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HOW JAPAN PERCEIVES RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE?



Analytical
commentary

HOW JAPAN PERCEIVES RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE?



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The tensions arising from the build-up of Russian troops in and around Ukraine in autumn 2021 and winter 2022, as well as the corresponding increase in world attention to it, have also drawn significant attention of Japanese-speaking society to these events. The number of news and articles about the Russian-Ukrainian war has grown, and all major media outlets have covered daily events relating to Ukraine. Japan's high level of attention to Ukraine can be compared to the situation in 2014–2015, when Russian aggression began with the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donbas. This analytical commentary examines the peculiarities of the perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Japan, considering the changes in the Japanese-language information space since 2014.

First of all, it is important to understand the mindset of Japanese society as regards Russia and Ukraine. According to a poll on public sentiment towards major countries and regions (the US, Russia, China, South Korea, India, Southeast Asia, Europe, etc.), conducted by the Administration of the Cabinet of Ministers of Japan in September 2021, as little as 13.1 percent of respondents have a positive attitude towards Russia (literally, "friendly," including friendly – 1.3 percent, rather friendly – 11.8 percent), while 86.4 percent take a dim view (rather unfriendly – 48.9 percent, unfriendly – 37.4 percent). This indicator should be compared with the attitude to other countries, for instance, to China (positive attitude – 20.6 percent, negative – 79.0 percent), the United States (positive – 88.5 percent, negative – 11.1 percent) and India (positive – 51.3 percent,

negative – 48.1 percent).¹ This data should also be compared with the tendency in sentiment towards Russia and China over the past 20 years. Public attitude towards China was more positive 20 years ago than it is now (47.5 percent of respondents had a positive attitude in 2001) and has gradually deteriorated to the current level, while attitude towards Russia has remained steadily negative (the number of positive responses stood at between 10 and 20 percent over the last two decades).² It can be argued that pro-Russian sentiment has almost never prevailed in Japanese society. Meanwhile, it is still an indisputable fact in Japanese society that people have scant knowledge of Ukraine in general. These important facts lay the basis for the perception of information related to Russia and Ukraine, including the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict.

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By the way, according to a poll conducted by the Japanese public broadcaster NHK after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 42% of Japanese respondents said

¹ 外交に関する世論調査 [Sociological survey on foreign policy] (conducted by the Administration of the Cabinet of Ministers of Japan in September 2021) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/r03/r03-gaiko/index.html>

² List of preliminary results of the sociological survey on foreign policy (conducted by the Administration of the Cabinet of Ministers of Japan) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>



that Japanese sanctions against Russia were "adequate" and 40% said "stronger measures are needed."³

Developments related to Ukraine are mostly covered by journalists and researchers who have access to a wide range of sources outside of the Japanese-speaking world. However, the number of experts in Japan covering the events surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict is limited, and the quality and general tone of coverage depends largely on their knowledge, experience and attitudes toward the two countries, the United States and Europe. It is among such specialists that qualitative changes have emerged for various reasons.⁴

THE REACTION OF JAPANESE POLITICIANS

The public debate greatly influences the opinions and actions of Japanese politicians. The increasing objective coverage of events by journalists, the declining presence of pro-Russian scholars in the media and a new view of comparing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict with the potential Sino-Taiwanese crisis are now leading to a broader understanding of the situation around Ukraine and the importance for sanctions against Russia. The same was reiterated by Serhii Korsunskyi, Ambassador of Ukraine to Japan, during the Forum of the New Europe Center "Ukraine and Japan in the regional and global context" in January 2022: "Japan clearly understands that there is a direct link between what is happening in Ukraine and what is happening in Asia."⁵

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³ NHK世論調査 (NHK poll, 14.03.2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA04DR60U2A200C2000000/>

⁴ During the Forum of the New Europe Center "Ukraine and Japan in the regional and global context" on January 27, 2022, Ambassador of Ukraine to Japan Serhii Korsunskyi stated that publications in the Japanese press have become much more objective over the past year and a half. (The video is available on the Facebook page of the New Europe Center) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=330588638959472

