



MEETING THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION THREAT: UKRAINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY'S ADAPTATIONS DURING FULL-SCALE WAR

// GALYNA PETRENKO, DETECTOR MEDIA

2022: ADAPTING TO WAR

A survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in May 2022 showed that the vast majority of Ukrainians do not believe in Russian disinformation narratives. Notably, 96 percent of respondents said that the Kremlin was responsible for the destruction of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and civilian casualties during its unprovoked full-scale invasion.¹ This response may seem obvious, but past surveys conducted since 2014 have indicated that a significant proportion of Ukrainians have been susceptible to such disinformation. In particular, according to an annual, nationwide survey commissioned in 2019, only roughly fifty percent of Ukrainians understood that Russia started the war in Donbas. Thanks largely to the efforts of civil society organizations working to address Russian information manipulation, this number increased to 68 percent by late 2021.²

Throughout Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, Ukrainian civil society has not stopped challenging Kremlin disinformation, which has aimed to justify the invasion, demean Ukrainians, and degrade Ukrainian solidarity. Organizations such as StopFake have continued to fact-check Russian fake news narratives; the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center has continued to research and publicize key Russian disinformation tactics; Texty has similarly expanded its data-driven journalistic

coverage of disinformation and data security issues in Ukraine; and Internews Ukraine has advanced UkraineWorld—a multi-media project in English that works to familiarize the world with the Ukrainian perspective and highlight the absurdity of Russian narratives.

My organization, Detector Media, monitors and analyzes media content for Russian influence and disinformation, and shares our findings through new public-facing content such as “NewsPalm,” a comedy show on YouTube, a joint program with Ukrainske Radio (the Ukrainian Public Broadcaster) entitled “Russian Fake, F*** Yourself,” as well as the #DisinfoChronicle,³ a daily aggregator of disinformation cases being debunked by different civil society organizations.

Given the rapidly increasing usage of Telegram as a source of news for Ukrainians—the platform went from being the eighth most popular messaging service in Ukraine before the war to being *the most* popular since the invasion began⁴—many Ukrainian civil society organizations have begun to track and respond to Russia’s efforts to utilize the platform to spread disinformation, working closely with private sector partners with critical data scraping and machine learning capabilities.⁵

On the whole, since the full-scale invasion began, **Ukrainian organizations that worked to build public awareness about Russian disinformation and its harmful effects on Ukrainians have grown their audiences significantly, as part of the growing demand for Ukrainian-language video content on social networks, including explainers on Ukrainian history and culture.**⁶ Thanks to these concerted efforts to engage the public, many Ukrainians are now more aware of civil society’s work in the information space. According to an Internews study conducted from July to September 2022, more than a quarter of respondents were familiar with fact-checking services.⁷ Respondents mentioned relying on StopFake, Detector Media, No Lies, On the Other Side of News, Vox Check, and Texty to verify the news media they consumed.



NewsPalm host, Yurko Kosmyna, discusses the protests against the Ukrainian government for banning Viktor Medvedchuk’s TV channels from being broadcast in the country—the latter has been identified as a key spreader of Russian disinformation.

2014-2022: DEVELOPING NEW CAPABILITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS

The foundations for the effectiveness of Ukrainian civil society's efforts to counter Russian disinformation in 2022 were laid during the preceding eight years, as many organizations honed their skills and built their networks. Ukrainian civil society's counter disinformation operations have evolved from journalistic fact-checking to the development of data-driven methods and approaches to identifying and responding to disinformation narratives through new machine learning and data analytics capabilities across a complex and evolving information space.

This evolution took place with the help of coordinating initiatives like the establishment of the National Democratic Institute's Countering Disinformation Hub and the Zinc Network's Open Information Partnership in 2019, as well as through the participation of experts from other, related professions such as journalism, linguistics, and data science. At the same time, the establishment of state-backed institutions to combat disinformation—one of which was led by a former civil society activist—speaks to the important influence Ukrainian civil society has over the evolution of the Ukrainian state's approach to disinformation. For example, the Center for Strategic Communications within Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, has worked to bring civil society and government actors together to jointly monitor and counter Russian narratives. Its existence highlights how vital civil society's role has become in combatting disinformation in Ukraine, and emphasizes how widely acknowledged civil society expertise has become, in contrast to earlier times when the government paid little attention to so-called "third sector" organizations.

