

Propaganda

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COUNTERING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION: UKRAINIAN NGOS ON THE FRONTLINE

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Fighting fake news and propaganda is what Ukrainian NGOs have been doing years before it became a trend around the world. Response to threats of Russian propaganda requires a complex strategy, and Ukrainian experts from civil society are already making important steps forward in this direction. This article represents the description of existing NGOs that opposed the information warfare started by Russia, analysis and description of the main Kremlin narratives, transformation of the Kremlin propaganda since the Euromaidan, and the main ways to fight against it. The author states that the role of the Ukrainian NGOs in countering Russian disinformation is crucial.

Russia's attempts to manipulate people's consciousness, to dominate the Ukrainian information space are not a new threat for Ukraine. Whether it was the prohibition of Ukrainian books in 1876 by the Ems Ukaz, forced russification of Ukrainians during the times of the Russian Empire, or the Soviet propaganda, all these measures had a common goal to control people's decisions and opinions, to govern neighbouring territories as its own. Numerous historical myths about significant events and personalities, a national inferiority complex, stable patterns in the perception of some events are some of the consequences of the Russian disinformation campaign during all these years. The attempted annexation of Crimea and the war on the territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions have once more shown how far this campaign could go if not provided with an appropriate answer.

Before the Revolution of Dignity, there were no such spheres of activity in Ukraine as confrontation propaganda and disinformation directed against the state. However, during the Euromaidan, the threat of propaganda became clear when the Kremlin's narratives influenced how Ukrainians in the regions with high popularity of Russian media and pro-Russian views perceived the Revolution of Dignity and its participants. The NATO *StratCom Centre of Excellence (COE) Report* noted that the information campaign was central in Russia's operations against Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea was one of the results of it. "Crimea may be considered a test-case for Russia in trying out this new form of warfare where hybrid, asymmetric warfare, combining an intensive information campaign, cyber warfare and the use of highly trained Special Operation Forces, play a key role" (p.4).¹

¹ *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine. Examining Non-military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine from a Strategic Communications Perspectives*, "NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence (COE) Report", 2015 [https://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/3213 access: 01 February 2018].

The impact of Russian media on the information space of Ukraine is still quite disturbing. For example, according to a study that was provided through the USAID “U-Media” project in 2017, in Ukraine, trust in Russian news websites has increased from 7% in 2016 to 10% in 2017, trust in Russian print media and radio has increased from 2% in 2016 to 6% in 2017.²



Ukrainian experience shows that civil society could perform important functions of the state as it happened with the resistance in the information warfare

Ukrainian Arms in the Information Warfare

Such obvious threats to the information space of Ukraine lead to the stepping up of civil society. When the state was not yet ready to answer to those threats, activists offered their help. Ukrainian experience shows that civil society could perform important functions of the state as it happened with the resistance in the information warfare. It was the NGOs that in March 2014 started checking the articles of Russian media, defined what is fake news and how to debunk them before the state began to make the first steps for the protection of its information space. Still, the activity of these organisations remains significant and their experience is useful for countries where the influence of the Kremlin narratives is present. Despite the establishment in December 2014 and

activity of the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, such NGOs remain an important voice of civil society in this struggle.

The *StopFake* project was one of the first launched against the backdrop of the Russian disinformation and propaganda in Ukraine. Faculty, students, and alumni of the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism founded this project in March 2014. The main website informs that “we not only look at how propaganda influences Ukraine, we also try to investigate how propaganda impacts on other countries and regions, from the European Union to countries which once made up the Soviet Union.”³

StopFake is positioning itself as a fact-checking organisation that checks and refutes propaganda, disinformation about events in Ukraine in Russian media. Moreover, the founders of the project consider it as an information hub, whose materials can be helpful in analysis of different aspects of the Kremlin’s propaganda in further research. Besides debunking of fakes, the project monitors other studies dedicated to the impact of propaganda and fake news, conducts its own surveys, and organises trainings about fact-checking, media literacy, verification of the different types of data. Information on the website is translated into 11 languages. There are various formats of debunking and information sharing: a video digest with the main fake news of the week, an audio podcast, social media accounts, and a newspaper “Your Right to Know” that is distributed on the territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions.

² *InMind: довіра українців до російських ЗМІ виросла на тлі зниження їх популярності (InMind: Ukrainians’ Trust in Russian Mass Media Has Grown against the Background of Declining Popularity)*, “mResearcher”, 27 September 2017, [https://mresearcher.com/2017/09/inmind-dovira-ukraintsiv-do-rosijskih-zmi-virosla-na-tli-znizhennya-ih-populyarnosti.html access: 01 March 2018].

³ “StopFake.org”, [https://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/ access: 30 January 2018].

