

Crossing Channels Episode 6

Ukraine invasion: Context, consequences and the information war

Speakers

Rory Cellan-Jones (Host), Nataliia Shapoval (Kyiv School of Economics), Horacio Larreguy from the IAST, Ayse Zarakol (University of Cambridge)

Rory Cellan-Jones 0:00

Hello and welcome to a special edition of Crossing Channels, the podcast which brings together the interdisciplinary strength of the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and today's special episode sees us come together with our colleagues at the Kyiv School of Economics in Ukraine. We would like to extend our strongest support to everyone in Ukraine at the moment, and in particular to our colleagues in academia, policy, and journalism, who are working through this crisis. This episode has the title "The Ukraine Invasion: Context, Consequences, and the Information War". To explore these issues today, we are very lucky to be joined by Nataliia Shapoval, from the Kyiv School of Economics. Nataliia, thank you so much for joining us at this time. Can you tell us briefly first of all, what you work on, what your main research interests are?

Nataliia Shapoval 0:52

Hello, everyone. So I'm head of a local think tank in Ukraine. I work on all kinds of areas that are policy relevant during a certain period of time. Mostly these are healthcare, I work on financial protection of citizens in Ukraine and in developing countries on public procurement and whatever reform our government is doing at the moment

Rory Cellan-Jones 1:19

To discuss the conflict with Nataliia, we have Horacio Larreguy from the IAST. Horacio, can you remind us of your main research interests?

Horacio Larreguy 1:27

Yeah, so I'm an economist and political scientist that works in political economy and economic development. Prior to the pandemic, I had a lot of work focusing on the importance of information, and mostly that disseminated via social media for accountability, but post-pandemic essentially, I've been using the tools I was employing for those questions, and trying to understand much more the impact of misinformation and importantly, like different ways to counter it.

Rory Cellan-Jones 1:51

So misinformation obviously going to be a key theme in our discussions because there is an information war going on. And our final guest is Ayse Zarakol from the University of Cambridge. Ayse, what do you focus on?

Ayse Zarakol 2:04

Hello. I'm a professor of International Relations. And among other things, I work on East-West relations from a historical perspective. And most recently, I'm the author of *Before the West*, which came out yesterday, so.

Rory Cellan-Jones 2:17

Thank you very much. Obviously, I'd like to start by asking Nataliia a simple and pretty obvious question, What is life like in Ukraine for you right now, for you, your colleagues and families?

Nataliia Shapoval 2:29

So I left Kyiv the capital city where I lived on 24th of February, we woke up from the airstrikes in Kyiv and went out of the city with my husband and several of our relatives, my team, which is around 50 people, 50 analysts, some of them stayed in Kyiv and still stayed there. Some of them were mobilised so they will internally join the military forces the first day of the war, and with most of our team we have still connection, even those who are fighting in the military or in territorial defence units. In general, the country can be divided into two parts. One part is where the active military action is going on, like Kyiv or Kharkiv or Donetsk, or Odessa or Sumy. These regions, there are very huge problems with everything. They mostly are disconnected from electricity, heating, gas, have water supply problems. Some cities are destructed completely, and people are being evacuated to the degree the system can cope with that. But then there

is another part of the country which is mostly western and central Ukraine. And in this part, businesses working there are no kinds of huge economic issues. So everything is working, of course on all territory of Ukraine and there are military forces, territorial defence units on the roads, you would have posts, everyone is being checked what's going on. In every city and village mobilisation is going on, soldiers have been sent to different locations near the borders of Ukraine. In the west, there are long queues for transport and for people because some are trying to relocate, some are trying to get back. Some people are very much okay like I am. I relocated from my flat and I have only like one sweater and one pair of shoes with me, but I never like I'm okay I always live like that. But for some people, it's much more difficult because they did not have savings. They have relatives that cannot move, or who have very serious diseases, and they are totally in different situation. Many families had to send their men to military forces. So in general, that's how it looks right now.

Rory Cellan-Jones 5:25

And is your academic work continuing? Obviously, you're a whole group of academics, who've got a great track record of analysing policy and so on. Are you able in any way to see this through an academic lens? Because it must be very difficult. For instance, had you any view about whether this was likely to happen? Did it come as a huge surprise? Can you analyse what Putin has done and is likely to do.

