



SHIELDING DEMOCRACY: CIVIL SOCIETY ADAPTATIONS TO KREMLIN DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE

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ONE YEAR LATER, UKRAINE IS WINNING IN THE INFORMATION SPACE

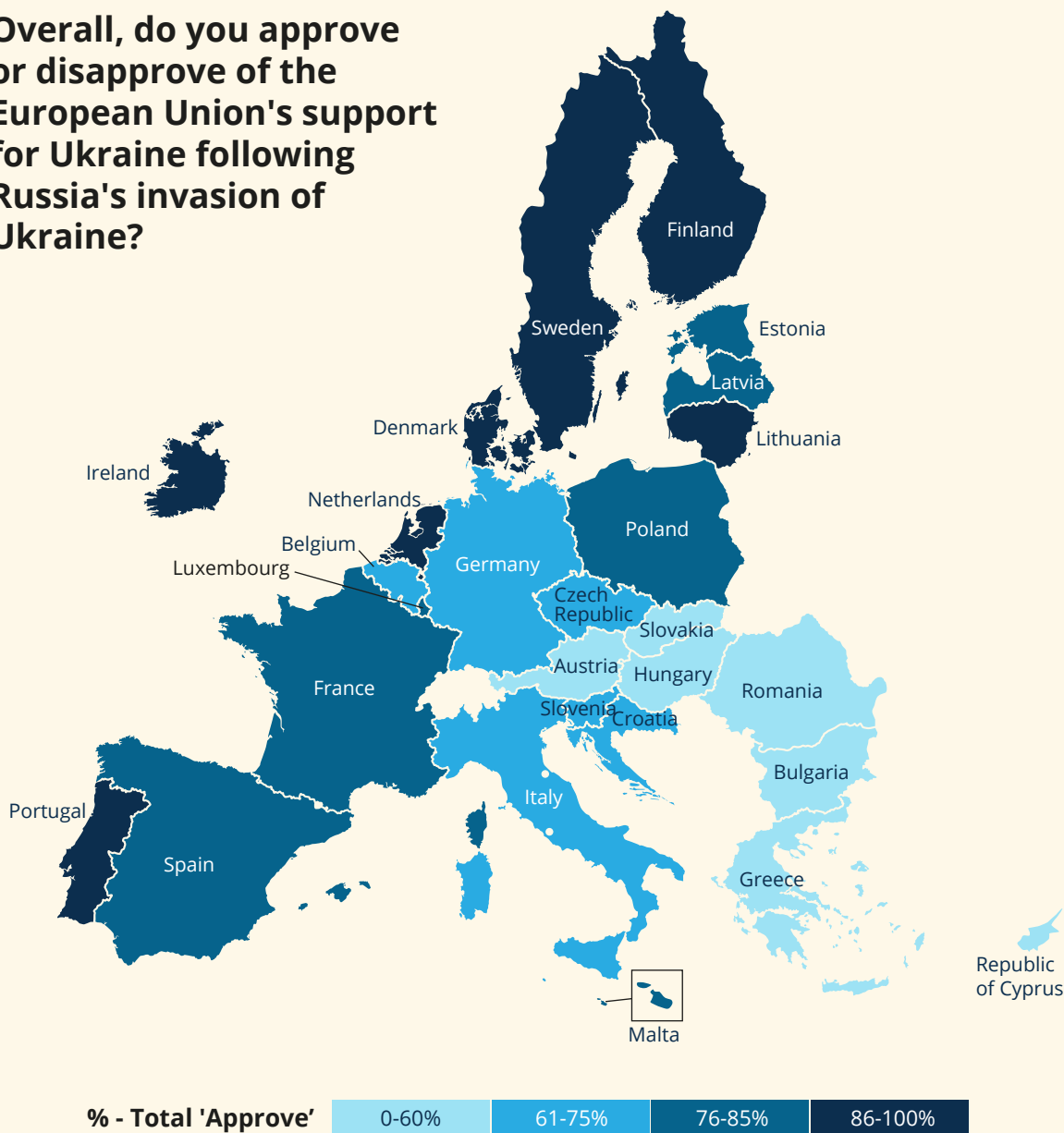
Since the onset of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year, competition in the information space has intensified. By the time the first volleys of missiles rained down on Kyiv in late February 2022, Russian propagandists had already been hard at work depicting the unprovoked attack as a grave necessity. In the Kremlin's utterly distorted portrayal, Ukraine was under the control of neo-Nazis who were repressing Russian speakers, and a Ukrainian invasion of Russian territory was imminent. During the subsequent year of fighting, Moscow's hydra-like rationalization of its violence has sprouted additional narratives, with features including purported Ukrainian satanists and bioweapon labs.