Consequently, *StopFake* has grown from a volunteer project into an organisation that is performing numerous important functions in combating Russian disinformation, and its activity is recognised on international level. It is worth noting that this project is sponsored by different international donors and it stays away from the support of the state in order to be objective in its work.

Another project that is considered “a unique example of official institutions and NGO joining forces to strengthen communication capacities of the state” is the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre. As well as *StopFake*, the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre was launched in March 2014 by efforts of leading Ukrainian experts in the sphere of international relations, communications, and public relations. The main goal of the project is “to help Ukraine amplify its voice on the international arena about the events connected to annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation”.⁴ The organisation consists of several departments:

- a press centre, where civil activists, experts, national politicians, and representatives of the government are given the opportunity to inform society about the events that take place in Ukraine and around it;
- a department that is working with foreign audience and disseminating information about Ukraine abroad, assisting foreign journalists;
- a department that is working with national audience, which aims to integrate different Ukrainian regions into one Ukrainian context;

- an arts and culture department that uses art as a tool to boost the dialogue between residents of East and West Ukraine and so on.

Improvement of the dialogue between Ukrainians, raising important issues, and discussing difficult topics are no less important than fighting against fake news. Besides that, at some period of time the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre supported the information resource “Ukraine under Attack” that gathered evidence about Russia’s military aggression, the annexation of Crimea, etc.

Another similar project, *InformNapalm*, was created “as a response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine in March 2014”. The core purpose of the project is “to inform about the real role of the Russian government in ongoing hybrid conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, and in the Middle East”.⁵ Volunteers of the project are not only debunking different fakes of Russian propaganda, but also exposing facts of Russia’s illegal weapon and military equipment exports, collecting evidence that confirms the participation of the Russian government officials and public figures in planning subversive operations and waging wars in other countries, etc. Materials of the project are translated into more than 20 languages.

Information Resistance is yet another similar project, trying “to counteract external threats to the informational space of Ukraine”.⁶ This project was also launched in March 2014 as an initiative of the NGO called Center for Military and Political

⁴ A. Jackson, *It May Not Be a Real War (Yet), but Don't Tell That to the Propagandists in Russia and Ukraine*, “PRI”, 13 March 2014, [https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-03-13/it-may-not-be-real-war-yet-dont-tell-propagandists-russia-and-ukraine access: 29 January 2018].

⁵ “InformNapalm”, [http://informnapalm.rocks access: 30 January 2018].

⁶ “Information Resistance”, [http://sprotvyv.info/en/about-us access: 30 January 2018].

Studies. It positions itself as an organisation that provides analytical materials about the situation in Donbas, transfer of military equipment, receipt of Russian weapons by the militants, internal situation in the so-called DNR and LNR. *Information Resistance* involves Ukrainians and foreign experts from non-governmental and governmental agencies, international organisations, etc.

An inseparable part of the Russian disinformation campaign is the spreading of certain historical myths and fakes. Ukrainian volunteers and professional historians have also intensified their work in this sphere by creating the project *ЛИКБЕЗ: The Historical Front*. The main purpose of the project is to popularise Ukraine's history in different formats, to debunk different historical fakes, etc. According to the founders of *ЛИКБЕЗ*, "an

 **with the increasing number of various fact-checking projects, Russian fake news has become more difficult to refute**

adequate vision of the past is the basis of the Ukrainian identity and the key to unity of the country".⁷ The main motivation to create this project was to counter Russian propaganda, especially its historical rhetoric.

Thus, as we see, the main Ukrainian NGOs that oppose Russia in the information

warfare were created during the same period, after the attempted annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Different in their activities and angles, these NGOs became the response of an active society to the challenges faced by Ukraine during the hybrid warfare. However, taking into account Russia's efforts in this war, the consequences of propaganda and manipulation of public opinion, Ukraine should be active and persistent at different levels: from state institutions to public organisations.

Faces of Russian Propaganda

Since the Euromaidan, Russian propaganda has incredibly transformed in terms of different formats, types, and ways of spreading its pieces through various channels. The number of narratives about Ukraine has expanded as well. The collection of fakes that was gathered and debunked by a *StopFake* team is helpful here as it could show the broader picture of how Russian propaganda has changed over time.

Russian media have not been afraid to use more simple ways to mislead their audience in recent years: for example, to present protests in Kyiv as protests in Simferopol⁸, to affirm that the Russian language will be banned in Ukraine and that there will be criminal prosecution of Russian-speaking people⁹, to use the same people in pro-Russian protests across Ukraine¹⁰, etc. The usage of false photos, video, actors who played different kinds of victims was popular. The audience was not

⁷ "ЛИКБЕЗ", [http://likbez.org.ua/ua/meta-proekt access: 30 January 2018].

