



ISSN 2312-5160
online ISSN 2786-4502

Current Issues of Mass Communication, Issue 38 (2025)

Journal homepage: <https://cimc.knu.ua/index>

RESEARCH ARTICLES ДОСЛІДНИЦЬКІ СТАТТІ

<https://doi.org/10.17721/CIMC.2025.38.31-42>

Communication Strategies of NGOs in Reporting War Crimes in Ukraine

Stanislav Miroshnychenko
V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine

This article examines the communication strategies of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in reporting and advocating accountability for war crimes during Russia's war against Ukraine. The **study aims** to identify effective mechanisms of public engagement, legal advocacy, and international outreach used by Ukrainian and international human rights groups. It applies the following **method**: qualitative content analysis, case studies, and source triangulation. Examples are drawn from the activities of ZMINA, the Media Initiative for Human Rights, Truth Hounds, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Clooney Foundation for Justice. The findings **reveal** a multilayered communication model that combines legal rigor, emotional storytelling, media collaboration, and digital innovation. The paper also highlights key challenges, such as disinformation, audience fatigue, and reputational risks, and outlines NGO responses. Communication emerges as a strategic instrument in the global fight against impunity.

Keywords: NGOs, war crimes, strategic communication, human rights advocacy, transitional justice

Citation: Miroshnychenko, S. (2025). Communication strategies of NGOs in reporting war crimes in Ukraine. *Current Issues of Mass Communication*, 38, 31–42.

<https://doi.org/10.17721/CIMC.2025.38.31-42>.

Copyright: © 2025 Stanislav Miroshnychenko. This is an open-access draft article distributed under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY)**. The use, distribution or reproduction in other forms is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted if it does not comply with these terms.



Комуникаційні стратегії громадських організацій у висвітленні воєнних злочинів в Україні

Станіслав Мірошниченко
Харківський національний університет імені В. Н. Каразіна

У статті проаналізовано комунікаційні стратегії неурядових громадських організацій (НУО) у висвітленні воєнних злочинів, скочених під час війни Росії проти України. **Метою дослідження** є виявлення ефективних механізмів публічного інформування, формування суспільної підтримки правосуддя та міжнародної адвокації з боку українських та міжнародних правозахисних організацій. **Метод дослідження** поєднує якісний контент-аналіз, кейс-стаді та триангуляцію джерел. Проаналізовано приклади з діяльності ZMINA, Медійної ініціативи за права людини, Truth Hounds, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Clooney Foundation for Justice. Особливу увагу приділено звітам, кампаніям у соцмережах, мистецьким проектам, правовим ініціативам та кризовим кейсам. У **результаті** виявлено багатоканальність та багаторівневість комунікаційних стратегій: НУО одночасно звертаються до внутрішньої та зовнішньої аудиторії, поєднують емоційні наративи й юридичні аргументи, застосовують як класичні, так і цифрові формати. Дослідження висвітлює ключові виклики (дезінформація, втома аудиторії, репутаційні ризики) та реакції на них (стандарти фактчекінгу, етична журналістика, коаліційна адвокація). Показано, що комунікація стала для НУО не лише інструментом інформування, а й засобом впливу на політику і правосуддя в Україні та за її межами.

Ключові слова: громадські організації, воєнні злочини, стратегічні комунікації, правозахисна адвокація, перехідне правосуддя

The communication of war crimes has become one of the defining elements of modern armed conflicts, shaping public narratives around the legitimacy or illegitimacy of war. The rhetoric surrounding war crimes is actively used by numerous actors, with human rights NGOs playing a particularly significant role. These organizations are vital in delivering objective information about crimes and drawing public attention to violations of international humanitarian law. For example, following the launch of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, Ukrainian human rights organizations joined efforts under the "Tribunal for Putin" (T4P) initiative. Over three years, the coalition has documented more than 84,000 instances of international crimes and submitted nine communications to the International Criminal Court (ICC) (ZMINA, 2025).

Ensuring accountability for war crimes represents not solely a legal task but also a communication challenge: without adequate public awareness and societal support, justice becomes significantly harder to attain. NGOs play a critical role in bringing to light the truth about war crimes and encouraging legal action. Increasingly, NGOs are assuming the dual responsibility of documenting events on the ground and appealing to the international community for justice. A compelling historical example is the war in the Balkans, where human rights advocates – specifically Helsinki Watch – later known as Human Rights Watch – were among the first to urge the UN to establish a tribunal to prosecute war criminals (Futamura, 2023). In this instance, the civil society initiative catalyzed the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The advancement of technology in the 21st century has created new opportunities for

Stanislav Miroshnychenko  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1066-6257>

This article was first published online on October 05, 2025.

