The White Book

Navigating the Russian
Propaganda Minefield

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Foreword

Russian disinformation has remained one of the primary tools of hybrid warfare against Ukraine for decades. It has evolved from isolated acts of manipulation to large-scale campaigns across media and social networks capable of influencing public opinion, political processes, and national security.

Since the early years of independence, Ukraine has been forced to confront this threat, facing various challenges – political crises, territorial occupation, and full-scale war. In responding to each new situation, it gradually developed best practices for countering Russian propaganda. These practices have allowed it to recognize narratives, assess their impact, and identify effective response strategies. However, despite many years of experience, these achievements have long remained fragmented and are scattered across numerous reports, studies, projects, and initiatives, making them difficult to study systematically or use as a methodological foundation.

This is precisely why we created the analytical guide "The White Book: Navigating the Russian Propaganda Minefield". Its purpose is to systematize Ukraine's experience and present it in a comprehensive, clear, and structured overview. Through key case studies, the guide demonstrates how the Russian disinformation machine operates, how its methods have evolved, and which Ukrainian approaches have proven effective at different stages of confrontation, providing readers with practical guidance for strengthening information resilience.

Summarizing this experience is important not only for understanding the path Ukraine has taken. Ukraine has become the country with the longest and deepest experience in countering Russian information aggression – experience that can now serve as a valuable resource for other states seeking to strengthen their information defenses.

Introduction

Freedom begins with clarity – the ability to see the world as it truly is. Ukraine is free.

Russia's attempts to subjugate Ukrainian society have failed – neither through military might nor through the insidious reach of disinformation. Ukraine has defended not only its independence but its collective consciousness. It has refused to be frightened, divided, or stripped of its will.

Through struggle, we have grown wiser. We have dissected Russian disinformation, dismantling its machinery piece by piece. Knowledge has stripped it of its potency – and now we are ready to share that knowledge with a world facing the same corrosive threat.

This guide is part of Ukraine's response to Russia's information assault – an essential component of its hybrid warfare, which later erupted into full-scale invasion. Yet this aggression began long before tanks crossed our borders.

The White Book of Russian Disinformation stands as evidence that Ukraine is not a passive pawn in someone else's game. We are – and will remain – a subject, a force. It signals that we have reduced the Kremlin's propaganda arsenal to its smallest cog. We understand its architecture, its mechanics, its intent.

This text is crafted for policymakers, journalists, analysts, and citizens determined to expose the anatomy of Russian disinformation: who engineers its narratives, which channels transmit them, which agents amplify them, and which audiences – within Ukraine and beyond – are most susceptible to their reach. It offers practical tools to identify and counter disinformation, illustrated with real-world cases.

Ukraine's experience is singular. Yet it carries a universal lesson for all nations committed to defending freedom and democracy – the values we share, the values Russia seeks to annihilate.

I. Russian Disinformation: A Brief History

The 1990s: The Birth of the "Russian Crimea" Narrative

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Russia was left grappling with the phantom pains of a vanished empire.

It's longing for lost dominion soon fixed on Crimea. Initially, the contest appeared pragmatic – a dispute over dividing the Black Sea Fleet on favorable terms. But ambitions quickly deepened. Russia began spinning invisible threads of influence, tightening its hold through politics and propaganda. Even then, the machinery of disinformation was humming, crafting myths that endure to this day: that Ukrainian statehood is artificial, its language contrived, its sovereignty an illusion.

Campaign leaflet by Yuriy Meshkov / source – chesno.org

This provoked a sharp counter-reaction from Ukrainian nationalist movements – some partially militarized – such as the Ukrainian National Assembly and its paramilitary wing, Ukrainian People's Self-Defense (UNA-UNSO).

In the early 1990s, these groups operated not only within Ukraine but also across other former Soviet republics, asserting their independence. Against the backdrop of a genuine threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity, nationalists staged bold demonstrations – images that Kremlin-controlled propagandists in Crimea skillfully weaponized to reinforce their narrative.

Falsehoods born in the early 1990s were repeated so relentlessly, so vividly, that they became embedded in the information space – and resurfaced in 2014 during the seizure of Crimea. One enduring myth: the so-called "Friendship Trains," allegedly packed with Ukrainian extremists bound for Crimea to terrorize pro-Russian locals. According to Kremlin propaganda, these "nationalists" intended to impose the Ukrainian language, eradicate Russian, and ban Russian culture and education [1].

In reality, no such repressions occurred – neither in the early 1990s nor later. This campaign aimed to sow fear and hostility toward Ukraine. Yet history tells a different story: in the 1991 referendum, the majority of Crimean residents voted for Ukrainian independence.

Still, propagandists wielded powerful tools to reshape perception. Russia maintained significant influence over Crimea's information space. After Ukraine declared independence, Russian media continued to circulate freely – sold, printed, and broadcast nationwide. In Crimea, they were reinforced by local pro-Russian outlets, repeating the mantra that Crimea was never Ukrainian, that it had always been – and must remain – Russian. Caricatures ridiculing Ukrainian culture, along with alarming stories of nationalist extremism, took hold in a media environment deeply imprinted by Soviet-era myths [2]. Russian politicians visiting Crimea added fuel to the fire, creating convenient propaganda triggers.

All this culminated in what became known as the Crimean Crisis – or the "Cold War for Crimea" – a series of tensions and confrontations on the peninsula between 1992 and 1994.

The crisis peaked under newly elected Crimean President Yuriy Meshkov (a position that existed at the time). Meshkov invited Russian citizens into the Crimean government, introduced Moscow time on the

peninsula, passed a string of pro-Russian decrees, and even planned a referendum on Crimean independence as a prelude to joining Russia. To halt these separatist moves, the Ukrainian government deployed internal troops to Crimea. Meshkov was whisked away to Moscow, and the peninsula appeared to return under Kyiv's administrative control.

In the mid-1990s, Russia, the state had not yet monopolized the information space, and political competition still existed. Politicians exploited the idea of restoring Russian influence over the post-Soviet sphere to win votes. In this game, the "return of Crimea" was a trump card. So, while Russia officially had no territorial claims against Ukraine, certain figures – like Moscow's mayor Yuriy Luzhkov – made provocative statements during visits to Crimea and Sevastopol. Meanwhile, propaganda kept priming Crimea's information environment for the next attempt at annexation.

Pillars and Foundations of Russian Disinformation About Ukraine

The cornerstone of Russia's information strategy toward Ukraine was laid in 1996 with the establishment of the Institute of CIS Countries (CIS – the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States). Though presented as an independent think tank, the institute operated under the patronage of the Russian presidential administration. Its mission was clear: to shape narratives that would undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. At the helm stood Konstantin Zatulin, whose media appearances became a conduit for the Kremlin's propaganda. Among the most prominent narratives were:

The Idea of Federalization. Unlike federal systems in countries such as the United States or several European states – where federalism evolved organically – Ukraine's governance structure is historically unitary. Russia sought to impose an artificial federal model, a Trojan horse designed to fracture the country and create openings for annexing its eastern and southern regions [3].

The Idea of Dual Citizenship. While dual citizenship is common in many democracies, Russia's advocacy for it was far from benign. It served as an instrument of expansion, cloaked in the rhetoric of "protecting" Ukrainians who would acquire Russian passports – effectively binding them to Moscow's sphere of influence [4].

The Defense of Russian-Speaking Rights. The narrative of "oppression of Russian speakers" remains one of the oldest and most persistent myths in Russia's arsenal. After independence, Russia continued to dominate many spheres of life in Ukraine for decades. Like other nations emerging from centuries of subjugation, Ukrainians faced the challenge of reviving their language. Nearly 80% of citizens identified Ukrainian as their native tongue, yet the process of re-Ukrainization was gradual and gentle – so much so that the term "soft Ukrainization" emerged. Russia, through figures like Zatulin, deliberately inflamed the language issue, seeking to provoke internal discord, fracture society, and mobilize its own supporters [5].

The Myth of Historical Unity Between Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In Russia, history has long been weaponized – written as an ideological framework rather than a record of facts. Myths divorced from reality became tools of justification for present-day aggression. This narrative resonated deeply within Russian society, making its repetition and amplification a cornerstone of future revanchist ambitions.

Eventually, the Institute of CIS Countries opened a branch in Kyiv, enabling Russian disinformation to infiltrate Ukrainian media more directly. Other propaganda hubs and influence networks operated in a similar fashion.

From the earliest days after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia launched an ideological information war against Ukraine. The political climate of the late 1990s and early 2000s provided fertile ground for a new Russian president – Vladimir Putin – to attempt a full-scale reformatting of Ukraine from within.

The Role of Russian Political Technologists in Promoting Kremlin Narratives

Ukraine's media landscape – especially television, dominated by financial-industrial groups – was deeply oriented toward Russia. Ukrainian channels routinely broadcast Russian-produced content or co-produced shows "for two markets," invited Russian celebrity hosts and media managers, and embraced Russian entertainment as a staple of their programming.

This penetration of Russia's "soft power" was reinforced by political dialogue with Moscow, President Leonid Kuchma's multi-vector policy, and the appointment of key officials who were either direct agents of influence or carried the ingrained "younger brother" complex toward Russia. Nothing illustrates this better than Viktor Medvedchuk's tenure as head of Ukraine's presidential administration – a man widely regarded as Putin's personal protégé [6].

Another trend soon emerged: a peculiar "fashion" among Ukrainian politicians for hiring Russian political consultants to run election campaigns. By the early 2000s, such strategists were embedded in the headquarters of most major political forces. In 2004, as Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych faced pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko in a pivotal presidential race, the Kremlin dispatched an entire team of political technologists to Ukraine [7]. Their mission was clear: secure Yanukovych's victory and inject Russian narratives, worldview, and a Kremlin-friendly vision of Ukraine's future into the campaign.

One name stands out – Timofey Sergeytsev, a member of that Kremlin team, who in 2022 authored a chilling article calling for the genocide of Ukrainians, published on Russia's state-run RIA Novosti before being quietly removed. Sergeytsev, along with Dmitry Kulikov and Iskander Valitov, is credited with creating a notorious fake campaign poster for Yushchenko, depicting Ukrainians divided into "three sorts." According to this fabricated map, widely circulated during the election, the "first sort" were residents of western Ukraine (where Yushchenko's support was strongest), the "second sort" lived in central regions, and the "third sort" were Ukrainians

from the south and east – Yanukovych's stronghold [9].

This crude but effective disinformation shocked voters in Lviv and Kyiv, yet deeply influenced those in the east and south, especially in Donbas. Local media loyal to oligarchs backing Yanukovych amplified the hysteria.

«Three Sorts of Ukrainians» – a fake created by Russian political strategists / chesno.org

The Russian consultants, by launching this primitive smear campaign, were not serving Yanukovych – they were serving Russia and Putin, who had already begun implementing a plan to fracture Ukraine.

Yanukovych's campaign – run by Kremlin strategists like Gleb Pavlovsky and Marat Gelman – was built on dividing Ukraine, stoking linguistic, cultural, and historical tensions, and spreading fear of "Ukrainian nationalism" and "fascism." One infamous episode occurred on October 31, 2003, during Yushchenko's visit to Donetsk. He was greeted not only by mobs of drunken youths organized by local authorities but also by a massive propaganda blitz portraying him as a Nazi sympathizer. Billboards and posters paired Yushchenko's image with Hitler's, adorned with swastikas and slogans about "racial purity" [10].

The scandal reverberated across the campaign – but it was just one link in a long chain of Russian information operations that continues to this day. Kremlin propagandists and officials still chant the mantra of "Nazism in Ukraine" – then to discredit an inconvenient opposition leader, now to justify full-scale war.

Billboards in Donetsk during Viktor Yushchenko's visit / istpravda.com.ua

Similar propaganda playbooks were deployed during the 2004 Orange Revolution,

portraying it not only as a "Nazi orgy" but as a Western-funded plot, allegedly staffed by paid radicals.

The revolution triumphed, and Russia's attempt to split Ukraine failed – though the "congress" of pro-Russian and pro-government deputies from southern and eastern regions during those days revealed how far the Kremlin was willing to go.

The Orange Revolution marked Ukraine's decisive break with its post-Soviet past. Though political turbulence lay ahead – including Yanukovych's return as prime minister and later president – those days on Maidan affirmed Ukraine's European choice with clarity and resolve.

Putin's Revenge for Maidan: The Launch of a Systemic Information War

Russia never relinquished its ambitions toward Ukraine. After the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin unleashed a wave of disinformation attacks – personally inspired and often articulated by Vladimir Putin himself. Once he consolidated power, subdued the oligarchs, and crushed independent media, information operations against Ukraine became systematic and relentless. Their scope widened, targeting not only Ukrainian citizens but also foreign audiences and Western policymakers.

The fingerprints of Russia's Federal Security Service – the institution that molded Putin and his inner circle – were evident in these campaigns and remain visible today. One striking example: the accusation that Ukraine was "stealing" Russian gas transiting through its pipelines to Europe.

In July 2005, Putin sneered: *"We plan to expand cooperation with Ukraine – if they stop swiping our gas"* [11]. The word "swiping" was no accident. It carried the flavor of criminal slang – a deliberate attempt to humiliate Ukraine, to belittle and discredit it, especially in the eyes of the international community. This remark echoed a chorus of similar accusations from Gazprom officials. The manufactured "gas war" between

Russia and Ukraine ultimately hurt European consumers, reinforcing the narrative that Ukraine was unreliable, unfit for partnership, and undeserving of integration into the European family.

Another brazen falsehood Putin promoted internationally concerned Ukraine's ethnic composition. At a NATO summit in 2008, he claimed: *"Out of forty-five million people, only seventeen million are Russians. There are regions inhabited exclusively by Russians – take Crimea, for example. There are ninety percent Russians. Ukraine is a very complicated state"* [12].

This was a lie and a calculated manipulation. According to the 2001 census, about 78 % of Ukraine's population were ethnic Ukrainians, while Russians accounted for roughly 17 %.

By distorting reality, Putin sought to persuade global leaders that Ukraine "naturally" belonged to Russia's sphere of influence – that it was, in essence, Russia, and its borders were artificial. Therefore, it should never join NATO or the EU. This narrative became a cornerstone of Kremlin rhetoric for years, until new challenges emerged in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

After Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 went largely unpunished, the countdown began toward its next move – the use of force against Ukraine.

The Information Front of Russia's Hybrid War Against Ukraine

When Russia launched its hybrid war in 2014, disinformation became one of its most potent weapons. Carefully crafted narratives served as both shield and sword – justifying the seizure of Crimea and igniting armed conflict in Donbas, where Moscow first deployed so-called "volunteers" and later regular troops.

"Coup d'état" and "Nazi junta": Demonizing the Revolution of Dignity. Russian propaganda branded the Revolution of Dignity as

a "Nazi coup" that installed a "self-proclaimed" government. The term *junta* – borrowed from Spanish and steeped in Soviet-era pejorative undertones – was meant to delegitimize Ukraine's new authorities. Meanwhile, Viktor Yanukovych – whom Russia itself spirited out of the country – was portrayed as the "legitimate" leader. To reinforce this narrative, Kremlin media invoked tales of "armed radicals" from Right Sector and claimed the uprising was financed by the United States.

"Friendship trains" and the threat to Russian speakers: Manufacturing fear. Maidan was framed as a mortal danger to Russian-speaking citizens, especially in Donbas and Crimea. To amplify fear and incite resistance, Russian propaganda resurrected a 1990s fabrication – the "Friendship Trains" allegedly carrying Ukrainian nationalists to Crimea to massacre Russians. Needless to say, this was pure fiction.

"NATO in Crimea": The myth of an external threat. Kremlin outlets claimed that Ukraine's new government intended to hand over military bases in Crimea – including the historically symbolic Sevastopol – to NATO. For a population partly indoctrinated by propaganda or economically tied to Russia's military presence, this narrative proved highly effective [13].

"Crimean Self-Defense": The legend of popular resistance. Russia presented Crimea's "declaration of independence" and subsequent "reunion with Russia" as an initiative of the Crimeans. The image of a "people's uprising" against Kyiv was carefully staged, while key actions were orchestrated by Russian intelligence. The so-called "Crimean Self-Defense" consisted largely of Russian troops and local collaborators.

Denying Russian involvement. Armed men in unmarked uniforms who appeared around government buildings and military sites in February 2014 were branded in propaganda as "polite people" or "little green men" – but never Russian soldiers. Moscow denied their identity, insisting they were part of "self-defense." Later, Putin admitted that Crimea was seized by Russian forces – and even revealed that Russia's nuclear arsenal had been placed on high alert during the operation [14].

"The Referendum on Returning Home": Legitimizing annexation. The "referendum" staged by the occupiers violated Ukrainian law, lacked international oversight, and was conducted under the shadow of Russian guns. Yet propaganda framed this farce as an "act of popular will," a "return home," a "journey back to the mother harbor" – to Russia.

The War in Donbas: Old Narratives Recycled, New Ones Born

In the spring of 2014, Russia ignited an armed conflict in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Propaganda was not a supporting act – it was the stage on which the Kremlin's plans unfolded. Here are the key narratives deployed during this period:

"Nazi coup" and the threat to Russian speakers: A fabricated pretext for violence. Unlike Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk had no Russian military bases. So, beyond mobilizing a handful of marginal pro-Russian forces, Moscow imported protesters – many of them semi-criminal youths from Russia. These groups stormed government buildings, attacked pro-Ukrainian demonstrators, and used weapons. On March 13 in Donetsk, activist Dmytro Cherniavskyi was stabbed to death. Propaganda framed

these actions as a "popular uprising" against "Nazis" who had seized power in Kyiv [15].

"Civil War": Girkin's Saboteurs Disguised as 'Insurgents'. In April 2014, a group of Russian operatives led by Igor Girkin (Strelkov) captured Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. For weeks, their identities remained hidden. Kremlin media portrayed this as the start of an armed rebellion by locals – a "civil war." A marginal collaborator was declared "people's mayor" of Sloviansk, and the story spread like wildfire.

From then until 2022, Russia pushed the narrative of an "internal conflict" in which it allegedly played no role – though in reality, this was a textbook hybrid operation, planned and directed from Moscow [16].

"People's republics": Legitimizing the myth of internal strife. The hybrid war machine accelerated. Soon came the proclamation of proxy entities – the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic." They were led by Russians; their fighters were largely Russian "volunteers." Moscow supplied weapons and resources, while propaganda painted them as grassroots resistance. Some locals, under constant influence, joined the militants or aided the occupiers.

For eight years, the Kremlin's goal was to force Ukraine into direct talks with these entities, integrate them into Ukraine's political system, and ultimately reshape the state to Russia's liking.

Later, Putin would utter his infamous line about *"miners and tractor drivers"* fighting the Ukrainian army – and claim weapons could be bought *"at any military store."* Yet Russia's direct involvement, including regular troops in battles like Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, is well documented [17, 18].

"Ukraine shells Russia": Creating the image of an aggressor. Kremlin media repeatedly accused Ukraine of shelling Russian territory – claims used to justify "retaliatory strikes" and cast Ukraine as a threat to "peaceful" Russia. In reality, Russian forces fired from their own territory to aid militants and staged provocations to produce the desired media narrative [19].
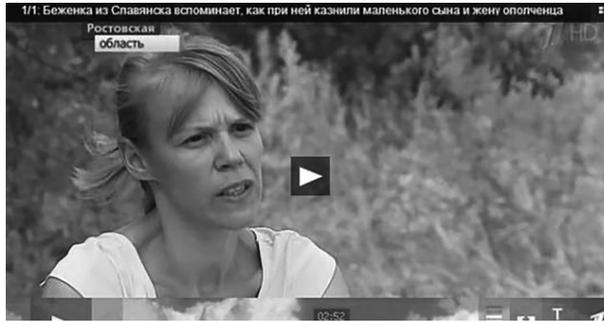
«A refugee from Sloviansk recalls how her son and wife of a militiaman were executed in front of her» / Channel One

"Crucified boy" and mass graves: Shock fakes to demonize Ukraine's army. In July 2014, Russian TV aired a grotesque story claiming Ukrainian soldiers crucified a young boy in Sloviansk's central square. No evidence existed; "eyewitnesses" were fabricated. Similar fakes about "mass executions" of civilians circulated widely – designed to inflame hatred and justify aggression [15].

Fake shelling of Donetsk: Fueling hatred toward Ukraine. Militants often shelled residential areas themselves, blaming Ukraine for "war crimes." These staged attacks created powerful propaganda images, deepening hostility toward Kyiv. Alternative narratives were silenced; truth was buried under lies [20].

Malaysia Airlines Tragedy: Maneuvering to Avoid Responsibility and Deflect Blame to Ukraine. Within hours of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, Russia launched a disinformation blitz – peddling contradictory theories, from claims of Ukrainian air-defense fire to phantom fighter jets. The goal: sow confusion and deflect blame. International investigators proved the plane was destroyed by a Russian Buk missile system brought from Russia. Yet Moscow continued to deny involvement, fabricating "expert reports" and false testimonies [15].

The Odessa tragedy: Twisting facts to stoke hatred. Russian media portrayed the May 2, 2014, events in Odesa as a "massacre" of pro-Russian activists "burned alive" in the Trade Unions House. Propaganda ignored that clashes began after armed separatists attacked a peaceful pro-Ukrainian

march. The fire resulted from Molotov cocktails thrown by both sides; most victims died from smoke inhalation, not deliberate killing. This distorted narrative became a cornerstone myth for mobilizing militant support [21].

Fabricated War Victims: Deploying Invented Characters for Propaganda. Russian media repeatedly used the same individuals as "victims" in different stories. One example: Maria Tsypko appeared in multiple reports – sometimes as a grieving mother, sometimes as a displaced civilian, sometimes as a militant's wife. Such staged roles were a standard tactic to manipulate emotions and sustain outrage [22].

Full-Scale War: Disinformation as a Weapon to Erase Ukrainian Statehood

From 2014 to 2021, Russian propaganda recycled familiar narratives, adjusting their intensity to the political climate as the Kremlin pressed Ukraine to legitimize its proxy "republics."

By 2021, anti-Ukrainian hysteria on Russian television reached a fever pitch. Talk shows devoted most of their airtime to Ukraine – priming Russian society for war.

That same year, Russia massed troops along Ukraine's border under the guise of "exercises." And then came Putin's programmatic essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," laying the ideological foundation for aggression.

Published on July 12, 2021, in Russian and Ukrainian, the article claimed Ukrainians and Russians were "one people," that Ukraine was an artificial state created by Lenin through the "theft" of Russian lands. It branded Ukrainian nationalism as a foreign import and Ukrainian nationalists as fascists. Since 2014, Putin argued, Ukraine had become "Anti-Russia," defied the Minsk agreements, and "proved" it did not need Donbas. Russian soldiers were reportedly required to read this text before the invasion [23].

On the eve of war and in its opening days, Russia deployed a barrage of disinformation narratives:

Ukraine plans to attack Donbas: Manufacturing a casus belli. In January–February 2022, Russian media and officials claimed Ukraine intended to commit "genocide" against residents of occupied Donbas. They staged videos of alleged Ukrainian sabotage groups, orchestrated self-shelling, and blamed Ukraine for attacks – all pure fabrications [24]. In reality, Ukraine had no plans to retake Donbas and even restricted its forces from responding to Russian provocations along the front.

