an academic like myself, who for more than 20 years has warned against this war we're now seeing in Ukraine—warning that it would destroy Ukraine and possibly trigger a direct war between NATO and Russia, which could then escalate into a nuclear exchange. In such a scenario, we would all lose. Yet every time I've raised these warnings over the past 20 years, I've essentially hit a wall. It's interpreted solely as taking the side of Russia, because by recognizing Russian security concerns and how they might respond, it's simply dismissed as siding with the out-group—and even seen as a betrayal of the in-group.

So this is what I've seen over the past years, indeed. The warnings about NATO expansion undermining the pan-European security architecture were dismissed as being pro-Russian. Warnings that support for the Orange Revolution in 2004 would lead only to conflict with Russia and war were also denounced as pro-Russian. In 2008, when NATO promised to expand to Ukraine and Georgia, even though only a small minority of Ukrainians wanted to join NATO, and knowing this would likely trigger a war and possibly even break Europe, it was again seen as pro-Russian. In 2014, when NATO countries backed the coup to remake Ukraine into a front line against Russia, the disaster was already evident.

But this was also seen as pro-Russian—something that could legitimize the opponent. During the seven years of sabotaging the Minsk Agreement, that too was labeled pro-Russian, because if you support your own country, then you must always blame Russia, even if the consequence is war. In 2019, we criticized the sabotage of Zelensky's peace mandate by NATO countries. That was also called pro-Russian. In 2021, when the warnings became more and more evident that war was coming, it was the same. I even wrote an article in November 2021 with a title along the lines of "war will soon be unavoidable." That was simply denounced as legitimizing Russia's military actions.

So again, there can be no recognition of the opponent, because that's then considered to be support. In 2022, many Western countries were criticized for sabotaging the Istanbul negotiations. This was also seen as pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, even though it predictably resulted in the destruction of Ukraine—something Zelensky himself had warned about. Over the past four years, I've seen lie after lie intended to create the conditions for a long war, as hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians were sacrificed in a war that could not be won, all under the banner of "standing with Ukraine." I've listened to leaders argue that weapons are the path to peace while they criminalized diplomacy. There's no way this can be explained as being in our interest, or even in the Ukrainians' interest.

But nonetheless, it all operates under the banner of being pro-us. And if you dissent, then you're pro-Russian. What was this all for? Very predictably, Ukraine is being destroyed, with horrible humanitarian consequences. In the wider strategic framing, we see that relations with Russia are destroyed for decades to come—at this critical point in time when the world is shifting into multipolarity. It would definitely have been in our interest to keep Russia on our side of the ledger. We see Europe now in systemic decline, with economic problems that can't be fixed without ending the division of Europe, security problems, and of course political fragmentation, which we'll see in the months to come.

Now we also see that the international system is falling apart, international law itself is disintegrating, and the future of the UN is no longer clear. Time and time again, there have been many pathways toward a workable peace, yet every time this is rejected as Putin is presented as Hitler and Russia as an evil adversary you can't even make peace with. It all goes back to the same original problem—the inability to even discuss the security concerns of the opponent. And this, as I mentioned in my speech, also applies to China, Iran, or whatever country we now see as the bad guy. So, thank you for your attention.