Stanislav Miroshnychenko is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Journalism, V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine. The author declares no conflict of interest. The sponsors were not involved in the research design, collection, analysis or interpretation of data, or writing of the manuscript.

Corresponding author's email: Stanislav Miroshnychenko s.miroshnychenko@mipl.org.ua



communicating war crimes. A relatively recent development is the emergence of investigations based on open-source intelligence (OSINT) conducted by citizens and independent communities. Publicly available digital data and tools now allow individuals to investigate crimes and verify the accuracy of claims made by conflicting parties. These civil society efforts have become part of the broader public discourse on war and have the potential to transform international legal frameworks. Thus, communication about war crimes is no longer the exclusive domain of states or the media – it has become a shared responsibility of the public, enhancing transparency and increasing pressure on perpetrators.

Examining the communication strategies of civil society organizations in the context of war crimes is both timely and valuable for several reasons. Firstly, it helps us understand how societies come to learn the truth about the gravest crimes and how public support for justice is fostered. Secondly, analyzing the communication efforts of both Ukrainian and international organizations provides practical approaches and lessons learned – especially in light of the unique circumstances posed by the full-scale war in Ukraine. Finally, recognizing the challenges faced by communication professionals allows for the development of practical recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of information campaigns in this critical domain.

Research specifically focused on the communication strategies of civil society organizations in the context of war crimes remains limited; however, related issues are addressed across several bodies of work. These sources can be grouped into three main categories. First, some studies and reports document the efforts of NGOs themselves to collect evidence and raise awareness of crimes. This descriptive approach is utilized in reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Clooney Foundation for Justice (CFJ), the Human Rights Center ZMINA, the Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR), and other organizations. For instance, Human Rights Watch report on Bosnia (2008) highlights the challenges of integrating evidence from local human rights groups into judicial proceedings (HRW, 2008). An article by the Atlantic Council on Amnesty International's controversial 2022 report demonstrates how poorly framed communication can lead to reputational losses for advocacy organizations (Posner, 2022).

Second, another strand of literature examines justice-oriented communication campaigns where the Ukrainian experience has grown increasingly relevant. For example, journalist Julian Borger, writing for The Guardian in 2023, describes how the CFJ team submitted files with war crimes to German prosecutors, leading to three investigations (Borger, 2023).

Third, several studies focus on the use of emerging technologies in the collection and presentation of the evidence concerning war crimes. This includes investigations by open-source research communities such as Bellingcat, which must navigate the verification of digital evidence amid an ongoing crisis of trust and widespread disinformation (OSF, 2023).

However, most of the aforementioned works either focus on normative aspects – for instance, the standards for collecting, verifying, and preserving digital evidence (Berkeley Protocol, 2022) – or on broader issues of transitional justice and the informational framing of war (Sherpa & Lugt, 2024).

In contrast, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the communication strategies employed by civil society organizations – their structure, channels, audiences, and effectiveness – in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Key issues remain underexplored, including the relationship between NGO communication efforts and international responses to war crimes, the specific features of Ukraine's advocacy communication during wartime, and how civil society organizations interact with the media and the broader public in shaping narratives of justice. These questions are central to this study, which aims to fill this gap in the existing academic literature by proposing a model for analyzing NGO strategies concerning war crimes, grounded in the experience of Ukrainian human rights organizations since 2022.



Method

This research employs a combination of qualitative analysis, case studies, and content analysis. The primary focus is on the communication strategies of human rights organizations from 2022 to 2025. The study incorporates a review of academic literature, analytical reports, media publications, and materials produced by the organizations themselves, including reports, public statements, website content, and social media posts.

Using a case study approach, this research analyzes the activities of six leading NGOs: three Ukrainian organizations (the Human Rights Center ZMINA, the MIHR, and Truth Hounds) and three international organizations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the CFJ). It conducts an in-depth analysis of their communication tools, target audiences, key messages, visual formats, media campaigns, and advocacy practices.

Special attention is directed towards high-profile and socially significant cases, such as the controversy surrounding Amnesty International's 2022 report, the advocacy campaign "Where Are Our People?", and the CFJ's legal initiatives concerning the investigation of war crimes. Content analysis was applied to publications, public statements, and social media messages, identifying key themes, rhetorical techniques, and narrative structures.