⁵ The video of the Forum on the Facebook page of the New Europe Center [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=330588638959472

invasion of Ukraine.⁶ Speaking on television, Nobuo Kishi, Japan's defense minister, said it was important to coordinate steps with the United States and Europe in case of an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.⁷ Meanwhile, Masahisa Sato, an influential member of the ruling party in Japan's parliament, decried the government, saying only Japan among the G7 countries had not assured the world of imposing economic sanctions in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁸ At the same time, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reiterated that Japan should pursue a policy of distancing from China and Russia and improve relations with Moscow.⁹ Muneo Suzuki, Japan's most prominent pro-Russian politician, also insisted that it was Zelenskyy who created the current tensions by sending a "suicide drone" to the territory where Russians with Russian passports live, so Putin's behavior is

a protective reaction of his citizens.¹⁰ At the same time, in these circumstances, Abe and Suzuki have recently met with Kishida in an important move to "hold consultations on the situation in Ukraine."¹¹ However, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kishida government decided to impose sanctions on Russia, almost fully in line with G7 sanctions (including restrictions on operations with Russia's Central Bank, sanctions against Russia's top officials, including Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, freezing the assets of seven Russian banks, disconnecting some Russian banks from the SWIFT system, etc.¹² In addition, an unprecedented decision was made for Japan to provide the Armed Forces with body armor, helmets, etc. On February 25, Kishida declared that Russian aggression was categorically unacceptable, and "for some time we must refrain from discussing the Northern territories issue and the peace treaty (with Russia)"¹³. These decisions and statements clearly show that the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has significantly pushed Japan to a complete rethinking of relations with Russia.

⁶ Background Press Call By Senior Administration Officials On President Biden's Meeting With Prime Minister Kishida of Japan, (The White House, January 21, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/01/21/remarks-by-president-biden-on-increasing-the-supply-of-semiconductors-and-rebuilding-our-supply-chains-2/>

⁷ ウクライナ問題「欧米と歩調を」 防衛相 [Ukraine's issue is "keeping pace with Europe and America" - "Defense Minister] (Nikkei, February 4, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA04DR60U2A200C2000000/>

⁸ 日本の対露外交「薄っぺら」 自民・佐藤外交部会長が批判 [Japan's foreign policy on Russia: critique of Sato, Head of the foreign policy division of the Liberal Democratic Party] (Sankei, February 9, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.sankei.com/article/20220209-GO6SA4PPA5KUFJX16KQQPPEUNY/?s=09>

⁹ [語る 新年展望] < 1 > 対中連携 各国と強化を...元首相安倍晋三氏 [On prospects in the new year: 1) Strengthen cooperation with other countries on China - Shinzo Abe, former prime minister] (Yomiuri, January 1, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20211231-OYT175019/>

¹⁰ A post in Muneo Suzuki's personal blog (February 4, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://ameblo.jp/muneo-suzuki/entry-12725044249.html?fbclid=IwAR1o60ozSseZA9rj-kWfrppBBHssRvh3FPRgFZicMffCqBaLWRLG7GipuSM>

¹¹ 岸田首相、安倍氏助言「参考に」 ウクライナ情勢で協議 [Prime Minister Kishida follows Abe's advice, the two hold consultations on the situation in Ukraine (Jiji, February 9, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=202202091036&g=pol>

¹² Response following Russian aggression against Ukraine [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: https://japan.kantei.go.jp/ongoingtopics/_00002.html

¹³ 平和条約締結交渉「当面論じるのは控える」ウクライナ侵攻で岸田首相 "We will refrain from discussing for some time" on negotiations on a Japanese-Russian peace treaty. Kishida declared because of aggression against Ukraine] (Tokyo newspaper, February 25, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/162347>



EXPERT CIRCLE

The attitude of the Japanese scientific community to the situation around Ukraine, whose representatives have often disseminated Russian propaganda narratives about the events in Crimea and Donbas since 2014, remained partly problematic. Although positive changes can be observed here too, this issue remains principal, and experts writing about the current tense situation around Ukraine are the main source of Russian disinformation in the Japanese-speaking community.

In general, sources of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Japan can be divided into three channels:

- 1 The official channel (social network accounts of the Russian Embassy Japan and the Russian ambassador, who has an excellent command of Japanese);
- 2 Japanese versions of Russia's state media (Sputnik and Russia Beyond. There is no Japanese version of RT);
- 3 Experts (including "Russianists") and ordinary users of social networks who trust the information provided by experts. At the same time, an important trend in the Japanese-language information space nowadays is that official channels and Russian state media are currently not effective and active in disseminating misinformation about Russian-Ukrainian tensions in Japanese¹⁴.

¹⁴ However, since the second half of February 2022, the Japanese-language Sputnik, along with other Russian state information channels, has intensified its activities and is widely spreading false reports from Russian armed groups.

