SHIELDING DEMOCRACY

CIVIL SOCIETY ADAPTATIONS TO KREMLIN DISINFORMATION ABOUT UKRAINE

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

FORUM

INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC STUDIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, competition in the information space has intensified, and Russian propagandists have been hard at work depicting the unprovoked attack as a grave necessity. In spite of pervasive efforts to spread malign narratives about Ukraine, it appears that Ukraine and its allies are—in key respects—winning the war in the information space across most of the transatlantic community. Public opinion polling from late 2022 supports the case that Moscow's information efforts have failed to undermine Ukrainians' desire for self-determination, sow division in Europe using Ukrainian refugees and the threat to energy supplies, and undermine support for economic and military assistance to Ukraine.

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

The research identified three advantages—**deep preparation, open 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 authoritarian disinformation campaigns:

- **Deep preparation:** There is no substitute for preparation in the struggle against disinformation. Since Ukraine's 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, multiple civil society organizations have been formed whose experience with Russian disinformation has been vitally important to informing current responses. **Since many of the narratives deployed in 2014 have been recycled to rationalize the full-scale invasion in February 2022, most Ukrainians were well-prepared and able to obtain trusted information** by the time the invasion began.

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- **Open networks of cooperation:** Civil society organizations have leveraged common values and diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the sophistication and speed necessary to combat the scale of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. These networks have developed multidisciplinary approaches to the challenge across governmental, nongovernmental, and private sector entities. Through such cross-sector collaboration, these networks can identify disinformation narratives, illuminate their underlying messages and target audiences, and design timely, effective responses. Cooperative networks have also provided a forum for disinformation researchers to share lessons and highlight best practices, limit potential duplication of efforts among resource-limited civil society organizations, and encourage citizen-led efforts to participate in counter-disinformation efforts.

- **Active utilization of new technology:** Even the most well-staffed civil society organizations struggle to monitor emergent disinformation narratives across the vast global media ecosystem. However, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning tools have empowered disinformation researchers to identify new Russian narratives more quickly and to design effective responses before these narratives can cross channels, platforms, and outlets to reach larger audiences. By facilitating analysis of the behavior of purveyors of Russian disinformation over time, AI and machine-learning tools have also enabled counter-disinformation specialists to predict future campaigns.

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 seized Crimea nine years ago. Naturally, not all lessons learned in Ukraine's context of active conflict will apply to other, non-conflict settings. The shared threat of a full-scale military assault creates unique incentives for cooperation. Yet across Central and Eastern Europe, which is not in conflict but is still a target of Russian malign narratives, networked approaches have been critical to designing effective responses to the Kremlin's own networked disinformation activities.

The threat Moscow's disinformation machine poses is clear. While its claims about Ukraine may 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. Given the high stakes, it is critical that democratic societies learn from the experiences in Ukraine and work together to affirmatively and purposefully confront this global challenge.

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