⁸ Вести24 показали бон в Киве как Симферополь (Vesti24 Shows Fights in Kyiv As If It Was in Simferopol), "StopFake", 03 March 2014, [https://www.stopfake.org/vesti24-pokazali-boi-v-kieve-kak-simferopol/ access: 30 January 2018].

⁹ "Утка" російського ТВ – Тягнибок призиває заборонити російський мову в Україні (Fake of Russian TV – Tyagnibok Calls to Ban Russian Language in Ukraine), "StopFake", 05 March 2014, [https://www.stopfake.org/utka-rossijskogo-tv-tyagnibok-prizyvaet-zapretit-russkij-yazyk-na-ukraine/ access: 30 January 2018].

¹⁰ The Same People Are Participating in Pro-Russian Protests across Ukraine, "StopFake", 04 March 2014, [https://www.stopfake.org/en/the-same-people-are-participating-in-pro-russian-protests-across-ukraine/ access: 30 January 2018].

ready to read and watch news critically, so the flow of propaganda was endless, and its methods were very simple.

Over time and with the increasing number of various fact-checking projects, Russian fake news has become more difficult to refute. The narratives are remaining the same, but the methods of disinformation have changed from false photos, video, or audio, false quotes and comments to exaggeration, manipulative representation of different kinds of data, using the most popular stereotypes and myths, false conclusions. One of the most popular kinds of misinformation has become a story with real facts and quotes but with a manipulative and misleading headline. Since Internet users mostly read only headlines and subtitles and pay little attention to the text, this method is also playing an important role in spreading propaganda.

Channels considered to be a part of the disinformation campaign are numerous. For example, the most popular Russian news websites create separate sections dedicated to events in Ukraine with the titles “Crisis in Ukraine”, “Situation in Ukraine”. Russian TV shows, such as *60 Minutes* on the TV channel *Russia-1*, everyday put on air such topics as “Who and why called Ukraine a ‘village toilet’?”, “How Kyiv authorities remove high-ranking officials by the order of American politicians”, “The US is preparing for war on the borders with Russia”, and so on. From August 2017, *60 Minutes* has been going on air twice a day. Methods of disinformation did change, but the number of propaganda materials is not decreasing.

The narratives of Russian propaganda are reflecting the agenda setting of the day, but there are some “eternal topics” that are still used by Russian propagandists and are worth to remember. The most popular Kremlin narratives about Ukraine are:

- Ukraine as a failed state (statements that Ukraine as a state does not exist, that the existence of this country is impossible because of history and economic reasons, that all attempts to change, reform the country are not worth it);
- Ukraine is the one to blame in the downing of MH17 (new and new evidences fabricated by Russian media appeared despite objective international investigations);
- Anti-Russian sanctions are not efficient (statements of pro-Russian European politicians with financial support from Moscow, false statistics, mistranslation of articles from foreign media);
- Ukrainian authorities are fascists;
- Crimea is not part of Ukraine and never was; global community supports the Crimean referendum; European countries recognise Crimea as part of Russia;
- Euromaidan was organised by the United States, the EU, the West in general;
- Ukrainian army is weak, incapable of fighting;
- Ukrainian soldiers are “punishers” who committed murders of civic citizens;
- Russian language is under threat in Ukraine.

Therefore, Russian propaganda has many faces, arms, and legs, but the fight against it is worth fighting. As Russian media are trying to shake people’s beliefs, perception of what is the truth and what is a lie, Ukrainian NGOs should continue to expose outright lies, teach the audience how to discover manipulation, find new narratives and patterns of the disinformation campaign.

Ways of Combating Russian Propaganda

The diversity of functions, aspects, goals of the existing projects that are countering Russian propaganda in Ukraine shows how complex this strategy of combating disinformation should be. The other important point is that the representatives of the state and representatives of civil society must work together on this complex information strategy. Ukrainian experience in fighting against Russian propaganda is unique, so the creation of such a strategy could serve as an example for other countries.

The Information Security Doctrine of Ukraine was signed by President P. Poroshenko in February 2017. As it was stated, the main goal of the doctrine is "to clarify principles of formation and implementation of the state information policy, first of all, with a view to counter the destructive information impact of Russia in conditions of hybrid war unleashed by it".¹¹ Obviously, the information space of Ukraine needed such a doctrine, which clearly defines national interests in the information sphere, the roles of departments in the realisation of this document, priorities in the information security, etc. Nevertheless, it was confirmed that there were just a few representatives of civil society participating in the discussion of the project of the doctrine.¹² Protection of the information space is followed by other important issues such as freedom of speech, the danger of censorship by the

government, access to public information. Therefore, it is important to devise such legislation under the close control of civil society. If we talk about what the government should do, it is also necessary to enhance communication between the authorities and citizens, clearly explain reforms and steps of the government, so that Russian disinformation could not have room to mislead Ukrainians about what is happening in their own country.