The establishment of state-backed institutions to combat disinformation—one of which was led by a former civil society activist—speaks to the important influence Ukrainian civil society has over the evolution of the Ukrainian state's approach to disinformation.

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT

Government authorities' recognition of Ukrainian civil society's expertise in matters related to the information space did not arise solely from counter-disinformation work; it was also driven by important public policy debates related to media and freedom of speech in Ukraine. In 2019, an anti-disinformation law was drafted for public comment, which instead of defeating disinformation, would have created significant risks for journalists and threats to civil society. Due in large part to civil society resistance, the law was not adopted. In late 2022, a related piece of legislation, "On Media," was passed into law, which expands the purview of the Ukrainian government's media regulator

over online media outlets. This law was supported by the majority of media-related civil society organizations and international donors for its expansion of democratic accountability in the information space. At the same time, it has been criticized by journalistic organizations for its potential to become a tool of incumbent political forces.

Similarly, the onset of martial law in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, including government-enforced limitations on media operations, has been controversial within and beyond Ukraine, but has clearly helped to rid the Ukrainian information space of harmful Russian disinformation. Although civil society rejoiced at the diminished presence of Russian disinformation narratives in the country's media landscape, there was also an immediate recognition of the importance of tempering the government's efforts to exert excessive control over the media.

Finally, one of the most significant results of joint civil society-government efforts was the establishment of a disinformation narrative database by civil society, which used this resource to advocate for the Ukrainian government's ban on three TV channels in 2020—all of which were closely associated with the Kremlin-aligned oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk—due to their systematic efforts to advance disinformation narratives. This decision was criticized by some in the international community as an attack on freedom of speech, but a broad swathe of Ukrainian society has agreed it was necessary to protect Ukraine's information space during war time.

LEARNING FROM UKRAINE'S EXPERIENCE

The Ukrainian experience may offer the following lessons for civil society in other contexts to prepare for crises and associated authoritarian information threats:

Expand the target audience of strategic communications: Observing the efficiency of strategic communications in Ukraine, civil society worldwide can borrow from these approaches and strategies to better lobby state authorities to tackle issues of importance to them—including countering authoritarian disinformation. The Ukrainian approach to international communications was initially designed to solidify support domestically. It has since evolved to focus on generating support among the publics and leaderships of countries across Europe and North America. In addition to expanding geographic focus, Ukrainian civil society organizations are currently engaged in efforts to respond to an evolving information space, developing [tools to monitor TikTok, where Russian disinformation about Ukraine is proliferating](#).

Strive for greater transparency: Work to increase the editorial and financial transparency of the media industry in order to discover the malign influence of political and foreign funding. **Civil society should aim to address the economic incentives for spreading disinformation** by stimulating the self-regulation of local advertising industries in order to exclude outlets and bloggers that spread disinformation from their media sectors.

Be cautious of authoritarian methods of countering disinformation:

Disinformation can seem unstoppable, especially when long-term methods of building citizen resilience such as media literacy may take years to show results.

An inability to make headway could lead to a move toward the application of more radical measures that could ultimately violate freedom of speech, for instance, advocating for laws which may create the risk of criminal liability for journalists or users of social networks. The Kremlin's war of aggression in Ukraine has relied on the same barbaric tactics as wars of the previous century, but the information environment has changed significantly and society derives greater benefit from an open information environment rather than one oriented toward censorship.