However, in Japan, negative impact is often generated by part of researchers, including some Russianists proud of their knowledge of "Russia's views." Such experts, to some extent, treated the actions of the Russian authorities sympathetically or at least attempt to understand them, whilst also tried to talk about the importance of comprehending views "alternative to those of Americans and Europeans." As a result, from time to time, they become de facto repeaters of Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Japanese society. Accordingly, they were often in favor of using Russian terms such as "neo-Nazis on the Maidan," "civil war in Ukraine," "neo-conservative US force secretly ruling Ukraine," accusing the Ukrainian government of "failing to comply" with the Minsk Agreement, etc.

The use of fears in Japan about the growth of China's military capabilities in the region and the strengthening of relations between Beijing and Moscow in order to facilitate the spread of Russian disinformation

In this regard, a unique phenomenon is worthy of note: the use of fears in Japan about the growth of China's military capabilities in the region and the strengthening of relations between Beijing and Moscow in order to facilitate the spread of Russian disinformation. Sanshiro Hosaka, Research Fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute at the ICDS, has found that Japanese Russianists seeking to develop or maintain an "upward trend" in Japanese-Russian relations are inclined

to call the potential Sino-Russian alliance a "nightmare for Tokyo." They emphasized the need to improve relations with Russia in order to distance it from China and avoid a full-fledged military alliance between the two countries. Hosaka noted that the narrative about the "Sino-Russian threat to Japan" is often accompanied by the aforementioned propaganda and disinformation about Ukraine.¹⁵ This is apparently done so that Japan would not demonstrate full solidarity with the democratic world in support of Ukraine by imposing severe sanctions on Russia.

Certain scholars tend to take into account local factors during the occupation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donbas, trying to downplay Russia's role in these events and exaggerate the role of the local separatist movement, ultimately describing the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict as a "civil war"

Hosaka also singled out an academic circle of Japanese experts who showed sympathy for Russian narratives because of their general commitment to finding alternatives to American and European mainstream narratives. Such scholars tended to take into account local factors during the occupation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donbas, was trying to

downplay Russia's role in these events and exaggerate the role of the local separatist movement, ultimately describing the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict as a "civil war."¹⁶ A striking example of this trend is the most authoritative expert on Ukraine in Japan, Kimitaka Matsuzato, who makes use of Russian narratives and terms in his research on the situation.¹⁷ However, the number and activity of such experts is limited to the academic circle, in contrast to Russianists, who are active in Japan's general public space.

In 2021–2022, when Japanese society once again turned its attention to the amassment of Russian troops in and around Ukraine, some experts, including certain Russianists, began to use statements almost identical to Russian propaganda, such as "Ukraine, not Russia, inflamed the current tension by using a drone," "Ukraine is divided into two parts. Many Russian-speaking citizens in eastern Ukraine consider themselves Russians and expect protection from Russia. That is why Putin has to meet this expectation." Over 2–3 months before the war, they have actively published similar articles in online magazines and sometimes appeared on television.

¹⁵ Sanshiro Hosaka, *China-Russia "Alliance" Lessons from Japan's Failed "Detachment" Strategy* (International centre for defence and security, October 27, 2021) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ICDS_EFPI_Analysis_China-Russia_Hosaka_October_2021.pdf

¹⁶ Sanshiro Hosaka. Forthcoming. "Japanese Scholars on the 'Ukraine Crisis': Russia-Centered Ontology, Aversion to Western Mainstream and Vulnerabilities to Disinformation," in Taraz Kuzio ed. *Russian Disinformation and Western Scholarship (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society)*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

¹⁷ For instance, Matsuzato compares the situation in Donbas with World War II in the following manner: "Leaving aside President Poroshenko's unquestionable war crime – shelling areas with children – I often explain residents of Donetsk that even in the days of cruel Japanese militarism, children were evacuated from cities in the last months of World War II." Kimitaka Matsuzato, *The Donbas War and politics in cities on the front: Mariupol and Kramatorsk*. Nationalities Papers, Vol. 46, No. 6, 2018.



An important shift in this situation is that now, unlike in 2014, researchers specializing in international relations, European politics and security are more often invited on TV to discuss the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict and express their expert opinions regarding the situation than Russianists

An important shift in this situation is that now, unlike in 2014, researchers specializing in international relations, European politics and security are more often invited on TV to discuss the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict and express their expert opinions regarding the situation than Russianists. In their articles and statements, these international experts tend to call on the Japanese government to adhere to the principles of international order, not to accept attempts to change the status quo by force under any circumstances and not to make an exception in relations with Russia. In addition, they are inclined to note that if Japan now turns a blind eye to what Russia is doing against Ukraine and does not join international solidarity with Ukraine, European countries will not heed Tokyo's position in the event of a similar situation in the Taiwan Strait or the Senkaku Islands.