Nataliia Shapoval 5:50

So we work as an analyst right now to try and to contribute to winning in this world, for example, we do monitoring of all kinds of damages, that Russia has done to Ukraine to calculate all the costs, and make them pay the bill every penny. We follow sanctions, and every day, we propose new ideas about the sanctions. We also are trying to look into supply chains that can be disrupted and how that could be replaced into some global issue that can happen like food security, we were analysing what's going to happen and how to prevent it. Of course, it's not the academic depths. And it's something that you can come up with during the day or during a few hours. But that's the only thing that we can do, you know, push the buttons on the computer, make tables in Excel. We also tried to collaborate with our partner institutions in US and in Europe, and involve them into some questions. And we tried to participate in as many, like conferences and events about the war to you know, bring the perspective of Ukrainian people into the discussion and give Ukraine like more agency, because, you know, there are many frustrating things for us in how this question has been covered, of the war.

Rory Cellan-Jones 7:18

Tell me about that. What are your frustrations?

Nataliia Shapoval 7:23

Firstly, it's very frequently about Putin and Russia, and then about US and Europe, like Ukraine doesn't have agency here, which is, of course, not true. Secondly, what I really

hate is when people started discussing “Putin’s strategy,” that’s also frustrating because of course, killing people is very easy thing to do and there is not much strategy or something, he’s just murderer. And he spent last 20 years to achieve what he have now, and to enslave his people and build this autocratic regime. I don’t think that people should call it strategy or something, it’s just crime.

Rory Cellan-Jones 8:05

What is your aim? In your research in trying to change that narrative? What kind of data are you trying to generate that that will give a fuller, richer story of what is happening to the Ukraine people and the Ukraine economy,

Nataliia Shapoval 8:19

Me personally, I’m trying to bring in perspective of humanity into that. and tell that, basically, this is crime of Putin against Ukrainian people, and this should be punished accordingly. So it’s just very, you know, humane dialogue with other people. And just sharing how it looks from here, and explaining that we are the same as they are. Me and my husband, we could well also live in the US. So he’s a US professor, actually, he teaches in Pittsburgh University, then we are trying to explain it’s also you know, not very academic thing. But just to explain that we stay here in Ukraine, not because we are suffering, or we need help or something. But explain that we just don’t want to give anybody, right to decide, instead of us whether we should leave or how we should think about. So it’s more about general humanity than about some academic frameworks. My friend, who is sociologist, he also brings as much as possible all kinds of sociological data to show how united people in Ukraine are, for example, like almost 80% of Ukrainian think that Ukraine will win the war. And most of people in Ukraine are now for joining European Union. So all kinds of, you know, sociological data that we try to bring in.

Rory Cellan-Jones 10:05

Nataliia, I want to focus on your experience as an economist and policymaker to get a sense of what happens in government during an extraordinary crisis like this. On this podcast, we talk about policy changes as a long, slow process, which can take years to happen. Of course, that’s not the case here. Things are changing so fast. In your experience, over the last week, even what the government’s do, what are their policy priorities? Are you seeing policy formed in front of your very eyes?

Nataliia Shapoval 10:34

Yes, so the government and parliament and office of president they are real heroes, firstly, because they stay in the government buildings, and don’t leave that, despite of numerous reports from intelligence agencies, about attempts of Putin to kill the president. And basically, the whole of their communication is about some kind of denazification, which implies that people who are in politics should disappear somehow. Secondly, there are several forms of work of the government. First is international relations, of course, so the Office of the President and the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, they work 24/7, to talk to all international partners, propose sanctions, request all kinds of support, then there is a front of internal work. It's led by the Central Bank, Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economy. So the central bank is supporting macro financial stability, right now. The exchange rate is fine, the reserves of the bank are okay, they create a special account to collect donations for the needs of the military. So you know, there are all kinds of macroprudential regulations, and they have been changed in order to make it easier to donate to Ukraine and all kinds of currencies, etc. They also issued special military bonds for internal markets to collect money for the needs of the military forces of Ukraine.

Rory Cellan-Jones 12:34

So you're painting a picture of the economy, working surprisingly well, given this huge shock.