19:14, 19 января 2022   Бывший СССР

ДНР обвинила Украину в подготовке диверсий в Донбассе

Представитель Народной милиции ДНР Басурин обвинил ВСУ в подготовке диверсий в Донбассе

Варвара Кошечкина (редактор отдела оперативной информации)

Командование Вооруженных сил Украины (ВСУ) готовит диверсионные атаки на неподконтрольные Киеву территории Донбасса, вблизи линии соприкосновения. Об этом заявил официальный представитель Народной милиции самопровозглашенной Донецкой народной республики (ДНР) Эдуард Басурин, сообщается на сайте ведомства.

Фото: Сергей Аверин / РИА Новости

По информации разведки Народной милиции, командир сил специальных операций ВСУ генерал-майор Григорий Галаган отдал указания 8-му полку спецназначения о подготовке и проведении терактов.

«Ukraine is preparing sabotage in Donbas» – January 2022 / screenshot from Russian media «RIA Novosti»

Mass evacuation of Donbas Residents: Creating the illusion of a humanitarian disaster. In mid-February, occupation leaders announced the "evacuation" of civilians to Russia, alleging an imminent Ukrainian assault. It was theater – designed to paint Ukraine as the aggressor.

"Russia will not attack": Denying reality for foreign audiences. Despite clear signs of war preparations, Moscow insisted it had no intention to invade, accusing the West of "hysteria."

The need for "denazification": A cover for erasing Ukrainian identity. On the eve of invasion, Putin repeated themes from his essay and introduced new terms – "demilitarization" and "denazification." These became the declared goals of the "special military operation" announced

on February 24, 2022. Behind these words lay the intent to destroy Ukraine as a state and Ukrainians as a nation. Years of propaganda portraying Ukraine as a "Nazi regime" primed Russian audiences to believe Putin was "helping" a neighbor cure its political disease.

Blitzkrieg and Kyiv's capitulation: Inflating success to demoralize. In the first days of war, Russian disinformation targeted not only politics but the battlefield – exaggerating Russian gains to break Ukrainian morale. Propaganda insisted Russian troops faced not Ukraine's army but "Nazi battalions," creating the illusion that regular forces had collapsed.

Biolabs in Ukraine: Fakes about biological threats. Kremlin media spread lies about "American biolabs" in Ukraine, allegedly developing biological weapons – including claims that COVID-19 originated there and that pathogens were engineered to target ethnic Russians.

Ukraine bombs its own cities: Twisting facts to mask aggression and discredit the Ukrainian Army. Ukraine has suffered – and continues to suffer – widespread destruction and civilian casualties as a result of relentless air and missile attacks. Yet, in a cynical twist, Russian propaganda insists that Ukraine is shelling itself, distorting reality to mask aggression behind a veil of lies.

Ukraine planned a nuclear strike on Bryansk: The ultimate absurdity. The Kremlin's disinformation machine managed to convince a large segment of Russian society that Ukraine was preparing to attack Russia. While there are no comprehensive sociological studies to quantify this belief, numerous interviews – ranging from conversations with captured Russian soldiers to street polls – offer telling clues. Among the most brazen fabrications was the claim that Ukraine, which surrendered its nuclear arsenal to Russia in the 1990s, was planning a nuclear strike on Bryansk [25]. Absurd as it sounds, this narrative took root. Over time, Russians stopped viewing Ukrainians as a "brotherly people" and began perceiving them as an existential threat – one that must be eradicated through the so-called "special military operation."

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II. How Russian Disinformation Operates: Who Shapes Its Meaning, Where, and How

How the Kremlin's Strategic Goals Shape Disinformation Narratives

How is Russian disinformation born? Who crafts its meaning? Is there a central "brain" orchestrating these narratives? And who is the dark mastermind – Russia's own equivalent of Goebbels in Hitler's Germany – who could be called the "father" of modern propaganda?

Naturally, you won't find a plaque that reads "Ministry of Lies" in Moscow. The architects of propaganda rarely step into the spotlight or speak openly about their craft. Yet, by tracing the fragments – examining patterns, connecting dots – we can assemble a strikingly clear portrait of how this machinery operates.

Russian disinformation is not a passing tactic – it's a calculated, enduring strategy aimed at reshaping reality itself. Its roots lie in Putin's overarching ambition: to avenge the Soviet Union's Cold War defeat and reclaim Moscow's lost sphere of influence. When it comes to Ukraine, the goal is even more ruthless – to erase the very concept of Ukrainian identity. This pathological obsession has only intensified with Russia's repeated failures on the battlefield and the existential challenge posed by a free, democratic Ukraine to Putin's imperial vision [26].

Each major storyline – the Kremlin's strategic framing – advances its ultimate goals. Consider the slogans: "The West seeks to destroy Russia," "Ukrainians and Russians are one people," *or* "Ukraine is a failed state." These aren't random phrases; they are pillars of a carefully constructed worldview.

Symbols of «Novorossiya» / source – wikipedia.org

One vivid example from this factory of falsehoods is the myth of Novorossiya – a grandiose project that collapsed, yet lingers like an ember, ready to be rekindled.

The notion first blazed into public view on April 17, 2014, when Vladimir Putin, during his marathon call-in show, casually invoked the language of empire: *"Let me remind you, in the terminology of the Tsarist era, this is Novorossiya. Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa – none of these belonged to Ukraine in Tsarist times. These lands were handed to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why they did that – only God knows"* [27].

Putin lied. The statement was not a historical reflection but a deliberate distortion – a seed planted to justify aggression and redraw borders under the guise of nostalgia. The historical entity known as Novorossiya – a fleeting imperial province of the 18th century – bore little resemblance to the borders invoked today. Its territory stretched across the newly subjugated southern steppes of what is now Ukraine, yet excluded Kharkiv and the Donbas. Nor was it some barren frontier "discovered" by Russia; these territories had long been inhabited by diverse communities, most notably Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians [28].

By draping modern territorial ambitions in the guise of historical myth, Putin ignited the engines of disinformation. Even as this narrative took shape, Igor Girkin-Strelkov's forces had already seized Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. On April 7, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic emerged; by April 27, its counterpart in Luhansk followed. Pro-Russian demonstrations rippled through eastern and southern Ukraine, fueling the vision of a "Confederation of Novorossiya" – a construct that, had Moscow's gambit in Donetsk and Luhansk succeeded, was intended to swallow additional regions.

Efforts to establish "people's republics" or orchestrate large-scale pro-Russian rallies in Kherson, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, and Kharkiv ended in failure. In Odesa, the violent clashes of May 2, 2014, between

pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups resulted in a decisive defeat for the latter. From that point on, the push for an "Odesa People's Republic" steadily faded, sealing the fate of Moscow's ambitions for the region.

By May, separatist leaders went so far as to sign a "treaty" proclaiming the birth of the "State of Novorossiya." For a fleeting moment, it flaunted the trappings of statehood – a "parliament," a flag, even a coat of arms. Under these symbols, Russian mercenaries waged war against Ukrainian forces [29].

In the realm of information warfare, "Novorossiya" was portrayed as something tangible, endowed with its own historical legacy. Its so-called "population" was described as having distinct interests – an imagined community that, according to Russian propaganda, consisted of ethnic Russians or, at the very least, was entirely Russian-speaking. Reality, however, told a different story: census data from 2001 showed that in all these regions, the overwhelming majority identified as Ukrainians, and most named Ukrainian as their native language [30].

The drive to amplify the "Novorossiya" narrative engaged every tier of Russia's propaganda machine – from prime-time television to fringe blogs, from warlords in occupied territories to self-styled "experts" and "activists." Their mission was clear: distort facts, erase Ukraine's historical roots in these regions, and weave a fiction that the inhabitants of southern and eastern Ukraine were Russians longing to secede, allegedly victims of cultural and linguistic oppression.

Here are a few statements from that period:

- *"The academic establishment swiftly aligned with the political directive. By July, the leadership of the Institute of Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences announced plans to craft a history of Novorossiya – a project endorsed by State Duma Speaker Sergey Naryshkin, who also chairs the Russian Historical Society"* [31].

- *"If the idea gains support only in the Southeast, it will clearly become a new federal entity – Novorossiya. Should it resonate across all of Ukraine, it will evolve into a new federal republic,"* stated former Ukrainian *presidential candidate Oleg Tsaryov. He added that 'Novorossiya' would occupy the borders of the historical Novorossiysk Governorate"* [32].

- *In Russia, a memorial plaque was unveiled to honor a so-called "hero of Novorossiya." Installed in the Altai region, it commemorated eight natives who fought on the side of pro-Russian militants and were killed in the ATO zone* [33].
- *The formation of the so-called Novorossiya Army – an alliance of armed factions operating under the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and supported by the FSS – triggered violent infighting among these groups. Reports from the military analysis team "Information Resistance" noted instances where members of certain terrorist units were arrested* [34].

When Russian operatives failed to spark mass pro-"Novorossiya" demonstrations across Ukraine's south and east, they resorted to terror – seeking to destabilize society and intimidate pro-Ukrainian citizens. On February 22, 2015, during a Kharkiv rally honoring the Heavenly Hundred – the activists slain by Yanukovych's regime during the Revolution of Dignity – a bomb exploded, killing four people, including a teenager.

By the spring of 2015, the Novorossiya project had collapsed. Putin's ambitions lay in ruins. Moscow retained only fragments: parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, along with Crimea. Gradually, the term "Novorossiya" slipped from the Kremlin's vocabulary.

Putin – The Chief Architect Behind Disinformation Narratives

To understand how a narrative unfolds – and who stands behind it – we need to revisit events from a decade ago.

In those earlier years, the machinery of governance in the occupied territories – and the Kremlin's strategic approach to Ukraine – was largely orchestrated by Vladislav Surkov, a trusted aide to the Russian president. Over time, his grip loosened, and new figures began to dominate the stage. As the full-scale invasion loomed, media narratives increasingly spotlighted Yuri Kovalchuk, an oligarch and long-standing confidant of

Putin, as a force of considerable influence. Alongside him stood other pillars of the inner circle: Nikolai Patrushev, until recently the Security Council's secretary, and Sergey Kiriyenko, the first deputy chief of the presidential administration – both architects of Kremlin policy in their own right [35, 36].

Naturally, there was no shortage of secondary players weaving narratives and directing the currents of disinformation. Russian sources even hailed the ultra-conservative political analyst Sergey Kurginyan as the "chief ideologist of Novorossiya." Yet these figures were never true power brokers – they served as executors, public mouthpieces, or advisors at best [37]. The propaganda engine takes its cue from Putin. Every strategic blueprint carries his final endorsement and, more often than not, is unveiled by him personally, without the mediation of others.

These decisions reflect Putin's inner world. Beyond his background in the Committee for State Security (KGB) and Russian Federal Security Service, his worldview was shaped by the writings of Ivan Ilyin, a theorist of Russian fascism [38]. And let's not forget Angela Merkel's 2014 remark to Barack Obama: Putin had "lost touch with reality" and was living "in another world" [39].

When he casually invoked Novorossiya during a televised Q&A, the word was brief, yet it triggered the vast machinery of the Russian state and its propaganda engine.

Another telling example is the narrative that "Ukrainians and Russians are one people," repeated countless times by Putin. He didn't invent it – it dates back to the Russian Empire. This ideology breaks down into several components, all leading to the same conclusion: one nation.

It includes claims about a "shared historical cradle – Kyivan Rus" ("Kyiv, mother of Russian cities"), assertions that Ukrainian is merely a distorted form of Russian, and the idea that Orthodoxy forever binds Ukrainians and Russians.

At the grassroots level, these theses are reinforced through propaganda operations designed to create the illusion that Ukrainians themselves embrace the notion of a "single people." One striking example is the

Victory Day commemorations that, until recently, took place in Ukraine adorned with imperial-Soviet symbols – most notably the so-called St. George ribbon [40]. This artificial emblem, invented by Russian authorities, was meant to signal a shared past linked to the triumph over Nazism. In reality, it imposes Russia's interpretation of history, stripping Ukrainians of their own knowledge and understanding of World War II.

When Russia's army began to stumble during the full-scale invasion, some commentators offered a curious explanation: the occupiers were up against "the Russian soldier – the best in the world." By that logic, Ukraine's resilience becomes proof of a paradoxical claim – that Ukrainians are, in essence, Russians.

In its most extreme iteration, this narrative demands "curing" Ukrainians who have supposedly "forgotten" they are Russians. Behind this euphemism lies a brutal reality: propagandists frame extermination – killing anyone who embodies Ukrainian identity – as a form of ideological treatment.

"Priests of the cult of 'Ukrainianness' must be destroyed like rabid animals. No mercy. That's obvious. But another conclusion is less obvious: Ukrainianness as a system must be eradicated in liberated territories. Complete and total de-Ukrainization," proclaimed Russian propagandist Sergey Mardan in December 2022 [41]. Echoes of this genocidal logic reverberate through Timofey Sergeytsev's notorious essay, which lays out a blueprint for erasing Ukrainian identity altogether.

These are not marginal voices – they are well-known journalists and federal-level analysts, handpicked to appear on state television. Their rhetoric is not spontaneous; it carries the stamp of approval from above and mirrors the Kremlin's true objectives.

The claim of "one people" is absurd and repeatedly debunked by scholarly research. It exposes Russia's imperial mindset, twisting reality through disinformation to justify a policy that denies another nation's right to exist, to sovereignty, and to statehood – principles that have no place in the modern world.

Future disinformation campaigns are conceived in the Kremlin – in the presidential administration and in the minds of informal advisors and

ideologues. But Putin bears personal responsibility for distorting reality and filling it with false meanings.

From there, a sprawling, multi-tiered system takes over – spreading propaganda narratives and crafting disinformation cases through tightly coordinated centers working hand-in-glove with the Kremlin.

Russian Television: Curators, Methods, and the Core Idea

Russia's television networks, print outlets, online media, and even the press offices of its security agencies operate under the supervision of Alexey Gromov, the first deputy chief of the presidential administration. A former head of Boris Yeltsin's press service, Gromov has served in Putin's administration since 2008. Each week, he convenes meetings with the heads of leading Russian media – including those that are nominally privately owned – ensuring that the Kremlin's messaging remains tightly coordinated and consistent.

With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the country's information space was purged of the last remnants of independent or even mildly critical journalism. In practice, this means that through Gromov, the Kremlin exercises absolute control over the national media landscape.

As insiders put it: *"If anyone thinks a random official can call the heads of state channels and order something to be aired, they're gravely mistaken. Most likely, that person would be sent packing – and for a long time. Only Gromov can do that."* [42].

Alexey Gromov, 2024, photo from Russian propaganda media / 1sn.ru

Mykhailo Podolyak, adviser to the head of Ukraine's Presidential Office, has stated that behind Russia's strategy of fueling hatred toward Ukraine through the media stands none other than

Gromov – *"one of the pillars of the so-called 'party of hawks,' and the author of the unofficial concept 'Ukraine is a state that does not exist'"* [43].

Among the key techniques employed by Kremlin propaganda in Russian media is the use of caricatured "Ukrainians" on air. Political talk shows regularly feature Ukrainian "experts" whose appearance alone often provokes disgust or ridicule. These individuals do not represent Ukraine's expert community and are likely paid to play the role of "punching bags." They are interrupted, mocked, and publicly humiliated. Such scenes reinforce stereotypes of Ukrainians as "wild," "uncultured," and "backward" – a people allegedly inferior to Russians and, therefore, undeserving of statehood [44].

Russian media – television above all – frequently deploy techniques aimed at manipulating the audience's emotions. *"The goal of any TV host is to break through the screen and land on the viewer's kitchen or living room, so they feel I'm speaking directly to them. The ultimate aim, of course, is to penetrate their consciousness, their soul,"* admitted one of Russia's leading propagandists, Dmitry Kiselyov [45]. The rhetoric, imagery, and storylines crafted by propagandists tap into fear, aggression, and patriotic sentiment. As a result, for viewers, listeners, and readers of Russian media, emotions overshadow rational perception – making it easier to steer public attitudes in the desired direction.

The hierarchy of Russia's propaganda structures / cpd.gov.ua

The Role of Russian Intelligence Services in Coordinating the Disinformation War

In 2024, Oleksiy Danilov, then Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, revealed a staggering figure: 166 million propaganda pieces about Ukraine are injected into the information space every week. Over time, the intensity of Russia's information attacks has only grown. Such scale is possible thanks to the active involvement of Russian intelligence agencies in planning, coordinating, and executing these operations.

According to Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation, the Kremlin's chief propaganda curator is Sergey Kiriyenko, first deputy head of the Russian presidential administration. He also oversees the work of Russia's intelligence agencies – the Federal Security Service, the Main Intelligence Directorate, and the Foreign Intelligence Service – in this domain [46]. Thus, these agencies, acting in direct coordination with the Kremlin, wage a vast and highly organized disinformation war against Ukraine. Their toolkit includes:

- Information-psychological operations;
- Mass dissemination of fake news via social media;
- Extensive use of bot networks;
- Bribing Ukrainian citizens to spread disinformation;
- Paying bloggers, journalists, and public figures to conduct influence campaigns;
- Terrorist acts staged to reinforce propaganda narratives.

For instance, to reinforce the narrative that Ukrainians should avoid mobilization, Russian intelligence services stage real terrorist attacks in the buildings of territorial recruitment and social support centers, recruiting perpetrators online. Explosive devices are often detonated remotely, killing the executors along with other victims – both military personnel and civilians [48].

In the information domain, Russian intelligence operates with remarkable dynamism and adaptability. On one hand, they pursue long-term strategic military and political objectives for Russia. On the other, they

seize every opportunity for immediate tactical gains – whether through injecting fake narratives or stoking discord within Ukrainian society.

Russians employ multiple tactics to infiltrate Ukraine's information space. One of the most pervasive methods is through social media – particularly Telegram – where they have built an extensive network of pages and channels dedicated to Ukrainian cities, towns, and villages. This system is especially concentrated in frontline areas, where destabilizing the situation is a top priority for Moscow.

Yevgeny Prigozhin's Troll Factory

A striking example of hybrid information warfare – an instrument not formally owned by the Kremlin yet operating squarely in its interests – is the "Internet Research Agency," better known as Prigozhin's troll factory. Founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the creator of the private military company Wagner, this entity served as a powerful propaganda tool. For years, Prigozhin remained close to Putin, entrusted with particularly sensitive assignments by the Russian dictator.

Like Wagner, the troll farm was nominally private. In reality, both carried out Kremlin tasks and advanced Russia's state policy – at home and abroad. Their ambiguous status, however, always allowed Putin to deny responsibility for their actions.

The "Internet Research Agency" was established in 2013, initially operating out of the Olgino district in St. Petersburg – hence its informal moniker, the "Olgino trolls" [49]. From 2014 onward, this entity played a pivotal role in Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine, serving as an effective instrument for manipulating public opinion. In Ukraine, the "Olgino" network sought to destabilize the political landscape, promote the narrative of a

Troll factory, illustrative image / detector.media

"civil war," and legitimize the puppet "authorities" installed by the occupiers in Donetsk and Luhansk.

The most notorious episode involving the "Olgino trolls" was their interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. When investigations confirmed the meddling, Prigozhin was sanctioned by the United States and placed on the wanted list [51]. His structures were also deeply involved in disinformation and propaganda campaigns leading up to – and accompanying – Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

After Prigozhin's death in August 2023, the "Agency" and its affiliated structures vanished from the public eye. Yet this does not mean their resources are unused – or will remain dormant. Just as Wagner's remnants were absorbed into Russia's regular army after Prigozhin's failed mutiny, the troll factory's operatives are unlikely to have been left out in the cold. Specialists of this caliber are indispensable to Russian intelligence services. Reports suggest that control over the troll factory has since passed to Yuri Kovalchuk, a close confidant of Putin [50].

In short, private entities engaged in disinformation campaigns operate under the Kremlin's direct patronage. They exploit emotional manipulation to polarize societies, undermine trust in traditional media, and target specific states, politicians, and institutions. Their methods are constantly evolving: from networks of internet bots simulating public opinion in comment sections to sophisticated information-psychological operations.

"Roskomnadzor" as an Instrument of Censorship

Any attempt to describe Russia's disinformation strategy would be incomplete without mentioning the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media – better known by its colloquial name, Roskomnadzor. Propaganda and fake narratives cannot thrive unless the audience is deprived of alternative sources of

truth. This is precisely where Roskomnadzor steps in: its mission is to block independent voices and censor content.

Officially, these actions are justified under the guise of combating extremism. In reality, they form a critical component of Russia's hybrid war – first against Ukraine, and now increasingly against the West.

Roskomnadzor systematically restricts Russian citizens' access to Ukrainian and foreign news outlets, as well as statements from NGOs and human rights organizations that expose the truth about Russia's aggression. The agency exerts pressure on major tech platforms – such as Google – demanding that they censor content within Russia that contradicts Kremlin narratives [53]. Those who refuse to comply face outright bans: Facebook and Instagram are already inaccessible, while YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) remain under heavy restrictions. The prospect of a full YouTube ban resurfaces periodically, but the authorities hesitate – aware that Russians consume vast amounts of non-political content on the platform. Access to platforms that the Kremlin hesitates to ban outright is deliberately slowed down..

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III. Channels of Russian Disinformation Influence

The System of Direct Levers in Russia's Disinformation Machine

In Putin's Russia – waging a full-scale war against Ukraine and a hybrid war against the West – the dissemination of fake news, propaganda, and manipulative narratives involves far more than just the media. A complex network of state institutions and numerous nominally non-governmental organizations plays an active role in this machinery.

Russian diplomatic missions abroad often serve as conduits for disinformation. Statements by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are, for the most part, not diplomacy but the echo of propaganda narratives. Regular briefings by Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are saturated with distortions and manipulations [54].

Глава ФСБ обвинил военную разведку Украины в причастности к теракту в «Крокусе»

Директор ФСБ Александр Бортников сообщил, что подготовку, финансирование, нападение и отход напавших на «Крокус Сити Холл» «координировали» члены «Вилаят Хорасана» (филиал запрещенной в РФ террористической организации ИГ При этом он подчеркнул, что хотя следствие еще идет, можно уверенно сказать, чт военная разведка Украины причастна к теракту.

Accusations against Ukraine by the FSB leadership / screenshot from Russian media «Kommersant»

The Russian law enforcement system also plays a significant role in crafting and spreading disinformation. At the highest level, this includes cases such as Federal Security Service chief Alexander Bortnikov accusing Ukraine of orchestrating the terrorist attack at "Crocus City Hall" in Krasnogorsk near Moscow. At lower levels, fabricated charges are brought against Ukrainian prisoners of war, accusing them of imaginary crimes that carry lengthy prison sentences [55]. These captives are coerced into self-incrimination, and their forced "confessions" are broadcast across Russia's central media outlets [56].

Humanities and academia have effectively become integral parts of Russia's disinformation apparatus. A unified concept for teaching history in schools has been introduced, embedding imperial interpretations of the past into the minds of children. Leading Russian universities now offer courses by ideologues of the "Russian World" and even classes in "Westernology" – a pseudo-discipline portraying the West as "satanic." This system does more than indoctrinate Russians; it actively trains agents of influence, including those destined for the international stage [57].