Whereas in 2014 Russianists were more often invited to TV programs, in 2021–2022 the circle of invited experts has changed significantly. One can assume that reasons thereof are as follows:

- 1) the abovementioned efforts of the journalists themselves, through which they realized the essence and harm of Russian propaganda and began to be much more cautious about potential disinformation and Russian propaganda;
- 2) the reduction in the number of Russians in academia who replicate outright Russian disinformation due to awareness of their mistakes made in 2014–2015;
- 3) Shinzo Abe's failed policy towards Russia, which has led to nothing but a unilateral concession (returning to the format of the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration¹⁸) and widespread public frustration with pro-Russian foreign policy;
- 4) the gradual increase in the presence of Ukrainian positions in the Japanese-language information space due to the efforts of those involved, namely Ukrainian diplomats and the Japanese version of the website of the Ukrainian agency Ukrinform.¹⁹

¹⁸ Back to 1956. What concessions to Russia is Japan ready to make? (Ukrinform, November 27, 2018) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/2588675-nazad-do-1956go-na-aki-postupki-rosii-gotova-aponia.html>

¹⁹ An interview with Atsuko Higashino, "On the understanding of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in Japan" (Day newspaper, February 15, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/den-planety/pro-rozuminnya-rosiysko-ukrayinskoyi-kryzy-v-yaponiji>

DISCUSSIONS OF JAPANESE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

Against the background of these changes, Japanese society was currently debating Japan's position on the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, including the potential imposition of anti-Russian sanctions if Russia further invades Ukraine. Masaru Sato, a former analyst at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan known as an active proponent of pro-Russian narratives, continued promoting such ideas as "Ukraine is divided," "populist Zelenskyy wants to raise his approval ratings" and "Putin simply cannot ignore Russian / Russian-speaking citizens in eastern Ukraine," "thus, it is important for Japan to maintain a neutral stance on this conflict."²⁰ Meanwhile, Yu Koizumi, a military analyst and Russianist, examined the deployment of Russian troops around Ukraine and concluded that Japan must be prepared to respond decisively to a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine²¹ by supporting sanctions. Michito Tsuruoka, Associate Professor at Keio University and specialist in international relations, recalled the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 by annexing Crimea and intervening in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and explained the OSCE's principles that every sovereign state has the right to choose its own policy and security alliances. Accordingly, Tsuruoka advised the government to take

seriously Japan's status as a member of the G7 in decision-making in the event of a further Russian invasion.²² Atsuko Higashino, Associate Professor at Tsukuba University and expert in European politics, and Tsuyoshi Goroku, a lecturer at the University of Nishogakush and expert on NATO, elucidate in an academic journal discussion the current course of events, the Russian occupation of Crimea, the fact that Russia is a party to the conflict and point out the rising support for the Euro-Atlantic course in Ukrainian society due to Russia's actions. They conclude that the security of Europe and East Asia is entwined; therefore, the principle of non-acceptance of attempts to change the status quo by military force applies to both Ukraine and the Taiwan Strait, so Japan should not be indifferent to the current Russian-Ukrainian crisis and should actively consider its response in case Russia further invades Ukraine.²³ The mainstream media were also critical of Russia's actions against Ukraine and called on the government to respond appropriately.

Principle of non-acceptance of attempts to change the status quo by military force applies to both Ukraine and the Taiwan Strait, so Japan should not be indifferent to the current Russian-Ukrainian crisis and should actively consider its response in case Russia further invades Ukraine.

20 佐藤優】2022年に注目すべき3つのキーワードは「第三次世界大戦・中小企業・論理力」[[Sato Yu] Three key words of 2022 to be taken into account, - World War III, small and medium enterprises and the power of logic] (Business Insider, February 2, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.jp/post-248608>

21 [深層NEWS] ウクライナ情勢「露が本格的な戦争準備しているのは間違いない」[[Deep News] Situation in Ukraine: "Russia is certainly getting ready for a full-blown war"] (Yomiuri, January 19, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/20220119-OYTT50329/>

22 Michito Tsuruoka, ロシアの「さらなるウクライナ侵攻」に米欧はいかに対応するのか [How will the US and Europe respond to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine] (Foresight, December 27, 2021) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://www.fsight.jp/articles/-/48512>

23 Tsuyoshi Goroku and Atsuko Higashino, ウクライナ危機における欧州の責任と戦略 [Europe's responsibility and strategy during the crisis in Ukraine] (Diplomacy (外交), vol.71 Jan./Feb. 2022)



Since February 24, 2022, after the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, Koizumi, Tsuruoka, Higashino and Goroku have been frequently invited to broadcast on Japanese national television to discuss events related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. At the same time, it is important that experts who have previously disseminated Russian narratives about Ukraine are much less likely to speak (compared to 2014).