Grappling with authoritarian-aligned media outlets: Harmful authoritarian, state-backed entities do not produce journalism or news as understood in a democratic context. Instead, they function as components of state propaganda machines that serve the interest of narrow political powers. Politicians, even during war time, may be rightfully concerned that banning such outlets will be seen as an attack on the freedom of speech. In other cases, political decision makers may think that banning a couple of TV channels backed by a hostile, authoritarian regime is a "silver bullet" that can resolve their country's disinformation problem. Neither scenario paints the full picture, and **civil society should aim to explain the difference between propaganda outlets and journalistic organizations to the public and to policymakers in advance of any move to restrict or censor information outlets.**

Take legal action: Support Ukraine's efforts to punish Russian propagandists in the International Criminal Court for incitement to war. Hold them accountable. **If such actors are punished, it may deter other authoritarian regimes from spreading disinformation to generate conflict.**

The Kremlin's war of aggression in Ukraine has relied on the same barbaric tactics as wars of the previous century, but the information environment has changed significantly and society derives greater benefit from an open information environment rather than one oriented toward censorship.

ENDNOTES

Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine

- 1 Sinan Aral, "Ukraine Is Winning the Information War," *Washington Post*, 1 March 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/01/information-war-zelensky-ukraine-putin-russia/.
- 2 Anton Hrushetskyi, "Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions for the Earliest Possible End of the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on December 4–27, 2022," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2 January 2023, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1167&page=1>.
- 3 Dimitra Tsoulou Malakoudi et al., *Eurobarometer*, European Parliament, December 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=85321>.
- 4 Dina Smetlz, Craig Kafura, and Emily Sullivan, "Growing US Divide on How Long to Support Ukraine," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 5 December 2022, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/growing-us-divide-how-long-support-ukraine>.
- 5 John Haltiwanger, "New Poll Suggests Americans' Support for Ukraine Is Softening as GOP Vows to Slow the Massive Aid Effort," *Business Insider*, 29 November 2022, www.businessinsider.com/poll-suggests-americans-support-for-ukraine-is-softening-2022-11.
- 6 For more information about this study and other data, please see: "European Parliament Eurobarometer: Parlemeter 2022," European Parliament, December 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2932>.
- 7 "Ukraine to Open Ten New Embassies in African Countries," New Voice of Ukraine, 23 December 2022, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/ukraine-to-open-ten-new-embassies-in-african-countries-news-50293059.html>.
- 8 Olena Churanova, "Countering Russian Disinformation: Ukrainian NGOs on the Frontline," *Ukraine Analytica* 1, no. 11 (2018), <https://ukraine-analytica.org/wp-content/uploads/churanova.pdf>.
- 9 "Джерела інформації, медіаграмотність і російська пропаганда: результати всеукраїнського опитування громадської думки" [Sources of information, media literacy, and Russian propaganda: Results of an all-Ukrainian public opinion survey], Detector Media, 21 March 2019, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/164308/2019-03-21-dzherela-informatsii-mediagramotnist-i-rosiyska-propaganda-rezultaty-vseukrainskogo-opytuvannya-gromadskoi-dumky/>; and "Media Consumption in Ukraine: Change in Media Needs and Defeat of Russian Propaganda," Detector Media, 15 February 2022, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/196477/2022-02-15-media-consumption-in-ukraine-change-in-media-needs-and-defeat-of-russian-propaganda/>.
- 10 "Ukraine Bans Pro-Russian TV Stations," Deutsche Welle, 3 February 2021, www.dw.com/en/ukraine-zelenskiy-bans-three-opposition-tv-stations/a-56438505.
- 11 Dmitri Teperik et al., "Resilience Against Disinformation: A New Baltic Way to Follow?" International Centre for Defense and Security, 20 October 2022, <https://icds.ee/en/resilience-against-disinformation-a-new-baltic-way-to-follow/>.
- 12 "Regarding the Creation of a Unified Position ('One Voice') of Ukraine to Global Tech Platforms to Fight against Disinformation and Fakes," Centre for Strategic Communication, 19 July 2022, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/regarding-the-creation-of-a-unified-position-one-voice-of-ukraine-to-global-tech-platforms-to-fight-against-disinformation-and-fakes/>.
- 13 Adéla Klečková, "The Role of Cyber 'Elves' against Russian Information Operations," German Marshall Fund, 28 January 2022, www.gmfus.org/news/role-cyber-elves-against-russian-information-operations.
- 14 Mark Scott, "The Shit-Posting, Twitter-Trolling, Dog-Deploying Social Media Army Taking On Putin One Meme at a Time," *Politico*, 31 August 2022, www.politico.eu/article/nafo-doge-shiba-russia-putin-ukraine-twitter-trolling-social-media-meme/.
- 15 svbl (@svblxyz), "Breaking: #Germany considers sending their entire fleet of Haunebu II to #Ukraine. According to a government spokesperson, there are no concerns about potential escalation over the supply of Rundflugzeuge and #NAFO troops will start training as soon as possible. . .," Twitter, 24 January 2023, <https://twitter.com/svblxyz/status/1617840692612722688>.