To ensure the validity of findings, source triangulation was applied, involving cross-referencing data from official NGO materials, independent journalistic investigations, and scholarly literature. This approach assured the comprehensiveness and reliability of the research results.

Results and Discussion

Civil society organizations play diverse roles in communicating the issue of war crimes, ranging from collecting and documenting evidence to public advocacy, educational outreach, and pressure on governmental institutions to ensure justice. Their communication efforts aim to raise public awareness about the crimes committed, shape public opinion around the inevitability of accountability, and prompt international action, such as investigations, sanctions, or tribunals. In pursuing these objectives, human rights organizations simultaneously tailor their communications to several key audience groups.

The first group is the general public within the affected country. For Ukrainian human rights advocates, it is vital to inform the domestic population about the aggressor's crimes to deepen public understanding of the scale of the tragedy, foster solidarity with victims, and generate support for justice. Coverage of war crimes through national media outlets, social media platforms, and public educational initiatives – such as lectures and exhibitions – is aimed at engaging Ukrainian citizens. This heightened public awareness strengthens resilience against enemy propaganda and unifies society around the conviction that perpetrators must be held accountable. Moreover, for affected individuals and their families, this communication serves as a public recognition of their suffering, affirming that it is acknowledged and documented – and, therefore, that justice remains attainable.

The second primary target audience is the international community. Nearly all communication cases concerning war crimes by Ukrainian NGOs are, to some extent, directed toward external audiences, including foreign media, democratic governments, and their citizens. This approach is driven by the critical need to secure international support, essential for ensuring justice and mobilizing military, financial, and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine as the victimized state. For this reason, Ukrainian human rights defenders frequently publish materials in English and organize international advocacy events where they present reports on war crimes and other international violations committed by the Russian Federation. For instance, in 2023–2024, the Human Rights Center ZMINA organized a series of events across Europe and the Americas – including activities within the framework of Crimea Week in Brussels, side events at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meetings, and delegation visits to the United States and Latin



America, where its representatives raised awareness of Russia's war crimes and human rights abuses in Ukraine. This form of communication aims to sustain global attention on the war and engage international institutions and foreign governments in taking specific actions against perpetrators.

Another strategic audience includes stakeholders with the authority to influence accountability processes directly. These actors include law enforcement bodies, judicial authorities, legislatures, executive branches, and intergovernmental institutions such as the ICC, the UN, the Council of Europe, the EU, and the OSCE. NGOs often craft messages tailored to this audience by publishing policy recommendations, issuing open letters, and participating in public hearings and roundtables. The key objective is to influence decision-making, such as advocating for the establishment of a special tribunal, imposing sanctions against war criminals, or seeking international legal support for Ukraine. A successful example of this is the work of the CFJ, which prepares legally substantiated case files and submits complaints to judicial bodies in various countries under the principle of universal jurisdiction, particularly regarding crimes committed by Russian actors in Ukraine. In 2023, the CFJ, in partnership with Ukrainian organizations, submitted evidence packages to the German Federal Prosecutor's Office, triggering investigations into three separate war crimes cases (Borger, 2023). The CFJ's communication team ensured broad media coverage of this legal step to amplify its political impact. They combined direct stakeholder communication with public outreach, generating societal pressure on German officials to take action.

Media and Opinion Leaders. While the media are not the final target of communication efforts, they are among the most influential intermediaries. Human rights organizations cooperate closely with journalists, providing them with verified data, expert commentary, and access to witnesses. Information about war crimes reaches mass audiences through news coverage, feature articles, and documentary films. Many NGOs have established relationships with leading global media outlets, who regularly cite their findings. Moreover, human rights defenders often act as media experts or spokespersons in broadcast interviews and on social media platforms. A case in point: the coordinators of the "Where Are Our People?" campaign, which highlights the deportation of Ukrainians, reported that their efforts resulted in over 700 publications in top-tier international media (WOAP, 2023). Thus, strategic engagement with the press significantly amplifies the effectiveness of NGO communications, allowing their messages to reach wider audiences.

Communication Channels and Formats. Civil society organizations employ various channels and formats in an integrated approach. These can be grouped into several key categories.