Yet despite these pervasive mythmaking efforts, **it appears that Ukraine and its allies are—in key respects—winning the war in the information space across most of the transatlantic community.**¹ Public opinion polling from late 2022 supports this impression:

- A December 2022 survey on Ukrainians' desire for self-determination and victory on the battlefield showed that more than 85 percent of respondents had a strong preference for no territorial concessions to Russia.² This figure has been fairly consistent since the beginning of the war.
- In the European Union (EU), the Kremlin has aimed to sow division over the hosting of Ukrainian refugees and the threat to energy supplies. Nevertheless, a Eurobarometer survey of European citizens released in December 2022 found that 74 percent approved of EU support for Ukraine, with particularly strong rates of approval among those from the Baltic states and Central Europe.³

FIGURE

Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the European Union's support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion of Ukraine?



Eurobarometer data showing public support for EU aid to Ukraine in December 2022⁶

- Nearly two-thirds of Americans support the continuation of U.S. military and economic assistance to Ukraine, according to a December 2022 report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,⁴ though that support is increasingly conditioned by partisan political affiliation.⁵

As in Greek myth, when Perseus uses a mirrored shield to see and defeat the snake-haired Gorgon Medusa, Ukrainians have employed critical strategic and tactical adaptations in the information space. These adaptations have served to identify and overcome the Kremlin's simultaneous efforts to delegitimize the idea of Ukraine as a sovereign and democratic state, legitimize and obscure the violence and depredations of the Russian invasion, demoralize the Ukrainian people, hollow out support for Ukraine across the transatlantic community, and ultimately fracture the democratic alliance.

In the crucible of conflict, Ukrainians have also galvanized and accelerated their responses to the increasing complexity and global scale of Russian disinformation about the invasion. While Kyiv's early efforts—starting in 2014—to counter Kremlin disinformation focused on defending its domestic information space, Ukrainian authorities have since recognized the importance of competing with Russian government influence in information spaces around the world and have begun to expand their diplomatic representation.⁷ Nongovernmental initiatives have likewise started to reach farther afield and communicate with a more diverse range of audiences relevant to public support for Ukraine.

This report examines such adaptations and innovations by Ukrainians in their struggle against Moscow's propaganda machine. Companion essays—one from Ukraine, the other from Central Europe—provide more context and details on the ways in which locally based organizations are working to meet the challenge. As part of the project, the International Forum on Democratic Studies conducted more than fifty expert interviews and hosted a series of convenings with counter-disinformation experts from Ukraine and across Europe, all of which informed the following analysis.

The research identified three advantages—**deep preparation, networks of cooperation, and active utilization of new technology**—that have allowed civil society organizations and governments in Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe to build trust and tell Ukraine's story, unite Ukrainians and their allies, and ensure resilience in the face of pervasive authoritarian disinformation campaigns. These efforts have fortified public support across much of Europe and the United States—support which has been critical to Ukrainians' ability to maintain the integrity of their state and defend themselves on the battlefield during Moscow's brutal assault.

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1. THE PROFOUND URGENCY OF PREPARATION

Ukrainian experts and civil society leaders have argued that there is no substitute for preparation in the struggle against disinformation. According to Jakub Kalenský of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “the work of civil society between 2014 and 2022 paid significant dividends in many ways, including how it inspired governments in Ukraine and around the region to ramp up their research and efforts to counter Russian narratives about the war.”