Nataliia Shapoval 12:41

And this is true, or partially through, of course, on the one hand, for example, prices are stable. But then, in some places, there is nothing that you can buy with this money, but policymaking is very timely, very appropriate. And there are changes every day, they come up with new ideas that respond to the problems that emerge.

Rory Cellan-Jones 13:06

I suppose in normal times, academics like you, economists in particular, would have a very kind of objective view, and often a critical view of government policy. But is there a feeling now that that just would not be appropriate, that you're all in this together, your job is more to lend support to the government in every way possible?

Nataliia Shapoval 13:29

That's very good comment. Of course, my work as a think tank is to evaluate what the government is doing, make some proposals, some of my teammates are sometimes quite critical about what's the government and the president officer doing. But right now, I guess the general feeling in Ukraine is that we all are impressed with how well the government is responding to the situation. And we all are impressed with the behaviour of the President, and with his courage and with how capable he is of telling the truth to all these big guys in US and Russia and everywhere. So it's not, you know, the consideration of whether it's appropriate or not, it's just we genuinely respect what's been done by them, and trying to help in every way possible.

Rory Cellan-Jones 14:33

What impact do you think that is very obviously, it's ridiculously early to say this. What lasting impact is this war going to have on Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian society that would stay even if, amazingly, the Russian troops were to just leave? Will there be lasting impacts?

Nataliia Shapoval 14:52

I think the world will not be the same after this war in many respects. First, huge impact for the world for the upcoming year, or maybe even several years, is related to food security. Ukraine and Russia are about 1/3 of global market of wheat and corn and some agri products. And right now, it's a period when farmers and agri holdings should be like doing all kinds of planting seeds, putting fertilizers into the ground. And this is not happening either here and in Russia, it's also distorted. So there will be significant influence on the global market, not only in terms of prices, but also through deficit. There are around 400 million people in the world that are like end-users of Ukrainian agri products, they might not receive that. Some of the products can be substituted, but like wheat can be substituted by rice, for example. But then food for animals that are brought for meat, it's not that easily substitutable. So there will be all kinds of effect, then energy market, in Ukraine and in Europe, in general will change, maybe, you know, for better because I think the world will not allow Russia to have such a leverage on the natural gas market and oil market as they had before. It was so, so ironic that just before the war, during the whole winter, Russia was charging several times higher price for the natural gas from Europe just to create the reserves for the central bank and have enough liquidity to conduct the war. It's so like stupid to be in this situation right now. And I think it will change. All countries will diversify. And Ukraine will become like independent with our energy resources. That's, that's for sure.

Rory Cellan-Jones 17:13

Ayse Zarakol, how does this all change Ukraine's standing? I mean, obviously, extraordinary support for Ukraine. Does that persist, in your view?

Ayse Zarakol 17:24

I think so. Yes. To some extent, this has made an impression on Western publics in a way that other even previous conflicts in Ukraine, haven't. So I think that's going to, that's going to be remembered. And there's going to be I mean, of course, there is material pain and real suffering. But in the long term, I think it will help Ukraine's standing in the international community, and there will be some good things, maybe to come out of this period of suffering for Ukraine.

Rory Cellan-Jones 17:56

I'd like to move the conversation on to what is one extraordinary factor in this, the information war. And Horacio Larreguy, this is your specialism. You've had a look at particularly during the pandemic, the epidemic of misinformation, what are you observing about who's winning that information war, I saw an article in the Financial Times, I think, this week, stating that this was one area where Ukraine was definitely winning, is that your assessment?

Horacio Larreguy 18:26

So certainly, like it's important to point out that you know, this is like not new because social media misinformation is very widespread. But this is common to every war. For