Official reports, analytical papers, and press releases

Many organizations publish detailed written reports on documented war crimes, which they post on their websites and distribute to media outlets and international institutions. These reports typically include well-structured evidence (witness testimony, photographs, videos, satellite imagery, and legal qualification of crimes) and often contain specific policy recommendations. For example, between 2014 and the onset of the full-scale invasion, Truth Hounds conducted over 50 field missions in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, collecting extensive documentation and submitting at least three significant files to the ICC (Dooley, 2022). Since 2022, they have shifted to producing rapid-response reports, issuing public alerts within 5.5 hours of the initial attacks and publishing daily updates about new war crimes on their website (Dooley, 2022). This approach enables the public to remain quickly and reliably informed. The MIHR also regularly disseminates factual data and analysis. As of April 2025, the MIHR identified at least 2,246 Ukrainian civilians who have been abducted by Russian forces from occupied territories and are unlawfully detained in Russian prisons (MIHR, 2025). These statistical updates are often presented as infographics and news-style summaries, drawing public attention and pressuring authorities to secure the release of the detainees. International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also issue detailed reports on war crimes, typically in the form of briefing papers and research documents,



which are accompanied by press releases. These reports often attract significant media coverage and help set the agenda for public discussion of the issue for extended periods.

Media Campaigns and Social Media

Human rights NGOs maintain an active presence on social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Telegram, using these channels for direct communication with their audiences. Social platforms serve as key venues for rapidly disseminating updates on new crimes, sharing survivor stories, and presenting short video or photo evidence, along with announcements of public actions. Hashtag campaigns have become essential to this strategy, leveraging recognizable slogans to mobilize attention. For instance, following the destruction of Mariupol, Human Rights Watch, in partnership with Ukrainian organizations such as Truth Hounds and SITU Research, launched the global campaign #JusticeForMariupol, encouraging users to share information about the crimes and demand accountability (HRW, 2022). Thousands of people, including prominent politicians and artists, engaged with the hashtag, further amplifying the reach of Human Rights Watch's report on the destruction in Mariupol.

Overall, social media empowers NGOs to engage younger, global audiences while bypassing traditional media gatekeeping, allowing information to spread virally. These platforms also facilitate online civic engagement. NGOs can coordinate petition drives, mass email campaigns to government officials, and digital solidarity actions. Amnesty International, for example, is known for its digital initiatives supporting victims, including its "Write for Rights" marathon to large-scale signature campaigns demanding investigations into specific war crimes. Meanwhile, the MIHR launched the "Release Hostages: A Demand for Freedom" campaign, which urged the international community to take action to save lives and help free Ukrainians held hostage by the Russian Federation (MIHR, 2023).

Press Conferences, Briefings, and Public Events

NGOs frequently organize in-person and online events with media participation to raise awareness of particularly sensitive or high-profile topics. Press conferences provide an opportunity to simultaneously present research findings or new developments to a broad audience of journalists, thereby ensuring coverage in subsequent news cycles. For instance, the MIHR held a press event in Kyiv titled "Always First: Families of Captured and Missing Paratroopers Demand Dialogue with the State," where relatives of Ukrainian prisoners of war publicly called on authorities to accelerate prisoner exchanges (MIHR, 2025). The event was covered by multiple TV networks, advancing public attention to the issue of military detainees.

ZMINA regularly holds public discussions and panel events, including presentations of its reports. In 2023, ZMINA and partner organizations held a briefing at the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center entitled "Evil Will Be Punished," summarizing three years of documentation work under the T4P initiative. The event was streamed live and received a wide media coverage. NGOs also participate in thematic public events such as exhibitions, memorial campaigns, and conferences. For example, during a week of open debates, the Center for Civil Liberties organized a photo exhibition on Russian war crimes displayed outside the UN headquarters in New York. These events serve as media triggers and emotionally powerful means of engaging audiences by appealing to their values and moral sensibilities.

Artistic and Interactive Projects

Cultural and artistic formats – from traditional exhibitions to digital storytelling initiatives – have emerged as innovative communication tools for NGOs. In 2024, Ukrainian NGOs Common Sense and PR Army launched the "Art for Freedom: Unseen Civilians" project, a series of exhibitions across Europe, spotlighting civilians unlawfully held by Russia (ZMINA, 2024). Ukrainian



and international artists created visual pieces telling the stories of specific detainees, often accompanied by QR codes linking to more detailed information. The project aimed to use the universal language of art to convey the human toll of war and mobilize international pressure for their release.

