# CIVIL SOCIETY INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE FACE OF THE RUSSIAN HYBRID THREAT

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## MOSCOW'S HYBRID WAR

February 24, 2022 marks the *official* start of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since last February, the Russian military has attacked and greatly damaged Ukraine's medical infrastructure,[1] the country's GDP has dropped precipitously,[2] thousands of Ukrainians have been killed in the conflict,[3,4] and equal numbers of children have been forcibly displaced.[5] Despite the world's increased focus on events in Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion, the war actually started in March 2014, when the Kremlin attacked and occupied parts of the Donbas and Crimea. This aggressive military action took place in the wake of Ukraine's *Revolution of Dignity*, which began in November 2013.

In 2014, Moscow also intensified its "hybrid" war—coercion through trade, systematic corruption of elites, and information operations—against Central and Eastern European countries to undermine European support for Ukraine and broadly diminish trust in democratic institutions across the region. In the information space, disinformation campaigns and the use of state propaganda channels served as conduits for the Kremlin to spread hatred and sow division among Western societies. Despite its many vectors, the hybrid threat was not taken seriously by all of the governments in the region—even immediately following

the start of Russian military aggression in 2014. While the Baltic countries and Poland have warned the West consistently about the dangers of Russian malign information influence, some governments considered this issue to be a problem for Eastern European democracies alone and did not adequately acknowledge the threat it posed to their own national security.

Lacking timely action at the government level, civil society organizations led efforts to counter Moscow's information operations and influence more broadly. It is important to consider how a range of organizations in the region reacted to the Russian hybrid threat, focusing on information operations since the 2014 invasion and occupation Crimea and parts of the Donbas. It is also vital to describe what civil society organizations in this part of Europe did in response to this hybrid threat between 2014 and 2022; explain how they reacted to the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022; and offer recommendations to governments across Central and Eastern Europe on what to do next and what role civil society organizations should play in countering Kremlin-backed malign information operations.

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## REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' OPERATIONS BETWEEN 2014-2022

While a number of groups and individual experts raised concerns about the threat of Kremlin-backed military aggression before 2014, it was only after the annexation of Crimea that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe understood the nature and full extent of this threat and began to mobilize against Moscow's information influence and disinformation campaigns. Ukrainian pioneers in fact-checking, such as StopFake, inspired many other civil society organizations in the region to begin public-facing, fact-checking activities to counter emergent disinformation narratives and build societal resilience to them over time. From 2015 through 2016, civil society organizations released reports that described what disinformation campaigns looked like, outlined their methods and channels, and offered ideas on how to combat them.[6]

Regional nongovernmental organizations became the first and most frequent contributors to the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force's EUvsDisinfo database, helping the European Union (EU) to collect examples of Russian disinformation, which had only recently been identified and described adequately. As a result, a large open source and regularly updated database of disinformation campaigns from all over Europe became available for researchers and experts trying to understand the phenomenon, which was still considered rather new. Based on this data, it was also much easier to compare Kremlin disinformation efforts in different regions, countries, and channels.

December 2, 2022 press conference with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine in Kyiv.

Civil society organizations across the region have continued to learn from Ukraine's example, where civil society has piloted innovative methods to combat Russian disinformation. Besides StopFake, which served as great inspiration for Central and Eastern Europe-based fact-checkers, the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, another noteworthy organization, has worked diligently to raise awareness about Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, as well as how these malign activities fall into the larger framework of Moscow's hybrid warfare tactics. Detector Media is another exemplary organization. It was among the few that tried to effectively reach out to and counter disinformation in the occupied territories.

Central and Eastern Europe think tanks and civil society organizations have also gleaned best practices from Ukraine to inform their own advocacy in Western capitals. One notable effort to collect such lessons is The Prague Manual.[7] This document analyzed both positive and negative developments across Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, in countering Russian disinformation in various fields, including fact-checking, media literacy, and even state responses.

Regional civil society activists were not as surprised by the invasion of Ukraine as many Western governments, which had overlooked increased military posturing by Russian armed forces and accompanying, Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns. French President Emmanuel Macron[8] and Czech President Miloš Zeman[9] were among the Western leaders who declared publicly that Moscow would not order the invasion of Ukraine up to the last days prior to the beginning of the conflict. **Civil society was able to mobilize existing activist communities and leverage the experience of Ukrainian organizations who had prepared for war-time challenges for several years,** not only by

developing new fact-checking techniques and tools for disinformation analysis, but also by conducting large-scale awareness raising activities and engaging with citizens of the occupied territories of Donbas to counter disinformation on the ground.