MASS MEDIA

Daily newspapers, news agencies and television remain the most influential platforms in Japanese society. Since 2014, two news agencies (Kyodo and Jiji), five major newspapers (*Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei* and *Sankei*) and the NHK public broadcaster have been covering the situation in Russian-Ukrainian relations most actively. Their headquarters, where they report, are located in Moscow. Most journalists examined events in Ukraine remotely and traveled to the epicenters, if necessary. Since 2014, the general problem has been that news on the events in Ukraine has often contained hues of Russian propaganda.

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For instance, on February 23, 2014, *Nikkei* published a news item entitled *Ukraine – Anti-Government Protesters Seize Capital. The State Is Under Threat of Partition*, which began with the following paragraph: "Ukraine, where clashes between anti-government protesters and police have led to a large human toll, is now under serious threat of state partition. Anti-government oppositionists are quickly establishing power in Kyiv, the capital city ... Viktor Yanukovich, whom the Verkhovna Rada has decided to impeach, is going to leave for the east of the country, his electoral stronghold. Thus, 'dual power' is emerging in Ukraine, where, with further divisions between the west and the east, a civil war

could break out."²⁴ Meanwhile, this news contains maps of Ukraine, divided into two parts, with the inscriptions "pro-European region" and "pro-Russian region."

The distorted view of Japanese journalists on Ukrainian society and developments at the time was probably due to a general lack of knowledge about Ukraine. This situation can be explained by the fact that the main task of such journalists for some time was to cover events in Russia, especially news related to the Northern Territories of Japan, occupied by the Russian Federation. Japanese journalists in Moscow visited Ukraine mostly when hot events, such as revolutions or all-Ukrainian elections, were already taking place. Otherwise, they followed the news about Ukraine using information published in Russian media. As a result, their knowledge of Ukraine was quite limited, and coverage was often oversimplified and biased, as evidenced by statements like "Ukraine consists of two parts – Ukrainian-speaking, pro-European, and Russian-speaking, pro-Russian."

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Since 2014, however, the general understanding and vision of Japanese reporters regarding the events in Ukraine has become much more objective. Although the abovementioned media still described the situation in eastern Ukraine as "a conflict between the Ukrainian authorities and pro-Russian armed groups (sometimes adding the phrase "Russia-backed")," they have never used the term "civil war." Regarding the legal status of Crimea, only "accession" or "annexation" were initially used, but now terms such as "unilateral / forced annexation" or "occupation" are more common. According to the latest news, most journalists seemed to have a clear understanding that the militants in Donbas are not independent actors, and that Russia plays a crucial role, but the media have not yet dared to change the terminology. Ukraine was increasingly being described as "divided." Besides, Japanese journalists tend to be interested in the direct opinions of ordinary Ukrainian citizens on the ground,²⁵ which enhances their understanding of Ukrainian society: for instance, the fact that the languages spoken by Ukrainians are not indicative of their political orientation.²⁶

²⁴ ウクライナ、反政権デモが首都掌握 分裂の危機 [Anti-Government Protesters Seize Capital. The State Is Under Threat of Partition], (Nikkei, February 23, 2014) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXNASGM2202F_S4A220C1FF8000/

²⁵ For example, an Asahi reporter traveled to Kharkiv and the village of Strilecha in Kharkiv region in February 2022 and asked locals about a possible further Russian invasion. ロシア国境まで800メートル ウクライナの村、交錯する楽観と不安 [800 m to the border with Russia. Optimism and anxiety in Ukrainian villages] (Asahi, February 13, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASQ2F5VMRQ2DUHBI011.html>