Another representative initiative is the global advocacy campaign “Where Are Our People?” (WAOP), initiated in 2022 by a coalition of Ukrainian public relations professionals. The campaign focuses on exposing the forced deportation of Ukrainians to Russia and Belarus. As part of the initiative, organizers developed an interactive website featuring a deportation map, a catalog of survivor testimonies, and a series of international events. In November 2022, the WAOP team held a press conference on the abduction of Ukrainian children in France, which gained traction in local media and helped draw the attention of the ICC (PR Army, 2022). As a result, in March 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Russian officials involved in the deportations. This swift outcome may not have been reached without the communication efforts of civil society actors (ICC, 2023).

In February 2024, as part of an advocacy tour in the United States, Ukrainian children who had been successfully repatriated from deportation testified before the UN Security Council about their experiences for the first time. Creative formats – such as art and interactive installations – allow human rights organizations to “breathe life” into dry facts, reach the hearts of diverse audiences, and overcome the growing sense of “news fatigue.” The participants have noted that art serves as a universal language that resonates with both diplomats and ordinary citizens, regardless of background (ZMINA, 2024). Consequently, creative initiatives have become an integral part of NGO communication strategies, complementing more traditional media tools.

International Advocacy and Legal Action

Communication through legal mechanisms warrants focused attention. Human rights NGOs do not merely report facts, they also initiate legal proceedings, which function as a form of public communication that signals justice is feasible. Using its legal expertise and resources, the CFJ files lawsuits on behalf of victims in various countries. As previously mentioned, in 2023, the CFJ and its Ukrainian partners prepared three war crimes cases involving the shelling of a resort near Odesa, executions in Kharkiv Oblast, and incidents of sexual violence near Kyiv. Evidence from these cases was submitted to Germany’s Federal Prosecutor’s Office, marking the start of a universal jurisdiction campaign targeting Russian war criminals.

Notably, these legal actions are accompanied by broad media coverage. The CFJ issues press releases, while prominent media outlets amplify the stories. For example, the UK-based The Guardian provided detailed reporting on the cases in Germany (Borger, 2023). As a result, the public is updated on the progress of the investigations, reinforcing belief in the possibility of justice. Ukrainian NGOs act in similar ways. The T4P coalition regularly submits evidence to the ICC, accompanied by public announcements demonstrating momentum. To date, the coalition has submitted nine formal communications to the Office of the ICC Prosecutor (ZMINA, 2025).

Additionally, representatives of Ukrainian organizations, including the Center for Civil Liberties, have been advocating for the creation of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression. They speak at international forums to promote this idea globally. These communication efforts have yielded positive results. On May 9, 2025, delegations from 35 European countries convened in Lviv and signed a joint declaration supporting the establishment of a Special Tribunal to prosecute Russia’s crime of aggression against Ukraine (Radio Svoboda, 2025).

Thus, communication strategies utilized by civil society organizations are both multichannel and multilayered. They combine factual evidence with emotional storytelling, address both domestic and international audiences, and integrate traditional media with digital tools along with legal and cultural dimensions. Importantly, Ukrainian human rights organizations cooperate closely with international partners, significantly enhancing their impact. For example, Human



Rights Watch and Amnesty International rely on local NGOs for data collection, while Ukrainian activists use global platforms provided by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International to amplify their messages. Joint projects – such as the Mariupol documentation initiative or international art exhibitions – demonstrate the synergy of efforts. As a result, a global communication network on war crimes is emerging, one that combats silence, preserves the visibility of truth, and maintains focus on justice.

In the process of communicating war crimes, human rights advocates face serious challenges that complicate their work:

Propaganda distortion and politicization

Any message about war crimes runs the risk of being distorted by hostile propaganda or co-opted for political purposes. A vivid example is the communication crisis surrounding Amnesty International's report in August 2022. The report, which criticized the Ukrainian military for allegedly stationing troops in residential areas, was widely condemned by Ukrainian officials and experts. In contrast, the Kremlin embraced the report and began actively citing it to justify its bombardments (Posner, 2022). Oksana Pokalchuk, then head of Amnesty Ukraine, publicly distanced herself from the report, noting that the global office had ignored the input of Ukrainian researchers, and resigned in protest. She stated: "The organization created material that sounds like support for Russian narratives. Seeking to protect civilians, the report has become a tool of Russian propaganda" (Posner, 2022). This case illustrates how poorly framed messaging can harm the credibility of human rights work and be weaponized by aggressors. The challenge for NGOs is to exercise extreme caution in crafting their messages and present them in context, so their work is not taken out of context or misinterpreted. Rapidly responding to disinformation by debunking falsehoods and clarifying controversial statements is crucial to maintaining public trust.