As part of this activism, our organization, the European Values Center for Security Policy, started a program called Information Defense Hub (IDH),[10] which was created in response to the invasion. The project has provided Ukrainian experts who have fled the country with a safe environment to use their knowledge and expertise to counter the Kremlin's influence and connect with European counterparts in the security field, as well as policymakers and journalists who write about Russian malign influence in the region. **Ukrainian experts' insight and detailed knowledge of Kremlin's influence operations and operational contacts inside Ukraine helped provide fact-based analytical information about Kremlin aggression, including information warfare.**

Similar initiatives were launched in other Central and Eastern Europe countries. The Poland-based Ukraine Monitor Program,[11] for instance, works in a similar fashion to the IDH project and serves as another example of creating safe spaces of operation for experts countering Russian influence.

Organizations across the [Central and East European] region have built communities of governmental and nongovernmental experts, policymakers, and journalists to raise awareness and establish a shared understanding of Russian disinformation.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENTAL AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to the many advances in civil society operations, **the extent to which civil society across Central and Eastern Europe has been able to collaborate with governments in the region underpins their larger success in countering Kremlin-backed disinformation and interference campaigns**— or at least in not hampering each other's efforts. While this shift is certainly not the only factor that has strengthened regional activism, it highlights the region's openness to use whole-of-society approaches and focus on countering disinformation and malign influence in a comprehensive manner, using all possible capabilities in areas such as strategic communication, cyber-security, media literacy, and support for independent media, among others.

The Baltic countries provide illustrative examples of where this dynamic has yielded results in the long term.[12] Lithuanian civil society organizations such as Res Publica, Civic Resilience Initiative (CRI), and Debunk.org, for instance, have cooperated with the government on matters of civil society information resilience, media literacy, and cyber security to great effect. Of particular note, CRI provides educational materials on media literacy and related topics to different age groups of Lithuanian society with which official institutions fail to consistently engage.[13]

In recent years, organizations across the region have built communities of governmental and nongovernmental experts, policymakers, and journalists, among others, to raise awareness and establish a shared understanding of Russian disinformation. These activist communities have also recommended potential policy responses to this threat and advocated for more proactive government action in response to Moscow's information warfare.

Despite these efforts, there are also cases of Central and Eastern Europe governments that only recently started to take the threat of disinformation seriously—usually due to significant changes in their government. Consequently, many (dis)information experts from civil society moved into official roles within state government. Slovakia is an instructive example of this phenomenon. The country's security sector is fairly small and interconnected. Now, many former civil society experts work for the civil service, and these connections enable more effective information sharing.

Moreover, some countries have been unsupportive—or even actively hostile— toward civil society. The Hungarian government, for instance, has attempted to shut down and harass civil society to discourage local activism. The closure of civic spaces in Central and Eastern Europe undermines regional civil society efforts to map the Kremlin's information operations, propaganda, and illicit connections to decision makers. Despite this setback, regional organizations, like Political Capital in Hungary, continue their important work.

In such contexts, without the support of local and national policymakers, **it is crucial for civil society organizations to participate in regional and international networks for information and research sharing about Kremlin influence, share findings with international donors, and nurture relationships with civil society organizations from other countries for support, collaboration, and advocacy assistance abroad.** Platforms and organizations like the Open Information Partnership[14] or European Digital Media Observatory[15] can provide civil society organizations with financing, real-time information sharing, and capacity-building. They may also have additional value especially if these organizations are unable to receive any kind of domestic support.

Despite the numerous examples of civil society-government collaboration, democratic governments must take the baton and advance what civil society began in the years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Governments have more resources and the ability to operate strategically in the long-term. They can also encourage additional investment by focusing all sectors of society on the challenge: public, private, and non-profit. Furthermore, governments must invest in clear and transparent strategic communication about the Kremlin's disinformation and malign influence campaigns—as well as that which originates in other authoritarian regimes—to the broader public to rebuild trust. **Popular trust in state institutions is a critical keystone of a resilient society that can resist the hybrid influence of authoritarian regimes and uphold democratic values and unity.**

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Governments should not—and cannot—counter Moscow's malign influence alone. Mutual cooperation of government representatives, civil society organizations, and the private sector should be encouraged, whether through government officials using methods and research championed by counter-disinformation civil society organizations, or the hiring of experts from civil society and the private sector where a country's civil service lacks the resources to address this challenge efficiently. Such measures benefit both state governments and society writ-large. Smaller countries such as Czechia, Slovakia, and the Baltic states do not have sufficient intelligence operations capacities to monitor Russian disinformation, analyze it across platforms and narratives, and create policies to counter its influence on their own. Thus, regional civil society organizations will and must continue to play a critical and complementary role to fill the gap and advance this important work.