Ukrainians have learned to mitigate risks in the information space through hard-won experience. Moscow’s use of disinformation in Ukraine goes back to Soviet times and extends to Russian influence activities in the aftermath of the union’s 1991 collapse, often taking the form of historical revisionism. As the Kremlin’s encroachments have intensified since 2014, Ukraine’s civil society, news media, and activist community have built their capacity, working with democratic partners to counter malign authoritarian narratives.

Ukrainians trace the origins of this response to the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, when Kremlin disinformation campaigns smeared the Euromaidan’s pro-Europe protesters as fascists and neo-Nazis in order to justify Russia’s annexation of Crimea and rolling invasion of eastern Ukraine. Many of the same narratives were notably redeployed to rationalize the full-scale invasion in February 2022.⁸ As Galyna Petrenko of Detector Media notes in her accompanying essay, the period between 2014 and 2022 represented a crucial stage of development for the counter-disinformation community in Ukraine, during which its ability to coordinate and build essential response mechanisms matured. **Reacting to the rising intensity, prevalence, and reach of Moscow’s information activities about Ukraine within the country and across Europe, new civil society organizations were formed specifically to address the problem, while established organizations reoriented themselves to meet the challenge** and expanded their research, analysis, outreach, and public education capabilities.

The emerging critical mass of counter-disinformation activity has greatly improved the Ukrainian public’s knowledge and awareness of Russian disinformation narratives and tactics. For example, according to national survey data, the percentage of Ukrainians who understood the war in Donbas to be the result of Russian aggression increased from 49 percent in February 2019 to 65 percent in December 2021.⁹ During this time, Ukrainian organizations began experimenting with new tools to fact-check and counter Kremlin-backed narratives more effectively, improving collaboration and information sharing to build a community of trust, and educating the Ukrainian public about Moscow’s goals in the information space and methods to strengthen citizens’ resilience and media literacy.

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— Jakub Kalenský

Choose one statement about the events in Ukraine that reflects your personal opinion the most

Data sourced from two Detector Media studies (one in [Ukrainian](#) and the other in [English](#)).



These civil society-led efforts, combined with the Ukrainian government's 2021 decision to limit access to Russian state-controlled media,¹⁰ meant that **by the time the full-scale invasion began in February 2022, most Ukrainians were able to obtain trusted information and understood, on at least a basic level, the nature of Russian disinformation and the distinct threat it posed**, as Galyna Petrenko argues in her essay.

The advance work by civil society groups also had an important impact on many of the democratic governments in the region whose support would later be critical, by providing a model approach for raising awareness and building societal resilience in the face of false Kremlin narratives and actors. For instance, the Baltic states, which also have historical experience in dealing with Moscow's malign influence and disinformation, have accelerated critical whole-of-society responses. As Veronika Víchová and Andrej Poleščuk of the European Values Center for Security Policy describe in their accompanying essay, the Baltic countries provide a complementary example of the type of early-stage risk-mitigation measures that are necessary to secure an information space from authoritarian disinformation efforts, such as close collaboration between and across civil society and government, and significant initiatives to educate the public.¹¹

2. COOPERATION IS KEY

In an increasingly complex information space, civil society organizations have leveraged common values and diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the scale, sophistication, and speed necessary to stay ahead of the adaptations in messaging strategy churned out by the Kremlin's multiheaded propaganda machine.

Such civil society collaboration may include the efforts of data scientists, narrative researchers, web-traffic analysts, marketers and audience-segmentation specialists, sociologists who focus on public polling, and investigative journalists. **Through dedicated information sharing across sectors, these networks can identify disinformation narratives, illuminate their underlying messages and target audiences, and design timely, effective responses.** They also help civil society organizations achieve valuable economies of scale that would otherwise be out of reach.

Cooperative networks provide a crucial forum for disinformation researchers to exchange findings and highlight best practices. Building trust and strategizing on outreach to amplify public advocacy are other crucial elements of such a collaborative approach. For example, the Disinformation Coordination Hub in Ukraine, launched in late 2019 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), created a platform for roughly 25 local civil society groups, media organizations, and international organizations to share research and outreach efforts, as well as technical knowledge on how to detect, monitor, and communicate their findings about disinformation. **According to NDI's Tamta Otiashvili, the Hub's "meetings are needs-based and convene when Hub members want to share research and analysis, start a conversation, or develop a joint strategy related to a particular topic."** This flexible structure was especially important during the early days of the 2022 invasion, when most organizations had to slow their work to focus on ensuring the safety and security of their staff and families, but it has continued to characterize the Hub's approach to fostering collaboration.