Security, Ethics, and Psychological Burden

Gathering evidence of war crimes often occurs in dangerous conditions – on the frontlines, under shelling, or through direct contact with survivors of traumatic events. Communication professionals within NGOs frequently accompany investigators into high-risk areas, exposing themselves to serious physical threats. Beyond physical safety, psychological burnout is another concern: constant exposure to harrowing stories – mass killings, torture, sexual violence – can take a toll on the emotional well-being of the team.

Equally important are the ethical considerations. Communicators must balance the imperative to reveal the truth about atrocities with the obligation to avoid inflicting further harm on victims. When publishing testimony, NGOs are responsible for obtaining informed consent, anonymizing vulnerable individuals (such as survivors of sexual violence or minors), and protecting them from stigmatization or reprisal. Cultural sensitivities must also be considered: overly graphic images or explicit descriptions of violence may trigger shock, disgust, or rejection of the message. Human rights organizations are often forced to adapt their content and include content warnings to avoid retraumatizing both survivors and viewers. These considerations present a heavy burden on communication teams and require professional training in trauma awareness, emotional resilience, and adherence to journalistic ethics when covering conflict-related topics.

Fact-Checking and Maintaining Trust

The reputation of human rights organizations depends mainly on the accuracy of the information they disseminate. In wartime, gathering and verifying facts is especially difficult: access to occupied territories is limited, witnesses may fear retaliation, and physical evidence may be destroyed. Nevertheless, public communication demands timeliness – audiences expect real-time updates. Therefore, the challenge lies in maintaining accuracy without sacrificing speed.



For this reason, NGOs are increasingly adopting formal fact-checking standards, collaborating with investigative journalists, and using digital tools for verification – such as satellite imagery or blockchain timestamps to authenticate evidence. OSINT has become a valuable asset: independent analysts and volunteers help verify photo and video materials, making it possible to confirm or refute claims more quickly. Organizations like Bellingcat have established themselves as credible actors capable of validating conflicting accounts and exposing disinformation (Futamura, 2023).

However, implementing such methods requires additional resources and expertise, which can be challenging for smaller organizations. Another essential dimension of trust is impartiality. Human rights groups must maintain a high standard of objectivity to avoid accusations of bias or political alignment. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this means international organizations are expected to monitor violations by all parties. Any perception of selective reporting can seriously damage an NGO's credibility. Therefore, the challenge is to deliver balanced, legally sound information that can withstand exhaustive scrutiny.

Audience Fatigue and Information Competition

At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the issue of war crimes dominated public discourse. However, over time, mass audiences have shown signs of fatigue. Emotional exhaustion sets in as people become overwhelmed by the constant stream of distressing news and their sensitivity to shocking information decreases. For NGO communicators, it becomes increasingly complicated to sustain the same level of public engagement. This is especially true of international audiences: as the active phase of war continues, the public in other countries shifts its attention to domestic issues, and war crimes risk fading into background "noise."

In response, human rights organizations are seeking innovative ways to regain public attention. Unconventional strategies have become essential: telling personalized stories from the perspective of individual victims rather than using statistics, employing VR/AR technologies to immerse audiences in the reality of war, and engaging high-profile ambassadors – artists, actors, or public figures – who can attract new audiences by harnessing their reputations. NGOs also emphasize positive developments – such as stories of successful prosecutions or the release of victims – to strengthen hope and sustain long-term public interest.

State Pressure and Reputational Risks

The work of human rights organizations often struggles against resistance from the authorities whose crimes they expose. In authoritarian states, NGOs may face direct repression. For example, in August 2024, Russian authorities tagged the CFI as an "undesirable organization," effectively banning it from operating on Russian territory – following its active investigations into war crimes committed in Ukraine (Starcevic, 2024). Russia's Prosecutor General accused the foundation of "discrediting Russia" and collaborating with "extremists." Such pressure poses a significant challenge for NGOs, as it impedes information gathering (by restricting access to Russian territory) and exposes local partners in the aggressor state to danger.