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## Civil Society Information Operations in Central and Eastern Europe in the Face of the Russian Hybrid Threat

1    Oleg Vaskiv, "Ляшко: Окупанти зруйнували сотні медзакладів, пошкодили - близько тисячі" [Liashko: The occupiers destroyed hundreds of medical institutions, damaged - about a thousand], RBC-Ukraine, 19 January 2023, www.rbc.ua/rus/news/lyashko-okupanti-zruynuvali-sotni-medzakladiv-1674097123.html.

2    "Ministry of Economy preliminarily estimates GDP decline in 2022 at 30.4%," Ministry of Economy, Government of Ukraine, 5 January 2023, www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/minekonomiky-poperedno-otsiniuie-padinnia-vvp-v-2022-rotsi-na-rivni-304.

3    "З початку вторгнення РФ загинуло понад 16 тисяч осіб, ексгумовано більш ніж тисячу тіл з місць масових поховань – відповідь на запит" [Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, more than 16 thousand people have died, more than a thousand bodies have been exhumed from mass grave sites – response to a request], ZMINA, 10 January 2023, https://zmina.info/news/z-pochatku-vtorgnennya-rf-zagynulo-ponad-16-tysyach-osib-vidpovid-na-zapyt/?fbclid=IwAR1Hr2TzDZFglVMyUojpAoN96IqYSSkZPXLh8x16lamIU6581ipec2L_pkg.

4    In this vein, It is worth mentioning that we do not have precise figures of civilian casualties because we do not know how many people exactly live in territories that are currently occupied by Russian forces. We can estimate that in Mariupol alone, there are likely tens of thousands of civilians fatalities. For more information, please consult the following resource: https://dnipro.tv/dumka-eksperta/mykola-osychenko-prezydent-mariupolskoho-telebachennia-volonter-hromadskyi-diiach-rozpoviv-iak-rozhortalysia-podii-v-mariupoli-na-pochatku-viiny/?fbclid=IwAR0btsZnZ2Kc4Wa9FeluQE_cBsVpvydPiNETkUKiFxuprfpbgr0yoaMfKgc. (Source material in Ukrainian.)

5    "Злочини, вчинені військовими рф під час повномасштабного вторгнення в Україну, станом на 29 січня" [Crimes committed by the Russian military during a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as of January 29], Ministry of Internal Affairs, Government of Ukraine, 29 January 2023, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/zlochyny-vchyneni-viiskovymy-rf-pid-chas-povnomasshtabnoho-vtorhnennia-v-ukrainu-stanom-na-29-sichnia.

6    The Prague Security Studies Institute, for example, published an analysis of the pro-Russian disinformation media scene in Czechia and Slovakia in August 2016. Similarly, our organization, the European Values Center for Security Policy (EVC), published a report on the Reaction of European Democracies to Russian Aggression in Ukraine in April 2017.

7    "The Prague Manual: How to Tailor National Strategy Using Lessons Learned from Countering Kremlin's Hostile Subversive Operations in Central and Eastern Europe," European Values Center for Security Policy, 30 April 2018, https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/prague-manual.pdf.

8    "Ukraine crisis: Macron says Putin pledges no new Ukraine escalation," BBC News, 9 February 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60299790.

9     "Zeman: Válka nebude. Informace o ruské invazi na Ukrajinu jsou opět blamáž tajných služeb USA" [Zeman: There will be no war. Information about the Russian invasion of Ukraine is once again an embarrassment to the US secret services], iROZHLAS, 17 February 2022, www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/milos-zeman-prezident-rozhovor-ukrajina-rusko-konflikt-valka-hospitalizace_2202170725_ako.

10   For more information, please see the "Information Defense Hub" webpage, operated by the European Values Center for Security Policy: https://europeanvalues.cz/en/information-defense-hub/.

11   For more information, please consult the "Ukraine Monitor" webpage, operated by the Warsaw Institute: https://warsawinstitute.org/programs/ukraine-monitor/.

12   For more information, please refer to this study on the successess (and challenges) the Baltic countries face in their efforts to counter disinformation: Dmitri Teprik et al., "Resilience Against Disinformation."

13   For information, please visit the Civic Resilience Initiative's homepage online: https://cri.lt/#about.

14   For more information, please see the Open Information Partnership homepage online: https://openinformationpartnership.org/.

15   For more information, please visit the European Digital Media Observatory's homepage online: https://edmo.eu/.

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