Participation in cooperative networks can also limit potential duplication of efforts among resource-limited civil society organizations. For example, the "one voice" policy adopted by the Strategic Communication Center within Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy seeks to unify the voices of civil society and the Ukrainian government when addressing disinformation content found on technology platforms. It has been described as critical to the clarity and success of Ukraine's communications with private-sector technology firms and social media companies, which have solicited platform support in taking down posts and accounts engaged in amplifying disinformation narratives about the full-scale invasion.¹²

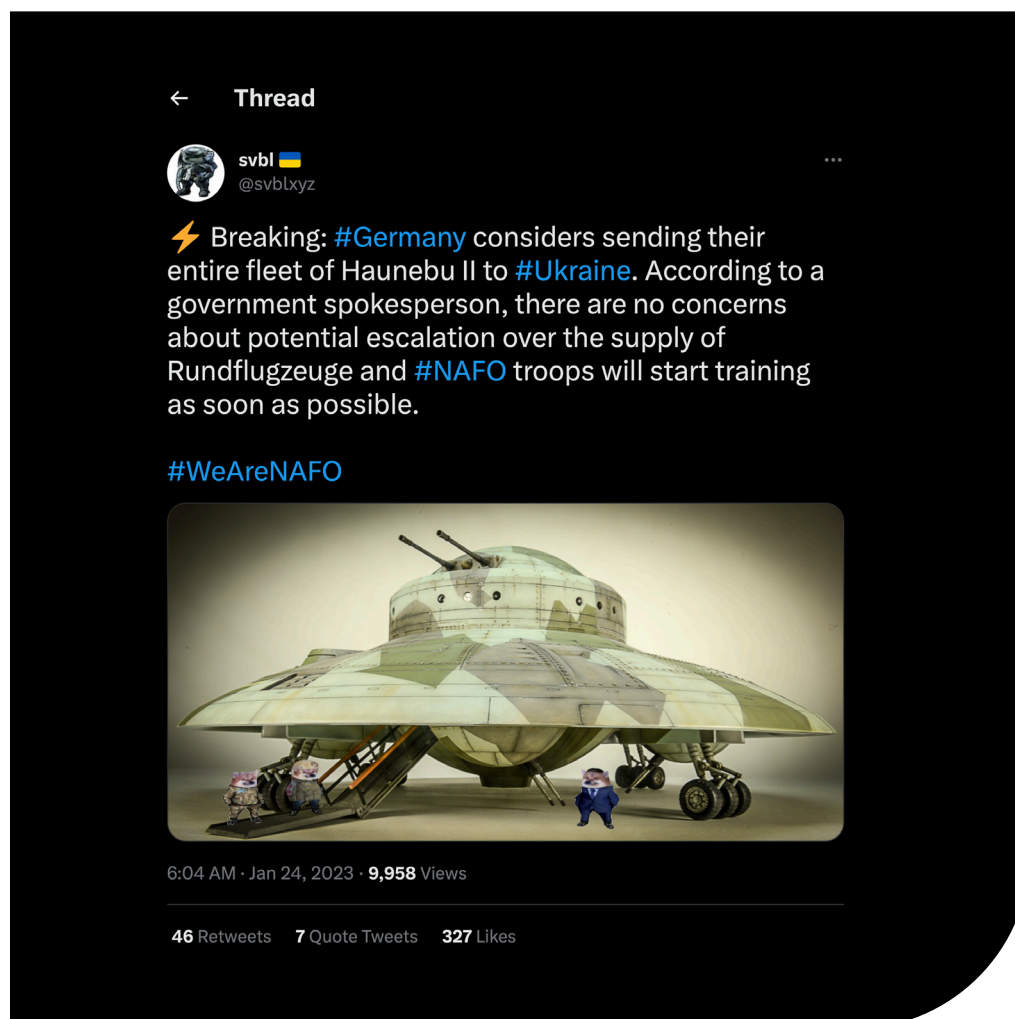
Given the tendency of disinformation narratives to cross platforms and outlets to reach diverse audiences, cooperation across and between sectors is critical to building the capacity to resist and counter disinformation. The Hub was notably