example, you know, when, shortly after, rising to power Hitler created the Reich Ministry of Enlightenment, and propaganda so, so you have a sense of and so this strategy has been used in history in every war, mostly to pit people against each other, and to destabilise governments. So I think that those are the two key components that are also here. I think there are two parts that I think that are important. So I think like two, there are two important distinctions when it comes to misinformation. One is kind of the misinformation towards Ukraine, and the ones basically, like towards Russia, and even even within Ukraine, you can split it again, between two sort of like, those essentially towards the Russian minorities. So essentially, when it comes to the misinformation towards the Russians, in Ukraine, especially strategy to try destabilise the government by saying, you know, the, you know, it's like a Nazi government and they were committing all these atrocities towards the Russian minorities. I think that in the sense that the clearly that since the, you know, that war of misinformation sort of has been lost. It's not really obvious, though, that, you know, the Russians are sort of, what I say, I like to say the Kremlin rather than the Russians, because I'm not sure like, they necessarily represent the majority of the people. But I think that sort of the Kremlin has, you know, clearly has done a pretty good job destabilising some insurgent areas and sort of it's not you know, that people decided one is one day to raise in arms, so that we have that since in the end of the cold war, the Kremlin has been extremely active in propaganda and disinformation and misinformation strategies to really, you know, try to like, create a buffer. And I think that in that sense the fact that we are we have some support from within Ukraine for like the Russian troops to enter, and sort of in a, quote unquote, justified way they kind won in that sense, and it's too late by now.

Rory Cellan-Jones 20:22

The fascinating thing about the information war within Russia, the Russian Government to its own people, because we're used to hearing that misinformation is massively spread on social media, and mainstream media has less of it, it seems, in this case, it's the other way around that the misinformation channel is kind of state TV in Russia, and the only hope of Russian people getting access to more accurate information is via social media. Is that fair?

Horacio Larreguy 20:55

The Russian misinformation apparatus, it's a massive thing that goes beyond just the state media, there's a lot of monitoring from like the bank EU, and also in news articles in the States and sort of in many places, it's just impressive the amount of misinformation narratives they have created for like different purposes. So I don't think unfortunately, they are just restricted to state media, of course, this is a big component, and they have an important control on that, but essentially, I think that it's pretty big. And actually, what's what's sad here is I think it's somewhat effective. And it's not clear, you know, that we're winning the war, it's kind of hard to get a good grasp from like, Western media on kind of what's going on within Russia. But if you talk to people that have family over there, and sort of and also academics, like things are pretty polarised. It's not the case that you know, everybody's totally against the war. I think that there

has been a lot of narratives about the threat of Ukraine joining NATO and how that was affecting sort of Russia. Narratives about like, genocide of Russians by the Ukrainian government. I think essentially there's been a lot of work that has been done on the misinformation front, to gather some support, I think is still present. And sort of, we have to see how the war evolves. But I think in that front, at least, we're not winning, I'm sure we're losing, but it's not clear what's going to happen.

Rory Cellan-Jones 22:11

Ayse, you wanted to come in.

Ayse Zarakol 22:13

Yes. I just had something to add, which is that this question of why the Russian, some Russians still support Kremlin or support the invasion. That's, I mean, to the extent that they even know it's happening, or whatever they think is happening.

Rory Cellan-Jones 22:25

The word invasion, the word war is actually banned by the Russian media.

Ayse Zarakol 22:30

Well, it's not just misinformation. I think it's important to realise it is the kind of misinformation but Kremlin usually uses various historical grievances that have some basis in fact, and points to examples of, you know, Western hypocrisy, etc. So, building kind of misinformation narrative around things that people can generally agree on. And then it becomes very difficult to know what's, what's real, what's happening now, what's in the past, there's kind of a blurring of different like layers of truth and misinformation. I think that's important to realise.

Rory Cellan-Jones 23:04

Nataliia, what's your view on how this information war is going from a Ukrainian point of view? Is your government being successful in kind of combating this Russian narrative?

Nataliia Shapoval 23:16

I think my government is very effective on the global arena, and very effective in getting the messages about how important military support is now, sanctions, and mobilising international community. At the same time, I don't think that anyone is effective against Russian propaganda. Because my perspective is that Putin has been working on creating a mindset of many people in Russia for years. Like as an example, there are priests in churches that draw on this spiritual paintings, they draw Putin,

Rory Cellen-Jones

On these icons?

Nataliia Shapoval

Yes, on icons. That's kind of you know, it's not about social media or any specific channel. It is the systemic effort. The same is happening in all kind of law enforcement agencies. For example, my father-in-law, he is in some kind of Russian military forces, and he sends to our family, to Ukraine, videos about Ukrainian protests, saying that you all are Nazis, and you all should die. And it cannot be contributed to one kind of, to media or anything. It's just very systemic, and it cannot be reversed.

Rory Cellan-Jones 24:46

And this is your own family in effect.