In democratic countries, the threat is reputational rather than physical. For instance, when Amnesty International released a controversial report on Ukraine, its reputation as an impartial human rights defender was called into question. A wave of criticism and backlash from Western media and experts cast doubt on the organization's credibility in this conflict. Thus, a core challenge for communication professionals is to uphold the reputations of their NGOs as trustworthy sources of information. This requires a prompt acknowledgment of mistakes, ensuring transparency in methods (including research procedures and fact-checking standards), and maintaining open dialogue with audiences.

Additionally, human rights organizations should work in coordination with one another to develop shared communication standards, such as ethical guidelines for reporting on war, which would help strengthen the overall credibility of the human rights sector.



Thus, the challenges facing NGO communication strategies in the context of war crimes are substantial but not insurmountable. Many of them are interrelated; for example, enemy propaganda intensifies audience fatigue, while security risks hinder the accurate collection of data. At the same time, civil society organizations have developed a range of counterstrategies: forming international coalitions to reduce pressure from individual states, experimenting with innovative storytelling formats to re-engage the public, and strictly adhering to the standards of accuracy and verification to uphold credibility. These trends and responses are further synthesized in the concluding section.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that communication strategies employed by civil society organizations are essential to the global pursuit of justice for war crimes. Both Ukrainian and international NGOs adopt a comprehensive approach to exposing such crimes – collecting evidence, conducting rigorous verification, disseminating information through diverse channels, and engaging in proactive advocacy with governmental and intergovernmental institutions. Human rights organizations serve as vital bridges between victims and the public: they elevate survivors' voices and transform individual tragedies into arguments for systemic change. Through reports, campaigns, and public actions, these organizations help society understand what constitutes a war crime, who holds responsibility, and why accountability is vital.

One of the significant achievements of NGO-led communication is the ability to sustain visibility of war crimes on the public agenda despite attempts to suppress or distract from the issue. In the context of Ukraine, human rights defenders have ensured that the world was promptly informed about the atrocities committed in Bucha, Mariupol, Izium, and dozens of other locations. International media relied heavily on the findings of Ukrainian NGOs and local journalists when reporting on those events, subsequently generating a wave of global support for Ukraine and increasing pressure on governments to take action. A revealing example includes the issue of child deportations: campaigns such as “Where Are Our People?” and coordinated advocacy efforts (e.g. testimony gathering, press events, appeals to international institutions) have successfully promoted the topic within the agendas of the UN and the ICC.

A defining feature of successful communication strategies is coalition-building and partnership. Ukrainian NGOs have come together in joint initiatives such as the T4P coalition, which helped standardize documentation methods and allowed them to speak with one voice on the international stage. Collaborations with trusted global organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the CFJ have strengthened international trust in Ukrainian data and intensified pressure on the Russian Federation. Conversely, international bodies have benefited from local expertise, which has made their statements more informed and impactful. This experience underscores the potential for global integration of communication efforts: a transnational network of NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and advocates can rapidly convey the truth and demand justice wherever needed.

The analysis of challenges shows that, although obstacles persist, human rights organizations are increasingly learning how to overcome them. The controversy surrounding the Amnesty report served as a key lesson in the importance of local context and the sensitivity of language during wartime. The public reaction in Ukraine revealed that audiences are also capable of critical engagement, meaning that trust in human rights communications is built through mutual responsiveness. Technological innovations, such as OSINT, have become indispensable in documentation work, and their further adoption will strengthen the credibility and evidentiary value of NGO communications.

In anticipation of the end of the war and the shift to transitional justice processes, the role of strategic communication will only continue to grow. It will be necessary to ensure transparency in the trials of war criminals, keep the public informed about the progress and challenges of these



proceedings, and maintain focus on reparations for victims. The communication infrastructure established by civil society organizations lays the foundation for effectively fulfilling these tasks. The continued coordination and professionalism of NGO communication teams will safeguard against historical amnesia and disinformation, helping to turn the horrors of war into lessons for humanity and arguments in favor of stronger systems for protecting human rights.

In conclusion, the communication strategies employed by civil society organizations to document and expose war crimes are strategically essential, multidimensional, and rapidly evolving. They contribute to shaping collective memory about the war, reinforce the moral imperative of justice, and coordinate the actions of various actors – from the general public to government institutions – to pursue accountability. Future research in this field may focus on empirically measuring the impact of specific communication tools (e.g., how public opinion shifts in response to campaigns) and developing guidelines for justice institutions to better engage with civil society.