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helpful to Ukrainian civil society organizations as they sought to react to Moscow's recent pivot to "hyperlocal" disinformation campaigns, wherein Russian state-controlled outlets have attempted to reach Ukrainians through content-sharing agreements with cash-strapped local news outlets and localized channels on the popular messaging application, Telegram. The Hub connected Ukrainian civil society organizations to local journalists across the country—many of whom are operating in active conflict zones—to better understand the dynamics of Russian disinformation operations in each context and design localized messaging in response.

In addition to nongovernmental organization (NGO) networks, **numerous citizen-driven initiatives have arisen to apply even more flexible, less formalized methods of collaboration in the struggle against Russian disinformation.** Examples include the "Elves" movements in Finland, Czechia, the Baltic states, and beyond, as well as the North Atlantic Fellas Organization (#NAFO). The Elves are a loose grouping of data experts, journalists, students, and interested citizens working together to expose and counter Kremlin narratives online.¹³ Meanwhile, #NAFO is a Twitter-based counter-disinformation group that trolls the Russian government and the broader network of pro-Russian accounts, using provocative and sometimes absurd memes to highlight and expose—or "bonk"—the ridiculous falsehood of many Russian narratives.¹⁴

A #NAFO Twitter post responding to Kremlin reaction to German decision to supply Ukraine with tanks.¹⁵



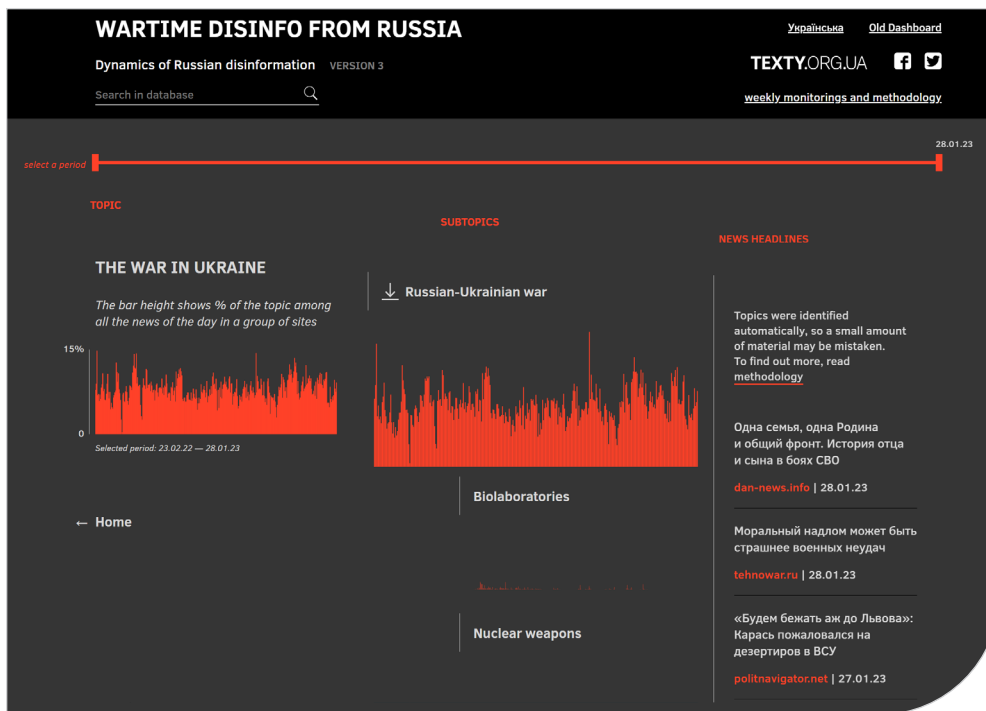
Due to their decentralized nature and considerable size, these informal groups represent a powerful extension of European efforts to counter Russian disinformation about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. **They are also a clear expression of democratic values by a cross-border community that is determined to marginalize those who would rationalize or dissemble on behalf of authoritarian regimes.**