Nataliia Shapoval 24:48

Yes. Yeah, that's really it's striking how far a person's brain can be out of from reality, I didn't think that it's even possible. But yeah, that's how it is.

Rory Cellan-Jones 25:06

Let's look at this conflict from a broader perspective with you Ayse, you specialise in East West relations, was this predictable? How does it fit in with a kind of post cold war history?

Ayse Zarakol 25:19

For the most part, international relations experts recently did not expect an invasion of the scale, there was some expectation of something happening similar to what's happened previously, maybe an Eastern incursion or something like that what's taken most people by surprise is the fact that the whole country is targeted. So that's, that's come as a surprise to most I think, IR experts. Now there is a school of thought in International Relations called realism. And they've been predicting, since the end of Cold War that Russia was going to do something like this. And it's it's the line of argument that puts most of the blame on Western expansion, essentially, into Russia's neighbourhood or what they call the backyard. And it's only natural, they argue that Russia and Putin was going to do something aggressive in return. But I think that line of argument overlooks a number of things. First, it overlooks, as Natalia said, Ukrainian agency, and Ukrainians genuinely expressed desire to make their own choices about which community they wanted to belong to. So putting all the blame on the west makes it seem like Ukrainians had no say in the matter. And I think it also overlooks the fact that I mean, what seems to have precipitated this latest invasion is a perception of Western weakness rather than strength. I mean, it's the fact that Putin has gotten away with so much of, you know, smaller scale type of violations of sovereignty, whether in, you know, Ukraine, or Georgia or Syria, etc. And the general perception of chaos and weakness in western leadership. So he seems to have made the calculus that, you know, he could do this, and, you know, get away with it. Maybe that's a different way of blaming the West, but it's not western expansion and show of strength and Russian background that provokes it. Finally, I think that are very Russia-based reasons for why Kremlin has done this. One is, you know, we could talk about Imperial hangover or, you

know, great power hangover, this idea that Russia is naturally and for historical reasons, entitled to its previous, you know, holdings, and Ukraine, I think seems to be a very special case, even more than, you know, the Baltics and elsewhere. I think it's difficult for Putin, but maybe for generally Russians to digest the idea that Russia is not part of the West, so how could Ukraine be? And also, I think, you know, we should factor in Putin's own desire for survival and how he uses war and, you know, foreign activities to shore up his base and consolidate support for some of the, you know, misinformation, disinformation reasons we discussed before. I mean, given all that, now that it has happened it seems like, you know, it was almost over determined, but I, I think most of us didn't expect the scale of, you know, what's what's happening. And I find it quite unbelievable still, actually.

Rory Cellan-Jones 28:25

And there's extraordinary things happening that presumably, Vladimir Putin didn't expect that it has united the West, in a way it's pushing countries towards NATO and the EU, it's isolating Russia, it is potentially having a huge impact on the Russian economy, there are going to be lasting effects. It's going to be a different world, whatever happens, is that fair to say?

Ayse Zarakol 28:44

Yes. So first, the scale of, you know, the invasion has been has taken many by surprise. But also, it's, you know, the answers of the West, the fact that it's almost maybe sad to say, but we've gotten used to, you know, EU responding to various crises around the world saying 'we're very concerned', you know, but this time, they're doing more. I mean, what they're doing may not be enough still in the short term, but at least you know, they've seem to not just the EU, but the West as a community have come together in a way that's also signalling to other states that are more peripheral. Like, I'm originally from Turkey. You know, Erdogan was hedging his bets. But now, you know, reading the tea leaves, I think he's seeing, he has to kind of stick with the Western Community. And I think we're going to see if, if the West can keep it up. We'll see more and more on that and also involving, you know, others like India and China, they don't, they don't seem to be supporting Putin. They have more of a wait and see kind of attitude at the moment.

Rory Cellan-Jones 29:45

We're moving towards the end. And in a way I'd like to get each of you and obviously I'll end with Nataliia to give us your thoughts and feelings about what the end game is here. First Horacio Larreguy from Toulouse. How is this information war, how is that gonna play out? Is that going to be crucial in determining whether Putin eventually withdraws?