The Russian Orthodox Church openly supports aggression against Ukraine. Its leader, Patriarch Kirill, has repeatedly voiced disinformation messages, leveraging church media resources and communication channels to amplify them. These channels extend beyond Russia's borders, reaching Ukraine and other countries with ROC communities – such as European nations hosting large Russian diasporas [58].

Even sports competitions, cultural events, and comedy shows are enlisted to sustain narratives about confrontation with Europe and the necessity of continuing the war against Ukraine. Prominent Russian actors have pledged loyalty to the regime and now serve as instruments of propaganda. Theaters display banners supporting the war and stage plays glorifying the so-called "heroes of the special military operation." Cultural figures unwilling to participate have been forced into exile.

Russia's disinformation efforts are further reinforced by Putin's allies abroad. For instance, the rhetoric of Belarus's self-proclaimed president, Alexander Lukashenko, mirrors Russian propaganda about Ukraine [59].

In essence, we are dealing with an almost all-encompassing system – save for a few minor exceptions – whose individual components maintain their own direct communication channels with both internal and external audiences. This is a crucial point to keep in mind when examining the primary instruments of influence: the media and social platforms.

Explosive Growth and Anonymity: How Telegram Became Russia's Primary Disinformation Tool

Let us begin not with traditional media, but with the social platform that, during the full-scale war, has become Ukraine's primary challenge in countering Russian disinformation. That platform is Telegram.

"This platform categorically refuses any cooperation with our state regulators – a fact confirmed by members of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting. It is owned by a Russian national, Pavel Durov, and few media analysts question that Telegram operates under the influence of the Federal Security Service (FSB). The evidence is plain: Facebook and Instagram are banned in Russia and accessible only through VPN, YouTube teeters on the brink of prohibition, yet Telegram? It flourishes," remarked Natalia Ligachova, head of the NGO Detector Media [60].

"Telegram is harmful. I've never been afraid to say it. It's a threat to our national security," – commented Kyrylo Budanov, Chief of Ukraine's Defense Intelligence [61].

The platform's unique features have fueled its popularity and transformed it into a serious threat to Ukraine's information security [62].

Anonymity: Telegram does not require identity verification, allowing the creation of channels and groups with no traceable link to real organizations or individuals – including intelligence agencies.

Lack of moderation: The platform has no systemic content control, enabling propaganda narratives, fake news, and even calls for violence to spread unchecked.

Speed of dissemination: Telegram ensures instant distribution of disinformation through its forwarding and reposting system. Content can also spill over to other platforms and mainstream media.

Absence of algorithmic filters: Unlike other major social networks, Telegram does not restrict content visibility based on its nature, fostering uncontrolled propagation of manipulative messages.

Controlled erasure of traces: Administrators can edit or delete messages without retaining any history of changes, making it harder to expose fakes and manipulations.

Mitigating the Impact of Blocking: Even when moderators remove certain channels, they are easily restored under new names or through duplicate channels.

Automation via bots: Telegram enables the creation of bots capable of performing a wide range of tasks, including mass dissemination of information. In the context of disinformation campaigns, this opens vast opportunities. Bots can not only publish posts but also add reactions, leave comments, and spread messages on behalf of "ordinary users." This creates the illusion of widespread support for certain narratives and helps push disinformation in a way that benefits manipulators.

There are additional factors that make Telegram exceptionally convenient for spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion. For instance, the use of virtual or temporary phone numbers for registration allows channels to be created and administered without any link to real identities.

The combination of functions – messenger, social network, and content aggregator – along with accessibility, ease of content generation, and rapid information sharing, triggered an explosive rise in Telegram's popularity among Ukrainians after Russia's full-scale invasion. People urgently needed real-time updates on the course of hostilities, threats, and consequences of shelling, as well as instant news and commentary. The demand for fast communication also surged, as countless families were torn apart by war. The heavy emotional strain and constant stress

drove Ukrainians to become hooked on the endless stream of quick news – and Telegram provided exactly that.

Traditional media struggle to compete with Telegram primarily because of its speed. In wartime, the responsibility of professional journalists and media outlets for their publications has grown significantly; martial law requires them to delay the release of certain information or coordinate reports with the military. This has created numerous ethical dilemmas and situations where timeliness and completeness must be sacrificed to avoid causing harm.

Many Telegram channels are free from such professional or ethical constraints. They have published – and continue to publish – information such as the aftermath of shelling without the necessary delay, putting rescuers at risk of repeated Russian strikes. The owners and administrators of these channels often operate outside Ukraine, beyond the reach of legal consequences [63].

Audiences are drawn not only by the speed of updates but also by content that traditional media avoid: scenes of violence, gossip, rumors, and false information designed to provoke strong emotions.

In December 2021, on the eve of the full-scale invasion, only about 20% of Ukrainians used Telegram to access news. By June 2022, that figure had tripled – reaching 65.7%. In 2024, it had grown nearly fourfold compared to 2021: more than 78% of respondents reported reading news on Telegram [64; 65].

Russian propaganda and disinformation, which found it increasingly difficult to penetrate traditional Ukrainian media after the start of the war, fully exploited Telegram's surge in popularity.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of Russian propaganda outlets or channels controlled by Russian intelligence services. The plat-form does not provide open statistics on the total number of channels or their audiences. Disinformation networks are highly adaptive, often masquerading as Ukrainian or foreign sources. Such channels may operate as anonymous "insider" blogs or pseudo-analytical projects. A portion of the content circulates in closed groups and private chats.
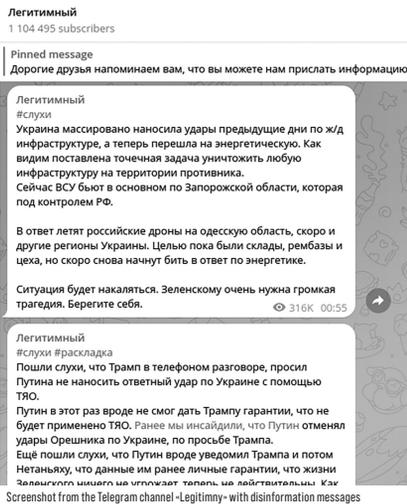
Screenshot from the Telegram channel «Legitimny» with disinformation messages

It is reasonable to assume that there are **tens of thousands** of Russian or Russia-linked channels and groups on Telegram, actively spreading propaganda and disinformation to shape public opinion. This vast eco-system includes:

- Official channels of state-controlled Russian media (such as RT, RIA Novosti) and the networks orbiting around them;
- War correspondents and bloggers, each surrounded by their own clusters of affiliated accounts;
- Prominent propagandists, operating personal channels, chats, and bot farms;
- Localized versions of major channels, tailored for specific regions or thematic niches.

Additionally, one must take into account:
- Channels masquerading as Ukrainian sources;
- Channels targeting residents of occupied territories;
- Channels aimed at frontline regions in Ukraine, designed to sow panic and demoralization;
- Chats and groups used to coordinate information attacks.

The Russian propaganda network on Telegram includes channels that disguise themselves as official Ukrainian institutions. For instance, Russian intelligence has been known to create fake Telegram channels posing as units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, using them to collect sensitive information and discredit Ukrainian soldiers [66].

Screenshot from the fake Telegram page «14 ombr» with a demoralizing message

The range of methods employed by Russian special services and propagandists to exploit Telegram for spreading their narratives and manipulations is remarkably broad. Their goal is clear: to embed themselves as deeply as possible into Ukraine's information space.

There are also so-called "insiders" – anonymous channels claiming access to "secret," "classified," or "internal" information. These channels often mimic independence or opposition, while in reality publishing fabricated stories or manipulative content with a sensational twist, eroding trust in the government, the military, and Ukraine's allies, and sowing doubt among Ukrainians [67].

Russia's disinformation strategy on Telegram is systematic and meticulously orchestrated: targeting diverse audiences, deploying multiple

roles and "masks," all serving the Kremlin's strategic objectives. Such a multi-layered system could never thrive on a more strictly moderated social platform. Yet Telegram grants Russian information operatives complete freedom under the convenient guise of "free speech."

Pavel Durov and His Hidden Collaboration with Russian Authorities

The policy of non-interference and minimal restrictions – even on blatantly destructive information campaigns – has long been a core principle of Telegram's founder, Russian-born Pavel Durov.

Back in 2006, Durov launched VKontakte, a Facebook clone that quickly became the most popular social network in Russia and across neighboring countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, VKontakte had more than ten million registered users at its peak, until it was blocked in 2017 as part of sanctions against Russian companies.

In 2014, Durov sold his stake in VKontakte and left Russia. Around the same time, he launched Telegram – a platform he claimed would be built on absolute freedom of speech and uncompromising user privacy [68]. This philosophy, however, attracted a dark clientele: terrorists, arms and drug traffickers, and distributors of child pornography. Later, Durov himself was even detained in France as an accomplice in cybercrimes . Notably, on the day of his arrest in August 2024, he arrived in France from Baku – a visit that coincided with Putin's trip to Azerbaijan.

After leaving Russia, Durov positioned himself as a dissident, allegedly persecuted by Russian security services for refusing to disclose user data. Yet this did not stop him from secretly traveling back to Russia. Investigators discovered that since 2014, Durov had visited Russia more than fifty times, including in the summer of 2020 – on the very day when Roskomnadzor dropped its claims against Telegram [70].

Although there is no direct evidence that these visits were for meetings with Russian intelligence, one fact speaks volumes: the Russian

authorities, who aggressively block moderated platforms like Facebook and Instagram, have ceased pressuring Telegram. In April 2025, Telegram deleted the anonymous channel VChK-OGPU, notorious for publishing damaging materials and insider leaks about Russian officials, oligarchs, and security forces. The channel had over one million subscribers, and its removal was demanded by Roskomnadzor and the Russian Prosecutor General's Office [72].

"We can see that within Russia, its security services are able to resolve issues with Telegram's administration very swiftly. Meanwhile… there is no proper interaction when it comes to protecting Ukraine's national interests or safeguarding personal data – even though there are countless channels publishing not just fake news, but also the personal details of Ukrainian defenders and prisoners of war," said Andriy Yusov, representative of the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense [71].

Thus, Telegram – with its proclaimed "freedom of speech," anonymity, lack of moderation, and easy accessibility – has proven to be an exceptionally convenient tool for the Russian government in its aggressive plans against Ukraine and in hybrid operations targeting other states.

Social Network X: Policy Shift and New Opportunities for Russia

If Russian intelligence operates in Telegram virtually without restrictions – as though in its own domain – on other social platforms it adapts to the rules and available loopholes. Twitter, now rebranded as X, is becoming increasingly hospitable to Russian disinformation.

In October 2022, Twitter – one of the world's most influential social networks and a key channel for communication in the Western world – was acquired by entrepreneur Elon Musk. Like Durov, Musk champions the idea of "absolute freedom of speech." Consequently, under his leadership, the platform revised its moderation policies, loosening restrictions on disinformation [73].

Long before 2022, Russian security services and bot farms were exploiting Twitter as a key channel for influencing Western – particularly American – audiences. Yevgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency created thousands of fake Twitter accounts to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Research revealed that these accounts shifted tactics in response to the campaign's dynamics [74].

By January 2018, Twitter announced that nearly 700,000 users had been exposed to Russian propaganda through more than 50,000 automated accounts linked to Russia's "troll factory," and therefore to the Kremlin [75].

One of Twitter's safeguards against impersonation and a guarantee of information quality was the blue checkmark, indicating an account verified by the platform. However, after rebranding Twitter as X, Elon Musk changed the verification system: now, the blue checkmark can simply be purchased – no verification required. This opened the floodgates to a surge of fake accounts.

Elon Musk didn't stop at loosening moderation. A supporter of European right-wing populist parties, he helped ensure that their views became more visible and widespread on X [76]. These are parties that largely oppose aid to Ukraine and blame the West – rather than Russia – for prolonging the war.

On his own X profile, Musk shared information about Ukraine that multiple media outlets and fact-checkers later deemed false. This included claims that USAID allegedly paid global celebrities to visit Ukraine and that a former Yanukovych-era official had purchased property in France – while Musk accused a current Ukrainian Defense Ministry official of corruption in connection with the latter [77].

X remains relatively unpopular in Ukraine, with only 6–10% of Ukrainians using the platform, according to various estimates. However, X hosts Russian accounts masquerading as Ukrainian, spreading disinformation and attempting to sway public opinion [78].

Yet the sharp edge of Russia's disinformation operations on X is aimed squarely at Western audiences. And today, Russian intelligence services have virtually free rein to do so.

TikTok: A Growing Threat to Ukraine's Information Security

TikTok, a platform designed for sharing short videos, is owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, headquartered in China. As of early 2025, TikTok boasts over 1.5 billion active monthly users, including a significant youth audience [79].

TikTok became the first Chinese platform to achieve such global popularity, particularly in the West. Unsurprisingly, politicians and intelligence agencies in Western countries have raised concerns that Beijing could exploit this trendy social network both as a channel for propaganda and influence operations and as a tool for illicit collection of users' personal data. In April 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden signed a law banning TikTok in the United States unless the platform was sold to American investors. However, President-elect Donald Trump postponed enforcement of this law for 75 days, and as of summer 2025, TikTok remains unblocked in the U.S. and has not changed ownership.

The European Union has also considered banning TikTok over fears of data security risks and potential interference in elections. In April 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that an EU-wide ban on TikTok was "not off the table" [80].

These concerns proved well-founded. In November 2024, far-right politician Călin Georgescu unexpectedly won the most votes in the first round of Romania's presidential elections. Experts attribute his sudden success largely to the influence of social media – Georgescu was even dubbed the "TikTok Messiah" [81].

In Germany, surveys reveal a striking trend: young people – especially TikTok users – hold markedly different views compared to those who rely on traditional media. TikTok users are significantly more likely to believe disinformation, including narratives pushed by Russia and China [82].

Russia is actively using TikTok to spread anti-Ukrainian disinformation. While the full scale of this threat is difficult to measure, it is clear that the platform offers enormous potential for toxic information campaigns.

"Telegram is already well-studied, and we understand its structure and mechanics. Right now, TikTok is causing far greater harm – because its audience is highly vulnerable: teenagers, young people, and, surprisingly, the 55+ demographic. TikTok is, in fact, a major problem today," said Alina Alekseeva, Deputy Head of Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council [83].

For example, researchers discovered that in 2023, nearly 13,000 TikTok bots generated fake stories about corruption in Ukraine's government. Experts described this as a covert Russian influence operation [84]. Some fake videos even featured AI-generated voices. The campaign reached 847,000 followers, and since the videos were published in seven languages, their potential viewership could have reached hundreds of millions. Later, TikTok's administration – claiming to be committed to stronger anti-disinformation measures – announced the removal of accounts involved in this operation.

Ukrainian journalists uncovered more than 2,000 accounts created as part of a single Russian information operation aimed at discrediting Ukraine's mobilization campaign, united under the hashtag #ThisIsNotMyUkraine [87].

Another investigation examined user reactions to humorous deepfake videos featuring Ukrainian politicians. Despite their crude execution and obvious signs of falsification, at least 20% of commenters believed the videos were real [85].

TikTok's algorithms amplify the viral effect, pushing fake videos beyond the original channel's audience and increasing the risk of manipulation. A video can rack up millions of views – even if posted by a newly created account with minimal followers. The algorithms are designed to maximize user attention through emotionally charged content, regardless of its accuracy. They curate recommendation feeds based on prior interactions, creating "echo chambers" users may not even realize they're in.

Meanwhile, TikTok's Ukrainian audience continues to grow – potentially reaching 17 million users in 2025 [86].

У ВСУ все стабильно, навигация НАТО в деле или попросту френдлифайер ВСУшники бьют по своим, поскольку связи «нема», взаимодействия «нема»
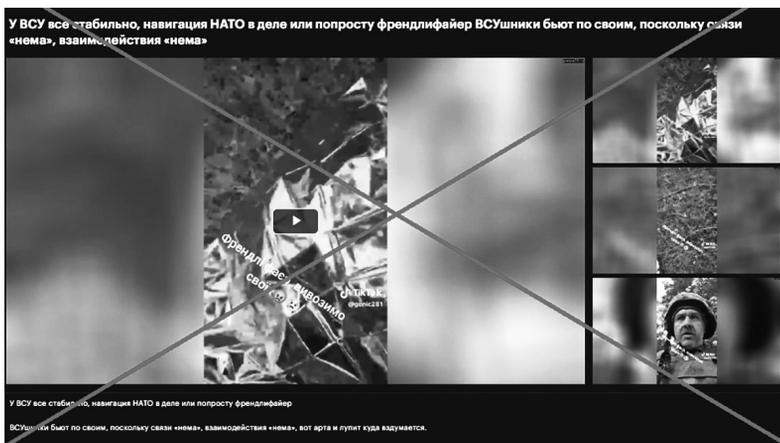
Screenshot from a fake TikTok video allegedly showing the Ukrainian Armed Forces firing on their own positions; the face of the «ukrainian soldier» was created using deepfake technology

Compared to Telegram and X, TikTok is indeed more open to combating disinformation and takes steps to protect its reputation. However, these efforts are often insufficient and delayed. Large-scale manipulations – especially those involving AI-generated or AI-voiced videos – spread widely before they are identified and neutralized.

Thus, TikTok represents a serious potential threat to information security – not only for Ukraine but for the West as well.

Russia's Disinformation Strategy via Facebook and Instagram

Although Meta's social networks are blocked for Russian audiences, Russia remains the "number one source" of coordinated global campaigns spreading disinformation and fake content on Facebook and Instagram, according to Meta's 2024 security report [88].

Facebook was the first social network to achieve true global popularity. It still boasts the largest user base among leading platforms – nearly three billion users – and retains significant worldwide influence. Over more than two decades, the corporation (rebranded as Meta in 2021) has developed

mechanisms to combat disinformation and harmful content, including hate speech, harassment, and violent imagery. These measures involve both internal moderation teams and partnerships with independent fact-checking organizations. However, the moderation system remains far from perfect.

In 2017, the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence investigated reports of political ads purchased on Facebook by Russia's infamous "troll factory." A year later, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress regarding possible interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election – won by Donald Trump – through the social network [90]. In 2024, the European Union launched an inquiry into Facebook and Instagram amid suspicions that their moderation practices were not rigorous enough to counter disinformation campaigns by Russia and other states [89].

On Meta platforms, virtually anyone can quickly place an ad and target it to a specific audience. Analysts from Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security and the Center for Democracy and Rule of Law have noted that Russia actively uses targeted advertising as a weapon in its war against Ukraine [91].

Ukrainian-language disinformation posts typically appear on newly created pages with abstract names and generic profile pictures. Their goal is to trigger emotional responses. These posts often focus on unfavorable developments for Ukraine at the front (usually defeats or difficulties for the Ukrainian army), mobilization (emphasizing its alleged unfairness), the critical state of Ukraine's energy sector, corruption in government, and human losses.

Facebook's policy aimed at preventing the spread of violent content has, paradoxically, played into Russia's hands – limiting Ukrainians' ability to tell the truth about Russian aggression and war crimes. For instance, Facebook removes posts about Russian shelling when they include graphic evidence of mass casualties [92]. Russian bot farms have learned to exploit vulnerabilities in moderation algorithms to block pro-Ukrainian or Russia-critical content, restrict pages of Ukrainian public figures or media
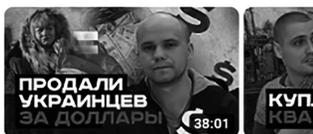
Example of Facebook ads about the benefits of Russian captivity / cedem.org.ua

outlets, and suppress the dissemination of Ukraine's perspective.

Unlike Telegram, Meta maintains dialogue with Ukrainian authorities, including the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC), on joint efforts to counter information attacks and adapt moderation rules [93]. However, the corporation primarily aligns its policies with global and U.S. political trends. In January 2025, following Donald Trump's election as U.S. President, Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook, Instagram, and Threads (Meta's platform similar to X) would end strict content moderation and discontinue partnerships with independent fact-checkers [94]. Instead, Meta introduced a Community Notes system, similar to the one already used on X, allowing users themselves to flag inappropriate content and errors.

Unlike Facebook, Instagram is centered on visual content – images, videos, and stories – and caters to a less politicized audience. This shapes the format of disinformation Russia spreads here: emotional video montages and memes. Influencers – users with large number of followers – also play a significant role, amplifying narratives aligned with Russian propaganda.

Meta's decision to abandon cooperation with fact-checkers and liberalize content moderation rules opens new opportunities for Russian information attacks – not only against Ukraine but also other democratic nations. By removing its responsibility for content accuracy, the company creates fertile ground for manipulation, especially in the context of war.

Russian International Broadcasting: A Tool for Foreign Information Attacks

Russia's international broadcasting system – media holdings created specifically to target foreign audiences – is a key component of its disinformation machinery. These outlets serve to "legitimize" narratives that are later amplified across social media.

Russia Today

The flagship of the state-owned media company RT (Russia Today) is the English-language news channel RT International. The network also includes RT Arabic, RT en Español, RT France, RT DE, RT Balkan, as well as documentary channels: RT Documentary (in English), RT Doc (in Russian), and RT Doc Hindi. In 2015, RT claimed – citing European research firm Ipsos – that its weekly audience reached 70 million viewers across 38 countries, with 35 million watching daily. These figures are highly questionable and likely part of RT's global promotion strategy. For example, in the UK, according to ratings agency Barb, RT's average daily audience was only 122,000 viewers, representing 0.02% of the total TV audience. By comparison, BBC News had 2.6 million viewers, and Sky News 1.6 million [96].

An investigation by The Daily Beast confirmed that RT's actual audience is far smaller than claimed. In Europe, the channel's viewership did not exceed 0.1% of the television audience [97].

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RT broadcasts were banned across the European Union and the United States. However, the ban proved far from absolute – by 2024, RT was still broadcasting in EU countries in six languages, as some national authorities failed to enforce the restrictions and local providers ignored orders to block the channel. In practice, only the Russian-language TV version of RT was effectively blocked [98].

Moreover, even after the TV signal was cut, Russia Today's content remains accessible via its website, mobile apps, and social media. In February 2025, according to Semrush, RT.com recorded 103 million visits.

The largest traffic sources were Russia, the U.S., and Mexico – though these figures may be skewed by VPN usage, which allows users in countries where RT.com is blocked to bypass restrictions [99].
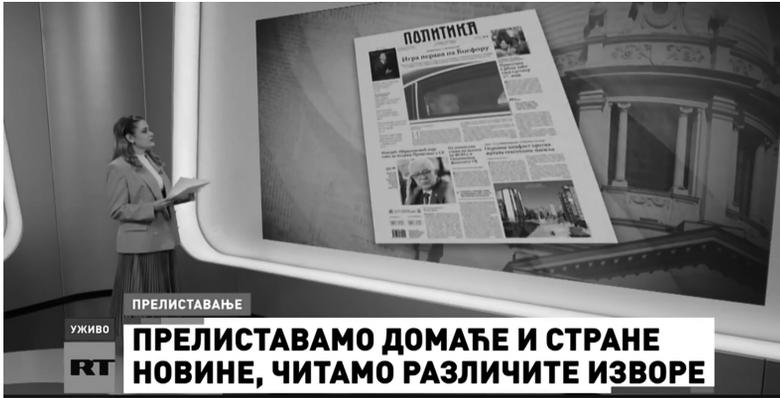
Screenshot from RT Balkan broadcast

Information agency Sputnik

The same applies to Sputnik, an information agency operating websites, mobile apps, online streams, radio broadcasts, and press centers. Despite sanctions, its resources continue to function in European countries. Sputnik's news sites publish in 30 languages, enabling coverage of regions geopolitically important to Russia.