- 16 Yasmin Green et al., *Evidence-Based Misinformation Interventions: Challenges and Opportunities for Measurement and Collaboration*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 January 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/09/evidence-based-misinformation-interventions-challenges-and-opportunities-for-measurement-and-collaboration-pub-88661>.
- 17 Claudia Flores-Saviaga and Deyra Guerrero, "In Latin America, Fact-Checking Organizations and Cross-Regional Collaborations Attempt to Counter Russia's Disinformation," *Power 3.0* (blog), 6 July 2022, www.power3point0.org/2022/07/06/in-latin-america-fact-checking-organizations-and-cross-regional-collaborations-attempt-to-counter-russias-disinformation/.
- 18 "Especial Rusia-Ucrania: Encuesta de Satisfacción Política y Opinión Pública" [Russia-Ukraine Special: Political Satisfaction and Public Opinion Survey], University of San Andrés, Argentina, April 2022, <https://enredaccion.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/UDESA-ESPOP-Especial-conflicto-belico-Rusia-Ucrania-Abril1.pdf>.
- 19 Ariel González Levaggi and Nicolás Albertoni, "Latin America Reacts to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Global Americans*, 8 March 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/03/latin-america-reacts-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.
- 20 Stephanie Busari, "Analysis: Why Some African Countries Are Thinking Twice about Calling Out Putin," CNN, 23 March 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/03/21/africa/africa-leaders-ukraine-response-cmd-intl/index.html.
- 21 Laura Angela Bagnetto, "Why Some African Nations Continue to Support Russia," *Radio France International*, 12 March 2022, www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220312-why-some-african-nations-continue-support-russia-guns-security-historic.
- 22 Maria Ressa, "Nobel Lecture," Nobel Prize Foundation, 10 December 2021, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2021/ressa/lecture/.

Meeting the Russian Disinformation Threat: Ukrainian Civil Society's Adaptations during Full-Scale War

- 1 "90% російськомовних жителів України не зазнавали утисків через мову – опитування КМІС" [90% of Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine were not oppressed because of their language – KIIS survey], *Detector Media*, 27 May 2022, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/199594/2022-05-27-90-rosiyskomovnykh-zhyteliv-ukrainy-ne-zaznavaly-utyskiv-cherez-movu-opytuvannya-kmis/>.
- 2 "Media Consumption in Ukraine: Change in Media Needs and Defeat of Russian Propaganda."
- 3 For more information, please consult *Detector Media's* "#DisinfoChronicle" web page: <https://disinfo.detector.media/>. (Source material in Ukrainian.)
- 4 "Дослідження Internews: Аудиторія новин перейшла переважно в соціальні мережі" [Internews Research: News Audiences Moved Mostly to Social Media], *Detector Media*, 29 November 2022, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/205433/2022-11-29-doslidzhennya-internews-audytoriya-novyn-pereyshla-perevazhno-v-sotsialni-merezhi/>.
- 5 "Викриття У телеграмі створили фейкові канали Повітряних Сил ЗСУ" [Fake Telegram created fake channels of the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine], *Detector Media*, 2 February 2023, <https://disinfo.detector.media/post/u-telehami-stvoryly-feikovi-kanaly-povitrianykh-syl-zsu>.
- 6 "Українська аудиторія після початку великої війни: зміни у медіаспоживанні, сприйняття інформаційного простору, чутливість до спотвореного контенту" [Ukrainian audience after the start of the big war: changes in media consumption, perception of the information space, sensitivity to distorted content], *Detector Media*, 16 November 2022, <https://detector.media/infospace/article/204890/2022-11-16-ukrainska-audytoriya-pislya-pochatku-velykoi-viyny-zminy-u-mediaspozhyvanni-sprynyattya-informatsynogo-prostoru-chutlyvist-do-spotvorenogo-kontentu/>.
- 7 "Українські медіа, ставлення та довіра у 2022 р." [Ukrainian Media: Attitudes and Trust in 2022], *Internews*, 29 November 2022, <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Ukrainski-media-stavlennia-ta-dovira-2022.pdf>.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adam Fivenson is the senior program officer for information space integrity at the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies, where he conducts research on the integrity in the information space and countering authoritarian information activities. Prior to joining the Forum, Adam advised political figures, governments, and international non-profits on communication, technology and data strategy, and led ethnographic research missions on the impact of new technologies on societies across four continents. He holds an MS from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a BA from the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter: [@afivenson](https://twitter.com/afivenson).