3. LEVERAGING NEW TECHNOLOGIES

It would be difficult—if not impossible—for even the most well-staffed civil society organizations to directly monitor emergent disinformation narratives across the global media ecosystem. However, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning tools make it easier to rapidly detect patterns across massive data sets. **These tools are empowering disinformation researchers to pick up on new Russian narratives more quickly and giving outreach specialists more time to design an effective response before the narratives can cross channels, platforms, and outlets to reach larger audiences.** Furthermore, by facilitating analysis of the behavior of purveyors of Russian disinformation over time, AI and machine-learning tools enable counter-disinformation specialists to predict future campaigns on the basis of societal fault lines, cultural tropes, annual events, and historical knowledge. Such analysis has led to the proactive design of counter-messaging and the preparation of new democratic narratives and campaigns to address societal vulnerabilities.

For example, Texty (based in Ukraine) uses AI and machine-learning tools to identify new pro-Kremlin narratives across a number of platforms, including Telegram (an encrypted messaging application whose popularity has grown rapidly in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion). Moscow has used Telegram at the local level to spread confusion in small communities near the front lines in advance of military assaults. Texty has used its advanced technology to rapidly perform analyses of information environments where narratives may be salient and impactful but otherwise difficult to identify and counter, and to compare the prevalence of narratives across platforms. Few other organizations have developed this capability to date, due to the technical challenges inherent in scraping data from thousands of Telegram channels and websites as well as the specialized—and at times expensive—human expertise this activity requires.

Detector Media also uses AI and machine learning to better understand Moscow's efforts in information ecosystems beyond the transatlantic community. Cooperating closely with LetsData, a Ukrainian private-sector firm that provides AI and machine-learning services, the group engages in real-time discourse monitoring in more than thirty countries. It is possible to do this work manually, but an algorithm can detect in ten seconds what might take an unassisted researcher an hour (or longer) to discover. **By coordinating narrative and audience research, public polling data, and focus groups, counter-disinformation networks can direct their efforts to the specific narratives that are empirically gaining the most traction among crucial audiences and create narrowly tailored responses that reach the right people.**



Example of [Texty's](https://texty.org.ua/) public analytical dashboard showing frequency of topic daily, over time, across a sample of Russian web sites.

Any technological enhancement of empirical research efforts could clearly help counter-disinformation activists to work more efficiently and avoid wasting resources. Ksenia Iliuk, the former head of research at Detector Media and co-founder of LetsData, shared an example of how the group identifies which narratives are actually influencing public opinion and decides on an appropriate response. She noted that according to one common narrative, the autonomous Orthodox Church of Ukraine has no right to exist. "This narrative was very prevalent in terms of likes and shares," she said, "but through surveys and focus groups we learned that people—at least in Eastern Ukraine—did not distinguish between Ukrainian and Russian churches, so there was no reason to fight back on this narrative. However, in Western Ukraine, the situation was the exact opposite, necessitating a response."

The challenge of implementing technology-driven approaches more broadly within Ukraine and beyond hinges on the fact that people with the skills to design and manage such systems tend to gravitate toward the private sector, where compensation is greater and employment may seem more secure. Moreover, digital rights activists are raising valid concerns about the potential threats that AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT pose to the integrity of the information space, as they could be used to automatically generate convincing disinformation at enormous scale. That said, **AI and machine-learning capabilities do offer significant opportunities for those seeking to combat disinformation, as their cost continues to drop and the human ability to deploy them effectively becomes more commonplace** among data scientists and programmers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

The democratic world has much to learn from Ukraine, which has been on the front lines of the struggle between democracy and autocracy—literally and in the information space—since Russian forces first seized Crimea nine years ago. While acknowledging the challenge of measurement and attribution in disinformation and counter-disinformation campaigns,¹⁶ this report offers lessons that could help accelerate learning and action as democracies respond to authoritarian efforts to spread disinformation and degrade their alliances.