Sputnik works particularly aggressively across the post-Soviet space, leveraging cultural ties, weak local media, and the absence of restrictions on pro-Russian disinformation. Partnerships with other media outlets – including local ones – allow the agency to significantly expand its reach. In 2019, Sputnik claimed its websites attracted over 60 million monthly visitors, though these figures lack independent verification [100].

On social media – especially X, Facebook, and Telegram – Sputnik expands its presence through bot networks and fake accounts, artificially boosting reach and engagement [101].

Sputnik and RT operate in close coordination as parts of a single, large-scale system for spreading Russian disinformation. They also collaborate

with anti-Western outlets in various countries, including Iranian and Chinese media, as well as far-right groups in Western nations [102].

Russian international broadcasting resources employ a range of disinformation techniques aimed at manipulating public opinion worldwide. They promote narratives aligned with Russia's foreign policy interests, often through distorted facts, manipulative headlines, and the illusion of "alternative truth." These outlets exploit themes such as institutional distrust, societal division, and push anti-Western messages. They seek to discredit media and democratic governments, propagate conspiracy theories, and amplify polarizing content. One of their systemic tools is the use of bots and coordinated social media campaigns, creating a false impression of widespread support for certain views or heightened interest in specific topics. Collectively, these methods generate information noise, eroding audiences' ability to distinguish truth from lies.

Propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov announces the expansion of Sputnik broadcasting in occupied Ukrainian territories / screenshot from the Telegram channel «Radio Sputnik»

Artificial Intelligence: A New Era of Disinformation Threats

The advent of generative AI models has propelled disinformation to an entirely new technological level. AI automates and accelerates processes that once required large teams, significant time, and substantial resources [103].

AI enables the creation of highly convincing texts, images, audio, and video content that mimic authentic sources. This could take the form of a news article, a blog post, a social media comment, or even an "expert quote." Detecting such content requires specialized tools – tools that ordinary users often don't even know exist.

Moreover, large language models (LLMs), when lacking robust filtering mechanisms, can inadvertently reproduce narratives embedded within their training data. In essence, it is possible to "feed" an AI system with disinformation, anticipating that the model will later draw upon this content as a source.

Russia is already building networks of websites that massively disseminate content from Kremlin-controlled media and Telegram channels. For example, the so-called "Pravda" network includes more than 150 sites, most of which have no real audience but consistently republish Russian propaganda in multiple languages. Their purpose is not to inform people but to create an informational backdrop for indexing and integration into AI systems, search engines, and news aggregators [104].

Another example is Operation Doppelganger, under which Russia has spent years creating dozens of fake "twin" websites – clones of influential media outlets from various countries. These sites mimic the style, visual design, and domains of legitimate publications. Their content consists of distorted or fabricated news aimed at discrediting Ukraine, the EU, NATO, and democratic institutions [105]. This material is then widely spread through social networks, Telegram channels, bot networks, and can even end up in datasets later used to train AI models. The result is a closed loop where fabricated information begins to circulate as "real" within digital ecosystems.
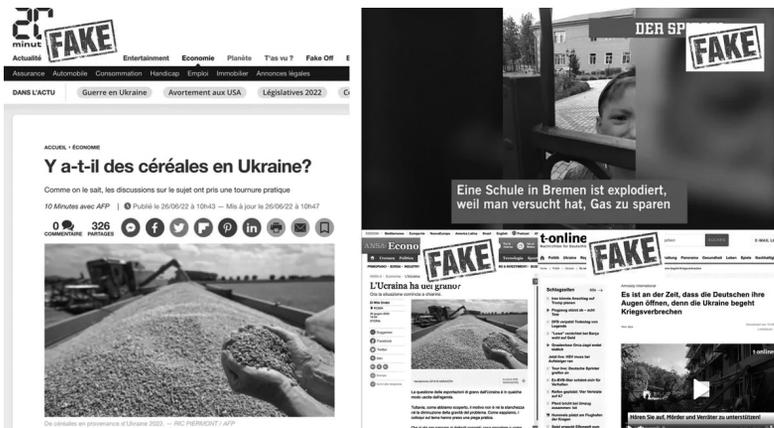
Examples of fake pages of well-known European media operating as part of the Doppelganger operation / Disinfo.eu

Another powerful disinformation tool is deepfakes – fake video or audio recordings that imitate real people. They are employed to manipulate perceptions, erode trust, or exert pressure on audiences. A deepfake might appear as a politician's statement, a supposed conversation between officials, or a "confession" by Ukrainian soldiers. Detecting a well-made deepfake without specialized analysis is extremely difficult, making this tool especially dangerous in the context of war.

Artificial intelligence is increasingly used to simulate user behavior on social networks. Bots now comment, like, and share content in ways that make them harder to detect. AI helps bypass platform filters by generating multiple variations of the same message, masking information attacks and adapting to moderation algorithms – allowing disinformation to be repeated countless times. After a campaign ends, AI can even "clean up" its traces by deleting content or automatically changing usernames, avatars, and other personal details to assume a new "identity."

AI can also be deployed to coordinate large networks of information resources during disinformation operations. Neither social media platforms nor other responsible institutions currently possess adequate tools to counter this level of automation.

All the channels described above do not operate in isolation – they work in a coordinated manner, either together or separately, depending on the target audience. They form elements of a hybrid disinformation ecosystem, where each component amplifies the impact of the others. This system must therefore be perceived and analyzed as a single, integrated threat to information security.

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IV. Russian Disinformation: Agents of Influence

Who Are Agents of Influence: Definition and Characteristics

When we speak of agents of influence, we refer to an entry point for disinformation into the legitimate information space. It is precisely the perceived legitimacy of these individuals or organizations that makes them particularly dangerous. The boundaries between spreading disinformation and engaging in lobbying or "soft power" are often blurred. Journalists, experts, scholars, and think tanks can lawfully and openly advocate for a certain position – or they can disseminate false narratives and manipulate public opinion.

Similarly, it is not always easy to distinguish agents of influence from those commonly labeled as "useful idiots" – individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, allow themselves to be exploited.

The National Institute for Strategic Studies, in its analytical report, defines agents of influence as individuals and organizations whose actions are *"aimed at shaping public opinion in targeted states to favor the aggressor or influencing decision-making in those states to produce outcomes beneficial to the aggressor"* [106]. Thus, agents of influence are a key instrument in conducting information-psychological warfare and implementing disinformation strategies.

The intelligence and political dimensions of this phenomenon lie beyond the scope of our discussion, yet they remain crucial, as influence is often multifaceted. It is also important to note that networks of agents of influence are far from homogeneous. They may include journalists, politicians, writers, scholars, or representatives of any socially significant profession. These agents vary in status – some act primarily

as executors (such as bloggers), while others operate as strategists, like political technologists or media editors. They may be highly visible or remain largely in the shadows, spreading disinformation either openly or covertly.

An agent's role is shaped by personal qualities, competence, and the level of trust granted by Russian intelligence services – which, in turn, determines the complexity of tasks assigned. In most cases, these tasks resemble the agent's usual professional activities. Yet they serve the objectives of information-psychological and disinformation campaigns, and more broadly, Russia's political and military-political goals. In other words, agents often do what they have always done, making them difficult to identify – and even harder to expose and neutralize. This is especially true in democratic societies, where freedom of speech is a core value and any restrictions require strong legal justification.

Since Russia's political leadership and intelligence services are successors to their Soviet counterparts, they rely not only on Soviet-era methods but also on personnel inherited from the USSR – individuals and organizations that once collaborated with the Soviet Union. These structures and individuals are deeply embedded within their own societies and can prove highly valuable to Russia [107]. At the same time, Russia is adapting to contemporary realities, employing diverse formats to weave new networks of its influence agents.

Forums, Foundations, and Public Initiatives as Instruments of Russian Influence

Valdai

The Valdai International Discussion Club was established in 2004. Officially, it serves as a platform for debating global issues with the participation of foreign experts, scholars, analysts, journalists, and others. In reality, it functions as a tool for promoting Russian narratives among Western intellectuals. Putin regularly attends the club's events [108].

Putin at the Valdai Forum / source – vedomosti.ru

Valdai and similar forums enable Russia to shape public opinion abroad and establish connections with foreign figures who may later act as conduits for Russian interests in their respective countries. There are other examples that illustrate the systematic nature of Russia's approach to building networks of agents of influence and the sophistication of these efforts.

Rossotrudnichestvo

Rossotrudnichestvo ("Russian Cooperation") is a state organization that has – or has had – representations in dozens of countries, including across the post-Soviet space, in EU nations, the Balkans, Latin America, and Africa. Officially, Rossotrudnichestvo promotes Russian culture and seeks humanitarian partnerships in these countries. In practice, it disseminates Russian narratives and ideological constructs: distorted interpretations of history, anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, and more [109].

These generously funded events serve as platforms for engaging local actors – journalists, educators, politicians, and opinion leaders. Through them, informal connections are forged, cooperation is established, and the groundwork is laid for the emergence of new agents of influence.

To identify loyal audiences, Rossotrudnichestvo employs online courses and scholarship programs. Each year, the Russian government provides up to 15,000 scholarships through this network, granting foreign citizens free education at Russian universities.

The Gorchakov Fund

The Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund, founded in 2010, maintains close ties with Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It organizes events and distributes grants to support projects in public diplomacy, as well as specialists in international relations, political science, and journalism.

Many recipients of these funds reside in countries where Russia seeks to preserve its influence [110]. At its summer schools and conferences, the fund directly propagates narratives aligned with Russia's foreign policy discourse. Some events focus on regions prioritized by Russian foreign policy – such as the Arctic, the Balkans, and the Caucasus – while others aim to build networks of young researchers loyal to Russia.

Analysts at the Ukrainian Institute note that one of the most prominent regular events co-organized by the Gorchakov Fund were the so-called Potsdam Meetings, where German and Russian high-ranking officials discussed foreign policy issues. After the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, these meetings became a platform for "dialogue" between Germany and the aggressor. Similar venues exist for pro-Russian politicians and organizations in Italy and France.

These organizations also operated in Ukraine. The Security Service of Ukraine shut down the Gorchakov Fund's activities in the country in 2015. Meanwhile, the Rossotrudnichestvo branch known as the Russian Center for Science and Culture continued to function until April 2021, when the National Security and Defense Council imposed sanctions against it. Even after that, the organization declared its intention to keep working on the Ukrainian front – albeit online [111].

Of course, these examples represent only the tip of the iceberg. *"Over the past decades, Russian intelligence services have built an enormous network of informal agents of Russian influence in other countries. These are not just individuals but entire institutions. And combating them is far more difficult because they are deeply integrated into Western societies,"* Liga.net quotes a source from Ukrainian intelligence [112].

He added that Russians leverage religious communities (especially Orthodox), business associations, joint scientific projects and Russian academic grants, educational exchange programs, cultural and creative industries, and even sports to achieve their goals. They also establish media outlets abroad – often disguised as local – and cultivate their own expert networks.

The funding of these networks is equally extensive. State grants, tuition payments, and fees for books or research represent only the official, visible part. Beyond that lies a web of "gray" schemes for indirect or anonymous financing. Russia invests billions of dollars in informal diplomacy and information influence, using both legal instruments and covert mechanisms. These efforts aim to advance narratives and strengthen influence across various regions.

In Ukraine, Russia spent years building, maintaining, and exploiting its influence networks: in media, political parties, the church, academic institutions, expert circles, NGOs, and pseudo-human rights groups – often under the guise of business ties and cultural cooperation that masked political objectives.

During the first three decades of Ukraine's independence, resistance to Russian agents of influence in different spheres was almost nonexistent or extremely weak. There were even periods when Russian agents held top positions in government – for instance, presidential administration heads under Kuchma, Viktor Medvedchuk and Dmytro Tabachnyk, both now hiding in Russia. The list of Russian protégés who played significant roles in state institutions, including security agencies, is long [113].

Until 2014, neither the majority of politicians nor a significant part of society viewed Russia as a direct threat; the belief in "brotherhood of nations," "good neighborly relations," and "strategic partnership" between the states was widespread. Public figures who echoed Russian narratives were largely seen as merely expressing personal opinions – after all, Ukraine is a democracy where freedom of speech prevails.

Even after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas, Russian agents of influence operated freely in Ukraine – within the information space, politics, and the humanitarian sphere. Only a year before the full-scale invasion did the government take decisive action, imposing economic sanctions against Kremlin agents and shutting down pro-Russian propaganda media. At that point, the most blatant Russian operatives began leaving Ukraine.

However, during the full-scale war, the activity of Russian agents of influence targeting Ukraine has not diminished; on the contrary, it has intensified. The difference is that their efforts are no longer concentrated on television broadcasts, as before 2022, but on social platforms.

Medvedchuk's Media Ecosystem: Preparing the Ground for Invasion

How did Russia manage – after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas, when illusions about its true intentions seemed shattered – to build several influential propaganda media networks in Ukraine? The answer lies in exploiting the principle of freedom of speech, a value cherished both by Ukrainian society and by the country's foreign partners. By echoing Russian propaganda narratives and openly serving the interests of the Kremlin and its local political allies, these channels branded themselves alternately as "independent" or "oppositional," framing any attempt to intervene in their activities as political repression.

This tactic proved effective. In 2021, when President Volodymyr Zelensky enforced the National Security and Defense Council's decision to impose economic sanctions on the pro-Russian TV channels *112 Ukraine, NewsOne*, and *ZIK*, the international organization *Reporters Without Borders* came to their defense. It condemned the sanctions as a violation of freedom of speech and Ukraine's international obligations [114].

Ukrainian civil society organizations countering disinformation issued a joint statement at the time: *"These channels are instruments of external influence operations and, accordingly, pose a systemic threat to Ukraine's information security"* [115]. Experts justified their position by citing data from the Office of the President of Ukraine, which indicated that these media outlets were financed from Russia; they systematically promoted Kremlin disinformation, including narratives about a "fascist post-Maidan Ukraine," "Russophobia," "Ukraine as a failed state," and

"Ukraine under Western external control." The overarching narrative was that Ukraine had no right to exist as a pro-European independent state.

Shielded by democratic principles and Ukraine's liberal legislation, this media group – the so-called Medvedchuk channels – constructed an entire ecosystem comprising pro-Russian politicians, experts, journalists, public figures, and an extensive distribution network. Together, they amplified and reinforced Kremlin disinformation messages. By creating an illusion of pluralism, these outlets blurred the line between freedom of speech and hostile information influence. Meanwhile, they enjoyed support and justification from segments of Ukrainian society and political elites, as well as from the international community, which perceived their activities as an expression of free speech. This is a textbook tactic of agents of influence.

Analysts from the "Texty" project demonstrated that ZIK, 112 Ukraine, and NewsOne were the starting point of a chain that generated thousands of propaganda publications. On one of these channels, a pseudo-expert or pro-Russian politician would voice a desired thesis during a broadcast. Later, the same thesis would appear on websites, cited as a direct quote from the TV channel [116]. According to the study, the top ten most frequently circulated narratives included accusations of radical nationalism, claims of "external governance" of Ukraine by the West, constant predictions of state collapse and the fueling of separatism, as well as

This is what the announcement about the telebridge looked like that the Russian Channel One and the pro-Russian Newsone intended to hold in 2019. The broadcast was eventually canceled due to significant public outrage in Ukraine / screenshot from the Russian TV channel «Russia 1»

manipulations surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic – such as promoting Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and discrediting Western vaccines.

Between February 2020 and February 2021 alone, at least 20,000 Russian-language news articles contained quotes from Medvedchuk's channels. During the same period, Ukrainian manipulative online resources cited them over 7,000 times. The disinformation distribution network included regional media and Russian outlets covering Ukraine.

After several changes of nominal owners, the three channels became the property of Taras Kozak in 2019. Yet everyone understood that they were effectively controlled and financed by Viktor Medvedchuk – Putin's close ally and Ukraine's leading pro-Russian politician. As later became clear, Medvedchuk was the key figure behind the creation of a media infrastructure that prepared Ukraine for full-scale invasion [117]. Alongside anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives echoing Kremlin propaganda, these channels also promoted Medvedchuk himself as the only politician allegedly capable of negotiating with Putin. By expanding his media influence, Medvedchuk aimed to seize power once Russia succeeded in subjugating or occupying Ukraine.

Evgeniy Murayev appeared to harbor similar ambitions. A pro-Russian politician, he once owned NewsOne before selling the channel and launching Nash to promote himself and his political project "Nashi." After Medvedchuk's channels were shut down, Nash became, for a year, the primary mouthpiece of Russian propaganda in Ukraine's television space. Its rhetoric and manipulative toolkit were virtually identical to those of 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK, differing only in its roster of commentators. Under the guise of formal "independence," Nash spread anti-Western messages, legitimized speakers with anti-Ukrainian positions, and undermined trust in Ukrainian institutions [118]. Like Medvedchuk's channels, any attempt by authorities to curb this propaganda was met with loud complaints from the channel's owner and staff about "political repression" and "suppression of free speech." Ultimately, on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion, sanctions were imposed on Nash, and Evgeniy Murayev soon fled Ukraine.

Digital Agents of Influence: YouTube Bloggers Spreading Russian Narratives

In April 2025, the President of Ukraine enacted the National Security and Defense Council's decision to impose sanctions on propagandists – both Russian and pro-Russian individuals originating from Ukraine. The list included 71 individuals and 18 organizations, among them entities controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk [119].

Oleksandr Shelest, Vadym Karasiov

Among those named were Oleksandr Shelest, a video blogger and TV host who worked for *NewsOne*, and Vadym Karasiov – a political analyst and strategist who, since 2014, had been a regular guest on pro-Russian channels, later becoming a host. YouTube blocked the channels through which these propagandists disseminated Russian disinformation within Ukraine.

However, many channels remain on the platform, operated by former employees of pro-Russian TV stations and their frequent collaborators – political technologists and pseudo-experts once promoted by the media structures of Medvedchuk and Murayev.

These individuals have adapted to new conditions by replacing overtly pro-Russian rhetoric with more veiled messaging, presented as "independent analysis" and "alternative viewpoints." Yet they have preserved the core narratives of Russian disinformation, now supplemented by the promotion of a "peaceful settlement" in Kremlin terms – that is, Ukraine's capitulation. Some of these channels boast tens of thousands of subscribers and continue to grow their audiences by collaborating with other pro-Russian YouTubers or sharing videos on Telegram channels aligned with Russia.

Anatoliy Shariy

The most prominent disseminator of Russian disinformation on YouTube is Anatoliy Shariy – a former Ukrainian blogger who has systematically

worked for Russia for many years, disguising himself as an "independent journalist" and "alternative analyst" [120]. His channel has over three million subscribers, but his danger lies not only in reach; it is amplified by his ability to build trust among viewers, particularly younger audiences. Shariy has successfully turned himself into a political brand: while living outside Ukraine, he founded the "Shariy Party," which managed to win seats in several local councils during the 2020 elections [121].

The content on Shariy's channels bears all the hallmarks of systematic information influence. His choice of topics closely mirrors Kremlin narratives, with one of the clear objectives being the discrediting of Ukraine as a state. While attempting to simulate an "independent" stance and mislead viewers, he occasionally makes a show of criticizing not only Ukraine but also the Russian authorities. In 2021, Shariy was charged with treason.

Anatoliy Shariy on Solovyov's propaganda show, February 2022, a few days before the full-scale invasion / Solovyov's Telegram channel

Diana Panchenko

Another key pro-Russian propagandist on YouTube is Diana Panchenko, a former host on Medvedchuk's channels. After these media outlets were shut down, Panchenko moved to YouTube, where she continued spreading Kremlin narratives, justifying Russian aggression, and promoting the idea of a "peaceful settlement" that effectively meant Ukraine's capitulation. In 2023, Ukraine's Security Service charged her with treason [122]. After leaving Ukraine, Panchenko began producing content in English to reach foreign audiences.

Thus, despite sanctions, the system for disseminating Kremlin narratives via YouTube remains active, and neutralizing it requires a far more robust response – both from the Ukrainian state and from the platform's administration.

How Foreign Agents of Influence Operate: Three Case Studies

Dmitry Simes

Dmitry Simes emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1973, integrating into the political environment and earning a reputation as an expert on Russian affairs. In the 1970s, Simes headed the Russian and Eurasian Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Topic: Security Tags: History, Russia, Soviet Union, USSR, and World War II

Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II

Putin's post featuring historical Russian narratives / nationalinterest.org

Later, he taught and conducted research at several American universities and worked as a correspondent for Radio Liberty in Washington [123]. In 2014, he became president of the Center for the National Interest, founded by former U.S. President Richard Nixon. The center publishes The National Interest, a magazine known for its historic 1989 article by futurist Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History." However, under Simes's leadership, the magazine began publishing articles by Russian propagandists, as well as texts authored by Vladimir Putin and Russia's Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. The National Interest became one of the few platforms in the U.S. that justified Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine, along with other actions of Putin's regime.

Simes was a frequent guest and host on Russian propaganda broadcasts, and in 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he returned to Russia – where he fully transformed from an intermediary into an open participant in the information war. In the U.S., he is under investigation on suspicion of money laundering [124].

Graham Phillips

Graham Phillips, a British journalist and video blogger, has embraced yet another persona – that of a deliberate provocateur. Once a contributor to well-known Western media, including coverage of Euro 2012 matches in Donetsk, Phillips openly supported Russia's actions in 2014, following its annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas. In his publications, he criticized the Revolution of Dignity, denied the legitimacy of Ukraine's new government, and claimed that the Ukrainian state no longer existed. Echoing Russian propaganda outlets, he labeled Ukrainians as "fascists" and referred to the country's leadership as the "Kyiv junta" [125].

In September 2016, during the exchange of Ukrainian prisoner of war Volodymyr Zhemchugov, Phillips made degrading remarks – calling him a "zombie," asking "Who brainwashed you?" and sneering, "Who needs you now, armless?" He also insulted Ukrainian journalists. Dunja Mijatović, a representative of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in

Europe, condemned his actions as shameful and entirely unrelated to journalism.

Phillips provoked scandals in other countries where Russia holds interests. On March 16, 2016, he was detained in Riga during a march commemorating Latvian legionnaires. He attempted to lead the procession, hurled insults at participants, and called them fascists.

In 2016, together with German journalist Billy Six, Phillips stormed into the offices of the Berlin-based outlet Correctiv, demanding a meeting with a reporter investigating the MH17 crash. They shouted "fake news media", filmed the incident, and refused to leave the premises. Promoting alternative versions of the crash that absolved Russia of responsibility was one of Phillips's key propaganda activities.

In August 2018, Phillips barged into the Georgian Embassy in London during an exhibition about the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. He denounced the display as one that "justifies fascism," shouting anti-Georgian and anti-NATO slogans.