²⁶ For instance, the Asahi newspaper published an interview with Volodymyr Fesenko, who explained that many Ukrainians consider themselves Ukrainians, regardless of the language they speak. 「逆効果」もたらしたプーチン氏の強硬姿勢 ウクライナ危機の深層 [Putin's Harsh Behavior Has Led to the "Opposite Effect." The Depth of the Crisis in Ukraine] (Asahi, February 15, 2022) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASQ2H3TZXQ2FUHBI020.html>



These positive changes are largely due to the efforts of the journalists themselves and their desire to deepen their understanding of the developments surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

These positive changes are largely due to the efforts of the journalists themselves and their desire to deepen their understanding of the developments surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This is confirmed by the fact that since 2014 most journalists have come to Ukraine much more often to cover events in more detail, to interview local people and experts. Put otherwise, using the standard journalistic method, they improved their understanding of the situation in Ukraine as the demand for information about the Ukrainian developments in Japanese society increased. Vivid examples thereof are two reportage books written by two former journalists of Japanese newspapers in Moscow. The author of one of them, Shinsaku Mano from the *Mainichi* newspaper, visited Crimea during the occupation and during the hottest phase of the war in Donbas, and even interviewed Igor Girkin,²⁷ who made it clear that militants in Donbas are puppets of the Kremlin. Based on his journalistic work, Mano wrote a book called *Putin's War*, dedicated to the events in Donbas, where he concludes that this is not a civil but an interstate war between Ukraine and Russia. In his book *The War of Destruction – Secret Operations in the New Cold War*, Aegean Furukawa, a former

Nikkei journalists, elaborated on Russia's malicious actions, such as intelligence, mass disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, secret funding of various political forces in Europe, assassination of political opponents, etc. Such efforts by some journalists to dispel myths have greatly influenced journalism in general and the way the Japanese population perceives the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

It is also worth noting that Serhii Korsunskyi, Ambassador of Ukraine to Japan, and the Embassy of Ukraine in Japan published posts on social networks, particularly on Twitter, much more actively than before,²⁸ thus significantly raising Ukraine's visibility. The ambassador also held periodical press conferences, and the media prepare materials based on his statements about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict much more frequently, giving the Japanese population an opportunity to learn about Ukraine's position.

²⁷ ウクライナ紛争 2 年–親露派元幹部語る [Two Years Have Passed in Ukraine Since the Beginning of the Conflict – Former Pro-Russian Leader] (*Mainichi*, October 15, 2018) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <https://video.mainichi.jp/detail/video/5713260222001>

²⁸ Alyona Getmanchuk, Ukraine-Japan: How to Ensure an Effective Global Partnership? (New Europe Center, February 15, 2021) [Electronic resource]. Retrieved from: <http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Dyskusiy-na-zapyska-Ukrai-na-YAponiya.pdf>

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last 8 years, perceptions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Japan have improved significantly, primarily thanks to Japanese journalists and researchers who are aware of the need for a deeper insight into the developments and the spread of Russian disinformation in the Japanese-language information space. However, some experts, who was inclined to search for so-called alternative views, continued replicating in Japanese society views similar to the Kremlin's propaganda narratives. At the same time, some politicians seem tried to influence the decision-making process of the current Kishida government, using statements based on Russian propaganda.

However, when full-scale Russian aggression began, Japan unhesitatingly imposed harsh sanctions on Russia, almost identical to those announced by other G7 and EU countries. This time the Japanese decision differs significantly from the decisions of 2014 for the following reasons:

- 1 Significant improvement of understanding of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict through independent efforts of experts and journalists in Japan to study its issues;
- 2 The corresponding increase in the influence of public-expert discussion on decision-making by the Government of Japan;
- 3 The obvious significance of the events of Russia's direct and full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022

At the same time, I believe that to further improve the objective perception of the further development of events, it is still

necessary to hold more frequent discussions with Japanese experts to promote deeper interest and immersion in the Russian-Ukrainian war. In addition, Japanese colleagues should be helped to visit different parts of Ukraine, independently analyze events, and explore the country itself reasonably and without prejudice.



ABOUT NEW EUROPE CENTER

The New Europe Center was founded in 2017 as an independent think-tank. Despite its new brand, it is based on a research team that has been working together since 2009, at the Institute for World Policy. The New Europe Center became recognized by offering high-quality analysis on foreign policy issues in Ukraine and regional security by combining active, effective work with advocacy.

The New Europe Center's vision is very much in line with the views of the majority of Ukrainians about the future of their country: Ukraine should be integrated into the European Union and NATO. By integration, we understand not so much formal membership as the adoption of the best standards and practices for Ukraine to properly belong to the Euroatlantic value system.

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