Naturally, not all lessons learned in an active conflict will apply to other, non-conflict settings. The shared threat of a full-scale military assault creates unique incentives for cooperation. Voices in Ukrainian civil society are already warning that their productive collaboration with the government during the war is an unlikely model for the postwar period, when activists will shift back to a more independent stance to focus on ensuring government transparency and accountability.

That said, the government's cooperative relationship with civil society is not unique to Ukraine: Czechia, Slovakia, and Romania also offer examples of close collaboration between government and civil society in countering Russian disinformation. Although these countries have not faced open military aggression, they are targets in Moscow's information war. Across Central and Eastern Europe, networked approaches have been critical to the effectiveness of responses to the Kremlin's own networked disinformation activities, which tend to focus on stirring up hatred against Ukrainian refugees and fear of reduced energy supplies. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have each crafted long-term, whole-of-society approaches to strengthening democratic institutions, with an emphasis on media-literacy training and coordination among governments, civil society, and the media.

The Beacon project, launched by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2016, seeks to facilitate this sort of collaboration for a wider array of civil society organizations from the Baltic to the Black Sea, stimulating joint research and tracking Russian influence activities and toxic narratives throughout the region. Working with this community, Beacon provides researchers with access to data-scraping tools, attempts to standardize research methodologies and share best practices, and fosters cross-sectoral contacts and access to decision makers in government.

As with the other aspects of counter-disinformation work discussed above, the benefits arising from collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental actors can help amplify and accelerate the overall democratic response in an environment where Russian disinformation is operating at significant speed and scale. Yet it is clear that some less democratic and more illiberal governments in the region—such as those in Georgia or Hungary—may reject engagement with or are actively opposed to independent civil society organizations.

Networked approaches have been critical to the effectiveness of responses to the Kremlin's own networked disinformation activities.

RUSSIA'S GLOBAL DISINFORMATION MACHINE

Russian authorities have prioritized the development of an elaborate apparatus for the dissemination of disinformation around the globe, delivering Kremlin narratives to ordinary citizens and policymakers alike. Over the past year, **its primary aim has been to deflect attention from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, blame Kyiv or NATO countries for the conflict, and dampen support for Ukraine's cause.** Russian government investment in the information space has yielded far greater results in regions—such as Latin America and Africa—where the Kremlin's toxic messaging goes virtually unchallenged as a result of political, economic, and historical ties to Moscow.

In Latin America, the Russian government has continued to intensify its manipulation of public opinion through the use of friendly local influencers on Facebook and Twitter.¹⁷ A national poll in Argentina found that as of March 2022, 43 percent of respondents did not agree with the United States and Europe sending arms to Ukraine, while only 37 percent agreed with this decision.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have shown consistent support for their Russian partner at the United Nations (UN).¹⁹

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has visited Africa twice since the February 2022 invasion in order to solidify ties with key governments and opinion makers. Leaders in a number of African countries have declined to voice support for Ukraine, backtracked on earlier critiques of Moscow's actions,²⁰ or openly sided with Russian diplomats at the UN, despite the war's impact on their food security and world energy prices.²¹

Activists, journalists, and civil society organizations that are focused on the information space in these two regions may find opportunities to draw on the experience of the Ukrainians and their allies in Central and Eastern Europe, where disinformation—whether of Russian or another origin—is being used to undermine democracies.

There is little evidence to suggest that the leadership in Moscow or like-minded authoritarian regimes will change course in their efforts to spread disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine. Given the significant payoff derived from their relatively inexpensive and low-risk disinformation activities to date, these regimes can be expected to continue to exploit asymmetries that enable them to sow confusion in information spaces worldwide.

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DEMOCRACY REQUIRES A SHARED REALITY

The threat Moscow's disinformation machine poses is clear. While its claims about Ukraine typically defy observable reality, they are a critical component of the Kremlin's information space strategy, which aims to unmoor societal perceptions from fact-based reporting and experience, undermining the very concept of knowable truth. Philippine journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa has explained the potential consequences of such campaigns: "Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems."²² Given the high stakes, it is critical that democratic societies work together to affirmatively and purposefully confront this challenge.



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—Maria Ressa, Philippine journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

ENDNOTES

Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine

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

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