In November 2018, he attempted to provoke a physical altercation with Ukraine's ambassador to Austria, Oleksandr Scherba, insulting him publicly and shoving him in the chest. Scherba later described Phillips as "a creature that feeds on anger, hatred, and war."

With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, Phillips focused squarely on anti-Ukrainian propaganda: denying Russian war crimes in Bucha and parroting Kremlin accusations of "Nazism" against Ukraine's leadership. His interview with British volunteer Aiden Aslin, captured by Russian forces in Mariupol, sparked outrage in the UK. Phillips's actions were deemed violations of the Geneva Conventions and potentially linked to war crimes. He became the first British citizen sanctioned by the UK for such conduct. Predictably, Russia granted him political asylum thereafter.

Graham Phillips exemplifies a figure with a Western background who, by crossing ethical and legal boundaries, openly serves Russia – provoking scandals and seeking to undermine international trust in Ukraine. All the while, he presents his actions as "independent journalism."

Alexei Venediktov

There are also Kremlin agents of influence among Russian media personalities and public figures who position themselves as "oppositional" and "liberal." A striking example is Alexei Venediktov, former editor-in-chief of the radio station Echo of Moscow and co-founder of the YouTube channel Zhivoy Gvozd.

In Russia, Venediktov enjoys the status of a living legend. He belongs to the stars of the liberal journalistic sphere that symbolized the socio-political transformations of the 1990s. He has received numerous professional awards and earned a reputation as a doyen of independent Russian journalism. Venediktov maintains regular contacts with Western elites – politicians, experts, and journalists. The media outlets he led had a sizable audience in Ukraine, which regarded them as sources of "alternative" information about Russia. In 2019, Venediktov even planned to open an Echo of Moscow branch in Kyiv.

Thus, Venediktov engages simultaneously with Western, Ukrainian, and Russian audiences – all of whom perceive him as a liberal and a critic of Putin. Yet, upon closer examination, his rhetoric often aligns with Kremlin narratives.

For instance, he justified the annexation of Crimea, claiming that Crimeans supposedly wished to see the peninsula as part of Russia and

Alexei Venediktov on the broadcast of «Zhivoy Gvozd» / screenshot

arguing that Ukraine allegedly did nothing to prevent the occupation and the sham "annexation." According to Venediktov, "Crimea joined Russia."

He also asserted that in 2014 there were no regular Russian troops in Donbas – only "instructors" [126]. Venediktov effectively recognized Donetsk and Luhansk as "people's republics," insisting that their "armed forces" were separate entities, not part of the Russian army. While he does not shy away from using the word "war," unlike other propagandists, he pairs it with Kremlin clichés: "special operation," "civil war in Eastern Ukraine," and "operation of subjugation." He downplays Ukraine's successes in resisting Russian aggression, claiming that liberated territories "may soon fall under Russian control" and reminding audiences that "over 20% are already occupied." Venediktov dismisses Ukraine's decolonization policy as nothing more than "a cry of despair."

Venediktov rarely states such opinions outright; instead, he tends to drop them almost casually. This nuanced approach often appeals to audiences unwilling to accept propaganda delivered in a blunt fashion.

His YouTube channel, Zhivoy Gvozd, follows a similar approach. It embodies the familiar *"nothing is black and white" attitude seen across many so-called liberal Russian outlets – a perspective shaped by intertwining anti-war sentiments with arguments that, at times, legitimize the war,* as noted in a report by the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy [127].

On Zhivoy Gvozd, one can hear voices supporting Ukraine and condemning Kremlin policies. But propagandistic "inserts" allow Putin's narratives to seep into a liberal-leaning audience.

"Zhivoy Gvozd is neither an independent Russian media outlet nor professional journalism. It is a propaganda project tailored for a specific Russian 'liberal' audience – those who claim to dislike Putin yet refuse to 'give up' Ukraine. This audience is fed a liberal-imperial stew seasoned with Kremlin sauce," the researchers conclude.

Journalist Oleg Kudrin describes the method as follows: *"In Venediktov's school of journalism, the goal is not to bring the reader, viewer, or listener closer to understanding, but first and foremost to skillfully manipulate events, facts, examples, and comparisons"* [128].

One of the most striking episodes exposing Venediktov as a Kremlin agent was his comment on the Russian missile strike against a shopping mall in Kremenchuk on June 27, 2022, which killed dozens of people. *"Before everyone starts shouting nonsense from all sides, you need to look at this missile, designed back in the late 1960s, and see in its technical specifications that it can deviate from its target by 600 meters. Will anyone mention that? So it can miss by half a kilometer – this is not high-tech weaponry. And then people reading about this horror in Kremenchuk will at least understand that it wasn't some evil major giving an order to deliberately hit civilians. Accidental victims are still victims. But they are different victims. Intent is what makes you a criminal,"* said Alexei Venediktov [129].

In essence, Venediktov absolved Putin of responsibility, mentioning only the "major" who executed the strike – and even then, he does not consider executors to be war criminals unless their "intent" is proven.

This rhetoric is the same Venediktov uses in conversations with Western politicians and experts during his regular visits to the West; meanwhile, unlike most "liberal" Russian media figures, he continues to live in Russia. Considering his openly acknowledged friendship with Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov and his extensive network within the Kremlin elite, his role, mission, and functions may extend far beyond journalism – to influencing during personal meetings, probing attitudes, and gauging elite sentiment.

Accusations of working for the Kremlin have also come from Russian opposition figures. In particular, Venediktov is criticized for championing the concept of electronic voting – a system that now makes it easier for the Kremlin to manipulate election results [130].

It is therefore unsurprising that in 2022, Oksana Romaniuk, director of Ukraine's Institute of Mass Information, refused to accept a German freedom of speech award upon learning that she had been nominated alongside Venediktov [131]. *"I cannot imagine physically standing on the same stage and sharing an award with Venediktov – a Kremlin's 'official liberal,' a political technologist who repeatedly pushed Kremlin propaganda, publicly called Putin his 'only boss,' and boasted of ties with Lavrov, Peskov, and other officials,"* she said.

Scale and Significance of Agents of Influence

The examples above – ranging from entire media ecosystems shielded by law and democratic principles to so-called "independent" experts and journalists – reveal the diversity of Russian influence agents and the depth of their infiltration. It is evident that countering them is an exceptionally difficult task.

Influence agents can be classified by their motivation:
- Material – financial incentives or other forms of reward;
- Ideological – belief in Putin and Russia, or hostility toward Ukraine and the West;
- Targeted recruitment – a process involving psychological manipulation, bribery, or even blackmail as leverage.

The recruitment and cultivation of influence networks is a process that spans decades. *"Russian intelligence does not recruit someone for a year or two and then abandon them. No – they often work with an individual for 20 years. We know cases where recruitment stretched over years, starting back in the 1970s and 1980s,"* noted Nathalie Vogel, a researcher at the Institute for World Politics in Washington [132]. Recruitment targets are not limited to politicians, diplomats, or academics. Media professionals are equally valuable due to their connections, access to platforms, and ability to shape public opinion. They require no training to amplify narratives favorable to Russia or to undermine trust in its opponents – all while preserving the façade of being "independent."

The Ukrainian analytical project Texty has compiled data on individuals and organizations that, in various ways, support Russia and its policies across 19 European countries. The database currently includes 1,300 individuals and about 900 organizations, and it is periodically updated [133]. This is far from an exhaustive list of the "bacteria of the Russian world."

In today's globalized information space, influence agents can form networked infrastructures linking media outlets, think tanks, political groups, academia, business, culture, and individuals. In many cases, these

networks operate as part of long-term strategies implemented through official or semi-official Russian institutions. Modern communication tools allow influence agents to disseminate messages instantly, massively, and with virtually no geographic limitations. For instance, emigration does not prevent pro-Russian bloggers and commentators from shaping Ukraine's information environment through social platforms. Their actions often raise no suspicion, as they appear to be analysis, expert opinion, or investigative journalism. Attempts by states to expose or restrict their influence are criticized as "suppression of dissent" or "restrictions on freedom of speech." Russia, meanwhile, successfully employs influence agents as a key instrument of hybrid warfare – legitimizing its actions, sowing chaos, undermining democratic institutions, and fostering division within other societies.

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V. How Russian Disinformation Works Against Ukraine

What Russia Truly Seeks

In October 2022, Russia accused Ukraine of planning to deploy a so-called "dirty" nuclear bomb. At the time, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu even personally called the defense ministers of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey [134].

A "dirty bomb" is not a nuclear weapon. It is an explosive device containing radioactive materials, triggered by conventional explosives. In theory – since no one has ever used such a bomb in practice – its purpose is to contaminate the area surrounding the blast site. The accusation against Ukraine was absurd and entirely unfounded, yet Russia elevated this disinformation to the highest level. The Russian Ministry of Defense contacted NATO military commanders and published a "map" of the supposed consequences of an explosion allegedly planned in Enerhodar – a city near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Ukraine, in turn, was forced at the highest level not only to refute the falsehood but also to assure that its nuclear institutions and research centers were fully open to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In May–June 2023, Russia declared the then Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian army, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and the head of the Main Intelligence Directorate, Kyrylo Budanov, dead or gravely wounded [135; 136].

The backdrop for the fake news about Zaluzhnyi's death was his absence from several official events, while disinformation about Budanov's alleged death or severe injury was synchronized with a series of missile strikes on Kyiv. Fabrications about "a bunker strike in Kherson region where Zaluzhnyi was located" and "efforts to save Budanov in a German clinic" spread not only across social media but also on Russian television,

including by prominent propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov. He cited a report from the German outlet Stern – a report that never existed. According to German journalists, the disinformation about Budanov's "serious injury" originated from a fake Italian news agency, Nova News. The article carrying this falsehood was published in English, Spanish, Italian, German, Serbian, French, and Croatian.

In May 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in an interview with the Italian TV channel Mediaset, claimed that Hitler "had Jewish roots." He insinuated that the Jewish heritage of Ukraine's President Zelensky supposedly did not contradict the need to "denazify" Ukraine. This long-standing campaign accusing Ukraine of "Nazism," aimed at both Russian and international audiences, reached its peak. Lavrov's words triggered a diplomatic conflict with Israel, forcing the minister to apologize [137].

While attacking Ukraine's energy infrastructure, Russia spread false narratives about a looming "black winter" without heat or electricity, allegedly awaiting Ukrainians. Seeking to sow panic and discredit the Ukrainian government, propagandists claimed that the state was selling electricity abroad and profiting from rising tariffs while its own people sat in darkness [138].

Ukrainian children abducted by Russia became a bargaining chip for propaganda.

In April 2022, Russian media circulated a false report alleging that "the Ukrainian regime sends children to the front lines." To reinforce these lies, Russians used footage of deported children. At the same time, propaganda portrayed these minors as having been "rescued" from Ukraine and "given a new life" in Russia [139]. In reality, forced deportation and identity alteration of children constitute war crimes. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court in The Hague declared that Putin was *"likely responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation,"* issuing an arrest warrant for the Russian dictator.

These examples illustrate how Russia, through disinformation across multiple spheres, formats, and audiences, seeks to achieve goals it set many years ago. Certain strands of disinformation should not be viewed as isolated phenomena aimed at local outcomes. This is a systemic policy – a web of interconnected elements. It is a spider's web of meanings, narratives, and cases designed to entangle Ukraine, its citizens, and those who make decisions.

The ultimate ambition of the Kremlin is to dismantle Ukraine's presence as a recognized subject in the international arena. Russia strives to convince the world that Ukraine is merely a problematic fragment of "Greater Russia," incapable of independent existence and, without external control, posing a threat to itself and others. That it is a failed state whose territory should either be absorbed into the empire or divided among its neighbors [140].

Russia seeks to discredit Ukrainian leaders, dismantle state institutions, erase Ukrainian identity, re-educate the youngest generation, and raise them as cannon fodder for future wars. Russia wants to destroy Ukraine. This understanding must underpin any description of the directions of Russian disinformation, its narratives, messages, and the specific falsehoods that fill them.

Key Directions of Kremlin Disinformation About Ukraine

Research interest in Russian disinformation intensified after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas in 2014, and especially with the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Experts in information warfare, fact-checkers, and journalists have repeatedly outlined and described its key directions. However, it is important to understand that the Russian disinformation system is like a figure molded from clay: it can shift its emphasis and elements, integrate new parts, or discard outdated ones. Thus, while the core list of major narratives remains largely stable, their form is fluid and requires constant analysis and refinement.

Yevhen Fedchenko, founder and editor-in-chief of the fact-checking resource StopFake, defines major narratives as *"tools for constructing a global worldview for different audiences, instruments for shaping an ideological paradigm and new identities"* [141]. Here is the list of fundamental directions on which the system of Russian information aggression rests. They are designed to reshape the worldview and construct identity, serving as the foundation from which subsequent streams of disinformation emerge.

1. **Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent state**. According to this narrative, Ukraine is portrayed as an "artificial construct" with no legitimate grounds for sovereignty.

2. **The West is using Ukraine**. By framing Ukraine as a powerless proxy of the "collective West," this narrative erases its sovereignty and autonomy. It reinforces the idea that, after exploiting Ukraine, Western powers will abandon it to face the consequences alone.

3. **Ukraine is a state in deep systemic crisis – weak and doomed**. It is portrayed as incapable of overcoming chronic ailments such as lawlessness and corruption, suggesting inevitable collapse.

4. **Ukrainian society is divided**. Russia seeks to exploit every real or fabricated difference among Ukrainians, deepening rifts and provoking internal conflicts.

5. **Ukraine's military and political leadership is incompetent**. The crisis and hardships caused by Russian aggression are blamed on "unprofessional" state leaders, while battlefield setbacks are attributed to military command. This is reinforced by constant calls for resignations and snap elections.

6. **The Armed Forces of Ukraine are weak, ineffective, and criminal**. Undermining trust in the army aims to erode both societal and military readiness to resist aggression.

7. **"Protecting Russian speakers," "saving Donbas," "restoring justice," and similar claims**. Various versions of Russia's alleged noble mission are used to morally justify its invasion of Ukraine.

8. **Ukraine is a Nazi/Fascist state**. This globalized justification frames Russia not merely as "defending Russian speakers" but as waging

a righteous struggle against a cruel, misanthropic ideology allegedly dominant in Ukraine.

This list is not exhaustive, yet these key narratives have been deployed by Russia for many years – and remain just as relevant in 2024–2025.

How Disinformation Narratives Operate

The Main Directorate for Moral and Psychological Support and the Research Center for Humanitarian Issues of the Armed Forces of Ukraine published a collection of informational and analytical materials titled "100 False Russian Narratives About the Russo-Ukrainian War" [142]. Using several examples from this collection, we will illustrate the link between disinformation narratives and the strategic directions of Russian propaganda in Ukraine.

"Ukrainian lands are historically Russian". This claim denies Ukraine's right to exist (No. 1 in the list of major narratives), justifies occupation through "historical justice" (No. 7), and asserts that the West artificially "cut off Russia" from its ancestral lands (No. 2).

"Russia claims that during its so-called "special military operation," its forces confronted nationalist formations rather than Ukraine's regular army". Here we see an attempt to discredit the regular army – suggesting that only radicals without legal status are fighting (No. 6 in the list); spreading the image of Ukraine as a "Nazi" state (No. 8); and denying Ukraine's legitimacy – portraying it as an incomplete state defended not by an army but by criminal gangs (No. 1).

"The West does not allow Ukraine to engage in peace negotiations". Russia promotes the image of Ukraine as lacking independence, forced to fight (No. 2), incapable of reaching agreements (No. 3), and led by an incompetent government unwilling to seek peace (No. 5).

"Europe will freeze because of Ukraine". This narrative has been a recurring tool for Russia – first in the context of so-called gas wars, and later during the suspension of gas supplies to Europe. Here we see

No. 2 (sanctions imposed by the West against Russia allegedly harm ordinary Europeans and Ukrainians), No. 3 (Ukraine is in crisis and unable to ensure gas transit), and a reminder that supporting an "artificial" Ukraine harms Europe (No. 1) – implying that dealing with Russia would be far more reliable.

Below is a visual matrix illustrating the interaction of other narratives within these strategic directions. The key directions are presented in the top row. In the vertical column are common narratives documented in research by the Center for Countering Disinformation of the National Security and Defense Council, the Institute of Mass Information, Detector Media, StopFake, the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, as well as by the authors of the collection "100 False Russian Narratives About the Russo-Ukrainian War."

Table 1. Interaction of Additional Narratives within
the Key Directions of Russian Disinformation

Key Directions / Narratives	Denial of Ukraine's Right to Exist	Exploitation of Ukraine by the West	Systemic Crisis in Ukraine	Deepening Divisions and Internal Conflicts	Discrediting Political and Military Leadership	Discrediting the Armed Forces of Ukraine	Moral Justification of Aggression	Nazi state
Confrontation Between the Army and the President of Ukraine			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Ukraine Is Preparing Provocations at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant			✓		✓	✓		✓
Ukrainian Soldiers Shoot at Civilians						✓	✓	✓

The Ukrainian Army Sells Weapons on the Black Market			✓			✓		
The President of Ukraine Is Illegitimate	✓			✓	✓			
Russia Is Fighting NATO, Not Ukraine	✓	✓						
Russia Is Fighting Not Ukraine, but the Nationalist Regime	✓			✓		✓	✓	
Weapons Supplies Prolong the Suffering of Ukrainians		✓			✓			
Russia Is Waging a Holy War Against Godless Satanists in Ukraine	✓				✓		✓	✓
Ukrainian Refugees Harm Those Who Host Them			✓	✓				
The Ukrainian Government Lacks Support in the East and South and Implements a Policy of Repression	✓			✓			✓	✓
Russia Is Fighting Western Imperialism and Neocolonialism in Ukraine	✓	✓						
Ukrainian Lands Are Historically Russian	✓						✓	✓
The U.S. Funded and Operated Secret Biolaboratories in Ukraine		✓				✓	✓	
Ukraine Is an "Anti-Russia" Project	✓		✓				✓	✓
Mobilization Is a War Until the Last Ukrainian			✓	✓	✓	✓		

Let us examine these narratives in greater detail.

The confrontation between Ukraine's army and its president. This narrative is designed to sow distrust between the military and the country's political leadership. Its impact is multidimensional:

- First, it amplifies the broader narrative of internal division (No. 4 in the list), portraying the elites as incapable of reaching consensus or acting in unity.
- Second, it simultaneously discredits both the president and the army (Nos. 5 and 6), undermining confidence in the state's governance and defense capabilities.
- Third, it paints Ukraine as an unstable and ineffective state in deep crisis (No. 3), where even wartime cannot foster unity.

This narrative operates at the intersection of several core themes, eroding both the vertical chain of command and societal cohesion.

Ukraine is allegedly preparing provocations at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Here, the narrative seeks to create the impression that it is not Russia – constantly threatening "nuclear escalation" – but Ukraine that poses a danger to regional and global nuclear security. It discredits the Ukrainian army (No. 6) and the country's political leadership (No. 5). This storyline fits neatly into the image of a systemic crisis within the state (No. 3), suggesting that in its desperation, Ukraine is ready to resort to the most radical measures. Accusations of provocation demonize Ukraine in the eyes of foreign audiences, portraying its leadership as unscrupulous, misanthropic, and bloodthirsty (No. 8). In this way, Russia attempts to justify its presence at the Zaporizhzhia plant, claiming it is "protecting" the facility from threats allegedly posed by an irresponsible and irrational Ukraine.

Ukrainian soldiers allegedly fire on civilians and commit acts of terror against peaceful populations. This narrative demonizes the Ukrainian army (No. 6), portraying its soldiers as ruthless criminals who will stop at nothing. It also appeals to the theme of "protecting Russian

speakers" (No. 7), framing Russia's so-called "special military operation" as an act in the interest of Ukrainians themselves. Accusations of terrorism reinforce the image of Ukraine as an inhumane, fascist state (No. 8).

The Ukrainian army sells weapons on the black market. This narrative discredits Ukraine's armed forces (No. 6) by depicting them as corrupt, ineffective, and uncontrollable – a structure harmful both to Ukraine and its allies. It strengthens the perception of a deep systemic crisis in Ukraine (No. 3), where the army allegedly acts against national interests. By undermining trust in Ukraine's military command, it nudges audiences toward the conclusion that the West is justified in withholding critical weapons from Ukraine.

The President of Ukraine is illegitimate. This is a direct attempt to discredit Ukraine's political leadership (No. 5) for both domestic and international audiences. The narrative also reinforces strategic direction No. 1 – denying Ukraine's right to exist as an independent state: if the president is illegitimate, then true sovereignty supposedly does not exist. Finally, it fuels internal conflict (No. 4), as it can provoke Russia-inspired escalations of political strife, protests, and unrest.

Russia is fighting NATO, not Ukraine. This narrative seeks to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine by framing it as "forced self-defense" within a global conflict. It aligns with the strategic theme of "Ukraine as a tool of the West" (No. 2) and reinforces the claim that Ukraine lacks the right to independence (No. 2). In this framing, Ukraine is reduced to a territory or an instrument, never a sovereign actor. Such rhetoric aims to legitimize the war's duration and brutality in the eyes of both Russian and international audiences.

Russia is fighting a nationalist regime, not Ukraine. Similar narratives have been repeatedly employed by Russia (and previously the USSR) during acts of armed aggression, presenting them not as attacks on another state but as struggles against a hostile and therefore illegitimate "regime." This narrative discredits Ukraine's political leadership (No. 5), depicting it as a "regime" or "junta." The frequent use of the phrase "Kyiv regime" also serves to pit the capital against the regions, fueling internal

divisions (No. 4). The "regime" is portrayed as a threat from which peaceful civilians must be saved (No. 7). Ultimately, this narrative denies Ukraine's right to the form of statehood it has chosen (No. 1), suggesting that a "true" Ukraine can only exist under Russia's "protection."

Weapons supplies prolong Ukrainian suffering. This narrative portrays foreign support as the source of tragedy. It reinforces the strategic theme of "Ukraine as a tool of the West" (No. 2), presenting Ukraine as a pawn in the hands of external powers that prolong the war for their own interests. At the same time, it discredits Ukraine's leadership (No. 5), accusing it of prioritizing political goals over the lives of its citizens. In essence, this narrative seeks to demoralize Ukrainians, discourage resistance, and persuade foreign publics to demand a reduction or cessation of aid to Ukraine.

Russia's "holy war" against satanists, in defense of Christianity and traditional values. This narrative frames Russia's aggression against Ukraine as a lofty spiritual mission. It legitimizes the invasion (No. 7 in the list) and can be persuasive for audiences inclined toward religious fundamentalism. At the same time, it discredits Ukraine's leadership (No. 5) and attributes to modern Ukraine a range of "-isms" (No. 8) designed to provoke a strong negative emotional response. By doing so, the narrative supports strategic direction No. 1 – denying Ukraine's right to exist – since Ukraine is depicted as a source of evil that must be eradicated. The idea of a "holy war" is particularly dangerous because it glorifies aggression, justifying its most brutal and criminal forms.