What is already undeniable, however, is that without the voices of civil society, the path to justice for war crimes would have been significantly longer and more difficult. In the hands of human rights defenders, communication has become a powerful weapon against war – a weapon of truth, dignity, and hope for a just peace.

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence and technologies using artificial intelligence in the writing process. The authors did not use artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this article. The authors of the article bear full responsibility for the correct use and citation of sources.

References

Borger, J. (2023, October 26). German prosecutors handed evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/26/german-prosecutors-evidence-russian-war-crimes-ukraine>.

Clooney Foundation for Justice. (2024, July 10). NGOs file landmark complaint to UN Human Rights Committee on Russian aggression in Ukraine. CFJ. <https://cfj.org/news/ngos-file-landmark-complaint-to-un-human-rights-committee-on-russian-aggression-in-ukraine/>.

Dooley, B. (2022, 21 березня). Tracking War Crimes In Ukraine With The Truth Hounds. Human Rights First. <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/tracking-war-crimes-in-ukraine-with-the-truth-hounds-2/>.

Futamura, M. (2023). Talking about War Crimes: War Crimes Discourse and Strategy. Defence Strategic Communications, 12, 135–164. <https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.riga.12.7>.

Human Rights Watch. (2008). Still waiting: Bringing justice for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina's cantonal and district courts. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/bosnia0708/10.htm>.

Human Rights Watch. (2023). Documenting loss in Mariupol: Justice for Mariupol project. <https://www.hrw.org/feature/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol>.

International Criminal Court. (2023, March 17). Judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.

Media Initiative for Human Rights. (2025, April 30). Rosiia utrymuie shchonajmenshe 2246 tsyyvilnykh ukrainciv. <https://mipl.org.ua/rosiya-utrymuye-shchonajmenshe-2246-czyvilyh-ukrayinciv-minimum-286-iz-nyh-otrymaly-nezakonni-vyroky/>.

Media Initiative for Human Rights. (2023). Release Hostages: a Demand for Freedom Campaign. MIHR. <https://mipl.org.ua/send-letter/>.

Media Initiative for Human Rights. (2025). Rodyny znyklykh bezvisty desantnykiv zaklykaiut Koordshtab do proporsiynosti pid chas obminu polonenymy. <https://mipl.org.ua/rodyny-znyklyh-bezvisty-desantnykiv-zaklykayut-koordshtab-do-proporsiynosti-pid-chas-obminu-polonenymy/>.

Open Society Foundations. (2024, July 3). How Open Source Evidence Is Challenging Abuses, Atrocities, and Disinformation. OSF. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/q-and-a-how-open-source-evidence-is-challenging-abuses-atrocities-and-disinformation#>.

Posner, L. (2022, August 9). Flawed Amnesty report risks enabling more Russian war crimes in Ukraine.



Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/flawed-amnesty-report-risks-enabling-more-russian-war-crimes-in-ukraine/>.

PR Army. (n.d.). Where Are Our People? Deportation campaign. <https://deportation.org.ua/about-our-project/>.

Radio Svoboda. (2025, May 9). Спецтрибунал для посадовців РФ за злочини агресії. У Львові підпісали декларацію [Special tribunal for Russian officials for crimes of aggression. Declaration signed in Lviv]. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-lviv-deklaratsia-spetstrybunal/33409337.html>

Sherpa, C. N., & Lugt, R. v. d. (2024, October). Navigating Pathways Toward Transitional Justice In Ukraine. The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights. <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Navigating%20Pathways%20Toward%20Transitional%20Justice%20in%20Ukraine.pdf#:~:text=Despite%20the%20ongoing%20hostilities.%20it,Moreover.%20experience.>

Starcevic, S. (2024, August 19). Russia bans George Clooney's 'undesirable' foundation. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-bans-george-clooney-foundation-amal-clooney/>.

United Nations. (2022). Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations. UN.

ZMINA. (2025, March 26). “Зло буде покаране”: ініціатива “Трибунал для Путіна” оприлюднила підсумки роботи за три роки [“Evil will be punished”: the “Tribunal for Putin” initiative published the results of its work over three years]. ZMINA Human Rights Center. <https://zmina.info/news/zlo-bude-pokarane-inicziatyva-trybunal-dlya-putina-prezentovala-rezultaty-roboty-za-try-roky-roboty/>.

Received 27.05.2025
Approved 19.08.2025
Published 05.10.2025