Galyna Petrenko is the Director of Detector Media, one of Ukraine's primary sources for rapid, trustworthy information about Russia's full-scale invasion. In this role, she oversees Detector Media's original reporting teams, research focused on Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives across the information sphere, and outreach initiatives designed to counter the Russian narratives about the invasion and about Ukraine in general. Previously, Petrenko served as Editor-In-Chief of Detector Media, Deputy Editor at Telekritika, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Marketing Media Review at Ekonomika, as well as a number of other publications. Connect with her on [Facebook](#).

Veronika Víchová is the Deputy Director for Analysis and Head of the Kremlin Watch Program at the European Values Center for Security Policy. She co-authored a study on how Kremlin propaganda portrays European leaders, published by the Atlantic Council, and an overview of counter-measures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's influence operations. She compiles the Kremlin Watch Briefing, a weekly newsletter on disinformation and influence operations with a broad audience that includes policy experts, journalists, and government officials. She graduated from Masaryk University in Brno and is a graduate of the New Security Leaders Program (2017). Follow her on Twitter: [@VeruVichova](https://twitter.com/VeruVichova).

Andrej Poleščuk is an analyst with the Kremlin Watch Program at the European Values Center for Security Policy. He is currently finishing his law studies at Palacký University in Olomouc. Follow him on Twitter: [@andrewofpolesia](https://twitter.com/andrewofpolesia).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors appreciate the contributions of the International Forum’s staff and leadership, including Christopher Walker, John K. Glenn, Kevin Sheives, John Engelken, Lily Sabol, and Joslyn Brodfuehrer, all of whom played important roles in the editing and publication of this report. Special acknowledgment goes to Adam Fivenson, whose support and vision for this project—as well as his contribution to it—were central to its completion.

The Forum also wishes to recognize Sunseed Art and, specifically, Oleh Hryshchenko for their openness to allowing us to use his artwork in this publication. Finally, the Forum acknowledges Factor3 Digital for their efforts and invaluable support in designing this report for publication.

PHOTO CREDITS

Cover image: Oleh Hryshchenko, “Medusa,” from [Sunseed Art](#). Reprinted with artist’s permission.

Page 3: Oleh Hryshchenko, “Ruzzism Delenda Est,” from personal collection. Reprinted with artist’s permission.

Page 9: Twitter screenshot from user svbl’s account ([@svblxyz](#)). Reprinted with permission.

Page 11: Screenshot of [Texty’s](#) online analytical dashbaord, reprinted with permission.

Page 15: Oleh Hryshchenko, “Minotaur,” from [Sunseed Art](#). Reprinted with artist’s permission.

Page 16: Screenshot of Detector Media’s [“News Palm” YouTube show](#), reprinted with permission.

Page 20: Oleh Hryshchenko, “Kobzar,” from [Sunseed Art](#). Reprinted with artist’s permission.

Page 22: Photo by Ruslan Kaniuka/Ukrinform/Future. Publishing via Getty Images.