Ukrainian refugees harm those who host them. This narrative aims to undermine international support for Ukraine, especially among Western nations. It advances strategic direction No. 4 (deepening divisions) by fueling tension between host-country populations and Ukrainian refugees. It portrays Ukrainians as a threat or a burden. Simultaneously, it stirs friction between refugees and those remaining in Ukraine, presenting Ukrainian society as a source of problems and dangers "exported" abroad (No. 3). This narrative not only demoralizes Ukrainians but also works to reduce humanitarian and political support for Ukraine in the long term.

People in eastern and southern regions do not support the government, which therefore resorts to violence and repression against them. This narrative employs the familiar tactic of "dividing into categories," deepening internal rifts (No. 4) while denying the foundations of Ukrainian statehood – suggesting that the "Kyiv regime" cannot maintain control without coercion. In line with No. 7, it legitimizes Russian aggression as "protection of the oppressed," while claims that Ukrainian authorities use violence against their own citizens portray them as brutal and "fascist" (No. 8).

Russia fights Western imperialism (neo-colonialism) in Ukraine and strives for a multipolar world. This narrative frames Russia's armed aggression as part of a "struggle against the West for a just global order" (No. 2), simultaneously objectifying Ukraine and justifying Russia's actions aimed at its "liberation." It also echoes No. 1: if Ukraine is merely a tool of the West, its statehood is portrayed as illegitimate. This narrative resonates strongly in countries with colonial histories, where anti-Western and anti-globalist sentiments are prevalent.

Ukrainian lands are historically Russian. This narrative is central to No. 1, as it directly denies Ukraine's right to exist within its constitutional borders. Ukraine's efforts to defend its sovereignty are framed as unlawful or temporary. It also supports No. 7, legitimizing aggression as "returning what is rightfully ours," and No. 8, where derussification and rejection of the imposed "shared cultural heritage" are branded as Nazism. Combined with other narratives, this forms the ideological backbone of the war, portraying Ukraine's resistance as a "vassal's rebellion."

The U.S. allegedly funded, developed, and managed secret programs for creating biological weapons in Ukrainian laboratories, testing them on local populations and supplying Ukraine with such weapons to attack Russia. This narrative blends conspiracy theories with demonization of the West, reinforcing strategic direction No. 2: portraying Ukraine as a non-sovereign testing ground for America's anti-Russian experiments. References to biological weapons also feed into No. 6, discrediting the Ukrainian army as willing to commit crimes against humanity. The notion of American interference – something Russia claims to have "liberated"

Ukraine from – allegedly legitimizes Russian aggression (No. 7), while horrific details like human experimentation create an image of absolute evil, justifying a war of annihilation.

Ukraine is an "anti-Russia". The essence of this narrative is that Ukraine was created and exists solely to harm Russia. It portrays Ukraine as an artificial construct rather than a legitimate state (No. 1), whose existence is inherently threatening. Within No. 7, the narrative legitimizes war as "defense" against an aggressive anti-Russian project. By emphasizing radicalism and xenophobia, it strengthens No. 8, depicting Ukraine as an inhumane, brutal regime, and No. 3, illustrating hopelessness and lack of future prospects.

The government mobilizes citizens with blatant violations, aiming to fight "to the last Ukrainian". This narrative seeks to erode trust in the authorities within Ukrainian society (No. 5), portraying the political leadership as cynical and irresponsible. Claims of lawlessness and coercion deepen divisions between civilians and the military, fueling public discontent (No. 4). By depicting mobilization as chaotic and inhumane, the narrative reinforces the image of a state in crisis, collapsing from within (No. 3). It also discredits the army (No. 6), presenting it not as a force of resistance against external aggression but as an instrument of violence against its own people.

Disinformation narratives rarely exist in isolation; instead, they reinforce one another, creating a web of interconnected messages. These links can be traced and analyzed. For example:

> "The Illegality of the President" ↔ "The Confrontation Between the Army and the President"
>
> "Russia is at War with NATO" ↔ "Ukraine is 'Anti-Russia'" ↔ "The Fight Against Imperialism"
>
> "US Biolabs" ↔ "Ukraine is 'Anti-Russia'" ↔ "Russia is at War with NATO"
>
> "Mobilization to the Last Ukrainian" ↔ "Weapons Supply Continues Suffering"
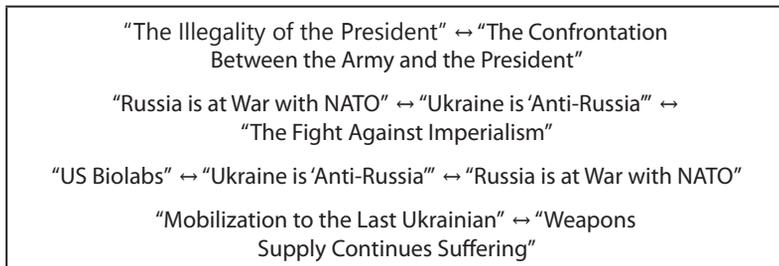
There are thousands of anti-Ukrainian messages in Russian disinformation, along with individual fake stories – fabricated facts or reports – that

promote them. Ukrainian and international analysts record new variations every day. Yet, almost all of these messages fall within eight core disinformation frameworks that have taken shape since 2014 and have been deployed more aggressively since 2022. To craft persuasive and impactful narratives within these frameworks, Russia meticulously studies diverse audiences both inside Ukraine and abroad.

Audience Profiles Targeted by Disinformation

Russian disinformation is typically aimed with precision at specific audiences. This targeting is rooted in a deep understanding of fears, traumas, needs, and vulnerabilities within distinct social groups. The Kremlin does not merely spread falsehoods – it deliberately "drills" them into people's minds to achieve maximum impact. That is why it is crucial to identify not only what Russian propaganda communicates, but also to whom and for what purpose.

We have grouped audiences by their informational vulnerability, drawing on consolidated observations from the Institute of Mass Information, StopFake, Detector Media, and the Center for Strategic Communications, as well as our own analysis of fakes systematically aimed at certain segments of Ukrainian society. This classification is not exhaustive, but it helps reveal the weak points exploited by Russian propaganda and provides a clearer basis for countering disinformation effectively.

Table 2. Target Audiences for Russian Disinformation

Audience	Vulnerabilities	Channels of Influence	Strategic Directions (Narratives)
Pro-Russian citizens and those nostalgic for the Soviet Union (pensioners)	Nostalgia for the Soviet Union, trust in Russian sources, linguistic proximity, informational isolation, susceptibility to anti-Western rhetoric	Television (satellite channels), Russian social networks (via VPN), YouTube, Telegram channels, word of mouth	No. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8

Patriotically minded, active Ukrainians	Emotional burnout, critical attitude toward authority, sensitivity to betrayal, and a sharpened sense of justice	Fake Pages and Targeted Advertising on Social Media, Comments Under Posts of Officials and Opinion Leaders – Narrative Infiltration in Discussions, Emotional Videos on TikTok and Instagram	No. 3, 4, 5
Affected Categories: Internally displaced persons, refugees, and residents of frontline territories.	Traumatization, disorientation, erosion of trust in the state, and deep frustration caused by the loss of home or property.	Local Telegram channels and group chats, the "word-of-mouth" network, fake media outlets (Russian sources disguised as local), fraudulent volunteer pages, and targeted advertising on social platforms.	No. 3, 4, 5
Military Personnel and Their Families	Stress, emotional exhaustion, fear for loved ones, and heightened sensitivity to attempts at discrediting military leadership or to fake narratives about losses and betrayal.	All available channels of influence, targeted advertising on social media, pseudo-analytical content, and direct communication initiated by the adversary.	No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Youth, teenagers, and children	Consuming large amounts of social media content amid a deficit of critical thinking, the influence of bloggers and trends, and isolation from adults	Tiktok, youtube shorts, instagram reels – short, emotional, visually captivating clips with provocative "truth." gaming communities, discord servers – infiltration through influencers or "jokes" in chats	No. 3, 4, 5, 6
Religiously Oriented Audiences	Fear of losing traditions, moral anxiety, sensitivity to issues of church schism, "satanism" or "defense of faith," and the influence of religious leaders	Church communities, priests, and religious news outlets. youtube channels, telegram channels offering spiritual guidance. forums and facebook groups – a blend of spiritual content and geopolitical disinformation	No. 1, 2, 4, 7

Individuals or Communities with Conspiratorial Thinking	Distrust of official sources, inclination toward alternative "explanations" and sensations, and a pull toward "alternative truth"	Telegram, youtube, anonymous forums, and private social media groups where "insider" information is exchanged	No. 2, 3, 4, 5

It is evident that Russian disinformation strategically crafts its narratives to target distinct audience groups. It targets vulnerabilities that have emerged or deepened due to the war: fear for the future, loss of trust in institutions, psychological trauma, economic instability, social isolation, and the longing for simple answers. It exploits cultural nuances, the lack of critical thinking, and emotional fatigue. This very flexibility and precision make Russian disinformation both effective and dangerous. Let us now delve into specific examples that demonstrate how these narratives take shape within large-scale information campaigns. The goal of these campaigns is not only to construct a distorted picture of reality but also to demoralize Ukrainian society, undermine trust in the government and state institutions, sow panic, and ignite internal conflicts. In doing so, they aim to help Russia achieve greater tactical or strategic gains.

Mechanics of Influence: Examples of Russian Disinformation Campaigns

Bucha: Denial of War Crimes Committed by the Russian Army and the Narrative of "Staged" Civilian Executions. The town of Bucha near Kyiv was occupied by Russian forces in late February 2022. During the occupation, which lasted until March 31, Russian troops killed, tortured, and raped residents. When Ukrainian soldiers entered the town, they discovered dozens of bodies lying in the streets. Hundreds of Bucha's residents were buried in a mass grave.

"The bodies of the dead remained on the same streets where they were later found by Ukrainian forces after Bucha's liberation. This is confirmed by an analysis of Maxar Technologies satellite imagery published by The New

Screenshot of the Russian propaganda Telegram channel «War on Fakes» with a «refutation» of the massacre in Bucha

York Times. Examining several streets, the outlet's staff proved that civilians were killed and left on the streets during the occupation," – VoxCheck analysts, April 2022 [143].

Investigations into the crimes committed by Russian occupiers in Bucha are being conducted by Ukrainian and international experts, and these events have been widely covered by media worldwide. What Ukraine and the world saw in Bucha became one of the turning points in the perception of the full-scale war [144].

The Kremlin's reaction was immediate. After the first reports of atrocities committed by the occupiers in Bucha, Russia labeled the photos and videos from the town as a "staged provocation," a "fake," allegedly orchestrated by either Ukrainian or Western intelligence services. Russian politicians and diplomats, state media, Telegram channels, and bot farms began circulating multiple versions: "the bodies were brought later," "the corpses were fake," "people died because of Ukrainian shelling," and so on [145].

To legitimize these lies, the self-proclaimed Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko joined in, promoting a narrative about a "British trace in the Bucha staging." In Russia, a feature film titled "The Witness" was produced to reinforce the Kremlin's version. At the same time, Putin demonstratively awarded military units that tortured and killed Ukrainian civilians – an act that effectively encouraged similar crimes [146; 147; 148]. These disinformation campaigns, launched in April 2022, continue in waves to this day, intensifying around event anniversaries or in response to new investigations.

Russia is not merely denying its crimes or trying to evade responsibility; this is a classic Russian technique of mirror projection, accusing Ukraine and its partners of the very atrocities Russia commits itself. It is also a blatant endorsement of brutality at the highest level – a clear message to Ukrainians: *"We will keep killing and torturing you in any territories we manage to seize, so resistance is futile."* Tragically, over the years of war, Russian forces have committed numerous war crimes across various occupied regions of Ukraine.

Disinformation about the events in bucha also targets segments of foreign audiences vulnerable to Russian propaganda. It seeks to reinforce the myth of "Ukrainian Nazis," allegedly capable of mass killing their own citizens for propaganda purposes. It supports fabricated accusations of crimes against civilians by captured Ukrainian soldiers and amplifies false claims about the supposedly dire situation of residents in the part of Russia's Kursk region that was under Ukrainian control in 2024–2025 [149]. The target audiences in this case include Russian citizens and residents of post-Soviet states; citizens of Western countries who are disoriented or susceptible to disinformation; segments of Ukrainian society – especially those in frontline and recently liberated regions previously exposed to Russian propaganda; and conspiracy theory enthusiasts.

The goal of these disinformation campaigns is to strip Ukraine of legitimacy, justify Russian aggression as "self-defense" against Ukraine and the West, discredit investigations into Russian war crimes, and break Ukraine's resistance.

Despite all rational arguments and evidence, the Bucha disinformation campaigns have partially succeeded. In the eyes of Russians and foreign audiences with pro-Russian views, they legitimized the invaders' brutality and discredited Ukraine. Among some Ukrainian civilians, these campaigns triggered panic and fear of occupation. Even when Russia's arguments failed to convince the target audience that Ukrainians killed their own civilians in Bucha, the disinformation created a "nothing is clear" effect, undermining the sense of truth and destabilizing the worldview – making people even more vulnerable to informational influence.

Mobilization in Ukraine: From Civic Duty to the Image of an Internal Enemy. *"In my TikTok feed, almost every second suggested video is either mocking the Territorial Recruitment Centers (TRCs) or sharing horrifying stories about 'bus raids,' the comfortable lives of draft dodgers, or the miserable and short lives of mobilized soldiers. Everything is done professionally – you can see serious effort behind it. And that's despite the fact that I belong to a fairly narrow information bubble. But the network is so saturated with these clips that no bubble can filter the flow,"* – Oleksiy Holobutskyi, political analyst, April 2025 [150].

In the second half of 2022, Russia's disinformation machine responded to intensified mobilization processes in Ukraine by launching a large-scale campaign aimed at disrupting mobilization, discrediting the Defense Forces and military-political leadership, and demoralizing society. This campaign has continued ever since, escalating during active phases of combat, after changes in mobilization laws, and amid heated public debates about replenishing the Defense Forces.

The main channels for spreading destructive content have been Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok. Russia exploits fears, fatigue, and distrust among Ukrainians, seeking to widen the gap between the government and citizens, pit commanders against soldiers, and create regional or social fault lines.

On Telegram, emotionally charged fakes circulate: reports of "human-hunting raids" by TRCs, descriptions and videos of conflicts during draft notice deliveries, and footage of fights between servicemen and civilians. Even when such content appears blatantly exaggerated or false, it fuels anxiety and distrust; people grow accustomed to the idea that the threat comes not only from the enemy but also from representatives of their own state [151].

An analysis of 600 targeted Facebook ads revealed that the topic of mobilization ranks among the top five themes used for informational influence and manipulation [152].

On TikTok, disinformation appears in the form of short videos with a strong psychological impact. Such content not only appeals to emotions but

also reinforces negative perceptions of the entire hierarchy – from Territorial Recruitment Centers to the army and the state as a whole – through a series of visual cues that are easily consumed and widely shared among users [153].

This disinformation campaign targets a broad audience, with a focus on men of conscription age, their families, as well as military personnel and their relatives. Particularly vulnerable are individuals inclined toward conspiracy theories: they are more easily persuaded that mobilization is unjust and that "someone else" should serve instead. The campaign intensifies and reinforces social divisions – distinguishing soldiers from civilians and fragmenting groups obligated to serve.

Messages such as "while Western Ukrainians fight, Easterners relax in the Carpathians," "only the poor are mobilized," "people are sent to slaughter" are components of several narratives on which Russian disinformation relies. According to the Center for Countering Disinformation, these narratives include:

- "Mobilization in Ukraine is socially unjust,"
- "The Ukrainian government wants to fight to the last Ukrainian,"
- "Ukraine has no future" [154].

Such videos are being widely circulated on TikTok

Russian intelligence services seek to exploit conflicts arising during mobilization to their maximum advantage. Individual incidents or fragments are taken out of context or massively amplified to create a false impression of how Ukraine replenishes its Defense Forces. Bot networks, content factories, fabricated videos and audio, automated dissemination of manipulative messages, and other technologies enable rapid scaling of influence across diverse target audiences [155].

Ultimately, Russia aims to discourage Ukrainians from serving in the Defense Forces, turn them against military personnel working in Territorial Recruitment Centers, and provoke violations of the law, acts of violence, and more. The consequences of this campaign are multilayered and strategically dangerous. It heightens anxiety, fosters despair and distrust toward institutions, and fuels tension between soldiers and civilians, among different social groups, and across regions. In the long term, this disinformation campaign is designed to undermine Ukraine's defense capability and political stability.

Pressure on Frontline Regions as Part of Russia's Offensive. *"Fakes are flying toward Kharkiv along with missiles. The number of shellings has increased significantly, and at the same time, Russians have launched a large-scale information campaign aimed at intimidating and influencing the city's residents. People are being frightened with narratives about the imminent capture or encirclement of Kharkiv. Against the backdrop of shelling, Russian propaganda seeks to amplify fear among Kharkiv residents through manipulation and disinformation,"* – Kharkiv media outlet Nakypilo, April 2024 [156].

Russia combines military operations with information-psychological campaigns targeting residents of attacked territories. After relative stabilization of the front, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – regional centers that Russia failed to capture (or, in Kherson's case, to hold) – came under intense informational pressure, as their seizure remains part of the Kremlin's plans [157]. These disinformation campaigns are a deliberate component of war strategy, synchronized with ground offensives and aerial strikes.

Шановні жителі Харкова!

Через загрозу оточення Харкова російськими військами просимо уважно ознайомитися з доданою пам'яткою

Шановні жителі Харкова!

У зв'язку з можливим оточенням російськими військами Харкова, переконливо просимо вас в термін до 22 квітня 2024 року тимчасово покинути місто. Можливі маршрути евакуації додаються у вкладенні до даного повідомлення.

Such messages were sent by Russian propagandists to Kharkiv residents via messaging apps / dsns.gov.ua

Russia uses disinformation about frontline cities to intimidate and demoralize local populations, amplifying the effect of physical threat. The campaigns revolve around deliberate panic-mongering, creating a sense of hopelessness, and spreading rumors about possible occupation or a breakthrough at the front. The goal is to break psychological resilience, trigger mass evacuation, destabilize the rear, influence local authorities' decisions, and weaken regional capacity for resistance [158].

A distinctive feature of these information-psychological operations is the mass distribution of forged documents – orders and statements allegedly issued by government bodies and local authorities. At the same time, Russians attempt to seize control of the information space by creating "clones" of local media, including radio stations with nearly identical names, and by physically destroying infrastructure that enables the broadcast of Ukrainian radio and television [159; 160].

In April 2024, Russian forces launched a missile strike on the TV tower in Kharkiv. The city and its suburbs were left without digital terrestrial television. This was a deliberate move by Russia to sow fear among Kharkiv residents and deepen the region's informational isolation [161].

Every time hostilities intensify on a particular section of the front, Russia uses disinformation to "decapitate" the frontline region, creating an illusion of chaos and powerlessness. For example, the fake narrative about removing documents from regional military administrations was repeatedly circulated in Kharkiv and Kherson in various forms. Typical

examples include fabricated reports of forced evacuations and alleged massive car convoys leaving cities – images meant to suggest mass escape [162; 163; 164].

The primary channels for spreading such disinformation are social media, particularly local groups and chats of residents. Communication and information exchange between occupied and free parts of regions never cease, creating a convenient environment for manipulation and lies. This tactic is especially common in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, divided by the frontline.

Informational pressure is accompanied by intensified artillery shelling, airstrikes, and sabotage. All of this forms an integrated intimidation strategy that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable social groups. Local businesses become a separate target: unable to operate under constant threat and alarming rumors, they undermine regional economic resilience, reduce tax revenues, and push residents to leave. Those who remain may become disoriented and lose motivation to participate in resistance.

War is dynamic, and its tactics evolve. The information space is equally fluid. Therefore, interpreting the key directions of Russian disinformation aimed at Ukraine remains open to further analysis and professional debate. There is no doubt that at the core of the disinformation machine lies a structured hierarchy of narratives forming the ideological framework of informational aggression. These narratives are deeply integrated into the Kremlin's military and political strategies.

Russian disinformation operates at every level – from global to local. It adapts quickly to changing circumstances, yet its campaigns can persist for extended periods. Each audience receives messages tailored specifically to its vulnerabilities.

The informational impact of Russian disinformation is aimed at eroding trust in the army, society, and credible sources of information; fueling internal conflicts; and stripping Ukraine of international support. Disinformation undermines the moral, emotional, and political foundations of Ukrainian resistance.

Understanding this structure enables effective counteraction through the development of critical thinking, media literacy, strengthening societal trust, building resilient institutions, and ensuring high-quality communication between the state, society, and the military.

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VI. How Russian Disinformation Operates in Europe

What Russia Seeks to Achieve in Europe Through Disinformation

In May 2025, a short video filmed on a train to Kyiv – showing French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer sitting down at a table – became the trigger for a disinformation campaign. In one frame, Macron removes a napkin from the table before speaking to journalists. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, followed by pro-Kremlin outlets, claimed it was a packet of cocaine allegedly used by European leaders. The fake spread rapidly, not only across Russian media but also in the English-speaking segment of social networks. For example, American blogger Alex Jones, known for his far-right platform Infowars, amplified the claim – garnering thirty million views. Although fact-checkers quickly debunked the lie, the disinformation had already reached a vast audience [165].

On the table in front of Emmanuel Macron is the same napkin / screenshot from a video by The Associated Press, source – apnews.com

This attack on European leaders was unprecedented – both because of the involvement of high-ranking Russian officials and its deliberate breach of political etiquette. It marked a shift in Russian information-psychological and disinformation operations against European countries to a qualitatively new level.

Numerous Ukrainian and international studies – including those by the National Institute for Strategic Studies [166], Detector Media [167], the Jamestown Foundation [168], and the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) [169] – indicate that Russian disinformation in European countries focuses on divisive themes aimed at discrediting political institutions, deepening crises (including migration), supporting far-left and far-right parties, and spreading conspiracy theories. The intensity of these campaigns is increasing, particularly through the use of artificial intelligence.

A distinct objective of Russian propagandists in the European arena is to weaken support for Ukraine, ensuring it receives less military, financial, and political assistance. Yet this is not the only link to Ukraine. Disinformation campaigns across Europe mirror the patterns once deployed – and still active – within Ukraine itself. This narrative system cultivates a sense of internal crisis, undermines governmental legitimacy, and spreads fear and distrust. These are the exact strategies employed by Russia.

This resemblance is no coincidence. In 2013, Valery Gerasimov, the long-serving Chief of the Russian General Staff, outlined the core principles of hybrid warfare in his article "The Value of Science in Prediction" [170]. These ideas became known as the Gerasimov Doctrine. *"The emphasis of applied methods of confrontation is shifting toward the extensive use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures, implemented by leveraging the protest potential of the population. All of this is complemented by covert military actions, including information warfare and the operations of special forces,"* he wrote.

The fact that Europe – much like Ukraine before – now faces this very Russian strategy is evidenced by the combination of information attacks

and numerous sabotage operations bearing a Russian footprint. The most notorious among them: the damage to undersea cables in the Baltic Sea. *"Russia may be linked to a hundred suspicious incidents in Europe in 2024,"* stated Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský [171].

This means that Russia is, in fact, already waging a hybrid war against a united Europe – employing disinformation, sabotage, and provocation. Yet the threat potential is far greater. Putin has not abandoned his ambition to seize all of Ukraine, nor his demands toward NATO, expressed in the ultimatum of late 2021. His vision extends to reclaiming the former sphere of Soviet influence, encompassing Eastern and Central Europe.