Besides special laws and doctrines, steps of the Ukrainian NGOs against the Russian disinformation campaign are worth noting here. First, debunking fake news and the main Kremlin narratives by using solid facts is still one of the important tools in fighting against numerous types of propaganda in the media. People form their beliefs according to their vision of the world. Russian propaganda forms this special vision of the world in people's mind for a long period of time. Therefore, it is hard not only to refute some lie, but also persuade the other side that this news story is not true, total nonsense, fake.

To shake faith in one or another piece of fake news, it is important to provide as many arguments as possible. The fact-checkers must be transparent in their work, submit links to all sources used in an article. Moreover, the logic of refutation should be accessible and understandable to the audience, so that anyone who has doubts can go through the same way of refutation as the fact-checker. Thus, *StopFake* uses the following principles in its work. First of all, to provide a context, broad explanations to

¹¹ Глава держави затвердив Доктрину інформаційної безпеки України (*The Head of State Approved the Doctrine of Information Security of Ukraine*), "President.gov.ua", 25 February 2017, [http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-doktrinu-informacijnoi-bezpeki-ukr-40190 access: 01 February 2018].

¹² Впровадження Доктрини інформаційної безпеки не має бути спрямоване на боротьбу з політичним інакомисленням усередині країни. Опитування експертів (*The Introduction of the Doctrine of Information Security Should Not Be Aimed at Combating Political Dissent within the Country: Interview of Experts*), "Detector media", 27 February 2017, [http://detector.media/infospace/article/123603/2017-02-27-vprovadzheniya-doktrini-informatsiinoi-bezpeki-ne-mae-butii-spryamovane-na-borotbu-z-politichnim-inakomislennyam-useredini-kraini-opituvannya-ekspertiv/ access: 02 February 2018].

some stories are important as well, as often it could not be an outright lie, but it could be some manipulation, distorted figures, misleading quotes, which leads to false conclusions. Second, tools of verification and debunking fakes should also be various: from official sources, experts' opinion to the latest online applications.

Debunking fakes is always a tip of the iceberg in the fight against the Russian disinformation campaign. Countering propaganda requires an integrated approach. Increasing the media literacy level of the population, promoting critical thinking skills to perceive media messages are the other important components of confronting this threat. Most experts point out that educational programs should already be implemented in schools. One of such projects has already been launched in Ukraine by the *StopFake* project and the Academy of Ukrainian Press with funding by the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine and the British Embassy Kyiv. The project "Learn to Discern – Schools" will be integrated into the existing curricula at 50 secondary schools across four cities with special educational materials.¹³

Strengthening media literacy among the adult population also should be conducted. Learning how to use information in the social media should be a part of such trainings. Information about media ownership and media interests of different business and political circles should also be included in these trainings. According to *StopFake* materials, Russian disinformation could be disseminated through Ukrainian media with pro-Russian views and interests as well.

Fact-checking materials should include all possible formats to persuade the audience. For example, the percentage of Internet

penetration in Ukraine depends on the region, socio-demographic factors. Access to different sources of information is not equal all over the country. This is important to keep in mind when genre and format is determined. As we talk about historical fakes, fact-checker should provide more original sources, documents, maps, use all possible data and expert opinion of professional historians. That is what the *ЛИКБЕЗ* project is using in their work.



Debunking fakes is always a tip of the iceberg in the fight against the Russian disinformation campaign. Countering propaganda requires an integrated approach

Professional journalists should be aware too. Even more important is to promote journalism ethics and standards, increase the professionalism of journalists, provide special trainings about verification data and fact-checking in the "post-truth" era. Unfortunately, "bad journalism" is one of the reasons why propaganda is still effective.

Conclusions

The threat of the Russian disinformation campaign led to the consolidation of many non-governmental organisations in Ukraine. These organisations have taken on an important role in confronting information attacks, which is no less important for a country that is in a state of hybrid war. They appeared on the frontline at the same time, in March 2014, and since that time are performing important functions of fact-checking, refuting the Kremlin narratives, raising the level of media literacy among Ukrainians, revealing

¹³ *StopFake Helps Schools to Teach Media Literacy*, "StopFake", 04 February 2018, [<https://www.stopfake.org/en/stopfake-helps-schools-to-teach-media-literacy/> access: 02 February 2018].

the facts of the presence of the Russian army in Donbas, and so on. Thus, their work could be used for defining the many faces of Russian propaganda, measures for countering it, as well as for studying the steps that Ukrainian NGOs are taking every day to resist the Russian hydra. The most efficient measures can serve as an algorithm of actions for other countries where the threat of Russian disinformation is no less imminent.

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