Horacio Larreguy 30:08

Academics get uncomfortable, you know, predicting things that they're not sure about, but I'll take my chances. My non-academic say on this is that it's gonna be pretty

crucial, I think, in Russia, how things are gonna play out essentially how much this can continue. You can subject people to misinformation to the extent that they don't get like a feedback that counters a narrative. And I think that essentially, if things get particularly bad. Something that I thought was fascinating is that they were allowing Russian soldiers to call back. And I think essentially, like, if there is some information that can just go back to Russia, and so there's a change in perceptions about things that are going on, that the Russians right now don't have, that might help a little to suck away support that Putin has right now. That might be an important angle, I think, from the misinformation side, but we'll see. It's harder to you know, like, have some scientific prediction on that. But I think that if I just speak on the misinformation side, I would say that, you know, that's going to be pretty crucial.

Rory Cellan-Jones 31:05

And Ayse Zarakol, is this about giving, this is terrible expression, giving Putin an off ramp? Is there some scenario, you can see where he can emerge, in his view with some kind of victory, that would not be too costly for Ukraine or the West?

Ayse Zarakol 31:24

That's, that's a difficult question. I mean, I think whatever happens he's going to spin it as a victory at home. The question is, is there something that the Ukrainian government can live with? And I think, you know, they've expressed some willingness to discuss, you know, neutrality and other guarantees. So, yeah, I mean, I suppose that would be the best case scenario.

Rory Cellan-Jones 31:54

Nataliia Shapoval, have you got any hopes now that this this terrible war, this brutal invasion can end with Russia agreeing to withdraw.

Nataliia Shapoval 32:06

So I'm coming from the point of view that Putin already presented himself to the international community in the way that there is no way back for him. After shooting people in Ukraine, after a bombing nuclear plants in the middle of Europe, after sending the military planes to Sweden, I don't think that anyone can tolerate this among the global leaders. And I'm coming from the second assumption that Putin already lost everything. So scenarios that I see, I see three of them. One is that after the next threat to nuclear plant in Ukraine, it will be the endpoint for the foreign leaders, and they will get much more aggressive than they were, and this will end Putin's leadership. Second scenario is that the situation will continue as it is right now, everybody will be deeply concerned in the West, will be sending all kinds of military equipment to Ukraine, but will not engage more directly, for example, by closing the air, making 'no flight zone' above Ukraine, and that will continue and continue for quite a long period of time and make just a huge frozen conflict like it was in Donbas but on the much larger territory. Third scenario would be that there would be some kind of internal war inside of Russia, because, so the whole idea of sanctions, as I see it, is not

just like isolate Russia or reduce resources for Putin, but also to signal and inform Russian citizens on what's really going on. And sanctions are getting much more targeted toward regular citizens every day. So today, we were writing, you know, recommendations to ban the access to all kinds of like DuPont, you know, company technologies, or Unilever technologies and patents. So if Russia doesn't like Western culture, then okay, they can use their own soap and their own vests without Kevlar. And that will get even more tough every day of war. And I think at some point, even Russian people who are in general feel okay being enslaved by their regime, they still, some of them will protest against what's going on. And that will create the huge unrest inside of the country, which will also end what's going on in Ukraine. So that's scenarios that I see. It's all quite futuristic, you know, and like from the fantasy book, but everything that we live in is quite like a fantasy book, over the last days.

Rory Cellan-Jones 35:31

And finally very briefly, what would you say about your morale and the morale of the Ukrainian people?

Nataliia Shapoval 35:36

We feel very good in general, of course, except for people who are vulnerable in all kinds of, you know, academic definition, like either economically or socially or through their health, the rest are very much, okay. Because we feel very true to ourselves by fighting against evil. And we feel very united, and we feel actually support of other countries of all kinds of communities around the world. And we are on the good side of the history. And we just don't want to, you know, live in the world where killing of people can be tolerated. So we don't feel suffering or anything, and we fight and we are sure that we will win in this war.

Rory Cellan-Jones 36:35

Well, I'm sure I speak for all of us in saying we wish you and the Ukrainian people all the best and in your attempts to repel this invasion. That's all we have time for on this episode. Thanks to our expert panel, Ayse Zarakol from Cambridge University, Horacio Larreguy from the IAST and Nataliia Shapoval from the Kyiv School of Economics. This episode was recorded on Friday, the fourth of March. Given the pace of change in Ukraine events may have overtaken us by the time of release, and please join us next month for another edition of crossing channels.