Putin also shows no intention of ending the war. Many experts argue that, should hostilities in Ukraine cease, Russia would face an almost insurmountable challenge in converting its economy back to peacetime and reintegrating hundreds of thousands of soldiers into civilian life. *"Russia has long shifted to a war economy and continues to arm itself. We must not believe that Putin will stop at Ukraine's borders if he has come this far,"* declared German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius in his address to the Bundestag. According to him, Germany must be prepared for war by 2029 [172].

Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service chief, Oleh Ivashchenko, warned that after concluding its war against Ukraine, Russia could be ready to launch aggression against Europe within two to four years. *"We're past the stage of 'possibility'; the question now is when – and who's next. Poland, the Baltic states, and Northern Europe remain in the danger zone,"* he warned [173].

Therefore, Russian disinformation in Europe should be viewed not only as a tool for achieving political and economic objectives – such as influencing election outcomes or lifting economic sanctions – but also through the lens of potential military aggression, which may manifest as hybrid or even kinetic warfare. Ukraine's experience teaches us this: when Kremlin propagandists boast on air about marching to Berlin and Paris, these threats must be taken seriously – and preparations must begin.

Key Vectors of Russian Disinformation in Europe

A synthesis of observations, research, and analysis of Russian information operations targeting Europe reveals several core directions:
- Undermining trust in democratic institutions and political leaders;
- Fragmenting societies through divisive issues;
- Eroding confidence in Europe's defense capabilities and the unity of alliances (NATO, EU);
- Empowering extremist political forces;
- Weakening support for Ukraine;
- Promoting the image of a failing West;
- Positioning Russia as a strong alternative;
- Spreading and amplifying conspiracy theories.

These vectors operate simultaneously, often intersecting and reinforcing one another. The intensity of activity in each area depends on the prevailing information environment, internal crises, or developments in international politics. The overarching goal remains clear: to dismantle Europe as a political, security, and value-based entity. Let us examine each of these directions with examples of fabricated narratives and disinformation campaigns.

Undermining Trust in Democratic Institutions and Political Leaders.
This vector aims to discredit and delegitimize political leadership and democratic processes within EU member states. Russia disseminates messages portraying European leaders as corrupt and incompetent, eroding confidence in election results, judicial decisions, and reputable media outlets.

Examples of narratives:
- EU leaders are driving their countries toward collapse [174];
- The West is in decline, while BRICS begins to shape a new world order [175].

Example in practice: ahead of Poland's 2025 presidential elections, Russia intensified its Doppelganger special operation. Within this campaign,

Russian intelligence created websites and social media pages mimicking legitimate Western media in both appearance and content. The core messages deployed during Poland's elections centered on criticizing support for Ukraine, advocating for Poland's exit from the European Union, and discrediting the policies of Prime Minister Donald Tusk [176].

Fragmenting Society Through Divisive Issues.

Russian disinformation deliberately amplifies contentious topics such as migration, race relations, LGBT+ rights, the COVID pandemic, climate policy, and historical memory. The goal is to create the perception of deep societal fractures. Narratives in this category intensify during elections, protests, or periods of social crisis.

Examples of narratives:

- European elites stand against the people [177]. Russia has also provided informational support to France's "Yellow Vests" movement, far-right anti-migrant groups in Germany, and advocates for Catalonia's secession from Spain [178].

Example in practice: During Pride events in Europe in 2023, there was a surge of disinformation traced back to Russia. False reports circulated about the creation of "LGBT units" within the Polish army. Additionally, claims were spread portraying the LGBTQ community as a threat to society [179].

Eroding Confidence in Europe's Defense Capabilities and Alliance Unity (NATO, EU).

Narratives in this category portray NATO as either an aggressive force or, conversely, a weak and ineffective structure, while depicting the EU as a failing union on the verge of collapse. Russia devotes particular attention to fostering skepticism toward aid for Ukraine, undermining trust in collective security, and fueling isolationist sentiments.

Examples of narratives:

- The EU is the root cause of all problems [180];
- The EU / NATO / the West are weak and destined to fall apart [181].

Example in practice: In spring 2025, Romania's Ministry of Defense reported a disinformation campaign on TikTok spreading fabricated "evidence" of a supposed decision by Romanian authorities to deploy troops to Ukraine. Officials stated these claims had no factual basis and were clear attempts to sow fear [182].

Supporting Radical Political Forces.

Russia consistently backs far-left and far-right parties and movements that oppose the foundational principles of the European Union and NATO. Rather than crafting unique messages, Russia often channels resources to bolster these forces during elections, leveraging local narratives. The overarching vector remains unchanged: amplifying anti-migrant and xenophobic sentiments, hostility toward the United States, Euroscepticism, and anti-Ukrainian attitudes.

Examples of narratives:
- European elites have usurped power [183];
- Russia is a global power with its own sphere of influence, which must include Ukraine [184].

Example in practice: Ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, Russia's disinformation apparatus sought to sway public opinion in Germany. These campaigns disseminated narratives discrediting EU institutions and mainstream political parties while simultaneously promoting far-right and far-left forces. Tactics included state-controlled media resources and covert advertising on social platforms, notably Meta [185].

Undermining Support for Ukraine.

Russia crafts an image of Ukraine as corrupt, ungrateful, or radical – a so-called "fascist" state. The ongoing war is portrayed as distant, futile, and dangerous for Europeans. These campaigns aim to provoke "war fatigue," fear of escalation, dissatisfaction with sanctions and military aid, and ultimately reduce political, military, and humanitarian support for Ukraine.

Examples of narratives:
- War fatigue [184];
- Ukrainians kill civilians and commit war crimes [167].

Example in practice: On October 9, 2023, social media circulated a video allegedly showing Western weapons being transferred to the Palestinian group Hamas by Ukrainians. Fact-checkers confirmed the footage was fabricated. The Institute for the Study of War reported that the Kremlin exploited Hamas's attack on Israel for information operations designed to weaken support for Ukraine, including spreading false claims about a "black market for weapons" [186].

Promoting the Image of a Failing West.

This vector seeks to portray Europe as weak, chaotic, and morally degraded – a civilization that has lost touch with reality. Russia pushes narratives of economic decline, demographic crisis, and cultural identity erosion, contrasting these with the image of a "stable" Russia. The goal is to undermine faith in the West's ability to progress and strip away any vision of a viable European project.

Example of narratives:
- Inflation and the energy crisis are the result of Europe's misguided policies [167].

Example in practice: Spain accused Russia of a disinformation attack during Hurricane Dana in 2022. Intelligence services directly blamed Moscow for spreading "fabrications and fake news" amid the disaster that claimed at least 222 lives. *"Pro-Kremlin actors focused on fostering public distrust toward state institutions, delegitimizing support for Ukraine under the pretext of prioritizing aid for hurricane-affected regions, and creating the image of a country sinking into chaos,"* the report stated [187].

Positioning Russia as a Strong Alternative.

This vector constructs an image of Russia as a guardian of traditional values, a force restoring global justice, and a champion of a multipolar world. Russia is portrayed as capable of challenging the West and leading

a new world order alongside China, Iran, and states of the so-called Global South. The aim is not only to legitimize Russia's aggressive foreign policy but also to win favor among Eurosceptics.

Examples of narratives:

- Third World countries choose Russia over the West [167];
- Sanctions harm the West more than Russia [167].

Example in practice: Russian disinformation frames BRICS as a new global power hub – an "UN 2.0" without the West, where Russia plays a leading role [188].

Spreading and Amplifying Conspiracy Theories.

Russia systematically leverages and propagates conspiracy narratives – from COVID-19 myths and alleged biolabs to sweeping notions of global conspiracies, the "deep state," and claims that major media outlets merely echo a dictated agenda [173]. Such content not only destabilizes the information space but also attracts individuals predisposed to distrust, protest, or anti-elite sentiments. This vector also serves as a vehicle for masking other disinformation messages under the guise of "alternative" sources.

Examples of narratives:

- Ukraine hosts laboratories developing biological weapons [167];
- Western media lie [167].

Example in practice: Russian propagandists circulated a false report about the death of Pope Francis, linking it to the so-called "Prophecy of the Popes" – a list of 112 short Latin phrases allegedly describing all popes from Celestine II (1143) to the final pontiff who would reign before the end of the world. Some interpretations claim this last pope is Francis himself. The prophecy is widely believed to be a 16th-century forgery created for political purposes [189].

These examples illustrate the scale and systemic nature of Russia's disinformation campaigns across diverse topics. The Russian disinformation machine spreads thousands of fake stories and hundreds of narratives

every month in numerous European countries [190]. This is a full-fledged information war – an integral part of Russia's hybrid warfare against the West.

The eight key directions of Russian disinformation create a conceptual framework that helps us grasp the logic behind these attacks and view each individual episode as part of a larger system. With this framework, we can answer questions such as: Why did Russia spread a fake story about European leaders allegedly using cocaine during their visit to Kyiv?

This episode operates across several vectors simultaneously. First and foremost, it undermines trust in democratic leaders and institutions by discrediting political figures through insinuations of unethical and illegal behavior. It fractures societies by appealing to taboos, cultural codes, and moral condemnation. It fuels conspiracy theories – such as the notion of "elites using drugs." Indirectly, it also supports radical political forces as an alternative to "compromised" leaders in power. Finally, it erodes support for Ukraine: a visit to Kyiv, which was in reality a powerful political gesture, becomes discredited. This narrative serves Russia's interests in the context of war and negotiations.

To fully understand how Russian disinformation operates against Europe, we must also examine its target audiences within European countries.

Who Is Targeted by Russian Disinformation in Europe

"Russia poses a threat. This perception is undoubtedly strongest in the northeast of Europe and gradually weakens as one moves southwest. I am not suggesting that Spain or Italy feel no threat at all. But inevitably, there is a geographical divide between the northeast and the southwest," notes Nathalie Tocci, Director of Italy's Institute of International Affairs [191].

Yet geography is not the only factor shaping how Europeans perceive Russia – and Russian disinformation in particular. Within every country, certain social groups – due to psychological traits or socio-economic status – are more or less susceptible to manipulative narratives. Local

political traditions and the prevailing political climate often play a decisive role. Myths about Russia's historical role and the legacy of the Soviet Union, along with romanticized notions of the "great Russian culture," deeply rooted in some European societies, create fertile ground for disinformation and prolonged information-psychological operations.

For a deeper comprehension of these dynamics, we will examine three typologies that structure the main audiences of Russian disinformation throughout Europe.

Geographical Typology

Eastern Europe. Russia is perceived as an immediate threat, which makes societies here less vulnerable to Kremlin-driven narratives. Moscow's information campaigns often aim to erode trust in alliances and undermine Western unity.

Western Europe. The discourse on Russia is less emotionally charged, and public opinion tends to be more pluralistic. This creates space for "alternative" interpretations of the war, sometimes tinged with notions of neutrality.

Southern Europe. A sense of distance from the war fosters lower sensitivity to Russian threats. Pro-Kremlin narratives frequently infiltrate through channels linked to pacifist, anti-American, or anti-elite movements.

Northern Europe. While attitudes toward Russia are predominantly rational and critical, vulnerabilities remain – particularly to operations exploiting security concerns or refugee-related issues.

Central and Southeastern Europe (the Balkans). Here, historical, political, and religious factors contribute to greater sympathy for Russia and a more tolerant attitude toward pro-Kremlin rhetoric.

Political-Ideological Typology

Far Right. This camp promotes narratives about "defending traditional values," "the migrant threat," and "Europe in decline" – themes eagerly amplified by Russia. Their rhetoric often mirrors Kremlin messaging about a "decaying West."

Far Left. Anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, pacifism, and nostalgia for socialist models make this group receptive to claims about "NATO provocations," "loss of sovereignty," and "Western double standards."

Eurosceptics. They view the EU as a weak or top-down construct that "fails to represent citizens' real interests." Russian narratives aimed at eroding trust in European institutions often resonate strongly within these circles.

Pacifists. Their principled opposition to war frequently translates into calls to halt military aid to Ukraine, evolving into rhetoric that "dialogue with Russia is the only way forward." Moscow exploits this stance to weaken solidarity with Kyiv.

Systemic Critics. These groups harbor deep distrust toward governments, institutions, and the political mainstream. Russian narratives reinforce their belief in "Europe's dysfunction" or "elite corruption."

Media-Psychological Typology

Conspiracy Theorists. Individuals inclined toward conspiratorial thinking quickly embrace narratives about "biolaboratories," "Masonic plots," or a "secret world government in Washington." This audience eagerly consumes any alternative storyline that contradicts official accounts.

Low Media Literacy Groups. Lacking critical skills to assess sources, they easily spread disinformation without verification – particularly among the elderly and the very young.

Seekers of 'Alternative Information'. Those who deliberately avoid mainstream media, turning instead to "independent channels" or bloggers they perceive as "voices of truth." They become prime targets for pro-Russian influencers or outlets masquerading as "independent analysis."

Active Social Media Users. Consumers of short videos, memes, and emotional reactions often fail to distinguish source from context. Russian disinformation exploits this group to amplify simple, viral messages.

There are countries where Russian disinformation operates with greater intensity – driven by geopolitical significance (Germany as a key EU and NATO state), historical ties to Russia (the Balkans), or the strong presence of radical political forces and anti-system movements (France, Italy). Other factors include sizable Russian-speaking diasporas, economic links with Moscow, and assets owned by Russian oligarchs and politicians. In some cases, pro-Kremlin messaging is tailored to local communities, even using minority languages. The Kremlin seeks to exploit every vulnerability – underscoring the systemic nature of its information war against the West.

Mapping European audiences through this typology highlights the key pressure points of disinformation. Combined with its main thematic vectors, this approach clarifies the logic behind targeting strategies. The most effective way to illustrate this is through a visual matrix, where:

◉ – primary focus of disinformation

○ – secondary focus of disinformation.

	Undermining trust in institutions	Societal Division	Undermining Defense Capability	Support for Extremist Political Forces	Undermining Support for Ukraine	The West as Dysfunctional	Russia as an Alternative	Conspiracy Theories
Geographical Typology								
Eastern Europe	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	○	○	○
Western Europe	◉	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	○	○
Southern Europe	◉	○	○	◉	○	◉	○	○
Northern Europe	○	○	◉	○	○	○	○	○
Central and Southeastern Europe (the Balkans)	○	○	○	◉	◉	◉	◉	○

Political-Ideological Typology								
Far Right	◉	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	○	◉
Far Left	◉	◉	◉	◉	◉	◉	◉	◉
Eurosceptics	◉	○	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	○
Pacifists	○	○	◉	○	◉	○	◉	○
Systemic Critics	◉	○	○	○	◉	◉	○	◉
Media-Psychological Typology								
Conspiracy Theorists	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	○	○	◉
Low Media Literacy	○	◉	◉	◉	◉	○	◉	◉
Seekers of 'Alternative Information'	◉	○	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	◉
Active Social Media Users	○	◉	○	◉	◉	◉	◉	○

This matrix is neither a dogma nor an exhaustive framework; rather, it serves as an analytical tool designed to navigate the complex and dynamic landscape of disinformation influences. It offers a working model for understanding which disinformation vectors dominate across different regions and within specific social or ideological groups.

The primary focuses (◉) are identified by their regularity, systemic nature, and strategic importance for Russian propaganda targeting a particular group or region. Secondary focuses (○) indicate a less prominent yet noticeable presence of narratives. Importantly, ◉ in the table signifies the thematic priority for Russian disinformation – not the vulnerability of the audience or the effectiveness of the influence. Thus, the matrix reflects not only the susceptibility of certain groups but also the intensity of the Kremlin's efforts to target them. This approach enables a structured analysis of disinformation campaigns. We encourage disinformation experts to use this matrix as a flexible tool – one that can be adapted, refined, or expanded to meet practical needs. It helps bring order to the chaotic

stream of falsehoods and supports informed decisions on counteraction formats and priorities.

How Russian Disinformation Is Evolving in Europe

Let us examine several illustrative cases of Russian information influence in Europe. These examples not only showcase the diversity of forms and mechanisms – ranging from technologically sophisticated, multilingual special operations to manipulations within individual election campaigns – but also outline the main directions of change. We are witnessing a fusion of classic information tactics with cyber operations, the use of artificial intelligence, targeted strikes on key institutions to erode public trust, and the rapid adoption of new popular platforms, including TikTok. These cases reveal how disinformation evolves from isolated "drops" into a complex instrument of influence.

The Doppelganger Campaign. Active since at least 2022, this campaign spans dozens of countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United States. Its goal: to undermine public support for Ukraine, discredit Western governments and institutions. To achieve this, Russian actors create cloned websites mimicking leading media outlets, publishing fabricated content. This material is then amplified through bot networks and targeted social media advertising, enabling large-scale dissemination of the narratives [192].

Operation "Matryoshka". This operation targets the very institution of fact-checking. Its mechanism is designed as a trap: false narratives are deliberately submitted for verification, creating a scenario where any response benefits the attackers. Ignoring the content is framed as censorship; responding is portrayed as proof that the fake is worth discussing. In this way, trust in fact-checking as an objective tool is systematically eroded [193].

The Portal Combat network unites nearly two hundred websites that mimic local media outlets. In reality, it is a synchronized system for spreading disinformation, targeting countries in Europe and the Global South. Content is published in fifteen languages, with a significant portion generated using advanced AI tools. While materials are tailored to local contexts, they consistently reproduce core Russian narratives – from delegitimizing Ukrainian resistance to accusing the West of fueling the war [194].

These examples highlight a new dimension of Russian disinformation: technological sophistication, adaptability, and the ability to precisely engage diverse audiences. Disinformation is increasingly transcending the boundaries of a mere media phenomenon, becoming an integral component of broader hybrid strategies.

The Romanian presidential elections in 2025, previously mentioned, were accompanied by a wave of disinformation – much of it spread through TikTok, a platform now frequently exploited for political influence, particularly among younger audiences. Candidates representing far-right forces, previously unknown to the general public, suddenly gained visibility and support, largely due to aggressive promotion on social media. Russian content factories and bot farms played a key role in amplifying this trend.

The fate of the state was decided in the second round, where a pro-European candidate ultimately prevailed. This success was largely attributed to the mobilization of voters with higher levels of media literacy and critical thinking [195].

Still, it is almost certain that Russia will persist in attempting to shape political developments across European countries, using disinformation and other means to promote candidates aligned with its interests. This highlights the pressing necessity to design and implement strong countermeasures against Russian information operations.

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VII. How Ukraine Confronts Russian Disinformation

For over eleven years, Ukraine has endured Russia's armed aggression. Throughout this period, Russian disinformation has evolved and intensified, while Ukraine's countermeasures have gradually taken shape: starting with initial government decisions and the rise of fact-checking projects like StopFake and the TV program AntiZombie, and culminating in the establishment of a broad network designed to resist hostile information influence.

Neither government institutions, nor civil society, nor the media can, on their own, mount a full-scale resistance to Russia's efforts to control Ukraine's information space – first during hybrid warfare, and later amid full-scale aggression. Only a united front can deliver a lasting and effective defense. This collective approach allows for the development of a dynamic, multi-level system with shared responsibilities, while preserving the agility and coordination necessary to respond to evolving threats.

Those fighting Russian disinformation in Ukraine face numerous challenges. Here are the key ones:

Key Challenges in Countering Russian Disinformation

The Duration and Systemic Nature of Russia's Information Aggression. Russia's coordinated actions against Ukraine, which can persist for years, demand sustained and consistent countermeasures.

Vulnerability of Information Space to Infiltration and Dependence on International Platforms. Ukraine's national information environment cannot be isolated, and a significant share of communication and content

consumption occurs on platforms over which Ukraine has no control. These challenges require constant monitoring, effective response tools, broad information campaigns, and systematic detection of hostile information operations.

The Scale and Speed of Fake News Dissemination. Neutralizing disinformation calls for swift and coordinated action at all levels, supported by a robust and enduring infrastructure capable of identifying and debunking false narratives.

The Hybrid Nature of Threats. This demands an integrated approach that combines informational, political, and military dimensions, while taking into account Russia's strategic objectives in the information domain.

Evolution of Disinformation Formats and Channels. The continuous emergence of new formats, the development of platforms and technologies – including the use of artificial intelligence – complicates identification and counteraction, requiring adaptive strategies and constant updates to the toolkit.

Vulnerability of Target Audiences. It is crucial to employ communication strategies tailored to the social, cultural, age-related, and psychological profiles of various groups – strategies designed to enhance their resilience against manipulation.

Psycho-Emotional Challenges. Society is weary after years of war and crisis, while Russia exploits every possible means, unrestricted in its use of lies as a political instrument.

Legal, Ethical, and Political Challenges. Countering disinformation demands a careful balance between safeguarding society and upholding civil rights and freedoms, while the success of any solution ultimately hinges on political will.

All these challenges converge into a single critical issue: Russia leverages social media to advance its narratives and spread falsehoods. Ukraine's successful blocking of access to Russian social networks and other online services has significantly reduced the Kremlin's toolkit for informational influence [196]. Yet another part of the problem demands a separate strategic solution: platforms like Telegram and TikTok remain key channels

for disinformation, operating under the influence of Russia and China respectively, while their administrations refuse meaningful cooperation or limit themselves to purely symbolic gestures in combating harmful content [197].

The decision to block Russian internet platforms was driven not only by their influence on public opinion in Ukraine but also by critical concerns over cybersecurity and data protection. In 2014, Russia enacted the so-called "anti-terrorist" legislative amendments, granting its security services access to user data on Russian online resources without a court order [198]. Two years later, in 2016, the Russian parliament adopted the "Yarovaya Package" – a set of laws that expanded surveillance capabilities, obliging internet providers to store not only technical data but also the content of user communications [199]. At that time, millions of Ukrainians – including military personnel – used Russian social networks, messengers, and email services. Moreover, Russian intelligence controlled not only social platforms but also widely used accounting and antivirus products in Ukraine. Their presence, particularly in the public sector, created opportunities for unauthorized access to sensitive information, cyberattacks, and sabotage [200].

In May 2017, following a decision by the National Security and Defense Council, enacted by a Presidential decree, internet providers were prohibited from granting access to Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, the search engine and other products of Yandex, the Mail.ru email service, antivirus companies Kaspersky Lab and Dr.Web, the distributor 1C, as well as major Russian TV channels and online media. In 2020, these sanctions were extended [201]. With the onset of the full-scale invasion, the restrictions were expanded to cover virtually the entire .ru domain zone.

By mid-June 2017, according to SimilarWeb, the audience of Russian social networks and services in Ukraine had dropped by an average of 60%. At the same time, Facebook's Ukrainian user base grew significantly [202]. Critics of the ban predicted that a large portion of users would continue accessing Russian services via VPN. Indeed, interest in VPN

surged immediately after the restrictions were imposed, but within three weeks, the intensity of VPN use for accessing Russian sites declined. By June 2017, for the first time since such measurements began, none of Ukraine's five most-visited websites were Russian. Companies Yandex and Mail.ru closed their offices in Ukraine [204].

The prohibition of Russian online services (and earlier, television channels) was supported not only by the conclusions and warnings of Ukrainian security agencies but also by the active stance of media and expert communities. Fact-checking initiatives and educational materials exposing Russian informational influence and highlighting the risks of widespread reliance on Russian platforms added legitimacy to government actions in the eyes of society [205].

Earlier efforts to counter Russian informational influence were largely confined to instruments suited for peacetime. However, the intensifying military threat and the surge of Russian propaganda targeting Ukraine in 2020–2022 compelled many actors on the disinformation front to rethink their approaches. Idealistic notions – that Russian disinformation could be defeated solely by spreading the truth without any restrictions – quickly dissipated. While debates over the necessity of certain limitations and bans have continued, most actors now agree that decisive measures to counter hostile information attacks and neutralize Russian influence tools are justified. International partners, who initially viewed Ukraine's decisions in 2015–2017 with caution, now actively support its fight against Russian disinformation.

«Can it be banned like VK?» – title card of a Suspilne TV news segment / screenshot
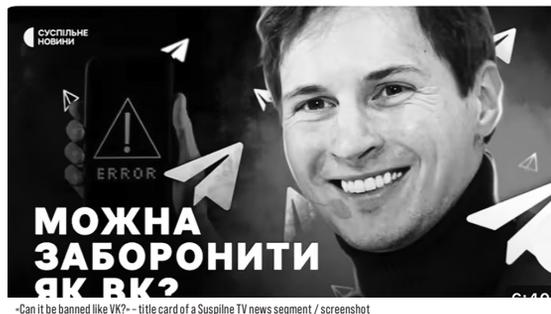
By mid-2025, Ukraine's anti-disinformation network has largely taken shape. It remains dynamic and adaptive, with an expanding circle of actors – state and military institutions, security services, civil society organizations, media, and more. Over years of resisting Russian informational aggression, Ukraine has gained unique experience and expertise, albeit at a high cost.

The discussion about the threats posed by Telegram and TikTok has shifted to a different dimension. The danger of disinformation spreading on these platforms is undeniable, yet fully blocking them in Ukraine is challenging. These services are not directly owned by Russian companies, and they remain essential tools for communication and news consumption for a large segment of Ukrainians. However, experience and well-established vertical and horizontal connections among various actors in this field enable the effective use of alternative instruments: rapid and large-scale debunking, fact-checking, early warnings, and disruption of Russian information operations. Effective resistance to informational threats is possible only when the state and civil society work together, complementing each other. It is precisely this synergy that ensures resilience and the ability to counter disinformation in any form.

Key Actors in Countering Disinformation in Ukraine

State Structures

In wartime, state institutions are prime targets of informational attacks, as Russia seeks to sow chaos and undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. Consequently, every level and branch of government faces the challenge of disinformation and the need to counter it. For any public authority, resilience to disinformation is not merely a matter of informational hygiene – it is a question of national security.

Government bodies and structures that play a pivotal role in detecting, preventing, and neutralizing disinformation attacks, while coordinating a systemic state response:

- **National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine** – strategic planning and coordination of information security policy.
- **Security Service of Ukraine –** detection and neutralization of informational threats, psychological operations, and bot farms.
- **Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine –** analysis of intelligence data, including Russian information operations, and counteraction to psychological operations.
- **Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine –** wartime communication and debunking of false narratives.
- **Ministry of Digital Transformation –** implementation of technological solutions for detecting and blocking disinformation, strengthening digital security.
- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs –** diplomacy and combating false narratives about Ukraine abroad.
- **National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting** – monitoring of broadcasting and restricting media that disseminate disinformation and Russian influence.

Specialized Structures Dedicated to Countering Disinformation

The creation of such entities represents a distinct success story in Ukraine's fight against Russian informational influence. These structures have become focal points – centers of gravity for coordinating the efforts of state institutions. They provide systematic analysis and proactive responses to informational threats. Through their initiatives, information security is being reimagined as a strategic policy of the state, balancing operational adaptability with the cooperation of varied participants.

- **Center for Countering Disinformation (CCD) under the National Security and Defense Council –** monitoring, debunking false narratives, and providing informational clarifications: cpd.gov.ua

- **Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (StratCom) –** strategic messaging, narrative deconstruction, and crisis communications: spravdi.gov.ua

The Center for Countering Disinformation (CCD) under the National Security and Defense Council has become the key national coordinator in combating Russian informational influence. It conducts round-the-clock monitoring of the information space, identifies and debunks false narratives, and promptly clarifies the official position of the state. The center also contributes to shaping information security policy and proposes strategic solutions to counter informational threats.

Operating under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (since September 2024 – the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications), the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (StratCom) focuses on detecting and deconstructing hostile narratives, crafting state messaging in response to information attacks, crisis response, and systematic communication with the public and media. The center also develops and implements training programs for civil servants, information campaigns, and educational initiatives aimed at strengthening the overall resilience of Ukrainian society.

Civil Society Initiatives

The network of organizations countering disinformation in Ukraine continues to expand and adapt to new challenges. This section highlights only several actors with established authority and significant visibility across the information landscape. Their work is widely used by journalists, experts, and state institutions.

- **StopFake –** debunking Russian propaganda and falsehoods through fact-checking, analytics, monitoring, and dissemination of materials across media and social networks: stopfake.org
- **Detector Media –** countering disinformation in Ukraine's media space. Recording, systematizing, and researching Russian fakes and narratives; promoting media literacy and critical thinking among Ukrainians through educational initiatives; and contributing to

legislative efforts aimed at combating propaganda while safe-guarding freedom of speech.: detector.media

- **Texty –** research, systematization, and publication of data on Russian disinformation; analysis of strategic informational threats; and in-depth reporting aimed at uncovering Russian informa-tion-psychological operations: texty.org.ua
- **VoxUkraine / VoxCheck –** a fact-checking project of the in-dependent analytical platform VoxUkraine, exposing Russian propaganda both inside and outside Ukraine: voxukraine.org / voxcheck.org
- **Institute of Mass Information –** countering Russian disinformation through systematic monitoring, research, and analysis of strategic informational threats; documenting facts (including genocidal rhetoric); and publishing analytical materials alongside other educational formats: imi.org.ua
- **Internews Ukraine –** developing and implementing systemic strategies to counter Russian disinformation during wartime: crea-ting counter-narratives, fact-checking tools, analytical materials, guides, educational campaigns, and training programs for media and citizens: internews.ua

Media

The intensification of Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine has posed a serious challenge for Ukrainian media. The saturation of the information space with Russian fakes and special operations demands that journalists adhere strictly to professional standards, verify facts, and actively debunk false reports and manipulations spread by Russia and its agents of influence. Another mission embraced by the media is to enhance media literacy, critical thinking, and resilience to Russian disinformation among their audiences – readers, viewers, and listeners. Particularly crucial is the role of local media operating within communities, closest to the people. These outlets are often the first to detect disinformation and deliver verified information to areas beyond the reach of national

media. Outlined below are the core functions of media within Ukraine's strategy to counter Russian disinformation:

- **Fact-Checking and Source Verification** – Rapid identification and verification of questionable reports, publications, and statements.
- **Debunking Fakes and Disinformation** – Документування, розвінчання та логічне спростування неправдивих повідомлень і ворожих інформаційних вкидів
- **Swift Delivery of Accurate Information** – Prompt publication of verified facts to neutralize disinformation and ensure public access to truth.
- **Analysis of Hostile Narratives** – Tracking themes, messages, and rhetorical constructs used by Russia, followed by explaining their meaning and objectives.
- **Interaction with State Institutions** – Sharing information with official bodies to coordinate actions during crises and provide timely updates to audiences.
- **Enhancing Media Literacy** – Educating audiences on principles of critical thinking and basic skills for recognizing fakes and manipulations.
- **Building Trust in Reliable Sources** – Systematic efforts to strengthen the authority of independent journalism as a trustworthy source of information during wartime.
- **Investigative Journalism and Analytics** – In-depth research into sources of disinformation, dissemination mechanisms, and interested actors using professional journalistic methods of data collection.

In addition to these core institutions, numerous actors contribute to the operation of the system aimed at combating disinformation. Equally important is the role of citizens – their willingness to consume and share information responsibly, verify facts, consciously select sources, and invest in self-development by cultivating critical thinking skills.

Examples of Systemic Counteraction to Russian Information Operations

Russia's Attempts to Disrupt Arms Supplies to Ukraine. Support from international partners has been – and remains – critical to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. If Russia had succeeded in using informational influence to halt arms deliveries, it would have fundamentally altered the course of the war. The arrival of multiple-launch rocket systems (including HIMARS), air defense systems, armored vehicles, artillery shells, and other essential weaponry directly affects the combat capability of Ukraine's defense forces and their ability to protect civilians.

Despite Russia's systematic efforts to influence leaders and societies in Western countries – and Ukraine itself (including attempts to convince them that resistance was futile) – partners continued to approve the provision of critical weapons: Leopard tanks, HIMARS, F-16 fighter jets, and long-range missiles. In 2022–2024, the volume of assistance did not decrease; in some cases, it even grew. The United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and other allies not only supplied new weapons but also developed long-term programs and strategic support plans [206]. In key NATO countries, political consensus persisted despite Russia's information attacks. At the same time, the pace and scale of deliveries were influenced by domestic political factors: elections, budget priorities, and political debate [207].

Intimidation and reality / collage, source – zn.ua, bbc.com/ukrainian

Russia conducted sustained information campaigns aimed at de-motivating and intimidating Ukraine's allies, while sowing doubts about our country's ability to effectively use the assistance provided. These efforts targeted political leaders, expert communities, and public opinion across the EU and North American states. To achieve this, Russia employed traditional media, social networks, and pro-Russian politicians and commentators [208]. Additionally, through diplomatic channels and informal negotiations, Russia sought to create divisions among allies regarding continued support for Ukraine. In some cases, anonymous Telegram channels were used – primarily to influence Ukrainian society, fueling distrust and skepticism toward foreign partners.

Russia's core narratives revolved around allegations that weapons sent to Ukraine were leaking onto the black market and that a significant portion of aid was being siphoned off. Russian propaganda stressed that Western involvement – marked, in Moscow's eyes, by arms deliveries to Ukraine – risked triggering an escalation that could spiral into a third world war. Alongside this, it amplified themes portraying Ukraine as ungrateful, its army and authorities as corrupt, and the war itself as futile, insisting on the need for swift negotiations to achieve "peace" [209].

Effective resistance to this campaign involved more than fact verification – it required a systematic breakdown of Russian messaging. This involved identifying target audiences and engaging them through all available channels: media, social networks, diplomacy, and public statements. Systematic detection of influence agents, analysis of information networks, and investigation of fake dissemination – including via bot farms – were essential. A critical factor was the resilience of Ukrainian society, strengthened through media literacy, clear explanations of complex foreign policy processes, and active involvement of experts, including military professionals.

The response to the campaign was multi-layered. Counter-narratives were developed emphasizing transparency in weapons accounting, their effective use, and the importance of Ukraine's resistance for the security of all of Europe. These narratives demonstrated that assistance was

monitored and utilized effectively [210]. The President, other officials, and diplomats consistently voiced these messages, reinforcing partner trust and strengthening Ukraine's position on the international stage [211].

Analytical studies of hostile narratives and systematic fact-checking formed the foundation for shaping and adjusting political messaging, providing authorities with objective information and strong arguments. Ukraine shared these findings with foreign partners, conducted joint research on disinformation, and presented compelling evidence to debunk false claims.

The results of using partner-supplied weapons – and the futility of the "red lines" Russia repeatedly declared regarding Western aid to Ukraine – became the strongest proof of the necessity for continued support [211].

The combination of counter-narratives, a consistent political stance, systematic expert work, and broad media coverage ensured effective resistance to information attacks aimed at halting the supply of modern weaponry essential for defending Ukraine's sovereignty.

The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Disinformation.

The accessibility of generative AI has elevated disinformation to an entirely new level. The spread of disinformation after AI's mass adoption feels like a flood following a faint drizzle. A tool has emerged that enables the rapid, large-scale creation of convincing fake content – texts, images, videos, and audio. Artificial intelligence is now employed in extensive and prolonged influence operations.

Moreover, AI systems have begun to be trained on distorted or entirely false data. This creates a self-reinforcing ecosystem: fakes circulate through search engines, infiltrate social media and news feeds, and over time become perceived as part of the general informational background [212].

All of this has made detecting false information significantly more difficult, especially for the average consumer. People find it increasingly difficult to discern reality within the information space, forced to spend more time and effort verifying whether what they encounter is genuine or fabricated.

Artificial intelligence and its role in disinformation / illustrative image created using AI

It is not simply a technological novelty; it marks a fundamental shift in how information operations function, with velocity and magnitude becoming critical. The threat grows as AI advances faster than defensive tools can be built, and regulatory measures remain behind the curve of innovation.

Russian intelligence services employ AI to automate the creation of texts, visual materials, and videos that mimic authentic statements by politicians, military officials, or reputable media outlets [213]. These materials quickly infiltrate social networks and messaging platforms, spreading through bot networks and targeted advertising. Special attention is given to TikTok and Instagram – platforms with algorithm-driven feeds that allow artificial amplification of desired narratives [214].

Fake websites are created to replicate the appearance of well-known media outlets, publishing AI-generated fabricated news with anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western content. These resources often have minimal real audience reach but are well indexed by search engines. AI also assists in generating message variations to evade blocking. This approach enables systematic influence on audiences, aiming to discredit Ukrainian authorities, deepen divisions, provoke societal fragmentation, weaken foreign public support for Ukraine, and disrupt mobilization efforts.

Fake content is disseminated not only by bots but also by real individuals with large followings – pro-Russian bloggers, analysts, journalists, and other influence agents [215]. Russia increasingly leverages AI for disinformation and continues to expand the range of domains where it is applied.

To effectively combat disinformation powered by AI, Ukraine must accelerate its response, allocate greater resources, and deepen coordination with international partners. AI can serve as a safeguard, powering systems that track recurring messages suggestive of organized efforts and tools that expose fake material.

Ukrainian actors in the fight against disinformation are developing and publishing analytical materials explaining how AI technologies are used to create fakes and how to recognize them [216]. Fact-checking initiatives, independent journalists, and analysts conduct investigations that uncover examples of AI-driven disinformation. These cases not only reveal techniques deployed against Ukraine and the West but also expose vulnerabilities. A portion of the audience trusts AI-generated content [217], which is why Ukraine places strong emphasis on enhancing media literacy and critical thinking among citizens [218].

Officials – such as representatives of the Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council – along with experts and opinion leaders regularly highlight emerging disinformation challenges. Analytical centers employ AI to monitor the information space and respond swiftly to new waves of fakes, sharing collected data promptly with state authorities and foreign partners for coordinated action.

The media community is actively discussing standards for using AI technologies in journalism, aiming to improve real-time disinformation countermeasures.

This comprehensive approach – combining analytics, public education, political support, AI-based counter-tools, and international cooperation – helps Ukraine not only adapt to a new reality but also stay ahead of the curve, anticipate technological developments, and prepare long-term strategies for informational resilience.

Unresolved Challenges in Countering Disinformation

Ukraine's fight against Russian information warfare illustrates that this is not a task for one sector alone but a shared obligation. What began as sporadic responses has matured into a systemic approach anchored in strategic foresight and an understanding of the scale of danger. In this architecture, each element contributes: the state ensures strategic direction, diplomacy, governance, and intelligence; civil society provides analytical depth; and media expose disinformation, react promptly to fakes, and sustain an environment of credible reporting.

The war has temporarily removed some obstacles to this interaction, such as insufficient coordination, the closed nature of state institutions (partly justified during wartime), and the critical stance of media and expert communities toward the authorities. All parties are committed to effective disinformation counteraction, yet the state often prioritizes security and stability, civil organizations emphasize transparency and trust, and media focus on speed and audience needs. These priority gaps may translate into divergent opinions on how tactics should be applied.

It is clear that Ukraine will have to fight Russian informational influence for a long time. Therefore, all actors in this sphere must maintain an ongoing dialogue to develop best practices. Such synergy should become permanent and extend beyond countering Russia's armed aggression, as the challenges we face now are unlikely to disappear with the end of active hostilities.

Other issues remain. One is the objective assessment of the effectiveness of disinformation counteraction. Counting detected hostile fakes or messages is not enough. We must also address "homework" – analyzing our own actions and developing publicly accessible crisis protocols based on the most successful cases. Evaluation of effectiveness should become a permanent structural element of disinformation resistance.

Another gap is the lack of a legal definition of disinformation – it is still absent from Ukrainian legislation [219]. This makes it difficult to hold

systematic disseminators accountable and to deploy all necessary tools for effectively neutralizing hostile influence.

Yet despite these challenges, Ukraine is mounting a worthy defense in the information space. The Ukrainian state, society, experts, and media have acquired unique skills and are becoming exporters of experience in repelling Russian aggression across various domains, including the informational sphere.

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VIII. Challenges in Combating Disinformation

"'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.'

It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control', they called it: in Newspeak, 'doublethink.'"

– George Orwell, 1984

George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* has long served as a reservoir of metaphors for describing practices of disinformation and the manipulation of human consciousness.

Modern Russia has mastered these practices with remarkable success. Consider this: not so long ago, most Russians regarded friendly and familial ties with Ukrainians as natural, maintaining a sense of continuity between the two nations – albeit through a lens quite different from that of Ukrainians themselves. Today, those same Russians endorse a war against Ukraine [220], sincerely believe Ukrainians to be "Nazis," and even rejoice at missile strikes on Ukrainian cities [221].

This dramatic shift in perception did not occur spontaneously. It is the outcome of prolonged, systematic conditioning of public consciousness. For centuries, Russians saw themselves as the "elder brothers," yet fifteen or twenty years ago, the notion of waging open armed aggression against Ukraine was inconceivable. They could not imagine Ukrainians being killed and tortured, their homes, schools, kindergartens, and hospitals reduced to rubble, nor that tens of thousands of Russians would sign military contracts to take part in such atrocities. And society, in turn, would embrace propagandist narratives such as: *"Ukrainians are shelling themselve,", "We never attacked anyone",* and *"Ukraine was planning to invade Russia".*

Russia has already demonstrated the effectiveness of disinformation and mind-manipulation techniques aimed at its domestic audience in the absence of systemic resistance. The Kremlin did not merely lie; it engineered an alternative reality for Russians.

Today, we are witnessing the dawn of a new era in the realm of disinformation – an era marked by unprecedented scale, velocity, and technological sophistication. Emerging digital tools unlock possibilities for manipulation that transcend borders, languages, and platforms. The information space has become global, and the deliberate shaping of millions of minds has turned into a mass phenomenon.

The rise of artificial intelligence introduces a new dimension of informational aggression. This is no longer just about disinformation campaigns or influence operations. Any authoritarian regime – not only Russia – now possesses the capability, if not to dismantle reality entirely for targeted audiences anywhere in the world, then at least to fragment it. This means that different social strata, different groups, may find themselves trapped in parallel informational realities – confused, disoriented, stripped of trust in sources, and ultimately deprived of any coherent understanding of truth itself.

In this new reality, the goal of disinformation is no longer mere persuasion – it is the rewriting of the very matrix within which human existence unfolds. A crucial factor here is humanity's innate tendency to believe not in proven facts, but in assertions they want to believe. In psychology, this phenomenon is known as confirmation bias: the inclination to accept only information that aligns with one's beliefs while disregarding anything that contradicts them [222]. This trait makes individuals profoundly vulnerable.

The growing emphasis on reshaping perceptions of reality has become the first strategic challenge for those seeking to counter disinformation. This alone is enough to destabilize societies, ignite conflicts, and influence electoral outcomes. Russian practices in this domain can – and likely will – be replicated by other authoritarian regimes.

Another challenge lies in the very nature of Russia's current power structure. Disinformation has become the cornerstone of both its domestic and foreign policy. In essence, Russia has institutionalized disinformation.

In the Soviet Union – the predecessor state to today's Russian Federation – propaganda served to secure the Communist Party's grip on power, while external expansion was justified through ideological motives. The USSR sought to export communist ideology as a global mission. Putin's Russia, by contrast, is officially devoid of ideological boundaries, though it exploits Soviet, imperial, and nationalist ideas when convenient. Its propaganda is aimed squarely at pragmatic objectives. It is flexible, adaptive, and capable of shifting both domestic and foreign narratives with ease. Meanwhile, society is prepared to believe anything – even if yesterday it believed the opposite.

Thus, the primary threat is not merely the spread of Russian falsehoods, messages, and narratives, but the existence of an entire state that thinks in manipulations, elevates disinformation to the level of an "absolute weapon," and relentlessly refines it. Russia operates under the principle that "everything is permitted," unconstrained by ethical or legal norms. Its foreign policy goal remains a geopolitical revanche for the Soviet Union's defeat. Such a Russia, for as long as it exists, will pose a threat to all its neighbors – including Western democracies.

Another immense challenge lies in the (in)ability of democratic states to counter Russia's total disinformation warfare. How can we strike a balance between freedom of speech and the need to defend against manipulation? Should the freedom of speech of democracy's enemies be curtailed? Where is the line between an "alternative opinion" and an information attack? How do we counter the weaponization of technological innovation in disinformation? These questions demand urgent, collective answers. The democratic world must find a way to shield itself from the abuse of free speech in the age of information warfare.

Against the backdrop of a radical transformation of the information environment and relentless disinformation pressure, another challenge emerges: humanity's adaptation to these new circumstances. Russia is

waging not merely an information war, but a cognitive war – a war for the very architecture of thought [223]. Increasingly, this war combines the spread of falsehoods with the deliberate oversaturation of consciousness through a flood of informational messages. The use of artificial intelligence, which creates an illusion of authenticity, erodes the human ability to distinguish truth from fabrication. Disinformation is no longer a single act of deceit or even a campaign; it has become a permanent element of the information field. For those accustomed to accepting what seems "self-evident," this poses a formidable challenge. Addressing it requires more than critical thinking, fact-checking, or media literacy. Under certain conditions – when the information space is flooded with false and toxic content – critical thinking loses its effectiveness. Furthermore, it is a resource-intensive process, and even experienced professionals engaged in countering disinformation can deplete their cognitive reserves.

We are confronted with an environment where the volume of information surpasses our cognitive ability to extract meaning. Disinformation succeeds not through persuasion, but because the mind becomes exhausted from trying to filter it.

Tackling these strategic challenges demands a systemic transition toward new interpretive paradigms. Until now, disinformation was viewed merely as lies, distortions, or manipulative fragments of truth, with fact-checking and debunking as the primary defenses. Moving forward, the focus must shift to cultivating interpretive competence – the ability to discern the frames shaping information, identify manipulative contexts, and critically engage with meaning. To perceive not only what is said, but how, why, and for what purpose it is conveyed.

Modern falsification transcends mere distortion of facts, targeting sources through AI-generated clones, deepfakes, bot swarms, and algorithmic manipulation that mimic mass approval of disinformation. Interpretation must begin before acceptance – probing how each message seeks to shape thought and action.

Currently, these skills reside in the toolkit of disinformation experts, information security specialists, journalists, and researchers. They must

become widespread. This behavioral shift is a prerequisite for safe existence in the modern world. It offers a chance to avoid becoming an object of manipulation – and to resist being drawn into someone else's informational matrix, particularly Russia's.

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